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### Communication in A Visual Mode: Papal Apse Mosaics

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## Communication in a visual mode: papal apse mosaics

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### ABSTRACT

Apse mosaics are a form of visual communication employed by popes throughout the Middle Ages, from the sixth through to the thirteenth centuries. This essay examines the nature of this visual mode and the means by which viewers could understand it. A theory of viewing widely attributed to Pope Gregory I (590–604) is shown to be especially pertinent to early medieval apse mosaics and to the twelfth-century mosaic in the apse of S. Maria in Trastevere. The apses of thirteenth-century popes display a new, more explicit approach to visual messaging that required less interpretive effort by the viewer. Two mosaics made at the end of this century were signed by the artist who made them. The emergence of the artist as a competing author of the image diminished the utility of this form of papal visual communication, which immediately fell out of use.

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Every appearance of a medieval pope was a source of visual communication. Much of that communication was ephemeral; we are left with the concretised forms that were meant to endure. As with verbal communication, these enduring forms are often repetitive and formulaic. It is necessary to know the conventions of the genre to fully understand the message being conveyed. Enduring forms of verbal communication (such as writing on parchment or monumental epigraphy) are inscrutable to viewers who have not been trained to read. By contrast, all forms of visual communication – processions, ceremonies, vestments, buildings, sculpture, painting – may seem to be universally accessible because they require only sight. This is only partially true. The viewer who watches a procession, for example, without knowing the conventions of the genre is able to identify the event but will miss significant absences and innovations. The interpretation of visual communication has its own requirements. This essay examines one enduring form of papal visual communication, the apse mosaic, as an example of the visual mode. The intention is not to offer a history of apse mosaics nor to produce new interpretations of individual examples, as all of the mosaics discussed have been well studied by others.<sup>1</sup> The focus here

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<sup>1</sup> For overviews, see Maria Andaloro and Serena Romano, 'L'immagine nell'abside', in *Arte e iconografia a Roma dal tardoantico alla fine del medioevo*, eds. Maria Andaloro and Serena Romano (Milan: Jaca Book, 2002), 73–102; Beat Brenk, *The Apse, the Image and the Icon: an Historical Perspective of the Apse as a Space for Images* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2010); Erik Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome: Time, Network, and Repetition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); *La committenza artistica dei papi a Roma nel medioevo*, ed. Mario D'Onofrio (Rome: Viella, 2016); and the volumes of *La pittura medievale a Roma 312–1431. Corpus*, eds. Maria Andaloro and Serena Romano. 6 vols. (Milan: Jaca Book, 2006–18), cited below.

is on the methods of communication and, in particular, on the knowledge, experience and skills needed to exhaust the content the mosaics are thought to represent. This mode of analysis is inspired by the pioneering work of Stefano Riccioni, whose study of the communication strategies in the apse mosaic of S. Clemente is a model of its kind.<sup>2</sup>

An apse mosaic comprises images in the semi-dome or conch, an inscription below the images and often more images on the wall surrounding the conch. In Rome, the depictions on the surrounding wall normally serve to collapse biblical time, pointing by means of human figures and symbols backward to the Old Testament and/or forward to the Apocalypse, and sometimes include Evangelist symbols as well (Figure 1, Figures 4 and 5).<sup>3</sup> The omnitemporal frame of the wall is an important part of the message. Although for reasons of space this paper can discuss only the figural compositions in the conch, it is assumed that the principles of visual communication active there pertained to the framing wall as well. Space limitations also preclude consideration of the architectural setting. The apses discussed here all are at the end of basilican naves, above the main altar. In theory they are the focal point of the building, but in practice many physical obstacles intervened, notably ciboria over the altar and parapets reserving spaces for priests, monks and canons in the apse and on the nave floor. The apse was difficult to approach and its mosaics could be viewed only from some distance away in the nave, where the inscriptions were illegible, or obliquely – and thus partially – as the viewer moved closer. An observer standing on the floor of the apse could see the entire composition in the conch by craning upward, but the posture is uncomfortable to maintain. Like the painted domes of later churches, apses are laborious to view. On the other hand, the effort was communal, shared by congregants and celebrants over long periods of time.

For the purposes of this study, a papal apse mosaic is defined by the presence of the pope. His image appears in the figural composition of the conch and in most cases he is named in the inscription underneath it. These signs of authorship, equivalent to a written signature, do not necessarily mean that the pope was either the iconographer or the poet, just as he did not personally compose every verbal document that went out in his name. The co-ordination of iconographers, mosaicists and epigraphers was an intricate task that would have been delegated to someone who could be on site, and that person – a *curator* in the early Christian period, a member or even a committee of the papal administration in later times – may have been the de facto designer, subject to the pope's approval.<sup>4</sup> Until the thirteenth century both designers and craftsmen were anonymous. Their works were normally megalographic (large-figured) compositions centred on the image of Christ or his mother. Their compositions incorporate references to the sacrificial liturgy enacted at the altar below them, memorialise the benefaction of the pope and contain site-specific variations that make each apse, however conventional, unique. According to modern iconographic research, apse mosaics also contain learned and

<sup>2</sup> Stefano Riccioni, *Il mosaico absidale di S. Clemente a Roma: 'Exemplum' della chiesa riformata* (Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 2006); idem, 'The Word in the Image: an Epiconographic Analysis of Mosaics of the Reform in Rome', *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* 24 (new series, 10) (2011): 85–137.

<sup>3</sup> Thunø characterised this temporality as 'God's time': *Apsse Mosaic*, 197–8.

<sup>4</sup> Claire Sotinel, 'Le personnel episcopal: enquête sur la puissance de l'évêque dans la cité', in *L'évêque dans la cité du IVe au Ve siècle: image et autorité*, eds. Éric Rebillard and Claire Sotinel (Rome: École française de Rome, 1998), 115–17; Dale Kinney, 'Patronage of Art and Architecture', in *Pope Innocent II (1130–43): the World vs the City*, eds. John Doran and Damian J. Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 379–80. Serena Romano speaks of *concepteurs*: Andaloro and Romano, 'L'immagine', 93.

subtle messages that require extensive explication. This essay is concerned with those intellectual messages and the viewing skills necessary to perceive them.

Mosaic is an expensive medium requiring a high level of skill. Few popes commissioned them, and the number of surviving examples is small.<sup>5</sup> None was produced in the tenth and eleventh centuries, when the art of mosaic died out in Rome, and apse mosaics of the twelfth century were self-conscious revivals of a venerable early Christian art form.<sup>6</sup> Thirteenth-century apses show a new approach to messaging and authorship. It is the thesis of this paper that before the thirteenth century, papal apse mosaics participated in a system of visual communication consistent with the belief of Pope Gregory I (590–604) that visually literate viewers can see in images what they should believe, regardless of their proficiency with letters. The minimal actions depicted in these mosaics are richly allusive and encourage a mental search for memories and associations that might explain them. Popes beginning with Innocent III (1198–1216) eschewed this approach, preferring a dogmatic mode that forestalled the productive ambiguity of the earlier mosaics and its attendant speculative mode of viewing. This development is illustrated by means of five examples: SS. Cosma e Damiano (526–30); S. Maria in Domnica (817–24); S. Maria in Trastevere (1141–3); St Peter's (1198–1216); and S. Maria Maggiore (1288–92).

## Praxis

The apse mosaic in SS. Cosma e Damiano is the earliest papal mosaic that survives (Figure 1).<sup>7</sup> Pope Felix IV (526–30) appears at the far left, bareheaded, dressed in a tunic, chasuble, amice and pallium, and holding a miniature building.<sup>8</sup> These features – distorted in this example by early modern restorations – became standard elements of the later portrait type.<sup>9</sup> Christ is shown in golden clothes, hovering in a bank of red and blue clouds in a cerulean sky. Below is a river labelled IORDANES and a strip of green ground. On the ground stand the pope and St Theodore, at the far right; the apostles Paul (on the viewer's left) and Peter flanking Christ; and the twin saints Cosmas and

<sup>5</sup> Preserved papal mosaics are in SS. Cosma e Damiano (526–30), S. Agnese fuori le mura (625–38), S. Venanzio (642–50), S. Cecilia (817–24), S. Maria in Domnica (817–24), S. Prassede (817–24), S. Marco (827–44), S. Maria in Trastevere (1141–3) and S. Maria Maggiore (1288–92). Modern reproductions of medieval originals exist in S. Paolo fuori le mura (1216–27) and S. Giovanni in Laterano (1288–92).

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Kitzinger, 'The Arts as Aspects of a Renaissance: Rome and Italy', in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, eds. Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable, with Carol D. Latham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 640–1.

<sup>7</sup> For possible antecedents see Klaus Gereon Beuckers, 'Stifterbild und Stifterstatus: Bemerkungen zu den Darstellungen Papst Paschalis I (817–24) in Rom und ihren Vorbildern', in *Form und Stil: Festschrift für Günther Binding zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Stefanie Lieb (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001), 62–3; Paolo Liverani, 'Costantino offre il modello della basilica sull'arco trionfale', in *L'orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini 312–468: la pittura medievale a Roma 312–1431, Corpus*, vol. 1, ed. Maria Andaloro (Milan: Jaca Book, 2006), 90–1; Francesco Gandolfo, 'Il ruolo della scrittura nei mosaici del medioevo romano', in *Roma e il suo territorio nel medioevo: le fonti scritte fra tradizione e innovazione*, eds. Cristina Carbonetti, Santo Lucà and Maddalena Signorini (Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 2015), 439–48; Paolo Liverani, 'The Memory of the Bishop in the Early Christian Basilica', in *Monuments & Memory: Christian Cult Buildings and Constructions of the Past: Essays in Honour of Sible de Blaauw*, eds. Mariëtte Verhoeven, Lex Bosman and Hanneke van Asperen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 187–91.

<sup>8</sup> The building is often called a 'model', but see Beuckers, 'Stifterbild', 56–9.

<sup>9</sup> Francesco Gandolfo, 'Il ritratto di committenza', in *Arte e iconografia a Roma*, eds. Andaloro and Romano, 139–49; Emanuel S. Klinkenberg, *Compressed Meanings: the Donor's Model in Medieval Art to Around 1300: Origin, Spread and Significance of an Architectural Image in the Realm of Tension between Tradition and Likeness* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 19–22.





**Figure 1.** Rome, SS. Cosma e Damiano, apse mosaic.

Source: Photo, author.

Damian, each being presented to Christ by an apostle. Contemporary viewers would not have found the composition difficult to decipher. The central triad recalls the scene known today as the *Traditio legis*, in which Christ stands with his right arm raised, as in SS. Cosma e Damiano, holding a scroll (the ‘law’) in his left hand. Normally the scroll is unfurled and its other end is held by Peter, while Paul looks on from Christ’s right. The *Traditio legis* is thought to have been depicted in the fourth-century apse mosaic of St Peter’s basilica, and it was also familiar from examples in other media.<sup>10</sup> Of the supplementary figures, the pope was recognisable by the pallium and St Theodore is labelled. It is an easy inference that the two males dressed in purple and gold and carrying crowns of martyrdom are the titular saints of the church.

Below the figural ensemble is a frieze of 12 white lambs proceeding toward a central, thirteenth lamb now obscured by the seventeenth-century altar. The lamb frieze was associated with the *Traditio legis* and is thought to symbolise the 12 apostles or the Christian people who ‘shall come from the east and the west, and the north and the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God’ (Luke 13:29).<sup>11</sup> The Christ-lamb (*Agnus Dei*) stands on a plateau from which issue four streams of water. Below the lambs an inscription in gold letters spells out three couplets. To those who can read it, the last couplet announces

<sup>10</sup> Armin F. Bergmeier, ‘The *Traditio legis* in Late Antiquity and Its Afterlives in the Middle Ages’, *Gesta* 56, no. 1 (2017): 28–33. For St Peter’s: Francesca Romana Moretti, ‘La *Traditio legis* nell’abside’, in *L’orizzonte tardoantico*, ed. Andaloro, 87–90.

<sup>11</sup> Rotraut Wisskirchen and Stefan Heid, ‘Der Prototyp des Lämmerfrieses in Alt-St. Peter: Ikonographie und Ikonologie’, in *Tesserae: Festschrift für Josef Engemann*, eds. Ernst Dassmann and Klaus Thraede (Münster: Aschendorff, 1991), 138–60.

the identity of the pope and the aspiration of his gift ('Felix has offered to the Lord this gift, worthy of a bishop, that he may live in the highest heights of heaven').<sup>12</sup> The second couplet identifies the martyrs presented by Paul and Peter as 'physicians', confirming that they are Cosmas and Damian.<sup>13</sup>

The mosaic's designer assembled it from the conventions of his visual culture: the *Traditio legis*, the presentation of deceased Christians or saints by Peter and Paul, and the founder holding a symbolic building. Its parts are easily identified, yet the meaning of the whole eludes definitive verbal articulation. The most recent attempt, by Armin Bergmeier, considers the composition an 'augmented' *Traditio legis*, which is in turn identified as a visualisation of Isaiah 2:2–4 ('the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be prepared ... and all nations shall flow unto it ... the law shall come forth from Sion').<sup>14</sup> The scene would thus depict the first coming of Christ and the spreading of his message. Bergmeier categorically excludes the possibility of eschatological allusions, ecclesiological symbolism and political connotations of Roman primacy, all of which have been suggested by other art historians.<sup>15</sup> Yet the inscription, which clearly states the eschatological expectations of the pope, suggests that this monothematic reading is too narrow. Other modern interpreters have seen the mosaic as an image of the second coming.<sup>16</sup> The inscription, again, indicates that it is not so much the event of the second coming as the pope's anticipation of its outcome that is of concern here.<sup>17</sup>

Still other interpretations of the mosaic have been proposed.<sup>18</sup> Together, they create what Maria Andaloro described as a 'thematic map rather than a linear route' of meaning.<sup>19</sup> The visual simplicity of seven standing figures belies the conceptual complexity of their simultaneous presence. Sts Peter and Paul are shown larger in scale than Cosmas and Damian, and protectively embrace them with one arm while hailing the Lord with the other. The viewer can see the difference in size, but why should it be so?<sup>20</sup> Are the saints already in paradise, and if so, is the pope there as well? If not, where is he? For that matter, where is the Lord? Is he ascending or descending? It requires many words to answer such questions, but visual apprehension is immediate and gratifyingly complete.<sup>21</sup> Even as it puzzles the intellect, the mosaic provides a satisfying and memorable – even indelible – picture of Christ's transcendence and of the saints' ranked proximity to him.

Imprecisely called a donor portrait, the man holding a miniature building represented the founder (*fundator*) of a church or monastery, whose legal rights and obligations were

<sup>12</sup> Thunø, *Apse Mosaic*, 209: OPTVLIT HOC D[omi]NO FELIX ANTISTITE DIGNVM / MVNVS VT AETHERIA VIVAT IN ARCE POLI.

<sup>13</sup> Thunø, *Apse Mosaic*, 209: MARTYRIBVS MEDICIS POPVLO SPES CERTA SALVTIS / VENIT.

<sup>14</sup> Bergmeier, 'Traditio legis', 38, 40; previously suggested by Wisskirchen and Heid, 'Prototyp', 150.

<sup>15</sup> Moretti, 'Traditio legis', 89.

<sup>16</sup> John Osborne, 'The Jerusalem Temple Treasure and the Church of Santi Cosma e Damiano in Rome', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 76 (2008): 181; Alessandra Guiglia, 'Il VI secolo: da Simmaco (498–514) a Gregorio Magno (590–604)', in *Committenza artistica*, ed. D'Onofrio, 119–20.

<sup>17</sup> Carola Jäggi, 'Donator oder Fundator? Zur Genese des monumentalen Stifterbildes', *Georges-Bloch-Jahrbuch des Kunsthistorischen Instituts der Universität Zürich* 9–10 (2002–3): 30.

<sup>18</sup> Bergmeier, 'Traditio legis', 33–7.

<sup>19</sup> Apropos the apse of S. Pudenziana: Maria Andaloro, 'Il mosaico absidale di Santa Pudenziana', in *L'orizzonte tardoantico*, ed. Andaloro, 116: 'una sorta di mappa tematica piuttosto che il verso di un percorso lineare'.

<sup>20</sup> Beat Brenk, 'Da Galeno a Cosma e Damiano. Considerazioni attorno all'introduzione del culto dei SS. Cosma e Damiano a Roma', in *Salute e guarigione nella tarda antichità*, eds. Hugo Brandenburg, Stefan Heid and Christoph Markschieß (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2007), 89–92; Thunø, *Apse Mosaic*, 191.

<sup>21</sup> Andaloro and Romano, 'L'immagine', 78.

codified around the time the mosaic in SS. Cosma e Damiano was made.<sup>22</sup> The founder had the right to liturgical commemoration. The mosaic visualises this right by placing him in the company of martyrs, presenting his building as if it were the equivalent of their wreaths. According to Paolo Liverani, sixth-century viewers would have seen the semi-circular array of figures three-dimensionally, as a procession moving toward Christ from the direction of the nave. Last in line on the left, the pope ‘constitutes a hinge with the liturgical procession of the faithful moving to the altar’ and appears as a mediator between the congregation and the saints.<sup>23</sup> This is a primary visual message of the mosaic, which precedes any allegorical meanings that might be deciphered intellectually. Viewers could see in this image the hierarchy through which they might be led to the salvific presence of the Lord, via the mediating role of the pope.

The composition in the apse of SS. Cosma e Damiano was made canonical by Pope Paschal I (817–24), who reproduced it twice in his churches of S. Prassede and S. Cecilia.<sup>24</sup> A third mosaic in S. Maria in Domnica is dramatically different (Figure 2). Instead of the authorial founder, Paschal appears as a supplicant kneeling at the feet of the Virgin Mary, his hands cradling one of her red slippers. This intimate type of portrait, suitable to an icon, is surprising in a monumental format. Mary, dressed in the Byzantine manner in a midnight-blue tunic and *maphorion*, sits on a jewelled throne with the Christ child on her lap. A heavenly setting is indicated by a flower-studded meadow and throngs of angels on either side of the throne. As in Paschal’s other apses, the pope’s head is framed by a so-called square nimbus, a Carolingian convention that indicated an image taken from life.<sup>25</sup> The square nimbus resolved the ambiguity of portraits like that in SS. Cosma e Damiano by clarifying that the pope is represented in his mortal state, not actually in Heaven but metaphorically or proleptically so, by virtue of the saint’s intercession.<sup>26</sup> Thus the portrait in S. Maria in Domnica represents Paschal’s efficacious devotion, not his bodily presence at Mary’s feet. In literal terms the Virgin could not be in Heaven either, of course, because the child in her lap is Christ’s earthly manifestation. The heavenly Christ appears overhead, seated in a blue *mandorla* on the wall above the conch. Like the pope’s portrait, the enthroned Virgin and Child must represent an abstraction: the capacity in which Mary properly receives veneration, as *Theotokos* or Mother of God.<sup>27</sup> The mosaic imprints this subtle point on the viewer’s memory without requiring that he or she think it through. The pair of mother and son also represents the Incarnation, showing the human-born Christ on axis with his transcendent future self. Again, the viewer can visually absorb this axial relationship without the extensive verbalisation

<sup>22</sup> Beuckers, ‘Stifterbild’, 63–5.

<sup>23</sup> Liverani, ‘Memory’, 192; see also Thunø, *Apse Mosaic*, 190.

<sup>24</sup> Rotraut Wisskirchen, *Die Mosaiken der Kirche Santa Prassede in Rom* (Mainz am Rhein: von Zabern, 1992), 14–27; Caroline J. Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I: Papal Power, Urban Renovation, Church Rebuilding and Relic Translation, 817–824* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 149–53; Thunø, *Apse Mosaic*, 16–19; Ivan Foletti and Valentine Giesser, ‘Il IX secolo: da Pasquale I (817–824) a Stefano V (885–891)’, in *Committenza artistica*, ed. D’Onofrio, 222–3.

<sup>25</sup> John Osborne, ‘The Portrait of Pope Leo IV in San Clemente, Rome: a Re-Examination of the So-Called “Square” Nimbus in Medieval Art’, *Papers of the British School at Rome* 47 (1979): 58–65. The convention was short-lived and not revived in later medieval portraits.

<sup>26</sup> Gandolfo, ‘Ritratto’, 140.

<sup>27</sup> Erik Thunø, ‘*Decus suus splendet ceu Phoebus in orbe*: zum Verhältnis von Text und Bild in der Apsis von Santa Maria in Domnica in Rom’, in *Die Sichtbarkeit des Unsichtbaren: zur Korrelation von Text und Bild im Wirkungskreis der Bibel: Tübinger Symposium*, eds. Bernd Janowski and Nino Zchomelidse (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003), 149.





**Figure 2.** Rome, S. Maria in Domnica, apse mosaic, detail: Pope Paschal I, Virgin and Child.  
 Source: Photo, Scala/Art Resource, NY.

required to explain it. The visual impression includes the pope's monogram prominently situated in the frame of the conch. The monogram is an emblem of authorship, but its position on the axis also conveys a mediating function between the two forms of Christ.

Like the mosaic in SS. Cosma e Damiano, the apse mosaic in S. Maria in Domnica has given rise to numerous modern interpretations. An argument that it depicts the corporeal assumption of Mary and was intended as a papal endorsement of that controversial doctrine, first advocated in the West by Ambrosius Autpertus (d. 784), was denied by Erik Thunø on the grounds that the image of Mary in paradise does not necessarily represent

her bodily presence.<sup>28</sup> Thunø proposed that the primary subject of the mosaic is intercession. Seen in the context of the renewal of iconoclasm by Emperor Leo V (r. 813–20) in 815, the mosaic has also been interpreted as a counter ‘manifesto’ representing the pope not only praying before an icon, but displaying it to the watching congregation.<sup>29</sup> Other scholars have seen different references to contemporary politics, both international (the new importance of Mary for the Franks) and local.<sup>30</sup> Thunø uncovered literary allusions in the inscription, which, like that in SS. Cosma e Damiano, comprises three couplets. Unpacking its metaphors (‘Phoebus in Heaven’, the veil of night, the brilliance of the decoration), he detected classical, biblical and ecclesiological references that deepen and enrich the message of the visual composition, but only for readers learned enough to recognise and understand them.<sup>31</sup>

The mosaic of S. Maria in Domnica illustrates the virtues and the perils of this form of papal communication. Visualisations of metaphors and abstractions fix those abstractions in the mind, making them apprehensible even if not fully comprehensible. They represent concepts that may never be accessible to reason, like Christ’s immanence, his Incarnation, Mary’s virginal motherhood and the intermediary powers of the saints.<sup>32</sup> Such images can communicate several messages simultaneously, from theological claims to political positions, and simultaneously address different audiences. The other side of the coin is that they are ambiguous and thus easily misunderstood. The image of Mary in Heaven can be seen as a representation of her corporeal assumption whether or not the iconographer meant it to be so. Literal interpretations of metaphorical images can foster mistaken beliefs. St Augustine warned of this, citing the example of images of Christ with Peter and Paul, which give the impression that Paul knew Jesus in his lifetime.<sup>33</sup> Yet popes throughout the early Middle Ages persisted in sponsoring such images, evidently confident in the ability of their flock to look beyond the literal subject to abstract or metaphorical meanings consistent with papal doctrine.

## Theory

Two letters written by Pope Gregory I to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles in 599–600 are widely recognised as the foundational statement of a papal theory of Christian visual imagery. Key phrases from these letters were quoted or paraphrased throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, as late as the eighteenth century.<sup>34</sup> In both letters the pope

<sup>28</sup> Rotraut Wisskirchen, ‘Santa Maria in Domnica: Überlegungen zur frühesten apsidialen Darstellung der thronenden Maria in Rom’, *Aachener Kunstblätter* 61 (1995): 381–93; Thunø, ‘*Decus suus splendet*’, 150–1.

<sup>29</sup> Floriana Svizzeretto, ‘Il mosaico absidale manifesto iconodulo: proposta di interpretazione’, in *Caelius I: Santa Maria in Domnica, San Tommaso in Formis e il Clivus Scauri*, ed. Alia Englen (Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2003), 241–56; endorsed by Goodson, *Rome*, 153; see also Andaloro and Romano, ‘L’immagine’, 84.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas F.X. Noble, ‘Topography, Celebration, and Power: the Making of a Papal Rome in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries’, in *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*, eds. Mayke De Jong, Frans Theuvs and Carine van Rhijn (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 66; see also Beuckers, ‘Stifterbild’, 66–8.

<sup>31</sup> Thunø, ‘*Decus suus splendet*’, 154–64.

<sup>32</sup> This is a theme of the book by Brenk, *Apse, the Image and the Icon*.

<sup>33</sup> *De consensu evangelistarum*, 1.10, quoted by Celia Chazelle, ‘Pictures, Books, and the Illiterate: Pope Gregory I’s Letters to Serenus of Marseilles’, *Word & Image* 6, no. 2 (1990): 146.

<sup>34</sup> Lawrence G. Duggan, ‘Was Art Really the “Book of the Illiterate”?’’, *Word & Image* 5, no. 3 (1989): 227–43; Celia Chazelle, ‘Memory, Instruction, Worship: “Gregory’s” Influence on Early Medieval Doctrines of the Artistic Image’, in *Gregory the Great: a Symposium*, ed. John C. Cavadini (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 181–215; David Appleby, ‘Instruction and Inspiration Through Images in the Carolingian Period’, in

chastises Serenus for ‘breaking’ and ‘throwing’ images from churches when he saw people adoring them. In the first missive, he explained that the bishop should not have destroyed the images because ‘a picture is displayed in churches on this account, in order that those who do not know letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they are unable to read in books’.<sup>35</sup> In his second, sterner letter Gregory reiterated that ‘what writing offers to those who read it, a picture offers to the ignorant who look at it, since in it the ignorant see what they ought to follow, in it they read who do not know letters’.<sup>36</sup> He insisted that the bishop should teach his flock not to adore pictures but to learn ‘through a picture’s story ... what must be adored’.<sup>37</sup>

Pope Gregory had only second-hand knowledge of Serenus’ iconoclastic episode, and his thoughts about ‘pictures’ probably were not specific to the incident but generalised from his experience elsewhere. The terms *historia* and *res gestae* in his second letter have led some modern readers to insist that his thoughts pertained only to narrative painting, but *res gestae* and *historia* are not always synonymous.<sup>38</sup> The ‘picture’s story’ (*historia picturae*) is the painting’s literal meaning, narrative or not.<sup>39</sup> Every figural image has an *historia*. The verb *legere* is more problematic, and there is an extensive discussion of how the pope thought that images could be ‘read’.<sup>40</sup> Celia Chazelle found a clue to his intention in another text, in which Gregory compared the ‘words and meanings’ of Scripture to the ‘colours and things’ of a picture: ‘For if we embrace the words that are spoken externally and pay no attention to their meanings, [it is] as if we disregard the things that are depicted [and] hold solely to the colours’.<sup>41</sup> In other words, the pope expected viewers to be able to recognise the ‘things’ – the subject matter – of a painting, just as readers recognise the referents of words. He assumed visual literacy. ‘Illiterates’ – *idiotae, ignorantes* – were not blank slates but ‘the majority of people without literary and rhetorical learning’.<sup>42</sup> They could name the subject of a painting but might not know its scriptural source, its typological references, or other meanings suggested by liturgy and exegesis. Herbert Kessler wrote that for such people, pictures ‘were reference

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*Word, Image, Number: Communication in the Middle Ages*, eds. John J. Contreni and Santa Casciani (Florence: SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2002), 85–111.

<sup>35</sup> Trans. in Chazelle, ‘Pictures, Books’, 139: ‘Idcirco enim pictura in ecclesiis adhibetur, ut hi qui litteras nesciunt saltem in parietibus videndo legant, quae legere in codicibus non valent.’

<sup>36</sup> Trans. in Chazelle, ‘Pictures, Books’, 139: ‘Nam quod legentibus scriptura, hoc idiotis praestat pictura cernentibus, quia in ipsa ignorantes vident quod qui debeant, in ipsa legunt qui litteras nesciunt.’

<sup>37</sup> Trans. in Chazelle, ‘Pictures, Books’, 139–40: ‘Aliud est enim picturam adorare, aliud per picturae historiam quid sit adorandum addiscere.’

<sup>38</sup> Herbert L. Kessler, ‘Pictorial Narratives and Church Mission in Sixth-Century Gaul’, *Studies in the History of Art* 16 (1985): 75; idem, ‘Diction in the “Bibles of the Illiterate”’ (1989), reprinted in idem, *Studies in Pictorial Narrative* (London: Pindar Press, 1994), 33; idem, ‘Gregory the Great and Image Theory in Northern Europe During the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries’, in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, ed. Conrad Rudolph (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 156.

<sup>39</sup> J.R. Niermeyer, *Mediae Latinitatis lexicon minus* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 489.

<sup>40</sup> Duggan, ‘Was Art Really the “Book”?’; idem, ‘Reflections on “Was Art Really the “Book of the Illiterate”?’’, in *Reading Images and Texts: Medieval Images and Texts as Forms of Communication*, eds. Mariëlle Hageman and Marco Mostert (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 109–19; Chazelle, ‘Pictures, Books’, 144–53; Michael Camille, ‘The Gregorian Definition Revisited: Writing and the Medieval Image’, in *L’image: fonctions et usages des images dans l’occident médiéval*, eds. Jérôme Baschet and Jean-Claude Schmitt (Paris: Le Léopard d’Or, 1996), 92–3; Peter Brown, ‘Images as a Substitute for Writing’, in *East and West: Modes of Communication: Proceedings of the First Plenary Conference at Merida*, eds. Evangelos Chrysos and Ian Wood (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 22–34.

<sup>41</sup> Chazelle, ‘Pictures, Books’, 147, quoting Gregory’s *Expositio in Canticis canticorum*: ‘Nos enim, si verba, quae exterius dicuntur, amplectimur et sensus ignoramus, quasi ignorantes res, quae depictae sunt, solos colores tenemus.’

<sup>42</sup> Kessler, ‘Pictorial Narratives’, 85. Kessler referred specifically to Gaul, but the definition holds for sixth-century Rome.



books'. They 'recall[ed] to mind or verif[ie]d] what was already known. Pictures made permanent what was transient in the oral reading and, by their presence in a church, authorised an interpretation.'<sup>43</sup>

This is precisely the kind of communication posited for the apse mosaics previously discussed. In SS. Cosma e Damiano, for example, the *historia* might be verbalised as 'the apostles Peter and Paul greet the Lord in the firmament, in the company of Sts Cosmas, Damian, Theodore and the pope'. Any visually literate viewer can see this. Christian viewers might be reminded of familiar snippets of Scripture like Matthew 24:30 ('they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of Heaven with much power and majesty'), or conversely the image might make such verses more comprehensible when they are heard in the future. Only a reader of texts, however, is likely to recall all the other scriptural passages in which a figure arrives amid clouds and to contemplate their intertextual dynamic.<sup>44</sup> Only a very learned reader might debate the temporality of such passages, whether they describe a future event or a present state of being.<sup>45</sup> Pope Gregory's message to Serenus was that the literate should teach these fine points to their congregations, so that in images the latter would 'see what they ought to'.

Pictures in churches are often accompanied by inscriptions. 'Reading' a picture was not achieved by deciphering its inscription, however, although in the case of narrative paintings inscriptions might identify the *historia* and even point to another level of meaning.<sup>46</sup> Apse mosaics are too densely allusive to be explained in a few lines of verse, and for the most part the inscriptions in Roman apses do not even try. The inscriptions are a parallel art form, recently analysed by Thunø. He observed that except for identifying the titular saint and expressing the votive of the founder, the hexametrical couplets are panegyrics to their setting – the 'palace' (*aula*) or 'house' – and the splendour of its ornament. They dwell on the materials of which they themselves are made (*claris metallis, concisis metallis, fulgente metallo*) and their effects: radiance, shine, sparkle, glow (*radiat, rutilat, micat, lucet*).<sup>47</sup> Thunø argued that these verbal tropes and the gleam of the golden letters created a kind of metonymy with the relics enshrined in the altar, as relics too were understood as sources of light 'that flickers, flashes, and coruscates'.<sup>48</sup> He concluded that the inscriptions communicated the power of the relics in an intensely affective way, 'making their subject – the relics – alive to the congregation in the church'.<sup>49</sup>

Another possibility is suggested by Dennis Trout's analysis of the unusually long inscription in the apse of S. Agnese fuori le mura, commissioned by Pope Honorius I (625–38) (Figure 3). The first line points to the mosaic image above it ('The image rises golden from cut stones').<sup>50</sup> Subsequent verses conjure the light of dawn, 'clear white fountains', a dewy meadow, Iris and Chaos. Agnes is never mentioned. Trout suggested that the inscription encouraged the reader to construct his own 'rhetorical' image, a mental picture

<sup>43</sup> Kessler, 'Pictorial Narratives', 86. For a different sense of Gregory's intention see Camille, 'Gregorian Definition', 90–1; Brown, 'Images'.

<sup>44</sup> Dennis Trout, 'Pictures With Words: Reading the Apse Mosaic of S. Agnese f.l.m. (Rome)', *Studies in Iconography* (forthcoming).

<sup>45</sup> Thunø, *Apse Mosaic*, 74–81; Bergmeier, 'Traditio legis', 36–7.

<sup>46</sup> Kessler, 'Pictorial Narratives'.

<sup>47</sup> Thunø, *Apse Mosaic*, 47–51, 209–15.

<sup>48</sup> Thunø, *Apse Mosaic*, 51, quoting Cynthia Hahn.

<sup>49</sup> Thunø, *Apse Mosaic*, 51.

<sup>50</sup> Trout, 'Pictures': 'aurea concisis surgit pictura metallis'.





**Figure 3.** Rome, S. Agnese fuori le mura, apse mosaic.

Source: Photo, author.

that (following Mary Carruthers) could be the basis for ‘further thinking’.<sup>51</sup> Such a reader might also be transported by the affective qualities of the materials, but the primary value of the inscription for him was intellectual. Thus the inscription and the visual representation above it created pictures for two different audiences, one made of shiny tesserae for the unlettered eye and the other made with words for the mind.

In the eighth and ninth centuries the papal doctrine of images was adapted to respond to the growing cult of icons and to Byzantine and Frankish attempts to suppress it.<sup>52</sup> Further adaptations were made in the twelfth century.<sup>53</sup> *Idiotae* became laymen (*laici*), literates became *clerici*, and it was acknowledged that pictures could benefit both groups, teaching one and inspiring love of Scripture in the other. There are no known papal contributions to this later literature, but Herbert Kessler has attempted to distil a ‘Gregorian Reform theory of art’ from two Italian sources: a letter of Peter Damian (d. 1072) concerning representations of Peter and Paul (1069), and some parts of *De laudibus ecclesiae* by Bruno, bishop of Segni (d. 1123).<sup>54</sup> Peter Damian’s letter reveals how carefully thinkers in the circle of Pope Gregory VII studied old images like the *Traditio legis* and how much they respected their authority. Responding to the question why some pictures

<sup>51</sup> Trout, ‘Pictures’.

<sup>52</sup> Chazelle, ‘Memory, Instruction’, 184–7; Appleby, ‘Instruction and Inspiration’.

<sup>53</sup> Kessler, ‘Gregory the Great’.

<sup>54</sup> Herbert L. Kessler, ‘A Gregorian Reform Theory of Art?’, in *Roma e la riforma gregoriana. Tradizioni e innovazioni artistiche (XI–XII secolo)*, eds. Serena Romano and Julie Enckell Julliard (Rome: Viella, 2007), 25–48. *De laudibus ecclesiae* was published under the title *Libri sententiarum*, which is how Kessler refers to it; see Louis I. Hamilton, *A Sacred City: Consecrating Churches and Reforming Society in Eleventh-Century Italy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 163.

show the Apostle Paul on the favoured right side of Christ and Peter on the left, when Peter might be expected to take precedence, Damian concluded that the anomaly must have been intended to provoke speculation.<sup>55</sup> He found that it hints at the ‘mystery of a mystical symbol in Benjamin’ (Genesis 35:18), which he unpacked with the help of St Jerome’s exegesis on Hebrew names and abundant citations from the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of St Paul.<sup>56</sup> Peter’s rather beautiful demonstration of St Paul’s spiritual superiority is a caution. Complicated, dense and seemingly idiosyncratic, it illustrates the near impossibility of recreating any learned eleventh-century interpretation of images using only the disciplinary methods of our own time.

Bruno of Segni’s *De laudibus ecclesiae* is devoted to the allegoresis of the ritual of church consecration and its relation to the eschatological Church. According to Louis Hamilton, it was intended for the instruction of the clergy.<sup>57</sup> The importance of Bruno’s teaching for apse mosaics lies in the principle that no word, gesture or object is to be taken literally, including the consecrated building. ‘The basilicas which are now everywhere dedicated by bishops openly signify the Church of God.’<sup>58</sup> Every basilica is at once the Temple, the heavenly Jerusalem and the bride of Christ. These were not new ideas, but Bruno was a prominent figure in the papacy of Paschal II (1099–1118) and his expositions presumably were familiar to viewers in Rome.

The first known mention of an apse mosaic by a medieval pope occurred in the thirteenth century, in a sermon by Pope Honorius III (1216–27) for the feast of the dedication of the Lateran Cathedral.<sup>59</sup> It shows no interest in interpretation. Following a nod to Old Testament types of the Church, including the queen ‘in gilded clothing, surrounded with variety’ of Psalm 44, the sermon shifts quickly to history.<sup>60</sup> It recounts a legend that after Pope Sylvester consecrated Constantine’s basilica – the first church, successor to the Temple – an image of the Saviour that had been depicted in the apse invisibly was revealed to the Roman people.<sup>61</sup> The miraculous face confirmed that the Lateran was the mother of all churches, the place where Christ first appeared in Rome.<sup>62</sup> The pope’s interest in the mosaic seems to have been documentary, as proof of the antiquity and authority of his see.

## Praxis revived

The first apse mosaic made in Rome after the hiatus of the tenth and eleventh centuries is not papal (Figure 4). It is in the title-church of S. Clemente and presumably was commissioned by the cardinal known only as ‘Anastasius’ (1102–25), who sponsored the

<sup>55</sup> Peter Damian, *Die Briefe des Petrus Damiani*, ed. Kurt Reindel. Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Die Briefe des deutschen Kaiserzeit. 4 vols. (Munich: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 1983–93), 4: 90–9 (no. 159); translated in *Peter Damian: Letters 151–180*, trans. Owen J. Blum and Irven M. Resnick (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 94–102.

<sup>56</sup> See the footnotes in Blum and Resnick, trans., *Peter Damian*, 94–102.

<sup>57</sup> Hamilton, *Sacred City*, 165–9.

<sup>58</sup> Bruno Astensis, ‘Sententiae I, Prologus’, in S. Brunonis Astensis, abbas Montis Casini ... , *Opera omnia*, vol. 2, ed. J.-P. Migne. Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1854), col. 875; trans. Hamilton, *Sacred City*, 178.

<sup>59</sup> James M. Powell, ‘Honorius III’s *Sermo in dedicatione ecclesie lateranensis* and the Historical-Liturgical Traditions of the Lateran’, *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* 21 (1983): 195–209.

<sup>60</sup> Psalm 44:10: ‘in vestitu deaurato, circumdata varietate’. Honorius modified the sense of ‘varietate’: ‘Hanc reginam diversarum gentium varietate circumdatam’. Powell, ‘*Sermo*’, 205.

<sup>61</sup> Powell, ‘*Sermo*’, 206: ‘In hac ecclesia imaginem Salvatoris, superius in absida depictam primo invisibiliter, Romano populo demonstravit.’

<sup>62</sup> Powell, ‘*Sermo*’, 199.



**Figure 4.** Rome, S. Clemente, apse mosaic.

Source: Photo: Luciano Romano, Scala/Art Resource, NY.

replacement of the early Christian basilica.<sup>63</sup> Depicting five rows of vine scrolls that grow from the base of a crucifix to fill the conch, the composition is nothing like the megalographic visions of the early Middle Ages. According to the inscription below the image, the vine represents the Church.<sup>64</sup> Some of the same craftsmen may have worked in the apse of S. Maria in Trastevere (1141–3) (Figure 5). At first glance the later mosaic seems more traditional, but the central subject is again an unprecedented allegorical representation of the Church. The Church was a constant subject also of earlier apse mosaics, but the mode of visualisation and the concept itself were different in the twelfth century. According to Thunø, the early medieval apses created an image of the Church as ‘a spiritual temple ... in which celestial saints come together with living believers in the resurrected body of Christ’.<sup>65</sup> Later iconographers were more concerned with the Church as an institution, and their representations are more learned and explicit. Serena Romano described the later mosaics as products of ‘an advanced intellectualism of extreme refinement, [with] a tendency to figurative conceptualisation that ... channels all ... themes toward the great ideological nucleus of the period’, the Church.<sup>66</sup>

In S. Maria in Trastevere Christ, robed in a light-coloured tunic and gold mantle, shares a throne with his mother, who wears a brilliantly patterned gold dress. The background is

<sup>63</sup> Riccioni, *Mosaico absidale*, 4.

<sup>64</sup> Stefano Riccioni, ‘I mosaici dell’abside e dell’arco absidale della chiesa superiore di San Clemente’, in *Riforma e tradizione 1050–1198: la pittura medievale a Roma 312–1431*, *Corpus*, vol. 4, ed. Serena Romano (Rome: Jaca Book, 2006), 210: ECCLESIAM CRISTI VITI SIMILABIMVS ISTI.

<sup>65</sup> Thunø, *Apsse Mosaic*, 117.

<sup>66</sup> Andaloro and Romano, ‘L’immagine’, 89.





**Figure 5.** Rome, S. Maria in Trastevere, apse mosaic.

Source: Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

gold as well. To either side of the throne stand seven figures: Pope Innocent II (1130–43) in the traditional type of the founder at the far left, preceded by St Lawrence and Pope Calixtus I (218–23); on the right St Peter nearest the throne, followed by Pope Cornelius (251–3), Pope Julius I (337–52) and the priest Calepodius.<sup>67</sup> All are identified by inscriptions under their feet. The hand of God extends a wreath from the apex of the conch and the traditional *Agnus Dei* and frieze of lambs appear below the inscription.<sup>68</sup>

The iconographer was a thoughtful student of the work of his predecessors. He rejected Marian models like the apse of S. Maria in Domnica that represent the Mother and Child, preferring the dominant pattern centred on the immanent Saviour. Mary is in St Paul's place at Christ's right and St Peter is in the standard but anomalous position at his left. Around them are the saints whose relics are in the altar and the pope as *fundator*. Despite his reputation for affecting imperial dress and ceremony, Innocent appears bare-headed and vested like the other popes in alb, dalmatic and chasuble. The relic-saints are all ecclesiastics (three popes and a presbyter). Adding the deacon St Lawrence completed

<sup>67</sup> Kinney, 'Patronage', 352–3, 365–80; eadem, 'A Building's Images: Santa Maria in Trastevere', *California Italian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2016): 19–30, at <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/3fp5z3gz> (Accessed 1 February 2018).

<sup>68</sup> For a full description, see Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, "Avant-Garde" in the Late Medieval Apse of Santa Maria in Trastevere', *Artibus et Historiae* 37, no. 73 (2016): 13–14. For the mosaics on the surrounding wall see Stefano Riccioni and Jérôme Croisier, 'I mosaici dell'abside e dell'arco trionfale di Santa Maria in Trastevere 1143 ca.', in *Riforma e tradizione 1050–1198*, ed. Romano, 305–11; Riccioni, 'Word', 107–16; Lavin, 'Avant-Garde', 21.

the clerical hierarchy and created the impression that each saint represents both himself and an office of the Church. The double entendre was extended by depicting Mary as the typological ‘queen in gilded clothing surrounded with variety’ of Psalm 44.<sup>69</sup> The sight of her sharing a throne with her adult son (*synthronos*) was more remarkable. As far as we know, it had never before appeared in monumental art.<sup>70</sup> Also unusual is the son’s physical embrace. It is justified by a verse from the Song of Songs inscribed on the scroll that the mother holds up to the viewer: ‘His left hand is under my head, and his right hand shall embrace me’ (Figure 6).<sup>71</sup> The reference to the Song of Songs identifies the image as an allegory and points to textual sources for the iconography. It is found in more elaborate form in the frontispiece to a German manuscript containing treatises by Honorius Augustodunensis (d. c.1140), where it represents his commentary on the Song.<sup>72</sup> The commentary is notable for its systematic demonstration that the Song is about the love of Christ and his Church.<sup>73</sup>

The *synthronos* also evokes the Assumption, described at least since the ninth century as ‘the day on which the unstained mother and virgin ... [was] raised to the throne of the king’.<sup>74</sup> The inscription on the book held open by Christ is a responsory in the Divine Office for this feast.<sup>75</sup> The iconographer must have intended that the Bride of his mosaic have two meanings: Mary assumed to Heaven and the Church. Twelfth-century exegetes were accustomed to what Honorius Augustodunensis, following Aristotle, called *aequivocum*: a single word that means multiple things.<sup>76</sup> Visual equivocation was already embedded in the tradition of papal apse mosaics, but the twelfth-century use of it is more deliberate and systematic than in the examples of the early Middle Ages.<sup>77</sup>

The image of the Church had topical resonance in the aftermath of the schismatic papacy of Anacletus II (1130–8), who had been cardinal priest of S. Maria in Trastevere before his election.<sup>78</sup> The mosaic commemorates the church’s triumphant rescue by Pope Innocent on two levels: materially, in the fine new basilica touted in the inscription below the image, and spiritually, in the restoration of the universal Church to the embrace of her Spouse.<sup>79</sup> The institutional vision created by the flanking ranks of clergy may reflect

<sup>69</sup> J.E. Barclay Lloyd, ‘Das goldene Gewand der Muttergottes in der Bildersprache mittelalterlicher und frühchristlicher Mosaiken in Rom’, *Römische Quartalschrift* 85 (1990): 66–85.

<sup>70</sup> Lavin, ‘Avant-Garde’, 13.

<sup>71</sup> LEVA EIVS SVB CAPITE MEO ET DEX[T]ERA ILLIVS AMPLESABIT[VR] ME; cf. Song of Songs 2:6, 8:3.

<sup>72</sup> Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Lat. 4550, f. 1v; Lavin, ‘Avant-Garde’, 17–20. The parallel was first noticed by G.A. Wellen, ‘Sponsa Christi: het Absismozaïek van de Santa Maria in Trastevere te Rome en het Hooglied’, in *Feestbundel F. Van der Meer*, eds. E.F. van der Grinten and others (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1966), 148–59.

<sup>73</sup> E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: the Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 58–85.

<sup>74</sup> Dale Kinney, ‘The Apse Mosaic of Santa Maria in Trastevere’, in *Reading Medieval Images: the Art Historian and the Object*, eds. Elizabeth Sears and Thelma K. Thomas (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 24, quoting Pseudo-Jerome (Paschasius Radbertus).

<sup>75</sup> René-Jean Hesbert, ed., *Corpus antiphonalium officii*, 6 vols. (Rome: Herder, 1963–79), 1: 284 and 4: 448: ‘Veni electa mea et ponam in te thronum meum, quia concupivit Rex speciem tuam’; Lavin, ‘Avant-Garde’, 16. Ernst Kitzinger argued that the *synthronos* was inspired by the display of icons in the Roman celebration of the feast: ‘A Virgin’s Face: Antiquarianism in Twelfth-Century Art’, *Art Bulletin* 62 (1980): 6–19.

<sup>76</sup> Matter, *Voice*, 61.

<sup>77</sup> Andaloro and Romano, ‘L’immagine’, 93.

<sup>78</sup> Ursula Nilgen, ‘Maria Regina – ein politischer Kultbildtypus?’, *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 19 (1981): 1–33; Kinney, ‘Building’s Images’, 19–22.

<sup>79</sup> For the inscription, see below, n. 89. Perchuk’s assertion that the basilica was built by Anacletus II is unfounded; documents show that it was under construction in 1141. Alison Locke Perchuk, ‘Schismatic (Re)Visions: Sant’Elia near Nepi and Sta. Maria in Trastevere in Rome, 1120–1143’, *Gesta* 55, no. 2 (2016): 204–10.





**Figure 6.** Rome, S. Maria in Trastevere, apse mosaic, detail: Bride and Bridegroom.

Source: Photo, Scala/Art Resource, NY.

a Gregorian Reform strain of commentary, in which the Song was interpreted in terms of priests who met the Reform's standard of purity and were worthy of Christ, and those who were not.<sup>80</sup> The clerics in the mosaic are the elect who will be joined to the Bridegroom at the end of time. They include Pope Innocent II, chosen by God over his schismatic rival.<sup>81</sup>

The complexity of this visual communication is illustrated by a comparison with the fifth-century mosaic in S. Pudenziana (401–17) that provided a model for the seated figure of Christ. There too the Saviour is wrapped in gold and displays an open book in his left hand (Figure 7).<sup>82</sup> The inscription on his codex ('The Lord, preserver of the church of Pudentiana') identifies the *historia* (Christ the Saviour) and speaks to a

<sup>80</sup> Matter, *Voice*, 107–9.

<sup>81</sup> Kinney, 'Building's Images', 29–30.

<sup>82</sup> Andaloro, 'Mosaico absidale', 114–24.





**Figure 7.** Rome, S. Pudenziana, apse mosaic, detail: Christ enthroned.

Source: Photo, author.

reader in the nave.<sup>83</sup> The inscription on the book in S. Maria in Trastevere ('Come, my chosen one, and I will place in you my throne') conveys essentially the same message: the Lord is the source of salvation, but its words are addressed to the Bride.<sup>84</sup> It is part

<sup>83</sup> DOMINUS CONSERVATOR ECCLESIAE PUDENTIANAE.

<sup>84</sup> VENI ELECTA MEA ET PONAM IN TE THRONVM MEVM.



of a dialogue internal to the picture, which visualises the words chanted by earthly celebrants of the liturgy as a divine conversation.

In his ground-breaking study of the apse mosaic in S. Clemente, Stefano Riccioni described an 'artistic discourse' that unites three 'systems of communication': image, writing and text.<sup>85</sup> He argued that at S. Clemente, only the discourse of the mosaic on the wall surrounding the apse was intended for the *populus*. The conch mosaic, full of obscure references to patristic and contemporary monastic writings, was designed for literates, specifically the canons who officiated in the basilica.<sup>86</sup> Riccioni characterised the conch mosaic as a 'memory machine' (*machina memorialis*) that invited its literate viewers to meditate creatively upon its contents.<sup>87</sup> Its imagery was a means of communicating the arcane learning of the monasteries to the canons, who in turn were mediators to the public.

The principles of Riccioni's analysis can be applied to the mosaic in S. Maria in Trastevere, with the caveat that we should not underestimate the ability of laypeople to participate in its play of multiple meanings. Twelfth-century viewers were better equipped to 'read' multivalent imagery than *idiotae* of the time of Gregory the Great. Like the iconographer, they knew the tradition of such visual communication, and they had learned from students of Bruno of Segni that every part of a church is richly symbolic of the Church. They could see for themselves that the woman in variegated gold is both the Church and the Virgin Mary. They knew that the gesture of Christ's embrace, which in a profane pair of lovers would be sexual, signified protection and favour.<sup>88</sup> In the *synthronos* they could recognise the Assumption, corporeal or not. Even unlettered viewers could have perceived that the mosaic is a kind of duck-rabbit picture, seeable sometimes as Mary and sometimes as the Church. Many of them probably enjoyed this pictorial play.

*Laici* could not see the inscriptions, however. Like the figural composition, the words below it conform to traditional patterns. Three hexametral couplets name the titular saint ('shining Mother'), praise the building and its gleaming decoration, and identify the pope as *fundator*.<sup>89</sup> Like the inscription in S. Clemente, this one also departs from tradition by stating the meaning of the symbolic central image ('Where you sit, Christ, will be a seat beyond time; worthy of your right hand is she enveloped by the golden robe').<sup>90</sup> Uniquely, it addresses three audiences in turn: Mary in the first couplet, Christ in the second and readers outside the image in the third. For those who could decipher them, the first two distichs were like prayers spoken to Mary/Ecclesia and the immortal King. In the dialogue inscribed on the book and the scroll, clerics could see the words they routinely chanted in the liturgy as an intimate conversation between the King and his Bride. They would have known that Christ's book is a breviary, implying an injunction to private prayer.<sup>91</sup> Devices like these were doors through which literate viewers might pass deep into

<sup>85</sup> Riccioni, *Mosaico absidale*, xvi–xviii.

<sup>86</sup> Riccioni, *Mosaico absidale*, 74–5.

<sup>87</sup> Riccioni, *Mosaico absidale*, 74.

<sup>88</sup> Lavin, 'Avant-Garde', 15.

<sup>89</sup> HEC IN HONORE TVO PREFULGIDA MATER HONORIS / REGIA DIVINI RVTLAT FVLGORE DECORIS / IN QVA CRISTE SEDES MANET VLTRA SECVLA SEDES / DIGNA TVIS DEXTRIS EST QVA[m] TEGIT AVREA VESTIS / CV[m] MOLES RVITVRA VETVS FORET HINC ORIVNDVS / INNOCENTIVS HANC RENOVAVIT PAPA SECVNDVS; trans. Riccioni, 'Word', 129, n. 162. Gandolfo noted that the rhyme and metre of the framing couplets are different from the one in the centre: 'Il ruolo della scrittura', 457–8.

<sup>90</sup> Trans. in Riccioni, 'Word', 129, n. 162.

<sup>91</sup> Lavin, 'Avant-Garde', 16, 20–1.

the world of Scripture, exegesis, liturgy and ecclesiology that exists beneath the surface of the images. Each was free to explore it in his own way.

The mosaic in the conch of S. Maria in Trastevere is the culmination of a mode of visual communication that began with the earliest Roman apse mosaics. It allows instant apprehension of liturgical and theological concepts that require books or many sermons to convey in words. Preaching is essential to this mode because the visual images are so abbreviated and often ambiguous. The image of the *synthronos* was especially fraught with potential for misunderstanding, just as the Song of Songs was fraught, even for the verbally adept.<sup>92</sup> The carnal embrace was a bold and dangerous choice for an apse mosaic, but Innocent II and his iconographer evidently trusted the collaborative viewing of *laici* and *clerici* to ensure its proper understanding.

### Praxis revised

The remaining apse mosaics of the high Middle Ages are all papal, and all are replacements of an early Christian mosaic in a papal basilica. Pope Innocent III began the series at St Peter's, and his successor Honorius III similarly remade the mosaic in S. Paolo fuori le mura.<sup>93</sup> At the end of the century Pope Nicholas IV (1288–92) commissioned new mosaics in both the cathedral, S. Giovanni in Laterano, and S. Maria Maggiore.<sup>94</sup> The iconographers of this sequence abandoned the age-old image of the pope as founder, depicting him less as the author of the representation than as its subject. They also changed the nature of the visual communication from elliptical to declarative, allusive to demonstrative.

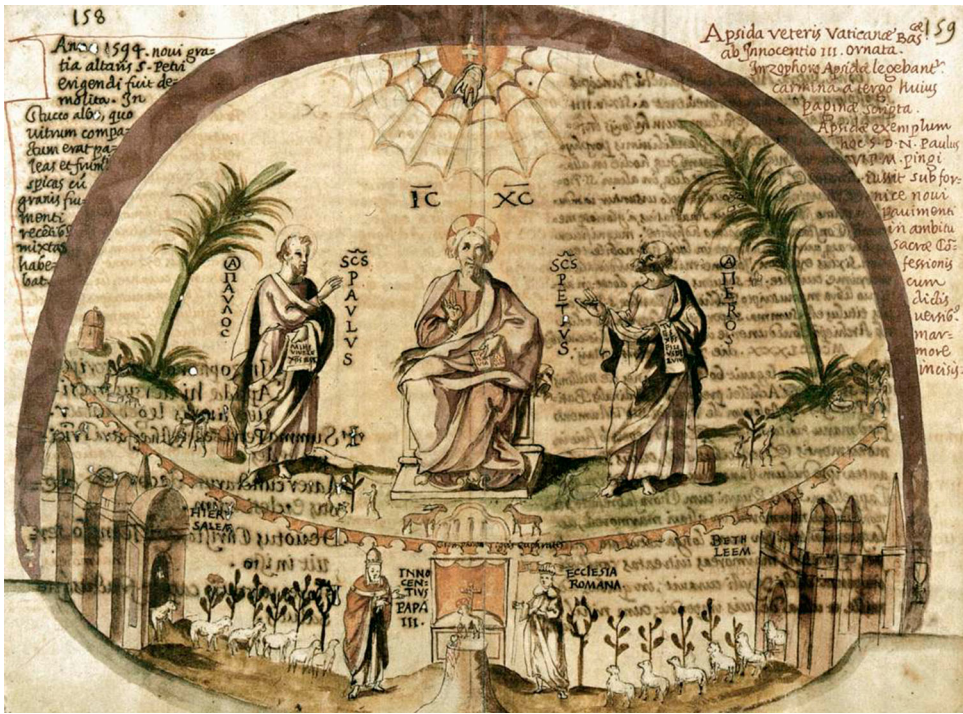
Pope Innocent III's new apse mosaic in St Peter's replaced the indeterminate early Christian *Traditio legis* with a more straightforward depiction of Christ enthroned in paradise acclaimed by Peter and Paul (Figure 8).<sup>95</sup> The pope appeared in a zone below this group, not as the humble *fundator* on the margin but in the centre, wearing the tiara, opposite a female figure labelled ECCLESIA ROMANA. A personification rather than an allegory, *Ecclesia romana* permits only one identification. The pope too was labelled.

<sup>92</sup> Lavin, 'Avant-Garde', 17, 42.

<sup>93</sup> For S. Paolo fuori le mura see Andaloro and Romano, 'L'immagine', 94; Julian Gardner, 'Innocent III and His Influence on Roman Art of the Thirteenth Century', in *Innocenzo III: Urbs et Orbis*, ed. Andrea Sommerlechner, 2 vols. (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il medio evo, 2003), 2: 1249–50; Karina Queijo, 'Il mosaico absidale di San Paolo fuori le mura', in *Il duecento e la cultura gotica, 1198–1287 ca.: la pittura medievale a Roma 312–1431, Corpus*, vol. 5, ed. Serena Romano (Milan: Jaca Book, 2012), 77–87; Julian Gardner, *The Roman Crucible: the Artistic Patronage of the Papacy 1198–1304* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2013), 222–3. The mosaic may have been begun by Innocent III; it was remade after a devastating fire in 1823.

<sup>94</sup> For S. Giovanni in Laterano: Alessandro Tomei, *Iacobus Torriti Pictor: una vicenda figurativa del tardo duecento romano* (Rome: Argos, 1990), 77–98; Andaloro and Romano, 'L'immagine', 97–100; Peter Cornelius Claussen, *Die Kirchen der Stadt Rom im Mittelalter 1050–1300*, vol. 2, *S. Giovanni in Laterano* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008), 104–13; Gardner, *Roman Crucible*, 257–9; Peter Cornelius Claussen, 'Nikolaus IV. als Erneuerer von S. Giovanni in Laterano und S. Maria Maggiore in Rom', in *Monuments & Memory*, eds. Verhoeven, Bosman and van Asperen, 53–67; Valentino Pace, 'Il XIII secolo: da Innocenzo III (1198–1216) a Bonifacio VIII (1294–1303)', in *Committenza artistica*, ed. D'Onofrio, 314–16. The mosaic was dated 1291. It was largely destroyed in 1883–4; the extant mosaic is a reproduction.

<sup>95</sup> Brenda M. Bolton, 'Qui fidelis est in minimo: the Importance of Innocent III's Gift List', in *Pope Innocent III and His World*, ed. John C. Moore (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 124–7; Gardner, 'Innocent III and His Influence', 1250–1; Antonio Iacobini, 'Est haec sacra principis aedes: the Vatican Basilica from Innocent III to Gregory IX (1198–1241)', in *St Peter's in the Vatican*, ed. William Tronzo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 49–52; Karina Queijo, 'Il mosaico absidale di San Pietro in Vaticano', in *Il Duecento*, 62–6. The mosaic was destroyed in 1592.



**Figure 8.** Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. Lat. 5408, ff. 29v-30r, record of the apse mosaic in St Peter's, destroyed 1592.

Source: Photo, © Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

He and the Church each stood at the head of a file of lambs. Between them was the *Agnus Dei* bleeding into a chalice and a throne bearing a gemmed cross, denoting Christ's triumph over death. The conjunction of the Lamb and the triumphal cross made the association of sacrifice with salvation. The vertical axis united three aspects of Christ: the sacrificial Lamb, the resurrected Saviour symbolised by the cross and the immanent Lord in Majesty. Such visual devices helped to convey the meaning of the mosaic without introducing alternatives. The message was clear: the pope and the Church of Rome lead their flock to the source of salvation in Christ's sacrifice; the triad of pope, *Agnus Dei* and Church is the earthly counterpart of the transcendent Lord acclaimed by his apostles. The inscription below the image, though poetic in form, was declarative, stressing the institutional place of the basilica and the special merit of the pope:

This holy house is the high seat of Peter the prince: mother, ornament and glory of all churches. He who faithfully serves Christ in this temple will reap the flowers of virtue and the fruits of salvation.<sup>96</sup>

The certainty of the second couplet is consonant with the new portrait type in the mosaic. Rather than offering a gift in the hope of personal salvation, as in apses going back to

<sup>96</sup> Jacobini, 'Est haec sacra principis aedes', 62, n. 22: SVMMA PETRI SEDES EST HAEC SACRA PRINCIPIS AEDIS / MATER CVNCTARVM DECOR ET DECVS ECCLESIA RVM / DEVOTVS CHRISTO QVI TEMPLO SERVIT IN ISTO / FLORES VIRTVTIS CAPIET FRVCTVSQVE SALVTIS.





**Figure 9.** Rome, Santa Maria Maggiore, apse mosaic.

Source: Photo, Scala/Art Resource, NY.

SS. Cosma e Damiano, the pope stands in his regalia as if assured of it, by virtue of his special relation to the Church.

Innocent III's mosaic visualises some of the leading tenets of his papacy, including the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the place of the pope as Christ's vicar and bridegroom of the Church.<sup>97</sup> United by the pope's own legislation and treatises, these concepts offer something like the 'linear route' of meaning eschewed by earlier iconographers. The mosaic displays complexity and even mystery, but no *aequivoca*. Clerics could have seen subtleties beyond the ken of lay viewers, but neither the image nor the inscriptions invited the speculative meditation facilitated by earlier apses.<sup>98</sup>

The final papal mosaic of the Middle Ages was commissioned by Pope Nicholas IV for S. Maria Maggiore (Figure 9).<sup>99</sup> Centred on a scene of Christ crowning his mother, the composition is an updating and implicit critique of the mosaic in S. Maria in Trastevere. The Lord and his mother share a throne, but they sit chastely apart. Gigantic in size, they are enclosed by a circular field filled with the sun, moon and stars. Adoring angels surround the lower part of the circle and the surface overhead is covered by inhabited vine

<sup>97</sup> Bolton, 'Qui fidelis est', 126–7; Iacobini, 'Est haec sacra principis aedes', 51–2; Gardner, *Roman Crucible*, 221.

<sup>98</sup> For more on this mosaic, see Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, 'Innocent III and the World of Symbols of the Papacy', in this special issue, *Journal of Medieval History* 44, no. 3 (2018): 261–279.

<sup>99</sup> Tomei, *Iacobus Torriti*, 99–125; Andaloro and Romano, 'L'immagine', 100–2; Gardner, *Roman Crucible*, 260–7; Lavin, 'Avant-Garde', 26–8. Completed in 1296, the mosaic is well preserved.

scrolls. Below the vine stand Sts Peter, Paul and Francis on the left, and Sts John the Baptist, John the Evangelist and Anthony of Padua on the right. Smaller in scale, the pope in his regalia kneels behind the angels at the left. Symmetrically opposite is a cardinal identified by an inscription as Giacomo Colonna, who as archpriest of the basilica oversaw the mosaic's execution.<sup>100</sup> As in St Peter's, the message of Nicholas's mosaic is explicit and unequivocal. Although the Coronation of the Virgin was the standard formula for visualising the Assumption in the thirteenth century and viewers would have recognised it easily, the subject is identified in words below the circle: 'Mary Virgin was assumed to the heavenly bed-chamber in which the King of Kings sits on a starry throne.'<sup>101</sup> The declarative prose casts the scene as history and precludes allegorical alternatives.

The inscription so closely resembles the pope's own writings that Nicholas himself could have been the iconographer.<sup>102</sup> As the first Franciscan pope, he must have been responsible for the shocking introduction of Sts Francis and Anthony as near-equals of the apostles.<sup>103</sup> In this and other innovations, including the graceful, three-dimensional style, the mosaic is aggressively modern. One modern element in particular alters the nature of the communication. The artist's signature, 'Jacopo Torriti the painter made this mosaic work', is written in the left corner of the conch in the traditional place of the founder.<sup>104</sup> Like the depiction of Cardinal Colonna, the signature draws attention to the material realisation of the mosaic by agents other than the pope. It demystifies a process of creation that had been obscured by past practice, in which apse mosaics appeared as emanations of the papal founder, just as letters were read as the pope's words rather than the scribe's. A contemporary of Cimabue and Giotto, Torriti was among the first generation of artists to systematically claim the authorship of visual communications for themselves. Such claims diminished the authorial status of the patron, relegating his contribution to the realm of words. The vision was the artist's.

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## Note on contributor

*Dale Kinney* is an art historian whose research has mostly concerned the art and architecture of medieval Rome. She has also written extensively on *spolia*, culminating in the co-edited volume *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011). From 1972 to 2010 she taught at Bryn Mawr College, where she is now Professor of History of Art Emeritus.

<sup>100</sup> D[omi]N[u]S IACOBVS DE COLV[m]PNA CARDINALIS.

<sup>101</sup> Gardner, *Roman Crucible*, 266–7: MARIA VIRGO ASSVMPTA EST AD ETHEREVM THALAMVM IN QUO REX REGVM STELLATO SEDET SOLIO.

<sup>102</sup> Tomei, *Jacobus Torriti*, 102–6.

<sup>103</sup> They first appeared in the same pope's mosaic in the Lateran Cathedral: Tomei, *Jacobus Torriti*, 89.

<sup>104</sup> Tomei, *Jacobus Torriti*, figure 1. Torriti also signed the Lateran apse: IACOB' TORRITI PICTOR H' OP' MOSAIC' FEC'.