

# Copernican Iconography in Michelangelo's *Giudizio Universale*

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## Sistine Chapel, 1473-81



Ceiling, painted 1508-12

*Last Judgment*  
commissioned 1533,  
painted 1536-41



*Creation and Last Judgment* - the beginning and the end





# Biblical cosmology and astronomy

- The *Last Judgment* based on *Revelation*
- The 'Good' go up to Heaven; the 'Bad' go down to Hell
- Traditionally carried over to Christian art and architecture
- Depiction of the universe (Heaven, Earth, Hell together)
- In layers, with ranks of Saints, angels, saved and damned - Christ at the top



Giotto, *Last Judgment*, c 1305





## BUT

- In Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* - Christ is unusually depicted as a beardless, Apollonian 'sun god' in a circular 'cosmic' design
- Reflection of Copernicus' theory of the sun-centred universe? (*De Revolutionibus*)
- Rejected on the grounds of dating:
  - *Last Judgment* 1541
  - *Revolutions* 1543



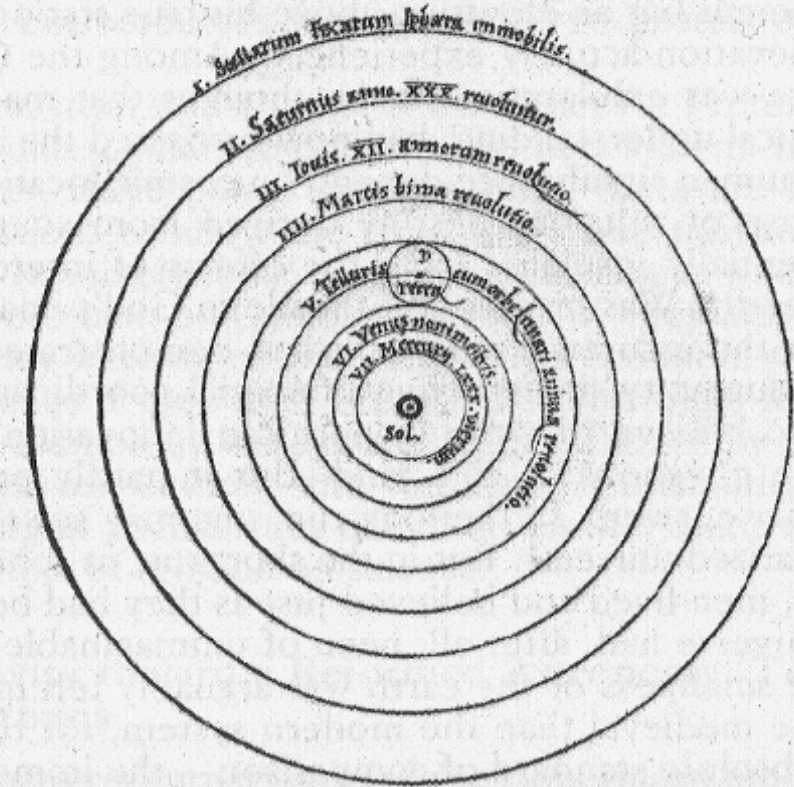
By means of the central place which Michelangelo reserved in his composition for the Sun (Christ-Apollo) ... the artist came of himself to a vision of the universe which surprisingly corresponds to that of his contemporary Copernicus.....

Yet he could not have known Copernicus' book *which was published in 1543 – at least seven years after Michelangelo conceived his fresco*

(Charles de Tolnay, 1960)

NICOLAI COPERNICI

net, in quo terram cum orbe lunari tanquam epicyclo contineri diximus. Quinto loco Venus nono mense reducitur. Sextum denique locum Mercurius tenet, octuaginta dierum spacio circū currens. In medio uero omnium residet Sol. Quis enim in hoc



pulcherimo templo lampadem hanc in alio uel meliori loco poneret, quàm unde totum simul possit illuminare? Siquidem non inepte quidam lucernam mundi, alij mentem, alij rectorem uocant. Trimegistus uisibilem Deum, Sophoclis Electra intuentē omnia. Ita profecto tanquam in solio re gali Sol residens circum agentem gubernat Astrorum familiam. Tellus quoque minime fraudatur lunari ministerio, sed ut Aristoteles de animalibus ait, maximā Luna cū terra cognationē habet. Concipit interea à Sole terra, & impregnatur annuo partu. Inuenimus igitur sub hac



*De Revolutionibus, 1543, 1, X*

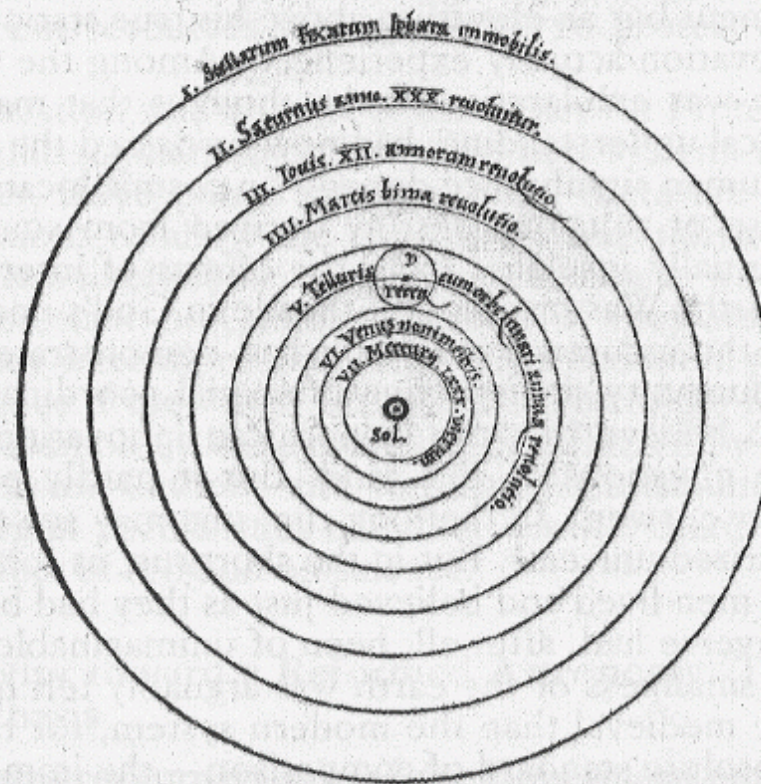
*In medio vero omnium residet Sol. Quis enim in hoc pulcherimo templo lampadem hanc in alio meliori loco poneret, quam unde totum simul possit illuminare.*

*Sidique non inepte quidam lucernam mundi ....*

*Sol residens circum agentem gubernat Astrorum familiam ...*

NICOLAI COPERNICI

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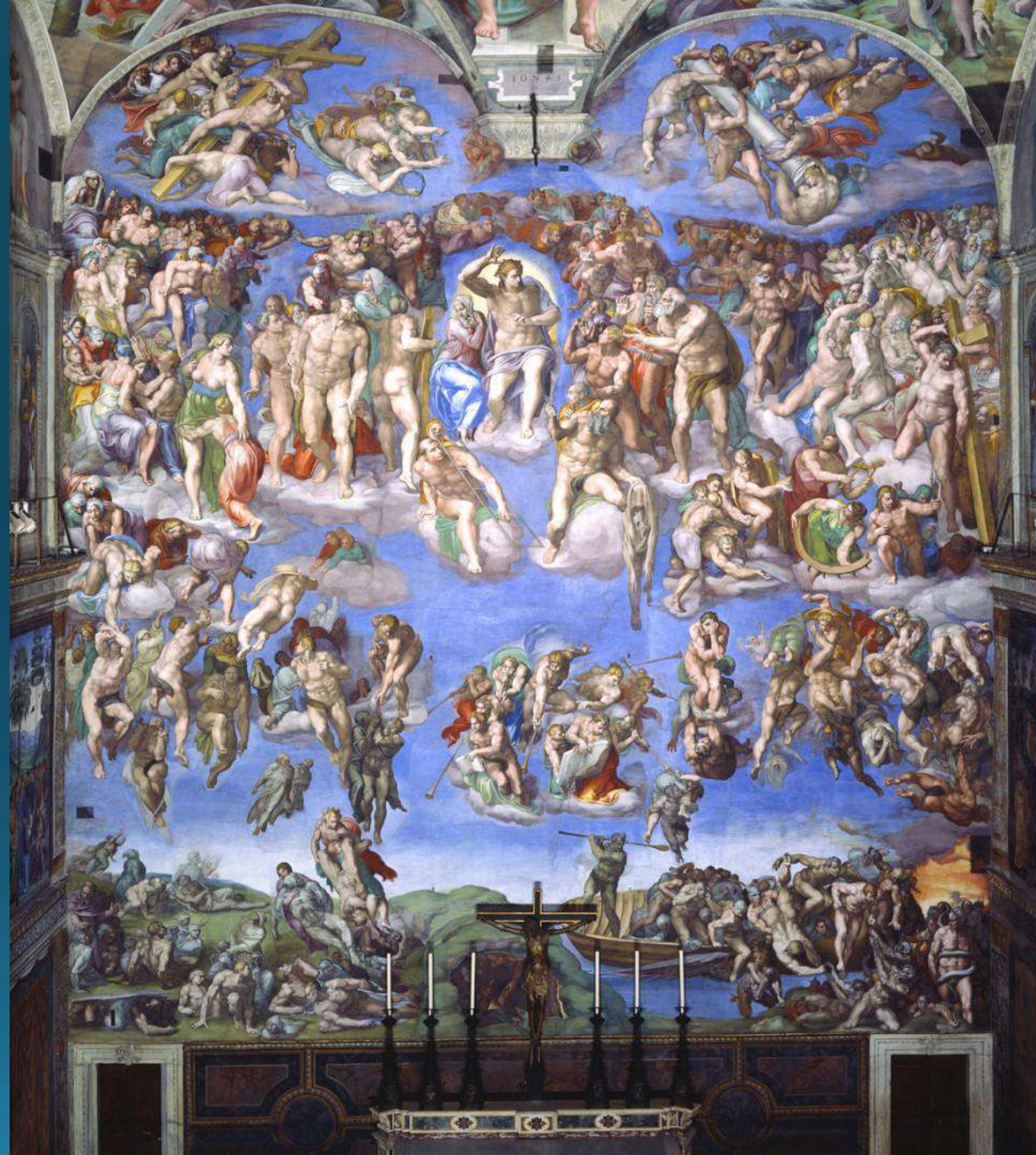
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# Michelangelo, *Last Judgment* 1536-41

In the midst of all assuredly dwells the Sun. For in this most beautiful temple who would place this illuminary in any better position ... some call him the Light of the World .. So he remains, governing the family of Heavenly bodies which circles around him

Copernicus, *Revolutions* 1, X  
published 1543







**Hypothesis:**

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**That Michelangelo's *Giudizio Universale* does indeed reflect Copernican heliocentricity**

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**- and with the knowledge, consent and approval of the two Popes concerned**



Shared Context  
and  
Details/evidence

- ***Theological***: traditional links between theology, astronomy and Christian iconography
- ***Literary***: Dante, and others
- ***Philosophical***: Neoplatonism and the Classical tradition
- ***Chronological***: commission and date of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*
- ***Scientific***: Copernicus in Italy



# Astronomy and Art

Galla Placidia, 425

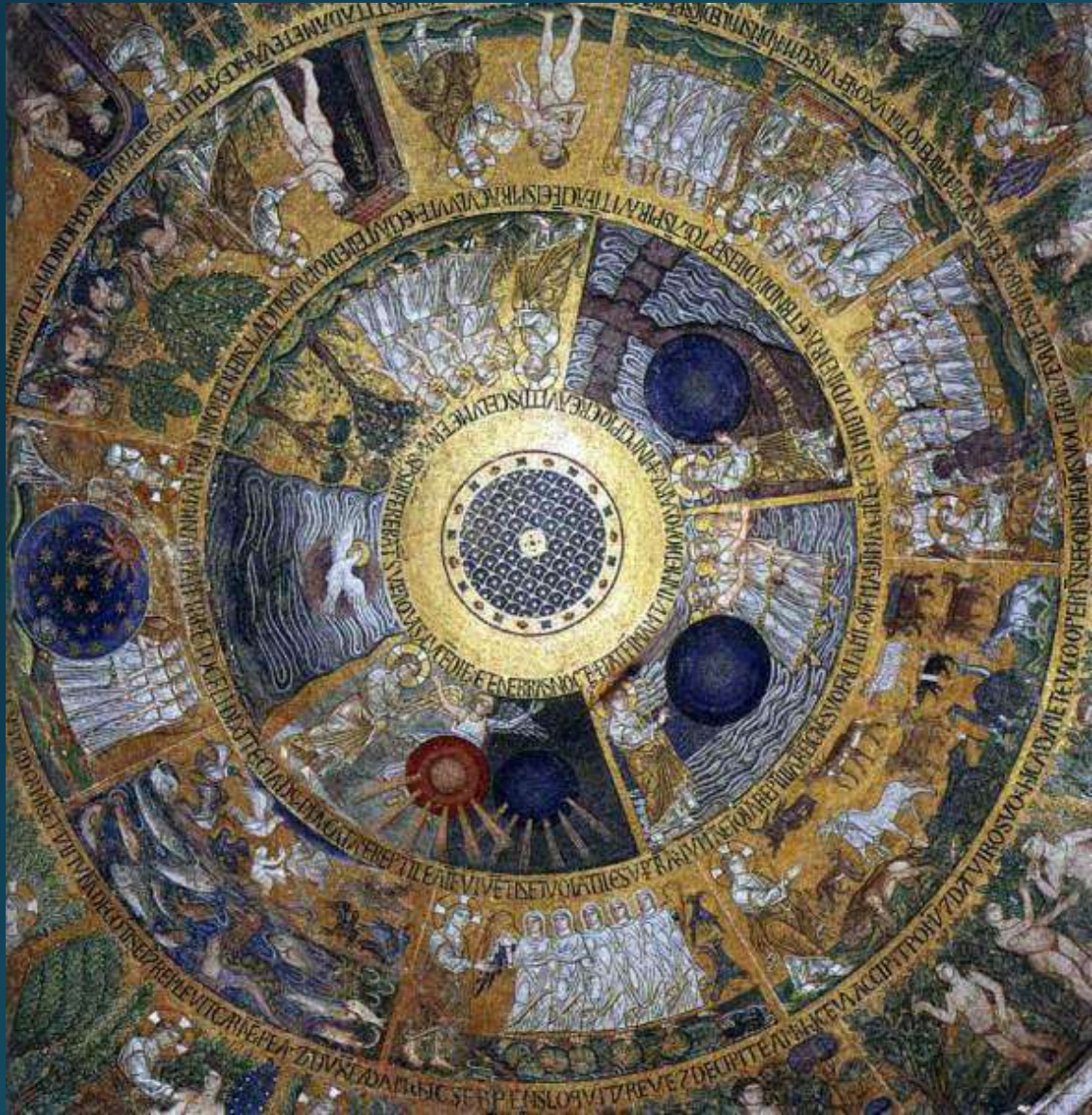


S Vitale Ravenna, 6th century

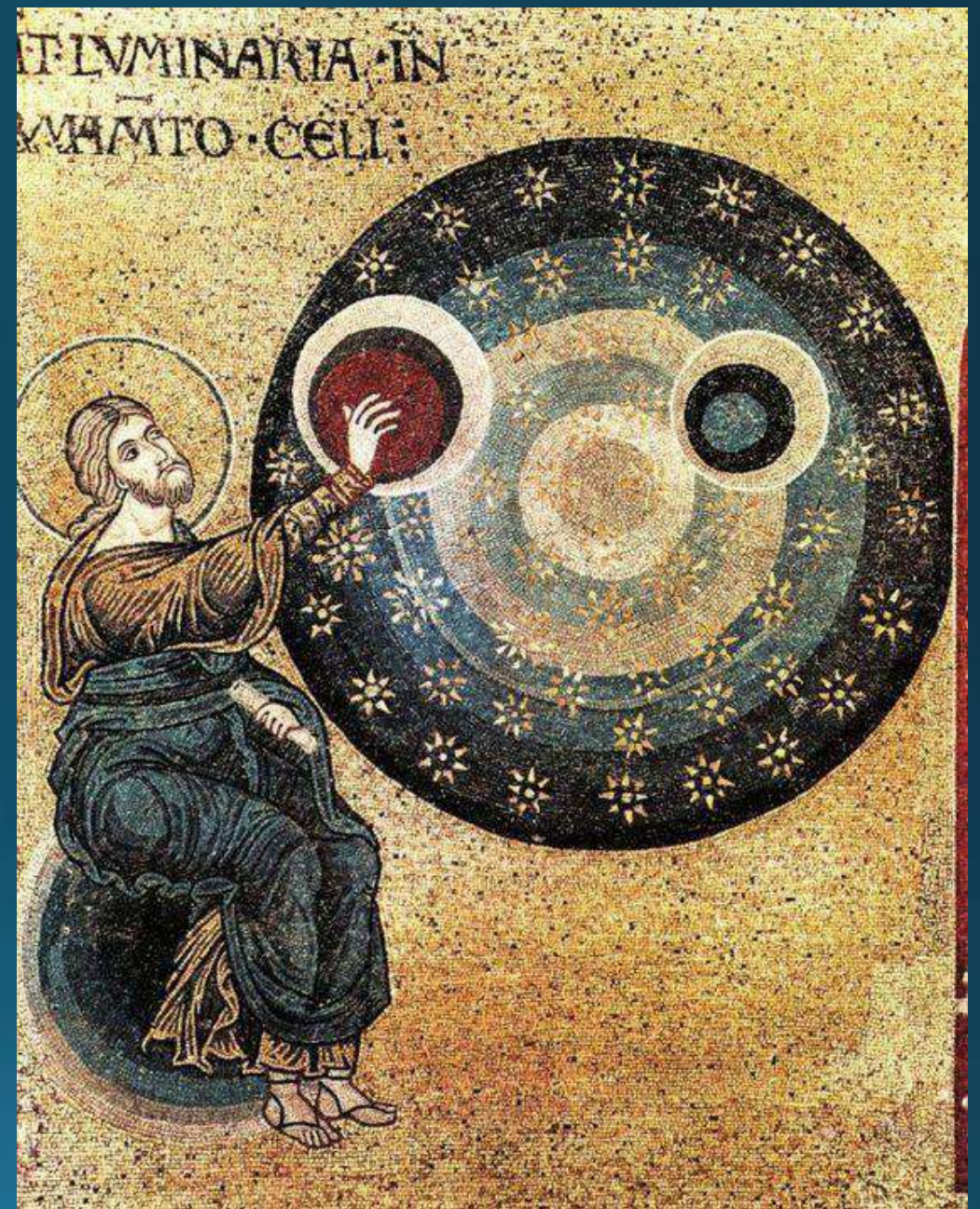




# Astronomy and Christian Iconography



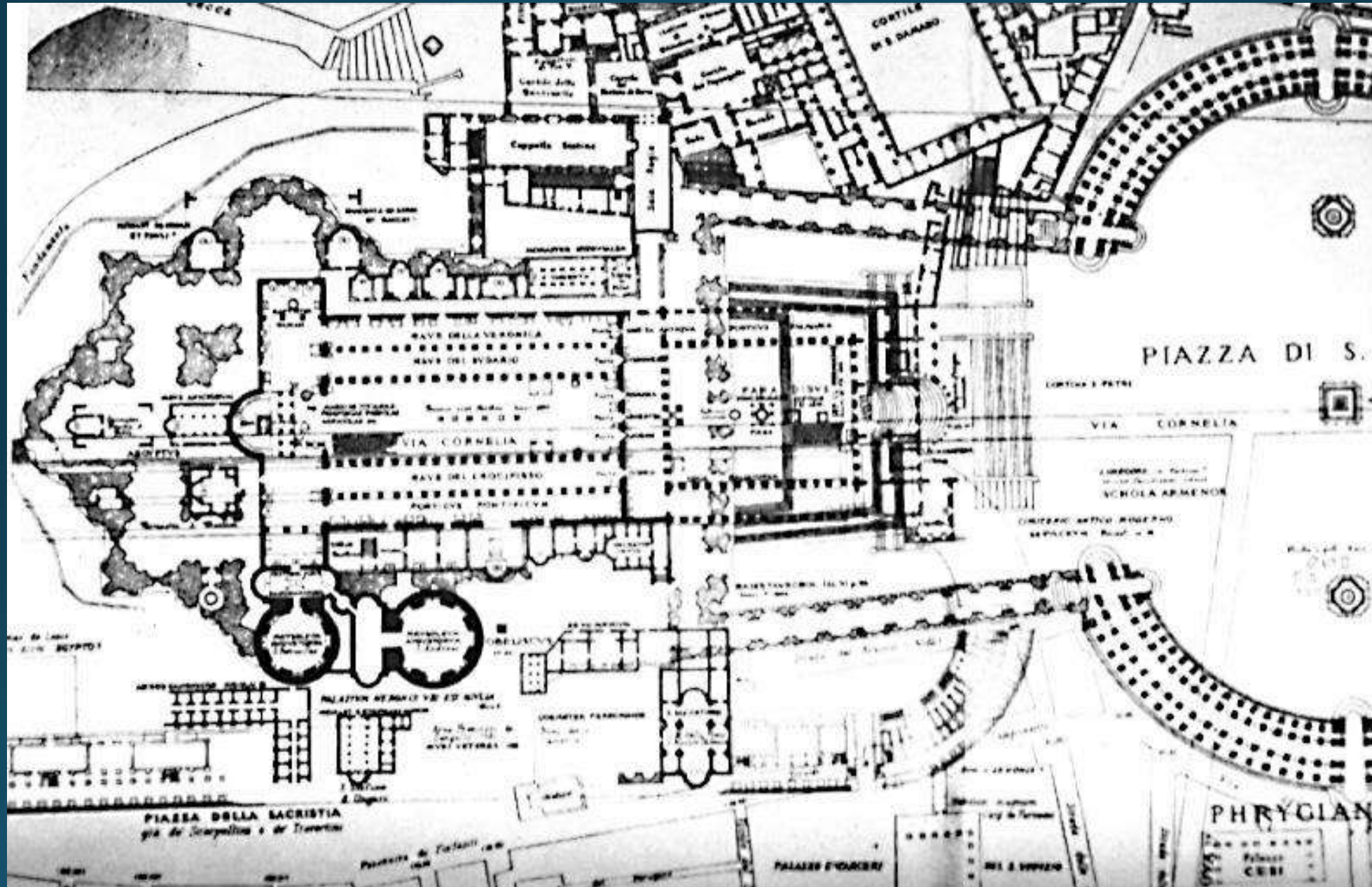
St Mark's Venice, *Creation*, 11th century



Monreale, Sicily *God Creating the Universe*, 1175

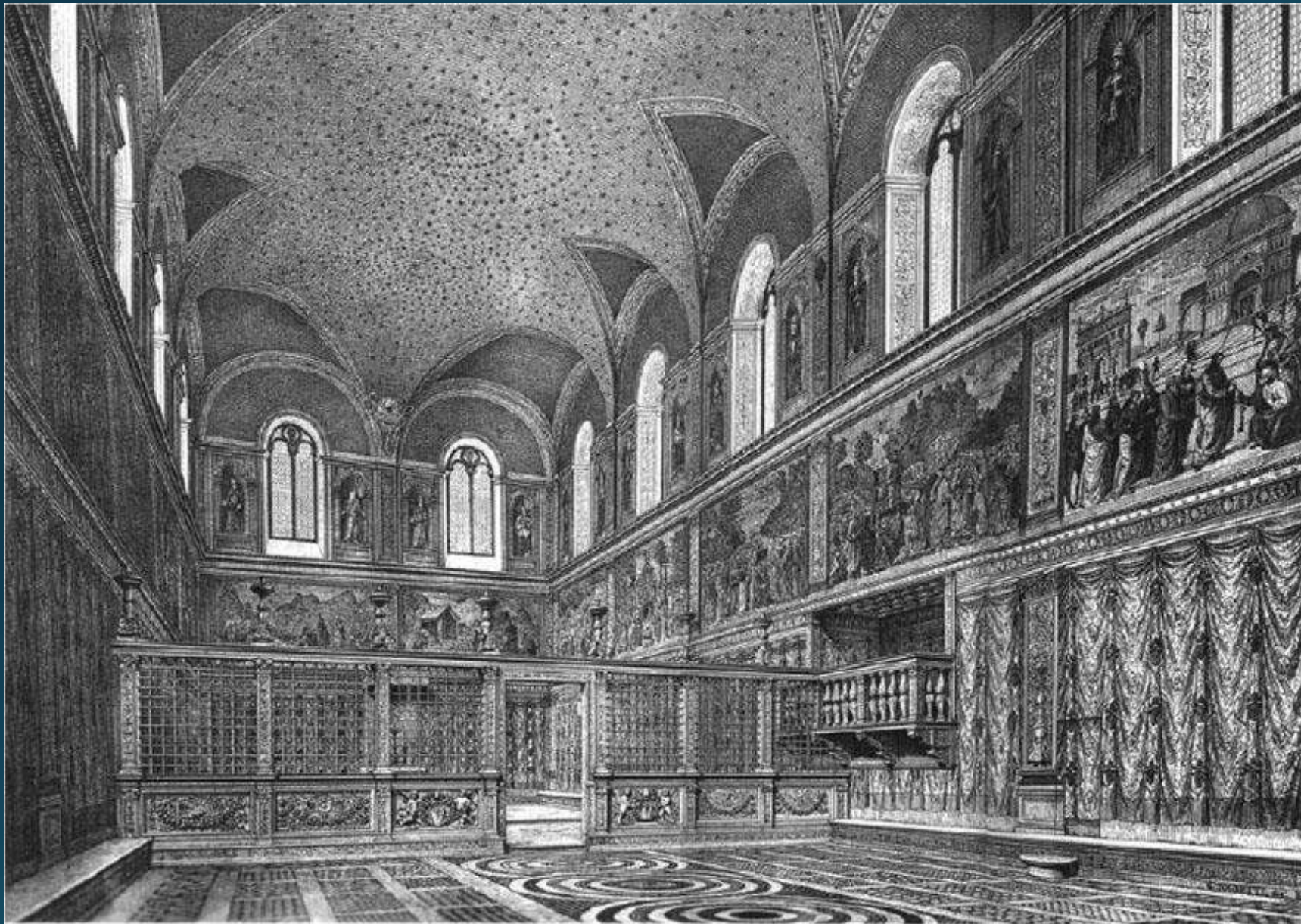


# Astronomy and Architecture - orientation



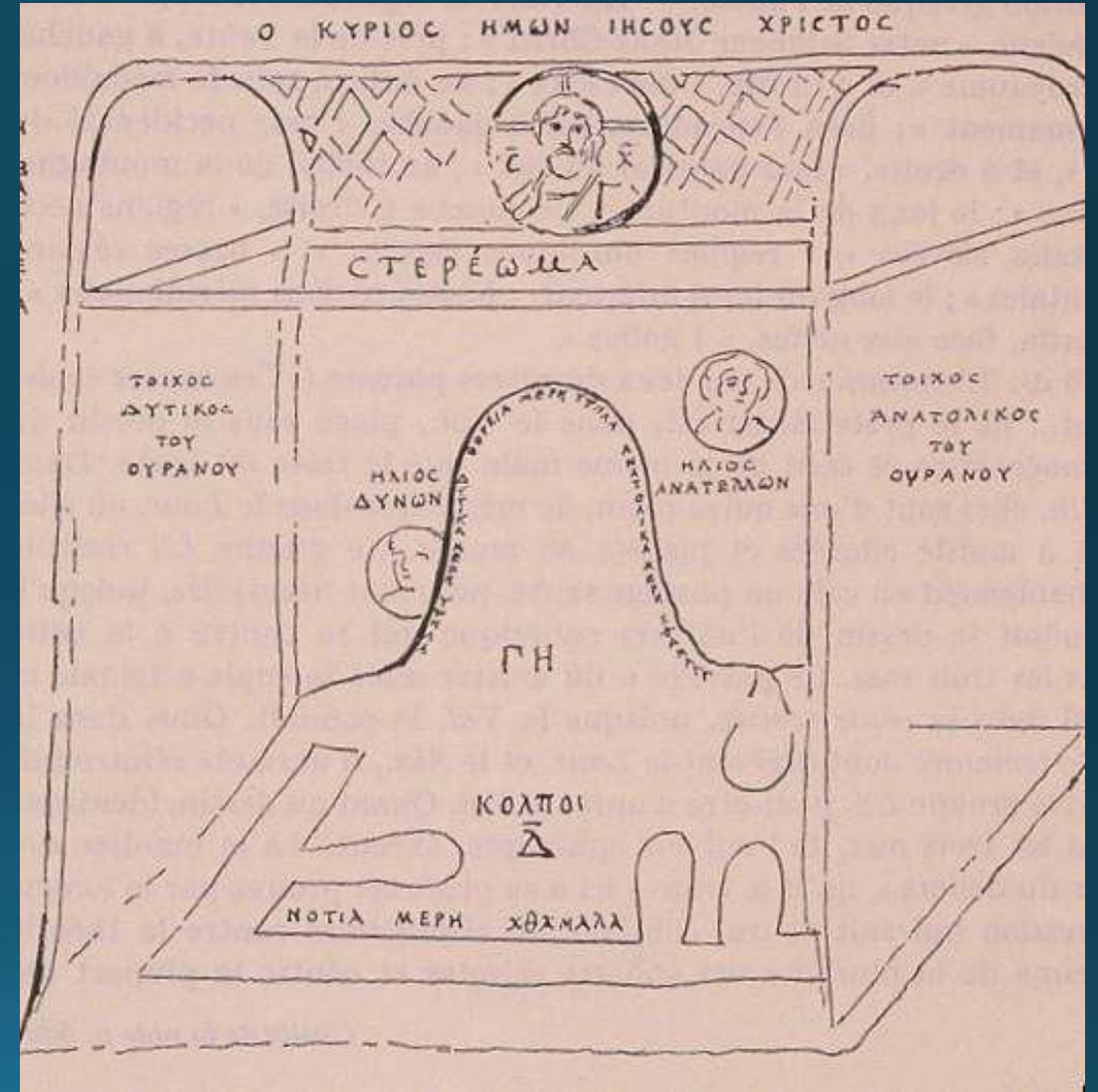


Sistine Chapel, 15th century (Temple of Solomon, 1 Kings 6)





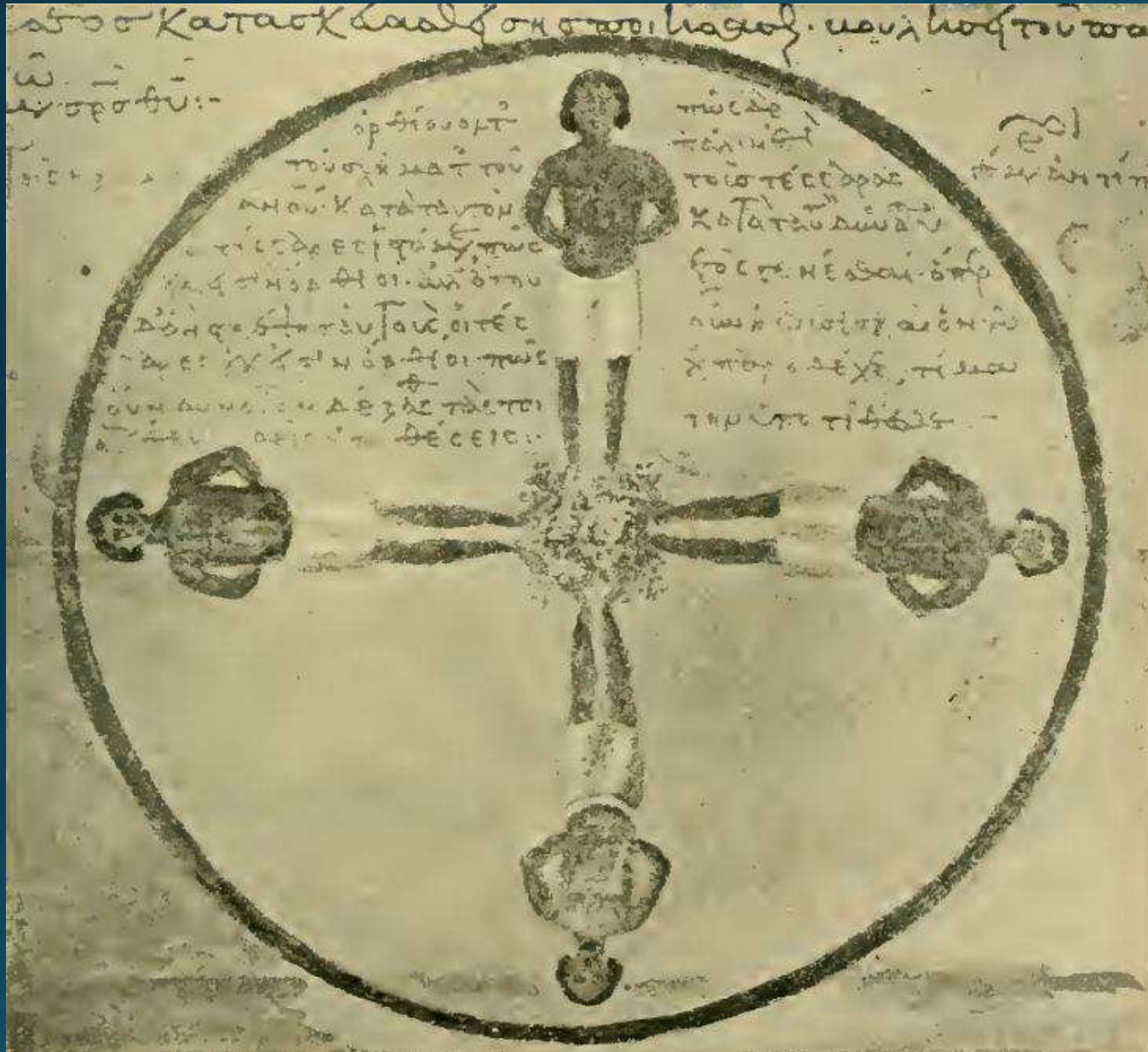
# Byzantine view of the cosmos/earth (6th century)



Cosmas Indicopleustes, *The Universe in Christian Topography* (painting and diagram)



# Cosmas' view of the earth/planet

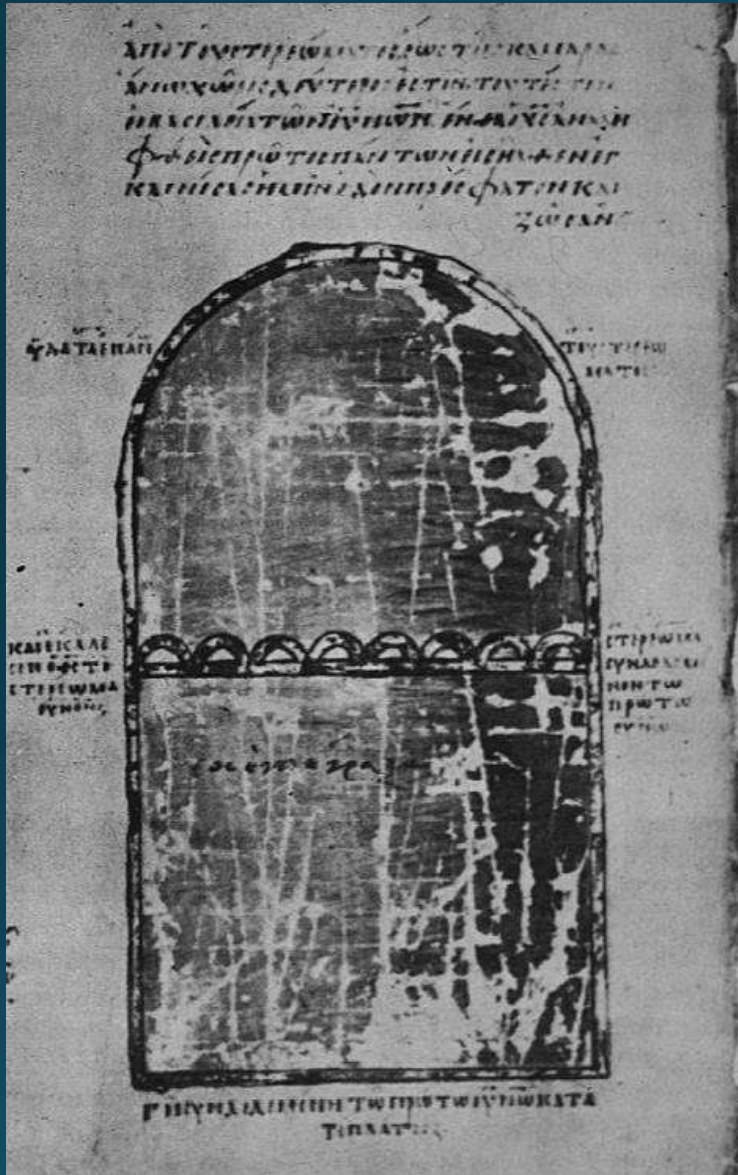


**Cosmas:** impossible to explain how rain should fall, how the earth could have become covered by 'the flood', or how there could be 'ascent to heaven' (*Christian Topography*)

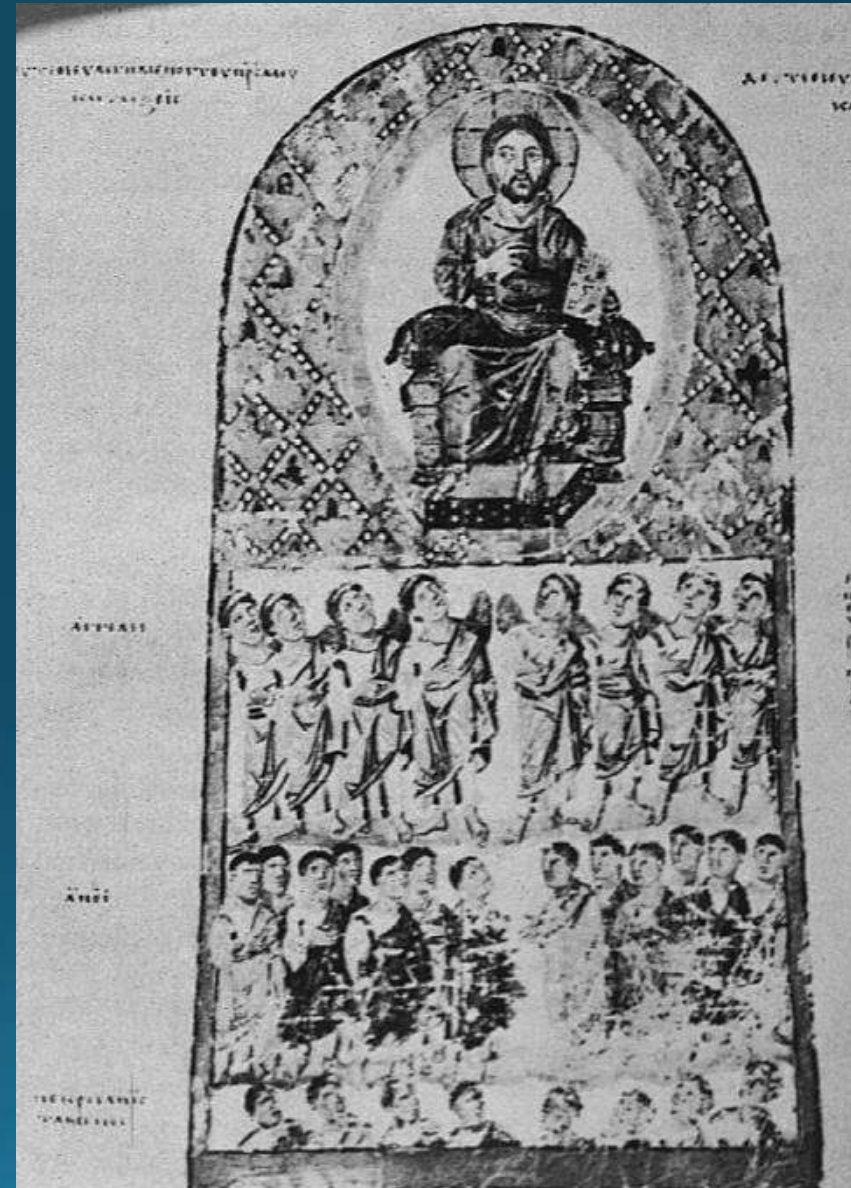
**Plato:** Seeing that the whole is spherical, the assertion that it has one region 'above' and one region 'below' does not become a man of sense  
*Timaeus* 63B



# View of the universe and depiction of the *Last Judgment*

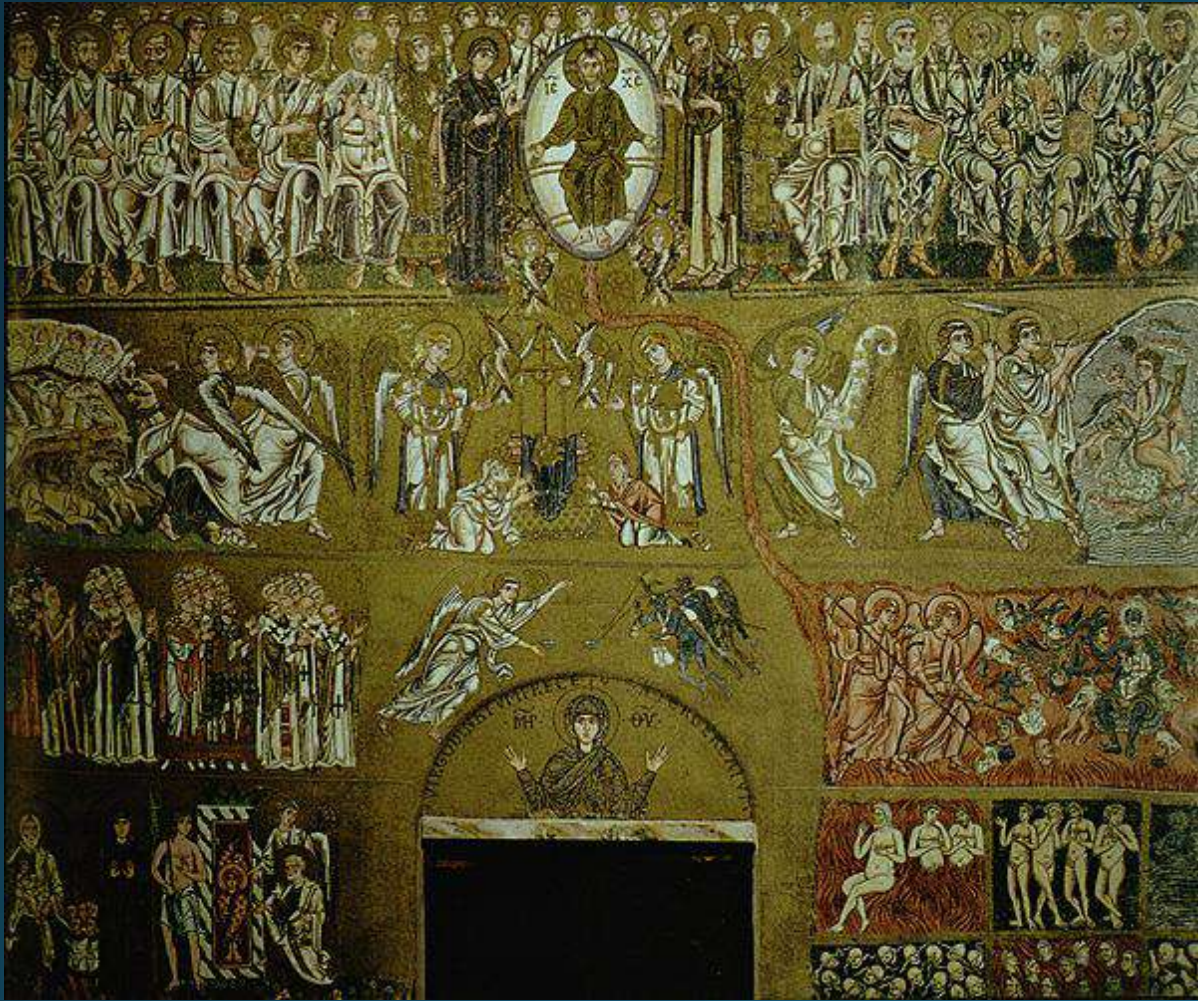


Cosmas Indicopleustes,  
*Universe*  
6th cent



*Last Judgment*  
6th century  
(VatGr699)





S Maria Assunta, Torcello, 12th century



Coppo di Marcovaldo, Florence Baptistery, late 13th century





Giotto, *Last Judgment*, c 1305

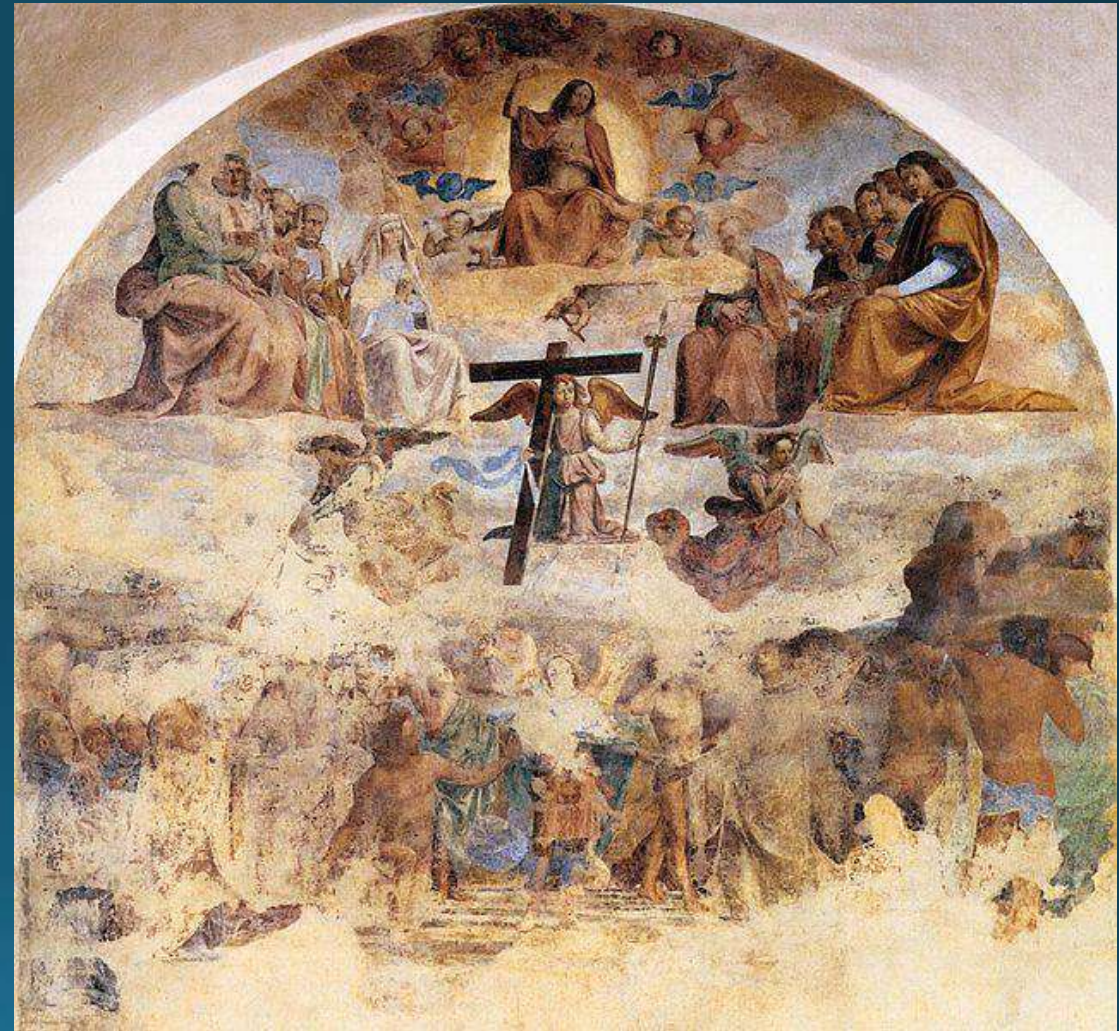


Giotto, detail, angels  
'rolling back the heavens'





Fra Angelico, c 1440



Fra Bartolommeo, S Marco, 1499-1500

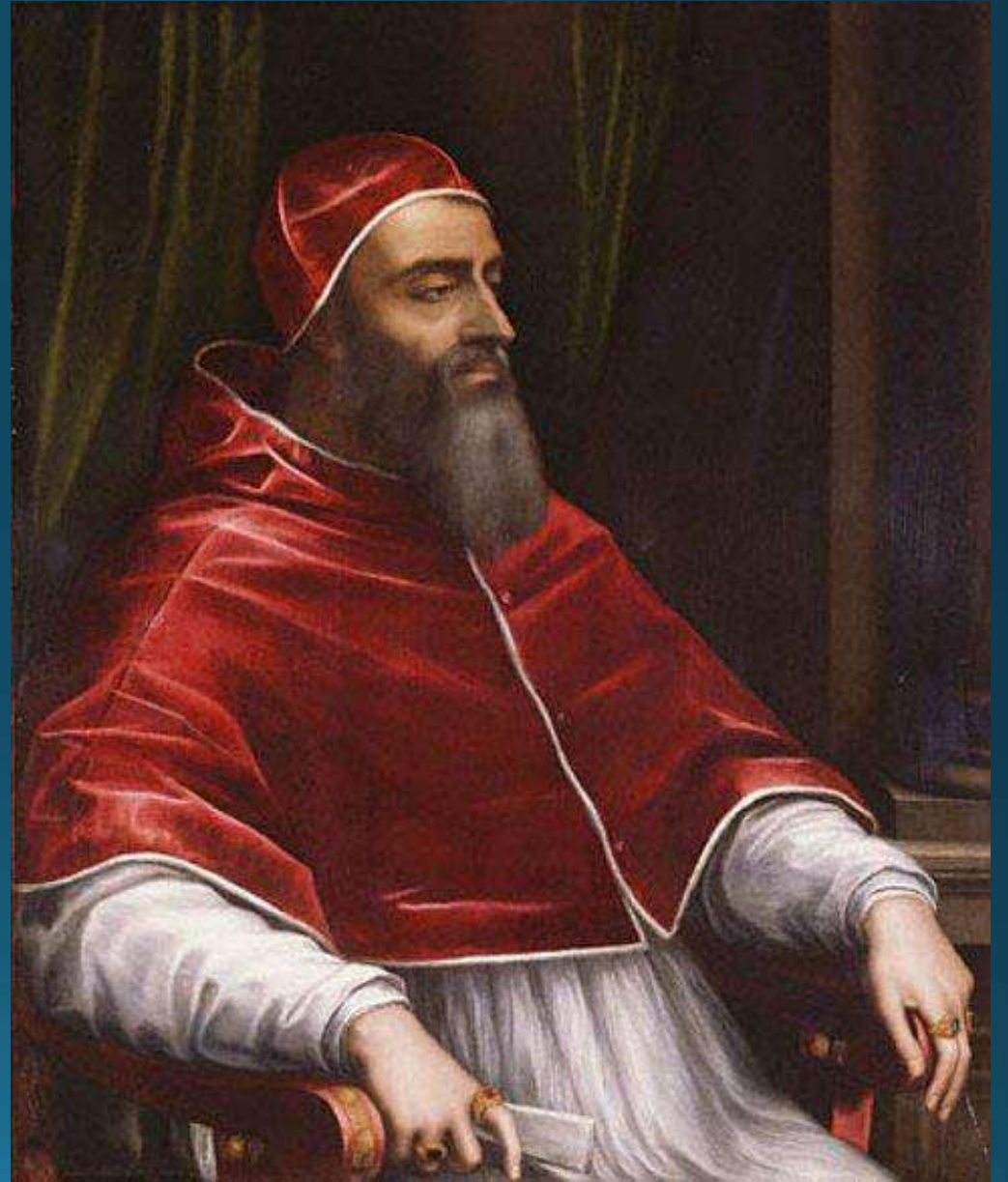


# The Commission - 22 September 1533



Clement VII  
Medici

Sebastiano del Piombo (1526 and 1531)







Bayonne drawing, 1533



Buonarroti drawing, 1534 (Rev 12)





Bayonne drawing, 1533



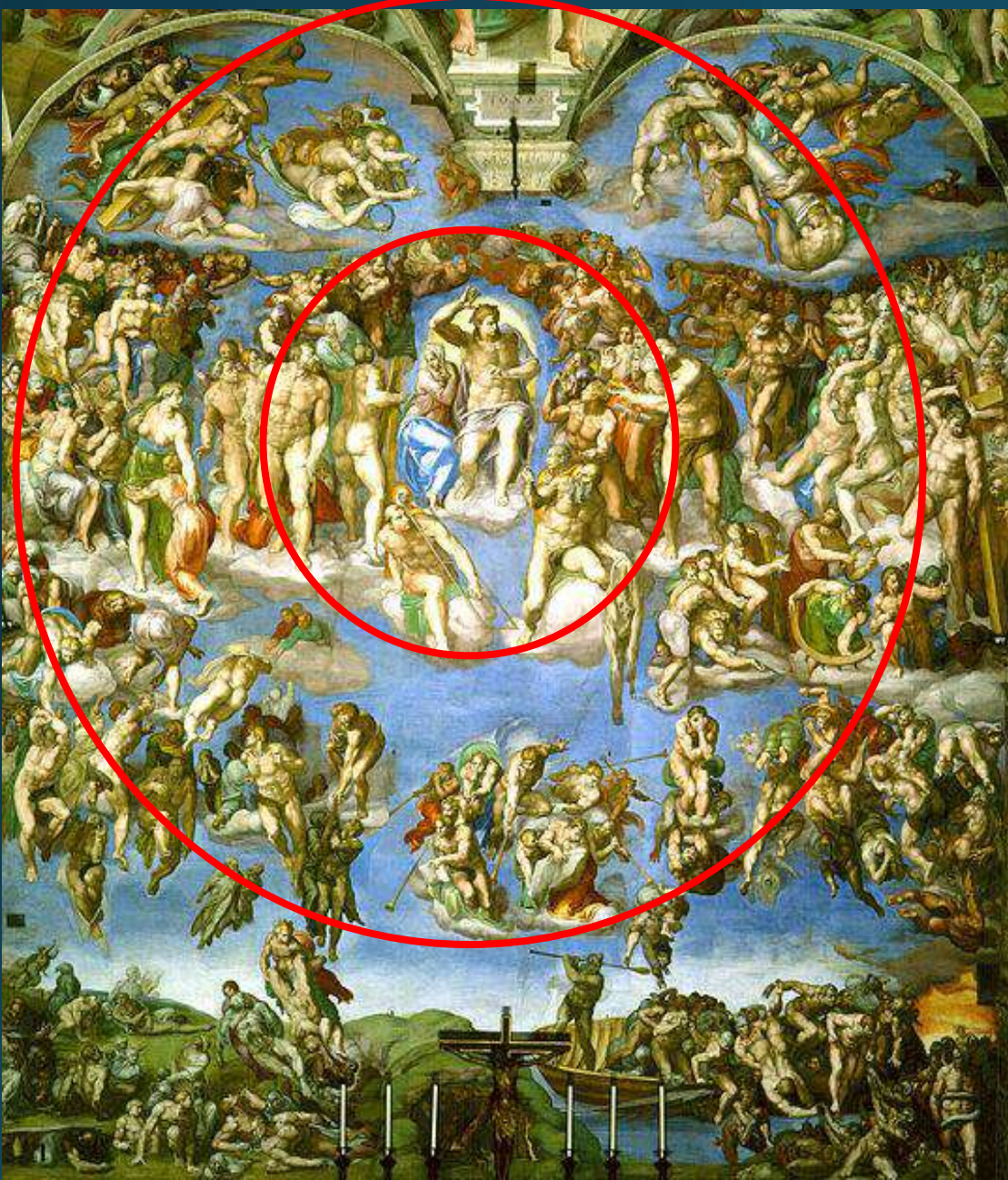
Buonarroti drawing, 1534 (Rev 12)



# Tradition and Innovation

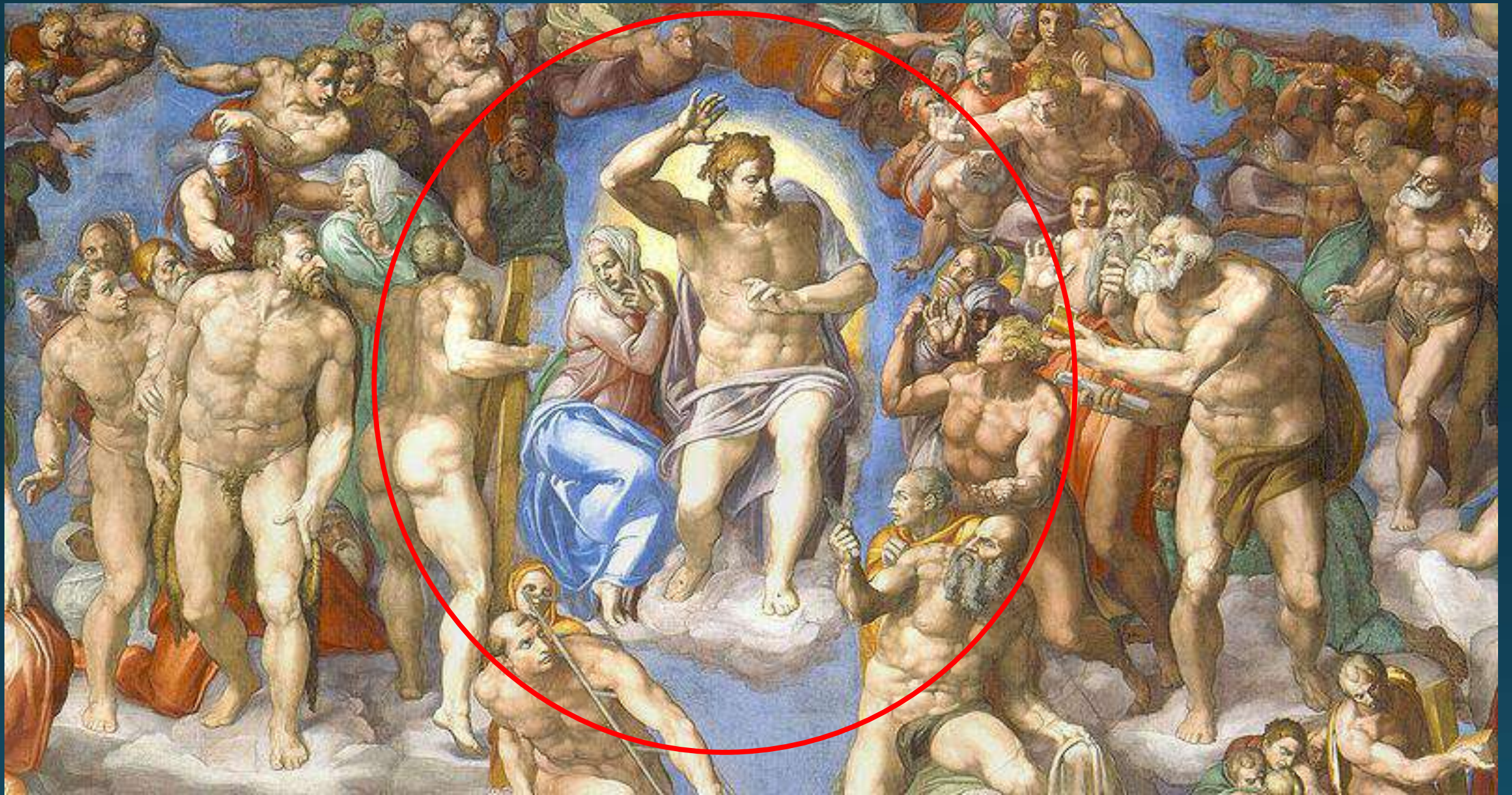
Michelangelo ... *'hid the mysteries under a veil that they might not be understood by the vulgar'*

(Pietro Aretino)



Inner and outer circles



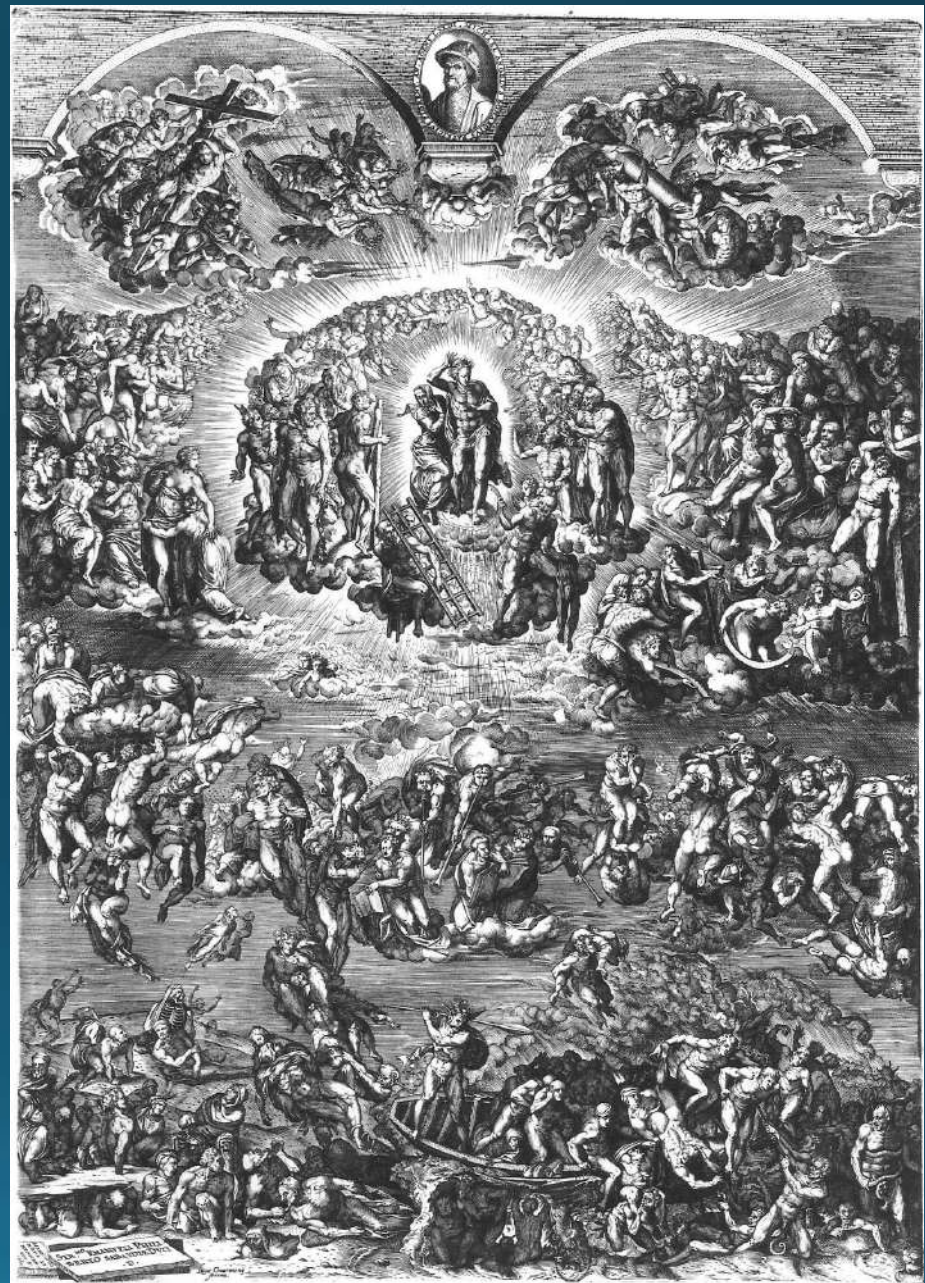


*Vasari 'in a circle around the figure of Christ are innumerable prophets ...'*





Marcello Venusti's copy, 1549



Martinus Rota's copy, 1569



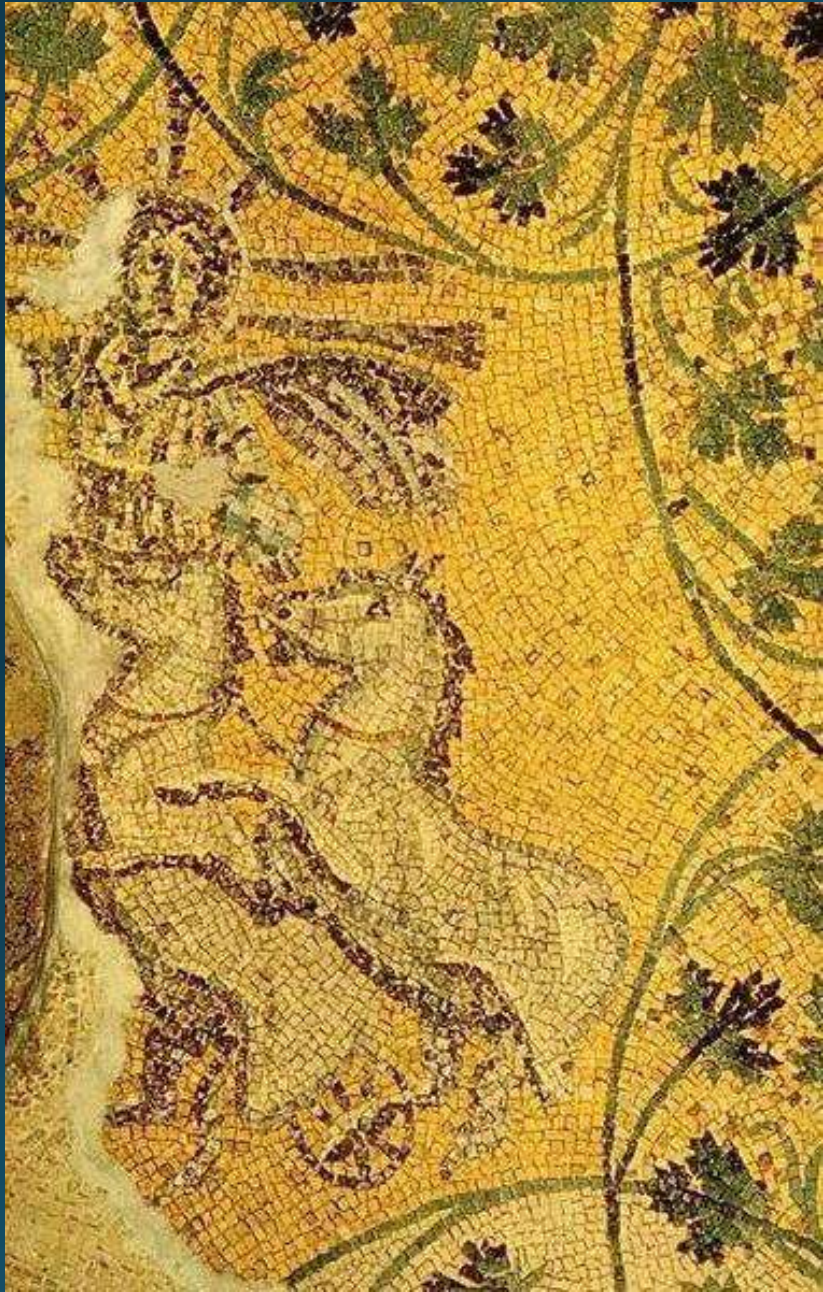
# Religious Sources

## Christ as the sun, the light of the world

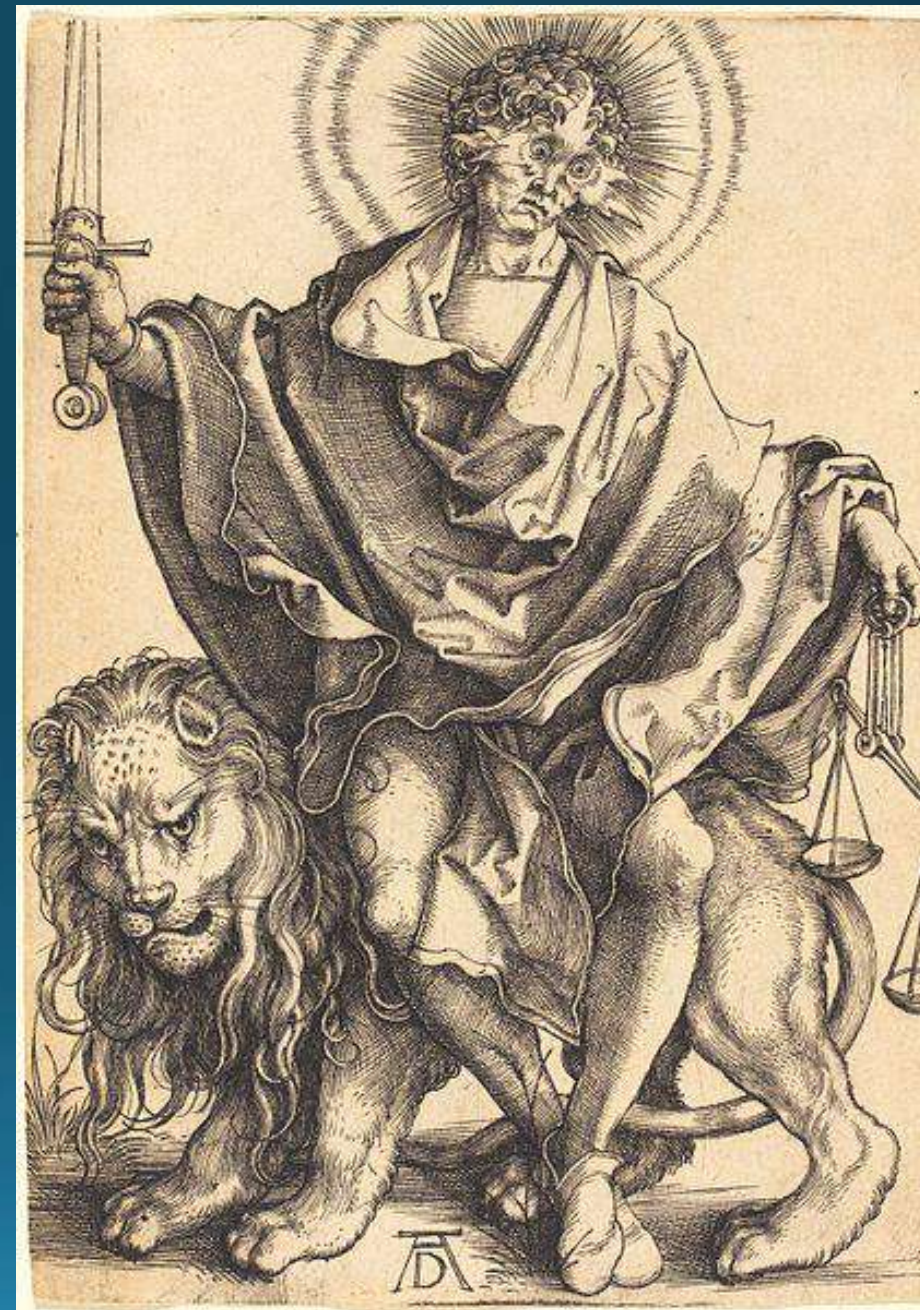
- I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall ... have the light of life (John 8:12)
- I am come as a light into the world (John 12:46)
- For the Lord God is a sun and a shield (Psalm 18:11)
- The sun of righteousness shall arise (Malachi 4:2)
- His face did shine as the sun (Matt 17:2)
- His countenance was as the sun (Revelation 1:16)



Christ as the Sun-God 3rd century, St Peter's



Durer *Sol Invictus* 1499-1500





Florence, Palazzo della Signoria, sun symbol with inscription 1528





# The Catholic Reformation

- Revival/emphasis on sun and light symbolism
- Writings of St Augustine
- The *Spirituali*, Illuminism, Viterbo Group
- To bring Protestants back into the fold
- Expressed in poems









# The centre of the universe?



T&O Map 1250 Jerusalem as centre (Ez 5:5)

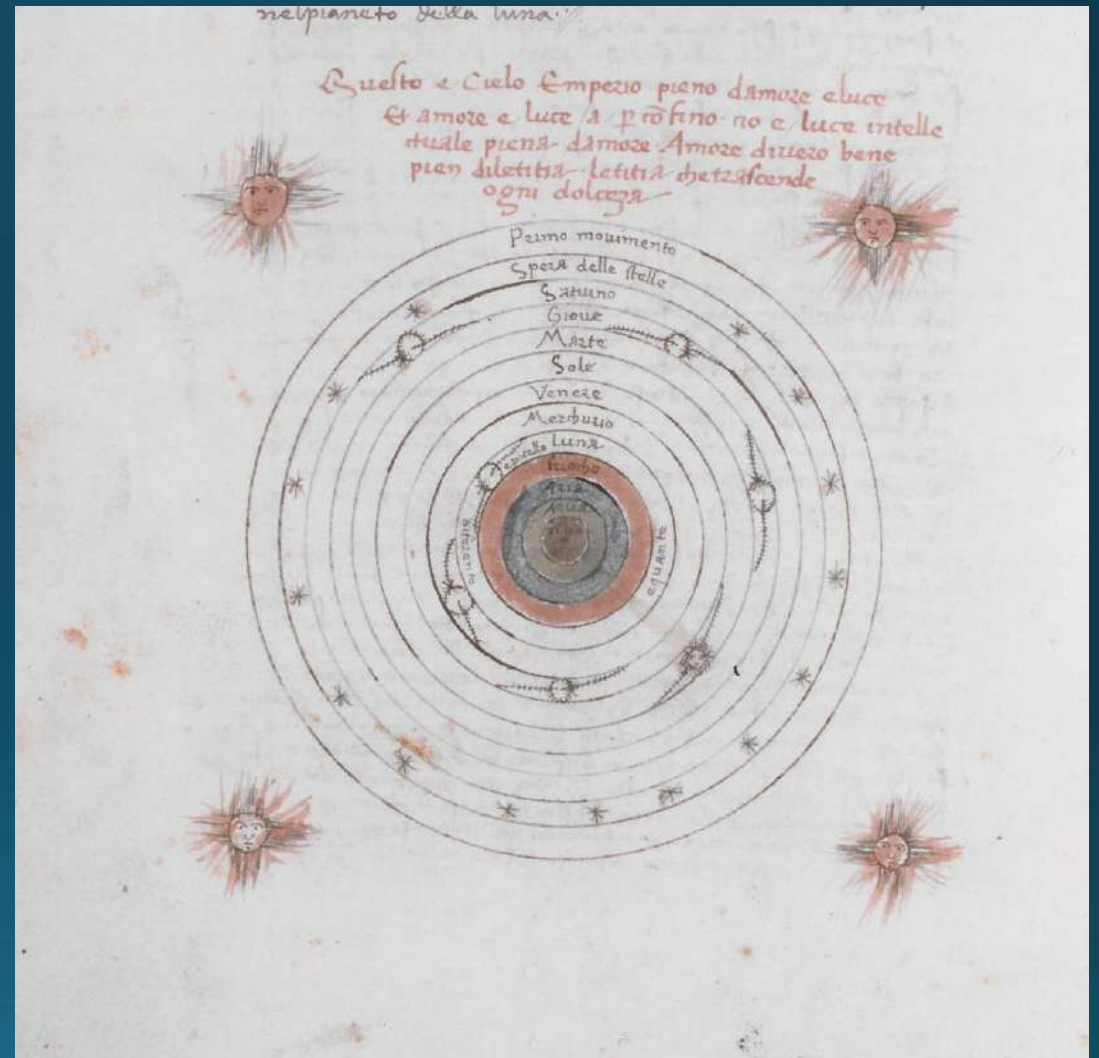
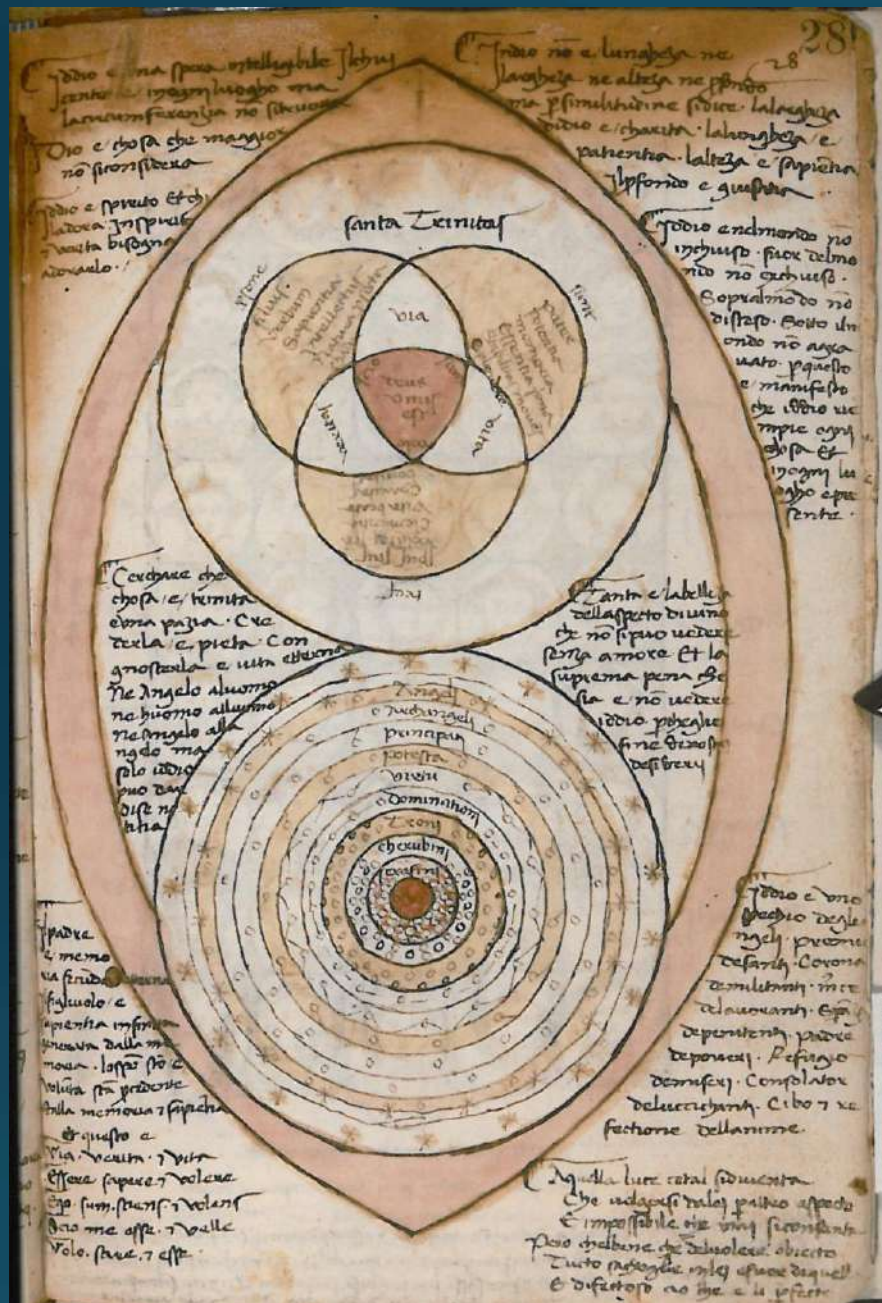
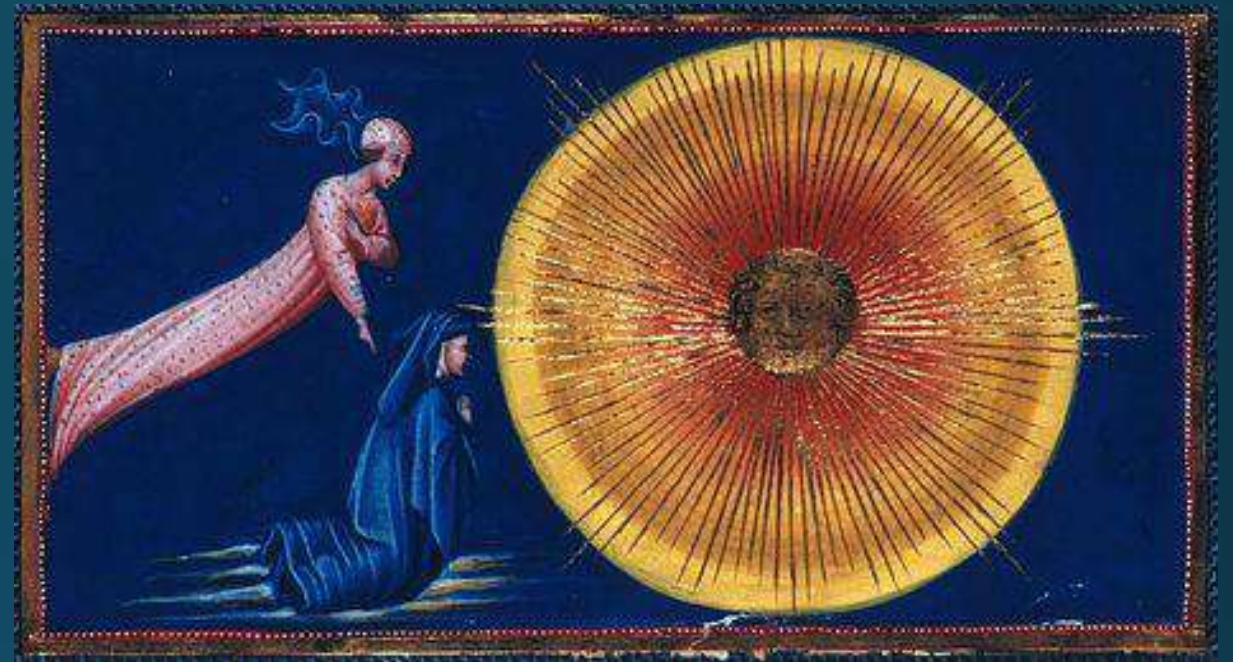


Diagram of Cosmos, Florence, 15<sup>th</sup> century (earth as centre/geocentric)





Dante schema, Buonaccorsi, 1440



Giovanni di Paolo Illustration to Paradiso 38, c 1450  
(God in the centre as sun)



Botticelli, *Paradiso*, 1490's

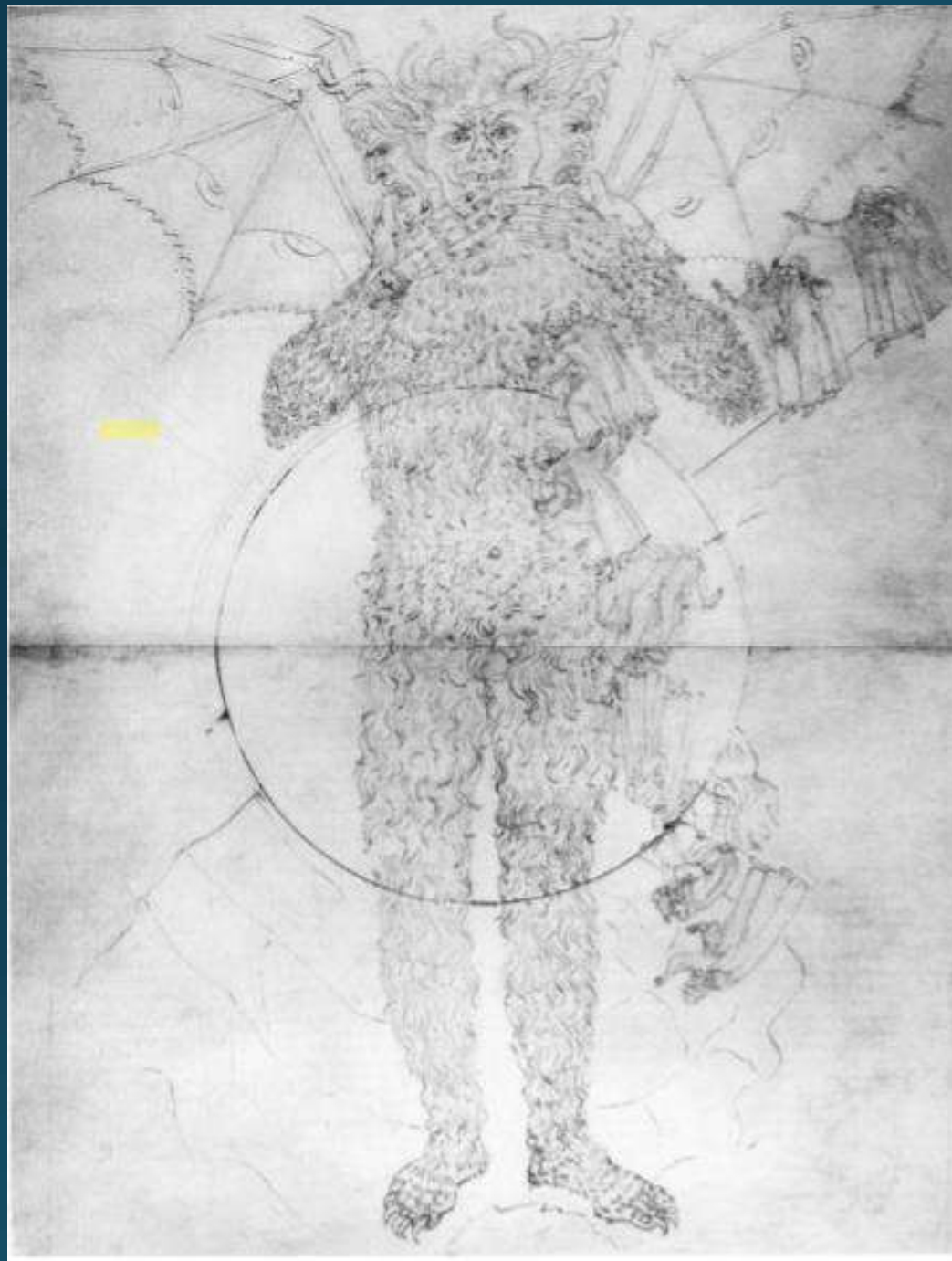
*I saw a Point that sent forth  
so acute a light ....*

*On yonder point depend the  
heavens and the whole of  
nature...'*

*(Paradiso, 28)*







Topography of Hell, Florence, late 15th century

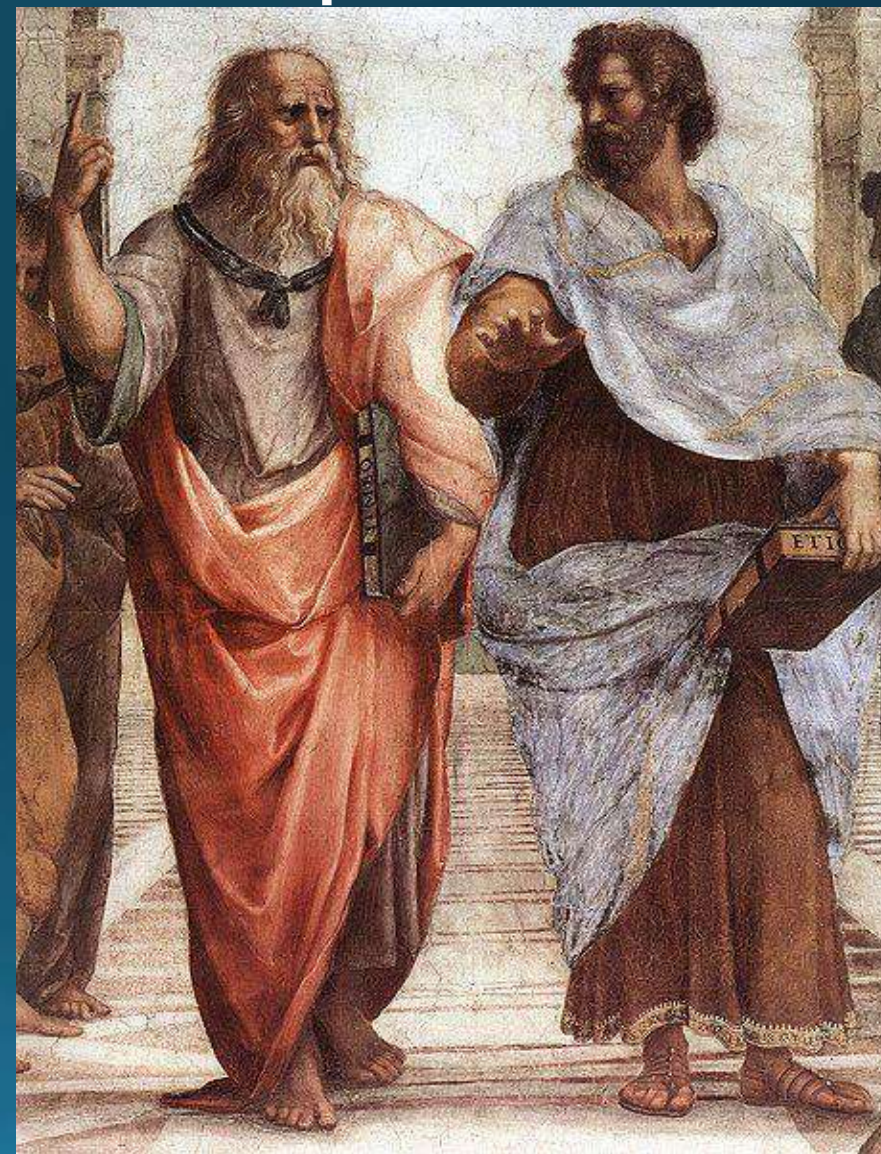


# Philosophical Sources



Raphael, *School of Athens*, 1510-11

# Neoplatonism



Detail, Plato with copy of *Timaeus*



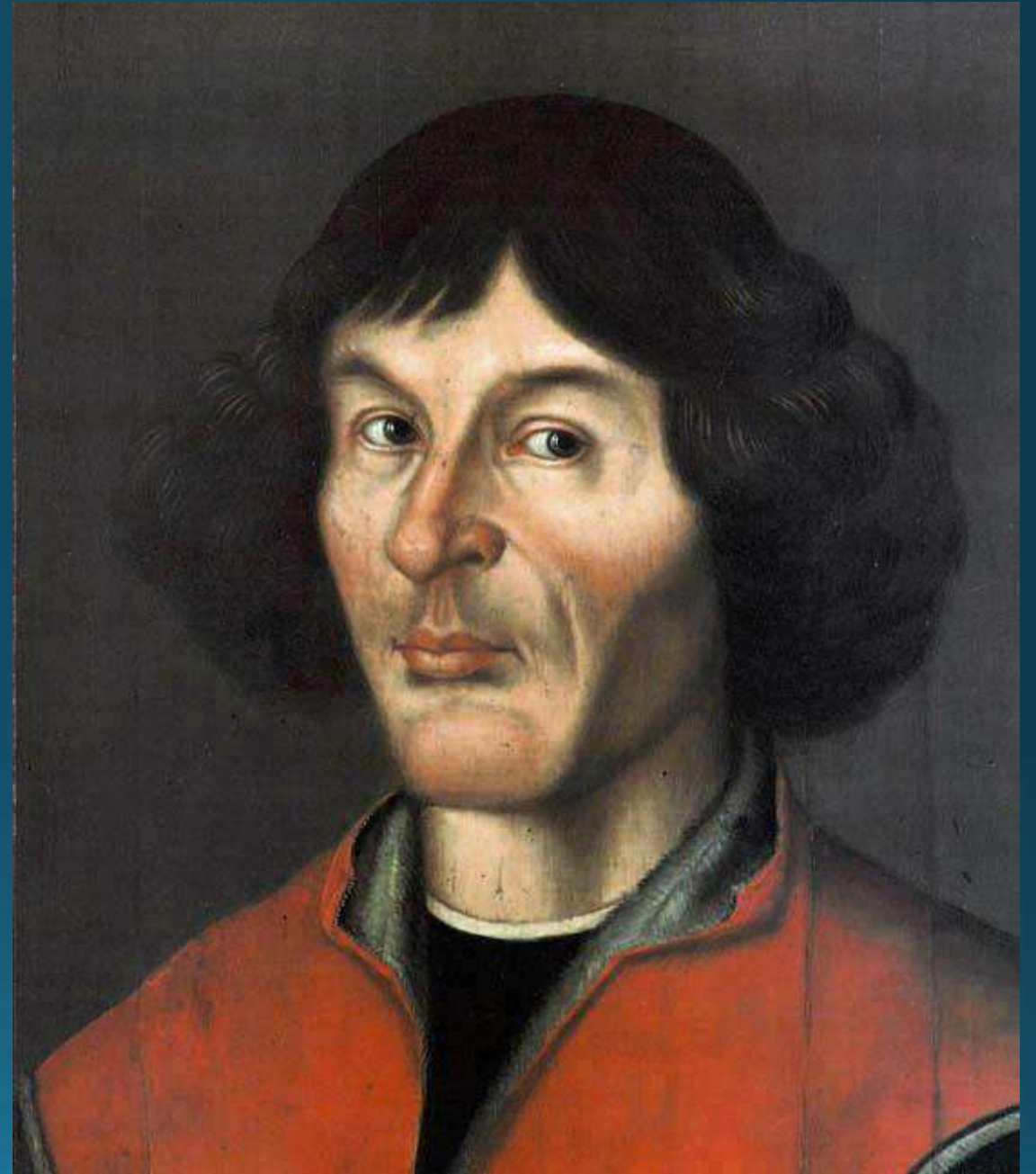
# Marsilio Ficino and Neoplatonism

- *The light for understanding all things is God ... and he [Plato] compares the Sun and God to each other (Republic 6)*
- *The greatest wonder in Nature...the middle **point** of all that is, the chain of the world, and the knot and bond of the universe (De Amore 3)*
- *The sun was the first to be created and was placed at the centre of the sky ... It sits, as if occupying a rock in the manner of a king*



# Scientific Sources

Nicholas Copernicus  
1473-1543





# Copernicus, 1490s-1530s

1496 - University of Bologna (7 years in Italy)

1500 - Public lectures, Rome

1514 - *Commentariolus*

1514 - Fifth Lateran Council

1524 - *Letter against Werner*

1531 - Satires on Copernicus

1530's - '*Conversations of the common people gathered in the evening in the Piazza del Duomo*' - Anton Francesco Doni

1539 - '*upstart astrologer*' - Luther

Not a heretic? (canon, priest?)





## Copernicus, 1473-1543

1491-94 Copernicus at Kracow

1496-03 Copernicus in Italy

1496 Copernicus in Bologna

- Domenico Novara
- Bentivogli
- Pico della Mirandola
- Luca Pacioli
- Leonardo da Vinci

1500 Copernicus in Rome

1530s Early publications and  
publicity

1530s eg Doni's observations

## Michelangelo, 1475-1564

1490s Michelangelo in Florence

1496 Michelangelo in Bologna

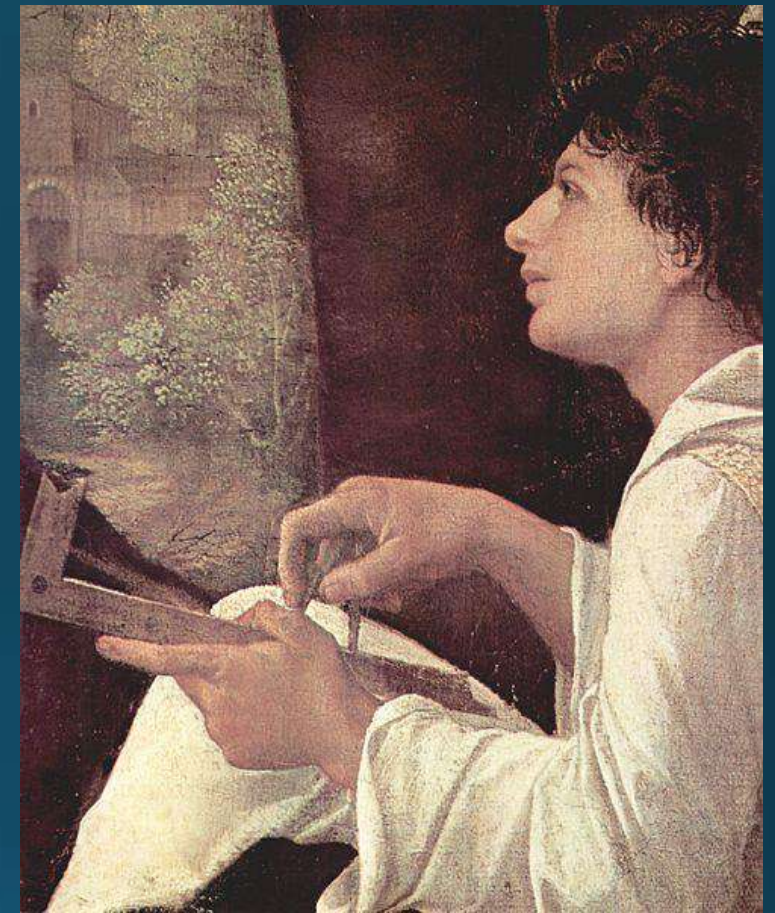
- Francesco Aldovrandi
- Bentivogli
- Ficino
- Pico della Mirandola

1500 Michelangelo in Rome

1530s Florence (corresponded  
with Doni)

1533 17 July 'a contract for such  
a thing...'





Giorgione, *Three Philosophers*, 1509-10



Clemens VII. Pont. Max. hunc Codicem  
mihi D. DD. Anno M D XXXIII  
Romae postquam ei praesentibus Fr. Ursino,  
Joh. Salviato Card. Joh. Petro Ep. Viter-  
biens. et Mattaeo Curtio Medico phy-  
sico in hortis Vaticanis Copernicana  
de motu terra sententiam explicavi.

Joh. Albertus Widmanstadius  
cogn. Luerctius, 3<sup>mi</sup> D.  
N. Secretarius domesticus  
et familiaris.

Vidit Pius VI. Pont. Max. 30. Aprilis 1782.  
cum Vindobonae redire Monachii afoerit

Reigenberger Biblioth.



6. 33.

# Codex Graecus Monacensis 151

Clemens VII, Pontifex Maximus hunc  
codicem mihi dono dedit Anno  
MDXXXIII Romae, postquam ei,  
praesentibus Fr Ursino, Joh. Salviato  
Cardinalibus, Joh. Petro episcopo  
Viterbiensi, et Mattaeo Curtio Medico  
physico in hortis Vaticanis Copernicana  
de motu terrae sententiam explicavi.

Joh. Albertus Widmanstadius



Clemens VII. Pont. Max. hunc Codicem  
mibi D. DD. Anno M D XXXIII  
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cum Vindobonae sedes Monachii afoerit

Steigerberger Biblioth.



6. 33.

# Codex Graecus Monacensis 151

Clement VII Supreme Pontiff presented this codex to me as a gift AD 1533, in Rome, after I had, in the presence of Fra Ursino, Cardinal Joh. Salviati, Joh. Petrus Bishop of Viterbo, and Matthias Curtius, medical physician, explained to him in the garden of the Vatican, Copernicus' teaching concerning the motion of the earth

Joh. Albertus Widmanstadius



*Last Judgment* Commissioned 22 September 1533 (Clement VII, Paul III Farnese)



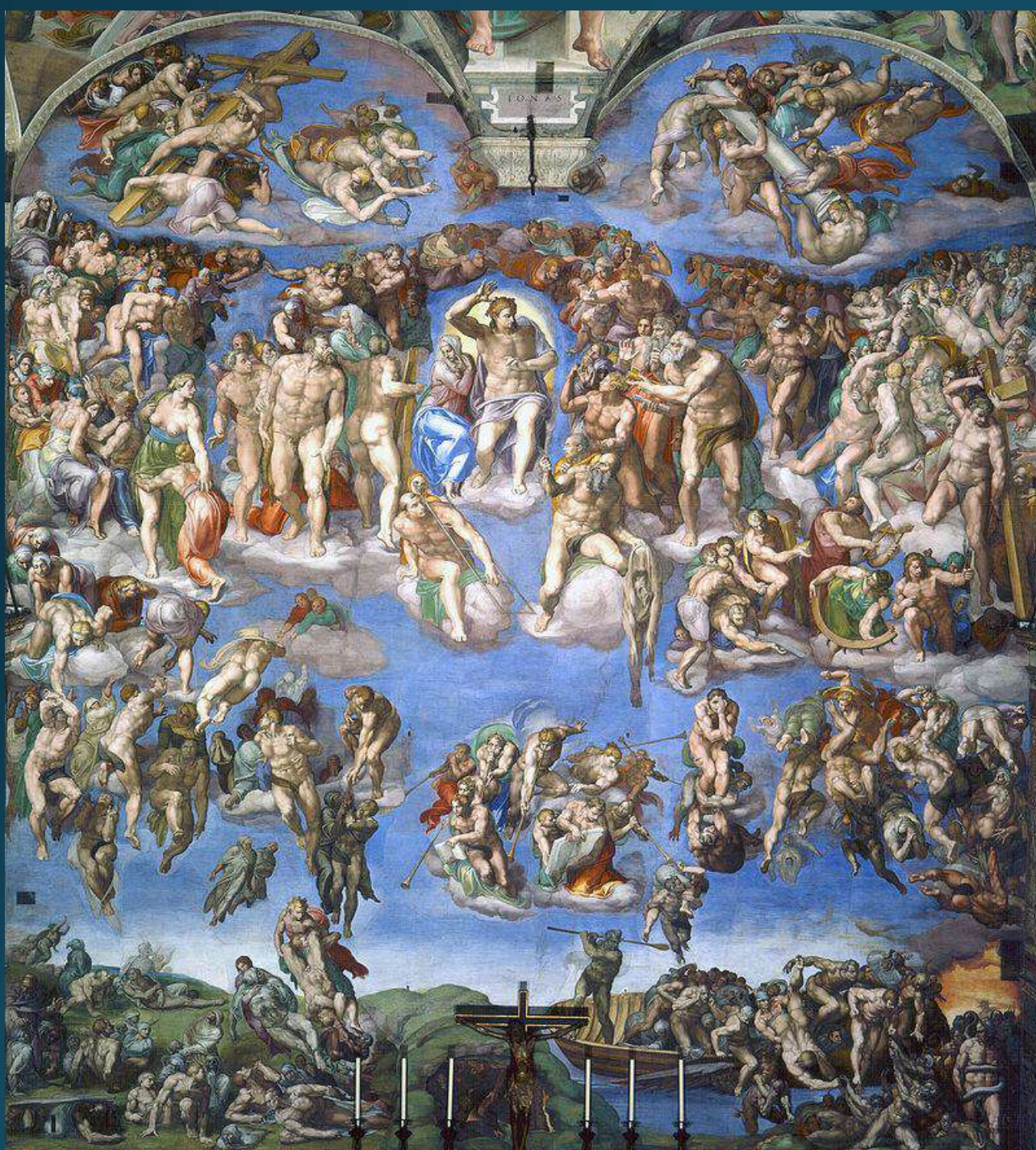


Letter from  
Cardinal  
Schoenberg  
to Copernicus  
17 November  
1536

*Some years ago word reached me concerning your proficiency of which everybody constantly spoke ....  
I learned that you had formulated a new cosmology... you maintain that the earth moves; that the sun occupies the most central place in the universe....  
I entreat you to communicate this discovery of yours to scholars ....*

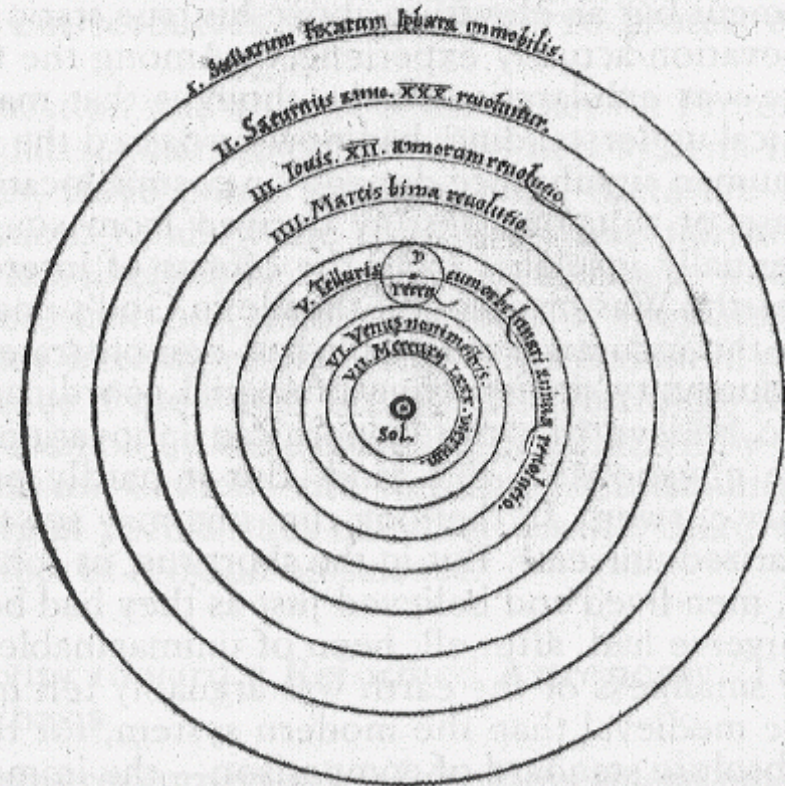
- *Narratio prima*, 1540
- *Revolutions* dedicated to Paul III, 1543





NICOLAI COPERNICI

net, in quo terram cum orbe lunari tanquam epicyclo contineri diximus. Quinto loco Venus nono mense reducitur. Sextum denique locum Mercurius tenet, octuaginta dierum spacio circū currens. In medio uero omnium residet Sol. Quis enim in hoc



pulcherimo templo lampadem hanc in alio uel meliori loco poneret, quàm unde totum simul possit illuminare? Siquidem non inepte quidam lucernam mundi, alij mentem, alij rectorem uocant. Trimegistus uisibilem Deum, Sophoclis Electra intuentē omnia. Ita profecto tanquam in solio re gali Sol residens circum agentem gubernat Astorum familiam. Tellus quoque minime fraudatur lunari ministerio, sed ut Aristoteles de animalibus ait, maximā Luna cū terra cognationē habet. Concipit interea à Sole terra, & impregnatur annuo partu. Inuenimus igitur sub hac



ΑΓΙΟΥ ΠΑΥΛΟΥ ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ  
ΚΑΙ ΤΟΥ ΚΑΙΣΑΡΕΩΣ

ΑΓΙΟΥ ΠΑΥΛΟΥ  
ΚΑΙ ΤΟΥ ΚΑΙΣΑΡΕΩΣ



ΑΓΙΟΥ ΠΑΥΛΟΥ



ΑΓΙΟΥ

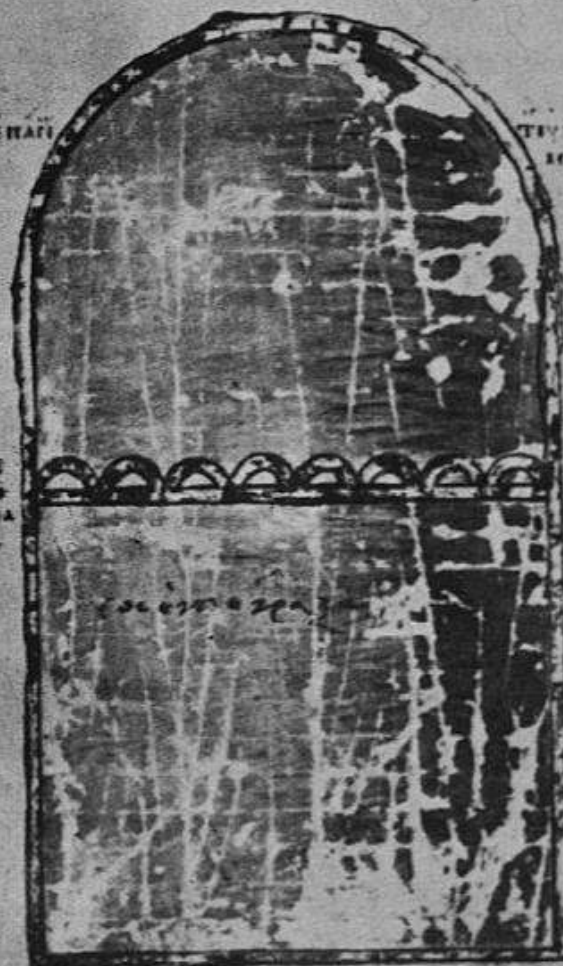


ΑΓΙΟΥ ΠΑΥΛΟΥ  
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ΚΑΙ ΤΟΥ ΚΑΙΣΑΡΕΩΣ

ΑΓΙΟΥ ΠΑΥΛΟΥ ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ  
ΚΑΙ ΤΟΥ ΚΑΙΣΑΡΕΩΣ



# The 'secret' of the fresco



# Revelation 19:16-17







And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS .... And I saw an angel standing in the sun...‘

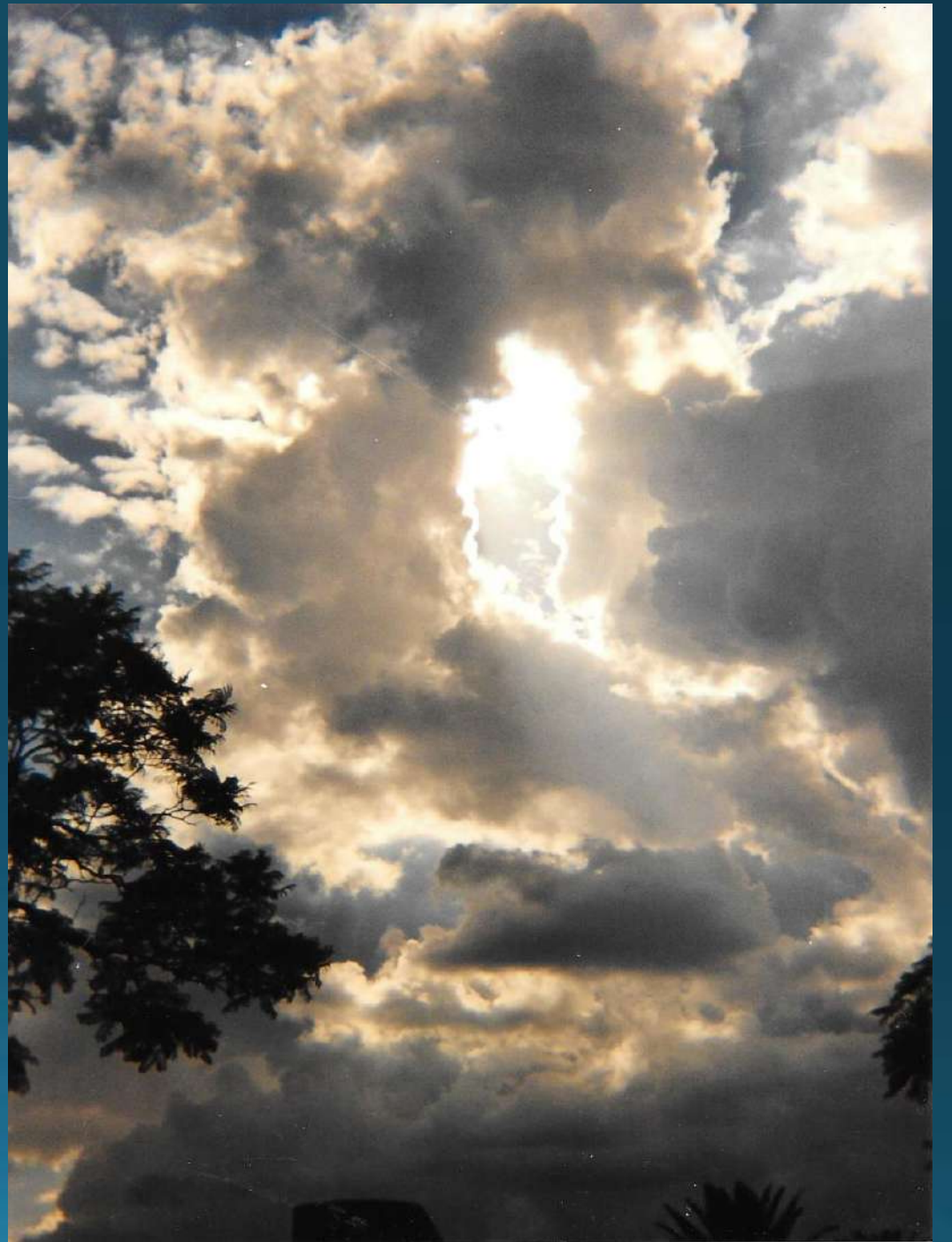
... et habet in vestimento et in femore suo scriptum *Rex Regum et Dominus Dominantium*



Florence, Palazzo della Signoria, sun symbol 1528  
NB inscription: *Rex Regem et Dominus Dominantium*









## Copernicus, 1473-1543

- 1491-4 Copernicus at Cracow
- 1496-03 Copernicus in Italy
- 1496 Copernicus in Bologna
- 1500 Copernicus in Rome
- 1514 Copernicus' *Commentariolus*
- 1514 Fifth Lateran Council
- 1524 *Letter against Werner*
- 1531 Satires on Copernicus
- 1533 Lecture in Vatican (June)
- 1536 Schönberg's letter
- 1539 Luther against Copernicus
- 1540 *Narratio Prima*
- 1541 Second edition, *Narratio Prima*
- 1542 Revival of Inquisition
- 1543 Death, *Revolutions*
- 1544/45 Opposition commences

## Michelangelo, 1475-1564

- 1496 Michelangelo in Bologna
- 1500 Michelangelo in Rome
- 1500-34 In Rome/Florence
- 1533 17 July 'a contract for such a thing...'
- 1533 22 Sept, Michelangelo, Clement VII meet at S Miniato (and Farnese)
- 1533 'Bayonne' drawing of LJ
- 1534 'Buonarroti' drawing of LJ
- 1534 Sept, Michelangelo returns to Rome; Clement VII dies; Paul III pope
- 1536 painting began (April/May)
- 1536 17 Nov, Papal breve on LJ
- 1541 31 Oct, completion/unveiling
- 1542 Pauline frescoes
- 1543 Superintendent for frescoes
- 1545 Opposition to LJ commences



# Selected References

- *Sun-symbolism and Cosmology in Michelangelo's Last Judgment* (2000), Kirksville, Mo: Truman State University Press
- *Michelangelo, Copernicus and the Sistine Chapel: The Last Judgment Decoded* (2013) Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing
- 'Sun-symbolism and Cosmology in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*,' (1990) *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 21 (4), 607-643
- *Journal of the History of Astronomy* (2000) xxxi, pp 156-160
- Gresham College lecture (YouTube)
- Wikimedia Commons, for illustrations



Thank you!





SUN SYMBOLISM  
AND COSMOLOGY  
IN MICHELANGELO'S  
"LAST JUDGMENT"



Valerie Shrimplin



Valerie Shrimplin

Michelangelo, Copernicus  
and the Sistine Chapel

The Last Judgment Decoded

LAP LAMBERT  
Academic Publishing