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Lambert and the Scholarly Culture

The Intellectual World of the *Liber Floridus*

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Seldom in the *Liber Floridus* do we hear the voice of its author, Lambert of Saint-Omer. Even when we do, it is usually indirectly. Lambert was first and foremost a compiler. He rarely synthesized. He chose fragments from his sources and copied them out, one after another, without much glossing. Small divergences from the source text may have had more to do with the different versions of the text that were in circulation than an intentional modification on Lambert's part. Very occasionally a sentence is 'adjusted', though whether it was done deliberately or was simply a slip of the pen is often hard to say. The few folios with annotations by Lambert himself contain summaries or lists of facts that he deals with in detail elsewhere. In short, the originality of the *Liber Floridus* lies not in the presentation of new theories but in the selection of sources and the choice of the segments extracted from them. Lambert was in the first place a collector who gave an encyclopaedic shape to his collection.

This is the picture that a study of the textual sources used for the *Liber Floridus* reveals. And by and large it is correct. Yet the study of Lambert's cartography in particular shows that a little nuancing is called for. The same thing appears when we look at the *Liber Floridus* in the context of intellectual trends in the twelfth-century renaissance.

The Encyclopaedist and the Scholars

The literature describes the *Liber Floridus* as an encyclopaedia. But the medieval encyclopaedia was very different to the encyclopaedic genre that has been more or less the norm since Diderot and d'Alembert produced their *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris, 1751-1772). Instead of an alphabetic order and rational classification, the medieval encyclopaedia had an organic structure. Knowledge was imbedded in the world view; it followed the structure and course of the Creation as described in Genesis. To distinguish the medieval encyclopaedia from a modern one, the German literature employs terms such as *Weltbuch* or *Imagines Mundi* text.

Lambert himself speaks of a heavenly meadow in which ‘flowers of literature’ bloom together in order to attract the pious reader with their sweetness, hence the title *Liber Floridus* or ‘Book of Flowers’. [48] In Lambert’s day the encyclopaedias of Isidore of Seville (c.560-636), Bede (673/4-735) and Rabanus Maurus (780-856) were still considered the most authoritative. Even so, in the early twelfth century Lambert was not the only encyclopaedist at work. Around 1110, Honorius of Autun (c.1080-c.1157) completed his *Imago Mundi*, and ten years later William of Conches (1080-1154) finished his *Philosophia Mundi*. [49]

In the work of these and other twelfth-century encyclopaedists we can almost always discern an intellectual process in operation that is not found in the *Liber Floridus*. Lambert’s encyclopaedia would therefore seem to have been but little influenced by the intellectual activity that the literature ascribes to the cathedral schools of Paris, Chartres, Laon and Reims. Bernard of Chartres, who taught at Chartres between 1114 and 1119, compared himself and his contemporaries to dwarves whose achievements were possible only because they perched on the shoulders of giants. The twelfth-century-renaissance scholar could see further not because of the acuteness of his sight or the stature of his body, but because he was carried aloft and elevated by the merits of his predecessors. [50] Whether or not this metaphor gives a glimpse of humility or self-awareness, the ‘giants’ in question were early Christian, classical and Neoplatonic writers such as Martianus Capella (fig. 38), Boethius, Macrobius, author of a *Commentary* on Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio*, and Calcidius, author of a *Commentary* on Plato’s *Timaeus*. Bernard of Chartres, William of Conches and Bernard Silvestris all produced numerous commentaries on the *Timaeus*. William of Conches also glossed Macrobius, Martianus Capella, Boethius and others. [51]

Neoplatonic influences could also be found in a Christianized form in the works of Augustine, for example. Lambert tells us in the prologue to his *Liber Floridus* how he extracted his knowledge from the abundant literature of the ‘Holy Fathers’, by which he meant authoritative Christian writers. Under this heading he included not just Augustine, Jerome and Bede, to name but three, but also Neoplatonists such as Macrobius, Martianus Capella and Calcidius. For according to Lambert the writings of all these authors were no longer read and their knowledge was in danger of being lost (figs. 39-43). [52]

Thus Lambert seems to present himself as a guardian of tradition. [53] Indeed, with the exceptions of Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), Anselm of Laon (d. 1117) and his pupil William of Champeaux (1070?-1121), as well as Odo, Bishop of Courtrai (1050-1113), his sources are seldom his contemporaries. [54] Whether it was through these scholars that Lambert came in contact with the intellectual currents of his day is difficult to determine. We do know that Anselm of Canterbury was a personal friend of Lambert, abbot of St Bertin’s, whom Lambert probably knew well (fig. 44). [55]

Anselm was a nobleman who left Aosta in his youth and travelled to Normandy, where he would become a scholar of international renown. He studied first at the cathedral school of Avranches and the monastery school of Bec (1060) recently founded by Lanfranc of Bec, which he would later lead himself before following Lanfranc as archbishop of Canterbury (1093). From around 1080 Anselm of Laon transformed the cathedral school of Laon into a flourishing centre of learning. From 1095 William of Champeaux taught at the cathedral school of Notre Dame in Paris, where he was a staunch defender of the realist theory of universals until he retired to the Abbey of St Victor, also in Paris, and resumed his teaching. The inclusion of extracts from these three scholars in the *Liber Floridus* suggests that Lambert was familiar with the intellectual milieu of his time. To what extent he was an active participant in it himself is less easy to deduce. As we shall see in Part Two, *One World under the Sun*, it is chiefly Lambert's imagery that provides us with information about this.

Thus we know that Lambert shared the twelfth-century-renaissance scholars' interest in Neoplatonic writers. Martianus Capella, Calcidius and Macrobius were important sources for him, albeit more in quality than quantity. Although historical texts were often extensively copied in the *Liber Floridus*, it was actually to the short extracts from the work of the Late Antique writers that Lambert appended his famous cosmographic illustrations.

In fact, we learn more about Lambert from what he left out than what he put in. In this respect the absence of Boethius is strikingly conspicuous. William of Conches, Thierry of Chartres and Clarembaud of Arras all make frequent reference to Boethius's work, particularly his *Consolation of Philosophy*. The ninth poem in Book III, in which Boethius calls upon God in terms borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus*, was hugely popular in the twelfth century.^[56] Boethius's works were in the St Bertin's library, to which Lambert most likely had access. In the twelfth century the Benedictine abbey had not only the *Consolation of Philosophy* but also Boethius's treatises on music, mathematics, astronomy, geometry and dialectics.^[57] A second notable absence is that of Johannes Scottus Eriugena, whose great *Periphyseon* was also in the St Bertin's library.^[58] Why these authors should be excluded we can only conjecture. Apart from some minor criticism of Boethius's *Consolation* by the abbot of Corvey, Bovo II (900-916), and of the commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate* by Gilbert of Poitiers (1080-1154) which was condemned as heterodox, Boethius evoked little controversy.^[59] It was otherwise with Eriugena, who, though renowned, attracted greater criticism and consequently fewer followers. And perhaps the polemic between Berengar of Tours (1000-1088) and Abbot Lanfranc occasioned by a work by Ratramnus of Corbie, which Berengar had erroneously attributed to Eriugena, was still fresh in Lambert's mind.^[60]

The subjects that link Lambert to the intellectual activity in Chartres, Laon and Reims offer more clarity. Significantly, that relationship is often hidden in the details. Unlike twelfth-century scholars,

Lambert did not resort to tradition in order to reinterpret it but mainly to make it reaccessible to his contemporaries and thus to safeguard it for the future. Though he did not always limit himself merely to transmission.

Favourite subjects for the scholars of the twelfth-century renaissance were God and Creation (figs. 45-47), nature and man. They were never dealt with purely on the basis of Bible study, nor simply derived from Plato's *Timaeus*; Augustine had already sought a harmonious balance between biblical tradition and Neoplatonic ideas. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the visible world provided the starting point from which articles of faith were reached.^[61] It was this line of thought which, not without some controversy, assimilated the Holy Spirit with the World Soul of Plato's *Timaeus*, for instance.^[62] Lambert shared the interest in the World Soul with the scholars of his time, just as he drew the necessary attention to the theme of the Creation.

God and Creation

When Thierry of Chartres (c.1100-1150) considers the six days of Creation in his *De sex dierum operibus*, he explains them not only according to the letter of the Bible – according to the classical exegesis, in other words – but also in accordance with physical reality.^[63] Once again, the visible world is the starting point from which a knowledge of God can be attained. This typifies the investigatory activity of the twelfth-century renaissance. And it was on this very point that Lambert showed what he was made of – one of his syntheses is entitled 'What God created in six days in the beginning'. One page was sufficient to frame the universe within the chronology of the six days of Creation. Lambert did not take his itemization of each day's creative activity from the Bible itself, which he probably considered obvious. Instead he accommodated his world view within the framework of salvation history. Thus, on day one, he tells us, God created the nine orders of angels, on day two the seven heavens, on day three the waters of the earth; on day four he discusses the size of the sun and the earth, on day five he summarises the aquatic creatures (including the apocalyptic Leviathan); on day six he lists the land animals and, finally, man.^[64] In this way Lambert sought harmony with reality in his summary of the days of Creation, just like Thierry of Chartres. Unlike Thierry of Chartres, however, he sought it not by way of argumentation but via the many matters of fact he found in his sources.

A second typical trait of the *Liber Floridus* is that in compiling the events of the first chapter of Genesis Lambert has no hesitation in citing Bede on the subject as well.^[65] From the study of the cartography, too, it appears that Lambert saw no problem in combining several sources. In addition to the six days of Creation he also describes a fourfold division of nature, which Bede attributes to

Augustine and which was also expanded on by Eriugena.^[66] The spontaneous course of nature is the last step in it and was extremely important in the philosophical discourse of the twelfth century renaissance.

Nature and Light

Lambert stated very clearly that his ambition extended no further than the rekindling of interest in the early Christian scholars, the ‘Holy Fathers’. Nevertheless, in all probability he also had access to the tenth- and eleventh-century scholarly world exemplified in the works of Gerbert of Aurillac (Reims, 945-1003), Fulbert of Chartres (Chartres, 1006-1028), Lanfranc of Bec (Avranches, 1040-1042, and Bec, to 1079) and Anselm of Laon (Laon, 1080).

In the twelfth century natural philosophy was a subject taken very seriously in the philosophical and cosmological treatises of William of Conches (1080-1154), Bernard of Chartres, and Thierry of Chartres (d. 1150/5).^[67] It was characterized by the idea that nature held the key to understanding God.^[68] Nature was no longer interpreted merely in symbolical terms, which was a strikingly new notion. In his *Quaestiones Naturales* Adelard of Bath (1070-1146) said that nature was no longer read like a book, analogous to the Scriptures; instead, knowledge gained by observation (of nature) contributed to the knowledge that comes from books. The observation of nature was thus a source of knowledge, just like the text of the Bible. Only the nature of that knowledge differed.^[69] The theological underpinning for this argument comes from William of Conches. An intrinsic quality of nature is the attraction between things that are similar and repulsion between things that are different. Yet the very fact that opposites stay together and still keep their own nature shows that God exists. God is the binding force that makes the study of nature necessary.^[70]

This fundamental characteristic of twelfth-century science is found in visual form in Lambert’s cartography. In his view, the study of Creation increased the love of the Creator.^[71] Probably influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fifth century), whose work was translated by Johannes Scottus Eriugena, he saw light as the binding force in the universe. The ‘metaphysics of light’ had not just appeared out of thin air. From early Christian times biblical passages referencing the sun were interpreted allegorically. Just as the sun lights the world, so Christ frees us from darkness. He is the spiritual light that permeates the universe.^[72] That idea was expanded in the eleventh and twelfth centuries on the basis of Calcidius’s translation of and commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus*.^[73] Although Calcidius’s world view was geocentric, he saw the sun as the living heart at the centre of the cosmos.^[74] To this was added the idea – derived from Plato’s *Republic* – that light was the belt (*syndesmos*) that held the circle of the universe together.^[75] Via Pseudo-Dionysius, light

as the platonic belt of the heavens was incorporated into the writings of Eriugena.^[76] The principal *mappa mundi* in the *Liber Floridus* projects the circle through which the planets run, which partly coincides with the ecliptic (the path of the sun) on the map of the cosmos. The belt that holds the universe together was formed by the orbits of the sun and stars (fig. 84).

One small reference in the *Liber Floridus* confirms our assumption that Lambert's contacts with the scholars of his day were in fact fairly close. On one of his *mappae mundi* he calls the projection of the ecliptic on the earth the *zodiacus lacteus* or 'zodiac milky way' (fig. 48).^[77] The combination of these two terms is noteworthy. Perhaps Lambert was trying to represent the junction of the zodiac and the Milky Way of which Macrobius writes. The two intersections that more or less coincide with the solstices were where Macrobius situated the gates of heaven, through which souls could pass from heaven to earth. In Macrobius's text the words *zodiacus* and *lacteus* are right next to each other, just as they are on Lambert's image.^[78] This apparently small detail from Lambert's encyclopaedia provides an important indicator for situating the *Liber Floridus* within its intellectual context. The heavenly gates near the solstices also occur in an appendix in Adelard of Bath's *Quaestiones Naturales*, and later in the writings of William of Conches.^[79]

Whether or not this is a question of direct influence is hard to determine and in any case is confined to (the circle of) Adelard of Bath.^[80] Perhaps the theory was more widespread than we now imagine. Since Augustine had borrowed from Plato the idea that the word of God is the true light, the (sun)light could symbolize the preaching of God's word.^[81] Odo of Tournai, later bishop of Courtrai (d. 1113), whose dispute with Leo the Jew was cited by Lambert among others, writes how Christ shines upon the Church in the same way as the sun illuminates the moon with its radiance.^[82]

Despite the age-gap between Lambert and William of Conches, which makes influence doubtful, the commonalities between them are also great. Lambert calls heaven and earth 'the elements of the world'. The same idea is expressed by William of Conches, who, inspired by Aristotle, calls them the material origin that lends substance to existence.^[83] Lambert believed that the elements would not be destroyed by the apocalyptic fire but would be refined. The image of the world may change, but not the substance.^[84] The proposition had a good deal of support in the twelfth century and goes back to the writing of Augustine, but the identification between 'heaven and earth' and the 'elements of the world' was much less frequent.

There is only one direct source whose author Lambert could have met in his lifetime, namely Anselm of Canterbury, the friend of Lambert, Abbot of St Bertin's. Whether it was thanks to Lambert that Lambert was able to copy one of the early summaries of Anselm's treatise *Cur homo deus* (*Why God became Man*) into the *Liber Floridus* we do not know. To Anselm, God was the highest nature, which

existed in and through itself.^[85] Light and the sun in particular could explain the nature of God – the Supreme and Inaccessible Light that cannot be seen because it is too much for man. And yet whatever he sees he sees through it, just as an eye that is weak sees what it sees by the light of the sun which it cannot look at in the sun itself.^[86]

A second important concept that Lambert shared with Anselm and also with William of Conches, for example, is the smallness of the world compared to the vast dimensions of God or the universe.^[87] Here Lambert was clearly harking back to Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. On one of his *mappae mundi* Lambert drew an arrow pointing towards the earth and wrote next to it, 'Look how small it is!' (fig. 49).^[88] Although the *Dream of Scipio* is a primarily Platonic treatise, the emphasis on the smallness of the earth is an Aristotelian idea. 'The earth is infinitesimal in comparison to the heavens that surround it' is taken almost literally from Aristotle's *Meteorology*.^[89]

Man and Reason

Lambert also followed the Neoplatonic line of thought in describing the essence of man. In Neoplatonism man is used as a template for the concept of the universe and there is an extensive homology between man as microcosmos, a small universe, and the universe as macrocosmos (fig. 51). Providing the basis for this construct are the four elements – fire, air, water and earth. Isidore of Seville, Bede, and Johannes Scottus Eriugena associated them with the four seasons and the four *humores* – blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy, the four chief fluids or cardinal humours of the body – that in turn determined a person's temperament.^[90] Lambert associated them with the four ages of man (youth, adulthood, old age and decrepitude), while elsewhere he defined seven ages (infancy, childhood, youth, young adulthood, mature adulthood, old age and decrepitude) which he also related to the seven historical ages of the world under the motto 'the microcosmos is a smaller world'.^[91] The theory of the elements and the temperament was an important aspect of the medicine that was making headway through the influence of Arabic treatises. To Lambert, medicine was largely limited to references to phlebotomy, or blood-letting, and the sphere of Apuleius, which was a method for predicting a patient's chance of recovery.^[92] In the matter of the body and soul he followed his source, Bede: 'the body is kneaded from clay, but the soul is created from nothing.'^[93]

Reason was a matter of great interest to the scholars of the twelfth-century renaissance. William of Conches writes that 'If man were to lack all his senses but keep his reason and intelligence he would not only be happier but would be absolutely happy.'^[94] Lambert evidently did not share the uncommon importance that the twelfth-century scholars ascribed to reason. He does not argue about

reason. Nevertheless, he made an extensive practice of astronomy, one of the ‘four genres of reason’ that according to Thierry of Chartres contribute to the knowledge of the Creator – arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy: in short the most usual arts of the quadrivium (fig. 53). What is remarkable is that Thierry of Chartres did not refer to the trivium of which rhetoric was part. In the twelfth-century renaissance the content of both the trivium and quadrivium changed, which perhaps explains Thierry of Chartres’s words. [95]

Lambert and the Scholarly Culture: in Conclusion

Our enquiry into the intellectual link between Lambert and the twelfth-century renaissance brings us up against the border between the encyclopaedist and the collector. Lambert chose to collect, rather than contribute. But that is not to say that his opinion is wanting. Because Lambert was an early representative of what has come to be called the twelfth-century renaissance, the most significant works to emerge from the intellectual current that was coupled with it were written after his death. Even though there are clear similarities with the writings of Adelard of Bath and William of Conches, most of their major works were produced after the *Liber Floridus* had been completed. [96] It is mainly in his visual language that links can be seen with the scholarly culture of the eleventh century, with Anselm of Canterbury, for example.

Lambert shared the interest in natural philosophy with the scholars of his day. He looked for a middle way by supplementing the classical exegesis of the Creation with the cosmographical knowledge he derived primarily from the writings of Isidore of Seville and Bede. In his imagery nature is the pre-eminent means by which knowledge of the Creation can be acquired. In certain respects his *mappae mundi* encapsulate the more modern learning of his time and are in line with the propositions of Adelard of Bath and William of Conches. Thanks to the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius light has a unifying power whose role is allegorical, but the border with what was possible or permissible within the Church’s teaching is close. Is that why no new theory is made explicit in the text? As to that, we can only conjecture...