Ivan Foletti – Marie Okáčová

AVREA CONCISIS SVRGIT PICTVRA METALLIS. An Epistemological and Methodological Approximation of Early Christian Multimedia Visuality

Abstract   One of the key instruments in the process of the Christianization of the Roman Empire was the visual arts. Shining images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Apostles, and other biblical figures, martyr saints, and bishops, produced in mosaic and located at prominent places in early Christian churches, were frequently accompanied by impressive monumental inscriptions. Based on selected case studies from late antique Rome (4th–7th cent.), this interdisciplinary paper aims to delineate a path to a comprehensive understanding of such multimedia aesthetics, based on the multi-layered and synergic relationship between text-as-image and image-proper with an implicit bearing on the Word made flesh rhetoric (Jo. 1, 1–14). Combining theoretical perspectives from art history and classical philology, we wish to reveal how these visual schemes containing classical echoes in both form and content may convey different meanings depending on the cognitive background of those who are looking.

Introduction

While naturally indebted to Graeco-Roman heritage, especially (but not exclusively) in terms of formal, technical, and rhetorical means, early Christian culture generated revolutionary concepts. It marked, among other things, the triumph of two-dimensional conceptual (and shining) images, produced in mosaic and replacing three-dimensional mimetic and polychromed sculptures of the 'pagan' temples, which were accompanied by impressive monumental golden inscriptions in Latin hexameters or elegiac couplets. The multimedia aesthetics of the visual schemes preserved in the late antique

churches of Rome – such as those in the apses of Santa Pudenziana (401–417), Santi Cosma e Damiano (526–530), Sant'Agnese fuori le mura (625–638), and the San Venanzio Chapel in the Lateran Baptistery (640–642), which will be examined in this article – thus represent a true turning point in the history of the visual arts. Despite their classical resonances, these text–image compositions were obviously produced and aimed to be perceived in a newly established epistemological framework with new discursive and hermeneutic implications.

To illustrate this cultural transformation, the Latin hexameter from the title of the paper – *aurea concisis surgit pictura metallis* – can serve as a sort of cognitive test. When decontextualized, the verse could well be recognized (by both contemporary recipients and modern readers versed in classical Latin) as a piece of promising (ekphrastic) classical poetry. The initial *aurea* has a very strong allusive force, evoking both Virgil's and Ovid's descriptions of the Golden Age[1], which – together with the alliterative pattern of the verse and its roughly chiastic structure – gives it a recognizable flavour of classical rhetoric. Nevertheless, the hexameter represents the opening verse of a 12-line monumental golden inscription accompanying a virtually shining mosaic image of an early Christian virgin-martyr and titular saint in the apse of Sant'Agnese fuori le mura, a church dating back to the first half of the seventh century (Pope Honorius I: 625–638). This visual scheme (fig. 1) is just one among a relatively decent number of similar multimedia 'spectacles' preserved (not only) in the apses of late antique churches and produced in Rome between the fourth and seventh centuries (with a significant resurgence in the first half of the ninth century, during the 'Carolingian' period, a moment of strong revival of early Christian visual and literary themes)[2].

This shared piece of research aims to approach this 'revolutionary' early Christian phenomenon from several complementary methodological perspectives, combining insights from art history and classical philology as well as literary and performance studies. While a comprehensive treatment of the entire corpus of extant/reconstructed visual schemes under consideration

---

1   Verg. ecl. 4, 9: *desinet ac toto surget gens aurea mundo;* Ov. met. 1, 89: *aurea prima sata est aetas, quae uindice nullo.*

2   The apse mosaics and accompanying inscriptions produced in Rome between the sixth and ninth centuries were included in a single survey by Erik Thunø (2015). The creation of such a distinct 'group' was justified on the basis of compositional and epigraphic similarities. However, we are convinced that this approach, while very interesting, does not properly account for the exceptional creativity and diversity of the 'late antique' moment (see further below, esp. note 49; cf. also Foletti – Okáčová 2022, with a further bibliography).

Fig. 1: Apse of Sant'Agnese fuori le mura, Rome, 625–638
© Domenico Ventura

with their idiosyncratic features is far beyond the scope of this paper, our aim is to delineate a path to a thorough understanding of the respective text–image interactions and the 'mystery' of their Christianizing power. A brief introduction of selected case studies, all situated within the Aurelian Walls of Rome and dating to the period between 401 and 642, will be followed by a survey of relevant theoretical tools for their study, naturally leading to epistemological considerations, including questions of rupture vs. continuity. Finally (but also throughout), this inquiry will be framed within a cognitive perspective, with due attention paid to the socially, historically, and culturally determined aspects of the reception of these artefacts.

Monumental mosaic images with inscriptions in late antique Rome (401–642)

The following examples of early Christian visual schemes were chosen to illustrate the visual-verbal dialectics marking the corpus of (not only) apsidal mosaics surviving or known to have existed in the late antique churches of Rome.

Santa Pudenziana (401–417)

The Basilica of Santa Pudenziana was commissioned by two local presbyters during the pontificate of Pope Innocent I (401–417)[3]. Despite major restorations over the centuries[4], it contains the oldest preserved decoration of a Christian apse with Christ seated as a teacher among the Apostles (fig. 2). This visual scheme, known already from funerary paintings, is not in itself surprising. Of special interest is the background of the composition: Christ with long hair and a long beard – an exceptional representation for the early fifth century – surrounded by the Apostles is shown in front of a heavenly city, in all probability Jerusalem, while the sky is occupied by the four living creatures commemorating the apocalyptic theme and located around a central cross. This is, in fact, a significant detail since it was Innocent I who introduced the Book of the Apocalypse to the canonical books of the Church of Rome[5]. The entire composition thus appears to be a true epiphany; God-logos debates with his followers in a clearly eschatological context.

The structure of the apsidal image – with Christ clothed in gold and seated amid a semicircle of Apostles – clearly refers to the ritual that must have taken place in the sacred space below, where the bishop and presbyters were seated on and around a similar throne. The parallel between heaven and earth must thus have been obvious. Since the 1930s, scholars have examined the models of this composition[6]. Today, there seems to be a consensus that it commemorates imperial images, representations of pagan deities, and also images of ancient philosophers. Contemporary recipients with an adequate cognitive background were thus visually encouraged to perceive the Christian God as encompassing the virtues of all deities, Socrates-like philosophers, and, not least, Roman emperors[7].

The visual scheme under consideration was originally accompanied by a monumental inscription at the bottom of the mosaic, surviving in the transcription of sixteenth-century Augustinian and historian Onofrio Panvinio (Vat. Lat. 6780, 63v.–64). This dedicatory inscription was allegedly still visible prior to the 1588 restoration when the "mosaic was drastically trimmed

---

3   See mainly the last synthetic studies by Andaloro 2006b, 114–124; Angelelli 2010; Braconi 2016; Foletti 2017a, 11–29; and Foletti – Okáčová 2022, esp. 36–38, with a further bibliography.
4   See Tiberia 2003; Braconi 2013, 61–99; and Braconi 2016.
5   Matthiae 1967, 57 f.
6   Grabar 1936; Mathews 1993.
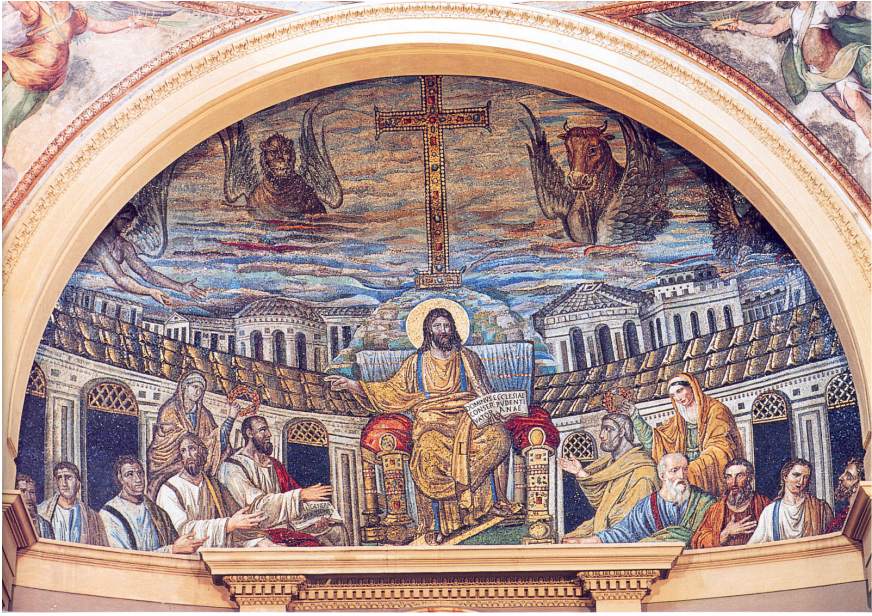7   Andaloro 2006b, 114–124; Foletti 2017a, 11–29.

Fig. 2: Apse of Santa Pudenziana, Rome, 401–417
© Center for Early Medieval Studies

on all sides"[8], and it gives the credit for decorating the church to Presbyter Leopardus:

> sal[uo] Innocen[tio episcopo Ili]cio Maximo et [...] pre[sby]teris Le[opardus presb(yter) sumptu proprio ...] [marm]oribus et p[i]ct[uris] decoraui[t][9].

> When Innocent [Innocent I, Pope 401–417] was bishop [of Rome] and Ilicius, Maximus and ... were presbyters, Leopardus the Presbyter made these decorations of marble and of pictures[10].

---

8 Mathews 1993, 98.

9 Reconstruction after de Rossi 1899, comment to pl. 10; regarding the recordings of Panvinio and the lost inscription, see also Braconi 2016, esp. 247, who claims that only the inscription's first part can be reconstructed with greater plausibility, suggesting the following: sal[vo] Innocent[io episcopo Ili]cio Maximo et [Leopardo] pre[sby]teris [...].

10 Translation taken from Oakeshott 1967, 65. Unless specified otherwise, the translations of the Latin quotes were produced by the authors of the present paper.

A relatively unique feature of the visual composition consists of the following two inscriptions that form integral parts of the apsidal image (fig. 2). One of them is located on the book in the hands of Christ and refers explicitly to the Lord's protective power over the church:

dominus conseruator ecclesiae Pudentianae.

Lord, the Saviour of the Pudenziana Church.

The other is written in the codex held by the Apostle Paul and refers to a specific part of the Book of Genesis:

liber generationis I.X.

The Book of Genesis I.X.

Together, these epigraphs provide a general framework for the interpretation of the visual composition, clearly linking the heavenly and the terrestrial Church, which will become a dominant feature in later mosaics, where the figures of individual martyrs, popes, and bishops are quite regularly portrayed next to the central image of Christ. In the physical space, this unifying visual rhetoric is reflected in the vertical axis connecting the apsidal conch with the altar and the relics of martyrs in the church crypt[11].

Santa Sabina (422–432)

The Basilica of Santa Sabina on the Aventine Hill was built during the pontificate of Pope Celestine I (422–432)[12]. This very ambitious project was one of the first presbyterial foundations of this size. The basilica hall was originally decorated with mosaics in the apse – now unfortunately lost, but probably still commemorated by the sixteenth-century apsidal decoration – and perhaps also by a narrative cycle in mosaic and exceptional *opus sectile.* The narthex was also richly decorated, still preserving fragments of false *opus sectile*

---

11 Cf. Thunø 2015, 4 *et passim.*
12 Regarding this monument, see most recently Gianandrea 2015, 139–152; and Gianandrea et al. 2016, with a further bibliography.

Fig. 3: Mosaic on the entrance wall of Santa Sabina, Rome, 421–431
Robert Couzin, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

and, most prominently, the basilica's famous wooden door[13]. The mosaic preserved on the counter-façade (fig. 3) represents the personifications of both parts of the universal Church: the *ecclesia ex gentibus* and the *ecclesia ex circumcisione*[14]. Originally, the decorations included the Apostles Peter and Paul (each associated with one of the *ecclesiae*) and figures of the four living creatures. In an eschatological context, the counter-façade was thus meant to celebrate the unity of the universal Church[15].

The monumental dedicatory inscription (CLE 312) in golden letters is this time located not in the apse but on the entrance wall, between the two personified figures of the Church. It commemorates the founder of the basilica, Presbyter Peter, in a way that is reminiscent of late antique imperial panegyrics. The epigraph mentions Peter's origin outside of Rome and praises his Christian upbringing and conduct, which predestine him for future salvation:

culmen apostolicum cum Caelestinus haberet
primus et in toto fulgeret episcopus orbe,
haec quae miraris fundauit presbyter urbis
Illyrica de gente Petrus, uir nomine tanto
dignus, ab exortu Christi nutritus in aula,
pauperib<us> locuples, sibi pauper, qui bona uitae
praesentis fugiens meruit sperare futuram.

---

13 See Foletti – Gianandrea 2015; Foletti – Kravčíková 2019, 24–45; and Foletti 2021a, 19–35, with a further bibliography.
14 Leardi 2006, 293–297.
15 Ciampini 1690–1699.

> When Celestinus held the highest apostolic throne and
> shone forth gloriously as the foremost bishop of the whole world,
> a presbyter of the city, Illyrian by birth, named Peter
> and worthy of that great name, established this building at which you look
> in wonder.
> From his earliest years he was brought up in the hall of Christ – rich to the
> poor, poor to himself, one who shunned the good things of life on earth
> and deserved to hope for the life to come[16].

Santa Maria Maggiore (432–440)

This basilica, one of the earliest built to celebrate the Virgin Mary, was completed and decorated under Pope Sixtus III (432–440)[17]. It is one of the most ambitious projects of the papal curia during the fifth century. As Krautheimer has already shown, the idea of 'occupying' the Esquiline Hill with a basilica with such dimensions must be read in the context of the Lateran, an episcopal seat, that was far too distant from the city center of Rome[18]. With the new construction, the bishop therefore wanted to move closer to the inhabited areas. The decorations, completed under Sixtus III, as confirmed by the monumental inscription on the triumphal arch (fig. 4: Xystus episcopus plebi dei [ILCV 975]), and covering the entire nave with stories from the Old Testament and the apsidal arch with scenes from Christ's infancy, represent one of the largest preserved mosaic cycles with a late antique origin. Traditionally, the Old Testament story is interpreted as a metaphor for the Christianization of the Urbs, while the apsidal arch is read in relation to the Council of Ephesus, where the divine nature of Christ was fully established[19].

Again, a probably monumental golden inscription (ILCV 976), documented by early modern sources, was present on the counter-façade; composed of four elegiac couplets, it celebrates the Virgin Mary as the Theotokos and her significance for the cult of the martyrs:

---

16 Translation taken from Parlby 2014, 151.
17 Regarding this richly studied monument, see, e.g., the summary studies of the past two decades with preceding bibliographies: Saxer 2001; Menna 2006, 306–346; Foletti 2022, 135–152.
18 Krautheimer 1980, 54–58.
19 Regarding the narrative cycle, see, e.g., Menna 2006, 306–346; and Foletti 2022, 135–152; regarding the decoration of the arch, see Wilpert 1931, 197–213; Bisconti 2000, 12–23; and Foletti 2017c, 41–62.

Fig. 4: Triumphal arch in Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, 432–440
Robert Couzin, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

uirgo Maria, tibi Xystus noua tecta dicaui
digna salutifero munera uentre tuo.
tu genetrix ignara uiri, te denique feta
uisceribus saluis edita nostra salus.
ecce tui testes uteri sibi praemia portant
sub pedibusque iacet passio cuique sua:
ferrum flamma ferae fluuius saeuumque uenenum.
tot tamen has mortes una corona manet.

Virgin Mary, to you I, Sixtus, dedicated this new abode:
a fitting offering to your womb, the bearer of salvation.
You, o Mother, knowing no man
yet bearing fruit, brought from your chaste womb our Saviour.
Behold, the witnesses of your fruitfulness bring you wreaths,
at each one's feet lie the instruments of their passion:
sword and fire and water, wild beasts and bitter poison.
Yet one crown awaits all these deaths[20].

---

20 Translation taken from Liverani 2016, 187.

Santi Cosma e Damiano (526–530)

This church was the first built on the Forum Romanum at the behest of Pope Felix IV (526–530)[21]. Its large hall – originally part of an ancient building – was adapted, especially with the addition of an apse, for Christian worship. The original decorations are preserved on the apsidal arch depicting the Twenty-Four Elders, who – together with the four living creatures and angels – worship the Lamb of God seated on a throne. The apsidal image (fig. 5) is dominated by the central figure of Christ descending from the clouds towards the spectators. Peter and Paul, depicted on either side of Christ, introduce to him Cosmas and Damian, the two martyr saints to whom the basilica was consecrated and whose relics had arrived at Rome at the end of the fifth century[22]. As demonstrated by Ursula Nilgen and Ivan Foletti, the choice of images must be understood in the broader context of the Roman liturgy; indeed, the images were meant to reflect the ritual practice, as documented in the *Ordines Romani* (1, 46) and in texts related to the stational liturgy of the city of Rome[23].

The monumental golden inscription (ILCV 1784) running along the lower rim of the apsidal conch is one of the first surviving early Christian epigraphs that thematize the shining glory of the surrounding visual scheme. Apart from that, it mentions the martyrs in whose honour the church was built and the commissioner of the building (these features, as we will see, became standardized in similar contexts):

aula dei claris radiat speciosa metallis,
in qua plus fidei lux pretiosa micat.
martyribus medicis populo spes certa salutis
uenit et ex sacro creuit honore locus.
optulit hoc domino Felix antistite dignum
munus, ut aetheria uiuat in arce poli.

With bright and precious stones splendidly shines the temple of God,
in which the precious light of faith flashes even more radiantly.

---

21 Tiberia 1998; Davis-Weyer 1999, 743–753; Wisskirchen 1999, 169–183; Osborne 2008, 173–181; De Giorgio 2023, 187–199.

22 Cf. the passage devoted to the life of Pope Symmachus (498–514) in the *Liber Pontificalis* (53, 9): *item ad sanctam Mariam oratorium sanctorum Cosmae et Damiani a fundamento construxit.*

23 Nilgen 2000, 75–89; Foletti 2017b, 161–179.

Fig. 5: Apse of Santi Cosma e Damiano, Rome, 526–530
© Center for Early Medieval Studies

> From the martyr-physicians unshakeable hope of being healed has come to the people,
> and the place has grown out of sacred honor.
> Felix has offered to the Lord this gift, worthy of a bishop,
> that he may live in the highest heights of heaven[24].

Sant'Agnese fuori le mura (625–638)

The Basilica of Sant'Agnese was rebuilt by Honorius I (625–638)[25]. The original church, completed before the middle of the fourth century, had probably collapsed even before Honorius' work began; it was too large (and ambitious) to survive the end of the Western Roman Empire[26]. In the new church, miraculously composed of spoliated material, the central figure on

---

24 Translation by Thunø 2015, 15 and 209, with modifications.

25 Krautheimer 1937, 14–38; Frutaz 1976; Ballardini 2018, 253–279; Trout 2019, 1–26; Ferraù 2020; Foletti – Lešák 2021, 35–46; Foletti – Lešák 2023, 75–96.

26 Magnani Cianetti – Pavolini 2004.

Fig. 6: Detail of the face of Saint Agnes, Apse of Sant'Agnese fuori le mura, Rome, 625–638
© Domenico Ventura

the golden background in the apse is that of Saint Agnes, depicted not as an adolescent girl, which the saint must have been at the time of her death, but as an adult woman dressed in courtly attire (fig. 6). The gold and gems covering her head and body are certainly intended to indicate that what we see is not the body of a child female martyr on Earth, but that of a saint in paradise; it is an image of Christian apotheosis, with the divine hand reaching down with the crown of martyrdom from the apex of the vault[27].

The inscription (ILCV 1769A) along the lower margin of the apsidal conch is one of the longest that has survived to these days. It consists of six elegiac couplets divided into three panels and possibly composed by the conceptor of the church – Pope Honorius I[28]. A great deal of emphasis is placed upon the shining glory of the visual scheme, to which the entire first two quatrains are dedicated and which is advertised using various images known from classical poetry (esp. Aurora, Iris, and a peacock). The last quatrain unsurpris-

---

27 Foletti – Lešák 2023, 75–96.
28 See, e.g., Foletti – Lešák 2021, 35–46. Regarding the seven preserved Honorian inscriptions consisting altogether of seventy-six lines of verse, see recently Trout 2021, 161–170.

ingly commemorates Pope Honorius who holds a model of the church in his hands and whose shining countenance is mentioned along with his glory:

> aurea concisis surgit pictura metallis
> et conplexa simul clauditur ipsa dies.
> fontibus e niueis credas, Aurora, subire
> correptas nubes roribus arua rigans.
>
> uel qualem inter sidera lucem proferet irim
> purpureusque pauo ipse colore nitens.
> qui potuit noctis uel lucis reddere finem,
> martyrum e bustis hinc reppulit ille chaos.
>
> sursum uersa nutu quod cunctis cernitur uno,
> praesul Honorius haec uota dicata dedit.
> uestibus et factis signantur illius ora.
> lucet et aspectu lucida corda gerens.
>
> Golden rises an image out of cut precious stones
> and the daylight is at once embraced and confined.
> You would suppose Aurora was rising above from snow-white springs,
> moistening the fields with dew as the clouds are swept away.
>
> Or it is such a light that Iris brings forth among the stars
> and a purple peacock, itself sparkling with color.
> He who was able to fix the limits of day and night,
> that one has driven Chaos away from the tombs of martyrs.
>
> Turning upwards, everyone at first glance discerns
> these consecrated gifts Bishop Honorius has given.
> His image is marked out by his clothing and his deed,
> he shines forth also in countenance, bearing a glorious heart[29].

Apart from this text, there was originally another two-line inscription (ILCV 1769) along the upper margin of the apsidal arch, which was also most probably commissioned by Honorius. Analogously to the last quatrain of the lower

---

29 Translation follows Trout 2019, 15, with some modifications. Regarding the metrical idiosyncrasies of this poem, possibly composed by Honorius I himself, see Trout 2020, esp. 157; cf. Trout 2019, 24, note 73; and Trout 2021, 169.

inscription, it indirectly compared the shining glory of the church with that of Agnes' merits, thus establishing an associative link between the outer (material) representation and the inner glorious presence:

> uirginis aula micat uariis decorata metallis,
> sed plus namque nitet meritis fulgentior amplis.

> The virgin's temple glitters, adorned with various precious stones,
> but it shines even more brightly with generous merits[30].

San Venanzio Chapel (640–642)

The San Venanzio Chapel, attached to the Lateran Baptistery, was built to celebrate the Dalmatian saints whose relics were imported to Rome by the patron Pope John IV (640–642), himself a native of the region[31]. In the apse and on the triumphal arch, images of the saints whose relics are deposited in the basilica are displayed on a golden background (fig. 7). At the center of the apse composition is, however, an unexpected image: the praying Virgin, located between the Apostles Peter and Paul and below a bust of Christ hovering between two angels. While the whole can be read as a synthetic image of the Ascension, the bust of Christ – heavily restored but still visible – refers back to what must have been, at least from the mid-fifth century, the decoration of the papal Basilica of St John Lateran[32]. In other words, the visual scheme recalls both the foreign saints who had just 'arrived' in Rome and the tradition of the Urbs.

The inscription (ILCV 1786A), preserved again along the lower margin of the apsidal image, is quite similar to those surviving in Santi Cosma e Damiano and Sant'Agnese. It commemorates the martyr saints, Pope John IV as the conceptor of the church, and the sparkling light of the visual scheme:

> martyribus X̄ρi domini pia uota Iohannes
> reddidit antistes sanctificante deo,
> ac sacri fontis simili fulgente metallo
> prouidus antistes nunc copulauit opus.

---

30 Translation modified from Thunø 2015, 26 and 210.
31 Marin 2009, 209–215; Giesser 2014, 116–125.
32 Regarding the apse at St John Lateran, see, e.g., Lauer 1911; Buddensieg 1959, 157–185; Christe 1970, 197–206; and Foletti 2017d, 139–159.

Fig. 7: Apse of San Venanzio Chapel, Rome, 640–642
© akg-images/Andrea Jemolo

quo quisquis gradiens et X̄ρm pronus adorans
effusasque preces mittat ad aethra sua<s>.

John, consecrated bishop by God,
has paid his pious vows to the martyrs of Christ the Lord,
and, using precious stone that gleams like that of the holy font,
he has now, with foresight, added this work
so that everyone who steps in and, prostrate, adores Christ
may send the prayers he has poured forth to heaven[33].

As shown, despite considerable diversity in the visual schemes under exam-
ination, we can observe a certain tendency towards their standardization
from the sixth century onward. While Christ remains the dominant figure in
the respective apsidal images (with, of course, the exception of Sant'Agnese),
the accompanying inscriptions typically share an emphasis on the shining
glory of the surrounding imagery together with a commemoration of the
titular saints and the founder of that particular sacred place.

---

33 Translation modified from Thunø 2015, 24 and 211.

Early Christian multimedia spectacularity: Methodological framing

Having presented an overview of selected text–image interactions in the late antique churches of Rome, we would like to address the question of how these multimedia 'spectacles' can be comprehensively understood using the theoretical frameworks of modern disciplines.

Images in context

It is vital to bear in mind that the respective visual schemes functioned more or less independently, reacting to the needs of contemporary local Christian communities. In general, they were, nevertheless, aimed at two very different types of audiences: the *plebs Romana,* by then becoming – in the rhetoric of Sixtus III – the *plebs Dei*[34], and the cultured aristocracy educated according to classical standards. For the former group, the images had to represent clearly recognizable and understandable concepts. The image in Santa Pudenziana was, for example, first of all to be perceived as a manifestation of the authority of the Christian God. The very face of Christ, however, at the same time probably evoked the presence of the 'pagan' (Graeco-Egyptian) god Serapis. This iconographic choice should perhaps be understood in the context of the 'conversion' of the cult of Serapis of Alexandria into a church in the early years of the fifth century when this ancient deity came to prophesy the victory of Christ[35].

The composition of the apse in Santi Cosma e Damiano was, on the other hand, a splendid example of how devotional innovations could be 'explained' and 'integrated' in Rome through the use of spectacular images. As already mentioned, the relics of the two martyr physicians were brought to Rome from the East at the end of the fifth century. Before their transfer to the church on the forum, they had been stored in a chapel at Santa Maria Maggiore[36]. The visual strategy aiming to integrate the 'newcomers' into the life of the city is brilliant: the crux of the composition is a very precise reference to what was most likely one of the official images of the Church of Rome, the visual scheme at the original apse of Old Saint Peter's made at the end

---

34 Regarding this transformation, see, e.g., the still seminal text by Brown 1982, 123–145.

35 Foletti 2017a, 11–29; Foletti – Okáčová 2022, 36–38.

36 Cf. note 22.

of the fourth century, under Pope Damasus I[37]. This assumption is indirectly confirmed by epigraphic evidence, namely parallels between the use of a distinct and standardized (Philocalian) script commissioned by Damasus I for the so-called *Epigrammata Damasiana* and the employment of a similarly unified epigraphic format in early Christian apsidal decorations (see further below). In the apse of Old Saint Peter's, Christ was depicted standing amidst the apostle princes, surrounded by splendid palm trees with a phoenix, a symbol of immortality, seated on one of them[38]. To this 'traditional' core, Felix IV had the two 'new' saints added, presented by Peter and Paul to Christ (but actually to the *plebs Dei*) at the center. The iconography thus served as a practical tool to promote and legalize a new cult in Rome, a city that had always been very conservative[39]. A traditional visual scheme was reemployed with variation to indicate that the new had a clear bearing on the old. It is therefore not surprising that at San Venanzio, about a century later, exactly the same strategy was adopted: the Dalmatian saints are depicted around the bust of Christ surrounded by angels, which must have been understood as a clear reference to the apsidal image of St John Lateran.

Other images were, nevertheless, much less straightforward and required reasonable knowledge of the Christian doctrine. For instance, the visual composition on the triumphal arch of Santa Maria Maggiore is to be interpreted as sophisticated theological argumentation about the divine nature of Christ[40]. Similarly, a comprehensive understanding of the mosaic in Sant'Agnese required thorough knowledge of the contemplative techniques of Christian prayer, contemporary episcopal preaching practices in Rome, and the specific readings of the stational liturgy in the city[41]. In these cases, images became instruments of 'esoteric' communication and thus implicitly of social stratification. It is similar for the inscriptions accompanying the respective images; for illiterates, they were simply integral parts of the images and signs of authority, with their visual appeal consisting in their spatial and material composition of golden letters on a dark blue background.

37 Regarding the original decoration of Old Saint Peter's, see Buddensieg 1959, 157–185; Romana Moretti 2006, 87–90; Foletti – Quadri 2013a, 475–492; and Christe 2020, 235–245.
38 Regarding the standing Christ composition, see, e.g., Spieser 2004; Foletti – Quadri 2013b, 12–33; and Foletti – Meinecke 2021, 116–135.
39 See, e.g., Andaloro – Romano 2000, 7–9.
40 Wilpert 1931, 197–213; Bisconti 2000, 12–23; Menna 2006, 306–346; Foletti 2017c, 41–62.
41 Foletti – Lešák 2023, 75–96.

For those who could read, however, another layer of meaning – ontologically and hermeneutically linked to the surrounding imagery – opened up.

Textual and visual networks

To understand the visual-textual dialectics of the apsidal compositions, it seems further crucial to examine the extant epigraphic material as part of complex textual networks. Of particular relevance in this context is the notion of transtextuality introduced by Gérard Genette in his 1982 book *Palimpsests*[42]. This overarching concept, proposed as an alternative to the concept of intertextuality, as first introduced by Julia Kristeva and Mikhail Bakhtin in the 1960s[43], subsumes all possible types of relationships among texts. For the present inquiry, we shall consider mainly three of them, namely the permeable categories of paratextuality, metatextuality, and, of course, intertextuality.

The epigraphs under examination obviously perform the function of paratexts in that they are placed – as a sort of visual frame – 'next to' (either above or below) the respective images. At the same time, they have a clear metatextual significance – they comment in an ekphrastic way on the surrounding visual imagery; see, for example, the incipit in Santi Cosma e Damiano – *aula dei claris radiat speciosa metallis* (ILCV 1784) – or a strikingly similar incipit in Sant'Agnese – *aurea concisis surgit pictura metallis* (ILCV 1769A)[44]. These monumental inscriptions thus require being read metatextually – or rather metavisually. They obviously refer to the shining mosaic decorations of the apses, but – given the fact that they are themselves composed of glittering golden letters on a dark blue background – they also have a self-referential function, which attributes to them some sort of tautological significance; the shining image is thus both advertised and materialized with the shining golden script (so what you read in the text is what the script is actually doing)[45]. In this sense, the materiality of the script becomes meaningful in its own right and the inscriptions should be read as 'speaking images', in other

---

42 For an English translation, see Genette 1997, esp. 1–5.

43 For a critical overview of this development, see, e.g., Plett 1991, 3–29.

44 For further examples, including the typical (ekphrastic) register employed, see below pp. 198 f.

45 Regarding self-referentiality, tautology, and meta-discursivity as features linking late antique literary production, namely the visual poetry of Optatian (4th cent.), and (post)modern conceptual forms of art, see Hernández Lobato 2017, 463–472.

words pieces of 'exposed writing'[46]. The emphasis on the material aspect of the script, in turn, de-automatizes its referential function and highlights the mediating role of language, namely its function to communicate extra-linguistic reality. These observations can thus be quite easily linked to structuralist and post-structuralist concerns with the working principles of language and the generation of meaning, which is a line of interpretation that has already been adopted for late antique literary discourse with a particular focus on experimental forms of writing[47].

Since, as already mentioned, texts in general do not exist in a vacuum but rather within textual networks, we shall also look at the potential of the epigraphs to refer to other texts, in other words at intertextual relationships. First of all, it should be noted that, based on iconological analysis and epigraphic evidence, the corpus of early Christian church mosaics produced in Rome between the sixth and ninth centuries has been identified by Erik Thunø as a distinct group with common characteristic features[48]. However questionable this perspective is – mainly due to a large number of idiosyncratic features within the group –, the apsidal inscription in Santi Cosma e Damiano from the sixth century indeed resembles several of the later mosaic epigraphs, especially that in Sant'Agnese dating to the seventh century and those in the three churches commissioned by Pope Paschal I in the ninth century, namely Santa Prassede, Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, and Santa Maria in Domnica[49]. Comparing the respective inscriptions, we reveal significant semantic and even lexical parallels; these are marked with underlining and

---

46 This concept goes back to the twentieth-century scholar Armando Petrucci, who examined various forms of public writing – in particular inscriptions – as not only texts but also material artefacts with significant social resonances; see esp. Petrucci 1993 and 1995.

47 Regarding the interface between postmodern theory and late antique literature, see esp. Hernández Lobato 2018, 51–70; cf. the partial insights on (post)structuralist readings of the late antique visual poetry of Optatian in Okáčová 2006, 44–47; Okáčová 2007, 64–66; and Okáčová 2023, esp. 450 and 463.

48 Thunø 2015.

49 The major weakness in Thunø's reasoning lies in the fact that he does not sufficiently take into account that, as already mentioned, the apsidal composition in Santi Cosma e Damiano is in all likelihood an echo of an earlier visual scheme of great authority, namely that of Old Saint Peter's. Unfortunately, the text that originally accompanied the Vatican image has not survived, but precisely because of a considerable diffusion of common *topoi* including places such as Sant'Agnese, where there are absolutely no visual parallels with the apsidal image in the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano commissioned by Felix IV, we are inclined to assume that the roots of the Roman tradition of apsidal epigraphs go

bold, respectively, and appear especially in the opening (and so particularly semantically charged) lines:

> **aula** dei claris radiat speciosa **metallis**,
> in qua **plus** fidei lux pretiosa micat
> (Santi Cosma e Damiano; Pope Felix IV: 526–530, ILCV 1784, 1f.; lower rim of the apse);

> uirginis **aula micat uariis decorata metallis**,
> sed **plus** namque nitet meritis fulgentior amplis
> (Saint'Agnese fuori le mura; Pope Honorius I: 625–638, ILCV 1769, 1f.; now lost inscription, upper rim of the apse);

> aurea concisis surgit pictura **metallis**
> et conplexa simul clauditur ipsa dies
> (Saint'Agnese fuori le mura; Pope Honorius I: 625–638, ILCV 1769A, 1f.; lower rim of the apse);

> **emicat aula** piae **uariis decorata metallis**
> (Santa Prassede; Pope Paschal I: 817–824, ICUR 2, 1: 353. 438, 1; lower rim of the apse);

> haec **domus** ampla **micat uariis** fabricata **metallis**
> (Santa Cecilia in Trastevere; Pope Paschal I: 817–824, ICUR 2, 1: 151. 156. 444, 1; lower rim of the apse);

> ista **domus** pridem fuerat confracta ruinis
> nunc rutilat iugiter **uariis decorata metallis**
> (Santa Maria in Domnica; Pope Paschal I: 817–824, de Rossi 1899, pl. 23, 1–2; lower rim of the apse).

Depending on the cognitive perspective adopted, these parallels can be interpreted simply and neutrally as a cluster of *topoi* or as intertextual clues, which would, of course, prioritize the model artefact, or as 'conceptual *spolia*'[50],

---

back to Old Saint Peter's in the late fourth century. For further epigraphic evidence in favour of this hypothesis, see pp. 195 and 202. Cf. also note 2.

50 This concept was first introduced by Serena Romano in Andaloro – Romano 2000, esp. 115.

which would again bestow greater significance on the model artefact and at the same time create negative connotations for its 'imitations'[51].

In any case, what stands out as a constant and both textually and visually significant motif is the golden splendour and shining glory of the apsidal images *(claris radiat metallis, lux pretiosa micat, micat/emicat/rutilat uariis decorata/fabricata metallis)*[52]. In the Christian context, this conceptual light metaphor has, of course, far-reaching spiritual and theological significance. The omnipresent notions of light – advertised by both the actual wording of the epigraphs and the technique used (a combination of golden and dark blue *tesserae*) – served as (material) manifestations of divine presence and revelation, eternity, divine knowledge and wisdom, the grace of God, and, not least, divine order. These notions are then intrinsically and conceptually contrasted with darkness, chaos[53], ignorance, sin, evil, and despair. In other words, the symbolism of light as a thoroughly positive and precious quality is here both communicated and materialized through the splendour, brilliance, and preciousness of the medium of communication itself, whether that is a shining mosaic image or a monumental golden inscription. In cognitive terms, it is, of course, essential that this representation of divine and iconic presence is physically located above the viewer and high in the church space[54], which brings us back to the spiritual axis running from the apse vault to the altar and finally below to the tombs of the martyrs.

---

51 Cf. Thunø 2015, 4 f. *et passim,* who suggested viewing the corpus of early Christian mosaics of Rome from the sixth to ninth centuries as a sort of synchronically existing continuum, which corresponds to his reading of the respective visual concepts as emphasizing simultaneous continuity between the heavenly and the terrestrial Church.

52 While Thunø 2015, 15, 18, 50, and 133, seemed to have been convinced that the noun *metallum* refers directly to the mosaic and pointed at the inaccuracy of this denomination (Thunø 2011, esp. 286), we believe that the noun is used metonymically to account for the shining quality of the vitreous mosaics deriving from metal- or mineral-like substances obtained from the earth (whether gold, silver, or cobalt) and used for coloring individual mosaic *tesserae.*

53 Cf., e.g., the inscription in Sant'Agnese (ILCV 1769A, 7 f.): *qui potuit noctis uel lucis reddere finem, / martyrum e bustis hinc reppulit ille chaos;* and the one in the Basilica of San Lorenzo fuori le mura (Pope Pelagius II: 579–590, ILCV 1770, 1–6): *demouit dominus tenebras ut luce creata, / his quondam latebris sic modo fulgor inest. / angustos aditus uenerabile corpus habebat / huc, ubi nunc populum largior aula capit. / eruta planities patuit sub monte reciso / estque remota graui mole ruina minax.*

54 Cf. Stockwell 2020, 79, and 124 and 126 (in the context of conceptual metaphors).

The intertextual links revealed so far, which establish a sort of conceptual network of divine spaces with similar (contemplative and performative) functions, are seemingly in an epistemological clash with the recognizable classical flavour of several of the respective epigraphs. Perhaps the most distinct overtones of classical poetry can be identified in the surviving apsidal inscription in Sant'Agnese (ILCV 1769A). Almost every line can ring a bell in the minds of connoisseurs of classical poetry, meaning those who went through rhetorical training in contemporary grammar schools, where the best classical authors were still widely used (again, the semantic and lexical parallels are indicated by underlining and bold, respectively):

> **aurea** concisis **surgit** pictura metallis
> et conplexa simul clauditur ipsa **dies**.
> fontibus e niueis credas, **Aurora**, subire
> <u>correptas nubes roribus arua rigans</u>.

> Cf. ***aurea*** *prima sata est aetas, quae uindice nullo* (Ov. met. 1, 89);
> *desinet ac toto* ***surget*** *gens* ***aurea*** *mundo* (Verg. ecl. 4, 9);
> *postera iamque* ***dies*** *primo* ***surgebat*** *Eoo*
> <u>*umentemque*</u> ***Aurora*** *polo* <u>*dimouerat umbram*</u> (Verg. Aen. 3, 588 f.).

> uel qualem inter **sidera** lucem proferet irim
> purpureusque pauo ipse colore nitens.
> qui potuit noctis uel lucis reddere finem,
> martyrum e bustis hinc <u>reppulit</u> ille **chaos**.

> Cf. *prima fuit rerum confusa sine ordine moles,*
> *unaque erat facies* ***sidera****, terra, fretum;*
> *mox caelum inpositum terris, humus aequore cinctast,*
> *inque suas partes* <u>*cessit*</u> *inane* ***chaos*** (Ov. ars 2, 467–470).

> sursum uersa nutu quod cunctis <u>cernitur</u> uno,
> praesul Honorius haec uota dicata dedit.
> uestibus et factis **signantur** illius **ora**.
> lucet et aspectu lucida corda gerens.

> Cf. <u>*adgnoscunt*</u> *atque* ***ora*** *sono discordia* ***signant*** (Verg. Aen. 2, 423);
> ***ora*** *puer prima* ***signans*** *intonsa iuuenta* (Verg. Aen. 9, 181).

The listed passages in Virgil's and Ovid's mythological, bucolic, heroic, and even love poetry include, among others, a description of the Golden Age in both authors (met. 1, 89 and ecl. 4, 9), the creation of the world as a 'stage' for the cultivation of love (ars 2, 467–470), the siege of Troy (Aen. 2, 423), and a description of the youthful beauty of Euryalus (Aen. 9, 181), one of the Trojan warriors who is eventually caught by the Greeks and dies at a young age. Even though these images are linked to a significantly different cultural prism, they – we argue – both amplify, reinforce, and even, in a sense, authorize the Christian imagery, typically through a more or less convincing analogy (cf. esp. the allusions to the Golden Age or a youthful death evoking the fate of Saint Agnes). The reason these ornamental or 'jeweled' allusions[55] sometimes feel bewildering or even inappropriate in a Christian context to modern scholars[56] seems to derive from their cognitive perspective developed through training based on binary thinking and contrastive dichotomies[57]. However, since "knowledge structures are dynamic and experientially developing"[58], it can well be argued that the presence of 'pagan' elements in early Christian churches may have been felt as something absolutely natural and even reassuring (pointing to the continuity of cultural development rather than the contrary) for contemporary recipients. The classical simply formed an organic part of their cognitive (syncretic) background encompassing both the 'pagan' cultural heritage of the past and contemporary Christian doctrine. In other words, given the markedly conservative cultural traditions of late antique Rome, the references to classical

---

55 While being somewhat reluctant to adopt the slightly self-contradictory term "nonreferential allusion", as proposed by Pelttari 2014, esp. 131–137, to characterize late antique allusions as opposed to those present in classical Latin poetry, we shall acknowledge that the mosaic-like allusions to classical poetry in the apsidal inscription in Saint'Agnese do not seem to directly engage with the respective hypotexts and that the meaning of the hypertext is thus not dependent upon confrontation of the original and the new semantic contexts. Regarding the Virgilian and Ovidian flavor of the epigraph, see also Trout 2019, 15; Trout 2020, 158–159; and Trout 2021, 164.

56 See esp. Trout 2019, 14–17.

57 The seeds of this development can probably be found already in the mind–body dualism, most famously defended by René Descartes in the first half of the seventeenth century. A similarly dualistic line of thought has been endorsed and promoted by structuralism, flourishing in the first half of the twentieth century, which saw binary opposition as a fundamental working principle of all language and thought.

58 Stockwell 2020, 106; cf. 173 (in the context of the cognitive concept of textworlds).

poetry in the respective inscriptions can be interpreted first and foremost as evidence of the traditional dimension of the decorative project. Indeed, as early as the fourth century, there are multiple examples of artefacts where elements that would appear as opposites in post-Cartesian rhetoric coexist peacefully, constituting one of the key features of the syncretic cultural identity of contemporary Rome. Looking within contemporary literature, we should definitely take into account such phenomena as the entire tradition of Christological readings of Virgil's *Eclogue* 4 and the late antique production (4th–6th cent.) of patchwork texts known as centos, fashioned out of quotes taken from Homer or Virgil and relating biblical stories from the Old and New Testaments.

Actually, it is not only the wording but also the standardized epigraphic form of the inscriptions that bears classical traits. The epigraphic material appears to be reminiscent of what has become known as Philocalian script, named after Furius Dionysius Filocalus, a Roman scribe and the official stone engraver of Pope Damasus I (366–384) who created a distinct script for the so-called *Epigrammata Damasiana,* inscriptions on the square marble tablets placed at the tombs of early Christian martyrs in suburban cemeteries (fig. 8) and containing – similarly as the monumental inscriptions in the apses of early Christian churches in Rome – allusions to both Virgil and Ovid[59]. And this Philocalian script, a sort of trademark of Damasus, while extensively copied by contemporary and later engravers, was itself reminiscent of classical imperial inscriptions such as those on the triumphal arches of Rome (fig. 9)[60].

Finally, the visual schemes are, as already mentioned, also full of references to the visual tradition of the Urbs. An eloquent example is the aforementioned mosaic in Santa Pudenziana, which combines features of the imperial, philosophical, and divine representation models[61]. In Santa Maria Maggiore, the very structure of the apsidal arch recalls the triumphal arches of the fourth century, while the empty throne dominating the composition is a visual echo of a very ancient tradition, known throughout the Mediterranean, which in classical Rome adorned no less significant a monument than the pediment of the Temple of Magna Mater[62]. The angels in Santa Maria Maggiore are reminiscent of ancient Nike and the standing Christ in Santi

---

59 Regarding Damasus' epigraphic poetry, see most recently Trout 2015.
60 See Thunø 2015, esp. 172–181; cf. Trout 2015, 47–52.
61 Grabar 1936; Mathews 1993; Foletti 2017a, 11–29.
62 Bloch 1951, 14; EAA Suppl. 1 (1994) 320 f. s. v. Ara Pietatis Augustae (E. La Rocca); Foletti 2017c, 41–62.

Fig. 8: Damasian epigram on Saint Agnes, replaced by Pope Honorius I (625–638) from her tomb in the catacomb on the Via Nomentana to the newly built church *ad corpus,* Rome, 366–384
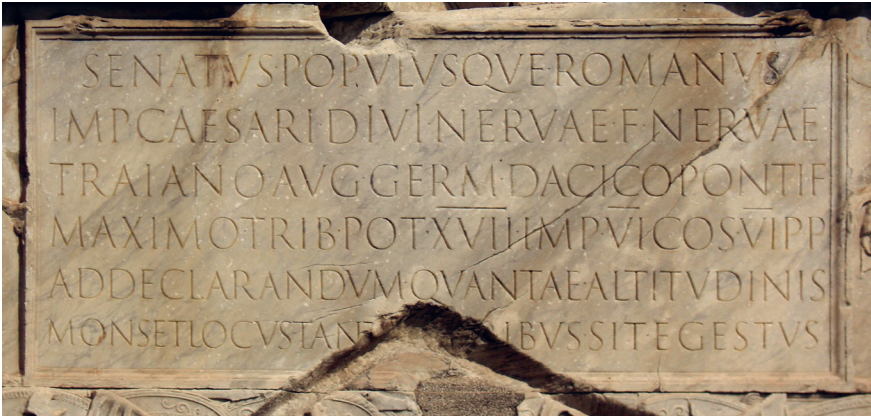Broutille, CCo, via Wikimedia Commons

Fig. 9: Trajan's column, base with inscription, Rome, 113
Photo by Matthias Grawehr

Cosma e Damiano seems to be a 'copy' of the statuettes of the god Serapis[63]. Moreover, Saint Agnes in the seventh-century church dedicated to her memory and the Virgin Mary from the fifth-century Santa Maria Maggiore are dressed in the same way – as Roman patricians from earlier centuries[64]. In terms of visual rhetoric, no doubt thus remains that the respective images represent the Christian tradition while simultaneously bearing well-known visual elements of pre-Constantine Rome.

---

63 L'Orange 1982, 152–156; Foletti – Meinecke 2021, 116–135.
64 Kondakov 2014, 141–144; Lidova 2015, 60–81.

Visual narrativity

Yet another modern methodological tool that may bring more comprehensive understanding of the visual schemes of late antique churches in Rome is narrative theory. While pictorial or visual narrativity is an established concept, the narrative potential of pictures, especially of single images, is, of course, considerably limited[65]. The narrativity of the apsidal visual schemes relies especially on intermedial references, specifically on the capacity of the mosaic images to refer mainly to the Holy Scripture and/or the accounts of individual martyrs' stories. What helps the beholder to 'read' the images are both the accompanying inscriptions, which frequently identify individual characters involved and their roles/social status, and the textual clues included in the images themselves, such as the reference to a specific part of the Book of Genesis in Santa Pudenziana. In addition, the visual schemes make extensive use of various 'symbols' that can express causal relationships and also notions of temporal sequence. A pregnant example can be seen in the apsidal mosaic in Sant'Agnese. Not only is the titular saint explicitly (epigraphically) identified in the mosaic but the entire story of her martyrdom is elliptically recounted through images of a sword and fire, symbols of her suffering, around her feet and the heavenly sign above her head at the apex of the vault. This vertical axis with Saint Agnes at the center provides a general narrative frame for the entire scene; her death for her Christian faith makes her an intercessor or intermediary between heaven and earth.

Performative context

In terms of the pragmatic function of the artefacts under consideration, the concept of performativity seems to provide an adequate methodological framework. For our purpose, this interdisciplinary concept, introduced around the 1960s, will be used in its broader (i.e. not strictly theatrical) sense as an approach to understand cultural dynamics and social interactions[66]. It

---

65 See, e.g., Wolf 2008, 431–435. Richer material for a narratological analysis is, for obvious reasons, provided by series of images, such as those constituting monumental narrative cycles decorating the naves of early Christian churches and containing scenes from the Old and New Testaments, frequently accompanied by 'explanatory' epigraphs in verse. These text–image interactions are beyond the scope of the present paper, but they can well be examined along the methodological lines proposed here.

66 Cf., e.g., Bell 1998, 205–224.

can thus help us to understand how the visual schemes were conceived as performative acts, meaning acts of communication with their recipients. We have already mentioned the multimedia spectacularity of the apsidal images, which were clearly designed to capture viewers' attention and engage them in contemplating the composition as a whole[67]. Apart from that, the entire setting is, of course, intrinsically linked to liturgical performances of different kinds (see further below). Not least, performative traits can also be found in the monumental inscriptions themselves. They not only advertise their shining material presence and (self-)referential function but occasionally also invite the viewer to reflect on these: see, for example, the appeal to recipients' cognitive capacities in Sant'Agnese with a potential perlocutionary effect[68]: *fontibus e niueis credas, Aurora, subire* and *sursum uersa nutu quod cunctis cernitur uno* (ILCV 1769A, 3, 9); in addition, the epigraph in San Venanzio has a clear reference to devotional performative practices: *quo quisquis gradiens et X̄ρm pronus adorans / effusasque preces mittat ad aethra sua<s>* (ILCV 1786A, 5–6). The epigraphic corpus also includes other expressions that thematize the performative purpose of the respective visual schemes and/or an appeal to viewers' involvement, typically with the use of dynamic and sensory vocabulary signifying the stunning visual effects of the shining mosaics (for example the action verb *surgit* and verbal forms such as *radiat, (e)micat,* and *rutilat*). In this sense, viewers are confronted with some form of "self-referential" or "decorative performativity"[69], which amounts to a multimedia – and within liturgical practices even multi-sensory – spectacle. In short, what is advertised is simultaneously being done by the script, which gives rise to a shining (textual) image.

It is indeed the performative perspective that has over the past three decades gained ground for the study of the space and images of (not only) the late antique churches of Rome[70]. The performative potential of the respec-

---

67 In this respect, the performative approach obviously overlaps with the reception aesthetics that originated in the late 1960s with the work of Hans-Robert Jauss and shifted attention to the reader as the focal point of literary criticism.

68 In speech act theory, as introduced by J. L. Austin in his famous *How to Do Things with Words* (1955), a perlocutionary act refers to the effect of an utterance on the listener.

69 Sládek 2010, esp. 53 f.

70 The performative dimension of sacred spaces in Rome has been widely examined especially after the seminal research of de Blaauw 1994, who authored numerous studies on the topic; see, e.g., de Blaauw 2001; de Blaauw 2011, 30–43; and de Blaauw 2020, 255–277. An excellent synthesis of this research line is provided, e.g., by Bock et al. 2000; Piva 2012; and Scirocco – de Blaauw 2023. Not least, de

tive visual schemes that has thus been revealed is considerable. In Santa Pudenziana, for example, liturgical services were probably conceived so as to legitimize episcopal authority. The bishop presented himself as an earthly reflection of the representation of Christ in the apse; seated together with his presbyters in the apse, he appeared as a 'performative image' of Christ[71]. In Santa Maria Maggiore, it was the empty throne of God, depicted on the apsidal arch, that in all probability referred to the performative actions that took place at the papal throne located directly below when the bishop was absent[72]. In fact, we know from contemporary sources, although from outside of Rome, that in the absence of the bishop, Christological attributes, such as a book of Scripture or the cross, were placed on his throne[73]. With these attributes, the throne became a 'performative installation' that made Christ himself present at the liturgical ceremony. At the same time, however, the apsidal image conferred Christological dignity on the one who sat upon the earthly throne, namely the bishop of Rome. In Santi Cosma e Damiano, the apsidal visual scheme seems to react directly to the liturgical chants – the apocalyptic vision depicted on the arch represents the moment when the Twenty-Four Elders together with the four living creatures intone the *Sanctus,* a liturgical chant present in the tradition of Rome since the end of the fifth century[74]. Moreover, from the *Ordines Romani* (1, 46), we know that during the pontifical liturgy the bishop of Rome was preceded by seven deacons carrying an equal number of candelabra that were placed on either side of the altar. The ritual (performative) situation thus faithfully mirrored what is described in the Book of the Apocalypse and represented on the apsidal arch, namely seven candlesticks next to the throne of the Lord. The lamb on the throne – a throne without a backrest and thus very similar to a splendid altar – could then be understood as an echo of the Eucharistic liturgy itself. The presence of angels beside the throne was most probably meant to recall the bishop's Eucharistic prayer inviting the angels of heaven to descend to earth to collect the offerings on the altar and bring them to the eternal altar

---

Blaauw 2017, 15–28, offers a substantial synthetic reflection on the urban nature of the Roman liturgy.

71 Regarding the concept of performative images, see, e.g., Pentcheva 2006, 631–655; regarding humans becoming performative images themselves, see, e.g., Ivanovici 2019, 128–147.

72 Foletti 2017c, 41–62; Foletti 2021b, 13–32.

73 See, e.g., Tchalenko 1990; and Janeras 2005, 117–137.

74 Nilgen 2000, 75–89; Foletti 2017b, 161–179.

of God[75]. Christ, depicted as if dynamically descending from the apse, may then have seemed to respond to an invocation from the crowd of believers gathered in the church. The latter invited him to join them for the Eucharistic act and, in the image, Christ responded by descending among his *plebs*. Finally, in Sant'Agnese, the sacred space with its decorations in marble and other precious materials and the apsidal image seem to respond to the readings sung *in situ* during the pontifical liturgy in the church[76]: the chanted text of the gospels and the homilies allowed the spectators to clearly interpret the transcendental features of the saint while simultaneously placing the shining image in a performative context. In sum, the images displayed in the late antique churches of Rome seem to have been born in strong synergy with respective liturgical rites and their significant performative potential was thus probably recognized by all those involved.

Conclusion: Epistemological considerations

Having looked at the surviving visual schemes from a variety of complementary perspectives, we would like to take a closer look at the epistemological framework within which these artefacts were originally created and perceived. While the respective visual compositions, 'activated' by regular liturgical performances, appear clearly rooted in earlier Roman traditions, they simultaneously exhibit significant originality. The medium of wall mosaic existed in previous centuries, but it had never had such prominence in sacred spaces. The choice of this particular medium is perfectly understandable in

---

75 Cf. *supplices te rogamus, omnipotens deus,* **iube haec perferri per manus angeli tui in sublime altare tuum in conspectu diuine maiestatis tuae,** *ut quotquot ex hac altaris participatione sacrosanctum filii tui corpus et sanguinem sumpseremus, omni benedictione caelesti et gratia repleamur. per Christum dominum nostrum* (quoted according to Chavasse 1997, XVII, 1252, 34; emphasis added).

76 Of special interest in this regard are two homilies pronounced in Sant'Agnese by Gregory the Great, thanks to which we know that in 591, on January 21 and 28, two feasts celebrating the martyrdom and earthly birth of Saint Agnes, respectively, took place in the church. The pope commented on the parables of the hidden treasure, the pearl, and the net from the Gospel of Matthew (13, 44–52) and the parable of the ten virgins from the same gospel (25, 1–13): see Morin 1911, 300; and Deshusses 1971, 121–123. 615 f. Foletti – Lešák 2023, 75–96, have shown how these two readings, which must have been linked to the site even in the years of Honorius I, perfectly reflect both the situation of the basilica buried like treasure in the surrounding landscape and the idea of Agnes white and shining like a pearl.

terms of confessional practices; images as objects of idolatry were strictly forbidden in the Old Testament and partly in the New Testament (Ex 20, 4–6; Apg 17, 16–34)[77]. Gradually, however, the prohibition became less strict, being limited mainly to three-dimensional images, which best embodied the Graeco-Roman idolatry from which Christians wanted to distinguish themselves[78]. Consequently, two-dimensional mosaic images gradually dominated early Christian spaces, and this development was not by chance: mosaics were, in fact, a medium capable of reflecting light in an absolutely unique way; each *tessera* was oriented slightly differently and this created the illusion of an *imago* animated by an inner light[79]. Given all the light rhetoric in Christian sacred texts – Christ defines himself as the "light of the world" (Jo. 8, 12) –, such a choice seems perfectly logical[80]. Moreover, the vitreous mosaic allowed, when properly illuminated, for a revolutionary experience; the two physical dimensions of an image were literally 'augmented' by light. Using current (and thus anachronistic but still relevant) terminology, the illuminated mosaic image amounted to true 'augmented reality'[81].

The use of two-dimensional images had, however, yet another advantage. Such images allowed the conceptor to 'control' the viewer's point of view. Whereas a statue of Jupiter could easily be seen from all possible angles, a two-dimensional image, for obvious reasons much less mimetic than a three-dimensional statue, allowed only one point of view, the one chosen by its conceptor. This aspect likely also had an impact in terms of bestowing an even more authoritative status on 'official' images. Thus, while at first dictated by theological issues, the mass use of two-dimensional shining devotional images, typically produced in mosaic, meant a real media revolution[82].

Still, as we have demonstrated, the late antique visual arts well show that the opposing notions of continuity and rupture are deficient concepts for describing the contemporary cultural climate, in which, in a way, everything changed but still remained the same. The interweaving of tradition and innovation obviously led to a profound cultural transformation, but, at the same time, the authoritative identity of Rome was in no way undermined. In other words, even though Christianity penetrated all spheres of cultural production

---

77 Andaloro 2000, 31–67; Andaloro 2006a, 37–52.

78 An excellent synthesis of this development is provided by Bordino 2020, 22–87.

79 Kessler 2004, 19–42; Bolgia 2013, 217–228; Foletti – Frantová 2021.

80 The question of the role of light in the late antique world has been much debated in recent years, not least in relation to the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite; see esp. Dell'Acqua – Mainoldi 2020.

81 Bolgia 2013, 217–228; Foletti – Frantová 2021.

82 Foletti – Frantová 2021.

with a rapid transformative power, the outcome was very far from a complete rupture with past cultural tradition. On the contrary, various aspects of Christian art, whether formal and technical, rhetorical, or stylistic features, reveal syncretic and organic continuity with classical tradition[83].

The general movement away from the mimetic towards more conceptual forms of art is in line with the tendencies underway in contemporary literature, which, in general, became more self-referential (metatextual) and ambiguous than before. Across all this artistic production, we can feel a heightened awareness of the materiality of the medium of communication (be it a visual language or text) and a general appeal to the recipients to contemplate rather than merely consume the artefacts, frequently conceived as multi-layered "open works"[84]. It did, of course, very much depend on who was perceiving the artefact because this fact determined which knowledge structures came into play. We should therefore, of course, not forget that the majority of contemporary visitors to early Christian churches were illiterate. For these people but also in general, the images were much more readily understandable and engaging than the accompanying inscriptions, which were, in turn, probably perceived as a more authoritative, perhaps even more valuable, means of communication[85]. On a basic level, it was the very presence of a shining script – as a visual artefact and organic part of the entire shining visual scheme – that mattered and that served as a material manifestation of Christ as the Word made flesh and the light shining in the darkness, as we read in John (1, 1–14). The late antique apsidal visual schemes thus constitute unique material for understanding the ways in which text and image functioned as a symbiotic means of 'activating' pre-modern spectators' spiritual contemplation. For contemporary believers, these multimedia 'spectacles' facilitated, especially during various liturgical services, an encounter with the divine, enhancing both collective (liturgical) and individual contemplative experiences.

---

83 An incredible amount of ink has been spent on the question of the transition between the 'ancient' and the 'medieval' worlds. Recently, the authors of this paper have attempted to address the issue in an interdisciplinary way, including a decent summary of previous scholarship on the issue: Foletti – Okáčová – Palladino 2022.

84 This concept was introduced by Umberto Eco in his 1962 book *Opera aperta;* for its application to late antique poetry, see esp. Pelttari 2014.

85 Cf. Thunø 2015, 186 f.

Bibliography

Andaloro 2000: M. Andaloro, Dal ritratto all'icona, in: M. Andaloro – S. Romano, Arte e iconografia a Roma, da Costantino a Cola di Rienzo (Milan 2000) 31–67

Andaloro 2006a: M. Andaloro, Dalla statua all'immagine dipinta, in: M. Andaloro, L'orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini, 312–468 (Milan 2006) 37–52

Andaloro 2006b: M. Andaloro, Il mosaico di Santa Pudenziana, in: M. Andaloro, L'orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini, 312–468 (Milan 2006) 114–124

Andaloro – Romano 2000: M. Andaloro – S. Romano, L'immagine nell'abside, in: M. Andaloro – S. Romano, Arte e iconografia a Roma, da Costantino a Cola di Rienzo (Milan 2000) 93–132

Angelleli 2010: C. Angelleli, La basilica titolare di S. Pudenziana. Nuove ricerche (Vatican City 2010)

Austin 1962: J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words. The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955 (Cambridge, MA 1962)

Ballardini 2018: A. Ballardini, *Habeas corpus.* Agnese nella basilica di via Nomentana, in: S. Pedone – A. Paribeni (eds.), Di Bisanzio dirai ciò che è passato, ciò che passa e che sarà, vol. 1 (Rome 2018) 253–279

Bell 1998: C. Bell, Performance, in: M. C. Taylor (ed.), Critical Terms for Religious Studies (Chicago – London 1998) 205–224

Bisconti 2000: F. Bisconti, Il programma decorativo di S. Maria Maggiore. L'incontro delle economie testamentarie, l'apparato apocalittico, l'ispirazione apocrifa, in: A. Nestori – F. Bisconti (eds.), I mosaici paleocristiani di Santa Maria Maggiore negli acquarelli della collezione Wilpert (Vatican City 2000) 12–23

Bloch 1951: R. Bloch, L'ara pietatis Augustae, in: M. Cagiano de Azevedo, Le Antichità di Villa Medici (Rome 1951) 9–23

Bock et al. 2000: N. Bock – S. de Blaauw – C. L. Frommel – H. Kessler (eds.), Kunst und Liturgie im Mittelalter (Munich 2000)

Bolgia 2013: C. Bolgia, New Light on the "Bright Ages". Experiments with Mosaics and Light in Medieval Rome, in: C. Entwistle – L. James (eds.), New Light on Old Glass. Recent Research on Byzantine Mosaics and Glass (London 2013) 217–228

Bordino 2020: C. Bordino, Počátky křesťanského umění [The Origins of Christian Art], in: C. Bordino (ed.), Teorie obrazu v raném křesťanství? Výběr z textů pozdně antických myslitelů s komentářem (Brno 2020) 22–87

Braconi 2013: M. Braconi, Enrico Caetani e il restauro della basilica di
S. Pudenziana a Roma. Fatti e misfatti di un cantiere del tardo Cinque-
cento, RIA 36, 2013, 61–99

Braconi 2016: M. Braconi, Il mosaico del catino absidale di S. Pudenziana. La
storia, i restauri, le interpretazioni (Todi 2016)

Brown 1982: P. Brown, Dalla "plebs Romana" alla "plebs Dei". Aspetti della
cristianizzazione di Roma, in: P. Brown – L. Cracco Ruggini – M. Mazza
(eds.), Governanti e intellettuali. Popolo di Roma e popolo di Dio
(I–VI secolo) (Turin 1982) 123–145

Buddensieg 1959: T. Buddensieg, Le coffret d'ivoire de Pola, Saint Pierre et le
Latran, CArch 10, 1959, 157–185

Chavasse 1997: A. Chavasse, Textes liturgiques de l'Église de Rome. Le cycle
liturgique romain annuel selon le sacramentaire du Vaticanus Reginensis
316 (Paris 1997)

Christe 1970: Y. Christe, À propos du décor absidal de Saint-Jean du Latran
à Rome, CArch 20, 1970, 197–206

Christe 2020: Y. Christe, Une image peut en cacher une autre. Le décor absi-
dal du Vieux-Saint-Pierre à Rome, AntTard 28, 2020, 235–245

Ciampini 1690–1699: G. G. Ciampini, Vetera monimenta, 2 vols. (Rome
1690–1699)

CLE: F. Buecheler, Anthologia Latina II. Carmina Latina epigraphica, 3 vols.
(Stuttgart 1982)

Davis-Weyer 1999: C. Davis-Weyer, "Discendete Loth a Sodomis". A Ticoni-
an Reading of the Mosaic on the Arch of Ss. Cosma e Damiano in Rome
(526–530), in: A. Cadei (ed.), Arte d'Occidente. Studi in onore di Angiola
Maria Romanini, vol. 2 (Rome 1999) 743–753

de Blaauw 1994: S. de Blaauw, Cultus et decor. Liturgia e architettura nella
Roma tardoantica e medievale: Basilica Salvatoris, Sanctae Mariae,
Sancti Petri, 2 vols. (Vatican City 1994)

de Blaauw 2001: S. de Blaauw (ed.), Atti del colloquio internazionale Arredi
di culto e disposizioni liturgiche a Roma da Costantino a Sisto IV (Assen
2001)

de Blaauw 2011: S. de Blaauw, The Church Atrium as a Ritual Space. The
Cathedral of Tyre and St Peter's in Rome, in: F. Andrews (ed.), Ritual and
Space in the Middle Ages (Donington 2011) 30–43

de Blaauw 2017: S. de Blaauw, Urban Liturgy. The Conclusive Christian-
ization of Rome, in: I. Foletti – A. Palladino (eds.), Ritualizing the City.
Collective Performances as Aspects of Urban Construction from Con-
stantine to Mao (Rome 2017) 15–28

de Blaauw 2020: S. de Blaauw, L'assetto liturgico delle chiese romane e il culto dei martiri promosso da Pasquale I, in: S. Ammirati – A. Ballardini – G. Bordi (eds.), Grata più delle stelle. Pasquale I (817–824) e la Roma del suo tempo, vol. 2 (Rome 2020) 255–277

De Giorgio 2023: T. De Giorgio, Felice IV (526–530), Giustiniano (527–565) e il culto dei santi orientali a Roma, in: A. Bremenkamp – T. Michalsky – N. Zimmermann (eds.), Importreliquien in Rom von Damasus I. bis Paschalis I. (Wiesbaden 2023) 187–199

de Rossi 1899: G. B. de Rossi, Musaici cristiani e saggi dei pavimenti delle chiese di Roma anteriori al secolo XV, 2 vols. (Rome 1899)

Dell'Acqua – Mainoldi 2020: F. Dell'Acqua – E. S. Mainoldi (eds.), Pseudo-Dionysius and Christian Visual Culture, c. 500–900 (Cham 2020)

Deshusses 1971: J. Deshusses, Le Sacramentaire Grégorien. Ses principales formes d'aprés les plus anciens manuscrits, vol. 1 (Fribourg 1971)

Eco 1962: U. Eco, Opera aperta (Milan 1962)

Ferraù 2020: G. Ferraù, Sant'Agnese fuori le mura. Il complesso monumentale sulla via Nomentana (Castiglione di Sicilia 2020)

Foletti 2017a: I. Foletti, God from God. Christ as the Translation of Jupiter Serapis in the Mosaic of Santa Pudenziana, in: I. Foletti – M. Gianandrea, The Fifth Century in Rome. Art, Liturgy, Patronage (Rome 2017) 11–29

Foletti 2017b: I. Foletti, Maranatha. Space, Liturgy, and Image in the Basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian on the Roman Forum, in: I. Foletti – M. Gianandrea, The Fifth Century in Rome. Art, Liturgy, Patronage (Rome 2017) 161–179

Foletti 2017c: I. Foletti, *Sicut in caelo et in terra.* Observations on the *cathedra vacua* in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, in: I. Foletti – M. Gianandrea, The Fifth Century in Rome. Art, Liturgy, Patronage (Rome 2017) 41–62

Foletti 2017d: I. Foletti, The British Museum Casket with Scenes of the Passion. The Easter Liturgy and the Apse of St. John Lateran in Rome, in: I. Foletti – M. Gianandrea, The Fifth Century in Rome. Art, Liturgy, Patronage (Rome 2017) 139–159

Foletti 2021a: I. Foletti, Singing Doors. Images, Space, and Sound in the Santa Sabina Narthex, in: B. V. Pentcheva (ed.), Icons of Sound. Voice, Architecture, and Imagination in Medieval Art (New York 2021) 19–35

Foletti 2021b: I. Foletti, The Book on the Throne as Image of Orthodoxy in Late Antique Mediterranean (and Beyond), in: V. Lucherini – C. Voyer (eds.), Le livre enluminé médiéval instrument politique (Rome 2021) 13–32

Foletti 2022: I. Foletti, Quand l'histoire devient prétexte. Les cycles narratifs à Milan et Rome au Ve siècle, in: S. Brodbeck – A.-O. Poilpré – I. Rapti (eds.), Histoires chrétiennes en images. Espace, temps et structure de la narration. Byzance et Moyen Âge occidental (Paris 2022) 135–152

Foletti – Frantová 2021: I. Foletti – Z. Frantová, Mediální revoluce. Christianizace Evropy, Ravenna pátého století a jak obrazy mění dějiny [The Media Revolution. The Christianization of Europe, Fifth-Century Ravenna, and How Images Change History] (Brno 2021)

Foletti – Gianandrea 2015: I. Foletti – M. Gianandrea, Zona liminare. Il nartece di Santa Sabina a Roma, la sua porta e l'iniziazione cristiana (Rome 2015)

Foletti – Kravčíková 2019: I. Foletti – K. Kravčíková, Closed Doors as Bearers and Constructors of Images. Santa Sabina in Rome and Notre Dame du Puy, in: I. Foletti – K. Doležalová (eds.), The Notion of Liminality and the Medieval Sacred Space (Brno 2019) 24–45

Foletti – Lešák 2021: I. Foletti – M.F. Lešák, Zrození pozdně antické avantgardy ve sv. Anežce za hradbami: factor, kočovníci, liturgie a Max Dvořák [The Birth of the Late Antique Avant-Garde in Sant'Agnese fuori le mura. Factor, Nomads, Liturgy, and Max Dvořák], in: J. Galeta – O. Jakubec – R. Nokkala Miltová – T. Valeš (eds.), Od dějin umění k uměleckému dílu. Cesty k porozumění vizuální kultuře (Brno 2021) 35–46

Foletti – Lešák 2023: I. Foletti – M.F. Lešák, Hidden Treasure and Precious Pearl. Sant'Agnese fuori le mura, Its Apse Mosaic, and the Experience of Liturgy, in: E. Scirocco – S. de Blaauw (eds.), From Words to Space. Textual Sources for Reconstructing and Understanding Medieval Sacred Spaces (Rome 2023) 75–96

Foletti – Meinecke 2021: I. Foletti – K. Meinecke, From Serapis to Christ to the Caliph. Faces as Re-Appropriation of the Past, in: J. Elsner – R. Wood (eds.), Imagining the Divine. Exploring Art in Religions of Late Antiquity across Eurasia (London 2021) 116–135

Foletti – Okáčová 2022: I. Foletti – M. Okáčová, An Age of Fragmentation. Evidence from Late Antique Literary, Visual, and Material Cultures, in: I. Foletti – M. Okáčová – A. Palladino (eds.), A Radical Turn? Reappropriation, Fragmentation, and Variety in the Postclassical World (3rd–8th Centuries) (Brno 2022) 24–47

Foletti – Okáčová – Palladino 2022: I. Foletti – M. Okáčová – A. Palladino (eds.), A Radical Turn? Reappropriation, Fragmentation, and Variety in the Postclassical World (3rd–8th Centuries) (Brno 2022)

Foletti – Quadri 2013a: I. Foletti – I. Quadri, L'immagine e la sua memoria. L'abside di Sant'Ambrogio a Milano e quella di San Pietro a Roma nel Medioevo, ZKuGesch 76, 2013, 475–492

Foletti – Quadri 2013b: I. Foletti – I. Quadri, Roma, l'Oriente e il mito della *Traditio Legis,* in: I. Foletti (ed.), Byzantium, Russia and Europe (Brno 2013) 12–33

Frutaz 1976: A. P. Frutaz, Il complesso monumentale di Sant'Agnese ³(Vatican City 1976)

Genette 1997: G. Genette, Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree, Translated by C. Newman – C. Doubinsky (Lincoln 1997)

Gianandrea 2015: M. Gianandrea, Nuove strategie figurative. La decorazione pittorica tardoantica di Santa Sabina all'Aventino a Roma, in: A. C. Quintavalle (ed.), Medioevo. Natura e figura. La raffigurazione dell'uomo e della natura nell'arte medievale (Milan 2015) 139–152

Gianandrea et al. 2016: M. Gianandrea – M. Annibali – L. Bartoni, Il convento di Santa Sabina all'Aventino e il suo patrimonio storico-artistico e architettonico (Rome 2016)

Giesser 2014: V. Giesser, De la côte est de l'Adriatique à Rome ou quand l'image accompagne la relique. Réflexions autour de la mosaïque de la chapelle de San Venanzio au baptistère du Latran, Convivium 1/1, 2014, 116–125

Grabar 1936: A. Grabar, L'Empereur dans l'art byzantin. Recherches sur l'art officiel de l'Empire d'Orient (Paris 1936)

Hernández Lobato 2017: J. Hernández Lobato, Conceptual Poetry. Rethinking Optatian from Contemporary Art, in: M. Squire – J. Wienand (eds.), Morphogrammata – The Lettered Art of Optatian. Figuring Cultural Transformations in the Age of Constantine (Paderborn 2017) 461–493

Hernández Lobato 2018: J. Hernández Lobato, Late Antique Foundations of Postmodern Theory. A Critical Overview, in: S. Schottenius Cullhed – M. Malm (eds.), Reading Late Antiquity (Heidelberg 2018) 51–70

ICUR: G. B. de Rossi, Inscriptiones Christianae urbis Romae septimo saeculo antiquiores, 2 vols. (Rome 1861–1888)

ILCV: E. Diehl, Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae veteres, 4 vols. (Berlin 1961–1967)

Ivanovici 2019: V. Ivanovici, Iconic Presences. Late Roman Consuls as Imperial Images, Convivium 6/1, 2019, 128–147

Janeras 2005: S. Janeras, Le bêma syrien, icône de réalités superieures, in: C. Braga – A. Pistoia (eds.), Les enjeux spirituels et théologiques de l'espace liturgique (Rome 2005) 117–137

Kessler 2004: H. L. Kessler, Seeing Medieval Art (North York, ON – Plymouth 2004)

Kondakov 2014: N. P. Kondakov, Iconografia della Madre di Dio, vol. 1. Edizione, traduzione e aggiornamento di I. Foletti (Rome 2014)

Krautheimer 1937: R. Krautheimer, Corpus basilicarum Christianarum Romae. The Early Christian Basilicas of Rome (IV–IX Cent.), vol. 1 (Vatican City 1937)

Krautheimer 1980: R. Krautheimer, Rome. Profile of a City, 312–1308 (Princeton, NJ 1980)

Lauer 1911: P. Lauer, Le palais de Latran. Étude historique et archéologique (Paris 1911)

Leardi 2006: G. Leardi, Mosaici della controfacciata. Le due ecclesiae, l'iscrizione dedicatoria, le perdute figure di Pietro e Paolo e i simboli dei quattro evangelisti, in: M. Andaloro, L'orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini, 312–468 (Milan 2006) 293–297

Lidova 2015: M. Lidova, The Imperial Theotokos. Revealing the Concept of Early Christian Imagery in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, Convivium 2/2, 2015, 60–81

Liverani 2016: P. Liverani, The Memory of the Bishop in the Early Christian Basilica, in: M. Verhoeven – L. Bosman – H. van Asperen (eds.), Monuments and Memory. Christian Cult Buildings and Constructions of the Past. Essays in Honour of Sible de Blaauw (Turnhout 2016) 185–197

L'Orange 1982: H. P. L'Orange, Studies on the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World (New Rochelle, NY 1982)

Magnani Cianetti – Pavolini 2004: M. Magnani Cianetti – C. Pavolini (eds.), La basilica costantiniana di Sant'Agnese. Lavori archeologici e di restauro (Milan 2004)

Marin 2009: E. Marin, Il mosaico della cappella di S. Venanzio al Battistero Lateranense. Status quaestionis, in: E. Marin – D. Mazzoleni (eds.), Il cristianesimo in Istria fra tarda antichità e alto medioevo (Vatican City 2009) 209–215

Mathews 1993: T. F. Mathews, The Clash of Gods. A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art (Princeton, NJ 1993)

Matthiae 1967: G. Matthiae, Mosaici medioevali delle chiese di Roma (Rome 1967)

Menna 2006: M. R. Menna, I mosaici della basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore, in: M. Andaloro, L'orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini, 312–468 (Milan 2006) 306–346

Morin 1911: G. Morin, Liturgie et basiliques de Rome au milieu du VIIe siècle d'après les listes d'Évangiles de Würzburg, Revue Bénédictine 28, 1911, 296–330

Nilgen 2000: U. Nilgen, Die Bilder über dem Altar. Triumph- und Apsis-bogenprogramme in Rom und Mittelitalien und ihr Bezug zur Liturgie, in: N. Bock – S. de Blaauw – C.L. Frommel – H. Kessler (eds.), Kunst und Liturgie im Mittelalter (Munich 2000) 75–89

Oakeshott 1967: W. Oakeshott, The Mosaics of Rome. From the Third to the Fourteenth Centuries (London 1967)

Okáčová 2006: M. Okáčová, The Aural-Visual "Symbiosis" in the Poetry of Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius (Towards the Disentanglement of the Mystery of Late-Ancient Expansive Grid-Verse), in: J. Nechutová – I. Radová (eds.), Laetae segetes. Griechische und lateinische Studien an der Masaryk Universität und Universität Wien (Brno 2006) 41–50

Okáčová 2007: M. Okáčová, Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius. Characteristic Features of Late Ancient Figurative Poetics, Graeco-Latina Brunensia 12, 2007, 57–71

Okáčová 2023: M. Okáčová, Text, Image, and Music. Performative Aspects of Optatian's Visual Poetry, Hermes 151, 2023, 449–466

Osborne 2008: J. Osborne, The Jerusalem Temple Treasure and the Church of Santi Cosma e Damiano in Rome, BSR 76, 2008, 173–181

Parlby 2014: G. Parlby, Images of Conflict. The Art of Anti-Judaism in Fifth-Century Rome, in: S. Prickett (ed.), Edinburgh Companion to the Bible and the Arts (Edinburgh 2014) 149–160

Pelttari 2014: A. Pelttari, The Space That Remains. Reading Latin Poetry in Late Antiquity (Ithaca, NY 2014)

Pentcheva 2006: B. V. Pentcheva, The Performative Icon, ArtB 88, 2006, 631–655

Petrucci 1993: A. Petrucci, Public Lettering. Script, Power, and Culture, transl. by L. Lappin (Chicago 1993)

Petrucci 1995: A. Petrucci, Jeux de lettres. Formes et usages de l'inscription en Italie, 11e–20e siècles, trad. de l'italien par M. Aymard (Paris 1995)

Piva 2012: P. Piva (ed.), Arte medievale. Le vie dello spazio liturgico, nuova ed. aggiornata (Milan 2012)

Plett 1991: F. H. Plett, Intertextualities, in: F. H. Plett (ed.), Intertextuality (Berlin 1991) 3–29

Romana Moretti 2006: F. Romana Moretti, I mosaici perduti di San Pietro in Vaticano di età costantiniana, in: M. Andaloro, L'orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini, 312–468 (Milan 2006) 87–90

Saxer 2001: V. Saxer, Sainte-Marie-Majeure. Une basilique de Rome dans l'histoire de la ville et de son église (V^e–XIIIe siècle) (Rome 2001)

Scirocco – de Blaauw 2023: E. Scirocco – S. de Blaauw (eds.), From Words to Space. Textual Sources for Reconstructing and Understanding Medieval Sacred Spaces (Rome 2023)

Sládek 2010: O. Sládek, Literatura a performance [Literature and Performance], in: O. Sládek (ed.), Performance/performativita (Prague 2010) 35–66

Spieser 2004: J.-M. Spieser, Autour de la *Traditio Legis* (Thessaloniki 2004)

Stockwell 2020: P. Stockwell, Cognitive Poetics. An Introduction ²(Oxon 2020)

Tchalenko 1990: G. Tchalenko, Églises syriennes à bêma (Paris 1990)

Thunø 2011: E. Thunø, Inscription and Divine Presence. Golden Letters in the Early Medieval Apse Mosaic, Word & Image 27, 2011, 279–291

Thunø 2015: E. Thunø, The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome. Time, Network, and Repetition (New York 2015)

Tiberia 1998: V. Tiberia, Il mosaico restaurato. L'arco della basilica dei Santi Cosma e Damiano (Rome 1998)

Tiberia 2003: V. Tiberia, Il mosaico di Santa Pudenziana a Roma. Il restauro (Todi 2003)

Trout 2015: D. Trout, Damasus of Rome. The Epigraphic Poetry (Oxford 2015)

Trout 2019: D. Trout, Pictures with Words. Reading the Apse Mosaic of S. Agnese f.l.m. (Rome), Studies in Iconography 40, 2019, 1–26

Trout 2020: D. Trout, ICUR 8.20757. Poetry and Ambition at S. Agnese fuori le mura, in: J. D. Muccigrosso – C. E. Schultz (eds.), Fide non Ficta. Essays in Honor of Paul B. Harvey. Jr. (Bari 2020) 147–163

Trout 2021: D. Trout, (Re-)Founding Christian Rome. The Honorian Project of the Early Seventh Century, in: G. Kalas – A. Dijk (eds.), Urban Developments in Late Antique and Medieval Rome. Revising the Narrative of Renewal (Amsterdam 2021) 149–175

Wilpert 1931: G. Wilpert, La proclamazione efesina e i musaici della Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore, Analecta Sacra Tarraconensia 7, 1931, 197–213

Wisskirchen 1999: R. Wisskirchen, Zur Apsisstirnwand von SS. Cosma e Damiano, Rom, JbAC 42, 1999, 169–183

Wolf 2008: W. Wolf, Pictorial Narrativity, in: D. Herman – M. Jahn – M.-L. Ryan (eds.), Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory (London – New York 2008) 431–435