Virgo lactans and virgines fatuae: The Façade Mosaic of S. Maria in Trastevere in Rome

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...if you find a turquoise with an image like this: a man carved with bent knees looking upward and holding a cloth, put it in the best gold [setting] and carry it with you virtuously and carefully, and it will heap upon you boundless favor in the buying and selling of all things.¹

The study of medieval iconography is generally the study of images produced by medieval artists and craftsmen. Yet people living in the territories of the old Roman empire – Britain, western Europe, parts of the Middle East, and Byzantium – also knew images made by others long before their own time. Whether through serendipity or purposeful search, seals, carved gems, marble ornament, sarcophagi, statues and other ancient artifacts emerged with regularity from the ground under their feet. Many were put to new use. The classic Panofskian approach to these finds assumes that medieval artists and viewers appropriated ancient iconography through allegory or so-called interpretatio christiana, which entailed swapping the name of a Christian subject for the original pagan one.² A paradigm of name-switching is the first-century sardonyx cameo of Jupiter standing with an eagle at his feet that was given to the treasury of Chartres cathedral in the fourteenth century as an image of St. John the Evangelist.³

Renaming was not the only means of rendering pagan iconography safe for medieval consumption; de-naming was equally common. The quotation in my epigraph, from a lapidarium (treatise on stones) of about 1200 in the Digby collection of the Bodleian Library, describes a figural type that closely resembles the standard image of the constellation Hercules, seen here in
a Carolingian example (Fig. 2.1). It is unlikely that the Digby author was unaware of this, but—omitting the club and transforming the lion skin into a “cloth”—he preferred to describe the astral deity as a “man.” Fabio Guidetti pointed to a rationale for this practice in a well-known astronomical manuscript produced at the court of Charlemagne’s son Louis the Pious (814–840), which contains 21 full-page illustrations of constellations inherited from late antiquity. A later (but still ninth-century) preface warns that the names of the constellations “were invented through false fabrications and must be ignored by … Christians, as if they were never heard of or written, [and] must be completely overlooked.” In other words, the images were valid but their mythological names were not. In stars and stones, forms were given by nature. Take away the false names bestowed upon them by misguided men, and these forms retained their intrinsic God-given value.

It was difficult to make this case for three-dimensional sculpture, in which form was plainly the work of men. For this reason, as Arnold Esch pointed out, statues “experienced a difficult fate.” Mythological sarcophagi were reused, however, perhaps because their pagan “names” were overlooked or forgotten, or, in some cases, because the antique forms were interpreted allegorically. The rare reuse of figured architectural sculpture presents similar alternatives. An example of its allegorical reuse can be seen in the sixth-century martyrial basilica of San Lorenzo fuori le mura in Rome, where a pair of second-century capitals decorated with military trophies and winged Victories was installed at the apse end of the nave colonnades, flanking the tomb of St. Lawrence (Fig. 2.2). In their new context the carved forms represent the triumph of Christ and his martyrs over death. Sixth-century Christians would have recognized this meaning without needing to consult the textual sources we use today to reconstruct it,
because the metaphor of Christ’s cross as a trophy, the *tropaeum passionis*, was a commonplace in their culture.

Other examples of the reuse of pagan figural ornament are not so easily explained. In eleventh-century Pisa, for example, a pair of third-century capitals carved with half-length images of pagan gods was reused in a colonnade of the little church of Santi Felice e Regolo. Each capital bears images of four gods: the Capitoline triad (Jupiter, Juno and Minerva) plus Mercury on one, and their Alexandrian counterparts (Isis, Serapis, Harpocrates) with Ceres on the other (Figs. 3, 4). Neither renaming nor de-naming would have disguised the fact that these were images of pagan deities in a space of Christian worship, where they must have provoked the curiosity that de-naming sought to avoid. Allegorization would have been hampered by the fact that the Egyptian gods did not belong to the Greco-Roman pantheon. Unlike star gods such as Hercules, whose allegorical potential was established in the early Middle Ages, or the gods that populate the Latin texts read in Christian schools, Isis and Serapis had almost no mythological tradition on which to build.

It is a remarkable coincidence that the colonnades of Santa Maria in Trastevere in Rome also contain reused third-century capitals with heads of Isis, Serapis, and Harpocrates. The images are smaller than those in Pisa and less distinct, and since Santa Maria also is a much larger building, they would have been easier to overlook (Fig. 2.5). Even so, the decision to reuse the pagan capitals in an ecclesiastical setting asks for some explanation. The theme of this volume allows me to return to an explanation I offered more than thirty years ago and to reflect upon how and why I would approach the same subject differently today. My original explanation posited an allegorical intention in two registers, moral and historical. It is based on the possible textual experiences of literate elites, and it attempts to integrate the capitals into an iconographic
program encompassing the church as a whole. The credibility of such a program entails some unstated assumptions, including a planner who could imagine iconographic unity and was empowered to impose it, and the ability to harness found iconography by renaming or de-naming it. From my current perspective the evidence in support of the explanation seems solid— I will reuse some of it here— but the explanation itself is vitiated by the assumptions. Even if there was an iconographic programmer of the building (which seems to me now unlikely), he could not have controlled the message of the capitals in the way I imagined. *Spolia* are not so amenable. Under any name— or no name— they introduce surplus meanings generated by anachronism and the marks of their journey through time.\(^{13}\) Seeking the intention of their reuse is not enough; the medium demands attention also to reception, in which meanings ranging from complementary to contradictory can coexist. Here I distinguish three phases in the medieval reception of the capitals in Santa Maria in Trastevere: discovery, installation, and improvisation.

*Discovery*

Pope Innocent II (1130–1143), the sponsor of Santa Maria in Trastevere, spent most of his papacy outside Rome.\(^{14}\) Local support for his rival Pope Anacletus II, consecrated in St. Peter’s nine days after their nearly simultaneous elections, forced Innocent to flee the city within a few months.\(^{15}\) Except for a brief period in 1133, he remained in exile in Italy and northern Europe until shortly before Anacletus’s death in 1138. For nearly four years (1133–1137) Innocent resided in Pisa, where he convened a major Church council in 1135.\(^{16}\) Soon after the end of the schism he called a council in Rome, which met at the Lateran in April 1139. There he publicly degraded every cardinal in Anacletus’s curia and annulled all of his acts and ordinations.\(^{17}\) He denounced each Anacletan bishop and archbishop by name, and according to a contemporary
source, he “violently seized the pastoral staves from their hands, and shamefully pulled off the pontifical pallia … from their shoulders, and also removed those rings by which betrothal to the church belonging to them is expressed.” In the following year Innocent proceeded to demolish Anacletus’s old title church, Santa Maria in Trastevere, in order to replace it with a magnificent new basilica bearing his own portrait in the apse mosaic. The building was under construction in 1141.

The pope’s agents must have been scouring Rome in 1140 to assemble the *spolia* needed to construct his grandiose basilica: a total of 32 column shafts and as many capitals and bases, marble blocks to make 78 m. (256 linear feet) of architraves, and enough ornamented cornices to form 104 modillions above the architraves (Fig. 5). The finds vary in size, material, type, and quality, and they must have come from multiple locations. The largest group from a single source consists of eight Ionic capitals with images of Serapis, Isis, and Harpocrates, which were found in the ruins of the outer enclosure of the Baths of Caracalla. Although not entirely uniform, the capitals are all of a type that predominantly features a head of Serapis or Isis in the center of the abacus and busts of Harpocrates, making his characteristic shushing gesture, in the volutes (Figs. 2.6, 2.7, 2.9; cf. Fig. 2.4). Today three of the heads on the abaci have been hacked off and three more are damaged. This was the work of the nineteenth century, as the capitals were still intact when the first edition of Karl Baedeker’s guide to Rome was published in 1866.

The Baths of Caracalla were a prime source of marble in the middle ages. The masons or marble-dealers who claimed capitals there for Santa Maria in Trastevere were preceded by many other prospectors, including a team from Pisa that carried off three figured Corinthian capitals from the west palaestra. These capitals also have heads on the abaci: one male on each face,
alternately a bearded Jupiter/Serapis and a youth who may have been Harpocrates. The baskets are decorated with Jupiter’s attributes, eagles and lightning bolts. The Pisans installed these capitals in the colonnades of their cathedral, which was completed not long before Pope Innocent II took up residence in Pisa in the 1130s. Not only the pope, but the members of his curia and many of the 122 bishops who attended the Pisan Council of 1135 were probably aware of the capitals, as well as of the more accessible (because closer to eye level) capitals in Santi Felice e Regolo. Some of these prelates must have observed and discussed their unorthodox iconography.

The original third-century viewers of the capitals now in Santa Maria in Trastevere would have recognized Serapis by the grain measure or modius on his head, his wife Isis by her “corkscrew” curls, and their son Harpocrates by his gesture for silence (Figs. 6, 8, 9). By the twelfth century these visual conventions were extinct. The agents who salvaged the capitals for reuse may have found them strange, but their job was to find the most ornate Ionic capitals available to outfit the colonnades of the new basilica, and these capitals fit the bill. As figured spolia were almost never reused in Roman church colonnades, however (the examples in San Lorenzo being a rare exception), the capitals must have been vetted by the project overseer, if not the pope himself, before they were hoisted into place. Perhaps one or more papal advisers were dispatched to the Baths to examine the capitals in situ, or perhaps they were inspected on the building site after they were carted over the Tiber. Any member of the curia who had been with the pope in Pisa might have noticed the iconographic resemblance of the sculpted heads to the Alexandrian triad in Santi Felice e Regolo. Others may have recognized the iconography from one of the ancient gemstones that cardinals and bishops routinely wore in their rings or applied to the adornment of liturgical objects. A fine second-century intaglio bust of Serapis wearing the modius was used as the court seal of Charlemagne, for example (Fig. 2.10). There must have
been similar gems in circulation in the twelfth century. The question is whether any educated churchmen of the era wondered about the significance of the attributes and wished to know the names of the figures they identified.

Erika Zwierlein-Diehl thinks not. Strictly adhering to Panofsky’s “principle of disjunction,” she maintains that pagan images on gems were not even recognized as pagan in the Middle Ages; rather, the iconography was simply ignored, or it was perceived through the lens of interpretatio christiana. Thus the seal of Charlemagne would have been seen as an emperor wearing a crown and interpreted as an image of Charlemagne himself. In other cases the value and beauty of the stone seemingly blinded its beholders to iconography; as an example, Zwierlein-Diehl cites the so-called “Cup of the Ptolemies,” an extraordinary first-century sardonyx vessel carved with scenes of Priapus and maenads that was donated to the Abbey of St-Denis by King Charles the Bald (d. 877). As late as the seventeenth century the subjects of the imagery were overlooked, or more precisely, they were recognized only at the pre-iconographic level as male heads, trees, animals, and birds. In other words, according to Zwierlein-Diehl, renaming and de-naming were the only possible medieval tactics for making pagan imagery (re)usable. Other scholars increasingly prefer a different model of reception, in which pagan images generated double, multiple, and sometimes contradictory meanings in Christian reuse. In line with this tendency, I believe that it may do a disservice to the curiosity and prodigious memories of twelfth-century clerics to insist that they were incapable of matching antique images to the contents of their mental storehouses of texts. This is not to say that every cleric was inclined to seek such matches. Many doubtless were not, but we should not ignore the possibility that some were.
To a literate cleric, the bust of Harpocrates in Pisa could have brought to mind the phrase *favete linguis* (“favor us with your tongues,” i.e., keep silent), which was invoked in ancient Roman religious observances and repeated by many of the classical authors read in medieval schools.\(^{32}\) Or it could have recalled the “boy with a crown” in Martianus Capella’s *On the Marriage of Mercury and Philology*, who “gave the signal for silence with his finger held to his lips” before Jupiter commenced to speak.\(^{33}\) Remigius of Auxerre (d. 908) identified him as Cupid, “the god of turpitude.”\(^{34}\) A reader of the *City of God* might have remembered “an image that seemed to enjoin silence” who was associated with Isis and Serapis: “since in practically all the temples where Isis and Serapis were worshipped there was also an image that seemed to enjoin silence by a finger pressed against its lips, Varro thinks this had the same meaning, that no mention should be made of their having been human beings.”\(^{35}\) Snippets like these could have arisen spontaneously in the mind of the literate beholder, without any concerted effort on his part to identify the image he was looking at.

On the other hand, medieval readers did make concerted efforts to learn the iconography of the gods and goddesses they encountered in classical texts, in order to identify them and to construe their stories. There was a long tradition of treatises and handbooks that assisted such efforts of interpretation.\(^{36}\) Because Isis and Serapis appear only fleetingly in the canonical works of Latin literature the handbooks pay them little attention, but they do not ignore them entirely. The catalogue of pagan gods by the great Carolingian scholar Hrabanus Maurus (d. 856), for example, provides essentially the same euhemeristic account of Isis and Serapis as St. Augustine: Isis was a queen who came from Greece and taught the Egyptians letters and agriculture. Serapis,
the greatest of all Egyptian gods, is Apis, king of Argives, who had sailed to Egypt by ship. When he died there … they started to honor him where he was buried, before his temple was built. At first he was called Sorapis, as if σορός [sarcophagus] and Apis, then, with one letter changed, Serapis.37

Other compilers omitted Serapis in favor of Osiris, Isis’s consort in pre-Hellenistic Egyptian mythology. After repeating a tradition that Isis originated as Io, turned into a cow by Jupiter and renamed when she was restored to human form in Egypt, the so-called Second Vatican Mythographer added that the husband of Isis was Osiris, “a giant”; he was dismembered by Typhon; Isis sought and gathered up his remains, and in their rites his devotees emulate her search.38 This tenth- or eleventh-century writer also described Isis’s attributes, noting that as the “Genius of Egypt” she carried a rattle (sistrum) and a bucket (situla). “Through the motion of a rattle that she carries in her right hand, Isis signifies the accession and recession of the Nile. Through a bucket that she holds in her left hand, she signifies the flowing of all waters.”39 The Third Mythographer, perhaps Master Alberic of London (d. 1202) or Alexander Neckham (d. 1217), added the (mis)information that “the sistrum is a type of trumpet or organ that only the Egyptians use; it is shown in the statue of Isis.”40 Despite the misunderstanding of the sistrum, this passage is noteworthy for the correlation of a literary mythological type with a material artifact. Whether or not the author had ever seen such a statue, the description fits a type known from a second-century example found at Hadrian’s Villa in Tivoli (Fig. 2.11). It also fits the capital in Pisa, in which Isis raises the sistrum in her right hand (Fig. 2.3).41

The statue type was evidently the basis for the most extended description of Isis in ancient Latin literature, the non-canonical Metamorphoses (“Golden Ass”) by the second-century
North African writer Apuleius. The protagonist of this story collection, Lucius, is transformed by his own foolishness into an ass. After many raunchy adventures, he is redeemed when he prays to a syncretic “queen of heaven” (regina caeli). He is rewarded by a vision of the divinity herself:

Her hair, thick, long, and lightly curled, flowed softly down, loosely spread over her divine neck and shoulders. The top of her head was encircled by an intricate crown into which were woven all kinds of flowers. At its midpoint, above her forehead, a flat round disc like a mirror – or rather a symbol for the moon – glistened … To right and left the crown was bounded by coils of rearing snakes, and adorned above with outstretched ears of wheat. Her robe … was of many colors …; and what most especially confounded my sight was a deep black cloak … which was wrapped around her … with part of its border let down in the form of a knot; it hung in complicated pleats, beautifully undulating with knotted tassels at its lower edge … She carried a wide variety of emblems. In her right hand she held a bronze rattle [crepitaculum]… From her left hand hung a golden boat-shaped vessel, and on the projecting part of its handle there rose an asp…

Restored to human form, Lucius is initiated into the mysteries of Isis and goes to Rome, where he worships at the great Temple of Isis in the Campus Martius (Iseum campense) and undergoes further degrees of initiation until the “mightiest of the great gods, the highest of the mightiest, the loftiest of the highest, and the sovereign of the loftiest” appears to him in a dream. It is not Serapis but Osiris. In fact, the ornament and presumably the cult of the Iseum campense contained many Egyptianizing features.
The earliest surviving manuscript of the *Metamorphoses*, now in Florence, was written in the eleventh century at Montecassino. Scholars have maintained that it languished there unread until it was taken from the monastery in the fourteenth century and copied for the likes of Petrarch and Boccaccio, but Robert Carver has made the case for a much earlier and wider dissemination. Carver provides evidence that the text was known to the Cassinese monk Guaiferius (d. before 1086) and to the monastery’s twelfth-century librarian Peter the Deacon (d. after 1153), and he suggests that through the many twelfth-century visitors to Montecassino the *Metamorphoses* might have been transmitted northward to the circle of Peter Abelard, to Chrétien de Troyes, and to other authors active in France. If anyone in the circle of Pope Innocent II wished to learn the ancient names of the pagan gods depicted on the capitals in Pisa and in Rome, he could have asked Peter the Deacon. Peter knew the books in his library. If he happened to remember St. Augustine’s association of a silentiary figure with Isis and Serapis, he could have deduced from that and the *Metamorphoses* that the found images represented Harpocrates, Isis, and her consort Osiris or Serapis. But there is no evidence at all that such an inquiry ever was made.

**Installation**

The moment of discovery was the only occasion for detailed scrutiny and scholarly speculation about the images on the capitals. After they were lifted into place, nearly 7 m. above the pavement, the heads retreated from view. In their elevated position they can go unnoticed, but once seen they are an undeniable visual presence, looking implacably out into the nave (Fig. 2.12). The builders distributed the capitals unevenly, five on the north (right) side of the nave over the third, fourth, fifth, seventh, and eighth columns, and three on the south side over the
fifth, sixth, and eighth columns (Fig. 2.13). The distribution speaks against an iconographic program and was more likely a practical response to the formidable problem of making twenty-two sets of three heterogeneously scaled components (bases, shafts, and capitals) rise exactly to the uniform height of the entablature.\textsuperscript{48}

Lack of a program is not the same as lack of a rationale. The decision to reuse the capitals must have had some justification, and while we cannot say precisely what it was, we can pinpoint its intellectual context. Among the members of Pope Innocent’s curia was the learned Cardinal Guido of Città di Castello (1128–1143; Pope Celestine II, 1143–1144).\textsuperscript{49} He commissioned a “script” (\textit{ordo}) for papal liturgy that was composed by the cantor Benedict, canon of St. Peter’s, around 1140–1143.\textsuperscript{50} The same author probably was responsible for the composite text known to modern editors as the \textit{Mirabilia urbis Romae}, which on internal evidence is exactly contemporary with the \textit{ordo}.\textsuperscript{51} The \textit{MuR} is an account of Roman topography. It provides lists of ancient buildings by category, narrative explanations of a few conspicuous monuments, and an enumeration of ancient sites organized by region.\textsuperscript{52} Manfred Luchterhandt recently described it as textual archaeology, the product of library research stimulated less by the sight of antique remains than by the desire to write a history of Rome from the viewpoint of Christian salvation.\textsuperscript{53} The author was “a type of ecclesiastical intellectual for whom Antiquity was local history.”\textsuperscript{54} He did not have the humanistic education needed for the iconographic inquiry just described, but he was an assiduous student of the history of his surroundings. To again quote Luchterhandt, the \textit{MuR} describes “a city in chronological layers, in which the present becomes the question of its past.”\textsuperscript{55}

The chapters detailing the regional topography are written mostly in the past tense, naming temples and palaces that once existed but had disappeared or been replaced by churches:
“On the Esquiline Hill there was a temple of Marius, which now is called Cimbrum … Where Santa Maria Maggiore is, there was a temple of Cybele. Where San Pietro in Vincoli is, there was a temple of Venus…”56 Some of the author’s topographical information is authentic, some is creatively reworked, and some seems to have been pure invention.57 There was no temple of Cybele on the site of Santa Maria Maggiore, for example. These topographical genealogies work two ways: backward, linking the sites of modern Rome to those of “the time of the pagans,” and forward, demonstrating that the ancient world’s greatest pagan city was destined to be converted to Christianity.58

The installation of eight capitals with heads of pagan deities in the colonnades of Santa Maria in Trastevere not only accords with the basic tenet of the Mirabilia that temples were destined to give way to churches; it actively promoted it. According to the MuR, the pagan genealogy of Santa Maria in Trastevere included the templum Ravennantium (“temple of the Ravennates”), a possibly fictional temple known from the late antique passio of the basilica’s first founder, Pope Callixtus I (ca. 217–222).59 The columns with the pagan capitals seem to rematerialize that temple in the church, or at least to evoke it in the eye of the viewer’s mind. For this purpose the names of the deities are not important; they represent the gods of the Ravennates. It was not necessary to know the Mirabilia to appreciate this reference, as everyone associated with Santa Maria in Trastevere – canons and the lay congregation – knew the story of Pope Callixtus I, whose passion was read there annually on his feast day, 14 October, and perhaps more often throughout the year.

Improvisation
The transport and elevation of 20-foot monolithic column shafts was a spectacle, and it is likely that layfolk as well as clergy watched some of the shafts and capitals being lifted into place.\textsuperscript{60} This initial audience may have been simply dazzled by the wonder of assembling and installing the \textit{spolia}, by their abundance and heterogeneity, and by their overall effect. To them everything about the colonnades was fresh and new, and the eight capitals with little heads, among 14 others of various types and origins, may not have stood out. Over time, however, the colonnades became familiar. Those who spent time in the basilica—notably the canons, who chanted the Divine Office there throughout the day—came to know its details and particulars. Sooner or later the faces staring from eight capitals would have caught their attention. Eventually, as memories of the capitals’ discovery and installation faded, those who were curious about the heads would have sought some explanation.

To judge from the limited surviving evidence, when confronted with found and unfamiliar iconographies medieval viewers often improvised meanings on the basis of contextual cues and unusual details. Zwierlein-Diehl provides several examples, including the story of the Gemma Augustea now in Vienna (Fig. 15).\textsuperscript{61} In the thirteenth century this giant cameo was in the abbey of Saint-Sernin in Toulouse, where a legend of indeterminate date held that it had been found by Joshua in the desert of Ethiopia. Subsequently taken to Jerusalem, it split at the moment of Christ’s crucifixion. Zwierlein-Diehl plausibly explains this story as an extrapolation from the crack in the cameo’s lower register, below the feet of Roma and Augustus.\textsuperscript{62} The \textit{Mirabilia urbis Romae} contains similar extrapolated stories about ancient statues and buildings in Rome, including the statues of the Dioscuri on the Quirinal Hill, the colossal bronze pinecone in the atrium of St. Peter’s, and the equestrian monument of Marcus Aurelius outside the Lateran.\textsuperscript{63}
To viewers curious about the capitals, the heads of Harpocrates offered a point of departure. His gesture of finger to lips was both unusual and self-explanatory. Even the simplest viewer could have interpreted it on the basis of experience or common sense. The appropriateness of a signal for silence in a religious setting was equally self-evident. Silence is both respectful and prudent, since a wagging tongue is a source of sin (Matthew 12.36-37). There are many more Biblical injunctions to silence, including some that refer to the gesture itself (e.g., Job 39.34: “What can I answer, who hath spoken inconsiderately? I will lay my hand upon my mouth”). Mindful of such exhortations, lay people in the nave of the church might have assumed that the silencing gesture was directed at them.

Although the capitals are located mostly in the people’s part of the nave, occupants of the schola cantorum sat or stood facing some of them (Fig. 2.13). It was presumably in this choir that the canons recited the Divine Office throughout the day. For them the admonition to silence had a deeper meaning. Canons were routinely urged to silence, not as an end in itself but as a means of disciplining speech. The theory was articulated by St. Ambrose in the fourth century. Departing from Psalm 38 (“I said, ‘I will take heed to my ways that I sin not with my tongue. I have set a guard to my mouth when the sinner stood against me’”), Ambrose began his treatise “On the Duties of Priests” with the role of silence. “What is it that we need to learn before everything else? Surely it is to be silent, so that we are able to speak as we ought.” Those who can remain silent in the face of provocation, calumny, and their own emotional reactions attain modesty and patience, “the kind of patience we require to remain silent … waiting for the right occasion to speak.” As preachers of the word of God, canons were instructed to limit their own words to what was useful and edifying for others.
The most profound significance of silence was for monks. For them the practice of silence was a gate to salvation, because only in silence could one hear the Word of God, which itself is silent.\textsuperscript{70} Silence or \textit{vacatio} was not a literal silence but a prayerful retreat into an inward state of receptivity to grace and the understanding of God. It was the sound of \textit{Lectio Divina}, through which monks mentally and physically absorbed the meaning of Scripture by mindfully murmuring its words.\textsuperscript{71} Silence was a theme of many twelfth-century monastic writers, such as Abbot Guerric of Igny (d. 1157), who wrote of “the Word of God silent in the midst of men.” “Let him who has ears to hear, hear what this loving and mysterious silence of the eternal Word speaks to us … He speaks peace for the holy people upon whom reverence for him and his example impose a religious silence.”\textsuperscript{72} While monks were not the intended audience for the reused capitals in Santa Maria in Trastevere, their practices were known and their sermons and treatises were read in the world outside the cloister, where they could have informed the viewing of canons and priests. The secular clergy would have known that silence was a means of internalizing the meaning of their own liturgical recitations.

These associations are in line with André Grabar’s interpretation of the relatively few known medieval examples of the silencing gesture, which mostly illustrate textual admonitions (e.g., Ps. 140.3: “Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth and a door round about my lips”) or represent figures in prayer.\textsuperscript{73} The iconography varies in detail: sometimes it is the whole hand that is raised to the mouth, or the finger is parallel to the lips rather than vertical. Despite the lack of a common visual formula, Grabar proposed that all of these depictions had the same meaning. Whether in images of Egyptian monks, Byzantine Evangelist portraits, or a Catalan fresco of Christ in Majesty, the covering of the mouth signified silence in the act of prayer. It meant the suppression of inauspicious or improper speech (\textit{εὐφημεῖν}) in order to pray properly, thereby to
access the silent voice of communion with God (σιγώση ψυχή, “silence mystique absolu”).\textsuperscript{74} The importance of silence in Christian worship could have fostered an \textit{interpretatio christiana} of the found iconography in Santa Maria in Trastevere, in which the silentiaries in the volutes of the capitals became angels and the gods in the abaci Christ and Mary. At the very least the capitals were constant reminders of the mental state and physical behavior required for efficacious prayer. They may also have provided occasions for the canons to explicate difficult Scriptural passages like Apocalypse 8:1 (“And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven as it were for half an hour”).\textsuperscript{75}

\textit{Ça change}

My previous essay on the figured capitals in Santa Maria in Trastevere was published in the last years of what might be called the age of innocence of traditional Panofskian iconography. It was still the standard approach to uncovering the meaning of historical artworks, but art historians were beginning to look askance at its binary opposition of form and meaning, its location of meaning in the intention and expression of the artist, and its logocentrism. The discipline was moving in new directions, and by the 1990s iconography was replaced by “Meaning/Interpretation” as a “critical term” for American students of art history.\textsuperscript{76} Meaning itself ceased to be considered exclusively the message encoded in the object by its maker, and it ballooned to encompass many facets of the object’s subsequent interactions: visual, physical, social, psychological. Methods for the study of meaning multiplied and often entailed the application of paradigms from other disciplines or critical theory to works of art.

Elsewhere I have written about the \textit{spolia} in twelfth-century Roman churches as morpho-historical signifiers, applying a semiotic category defined by Umberto Eco, and as mythological
objects in the sense of “mythological” advanced by Jean Baudrillard. These extra-art-historical concepts helped me to articulate a dimension of the capitals’ meaning that cannot be accessed through strict iconographic research. Here instead I have confined my discussion to a dimension proper to iconography, denotation. My revised approach to it, though determined by my specific experience with spolia, is in line with a general trend to privilege viewer response over intention in the study of medieval artworks. I have posited three “viewing communities” of the capitals: the hyperliterate clerical elite; Romans conscious of the fact that every church in their city replaced, if it did not actually occupy, a building from the pre-Christian past; and the resident canons. Other viewing communities existed; these three were chosen because they seem the most likely to have engaged with the capitals’ iconography. Of the three, the hyperliterate clerical elite best fits the Panofskian paradigm and is in that sense a holdover from my original study. It is also, paradoxically, the most speculative. On the one hand, such classically educated churchmen unquestionably existed; an obvious example is John of Salisbury, too young to have visited Rome under Innocent II but frequently at the court of his near-successor Pope Eugenius II (1145–1153). On the other hand, it is debatable whether any such twelfth-century cleric attempted to match textual knowledge and visual experience in the manner suggested here.

Whether or not my speculations are correct, the study of post-factum denotation can contribute to the broader question of the nature of the visual image in the Western middle ages. The ease with which found iconography was emptied of its denotational value to become a “pre-iconographic” signifier (the “man carved with bent knees looking upward and holding a cloth”), or renamed to denote a new subject, may recall the well-known passage in the Libri carolini in which Theodulf of Orléans (d. 821) cautioned that the image of a woman holding a child in her arms cannot be assumed to be Mary and Jesus. Without a written label confirming its subject, the
image might as well represent an Old Testament pair like Sarah and Isaac or a mythological one like Venus and Aeneas, Alcmene with the infant Hercules, or Andromache and Astyanax.\textsuperscript{81} According to Theodulf, lability of denotation was not confined to found iconography, and meaning was not intrinsic to the medieval image as Panofsky’s model would have it.\textsuperscript{82} Yet sometimes it was, as in icon types like the “Madonna Avvocata,” in which form and content are inseparable and the denotive value of the image, as Mary in her role of intercessor, was fixed (Fig. 14). Understanding denotation is essential to understanding the operation of meaning in medieval visual art. In that respect, traditional Panofskian methods remain essential as well.\textsuperscript{83}
Found Iconography: Illustrations

Fig. 1  Pseudo-Bede, *De signis coeli*, Montecassino MS 3, p. 178, Engonasin. Photo: Valentino Pace

Fig. 2  San Lorenzo fuori-le-mura, Rome, reused capital with trophies and Victories. Photo: Kinney

Fig. 3  Former Santi Felice e Regolo, Pisa (now via Ulisse Dini, 4), reused capital with Alexandrian triad: Harpocrates and Isis. Photo: Kinney

Fig. 4  Former Santi Felice e Regolo, reused capital with Alexandrian triad: Harpocrates. Photo: Kinney

Fig. 5  Santa Maria in Trastevere, north colonnade. Photo: Alessandro Vasari, Rome

Fig. 6  Santa Maria in Trastevere, capital N3, Serapis and Harpocrates. Photo: Kinney

Fig. 7  Santa Maria in Trastevere, capital N4, Isis and Harpocrates. Photo: Kinney

Fig. 8  Santa Maria in Trastevere, capital S5, Isis. Photo: Kinney

Fig. 9  Santa Maria in Trastevere, capital N8, right volute. Photo: Kinney

Fig. 10  Impression of the court seal of Charlemagne. Photo: © Genevra Kornbluth

Fig. 11  Rome, Capitoline Museums, Statue of Isis from Hadrian’s Villa at Tivoli. Photo: Wikimedia

Fig. 12  Santa Maria in Trastevere, north colonnade, columns N7–N9. Photo: Kinney
Fig. 13 Santa Maria in Trastevere, plan showing distribution of Isis and Serapis capitals. Plan: Roberto Einaudi; montage: Elise Ferone

Fig. 16 Rome, Santa Maria in Aracoeli, icon of the Madonna Avvocata. Photo: Art Resource

Illustrations
Fig. 3
Fig. 9
Fig. 10
Si inveneris in (turchesio) tale sigillum virum scilicet flexis genibus sculptum sursum respicientem et pannum tenentem. pone in auro optimo et tecum caste et diligentur defer tibique gratiam nimiam in emendis omnibus rebus sive vendendis accumulabit. Quoted by Joan Evans, *Magical Jewels of the Middle Ages and*


4 Montecassino, MS 3, fol. 178v.

5 British Library, Harley MS 647, fols. 2v–13v;


14 A recent claim that the church was actually built by the antipope Anacletus II is incorrect: Alison Locke Perchuk, “Schismatic (Re)Visions: Sant’Elia near Nepi and Sta. Maria in Trastevere in Rome, 1120–1143,” *Gesta* 55 no. 2 (2016), 180–212, at 204–210. I will discuss this in volume “M” of *Die Kirchen der Stadt Rom im Mittelalter*.


Doran, “Two popes,” 21–22.


*Pensabene, Roma su Roma*, 879–880, cat. nos. 101–108. My numbering starts at the entrance end, which is at the east in Santa Maria in Trastevere.

In one case (N5) the female head on the abacus wore a veil and may not be Isis, and in that case and one other (N7) the images in the volutes are female heads rather than Harpocrates.

Hacked off: N5, N8, S8; damaged: N4, N7, S6.


28 Zwierlein-Diehl, Antike Gemmen, Abb. 840, pl. 191. The seal is known from impressions made in 775 and 812.

29 Zwierlein-Diehl, Antike Gemmen, 253.


32 Cicero, De divinatione 1.45.102 (rebusque divinis, quae publice fierent, ut faverent linguis imperabatur); Seneca, De vita beata 26.7 (quotiens mentio sacrarum litterarum intervenerit, favete linguis); Pliny, Naturalis historia XXVIII.2.11 (alium [custodem] vero praeponi qui favere linguis iubeat). See also Virgil, Aeneid 5.71; Horace, Carmina 3.1.2; Ovid, Fasti 2.654.

33 Martianus Capella, De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii 1.90, ed. James Willis, Martianus Capella (Leipzig: Teubner, 1983), 25 (quidam redimitus puer ad os compresso digito salutari


41 Unfortunately the *sistrum* is obscured by the corner Victory in my photo; see Tedeschi Grisanti, “Capitelli romani figurati,” Tav. IV.


43 *Metamorphoses* 11.3–4; trans. Hanson, 2:297–299.

44 *Metamorphoses* 11.30; trans. Hanson, 2:357.

46 Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, 68.2.


Luchterhandt, “Mirabilia,” 100.

Mirabilia urbis Romae, 28, ed. Valentini and Zucchetti, Codice topografico, 3:60 (In Exquilino monte fuit templum Marii, quod nunc vocatur Cimbrum, eo quod vicit Cimbros ... Ubi est Sancta Maria Maior, fuit templum Cibeles. Ubi est Sanctus Petrus ad Vincula, fuit templum Veneris).

Valentini and Zucchetti, Codice topografico, 3:60, nn. 1–3.

Mirabilia urbis Romae 32, ed. Valentini and Zucchetti, Codice topografico, 3:65 (Haec et alia multa templum et palatia imperatorum, consulum, senatorum, praeffectorumque tempore paganorum in hac Romana urbe fuere...).


The height of the shafts bearing the capitals with heads ranges from 5.95 m. (20.10 Roman feet) to 6.35 m. (21.45 Roman feet). An inscription records the praise heaped on the architect of Pisa cathedral for erecting the column shafts there: Tedeschi Grisanti, “Dalle Terme di Caracalla,” 170.

Zwierlein-Diehl, Antike Gemmen, 243–244 and Abb. 610, pl. 128.

Zwierlein-Diehl, Antike Gemmen, 243.


All Scriptural quotations and translations are from the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library edition of the Vulgate by Swift Edgar and Angela M. Kinney.


Psalm 38:2: Dixi, “Custodiam vias meas ut non delinquam in lingua mea. Posui ori meo custodiam cum consisteret peccator adversum me.”


De officiis 1.23 (Advertimus enim ex his quae breviter libavimus, et silendi patientiam et opportunitatem loquendi); trans. Davidson, Ambrose, 1:131.


Grabar, “Une fresque visigothique,” 128.

*Et cum aperuisset sigillum septimum, factum est silentium in caelo quasi media hora.*


For “viewing communities”: Caviness, “Reception,” 68.


Bann, “Meaning/Interpretation,” 130.

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