

CHAPTER 4

The Church of Santa Maria Antiqua: further encounters with the visual culture of Rome

4.1 Introduction

Having examined the ways in which visitors to early Christian Rome, such as those from Anglo-Saxon England, would have encountered the 'Church' in the city, it is now possible to examine some examples of the visual culture that they might have viewed as part of that experience. If taking into account the wider situation in Rome, there are several relevant monuments in which the great significance of the models may have had an impact on Anglo-Saxon art, especially when considering fresco and mosaic decoration and painted icons. The Pantheon and Santa Maria in Trastevere icons, the mosaic and *opus sectile* decoration at the Lateran Baptistery, the mosaic and marble decoration at the churches of Santa Sabina, Santo Stefano Rotondo, San Clemente and Sant'Agnese are all important, albeit scattered, survivals of the wealth of Roman creativity and influence. However, here the discussion will focus primarily on the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in the Roman Forum, as it allows a privileged insight on the complexity of early medieval art in Rome, in its papal connections and for its wealth of frescoes, especially in combination and comparison with the other buildings, frescoes and mosaics which will provide further indications of the rich variety of artistic stimuli that could inspire an Anglo-Saxon viewer.

4.2 Santa Maria Antiqua

Although the existence of at least the original apse of Santa Maria Antiqua was known and reproduced in drawings,¹ the church itself was 're-discovered' only in 1900, when the baroque church of Santa Maria Liberatrice that had been built over the site in 1617, was demolished, and systematic excavation of the site

¹ A watercolour by Valesio, dated 1702, shows the apse and triumphal arch, although partially buried. See Osborne-Rasmus Brandt-Morganti (eds), *Santa Maria Antiqua*, p. 97.

started. The location and remains of the church had been slowly obliterated – buried by collapsed material, its frescoes preserved as in a sealed chamber – after it was moved to a different location close by and rebuilt, with the new dedication of Santa Maria Nova, under Pope Leo IV (847-855), probably following the earthquake of 847.²

Santa Maria Antiqua was originally installed in the Forum, at the foot of the western side of the Palatine hill, incorporating structures of the imperial residence of Domitianus (81-96) (Pl.65). It is not possible to identify the nature and function of that imperial building; it has been suggested that it formed some kind of official hall which was later transformed into a guardroom to protect the passageway that led to the palace when it became the residence of the Byzantine governor in Rome.³ A fresco of the Virgin and Child in the main chamber, dated to the mid-sixth century (Pl.66), declares the Christianity of at least part of the building, and its particular devotion to Mary, even before it was officially and physically transformed into a church. From the outset its status was extremely high, embodying the different aspects of the Empire at the time: Roman, Byzantine and Christian.

It is important to mention here once again the significance of the transformation into ecclesiastical space of a public, secular and formerly imperial building inside the Forum. As already demonstrated,⁴ the processes by which Rome became officially and publicly Christian under the Emperor

² On the excavations of 1900 and after see G. Morganti, 'Giacomo Boni e i lavori di Santa Maria Antiqua: un secolo di restauri', pp. 11-30; A. Augenti, 'Giacomo Boni, gli scavi di Santa Maria Antiqua e l'archeologia medievale a Roma all'inizio del Novecento', pp. 31-39; J. Rasmus Brandt, 'The Oratory of the Forty Martyrs: From Imperial Hall to Baroque Church', pp. 137-52 all in Osborne-Rasmus Brandt-Morganti (eds), *Santa Maria Antiqua. On the possible use of Santa Maria Antiqua in the tenth/eleventh centuries*, see J. Osborne, 'The atrium of S. Maria Antiqua, Rome: a history in art' in *Papers of the British School at Rome* 55 (1987), pp. 186-223.

³ According to Krautheimer the original decoration of this guardroom was likely to have been inspired by and so possibly similar to the Justinianic mosaics in the guardroom of his imperial palace in Constantinople. Krautheimer, *Rome*, p. 73. See also P. Liverani, 'Dal *palatium* imperiale al *palatium* pontificio' in J. Rasmus Brandt [et al] (ed.), *Rome AD 300-800. Power and Symbol – Image and Reality. Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia*, 17, Roma 2003, pp. 143-63.

⁴ See *supra*, ch.1.

Constantine saw the churches commissioned by the Emperor himself being initially situated outside the Roman and pagan heart of the city, on private imperial properties. Against this background, the impact of establishing a church in the Forum must have been of considerable significance.⁵ This was always an extremely symbolic area of Rome, a place of considerable public activity, even if in decline, as demonstrated by the erection of the triumphal column for the Byzantine Emperor Phocas in 608 and by Constant II's 'tour' of the area in 663, during the first official visit of a Byzantine Emperor to the western capital in nearly two centuries.⁶ Perhaps more importantly, Pope Felix IV (526-30) had founded and decorated the church of SS Cosma e Damiano, converting the *aula*, originally part of Hadrian's Foro della Pace, next to the Basilica of Maxentius (or Basilica Nova), and facing the *via Sacra*. The first transformation of the space that was later to be occupied by Santa Maria Antiqua can be ascribed to this period. Subsequently, the same church is mentioned as the seat of a *diaconia*: as noted, the creation of these institutions is traditionally assigned to the Gregorian period and they were usually associated with pre-existing structures.⁷

Once established, Santa Maria Antiqua (Pl.67-68) consisted of a large atrium, which was probably originally at least partially covered; the room onto which this opened was separated by columns into a central nave flanked by two narrow lateral aisles. The central nave opened through a large chancel arch into the presbytery which terminated in a small apse formed by excavating and cutting into the thickness of the Roman wall. To the left and right of this space were two smaller rooms of different sizes and shapes; it is difficult to say if they were an original part of the imperial structures, but it seems that, once the space was transformed into a church, these side-rooms were assimilated with the *prothesis* and *diaconicon* of Byzantine origins, and known respectively as the

⁵ See supra, p. 49.

⁶ See supra, pp. 54-6.

⁷ See supra, ch.3.

Chapel of Theodotus (north/left) and the Chapel of the Holy Physicians (south/right).⁸

Although re-opened with a solemn Mass in 1954, the church is not only still closed to the general public, but also preserves a ‘non-religious’ atmosphere, functioning almost only as a shrine for its fortuitously preserved frescoes and decoration. This has created a situation in which, although Santa Maria Antiqua is widely studied and highly esteemed for its art, the opportunity of appreciating it as a whole, single sacred space in the context of early medieval Rome has so far been largely neglected.

4.2.1 Scholarly approaches

As often happens, scholars working on Santa Maria Antiqua have been primarily concerned with establishing the chronology of the building.⁹ In this, they were helped by the wealth of decoration and the possibility of separating and accordingly dating its different phases, in conjunction with some scanty references in the *Liber Pontificalis* and small archaeological findings.¹⁰ The lives of the Popes seem not to adequately reflect the hub of artistic activity that Santa Maria Antiqua must have been, especially in the earlier stages of its life. Apart from the life of John VII (705-07), one of the major patrons in the history of the church, and Leo III (795-816), who provided the church with gifts and liturgical objects, mention of Santa Maria Antiqua only appears elsewhere in the life of Gregory III (731-741).¹¹ Afterwards, we know from the later lives of Benedict III (855-58) and Nicolas I (858-67) that the church ‘*Dei genitricis semperque virginis Mariae que primitus Antiqua, nunc autem Nova vocatur*’ was rebuilt from the

⁸ On the *diaconicon* and *prothesis*, see *infra*, p. 213.

⁹ For a summary of the relevant bibliography see Osborne, ‘The atrium’, p. 186, fn. 1, to which it is necessary to add the recent Osborne-Rasmus Brandt-Morganti (eds), *Santa Maria Antiqua*; S. Lucey, ‘Art and Socio-Cultural Identity in Early Medieval Rome: The Patrons of Santa Maria Antiqua’ in *Roma Felix: Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome*, É. Ó Carragáin & C. Neuman de Vegvar (eds), Aldershot 2007, pp. 139-58.

¹⁰ On the archaeological evidence of the coins supposedly found at Santa Maria Antiqua see Osborne, ‘The atrium’, p. 188, fn. 11.

¹¹ See *Liber Pontificalis*, vol. 1, respectively pp. 385-7, 415-25, and vol. 2, pp. 1-48.

foundations on a different site under Leo IV (847-855), being redecorated and given gifts and rights that belonged to the former church, following an earthquake in 847;¹² this is a sequence of events supported by the archaeological excavations of the site.

As part of the process of reconstructing the history of the building, study of the church has identified at least five cycles of paintings, attributed chronologically to Martin I (649-53), John VII (705-7), Zacharias (741-52), Paul I (757-67) and finally Hadrian I (772-95). The presence of many painted inscriptions helped to determine the sequence of some of the different phases of this decorative programme. However, while the initial studies seemed to suggest extremely careful and reliable theories in terms of dating and distinguishing the layers of paintings, later scholars have dealt more thoroughly with the reasons for this continuing redecoration and with issues concerning the iconographic programmes in a much wider context. The works of Rushfort, Grüneisen, Wilpert, Kitzinger and Nordhagen concentrated almost exclusively on the frescoes, and the related issues of style(s) the different influences or schools involved in their production and problems of chronology. Although invaluable, these works analysed in depth the different minute details of a puzzle, but rarely brought them together as a whole; their scholarship thus almost created a dichotomy between the paintings and the church itself. More recently, and especially on the occasion of a publication celebrating the centenary of the excavations, Brubaker, Brenk, Lucey and Andaloro have suggested different research questions on topics such as patronage, audience, politics and technical aspects in the realization of the paintings.

4.2.1 a) The stylistic interpretation of the frescoes: some examples

A brief outline of the use of 'style' in the study of the frescoes of Santa Maria Antiqua opens with the work of Dvořák, the first to suggest the long running hypothesis of an antithesis between 'foreign' and 'local' stylistic elements in the

¹² *Liber Pontificalis*, vol. 2, pp. 140-50, 151-72, esp. p. 158; also, Davis (ed.), vol. 3, p. 115

art of Rome, pointing to the seventh-century frescoes 'as the earliest manifestation of the foreign influence'.¹³ A similar focus was adopted in the work of Avery,¹⁴ itself followed by a series of studies which regard the paintings of Santa Maria Antiqua within the context of waves of 'Hellenistic' influence in Rome. The most significant representative of such school of thought is Ernst Kitzinger: he refined his theory over a number of years, contributing enormously to understanding of the chronology, style and different phases of the paintings. He structured his descriptions of the frescoes according to different levels of 'Hellenism', identifying frescoes reflecting in their style the purest – and therefore earliest – form, to the later and more 'corrupted' examples. Although his point of view is not shared overall – Nordhagen and Krautheimer especially disagreed with him – his explanation of the reasons behind the changes in style, his support for a strong connection with Constantinople, and the picture of the political and religious conditions before the outbreak of Iconoclasm, have created a comprehensive and challenging approach to the art of this period.¹⁵

One of the main painted areas of Santa Maria Antiqua, and the one that has probably inspired the most careful consideration and discussion, is the so-called 'palimpsest wall', that covers almost the whole surface to the right of the presbytery apse (Pl.69). This striking definition, introduced in a report by Boni after his excavation in 1900, connotes all the complex implication of his discovery. Just as a manuscript can be deciphered to reveal previous writings surviving underneath the most recent text, up to six layers of frescoes have been identified, analyzed and questioned, in attempts to increase our knowledge of

¹³ P.J. Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII (A.D. 705-707) in S. Maria Antiqua in Rome. Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* 3, Roma 1968, p. 5.

¹⁴ Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, p. 9.

¹⁵ Kitzinger dealt with Santa Maria Antiqua in several studies, the most important ones have been reprinted in his *The Art of Byzantium and the Medieval West: Selected Studies*, Bloomington 1976; see also his *Byzantine Art in the Making. Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art 3rd – 7th Century*, London 1977.

early medieval painting in general, and more specifically of the paintings of this period in Rome.¹⁶

The earliest figurative layer is that representing a large image of the Virgin sitting on a golden throne encrusted with precious gems and pearls, holding the Christ Child and flanked by an angel on her right (Pl.66). It has been suggested that the composition was once symmetrical, with a second angel on the Virgin's left, which was destroyed when the apse was cut into the wall.¹⁷ This phase, when the imperial guardroom was converted into a church, is likely to date to the second half of the sixth century; the enthroned Virgin has therefore been dated to the 540s.¹⁸ The choice of a religious image to decorate an imperial building even before it was turned into a church seems particularly significant. Furthermore, the iconography chosen, that of the so-called 'Maria Regina', a majestic, monumental, portrayal of the Virgin as imperial queen, and described by Kitzinger as 'Byzantine in its solemnity and in antiquarian detail',¹⁹ calls for further examination. Stylistically, this image has been compared with those on the apse mosaics of SS Cosma e Damiano in Rome and S. Vitale, Ravenna, dated to the Justinianic period (527-65): they all present a similar solid stance, with large, penetrating eyes, as well as the precious jewelled garments, portrayed in an almost metallic manner (Pl.70).²⁰ The iconography of the 'Maria Regina' type has been widely discussed, and thought to include not only triumphal imperial

¹⁶ It should be noted that the 'palimpsest wall' did not present itself to the scholars as it is now: some of the underlying layers were revealed by the falling of the plaster after the excavations, for the sudden and prolonged exposure to the atmospheric agents, while the careful and intentional removal of some fragments was undertaken by Wilpert to better understand the genesis of the different phases of the decoration. See P.J. Nordhagen, 'S. Maria Antiqua: the frescoes of the seventh century' in *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* 8 (1978), p. 90.

¹⁷ P.J. Nordhagen, 'The earliest decorations in Santa Maria Antiqua and their date' in *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* 1 (1962), p. 56.

¹⁸ See Nordhagen, 'The earliest decoration', p. 71; for the different view on dating see Krautheimer, *Rome*, pp. 126-31; E. Kitzinger, 'On Some Icons of the Seventh Century', in Id. *Art of Byzantium*, pp. 234-7; Matthiae-Andaloro, *Pittura Romana*, pp. 93-103.

¹⁹ Kitzinger, 'On some icons', p. 236.

²⁰ Krautheimer, *Rome*, pp. 125-6; Kitzinger, 'On some icons', p. 246.

elements, but also references to the role of the Virgin as intercessor and protector.²¹

The next layer of the 'palimpsest wall' consists of a fragmentary Annunciation: all that remains are the softly modelled head of an angel, the outline of his body, and the extremely scanty remains of a female head facing the angel. The image of the angel has caused some of the most impassioned scholarly discussions in the study of the Santa Maria Antiqua frescoes in particular, and of early medieval painting in general: renamed the 'Fair Angel' or 'Pompeian Angel' for its plastic traits and confident, realistic brushwork, its dating has sparked wide disagreement. While Kitzinger dated it to the first half of the seventh century (c.630),²² Nordhagen, Krautheimer and Matthiae and Andaloro trace its origins back to the last quarter of the sixth century or turn of the seventh century.²³ Certainly, the two angels' heads, preserved very close together on the 'palimpsest wall' and – if one leans towards the earlier dating – separated by only half a century, could not be more different. Although both heads are slightly inclined, the colours and rendering are surprisingly dissimilar.

The figure of the angel together with the small but clearly visible fragment of the Virgin's head, an element of the composition strangely neglected in most of the scholarly accounts, prompt a striking comparison with an icon of the Virgin now preserved in the church of Santa Francesca Romana (Pl.71).²⁴ It seems very likely that this large painting, now belonging to the church

²¹ A. Cameron, 'The Theotokos in sixth-century Constantinople' in *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 29 (1978), pp. 79-108; see also Russo, 'L'affresco di Turtura', pp. 44-5; J. Osborne, 'Images of the Mother of God in Early Medieval Rome' in *Icon and Word. The Power of Images in Byzantium. Studies presented to Robin Cormack*, A. Eastmond & L. James (eds), Aldershot 2003, pp. 137-56; Id., 'The Cult of 'Maria Regina' in Early Medieval Rome' in *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* 21 (2008), pp. 95-106.

²² Kitzinger, 'On some icons', pp. 234-5.

²³ See footnote 19.

²⁴ Kitzinger, 'On some icons', pp. 233-4; Matthiae-Andaloro, *Pittura Romana*, pp. 125-6; H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A history of the Image before the Era of Art*, (English translation by E. Jephcott), Chicago 1994, pp. 124-6; M. Andaloro, 'Le icone a Roma in età preiconoclasta' in *Settimane del CISAM* 49 (2002), pp. 719-53; G. Wolf, 'Icons and Sites. Cult images of the Virgin in medieval Rome' in *Images of the Mother of God. Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, M. Vassilaki (ed.), Aldershot 2005, pp. 23-49.

previously known as Santa Maria Nova, is to be identified with the *imago antiqua* mentioned in the life of Pope Gregory III (731-41),²⁵ which originally came from Santa Maria Antiqua and was transferred when the church was abandoned (post-847) and the new see was founded and invested with the rights (and sacred objects) of the former church. Thus, it has been suggested that this monumental portrait of the Virgin, the largest of the surviving Roman icons, was produced to coincide and mark the first consecration of the Imperial Palatine structure into a Christian church: the same process is documented for the Marian icon preserved at the Pantheon, and dated to 609, the year when the temple was converted into the church of Santa Maria ad Martyres.²⁶ The fragment of the Virgin head in the Santa Maria Antiqua fresco and that, only apparently better preserved, of the probably contemporary icon, offer surprising similarities in the line of the nose, the shape of the mouth and the pale, luminous rendering of the complexion. The large, transfixing eyes of the icon Virgin do not survive in the Santa Maria Antiqua fresco, therefore preventing further comparisons. However, if considering the eyes of the 'Fair Angel', it is apparent that the style and effect are remarkably different: this can be explained by the marked difference in the iconography and function of the two images. On the one hand the monumental and symbolic Virgin and Child; on the other, the narrative depiction of an Annunciation.²⁷

Other frescoes in the church have also been considered and described with a particular focus on their style, for instance the panel representing the 'Mother of the Maccabees', on the lower register of the right pier of the chancel arch (PI.72).²⁸ Here, the central female figure surrounded by her sons, stands against an impressively coloured and nuanced background. These figures have been considered more elusive than those previously discussed, and it has proved

²⁵ *Liber Pontificalis*, vol. 1, p. 419; Davis (ed.), vol. 2, p. 24.

²⁶ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, pp. 121-4.

²⁷ On the symbolic power of images and their cult see Brown, *Cult of Saints*, pp. 41, 51-68, 85, 124-7; Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, pp. 30-46, 59-62, 78-88, 129-34.

²⁸ This image is central to Kitzinger's discussion, see Kitzinger, 'On Some Icons', p. 235; Nordhagen, 'Frescoes of the seventh century', pp. 114-20.

difficult to determine the period to which the composition should be assigned: while Kitzinger considered the panel as the purest example of 'Hellenism', some elements of the images have been taken to suggest that this so-called 'classicism' tended to acquire an increasing solidity within the Roman workshops. Kitzinger defined the Byzantine impressionism as 'perennial Hellenism', a persistent, classical ability of creating realistic, illusionistic figures with a three-dimensional interaction with the background, such as the mosaics in S. Vitale (Ravenna), or the 'Maccabees' panel or the 'Fair Angel' itself, or even the later, sketchy Old and New Testament scenes belonging to John VII's programme at Santa Maria Antiqua (PI.73). Once in Rome, he argued, this style seems to have gradually become more linear and two-dimensional, while representing figures in an increasingly abstract manner, particularly in the stylization of their gaze and posture, on a rarefied background.²⁹ Images like the *clipei* with the Apostles from the presbytery decoration of John VII in Santa Maria Antiqua, or the fresco panels with St Anne or St Barbara on the nave piers of the same church are indicative of this style (PI.74).³⁰ In addition, it can be proposed that this process was not local and characteristically confined to Rome: when two contemporary icons from Mount Sinai are considered (PI.75), one representing the bust of a bearded saint (probably St Peter) and the second a Virgin and Child flanked by two saints and two angels, they can be easily compared with the St Peter in the Santa Maria Antiqua *clipeus*, or the panel with St Barbara.³¹ In other words, this was not a one-way process, by which the artistic influences came from the East into Rome where they were developed and transformed leaving the original models completely unharmed. Kitzinger himself admitted that 'the Sinai icons suggest that [...] a similar phenomenon may have existed in the East at the same period and may, indeed, have been the

²⁹ Kitzinger, 'On Some Icons', pp. 246-7; Krautheimer, *Rome*, pp. 123-36; Nordhagen, 'Frescoes of the seventh century', pp. 138-40.

³⁰ Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, pp. 17-21, 94-5; Id. 'Frescoes of the seventh century', pp. 100-1, 120-1.

³¹ Kitzinger, 'On Some Icons', pp. 237-9.

point of departure for the style of the works in Rome'.³² While supporting the idea of 'perennial Hellenism' in Rome, this still fails to consider the possibility of a common evolution in both areas towards a more simplified, abstract and 'iconic' style.

It is important here to underline that, regardless of stylistic considerations, this process of isolating the figures – especially when they are portraits of saints, apostles or the Virgin – can be explained through changing attitudes towards religious images.³³ The power and veneration of these images grew exponentially, and the images themselves multiplied and became a privileged means of connecting with the holy person. Sacred images conjured their power of mediation, holiness and intercession to the viewer, establishing a personal and meaningful relationship in which what was represented were not the physical features but the presence of God Himself. In a sense, action and realism were almost to be avoided, so that the images were ready to receive the homage of the faithful, to listen to their prayers and fulfil their wishes. The act of representation becomes devoid of any distraction of background, setting, landscape or objects, and is in turn highly symbolic and synthetic: this ultimately explains and justifies the convergence of the trend combining the passive, motionless figure with an isolated and isolating background.³⁴ Finally, it has been suggested that this style and inherent practice were somehow carried to the extreme, and that this might have been in turn an influential factor in the outbreak of Iconoclasm.³⁵

In this context, close reading of some of the fresco panels of Santa Maria Antiqua have opened up further important considerations on the role and

³² Kitzinger, 'On Some Icons', p. 239.

³³ See references at footnote 28; see also Cameron, 'The Theotokos'.

³⁴ E. Kitzinger, 'Byzantine Art in the Period Between Justinian and Iconoclasm' in Id. *Art of Byzantium*, p. 201.

³⁵ E. Kitzinger, 'The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm' in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954), pp. 83-150, esp. p. 87.

success of some of the paintings as possible foci of private devotion.³⁶ The remains of a hole have been identified on the fresco of St Anne holding the Child Mary (PI.76), situated on the left of the entrance to the *diaconicon*; it can be seen to the left of the face of the Child Mary, on St Anne's throat, and was probably used to hang a lamp illuminating the Virgin in her mother's arms.³⁷ Similar traces of nail holes have also been found in at least two other panels depicting S. Demetrius and S. Barbara,³⁸ situated on the pilasters separating the sanctuary from the nave: here they were left not only by lamps or other votive gifts, but also by sheets of metal – possibly gold – covering their mouths, to signify the healing power of their intercession.³⁹ In another fragmentary representation of the Virgin and Child, on the left pier in front of the chancel, Nordhagen suggested that even the curious position of the Virgin's hands could be explained by the presence of a votive gift attached to the fresco, so as to appear being held in the Virgin's hands (PI.77).⁴⁰ All these examples bear witness to a particular form of devotion expressed through objects, *ex-voto*, a devotion largely shared by the users of the church, and that was recognized, protected and preserved throughout different phases of decoration. These icon paintings, although charged with spiritual and devotional meaning, managed to escape from the ideological implications – both political and doctrinal – of the other frescoes, and were venerated in the same ways by different audiences at different times.

Further proof of this can be found in the small icon of the Virgin situated in a lower niche at the north-west end of the nave (PI.78), an apparently minor painting, in terms of both size and location, which nevertheless also contained a

³⁶ On this see P.J. Nordhagen, 'Icons Designed for the Display of Sumptuous Votive Gifts' in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987), pp. 453-60; see also Nordhagen, 'Frescoes of the seventh century', pp. 103-5, 141-2.

³⁷ Nordhagen, 'Frescoes of the seventh century', p. 101.

³⁸ *Id.* pp. 105-6, 120-1.

³⁹ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, pp. 38-40.

⁴⁰ Nordhagen, 'Icons Designed', pp. 457, 458.

lamp or gift from previous worship which was carefully spared by subsequent repainting.⁴¹

4.2.1 b) The ideological implications of the frescoes: some examples

While stylistic interpretation has its merits, many of the frescoes in Santa Maria Antiqua can also be effectively understood in the light of contemporary political and doctrinal controversies. This is immediately apparent when taking into account the phase of decoration attributed to Pope Martin.⁴² Here, the most important elements are the paintings on both sides of the apse depicting the Church Fathers holding scrolls inscribed with Greek excerpts from the Acts of the Lateran Council of 649 (PI.79).⁴³ This Council caused upheaval and disagreement between Rome and Constantinople, and eventually culminated in the abduction and exile of Martin himself.⁴⁴ The Pope's decision to set the Council statements firmly in paint (the frescoes are dated c.650), and in one of the most central and imperially connected churches in Rome, must have been considered a bold statement, if not openly confrontational; they may even have contributed to the subsequent tragic conclusion of Martin's life.

As a possible response to these events, the fresco programme on the triumphal arch, commissioned by John VII, depicted four Popes, including John himself, represented as taking part in the procession of the Blessed, Seraphs and Angels in the 'Adoration of the Crucifixion' (PI.80).⁴⁵ The four Popes are balanced in the lower register by four of the Church Fathers. John VII is identified by the blue, square halo used to characterize portraits or living

⁴¹ Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, pp.75-6; Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, pp. 116-20; see also 'Early Medieval Painting in San Clemente, Rome: the Madonna and Child in the Niche' in *Gesta* 20 (1981), pp. 299-310.

⁴² Nordhagen, 'Frescoes of the seventh century'.

⁴³ Id. pp. 97-100;

⁴⁴ *Liber Pontificalis*, vol. 1, pp. 336-40; Davis (ed.), vol. 1, pp. 70-2; see also *The Acta of the Lateran Council of 649*, translation and introduction by R. Price & C. Cubitt, Liverpool (Translated Texts for historians), forthcoming.

⁴⁵ See Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, pp. 39-54;

people,⁴⁶ and Martin stands symmetrically by him, an exact counterpart to the figure of John himself. This choice and pose were deemed by Nordhagen as not coincidental, Martin being a defender of the Roman prerogatives, who fell victim to the Imperial powers and became a martyr of the Roman church.⁴⁷ It would appear that in his decorative scheme, John VII was continuing Martin's campaign against Byzantium, and the portrayal of his martyred predecessor in such a prominent place has to be intended as a political exaltation of Martin.⁴⁸

It seems this was not an isolated instance, as consideration of the iconographic significance of John VII frescoes indicates a deep concern with issues other than the devotional. The composition on the triumphal arch of Santa Maria Antiqua, defined as 'Adoration of the Crucifixion', for instance, was interpreted by Nordhagen as the attempt to create or adapt an iconography that would comply with the decrees of the Quinisext Council (692).⁴⁹ It strongly resembles the traditional arrangement for the Worship of the Lamb, including the extremely steep hill representing Golgotha/Zion, the procession of the Redeemed and the presence of the Seraphs, but it is characterized by the full replacement of the Lamb with Christ on the Cross. This corresponds exactly to what the Council had prescribed, in the 82nd Canon: 'that the figure of the Lamb, Christ our Lord, who removes the sins of the world, should henceforward be set up in human form in images also, instead of the ancient lamb'.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ See J. Osborne, 'The portrait of Pope Leo IV in San Clemente, Rome: a re-examination of the so-called 'square' nimbus, in medieval art' in *Papers of the British School at Rome* 47 (1979), pp. 58-65.

⁴⁷ Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, p. 95.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Id.* pp. 50-4, 95-8.

⁵⁰ *Id.* p. 52. Kitzinger's thoughts on the subject have specific consequences on the 'visual heritage'. On the one hand the Canon's insistence on anthropomorphic representation was obviously implemented to the detriment of the use and promotion of symbolic images (one of the main causes of issues with the West); on the other hand, though, it implied that 'certain forms of pictorial representations carried more meaning than other' and almost granted a 'silent recognition of an inherent virtue and power of visual form, a power contingent upon its being a direct reflection of its prototype'. The exclusivity of Christ human form and his image, augmented the transcendental power of Incarnation and gave in turn the image a value that was almost sacramental. Furthermore, Kitzinger linked this to the rise of *acheiropoietai* icons. See

Although this interpretation has recently been questioned by Nilgen as non-apocalyptic, instead reflecting a 'form more strictly in accordance with the Greek liturgical texts',⁵¹ which had a different attitude towards the Book of Revelation, this would not necessarily exclude a twofold interpretation, open and somehow adjusting to the varied audience of the church.

In addition, the emphasis on a representation of Christ that would focus on his human form has commonly been associated with the establishment of a new official type of Christ image, with a more youthful appearance, short curly hair, a short beard, and without the long *colobium*.⁵² This depiction of Christ features on some coins of Justinian II, and seems to reflect the iconography adopted for the Crucifixion on the triumphal arch of Santa Maria Antiqua, in adherence with the new official image type required by the Council (PL81).⁵³

Thus, this fresco's iconography suggests that John VII was giving the impression of being in accord with the prescriptions of the Byzantine Council.⁵⁴ His life in the *Liber Pontificalis*,⁵⁵ possibly reflecting the resentment of his contemporaries, describes this behaviour as cowardly and submissive: when he received the Acts of the Council, held under his predecessor Sergius (687-701), containing '*diversa capitula Romanae ecclesiae contraria scripta*' to be examined or maybe even reviewed, he simply handed them back, '*humana fragilitate timidus*'.⁵⁶ This implies that the acts were submitted without corrections;

Kitzinger, 'Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm', pp. 142ff. See also Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 225-8, 247ff.

⁵¹ U. Nilgen, 'The Adoration of the Crucified Christ at Santa Maria Antiqua and the Tradition of Triumphal Arch Decoration in Rome' in Osborne-Rasmus Brandt-Morganti (eds), *Santa Maria Antiqua*, pp. 128-35, esp. p. 132.

⁵² See E. Kitzinger, 'Some Reflections on Portraiture in Byzantine Art' in Id. *The Art of Byzantium*, pp. 256-69, esp. pp. 262-3; 'John VII's Adoration of the Cross in S. Maria Antiqua' in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 30 (1967), pp. 388-90; Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, pp. 52-3; Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, pp. 134-9.

⁵³ The idea that human and divine natures of Christ were coherently and harmoniously united was one of the lynchpins of the anti-monothelite position prevalent in Rome from Pope Martin onwards.

⁵⁴ Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, pp. 96-7.

⁵⁵ *Liber Pontificalis*, vol. 1, pp. 385-7; Davis (ed.), vol. 1, pp. 90-1.

⁵⁶ 'in which there were written various chapters in opposition to the Roman church [...] terrified in his human weakness', pp. 385-6.

however, it also seems likely that they remained unsigned, not so much in an open act of disagreement or disapproval, but still displaying a refusal to reconcile and obey the Byzantine decisions of ten years earlier.⁵⁷

John VII's inclusion of Pope Martin on the frescoes of the triumphal arch certainly seems at odds with his somewhat compromising attitude towards the imperial religious decree – reflected so well in the iconography of the apse and in the dry account of his life. Nonetheless, it can probably be interpreted more correctly as an attitude of 'opposition in the face of coercion' and, in some ways, a form of deliberate and ironic provocation.⁵⁸ His frescoes were painted over the very explicit excerpts from the Lateran Council of 649 belonging to Martin's programme, preferring a somewhat more subtle form of disagreement.

Analysis of the frescoes of Santa Maria Antiqua has so far revealed a church for which it is possible to postulate an audience versed in ecclesiastical matters and thus aware of the subtle ideological allusions of the iconographical constructs. At the same time, the votive frescoes tell a slightly different story. A third type of potential audience can be further suggested by consideration of the so-called Theodotus Chapel, and its mid-eighth century frescoes.⁵⁹

The walls of this chapel, to the left of the sanctuary, are covered by a single cycle of frescoes (Pl.82-83-84), dated to the papacy of Zacharias (741-52), due to the inclusion of his portrait with a square nimbus.⁶⁰ The paintings themselves present an astonishing illustration of the complex artistic, social and religious forces at play in the church of Santa Maria Antiqua. Patronage of the cycle has been assigned to the *primicerius-pater diaconia*, Theodotus,⁶¹ who appears – also square-nimbed – in several scenes. It is this non-ecclesiastical

⁵⁷ Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, p. 96.

⁵⁸ Id. p. 98.

⁵⁹ N. Teteriatnikov, 'For whom is Theodotus praying? An interpretation of the programme of the private chapel in S. Maria Antiqua' in *Cahiers Archéologiques* 41 (1993), pp. 37-46. See also Matthiae-Andaloro, *Pittura Romana*, pp. 138-47; S. Lucey, 'Palimpsest reconsidered: Continuity and Change in the Decorative Programs at Santa Maria Antiqua' in Osborne-Rasmus Brandt-Morganti (eds), *Santa Maria Antiqua*, pp. 83-95; Id. 'Art and Socio-Cultural Identity'.

⁶⁰ Osborne, 'The portrait of Pope Leo IV'.

⁶¹ See supra, pp. 119-21.

patronage of the frescoes that provides an essential insight to the church's audience. The end wall of the chapel, presumably the main focus of the space's religious activity and of its decorative programme (P1.82), has a large upper niche containing the depiction of a Crucifixion; below is a large rectangular panel, spanning the entire width of the room, portraying a centrally enthroned Virgin and Child flanked by the Apostles, the patron saints of the chapel and the living figures of the patron Theodotus and, as a sign of reverence, the reigning Pope Zacharias. Both scenes require further consideration.

The Crucifixion panel (P1.83) recalls quite closely the iconography of the same subject on the sanctuary triumphal arch, although the type of Christ is not the new, 'official' one; rather, it conforms to the more traditional image of Christ crucified in human form, having long hair and a beard, and wearing the *colobium*. However, like the earlier version by John VII, the crucified figure of Christ has wide-open eyes, to underline 'not human death but the life of the divinity'.⁶² In addition, the Theodotus panel is isolated and made independent and autonomous in its niche. Thus, although drawing obvious visual links with the decoration of the sanctuary in virtue of its iconography, the Theodotus Crucifixion probably had a different function, one privileging the devotional approach, which was enhanced by the physical separation of the panel.⁶³ This votive significance is furthermore strengthened by the panel below (P1.83), in which the central, intercessory image of the enthroned Virgin with Child is flanked by the Apostles and the patron saints, who in turn introduce and intercede for the patron Theodotus, portrayed in the act of offering a model of the church. Examples of such a composition can be seen elsewhere, as on the mosaic schemes of the triumphal arch at San Lorenzo fuori le mura, or the apse of SS Cosma e Damiano, where the central figure is that of Christ in Majesty, or

⁶² Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. 121.

⁶³ See Lucey, 'Palimpsest reconsidered', pp. 88-91, for a contrary opinion.

in the so-called 'Madonna di Turtura' fresco in the catacomb of Commodilla (PI.58-43).⁶⁴

The donor panel in the chapel clearly identifies the patron through a long inscription,⁶⁵ and Theodotus himself is portrayed twice more, in association with the patron saints of the chapel, the fourth-century martyrs Quiricus and Julitta (PI.84). Here, it is interesting to note that the rest of the paintings focus almost entirely on narrative scenes from their martyrdom. In addition, at this date the depiction of saints' martyrdom is very unusual in Roman frescoes, while the two saints themselves are fairly unique. There has been little speculation on why they were chosen by Theodotus to figure so prominently in his equally prominent, central and lavish chapel within one of the most important early medieval churches in Rome. One possible explanation perhaps lies with the fact that the saints, originally from Cilicia, were probably better-known and more widely venerated in the East, which made them an appropriate subject within a church with a significant 'Eastern' audience. Also, the martyred pair – a mother and her very young child, who was sacrificed before her eyes – could be regarded as presenting a powerful and symbolic allusion to the Virgin Mary, patron of the church, and to her human and sacrificed child, Christ. This association was in all likelihood one understood and accessible to the very human patrons of the chapel, Theodotus and his family, who are portrayed in the last panel of the narrative cycle, in close visual proximity to that depicting the climax of Quiricus' martyrdom. Here, the painting resembles a family portrait, the parents and their two young children gathered around a central figure of the Virgin (or Julitta), and depicted with a fine, realistic attention to detail, such as their jewellery and luxurious garments.⁶⁶

The emphasis on the patron and his family, the devotional and narrative nature of the iconography, and the private character of the space further

⁶⁴ See supra, pp. 84-7.

⁶⁵ See supra, p. 119.

⁶⁶ Lucey, 'Art and Socio-Cultural Identity', pp. 156-7.

suggest a private use for the chapel. At the same time, its position in such proximity to the sanctuary emphasised the high status of the patrons, their privileged role in the management of the church, and possibly as leading figures within the congregation.⁶⁷ The prominence of Roman aristocratic evergetism, once more clearly displayed and promoted in a sacred space, echoes the ongoing process in early medieval Rome, symptomatic of the social interaction between lay and religious hierarchies.⁶⁸ It is a persistent phenomenon that can be observed in its later phases in the lower Basilica of San Clemente, where some of the frescoes in the narthex and nave – dated to the end of the eleventh century – display a very similar approach, at least in terms of the iconography and popular visibility of an important Roman family.⁶⁹ In the narthex two scenes illustrate the life and martyrdom of San Clemente: to the left a panel depicting the Miracle of the Child in the Sea of Azov and to the right the Translation of Clement's relics (PI.85). Below the first fresco is a further panel depicting the donor's family, identified by an inscription: Beno de Rapiza is portrayed with his wife and children, the boy named Clemente, probably to confirm the family's particular devotion to the patron saint of the Basilica (PI.85).⁷⁰ Two further fresco panels in the central nave, both on the south wall were also commissioned by his family: the first represents scenes from the Life of Sant'Alessio, while the second, closer to the sanctuary, depicts another episode from the Life of San Clemente, including once again the members of the Rapiza family, participating in the Mass celebrated by the Pope-Saint and bringing offerings of candles and crowns (PI.85).

Although very late for the present enquiry, these frescoes confirm the continuous centrality of lay patronage in the religious buildings of Rome,

⁶⁷ Ibid. pp. 153-4.

⁶⁸ See supra, ch.1.

⁶⁹ For the following description of the frescoes see Boyle-Kane-Guidobaldi, *San Clemente Miscellany*, pp. 80-98; see also J. Osborne, 'Proclamations of Power and Presence: the Setting and Function of Two Eleventh-Century Murals in the Lower Church of San Clemente, Roma' in *Mediaeval Studies* 59 (1997), pp. 1-18.

⁷⁰ Boyle-Kane-Guidobaldi, *San Clemente Miscellany*, pp. 88-9.

which, starting as early as the fourth century and continuing almost without interruption, seems to be characteristic of the architecture and decoration of ecclesiastical structures. In drawing a comparison with Santa Maria Antiqua, the frescoes at San Clemente differ in having a more public and accessible position than those – almost privately secluded – in the Theodotus chapel. At the same time, it has been suggested in a convincing article by Tronzo,⁷¹ that a group of mid-ninth century frescoes in the central nave of San Clemente to the left of the Rapiza panels (and thus further away from the sanctuary), constituted one element of a more complex structure, a ciborium in all likelihood covering an altar, which in turn created a small (votive?) chapel attributed to Pope Leo IV (847-55).⁷² Here, as at Santa Maria Antiqua, the interaction between papal and lay patronage is displayed side-by-side, regardless of the centuries separating one programme from the other, evidence yet again of the fruitful combination and competition between the two main forces active in early medieval Rome who found a meaningful tool of power, affirmation and visibility in ‘sponsoring’ church decoration.

4.2.2 John VII patronage in Rome

John VII’s painted decoration at Santa Maria Antiqua, and in the city of Rome more generally, provides evidence of this activity on an almost unprecedented scale, especially when considering that he was Pope for only two years. Throughout, however, his concerns seem to have been to respond artistically both to some of the liturgical innovations introduced by his predecessor Sergius – in particular with emphasis on Marian devotion – and to the social, spiritual, liturgical and political issues of contemporary Rome.

As already demonstrated, the frescoes attributed to John are the most organic and well documented of the different artistic phases at Santa Maria

⁷¹ W. Tronzo, ‘Setting and Structure in Two Roman Wall Decorations of the Early Middle Ages’ in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987), pp. 477-92.

⁷² Depicted in the frescoes with the square halo: see Osborne, ‘The portrait of Pope Leo IV’; also Boyle-Kane-Guidobaldi, *San Clemente Miscellany*, pp. 62-70.

Antiqua, thoroughly and masterly investigated by Nordhagen in his monograph on the paintings.⁷³ John VII is also the only Pope whose work in the church was explicitly recorded in the *Liber Pontificalis*. Together with the disapproval of his meek attitude, one of the few details provided in John's brief life is, interestingly, the stress on his intention to build his residence above the same church and the fact that he died there.⁷⁴ Furthermore, it is known that John VII's father, the Greek Plato, occupied an important administrative, and possibly diplomatic position, as the *curator* of the Palatine palace, residence of the Byzantine governor in Rome.⁷⁵ These associations imply that the church of Santa Maria Antiqua played the role of palatine church or chapel, large, luxurious and repeatedly decorated by a succession of Popes who possibly regarded it as an ecclesiastical symbol of prestige, status and power during the seventh and eighth centuries.

Some of John VII's frescoes have already been discussed, but addressing other aspects of his programme may elucidate its significance further. The decoration in the apse and triumphal arch, although constituting the focus of the presbytery, was enhanced by a complex cycle of narrative frescoes on the adjacent walls. These have deteriorated considerably, but, from the little that remains, it is possible to reveal that a coherent sense of unity and a potential, multifaceted liturgical interpretation was intended.⁷⁶

As noted, the physical space of Santa Maria Antiqua was one that had been adapted into a church, and in this process the expected correlation between architecture and decoration seems to have been upset.⁷⁷ The space of the sanctuary, for instance, is emphatically separated from the nave; the apse is low and almost diminutive compared to the triumphal arch that surrounds it

⁷³ Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*.

⁷⁴ 'et super eandam ecclesiam episcopium quantum ad se construere maluit, illicque pontificati sui tempus vitam finivit', *Liber Pontificalis*, vol. 1, p. 385.

⁷⁵ P.J. Nordhagen, *Giovanni VII* in *Enciclopedia dell'Arte Medievale*, A.M. Romanini (ed.), Roma, 1991-2002, Vol. VI, pp. 687-95; also, Liverani, 'Dal palatium imperiale'.

⁷⁶ The frescoes are described in Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, pp. 22-39,

⁷⁷ *Id.*, pp. 94-5.

rather than framing it; and the narrative frescoes on the side-walls of the presbytery are those that one would normally expect in the nave, leading towards the main focus of the church.⁷⁸ On the other hand, the desire to reproduce the decorative programme usually reserved for the nave in the confined and sacred space of the sanctuary might have been intentional.

With this in mind, the cycle of New Testament scenes, culminating in the 'Adoration of the Cross' on the triumphal arch, can be seen as having been organized in two registers of scenes of five rectangular panels each, with a lower band of six *clipei* containing busts of the Apostles, and the lowermost register decorated with a painted *velum*.⁷⁹ The east and west walls mirror each other and thus include twenty narrative panels, all individually framed, and the twelve Apostles (Pl.86). Of these scenes only few have been identified with certainty, and one proposed reading starting from the upper register of the east wall and moving from left to right would present the following (Pl.87): the first three scenes are missing, while the following two panels, those closer to the apse, contain the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi. Continuing on the upper register of the west wall, and reading from the scenes closest to the apse towards the right, the first panel represents the Presentation to the Temple, followed by the Flight into Egypt, and three further unidentified panels. Moving to the lower register on the east wall, and starting again at the point furthest from the apse, the first two panels are illegible, but the Last Supper, the Betrayal of Christ and the Carrying of the Cross can all be discerned, this last scene being the closest to the apse. Continuing on the west wall, Peter and John at the Sepulchre, the Incredulity of Thomas, the Appearance of Jesus at Lake Tiberias, the Appearance of Christ to the Eleven (Christ Adored by the Apostles/Blessing of the Apostles) and finally the Appearance of Jesus on the Road to Emmaus, can all be identified.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Lucey, 'Palimpsest reconsidered', pp. 92-3.

⁷⁹ Discussion of the frescoes follows the identification and description provided by Nordhagen.

⁸⁰ John VII's cycle in the presbytery updated a pre-existing decoration but planned to save and include in the frescoes of the presbytery the decoration in the band running above the painted

The iconography of many of the scenes has been described as the first examples of composition that were later to become standard in middle Byzantine iconographic schemes.⁸¹ However, Nordhagen himself argued that this was not enough to conclude that John VII scheme is 'Byzantine';⁸² it certainly seems an inadequate explanation for the choice of such specific episodes. Further connections with the Eastern character of the clergy at Santa Maria Antiqua, and a close relation of the frescoes iconography with the writings of Maximus the Confessor have been advanced by Lucey, who also discusses the spatial and liturgical meaning of the sanctuary as a separate, inaccessible, ecclesiastical space.⁸³ In addition, van Dijk suggested a reading that adds the few surviving Old Testament scenes on the *bema* to the programme: here, the combination of Old and New Testament scenes are interpreted as type and antitype, a systematic iconography that was widespread and largely understood in the early middle ages, and not just in Rome;⁸⁴ in Rome itself the mosaics at Santa Maria Maggiore provide, perhaps, the best-known example of the pairing of type and antitype. However, it remains the case that such a reading at Santa Maria Antiqua has to be more speculative, given the fragmentary condition of the New Testament images and the negligible presence of Old testament scenes.

In the light of this, it is worth considering another explanation that might help identify the missing scenes of the New Testament cycle, and which introduces consideration of the iconographic programme, also sponsored by John VII, in the Oratory dedicated to the Virgin which he had built within the Basilica of Old St Peter's. This was destroyed in 1609, leaving only a few

panels just described. This section is quite low in proportions and thus seems unsuitable to contain narrative or figural images. Interestingly, Nordhagen suggested salvaging a pre-existing painted inscription, a quite prominent characteristic at Santa Maria Antiqua, without providing further speculations on which text it could have featured. Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, pp. 38-9, 89.

⁸¹ Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, pp. 26, 31, 34-7 and discussion at pp. 91-4.

⁸² Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, p. 92.

⁸³ Lucey, 'Palimpsest reconsidered', pp. 91-3.

⁸⁴ A. van Dijk, 'Type and Antitype in Santa Maria Antiqua: The Old Testament Scenes on the Transennae' in Osborne-Rasmus Brandt-Morganti (eds), *Santa Maria Antiqua*, pp. 113-27.

fragments of its mosaic and sculptural decoration, but these – combined with several seventeenth-century drawings and descriptions – have enabled much discussion on the artistic patronage of this ambitious pope, and the meaning of his iconographical choices (P1.88).⁸⁵ More recently, a pioneer study, which includes an impressive three-dimensional reconstruction of the Oratory, has been produced by a team of Italian scholars under the direction of Prof. Andaloro.⁸⁶

The Oratory was most likely intended to have a very precise function, as the funerary chapel for John himself. This presumed liturgical use of the chapel has suggested at least one possible interpretation of the iconographic scheme, linking it to the readings associated with the funeral mass.⁸⁷ However, it has also been underlined, most notably by van Dijk, that the images – arranged in three superimposed registers – focus around a much larger picture of the crowned and *orans* Virgin, and accompanied by the smaller portrait of the donor, John. This has in turn suggested a series of coexisting allusions, stressing the intercessory power of the Virgin and her pivotal role in the Incarnation, which in turn emphasizes the continuing, underlying concerns about the human nature and will of Christ, following the monothelite controversy.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ See A. van Dijk, 'The Angelic Salutation in Early Byzantine and Medieval Annunciation Imagery' in *The Art Bulletin* 81 (1999), pp. 420-36; Id., 'Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, and Constantinople: the Peter Cycle in the Oratory of Pope John VII (705-707)' in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001), pp. 305-28; Id., 'Domus Sanctae Dei Genitricis Mariae. Art and Liturgy in the Oratory of Pope John VII' in *Decorating the Lord's Table. On the Dynamics between Image and Altar in the Middle Ages*, S. Kaspersen & E. Thuno (eds), Copenhagen 2006, pp. 13-42; see also Tronzo, 'Setting and Structure'.

⁸⁶ Part of the project *Corpus/Atlante della Pittura Medievale a Roma*, which has so far yielded two publications, M. Andaloro, *La pittura medievale a Roma 312-1431, Corpus, vol. I, L'orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini: 306 – 468*, Milano 2006; Id., *La pittura medievale a Roma 312-1431, Atlante. Percorsi visivi, vol. I, Suburbio, Vaticano, Rione Monti*, Milano 2006. Two papers were also presented at the Old St Peter's Conference, British School at Rome, 22-25 March 2010: A. Ballardini, 'Per una ricostruzione dell'oratorio di Giovanni VII nell'antica basilica Vaticana: la decorazione architettonica e scultorea' and P. Pogliani, 'Per una ricostruzione dell'oratorio di Giovanni VII (705-707) nell'antica basilica Vaticana: i mosaici'.

⁸⁷ See van Dijk, 'Domus Sanctae Dei Genitricis Mariae', pp. 21-2.

⁸⁸ Van Dijk, 'Domus Sanctae Dei Genitricis Mariae', pp. 19-21, 23; see also Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 225-8, 244-5.

The scenes accompanying the central image of the Virgin include an upper register with three panels (from left to right): the Annunciation and Visitation in the first panel, the Nativity in the central panel – in an unusual composition which includes the figures of the Midwife, the bathing of the Christ Child, and the Annunciation to the Shepherds; and the Adoration of the Magi on the third and last panel to the right. The two remaining registers are separated – and connected – in the middle by the larger figure of the *orans* Virgin and include two scenes each: the Presentation in the Temple and the Baptism of Christ (central panel to the left); the healing of the Blind Man and Zaccheus in the Sycamore tree (central panel to the right); the Raising of Lazarus, Entrance to Jerusalem, and the Last Supper (lower panel to the left); and the Crucifixion, the Women at the Sepulchre and the Descent into Hell (lower panel to the right).⁸⁹

Both this narrative cycle, and that at Santa Maria Antiqua, use episodes from the life, miracles, passion and resurrection of Christ, but the more complete evidence for the cycle in the Oratory demonstrates that the true symbolic significance of the seven panels lies in the historical and salvific role of Mary, who, depicted in the centre of the scheme, functions as the unifying focus and point of convergence. As noted, in the decorative programme of the Palatine church this focus is replaced by the large and complex central composition of triumphal arch and apse, where the Adoration of the Crucifixion provides the key to unlocking one possible interpretation of the narrative cycle on the adjacent walls.

Here, it is immediately noticeable that some of the scenes appear in both cycles (namely, the Nativity, Adoration of the Magi and Presentation in the Temple). One reason for this is that they were considered iconographically essential, representing central statements of both the Christian faith and liturgy. However, some of the scenes depicted at Santa Maria Antiqua present less obvious choices. One likely explanation for their selection might lie in their

⁸⁹ For the description of the frescoes see van Dijk, '*Domus Sanctae Dei Genitricis Mariae*', pp. 19-22.

arrangement. The episodes represented in the panels on the upper register that have been unquestionably identified, correspond to the readings⁹⁰ for Christmas (Nativity; Luke 2:1-20), Epiphany (Adoration of the Magi; Matt 2:1-12), the Octave of Christmas (Presentation in the Temple/Circumcision; Luke 2:21-40) and the Feast of the Holy Innocents (Flight to Egypt; Matt 2:13-23). In the light of this, and recalling the programme of the Oratory, it may well be that the two unidentified panels preceding these scenes could depict the Annunciation and Visitation. The Annunciation account was, after all, the lection for the fourth Sunday of Advent, just before Christmas, and was later combined with the Visitation, as the readings assigned to the Ember Days, the Wednesday and Friday after the feast of Santa Lucia (13 December), in the week leading up to Christmas.⁹¹ Thus, it seems that the scenes chosen for the first seven panels in the narrative cycle at Santa Maria Antiqua can be associated with the corresponding liturgical readings for Advent, Christmas, the Octave of Christmas and Epiphany.

Leaving to one side, for the moment, the five unidentified panels of the west and east walls, the remaining scenes of the lower register that have been securely identified can be further associated with the Gospel readings for Palm Sunday and the Passion (Last Supper, Betrayal, Carrying of the Cross; Matt 26:2-27.66); Easter Sunday (Peter and John at the Sepulchre; John 20:1-10); and the week following Easter (Incredulity of Thomas, John 20:24-31, Octave or Sunday after Easter; Lake Tiberias, John 21:1-14, Wednesday after Easter; the Appearance to the Eleven, Matt 28:16-20 & Luke 24:36-47, Tuesday & Friday after Easter; and the Road to Emmaus, Luke 24:13-35, Monday after Easter). In

⁹⁰ As noted at footnote 79, identification of the scenes depicted in the panels follows Nordhagen, while the association with the liturgical readings is based on T. Klauser, *Das Römische Capitulare Evangeliorum: texte und untersuchungen zu seiner ältesten geschichte*, 2 vols, Münster in Westf. 1935; W.H. Frere, *Studies in Early Roman Liturgy*, 3 vols, Oxford 1930-5; A. Chavasse, *Les lectionnaires romains de la Messe au VIIe et au VIIIe Siècle: sources et derives*, 2 vols, Fribourg Suisse 1993.

⁹¹ See Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 85ff.; however, Pope Sergius assigned these readings to the recently introduced Marian feasts (Annunciation, 25 March; Nativity of the Virgin, 8 September), *ibid.* p. 101.

this context, of apparently systematic convergence of image and liturgical calendar, it seems likely that the unidentified panels may originally have included episodes corresponding to the Lenten Gospel readings, and possibly the Entrance into Jerusalem, the grand opening of the Holy Week liturgy.

Given the short period during which both the St Peter's Oratory and Santa Maria Antiqua were decorated, it is not unlikely that the iconography of some scenes was 'recycled'; indeed, this is the case for a number of scenes that have survived at Santa Maria Antiqua: the Adoration of the Magi, for example, follows almost exactly the same pattern at both sites, the one being a mirror image of the other (Pl.89).⁹² Allowing for such coincidences, the lost scenes of Santa Maria Antiqua, if accepted as having corresponded to the readings for the Sundays of Lent, may have included the Healing of the Blind Man, the Raising of Lazarus, Zaccheus in the Sycamore tree (all present in the Oratory), or possibly the Temptation of Christ, the Transfiguration, the Samaritan woman, or the Woman who was a sinner.

Although somewhat speculative, this hypothetical reconstruction of the Christological cycle at Santa Maria Antiqua would mirror the liturgical interpretation recently proposed for the similarly selective and related cycle sponsored by John VII in his funerary chapel. While this programme seems to have fully explored the connections between the Incarnation and the Eucharist, and revolved around the intercessory icon of the Virgin,⁹³ at Santa Maria Antiqua the frescoes in the sanctuary possibly reflected the liturgy of the two culminating moments of the Christian calendar. They illustrated, through a deliberate selection, a pictorial history of the spiritual concerns regarding, not only the Incarnation and Nativity of Christ, but also the salient moments after

⁹² However, in Nordhagen *The Frescoes of John VII*, p. 25 underlines the very different position of both the angels and the Child. On the similarities in the composition of the frescoes it has been recently added the interesting technical observation on the use of curvilinear templates, identified in both the frescoes of Santa Maria Antiqua and in those of the Oratory at St Peter. See M. Andaloro, 'La parete palinsesto: 1900-2000' in Osborne-Rasmus Brandt-Morganti (eds), *Santa Maria Antiqua*, pp. 97-112, esp. pp. 103-7 and the papers by A. Ballardini and P. Pogliani (see supra footnote 86).

⁹³ See van Dijk, '*Domus Sanctae Dei Genitricis Mariae*', pp. 23-34.

Christmas, as well as those of Lent, Palm Sunday, Easter, and the Octave of Easter.

There are, furthermore, other suggestions that can be made regarding the triumphal arch and apse images, which constitute the central focus of the Santa Maria Antiqua scheme. First, although presenting an iconography that complied with the recent prescriptions of the Quinisext Council, the Adoration of the Crucifixion can be interpreted as illustrating events from the Book of Revelation; in addition, most of the readings which were integral to the liturgy of Eastertide contain constant allusions not only to the Crucifixion, but also to significant aspects of the nature of Christ and his Resurrection, implying once again that the iconography was concurrently suggested and enhanced by the liturgical observances.⁹⁴ Just as the *orans* Virgin in the Oratory cycle acted as an intermediary and common denominator for all the other scenes, so too in the Santa Maria Antiqua cycle, it was the ultimate Revelation and Adoration of the Living and Glorified Lamb that invested with profound meaning the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection of Christ, as celebrated in the two most crucial seasons of the Roman liturgical year, and which were depicted in the narrative scenes leading up to the east end of the sanctuary.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ For instance the reading for Palm Sunday: Phil 2:5-11, especially verses 7-11 'But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man. He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross. For which cause God also hath exalted him, and hath given him a name which is above all names: That in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth: And that every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father'; reading for Good Friday: Exod 12:1-11; reading for Pascha Annotina: 1Pet 2:21-5, especially verse 24 'Who his own self bore our sins in his body upon the tree: that we, being dead to sins, should live to justice'; and John 3:1-15, especially verses 13-15 'And no man hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended from heaven, the Son of man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him, may not perish; but may have life everlasting'; reading for the Second Sunday after Easter: John 10:11-16, especially verse 15 'As the Father knoweth me, and I know the Father: and I lay down my life for my sheep'; reading for the Third Sunday after Easter: John 16:16-22.

⁹⁵ It is impossible to assert with certainty what was depicted in the apse at the time of John VII, Nordhagen *The Frescoes of John VII*, p. 54. It has been suggested that John VII's decoration of the apse represented a Maria Regina, and possibly repeated an earlier iconography. See Nordhagen, 'Frescoes of the seventh century', pp. 90-3; Lucey, 'Palimpsest reconsidered', p. 86;

In addition, the readings for the liturgy of Good Friday were also redolent with allusions to the Lamb.⁹⁶ Thus, even if the east end decoration of Santa Maria Antiqua focused on the Adoration of the Crucifixion, the symbolic, and more customarily Roman interpretation could be evoked by the liturgical lections.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the recent ‘official approval’ by Pope Sergius of the widespread veneration for the Cross, which in Rome also saw the introduction of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (14 September) and of a complex Good Friday liturgy,⁹⁸ can also be read in the Adoration of the Crucifixion on the triumphal arch where the focus of the decoration is the Cross, upraised on the hill of Golgotha, bearing the living, glorified Christ, adored by the hosts of the Blessed and the Angels.

At Santa Maria Antiqua the paintings could be regarded as staging a reconciliation and adaptation, reflected in the choice of an iconography that was both apparently in line with the requests of the Council, and truly open to multiple – and coherently Roman – interpretations, which were both inspired and made coherent through active participation and visual connections arising from the liturgy. This explanation, focusing on the liturgical and devotional significance of the decoration, also accords with the prestigious status of Santa Maria Antiqua as a church where the hierarchies, both lay and ecclesiastical, Roman and Eastern, met, while also continuing the tradition of papal patronage enjoyed by the church for at least two centuries. From this, a picture emerges in which Rome was Byzantine as much as Byzantium was Roman. The separation into autonomous zones of activity and influence unnecessarily denies the prolific and fertile lines of communications between the two ‘Romes’ which encompassed theological, doctrinal, social, liturgical and obviously artistic material: the church of Santa Maria Antiqua encapsulates such richness and complexity.

the present fragments of the apse decoration depicting Christ in Majesty belong to the phase attributed to Pope Paul I (757-67).

⁹⁶ In particular Exod. 12:1-11

⁹⁷ Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 247-55.

⁹⁸ Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 183-201.

Before moving on to consider the overall significance of Santa Maria Antiqua and its site, and in the light of the Christological focus of the fresco programme of John VII, it is worth re-assessing the particular emphasis on Marian decoration in the church. At least four panels representing the *Theotokos* – usually flanked by other figures (angels, saints, donors or possibly the Pope himself) – can be found in areas of the church other than the presbytery: one in a niche on the north-west pillar of the nave, the second on the doorway leading to the Palatine ramp, the third in the atrium, and the last on the façade of the adjacent Oratory of the Forty Martyrs (PI.90).⁹⁹ Although most of these frescoes survive in a fragmentary condition, the insistence on the same, single, reiterated subject cannot be dismissed.

In some cases it appears that the Marian focus replaced a previous phase of comparable activity: after all, the earliest dated image in the church, apparently relating to the previous, lay *facies* of the building, represented the enthroned Virgin and Child.¹⁰⁰ Other examples, as noted, include an image of the Virgin in a niche (PI.78) which seems to have replaced a previous figure which was already the object of veneration, as inferred by the surviving nail holes where votive gifts were hung.¹⁰¹ Another seventh-century picture of the Virgin was covered with a painted *velum*, possibly to make the valued fresco last longer;¹⁰² a similar decision, articulated in a completely different way, was taken with the panel of St Anne holding the infant Mary on the right edge of the west wall of the presbytery (PI.76).¹⁰³ Here, the image was carefully and respectfully incorporated into the decoration of John VII:

...by grading the layers of plaster at the points of overlap, the transition from one stratum to the other was made almost imperceptible...the panel with St. Anne was singled out as

⁹⁹ Nordhagen *The Frescoes of John VII*, pp. 75-6, 80-1, 83-5.

¹⁰⁰ See *supra*, p. 145.

¹⁰¹ See *supra*, pp. 155-6; also Nordhagen, 'The earliest decorations', pp. 69-70.

¹⁰² Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, p. 88.

¹⁰³ Nordhagen, 'The earliest decorations', pp. 60-1; Id. 'Frescoes of the seventh century', pp. 100-1; Id. *The Frescoes of John VII*, pp. 88-9.

too precious (and possibly, also, too well preserved) to be covered over and therefore it was retained and embodied, at a considerable effort, in the new program.¹⁰⁴

Not only did he preserve the panel with the Child Mary, but he also added a new, updated version of the Annunciation on the south-eastern pillar of the nave, covering a previous image of the same scene displayed on exactly the same spot (PI.91).¹⁰⁵

John himself was clearly a champion of Marian devotion. This is particularly apparent in the way the central mosaic in the Oratory at St Peter's has been rendered. The three-dimensional nature of the large Virgin *orans* makes it a monumental equivalent of the iconography of the 'Virgin in the niche': the framed panel was placed in a recess in the wall, and flanked by two real columns, probably holding candles.¹⁰⁶ John's devotion was also explicitly stated in the dedicatory *formula* which has survived both in an inscription running next to the large Virgin *orans* mosaic at St Peter's (*Beatae Dei Genitricis Servus*) and on a carved, octagonal ambo from Santa Maria Antiqua (*Iohannes Servus Sanctae Mariae*).¹⁰⁷

Despite this, and although Santa Maria Antiqua was dedicated to the Virgin, the iconography does not reflect any special emphasis on the 'new' Marian feasts that were introduced during the seventh century (Presentation, Dormition, Nativity), other than the Annunciation. This, however, seems to be independently represented in the church, rather than being iconographically linked with the other 'festal' images; its frame of reference seems to range from the votive-devotional, to the particular significance of the Annunciation in connection with the full Incarnation and humanity of Christ: as the Virgin Mary is portrayed 'conversing' with the Angel, rather than turning her body away in expression of humility and purity, the iconographic emphasis can be regarded

¹⁰⁴ Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁵ Nordhagen, 'Frescoes of the seventh century', pp. 107-9; Id., *The Frescoes of John VII*, pp. 78-9.

¹⁰⁶ Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 242-5; see also the jewelled cross bearing candles in the fresco at the Catacomb of Ponziano, see supra pp. 98-9.

¹⁰⁷ Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 240, 244.

as more Christological than Marian.¹⁰⁸ As noted, this was a current and pressing issue in the doctrinal landscape of Rome, strictly linked to the anti-monothelite controversy and the collateral political opposition to Byzantium from Martin I onwards. These considerations may, in fact, explain the isolated position of the images and their particular stress on the iconography of the Annunciation.¹⁰⁹

A last observation on the significance of John VII's activity at Santa Maria Antiqua, and more generally within Rome, combined with such intellectual and spiritual aspects, concerns the technical and artistic achievements displayed in the works he promoted. In addition to the use of templates in the production of images at Santa Maria Antiqua and in his Oratory (a technique also found in Anglo-Saxon England), the decoration at both sites involved the mobilization of a remarkable wealth of material and skills, which, although not surprising under papal patronage, was still considerable given the limited time-span in which it was accomplished.

A significant example of this is the sculpted furnishing of the Oratory at St Peter's. The ornamentation included an altar set underneath an arched canopy supported by two twisted and carved columns – clearly evocative of the similar canopy and columns framing the main altar and *memoria* of Peter in the Basilica itself – which in turn were flanked by two tall carved pilasters strips; four others, set at regular intervals, were used to decorate the north wall of the chapel.¹¹⁰ Notable here is the fact that five of these pilasters, decorated with elaborate inhabited vine-scrolls, were a set of *spolia* from the Severan age (193-235 AD), while the sixth was especially commissioned by John VII to complete the series (Pl.92). This represents a unique example of deliberate mimesis in

¹⁰⁸ See van Dijk, 'The Angelic Salutation'.

¹⁰⁹ In connection with the often noticed realization that Marian decoration seems to be a trademark of John VII, it needs to be mentioned here the coincidence of a strikingly similar Marian iconography at the Catacombs of San Valentino, which has in turn proved essential for the subsequent attribution of these frescoes to the same Pope. Osborne, 'Early Medieval wall-paintings in the catacomb of San Valentino'.

¹¹⁰ P.J. Nordhagen, 'A carved marble pilaster in the Vatican grottoes. Some remarks on the sculptural techniques of the early middle ages' in *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* 4 (1969), pp. 113-19; Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, p. 242.

early medieval Rome: the imitative sculpture was not inspired by the *spolia*, but curiously rendered to be as close as possible to its model. In addition, as noted by Nordhagen, the 'running drill' technique used to create the early-eighth century pilaster was one that seemed to have survived only in Byzantium at the time. This in turn led Nordhagen to postulate the presence of Byzantine – or Byzantine-trained – craftsmen in the workshop.¹¹¹ The only other example of such technique in the eighth century is found in Northumbria, in the carved stone crosses of Bewcastle and Ruthwell.¹¹²

4.2.3 The overall significance of Santa Maria Antiqua and its site

From the discussion so far it seems evident that the church of Santa Maria Antiqua had different but complementary functions. The involvement of several Popes in the church's decoration and upkeep, as well as the building's position within the Forum and at the foot of the Palatine hill, call for the role of palatine chapel, made explicit at least under John VII. With regard to this, it is worth noting that one of the stages in the process of electing Pope Sergius (687-701) seems to have happened on the Palatine, in the Oratory of S. Cesario.¹¹³ What is even more interesting is that from the early ninth century, there was also a Greek monastery of S. Cesario on the Palatine, although there is no unanimous agreement on the coincidence of the two sites.¹¹⁴

On the other hand, the frescoes indicate a very active votive element. Both aspects, the 'popular' (devotion) and the 'high' (patronage), have been

¹¹¹ A similar hypothesis has been put forward for the mosaic technique of the Oratory, where the use of little stone *tesserae* to underline details of bodies and faces seems to imply the work of a similar 'Byzantine' workshop; P.J. Nordhagen, 'The Mosaics of John VII (705-707 A.D.)' in *Acta Institutum Romanum Norvegiae* 2 (1965), pp. 121-66.

¹¹² Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, p. 242, and see *infra*, ch.6.

¹¹³ 'in oraculum Beati Caesarii, Christi martyris, quod est intra suprascriptum palatium', *Liber Pontificalis*, vol. 1, pp. 371 and 377.

¹¹⁴ Hülsen, followed by Ferrari locate the earlier oratory at the Lateran, see C. Hülsen, *Le Chiese di Roma nel Medioevo*, Firenze 1927, p. 234; G. Ferrari, *Early Roman Monasteries*, Città del Vaticano 1957, pp. 88-91; support for a Palatine location comes instead from Duchesne, *Liber Pontificalis*, vol. 1, p. 481; Valentini-Zucchetti, *Codice Topografico*, p. 258; A. Augenti, *Il Palatino nel Medioevo. Archeologia e Topografia (secoli VI-XIII)*, Roma 1996, pp. 50-60; Liverani, 'Dal palatium imperiale', pp. 151-2.

frequently associated with the Greek heritage of the church's audience, the church serving – at least in its earlier stages – a predominantly Eastern community.¹¹⁵ This needs further explanation. In terms of patronage and audience, the hypothesis that privileged the so-called 'Greek' presence has always dominated the scholarship on Santa Maria Antiqua, and rightly so, given the evidence for Eastern liturgical and iconographic elements, as well as the ongoing use of the Greek language within the church.¹¹⁶ Greek was also the main theological element behind the notorious 649 Lateran Council: although Pope Martin was not Greek himself, it has been demonstrated that the main arguments and written evidence in the controversy were the work of the Greek theologian and philosopher Maximus the Confessor (580-662).¹¹⁷ Furthermore, it has been suggested that the future Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore (c.602-90), may have actively contributed to the intellectual milieu of the Council. A native of Cilicia, and having had experience of Syriac and Constantinopolitan cultures, once in Rome he probably resided in one of the Greek monasteries, in all likelihood that of Sant'Anastasio *ad aquas Salvias*, on the via Laurentina in the southern area of Rome. Once in Anglo-Saxon England, he acted as the key repository and mediator of Greek culture there.¹¹⁸ It is also significant that, apart from Martin, the majority of the Popes in the seventh and eighth centuries were of 'Greek' origin.¹¹⁹

Yet, regardless of such considerations, the 'Greeks' are too often understood to be an isolated group, a 'foreign enclave with little or no

¹¹⁵ See most recently B. Brenk, 'Papal Patronage in a Greek Church in Rome' in Osborne-Rasmus Brandt-Morganti (eds), *Santa Maria Antiqua*, pp. 67-81.

¹¹⁶ For a recent overview see Lucey, 'Art and Socio-Cultural Identity', pp. 141-50.

¹¹⁷ C. Cubitt, 'The Lateran Council of 649 as an Ecumenical Council' in *Chalcedon in Context. Church Councils 400-700*, R. Price & M. Whitby (eds), Liverpool 2008, pp. 133-47; Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 226-8.

¹¹⁸ On the monastery *ad aquas Salvias* see Ferrari, *Early Roman Monasteries*, pp. 33-48; on Theodore see M. Lapidge (ed.), *Archbishop Theodore*, Cambridge 1995, esp. Id. 'The career of Archbishop Theodore', pp. 1-29; S.P. Brock, 'The Syriac background', pp. 30-53; H. Chadwick, 'Theodore, the English church and the monothelete controversy', pp. 88-95.

¹¹⁹ Sansterre, *Les moines grecs et orientaux a Rome*; Ekonomou, *Byzantine Rome and the Greek Popes*;

connection with Romans and their city'.¹²⁰ On the contrary, recent work by Brenk shows how Santa Maria Antiqua can be understood as a, or rather the church for 'Greeks living in Rome'.¹²¹ However, while Eastern communities emerged strongly in Roman ecclesiastical and religious life in the seventh and eighth centuries,¹²² it is also true that they were progressively absorbed and 'Romanised', as is underlined in the description and interpretation of some of the frescoes of the church.¹²³ Defining Santa Maria Antiqua's audience as 'Greek' should not automatically imply philo-Byzantinism, and cannot shed light on how these 'Greeks living in Rome' perceived themselves or acted with respect to their origin. It is a salutary reminder to consider that some of these 'Roman Greeks' at the beginning of the eighth century were probably descendants of the Byzantine families who settled in the city after the reconquest of Justinian in the mid-sixth century.¹²⁴ In addition, it is important to reaffirm the impact of Santa Maria Antiqua on a much wider audience; it is not unlikely that Anglo-Saxons like Benedict Biscop, Wilfrid, Theodore or Acca would have been more than familiar with it.¹²⁵ Thus, it seems that at Santa Maria Antiqua, especially in its decoration, the Popes were concerned to accommodate the contrasting needs and expectations of the different social groups coexisting in the city and making use of its religious spaces.

The popular and Greek connections have also been highlighted in the discussion of both the second chapel at Santa Maria Antiqua, that on the north side of the sanctuary, the former *diaconicon*, known as the Chapel of the Holy Physicians, as well as the Oratory of Forty Martyrs, physically independent from the church, but in all likelihood linked to it in origin, decoration and

¹²⁰ Lucey, 'Art and Socio-Cultural Identity', p. 141.

¹²¹ Brenk, 'Papal Patronage', p. 79.

¹²² A telling example is the fact that the common spoken language at the council of 704 to which Wilfrid took part seems to have been Greek. See *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 53, pp. 117-21.

¹²³ Santa Maria Antiqua seems to have maintained this 'mixed' status for a fairly long time, if by the first half of the ninth century, the extremely Roman saints Agnes and Cecilia were depicted in the atrium, albeit labelled in Greek; see Osborne, 'The atrium', p. 193.

¹²⁴ Brown, *Gentlemen and Officers*.

¹²⁵ Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, p. 229.

overall significance. Thus, the decoration of both the chapel and the Oratory needs to be briefly considered.

The frescoes in the Chapel of the Holy Physicians have been described stylistically in the exhaustive work of Nordhagen, and, with a different approach, in a recent article by David Knipp.¹²⁶ Here, it is only necessary to highlight some aspects of the discussion. The frescoes (Pl.93), coeval with John VII's decoration, have a homogeneous theme, depicting Eastern medical saints, most of them standing full-length in regular rows, and identified by painted inscriptions. On the south wall, corresponding to the church's east end, a central, specially constructed niche, isolates a group of five of these saints: the large recess is characteristically placed at a low level. This particular setting, combined with the unique choice of iconography, considered together with the predominantly 'Eastern' audience of the church, has been understood to indicate that the chapel was deemed an appropriate place for the practice of the *incubatio*, a curative ritual with pre-Christian origins that involved sleeping in a sacred place and being healed through dream oracles.¹²⁷ The possibility that this practice could happen within a Christian context is strengthened not only by the decoration, but also when considering the pre-existing association of the site itself. Santa Maria Antiqua lies in a particular area of the Forum, close to the *Lacus Iuturnae*, a spring with healing water associated with Castor and Pollux.¹²⁸ It seems plausible, therefore, to postulate a continuity of cult on the site that evolved from 'pagan medical centre' to a 'more traditional ministration under Christian auspices'.¹²⁹ Not only do Castor and Pollux seem to be the pre-Christian antecedent of Cosma and Damiano, whose church lies only meters away from Santa Maria Antiqua, but statues of the twins were found close to

¹²⁶ Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, pp. 55-66; D. Knipp, 'The Chapel of Physicians at Santa Maria Antiqua' in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 56 (2002), pp. 1-23.

¹²⁷ Knipp, 'The Chapel of Physicians', pp. 6-8, 10-4, 16.

¹²⁸ On this association see G.A. Kalas, 'Topographical Transitions: the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs and Exhibition Strategies in the Early Medieval Forum' in Osborne-Rasmus Brandt-Morganti (eds), *Santa Maria Antiqua*, pp. 199- 211, esp. pp. 199-204.

¹²⁹ Niederer, 'Early medieval Charity', p. 292.

the pool; there is no reason to think they were destroyed in ancient times: they could have been visible to an early medieval audience thus fostering the continuity.¹³⁰ Furthermore, Niederer has proposed that some of the votive fresco panels at Santa Maria Antiqua could be interpreted as actual 'ex-voto', after 'cure from disease or disability'.¹³¹ In this context, a further link with the pre-Christian identity of the site was revived when Santa Maria Antiqua became a *diaconia*. Indeed, it is very likely that establishing a *diaconia* on the site was one way to make official, as well as perpetuate, a practice that pre-dated its Christian control and facies.

Associations with the Dioscuri have also been proposed in interpretations of the frescoes in the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs.¹³² This building was, in all likelihood, closely bound to Santa Maria Antiqua from the outset, as a Domitian *aula* for the cult of the Emperor.¹³³ Although the decoration of the Oratory is attributed to the Martinian phase,¹³⁴ it is entirely consistent not only with the pre-Christian nature of the site, but also with the subsequent programme of John VII, providing further proof of how he intentionally integrated old and new in his decorative campaign.¹³⁵

The main focus of the Oratory is a large apse painting (Pl.94): here, the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste are depicted at the moment of their torment, standing, rows upon rows, in the freezing water of the lake. While the presence of water creates an immediate visual and ideological link with Baptism, Kalas has pointed to the absence of suffering in the portrayal of the martyred bodies;¹³⁶ rather, the interpretative key seems to lie not in their human death, but in their resurrected bodies, 'transcending physical limitations' and thus creating a

¹³⁰ Kalas, 'Topographical Transitions', p. 203.

¹³¹ Niederer, p. 293.

¹³² Kalas, 'Topographical Transitions'.

¹³³ See supra, p. 145; see also Rasmus Brandt, 'The Oratory of the Forty Martyrs'.

¹³⁴ Nordhagen, 'The earliest decorations', p. 63; Id., 'Frescoes of the seventh century', pp. 133-5.

¹³⁵ For this interpretation see K. Gulowsen, 'Some Iconographic Aspects of the Relationship between Santa Maria Antiqua and the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs' in Osborne-Rasmus Brandt-Morganti (eds), *Santa Maria Antiqua*, pp. 187-97.

¹³⁶ Kalas, 'Topographical Transitions', pp. 204-5.

meaningful association with the open-eyed crucified Christ in the apse fresco of Santa Maria Antiqua.¹³⁷ Such a reading, underlining Christian endurance, would also have had a significant impact on those involved in the healing ritual of the *incubatio*, reinforcing the complex interaction and correlation of all the monuments and images on this site.

A different, but not incompatible, interpretation by Gulowsen points out the obvious baptismal references,¹³⁸ while stressing the possible links with the Great Entrance processional,¹³⁹ a rite that articulated a visual and ideological path from the Oratory and into Santa Maria Antiqua, not by the central nave, but through the palatine ramp, into the left aisle, then to the Theodotus chapel and finally into the sanctuary.¹⁴⁰ In the Oratory, the Baptismal allusion is paired with the victorious iconography of the jewelled cross (three of them painted within medallions flanking the apse) (PI.94),¹⁴¹ and is followed visually by two panels illustrating the Anastasis, the first situated on the façade of the Oratory itself, and the second on the jambs of the opening from the ramp into the left aisle of Santa Maria Antiqua (PI.95).¹⁴² The Anastasis ‘as a portal iconography’ could have imperial as well as Paschal value, a multivalent interpretation being entirely possible, and in line with the multi-functional nature of Santa Maria Antiqua.¹⁴³ A second representation of the Forty Martyrs, combined with an image of the Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace, is placed at the end of the left aisle, reaffirming the aspects of ‘victory over death, resurrection and salvation [...] activated at the Easter vigil’.¹⁴⁴ Thus, it seems that, regardless of the potential baptismal function of the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs, a liturgical

¹³⁷ Kalas, ‘Topographical Transitions’, p. 208.

¹³⁸ Gulowsen, ‘Some Iconographic Aspects’, pp. 188-90, 196.

¹³⁹ Id. p. 195.

¹⁴⁰ The link with the Palm Sunday Great Entrance procession finds an artistic allusion in the palm branches painted in the doorway leading from the left nave into the Theodotus chapel. I am grateful to M. Boulton for this observation.

¹⁴¹ A similar connection in a baptismal context is advocated in the decoration of the catacomb of Ponziano, see *supra*, pp. 98-9.

¹⁴² Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII*, pp. 86, 81-2.

¹⁴³ Gulowsen, ‘Some Iconographic Aspects’, p. 195.

¹⁴⁴ Id. p. 193.

underpinning of the decoration provides a fuller appreciation of the overwhelming complexity of this site.

4.2.4 The significance of Santa Maria Antiqua within Rome

Overall, Santa Maria Antiqua is a church reflecting a multifaceted spiritual and religious environment, a city-centre 'parish' church, as well as a means of displaying very lavish, luxurious, and high status patronage from lay as well as ecclesiastical figures. It is difficult to establish whether Santa Maria Antiqua is to be considered unique in the landscape of Rome at this time, or suggests that a comprehensive understanding of the diversity of decoration at Santa Maria Antiqua may reflect what was happening at other churches in Rome, as for example at San Clemente.¹⁴⁵ The 'fortuitous' circumstances that ensured the preservation of Church and its decoration, spared it from the subsequent encroachment or destruction characteristic of so many early medieval Roman churches. Thus, the different layers of frescoes are still visible, providing a privileged insight to the earliest stages in the life of the church, after which they were almost frozen in time and space, delivering to the twentieth century a monument that has come to occupy such a special place in art historical discussion. The complexity and political relevance of the building, as reflected in the iconography and multiple co-existing spaces and their uses, is exceptional. However, although Santa Maria Antiqua is an exclusive witness for that period, it could also be considered paradigmatic, and may well indicate that similar situations could have been observed at other churches in Rome, especially the ones that had played an active role in the theological and political controversies of the preceding centuries.¹⁴⁶ As noted, at Santa Maria Antiqua political dissent was openly expressed, as in the case of Martin I or Sergius I and John VII in relation to the Quinisext Council. Thus, although this church clearly represents an exceptionally preserved document of early Roman church

¹⁴⁵ See supra, p. 44.

¹⁴⁶ See supra, ch.1.

decoration, it conversely fits very well within the wider context of church architecture and the topography of power in early medieval Rome, revealing the process of accommodating Eastern communities, in a manner analogous to that by which other churches had progressively accommodated – or abruptly expelled – schismatic groups.¹⁴⁷

On the other hand, it is worth noting what Santa Maria Antiqua is not, in comparison with the Roman churches so far discussed: it is not a martyrial church, a papal/Constantinian Basilica, nor a *titulus*. Nevertheless, especially when considered on the larger canvas of Roman church architecture, history and topography, a re-assessment is needed, one that – as Lucey pointed out – presents Santa Maria Antiqua as a whole unitary sacred space,¹⁴⁸ a church rather than a ‘fresco-shrine’, while taking into account the multiple functions of the space, its vitality, and the contiguous existence and use of it by different groups. Through such an approach, Santa Maria Antiqua can be truly representative of early medieval Rome at its most complex, contradictory and powerful.

It remains to be seen what potential influence Santa Maria Antiqua could have held for Anglo-Saxon visitors. The discussion of the frescoes in the church, and the emphasis on the iconic, framed, almost ‘portable’ images is probably one of the most significant sources of inspiration, as will be demonstrated when considering Anglo-Saxon sculpture. In this respect, the tendency to isolate the images at Santa Maria Antiqua, and compose the scenes against a set, geometric background, thus creating almost autonomous panels is also important. Furthermore, the frequent positioning of the frescoes in niches or recesses increases their three-dimensional nature and in turn their possible impact on sculpture.

One example that should be kept in mind when considering the visual inheritance of this church in Anglo-Saxon England is that of the ‘Virgin in the

¹⁴⁷ See *supra*, pp. 45-56.

¹⁴⁸ Lucey, ‘Palimpsest reconsidered’, p. 83.

niche', an image preserved in the north west corner of the central nave, and treated with great care in the subsequent campaigns of re-decoration.¹⁴⁹ Another such image, dated to the mid-eighth century, survives in the right aisle of the lower church San Clemente,¹⁵⁰ a church (as seen) comparable with Santa Maria Antiqua in its status and decorative schemes, while a third small fresco, similar to that at Santa Maria Antiqua and indeed also attributed to John VII, is preserved in the Catacomb of San Valentino.¹⁵¹ These paintings, quite small in their dimensions and set deep in arched or square niches, reminiscent of windows, offer a striking parallel to some of the carved panels found in Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁵²

Further observations can be made concerning the frescoes, especially in their combination of liturgy and iconography. Such an approach is not new, and it has been successfully used to gain a better understanding of the monuments and painted decoration in Anglo-Saxon England, as well as Rome.¹⁵³ The seminal work of Ó Carragáin has demonstrated the significance of Roman liturgy in explaining and interpreting the complex imagery of the Ruthwell Cross, by highlighting the substantial links between some of the most important figures of Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastics and liturgists and their actual presence in Rome in the late seventh and early eighth centuries.¹⁵⁴ Here, Anglo-Saxons like Benedict Biscop and Wilfrid, would not only have experienced the churches and monuments, but also participated in the liturgy that took place there. As previously mentioned,¹⁵⁵ during Wilfrid's last visit in Rome in 704, which lasted over four months and during which he regularly participated to the meeting of the synod gathered to judge him, there is clear evidence that some of the 'synod fathers' were of Greek-Eastern origin. As a consequence, it is

¹⁴⁹ See supra, pp. 155-56.

¹⁵⁰ J. Osborne, 'Early Medieval Painting in San Clemente, Rome: the Madonna and Child in the Niche' in *Gesta* 20 (1981), pp. 299-310.

¹⁵¹ Osborne, 'Early Medieval wall-paintings in the catacomb of San Valentino'.

¹⁵² See infra, ch.6.

¹⁵³ See for instance the above-cited works of Ó Carragáin, Hawkes and van Dijk.

¹⁵⁴ Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, p. 245ff.; see also infra, p. 311-313.

¹⁵⁵ See supra, p. 107.

very possible that Wilfrid would have visited one of the more important churches in Rome, possibly the most significant for Greek-speaking ecclesiastics. Such direct Roman influence on Anglo-Saxon visitors, especially those in the higher ecclesiastical ranks, would also have extended to aspects of ideological and theological thought, which was largely reflected in the iconography of Santa Maria Antiqua. Encounters with the most up-to-date visual expressions of the rising cult of the Virgin – fully expressed at Santa Maria Antiqua – must have had its impact too. Overall, strong connections between the art and iconography of Rome, and especially of Santa Maria Antiqua, and the Anglo-Saxon world seem increasingly less speculative.

Finally, it seems also relevant the manner in which the iconographic programme at Santa Maria Antiqua demonstrated the conscious attempt to be as inclusive as possible of all the different forces at play in the city; this claim echoes the perception, often propounded by Bede, that Rome represented the cradle of catholicity and unity at all levels, and that in this resided one of the major appeal of ‘Romaness’.¹⁵⁶ The pledge to uniformity in art, doctrine, language, architecture, was not the result of an imperialistic claim over individual geographic forces, but more the symptom of striving for a universal tradition, one that would encompass the diverse contributions and blend them in the recognizable style of the Roman church, just as happens in the frescoes at Santa Maria Antiqua.

4.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth reflecting not only on the material discussed here, but also, more generally, on the churches, monuments and decoration taken into account so far. Clearly, Roman churches can be seen to have belonged to different groups and types, and combined a number of decorative themes and structural elements with complex results, which it is often difficult (or unjust) to confine to descriptions and definitions. Santa Maria Antiqua, as demonstrated,

¹⁵⁶ Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, p. 230; see *infra*, pp. 195-201.

seems to stand as a successful and telling example of the multifaceted nature of Roman churches.

While early medieval Rome has been appreciated through its impact on visitors, especially Anglo-Saxon ones – an approach that creates several and often intersecting angles – it is essential to bear in mind that the impact of images, decoration and furnishings on the pilgrims and visitors to the churches would have been mediated by the context in which they were experienced. Individual responses and perceptions would have been strongly linked to the setting and supposed function of images and objects: the same theme or representation would have a completely different effect not so much in terms of style, but more in relation to concepts such as their liturgical, private or devotional use; large or small scale; iconic or narrative images. Again, it is worth emphasizing how Santa Maria Antiqua seems to encapsulate in its decoration all these issues, making it the unique and exemplary monument it is, and one that reflects – in its complexity – the complexity of the environment that produced it.

In the course of the seventh and eighth centuries, the Pope's progressive distance from Byzantium increased and eventually made necessary a new frame of references related to the idea(s) of power, which was transformed so as to include not just the codified imperial Late-Antique metaphors, but also more explicit connections with the divine, and a direct link between the popes or donors and the heavenly hierarchies.¹⁵⁷ This was obviously reflected in the approach to sacred images, which in Rome can rarely be taken 'at face value', as they never managed to escape from the political implications that shaped the city and the attitudes of its most powerful administrators, both lay and ecclesiastic. In this, too, Santa Maria Antiqua is emblematic, as it incorporates the majority of the issues discussed in previous chapters: it was a *diaconia*, and somehow a schismatic church; it was also an imperial church, and a papal

¹⁵⁷ E. Thunø, 'The cult of the Virgin, Icons and Relics in Early Medieval Rome. A Semiotic Approach' in Rasmus Brandt [et al] (ed.), *Rome AD 300-800*, p. 96.

church; it was the setting for the most traditional Roman evergetism, and at the same time it can be linked to the *xenodochia* in its 'healing' role; it reused Roman structures while displaying the most up-to-date and experimental, Byzantine-influenced iconography.