
The Symbol at Your Door: Number and Geometry in Religious Architecture of the Greek and Latin Middle Ages by Nigel Hiscock

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If indeed all of western philosophy is to be taken as a commentary on Plato, Nigel Hiscock would include the religious architecture of the European Middle Ages in the same extended footnote. He explains that his recent *The Symbol at Your Door* is meant to serve as a companion volume to his *The Wise Master Builder* [2000]; but where the earlier work explored the implicit use of Platonic geometry in medieval building, this new one, he says, is explicit in showing ‘the occurrence of number and geometry... <to be> beyond doubt’ [9]. Moreover, Hiscock is forceful in arguing that this application of Pythagorean/Platonic mathematics to religious architecture was not merely a question of arbitrary pattern-making or of blind lodge practice, but rich with deliberate symbolism in affirming, through number and geometry, the concurrence of cosmic order and Christian doctrine.

In this, the author says, he is taking issue with the modernist denial of meaning that made architecture a self-referential question of structure and function; and he allies his own project to post-modernism and the retrieval of meaning. The post-modern critique of modernism is not new, nor for that matter is the argument for the importance of number and symbolism in medieval architecture. Besides his own previous work [2000], Hiscock mentions the work of Conant [1963], Frankl [2000], Krautheimer [1965], Panofsky [1953], and Otto von Simson [1956], among others. He might also have mentioned the work of Joseph Rykwert [1988, 1996]. Most recent among books demonstrating the connection between Platonism and Gothic architecture is Philip Ball’s ‘biography’ of Chartres cathedral, *Universe of Stone* [2008].

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Hiscock's new book does, however, appear singular in the range of its ambition, in the tenacity of its author's determination to demonstrate the significance of virtually all combinations of geometric forms and numbers in the plans, elevations, and volumes of the medieval religious buildings analyzed, and in his virtually unwavering ascription of it, ultimately, to the Platonic fountainhead. The number of cases explored is, to say the least, impressive, as indeed is the scope of textual evidence brought to bear: from Plato, Pythagoras, and Vitruvius, through the Old Testament, the Gospels, St Augustine and Boethius, to Alcuin, Robert Grosseteste, Hugh of St Victor, Alberti, and beyond. In an investigation where, as Hiscock puts it, the thematic is meant to take precedence over the chronological, 'the ideas exemplified are relatively timeless' [11]. Even the popular number song known as 'Green Grow the Rushes-O' which begins with 12 (the 12 apostles) and ends with one (God), is shown to be rife with number mysticism, with 5 standing for the pentagram as apotropaic symbol—'the symbol at your door' the song calls it, and the source for Hiscock's title [47].

The *Symbol at Your Door* consists of a prologue, six chapters of varying length, and an epilogue. The prologue provides a historical introduction, most of it, Hiscock acknowledges, a digest of material already presented in *The Wise Master Builder* [2000]. It is a useful review for those not already familiar with this well-known background, but reveals nothing new—certainly not to someone who has recently covered much of the same territory. The key ancient source is, of course, the *Timaeus*, the most Pythagorean of Plato's dialogues, which was well-known throughout the Middle Ages. With its divine craftsman who fashions the universe in keeping with a mathematical model using 4, especially, as the number of cosmic order, and with its account of the regular, 'Platonic', solids, each with its own elemental referent, the *Timaeus* was (as it remains, for many) the ultimate touchstone for reflections on the cosmic dimension of architecture.

Two of these solids, the sphere and the cube (the heavens and Earth, in the *Timaeus*' repertory), supply the theme for Hiscock's first chapter, 'Heaven and Earth', which deals with the symbolism of domed churches in the Byzantine world. Chapter 2, 'Temple and Body', is a brief, 20-page account of the relation between macrocosm and the human microcosm, and of the temple as their architectural point of intersection. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 deal, respectively, with

the numbers 3, 4, and 5 and the deployment of their corresponding geometrical figures (triangle, square, pentagon) in building. Chapter 6, 'The Whole Frame of the Universe', ranges widely, devoting over a 100 pages to the symbolism of circular and centralized structures including apses, wheel imagery (in rose windows, e.g.), and tracery. The epilogue reviews the material covered and ventures a short excursus into survivals of symbolism in Romance literature and music.

The principal and most difficult question Hiscock appears to be addressing in this rather unwieldy book is the following. Abundant textual evidence from the Middle Ages leaves no doubt that the teachings of Plato and Pythagoras survived in Christian Platonism and that, because of their symbolic resonance with Christianity, Platonic/Pythagorean numbers became an integral part not only of Christian teaching but also of how churchmen responsible for initiating building projects imagined their buildings. The evidence presented also seems to leave no doubt that the relevant numbers and geometrical figures are in fact present, to an overwhelming degree, in the fabric of medieval religious buildings. To put it simply, the question then becomes how and why the numbers moved from the metaphysical speculations of architectural patrons, through to the building yards of master builders and their teams of masons who then transferred them into plans, and chiseled them into shapes of trefoils, quatrefoils, pentagrams, and the like. What is the connection between the learned, textual evidence and the silent evidence, so to speak, on the ground? What, in other words, was the connection between medieval theory and practice? Hiscock infers that the transfer of metaphysics to solid matter occurred not just through training in practical geometry but that it was also entirely self-conscious, the result of teaching in monastery schools of the liberal arts (the trivium and quadrivium) which were the main vehicle for the Christian Platonist world view. To teach this world view to the illiterate was, according to Hiscock, the purpose of deploying number symbolism in religious architecture.

The simplistic exercise of such a linear approach is bound to falter, and often does, with declamation frequently standing in for

genuine scholarship,¹ and much recourse to phrases like ‘would have been’, ‘conceivably’, and ‘it may be safely assumed that’. The assumption underlying this linearity is that theory directs practice just as the king directs the architect the 13th-century manuscript drawing which Hiscock reproduces on page 39. It might have been helpful to entertain alternative scenarios, especially in view of how faint the traces of transmission actually are.

The book is more convincing when it comes to dealing with specifics. In his first chapter, ‘Heaven and Earth’, the discussion of Hagia Sophia, which Hiscock says supplied the fundamental pair of Platonic solids—sphere and cube—to the schematic design of Byzantine churches, is quite compelling. So too, in the final chapter, is his well-documented argument that the geometrics of tracery carried a weightier narrative than that of the stained glass it framed. The suggestion raised in the epilogue that, in the Renaissance, Alberti and others were as much perpetuating a medieval tradition as reviving an ancient one also raises interesting questions.

In general, however, Hiscock’s book is overly long with far too many quotations, clumsily written, and redundant. It is flawed by weak scholarship, displaying no apparent awareness, for instance, of basic references such as Karl Lehman’s *The Dome of Heaven* [1945], Carol Krinsky’s bibliography of the Vitruvius manuscripts [1967], or J. E. Raven’s important ‘Polyclitus and Pythagoreanism’ [1951], not to mention recent work on Vitruvius [see, e.g., McEwen 2003]. Translations cited—Leoni for Alberti, Granger for Vitruvius—are often no longer acceptable. Nor does the arguable claim that ‘the ideas exemplified are relatively timeless’ [11] excuse a tendency to anachronism.

The *Symbol at your Door* is of potential value for its detailed case studies but, as an attempted synthesis, falls disappointingly short of its avowed aims.

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¹ See, e.g., on page 50: ‘Is it likely that an architect would have built a church devoid of symbolic content, divorced from his patron’s religious predilections, and confounding literary and documentary evidence to the contrary?’

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