Abstract/ In one of his earliest monographs, Hans Belting recognized the painted crypt of the Abbot Epyphanius (824–842) in the monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno as the most important cycle in early medieval South Italy. Belting developed an interpretation of the murals, their style, and content, by tracing connections over a wide geographical perspective. Though challenged over the years and eventually generally rejected, his reading of the crypt remains thought provoking. A response to the questions involved, this paper focuses on a specific image in the crypt, the Annunciation visible on the sides of the fenestella confessionis. This faded mural is one of the earliest Annunciations extant in which the protagonists are flanking an opening, as became conventional later in the Middle Ages. The appearance of this kind of Annunciation is considered here by reconstructing the east-west circulation of theological concepts during the Iconoclastic controversy; by identifying the textual imagery derived from these concepts; and by analyzing the translation from textual to visual as a result of influencing the religious mentality.

Keywords/ Annunciation, Religious mentality, Marian homilies, Byzantium and the West, Ambrosius Autpertus, Iconophilia

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Porta coeli: the Annunciation as Threshold of Salvation*  
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Introduction

In one of his earliest monographs, Studien zur beneventanischen Malerei (1968), Hans Belting concentrated on the arts of Langobardia Minor, among which the painted cycle in the crypt of the Abbot Epyphanius (824–842) in the monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno was recognized as the most important cycle in the early medieval central-southern Italy, and therefore accorded particular prominence. Belting developed an interpretation of the murals, their style, and contents, by tracing connections within a wide geographical perspective1. Identifying in the murals “östliche Elemente” and Constantinopolitan prototypes, he rejected Rome as their necessary mediator, ruling out any parallelism with murals made in Rome at the time of Paschal I (817–824). Inspired by the issues addressed in his inquiry, the present paper concentrates on a specific image in the crypt, the Annunciation painted around the fenestella confessionis, above a tomb which was probably covered by an altar /Fig. 1/2. This faded mural is one of the earliest extant examples of the depiction of the scene in which Mary, receiving from the archangel Gabriel the announcement that she will give birth to the Son of God, appears “separated” from Gabriel, that is with the two protagonists shown either side of an archway, window or door – as would become customary in later Byzantine, medieval and Renaissance art3.

3 Joseph Manca, “Mary versus the Open Door: Moral Antithesis in Images of the Annunciation”, Source, x/3 (1991), pp. 1–8, interpreted the open door appearing on the background of Renaissance paintings depicting the Annunciation as “a moral contrast to Mary” since she was identified with the metaphor of the porta clausa, and added that “the equation of Mary as the Gate of Heaven, which is linked to her identification with the Church itself, is a grandiose conceit that is ill suited to explain many of the humble gates, doors, cabinets, and shutters that open in Annunciation imagery of the Renaissance”. Manca here dismisses the tradition of the important Marian metaphor of porta coeli and her most notable virtue, i.e. the humilitas, that will be the subject of this paper.

* The first time I met Hans Belting was on Easter Sunday 2004, when he and I were the only guests in the old refectory at Dumbarton Oaks and enjoyed a long talk on the Mandylion of Edessa – he bearing with sympathy my inexperience and enthusiasm. I express my gratitude to the following scholars for sharing thoughts and photographs on the current subject: Massimo Bernabò, Eve Borsook, Beat Bredek, Leslie Brubaker, Mary Cunningham, Maria Evangelatou, Ernesto Sergio Mainoldi, John Mitchell, Nancy Patterson Sevchenko, Natalia Terebintnikov. I am also grateful to the anonymous readers for their helpful comments. The title of the present article recalls the one by Derek Krueger, “Mary at the Threshold: The Mother of God as Guardian in Seventh-Century Palestinian Miracle Accounts”, in The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images, Leslie Brubaker, Mary Cunningham eds, Farnham 2011, pp. 31–38, and partly relies on his presentation of Mary as “threshold”. Dumbarton Oaks, on the feast of St. Peter and Paul, June 29, 2014 – Florence, on the feast of the Hypapante, February 2, 2015.
Owing to the assumption that the Annunciation coincides with the moment of the Incarnation, Mary becomes at once the “limen” between Earth and Heaven. But how did Mary come to be represented in the visual arts as the porta coeli? The answer will be sought by taking into account the circulation of theological concepts and liturgical writings conveying a specific Marian “textual” imagery, and the possibility that this imagery influenced contemporary religious mentality and that it was eventually “translated” into “visual” imagery between East and West, before and during the period of the Iconoclastic controversy.

The Annunciation in the crypt of Epyphanius

In the visual arts, representing the Annunciation meant finding ways to express by visual means the ineffable mystery of the Incarnation, that is the “process” through which Mary, at the delivery of Gabriel’s message, became pregnant. In his standard work on Byzantine iconography, Gabriel Millet noted that in the Annunciation Mary is represented as expressing amazement at the bewildering message, either puzzled yet submissive expression while seated and attending to domestic work, as it is common in Syro-Palestinian art, or with a firm and rational reaction while standing, responding with eloquent gestures to the address of the angel in the manner of an antique orator. The literary sources for the scene are Luke 1, 26–45, the Protoevangelium of James, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (an adaptation of the Protoevangelium), and also homilies which commented on these sources.

In the crypt painted under the Frankish Abbot Epyphanius, Mary appears on one side of the fenestella confessionis, receiving the Annunciation of the miraculous Incarnation, the outcome of which was to be the enthroned Christ-Logos depicted in the vault. On the flanking walls of the arched recess over the tomb, to either side, are shown the Nativity on the left, and, on the right, the Bathing of the Christ child. These scenes and the rest of the painted programme, which emphasize Mary’s role in the history of Salvation, have been interpreted as fitting imagery for a funerary oratory. In the Annunciation, Gabriel has just landed on the left of the fenestella, still folding his wings, with a light-blue tunic and beige pallium with purple clavi flowing in the breeze – these details...
giving the scene a lively tone /Fig. 2/. Gabriel salutes Mary by stretching his right arm toward her, and holds a long, slender staff in his left hand. The fenestella is flanked by two elegant twisted columns, one on Gabriel’s side and the other on Mary’s, alluding to the entrance to her house, which is not presented here as a modest dwelling, but rather as a palace appropriate to a noblewoman. Mary stands to the right of the fenestella, opening an unnatural large right hand before her chest in a gesture of wonder at Gabriel’s sudden entrance, before a bejewelled throne with a large silk cushion and a suppressedaneum /Fig. 3/. She has been given the position of honour, to the right of the beholder, while in earlier examples she usually appeared on the left, with Gabriel having the position of honour as God’s messenger. After Iconoclasm, Mary came to be given a new emphasis for being the vessel of the Incarnation, and was regularly shown on the right, seating or standing before or on a throne. Befitting to the throne, the clothes Mary wears in the Annunciation of the crypt seem to denote royal or imperial rank. She is shown at the very moment of receiving the revelation that she would bear the Son of God and therefore would become the Queen of Heaven. In an early description of the Annunciation of Epyphanius, that of Émile Bertaux in 1900, when the paintings were fresher, Mary is described as being crowned, although in its present state a crown is hard to see /Fig. 4/. The crown she wears in this Annunciation has no parallel in earlier iconography, either in the West or in the East. Furthermore, the rest of Mary’s clothing in the Annunciation bears the mark of high rank: she wears prominent circular earrings with pearls, a white undergarment with bejewelled cuffs and a purple, full-length purple dalmatic with a round bejewelled collar which extends in a richly embellished yellow loros and wide apparel at the lower hem of her garment. Her feet are not visible because of damage to the painted surface. Mary’s regal attire recalls the bride of the king in Psalms 44, 13–14: “All glorious is the princess in her chamber, with robes interwoven with gold. In many-colored robes she is led to the king”. And truly, in becoming Theotokos, Mary gains a future standing as queen of Heaven to the side of her Son and Bridegroom.

The precious garments in the Annunciation are almost identical to those she wears in her image in the vault of the western arm of the crypt, apart from the addition in the latter case of a roundel hanging at the bottom of the loros, a detail of high-ranking female clothing, and of purple pointed shoes studded with pearls that only an empress could wear. Her status as Queen of Heaven here is clearly visualized also by the gem-studded golden throne on which she sits. She is encircled by a huge triple halo in blue and purple, an outer projection of the golden yellow halo around her head, seated above the angels.
2/ Detail of the Annunciation: Gabriel, “Crypt” of Epyphanius, San Vincenzo al Volturno, Isernia, 824–842
holding a codex inscribed with the words from the Magnificat which refer to her as “beatam” / Fig. 5 /.

In the painted cycle of the crypt she appears exulted for her election to be Mother of God and Queen of Heaven, on account of her humility in accepting God’s will and becoming ancilla Domini. However, in the Annunciation, alongside these royal attributes, Mary holds in her left hand two objects painted in a purple colour. Curiously, Bertaux describes Mary as holding one spindle, possibly because he did not pay sufficient attention to this detail. Although the two objects appear as spindles, Fernanda De’ Maffei recognized here a distaff and a spindle, the former to hold the unspun fibers, and the latter to spin them, as a reference to the action in which Mary was occupied when Gabriel arrived. Mary is described as spinning a thread from a basket of wool dyed in purple and scarlet for the curtain or veil of the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem (Protoevangelium of James 10, 2–11, 1) – an action taken to visualize the double nature of Christ, since the purple alludes to His human flesh as well as to His royal dignity and divine nature. No basket is shown in this Annunciation.

For the overall iconography of the Annunciation as well as for other features in the painted crypt of Epyphanius, no parallels could be traced in early medieval art by Bertaux, who derived from these murals a confused impression of a unique as well as a most ancient art. Belting, on the other hand,

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10 This scene and the origins of the iconography of the Assumption of Mary will be analysed in the paper “Mary as ‘scala caelestis’ in Eighth and Ninth Century Italy” I will deliver on the occasion of the workshop Patristic Theology and Apocryphal Narratives in Byzantine Devotion to Mary the Mother of God (Sixth to Tenth Centuries) convened by Mary B. Cunningham at the xvin Conference on Patristic Studies, Oxford, 10–14 August 2015.


12 Bertaux, “Gli affreschi” (n. 9), p. 112.

13 De’ Maffei, “Le arti a San Vincenzo” (n. 11), p. 276.


detected Carolingian, Roman, cassinese, and wide Byzantine features in these paintings. He concluded that *San Vincenzo al Volturno* was one of the most promising case studies for investigating the ways in which the arts of central-southern Italy, *Langobardia Minor*, related to eastern-Mediterranean practice and models. Like Pietro Toesca in 1904, Belting made apt recourse to the writings of Ambrosius Autpertus (*†* 784), a Gaulish monk and briefly abbot of the Volturno monastery between 777–778, for the purpose of explaining the painted programme of the crypt, with its overt focus on Mary as Mother of God. With Bede (*†* 735) and Beatus de Liébana (*†* 798), Autpertus is one of the earliest medieval authors to have written a commentary on the Apocalypse. However, it is his Marian homilies in which he expounded a theological understanding of Mary which was particularly innovative and influential in the West, that are more relevant to the imagery of the crypt. Authoritative art historians have considered Autpertus’ ideas influential on the conception of many works of art dating between the ninth and the twelfth century, with a focus on Mary and the Apocalypse. However, notwithstanding the attention they have received, Autpertus’ ideas about Mary and her role in the history of Salvation, which reveal extensive familiarity with the Byzantine Chalcedonian and iconophile tradition, have never been considered against the background of “iconomachy”, that is the struggle over the cult of sacred images, which involved Rome and possibly also the principal monasteries in central-southern Italy, between the eighth and the ninth centuries. In fact, Autpertus reveals not only an attention that is unparalleled in the West to arguments involved in iconophile discourse in Byzantium, but more tellingly he adopts epithets and metaphors that are borrowed from the Byzantine hymnographic and homiletic tradition. My intention is not to attempt to account for and explain every detail of the Annunciation of the crypt through his writings – rather I wish to contextualize the image within the development of the religious understanding of the Annunciation-Incarnation. The literary and visual motifs I will analyse in this study are the spinning of the purple thread, the Incarnation through the *conceptio per aurem*, Mary’s attitude to Gabriel’s announcement, and the identification of Mary with the *porta coeli* for the salvation of humankind.

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6/Annunciation, lead seal, Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, inv. nr. 18247142, Berlin, 600–700
The spinning maid

One of the notable examples of the Annunciation in Paleochristian art is the mosaic appearing on the left of the apsidal arch in *Santa Maria Maggiore*, executed soon after the Council of Ephesus of 431 and reflecting its resolution that Mary was to be considered *Theotokos*, i.e., Mother of God. Here the Annunciation is a complex, crowded, unprecedented scene in which Mary’s house actually takes the shape of an elegant temple or palace from which two angels proceed to salute her, while another angel stands on the right addressing her with outstretched hand. Another angel is flying above, as well as the dove of the Holy Spirit. The angel addressing Mary could be recognised as Gabriel thanks to the gilded outer rim of his halo, which seems to visualize the important message he is keeping in his mind and is in the act of conveying. Mary is not shown as a humble virgin, but seated on a low throne with a *suppedaneum*, crowned and clothed like a queen. She pulls a purple skein from a basket by her side, but no instruments for spinning are shown. The purple thread appears in the fifth century representations of the Annunciation, with meaningful exegetical associations. It was adopted, for example, on the fifth-century Pignatta sarcophagus (Ravenna, Museo Braccioforte), a rare depiction of the subject in late antique funerary sculpture, where Gabriel appears on the right, winged, and addresses Mary who sits on a stool while spinning a thread. The symbolism of the veil is present in passages in Scripture. But the literary image of Mary spinning a purple thread from a basket of wool for the veil of the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem finds its finest explanation in a homily possibly delivered on the 26th of December 430 in the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople by Proclus, bishop of Cyzicus, later bishop of the capital city (434–446). The homily was soon included at the beginning of the acts of the Council of Ephesus (431): this was the most celebrated sermon on the *Theotokos*, translated into almost every language of the early Christian church, and put to music. Here Proclus’ signature metaphor of the womb of Mary as a loom features in a litany of metaphors through which the role of the *Theotokos* is explained: the “awesome [textile] loom of the divine economy upon

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21 Joseph Wilpert, *I sarcofagi cristiani antichi*, Rome 1932, vol. i/i, p. 279, notes that the Annunciation, a scene that would become part of every Christological cycle, is absent from late antique funerary sculpture.
22 The purple curtain in Solomon’s Temple (2 Chronicles 3:14) and in Moses’ Tabernacle (*Exodus* 37:3–5); Christ’s body as a the veil of the Temple (*Matthew* 27:51; *Mark* 15:38; *Luke* 23:45); Christ as the new Melchizedek who, by sacrificing his own blood on the Cross, redeemed humanity from its sins and lifted the veil of the Temple so granting to all humankind access to the Holy of the Holies and to the vision of God (*Hebrews* 6:19–20, 9, and 10:19–22), which had a large reception in later exegesis, such as John Chrysostom († 407), John of Damascus († 749), the patriarch Photius († 891 ca.). See Evangelatou, “The Purple Thread of the Flesh” (n. 14), p. 264.
which the robe of union was ineffably woven (...) the artisan was the Word who entered in through her sense of hearing” 24. It has been suggested that Proclus drew inspiration for the image of the textile loom producing human tissue from the life-style adopted by the empress Pulcheria († 453), who took public vows of chastity, and converted her palace into a convent in which she and her sisters engaged themselves in spinning and weaving. Such an environment could be seen as an ideal place for genesis and elaboration of metaphors of this kind 25. At the same time, the inspiration might also have come from Neoplatonic philosophy, as Porphyry’s third-century treatise On the cave of the nymphs presented the nymphs weaving sea-purple garments in a darkened cave as a metaphor for the body’s formation and growth. The literary image of the textile loom therefore seems to have been a symbol shared between the Pagan and the Christian cultures of late Antiquity 26. Perhaps the relation of Proclus with the Neoplatonic tradition should be investigated further – not so much as for speculative aspects, but rather for the use of literary images often characterized by paradoxical conceits, which were to be employed to explain assumptions also in later Byzantine theology. It has been noted there that the importance of the veil as a complex symbol for the idea of incarnation needs to be justified by reference to the auctoritas of pseudo-Dionysius, the monastic writer active in the Syro-Palestinian milieu, who combined the Neoplatonic tradition with Christian doctrine in his description of the unknowable God 27. Recent studies have uncovered the profound influence that the writings of Dionysius – and his poetic of mystical blindness and vision – exerted on iconophile authors of the early eighth century, namely on Andrew of Crete († 740) and John of Damascus († 749) 28.

In the scene in the crypt of Epyphanius, the reference to spinning appears to be limited to the distaff and the spindle, there being no trace of the basket in which the purple thread is gathered – although the lacunae in the painted plaster surfaces, at the feet of Mary, do not allow the exclusion of its original presence. However, what makes the basket superfluous in the iconography of the Annunciation is the idea – frequently met within Byzantine hymns and homilies from the fifth
century onward and therefore present in the visual mentality of the faithful between late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages – that the womb of Mary is in fact the container in which the purple thread of the flesh of Christ is gathered. No homily for the feast of the Annunciation remains in the corpus of Autpertus’ writings, though in the sermon for the Dormition, he speaks of the womb of Mary as a container which contained the uncontaminable, the instrument for the redemption of humanity – here following Andrew of Crete. The basket seems to be a more or less recurrent feature in the illustration of the Annunciation “until” the ninth century.

Among western examples of the Annunciation close in date to the painting of the crypt of Epy- phanius, is that in mosaic on the apsidal arch of Pope Leo III, ca. in 815–816. Robed in a purple *maphorion*, Mary is shown seated on a low wooden throne, greeting Gabriel with her right hand in front of her chest while holding the distaff and the spindle with her left hand on her lap. On the right of the same arch, the *Theotokos* is escorted by an angel /Fig. 7/. In the Genoels-Elderen ivory diptych (Brussels, Musée du Cinquantenaire, inv. no. 1474), dated to the eighth – ninth century and attributed either to Anglo-Saxon Northumbria, to Carolingian Francia or to Bavaria, the source of the iconography of the Annunciation remains “elusive”. No basket is depicted at the feet of Mary, though she holds a distaff and a spindle in her left hand. Gabriel almost touches Mary’s head in delivering the wondrous message, on hearing which she is expresss shocked, as her blank face reveals. She has no royal attributes, just a low throne with a cushion. A simple *maphorion* covers her head and body. On the far right a maidservant assists, drawing back a curtain. By contrast, no spinning tools are represented in the Annunciation on the Harrach Diptych (Cologne, Schnütgen Museum), variously dated to the early eighth – early ninth century and assigned either to Northern Italy or to the court school of Charlemagne. A miniature walled city "tunic without seam", i.e., the body of the Incarnated God (John 19, 24), with “no share in any human craftsmanship”, was produced.

30 Ambrosius Autpertus, *Sermo de adsumptione sanctae Mariae, 4, cccm π α, p. 1029, ll. 6–11; Idem, *Sermo in Purificatione sanctae Mariae, 1, cccm π α, p. 985, ll. 8–9; "paravus Virginis filius, cuius divinitate non caput mundus"; Idem, *Oratio contra septem uitia* [recensio α], 15, cccm π α, pp. 958–959, ll. 1–12. His corpus of writings has been reconstructed with some difficulty owing to earlier misleading attributions to Church Fathers. It would be surprising if he had not composed a homily on the important moment of the Annunciation, since in the penultimate book of his commentary to the Apocalypse, written between 757–767, he admits that he had devoted more time than was appropriate to preaching on divine matters to secular people, and to composing sermons; see *Idem, Expositio in Apocalypsin*, 9, ProL, cccm π α, p. 718, ll. 50–54.
32 Evangelatou, "The Purple Thread" (n. 14), pp. 261–262. For example, Mary has a basket at her feet in the Annunciation scene on the early fifth-century Pignatta sarcophagus (Ravenna, Museo Braccioferte); in the sixth-century Ethmiadzian Gospels (Yerevan, Matenadaran Mesrop Mashtots Institute for Ancient Manuscripts and Scientific Research, ms 2374); on a sixth – eighth-century embroidered roundel possibly from Coptic Egypt (London, vma Museum, inv. no. 814-1903); on a sixth-century clay amulla (Israel Museum, Israel Antiquities Authority, inv. no. 65–434); on Byzantine lead seals dated to the sixth – ninth century where the Annunciation with Mary spinning the purple thread is the most represented scene (for example Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Minzkinhteit, inv. nr. 18247142) /Fig. 6/, see Cotsonis, "Narrative Scenes" (n. 8), p. 63; on a famous textile fragment with the Annunciation encircled in *rotae* dating to the eighth or ninth century (Rom, Vatican Museum, inv. no. 61231, produced in Constantinople, Syria or Egypt, see Stephen J. Davis, "Fashioning a Divine Body: Coptic Chrstology and Ritualized Dress", The Harvard Theological Review, xcvi/3 (2005), pp. 335–362, sp, pp. 353–360, for the visualization of the Incarnation on fourth – eighth centuries tunics in Coptic Egypt and how this determined an understanding of the mystery.
alluding to Nazareth carved above the heads of Gabriel and Mary defines the location for the event, which sees Mary dressed in a simple maphorion, timidly greeting the angel with her right hand but expressing her amazement at the frightening apparition by inclining her head and sitting uncomfortably on a high, bejewelled throne. In the East the debate over sacred images led to an increased veneration of Mary with a heightened emphasis on her regal associations. Symptomatic of this is that on middle Byzantine seals, miniatures or paintings she is usually depicted with no spinning implements.

**An antique orator**

Another striking feature in the Annunciation in the crypt at San Vincenzo al Volturno is Mary’s resolute attitude, expressed in her upright position and in the firm gaze she directs at Gabriel, whom she greets with a gesture of her right hand. She extends her left arm in an elegant pose counterbalancing her sudden movement, prominently holding out the distaff and the spindle. Owing to the active poses held by Gabriel, still with his garments flowing and open wings, and by the Virgin, the scene has a dynamism, an immediacy, and a freshness rarely seen in early medieval art. The calm countenance of Mary, presented as a seated matrona in the Roman catacombs, or as a composed “spinning” queen in Santa Maria Maggiore, contrasts with the amazement she usually displays in later works, bewildered at the words of Gabriel (Luke 1, 29: “Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be”). In the sixth-century Annunciation in the apsidal mosaics of the Euphrasian basilica at Poreč (Croatia) – a building with many connections with the arts and culture of Byzantium – Mary appears as a young maid, seated, occupied in spinning, as shown by the purple thread she holds in her left hand. At Gabriel’s apparition, she inclines her head in a submissive manner, though her eyes staring at him and her right forefinger raised to her chin reveal an inquisitive attitude. The early Patristic tradition had held that the Incarnation took place through the sense of hearing, at the moment Mary received Gabriel’s salutation, tracing a typological connection between the seduction of Eve through the words of the serpent (Genesis 2, 2–7) and the pregnancy of Mary through the words of an angel (Luke 1, 26–38). When describing the moment of the Annunciation-Incarnation in his homily included in the acts of the Council of Ephesus, Proclus uses the image of the conceptio per aurem, “δι᾽ἀκοῆς”, epitomizing a consensus on the matter. In 512, Severus of Antioch wrote a homily in Syriac on the Annunciation in which Gabriel is characterised as worried that the consequences of his apparition and salutation had not been fully understood by Mary: that the greeting coincided with the conception of the Word, and could be described as an “instantaneous conception”. Mary is described as admitting her bewilderment at the “paradox” of Gabriel’s words, when he spoke of “childbirth from a conception without seed”, also in the most famous Marian hymn, the anonymous fifth- or sixth-century composition known as Akathistos (ii, 3–5) which powerfully frames Mary in the role of Mother of God, privileged mediator between Heaven and Earth, and a stronghold for the faithful. The mysterious act of the Incarnation is expressed in these fifth-sixth century texts with evocative literary images interwoven with an apophatic terminology of neoplatonic origins that can be traced back to the Cappadocian fathers. This terminology and evocative symbolism was developed especially by Dionysius, whose ideas have been detected in iconophile authors of the eighth century such as Andrew of Crete and John of Damascus. They adopted a pseudo-dionysian symbolic language, and a related visuality connected with the cult of images that they shared with their audience, in order to evoke emotions with regard to focal issues such as the Incarnation and the role of Mary. Thanks to Proclus and his followers, including Romanos the Melodist in the sixth century, Sophronios of Jerusalem in the seventh and the iconophile authors in the eighth, the doctrine of the Virgin’s conceptio per aurem achieved a normative status. From the majestic, highly formal representations seen in Paleochristian art, in the middle Byzantine period Mary came to be portrayed in an emotional way. The reaction of the young maid responding to the angel with eloquent gestures was compared to the gestures of an antique orator, by Millet, who found in middle Byzantine homilies the roots of this new theological understanding of
Mary. Emotions played an important role in the literature of the eighth and ninth century, especially in iconophile homilies, in which Incarnational theology was strongly defended. The encounter between Mary and Gabriel had been described in emotive tones by Andrew of Crete and Germanus of Constantinople (†730) in their highly innovative dialogical sermons. Andrew of Crete describes the moment in which the Angel hesitates in stepping through the door of Mary’s house as he does not want to frighten her, and addresses her in a soft voice by saying, “χαίρε.” Despite his fear of scaring the maid with his supernatural appearance, Gabriel enters the door, greets Mary and says: “He [existed] before you, he is with you today, and after a short time, he will [emerge] from you; thus he is present both eternally and in historical time.” Andrew’s description of the entrance of the Angel becomes a metaphor, as the act of entering the door of Mary’s house coincides with the Annunciation “and” the Incarnation. In the same homily Mary is troubled by Gabriel’s long speech, and experiences confusion, but she is resolute in her reaction. She “pondered”, “testing her reasoning as if by the judgement of [her] pure intelligence, that took what was said not without trial”, knowing the Scriptures and thus recalling the fall of her ancestress Eve when deceived by the Serpent. Then Andrew adds that the evangelist Luke, in order to show “how ready of wit she [Mary] was, he also set down her firmness and steadfastness in outlook.” She does not answer and waits to hear what Gabriel has to add in order to understand better the content of his message, dissolve her doubts about being deceived, and embolden her soul. Only at that point does Mary answer by saying that she has had no experience of a man (see Luke 1, 34), and that the angel is promising “strange things” to her, “announcing things which transcend nature”, i.e., becoming a mother without being married or having had intercourse with a man.

The earliest extant representation of the Annunciation is a mural painted on the vault of a cubiculum in the catacomb of Priscilla on the Via Salaria in Rome, dated between the early third and the fourth century. The scene, encircled by three painted roundels against a plain background, depicts on the right a standing figure addressing, with a raised arm, a woman sitting on a sort of throne on the left side. Comparisons with paintings in the catacomb of Santi Marcellino e Pietro and with cubiculum A in the catacomb on the Via Dino Compagni, both dating to the first half of the fourth century, have led to the conclusion that the early type of the Annunciation was characterized by the absence of the dove representing the Holy Spirit descending on Mary, and simply by a young man standing on the right while addressing a young woman seating on the left. See Joseph Wilpert, Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms, Freiburg 1903, pp. 187–190; Barbara Mazzei, “Il cubicolo dell’Annunciazione nelle catacombe di Priscilla in Roma”, Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana, lxxiv (1999), pp. 233–280.


“Apophatic” or “negative” theology (from ἀπόφασις) aims at describing what God is by negation, as He transcends human comprehension. The apophatic language appearing in the Akathistos has not been yet investigated, to my knowledge; see Peltoma, The Image of the Virgin (n. 29), pp. 143–144.

Cunningham, “The Impact of Pseudo-Dionysius” (n. 28).


Constas, Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin (n. 23), pp. 273–313, sp. p. 312.


Andreas Cretensis, In sanctissimae Deiparae Dominae Nostra Annuntiationem, rc. 97, cols 891c–893a; trans. Cunningham, Wider than Heaven (n. 31), pp. 204–205. Cunningham, p. 205, n. 33, notes that the long soliloquy by Gabriel is “unique in Byzantine homilies and hymns on the Annunciation. Invented interior monologue (ethopoeia) both reveals the character of the protagonist and has a didactic purpose”.


Ibidem, p. 206. See Millet, “Quelques représentations byzantines” (n. 6), p. 480, who notes that in middle-Byzantine homilies Mary reveals a “profonde sagesse d’une Athéna”.

Andreas Cretensis, In sanctissimae Deiparae Dominae Nostra Annuntiationem, rc. 97, col. 901a–904a; trans. Cunningham, Wider than Heaven (n. 31), p. 211.


* The earliest extant representation of the Annunciation is a mural painted on the vault of a cubiculum in the catacomb of Priscilla on the Via Salaria in Rome, dated between the early third and the fourth century. The scene, encircled by three painted roundels against a plain background, depicts on the right a standing figure addressing, with a raised arm, a woman sitting on a sort of throne on the left side. Comparisons with paintings in the catacomb of Santi Marcellino e Pietro and with cubiculum A in the catacomb on the Via Dino Compagni, both dating to the first half of the fourth century, have led to the conclusion that the early type of the Annunciation was characterized by the absence of the dove representing the Holy Spirit descending through the door of Mary’s house as he does not want to frighten her, and addresses her in a soft voice by saying, “χαίρε.” Despite his fear of scaring the maid with his supernatural appearance, Gabriel enters the door, greets Mary and says: “He [existed] before you, he is with you today, and after a short time, he will [emerge] from you; thus he is present both eternally and in historical time.” Andrew’s description of the entrance of the Angel becomes a metaphor, as the act of entering the door of Mary’s house coincides with the Annunciation “and” the Incarnation. In the same homily Mary is troubled by Gabriel’s long speech, and experiences confusion, but she is resolute in her reaction. She “pondered”, “testing her reasoning as if by the judgement of [her] pure intelligence, that took what was said not without trial”, knowing the Scriptures and thus recalling the fall of her ancestress Eve when deceived by the Serpent. Then Andrew adds that the evangelist Luke, in order to show “how ready of wit she [Mary] was, he also set down her firmness and steadfastness in outlook.” She does not answer and waits to hear what Gabriel has to add in order to understand better the content of his message, dissolve her doubts about being deceived, and embolden her soul. Only at that point does Mary answer by saying that she has had no experience of a man (see Luke 1, 34), and that the angel is promising “strange things” to her, “announcing things which transcend nature”, i.e., becoming a mother without being married or having had intercourse with a man.
The rich literary imagery derived from the Byzantine Marian tradition contributed to evoking emotions and the shaping of mental images in the minds of the faithful, among which one should also include those who conceive iconographic programmes and the artists who translated them into images. The dramatic encounter between the angel and the virgin seems well visualized through the vibrant details of the Annunciation of Epyphanius’ crypt. Gabriel’s sudden appearance and Mary’s immediate reaction seem to enact a drama. A “dramatic visual story-telling”, with figures displaying emotional and physical engagement, has been recently detected by John Mitchell in the arts of Langobardia and the Carolingian kingdom in the mid eighth – mid ninth century, for which he recognises parallels and possibly immediate origins in the Umayyad caliphate. In this context, Mitchell has drawn attention to the murals in the side apses of Santa Sofia in Benevento built by Duke Arichis II (758–787) – the starting point of Belting’s studies on the Longobard Dukedom of Benevento – and those executed in the basilica of San Salvatore in Brescia under the patronage of the Longobard queen Ansa, and her consort, King Desiderius, uncontestably dated to 760–770. The Annunciation in San Salvatore with Mary seated on a throne is no longer visible. The corresponding scene in the right apse of Santa Sofia shows Gabriel with flowing garments addressing Mary robed in purple and seated on a bejewelled throne, her upper part now missing. Although the cultural and stylistic comparisons between the murals in Benevento and those in the crypt of Epyphanius are compelling, despite a chronological divide of some decades, the Annunciation of Epyphanius may derive some of its dynamic character, as well as its subtly psychological nuances and iconographic novelty also from Byzantine homilies, in which the event was described with new dramatic accents. Millet noted that also in the illustrated Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus (Paris, BNF, gr. 510, f. 3r) – the earliest preserved post-iconoclastic deluxe manuscript made for the emperor Basil I under the supervision of the iconophile patriarch Photius in the years 879–883 – Mary appears almost as a classical orator standing on the suppedaneum of her elaborate seat, and answering with an eloquent gesture the call of the Angel, while to her side there is a sewing basket, and behind her house with an open door. In ninth-century marginal psalters, the Annunciation is so depicted illustrating the virgin bidden to pay attention to an important message in Psalms 44, 10–11 (“Listen, daughter, and pay careful attention: Forget your people and your father’s house. Let the king be enthralled by your
beauty; honour him, for he is your lord”). In the Pantokrator Psalter (Mt. Athos, Pantokrator monastery, cod. 61, f. 55v) David, on the left, instructs Mary to listen to Gabriel, who is approaching from the right, their haloes overlapping in unusual intimacy, while she stands on the suppedaneum of her elaborate throne, smiling and greeting him with her left hand. However the young virgin’s reaction was visualized, the aural conception implied that upon receiving Gabriel’s address Mary conceived her Son and became Theotokos, therefore the Queen of Heaven, intercessor for humanity, in short, the gate of Heaven.

The gate of Heaven

The iconography of the Annunciation in the crypt of Epyphanius appears to be quite distinct when compared with contemporary western examples, not only for the presence of spinning tools, for Mary’s straightforward attitude and upright position and for her regal attire, but also for being set either side of an opening. The encounter of Gabriel and Mary, split between the two sides of the fenestella confessionis, marks the threshold between the intimate, devotional space of the subterranean funerary oratory and the church above destined to a larger congregation. It has been noted that in the arts of the late medieval West and Byzantine East, the Annunciate Virgin is “frequently associated with a portal, or she and Gabriel are separated by an arrangement of arches or other forms which, although primarily decorative in character, suggest for the Annunciate a degree of privacy.”

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51 Tsironis, “Emotion and the Senses” (n. 42), pp. 184–185, on Byzantine iconophile homilists adopting a symbolic language, and a related visuality connected with the cult of images, they shared with their audience.
54 Only a preparatory drawing of what has been interpreted as the Annunciation, the first scene of the New Testament cycle, has been detected in the upper South wall of the nave close to the facade (corresponding to the square “s”). See Monica Ibsen, “Sistemi decorativi per la basilica di Ansa e Desiderio”, in Dalla corte regia al monastero (n. 53), pp. 141–167, sp. pp. 153–154.
56 Millet, Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'Evangile (n. 5), p. 68.
58 Denny, The Annunciation from the Right (n. 8), p. 15.
came to be “split” between the two sides of an opening, creating the standard way for representing the event, as found in Western and later Byzantine art? In Santa Maria Maggiore a crowded Annunciation is depicted on one side of the apsidal arch, with the gate of salvation and the living temple, “both” metaphors associated with Christ and the Theotokos, embodied by the elegant building to the left of the Virgin, whose doors are still closed but are soon to be opened by the possibility of the redemption offered to humanity by the Incarnation. In the mid-sixth-century mosaics of the Euphrasian basilica in Poreč, in the register below the apsidal conch, the Annunciation is paired with the Visitation between the window-openings; both prepare the beholder to appreciate the fruit of the Incarnation displayed in the conch above with the Theotokos.99 The position of the two narrative scenes is telling, because in them Mary appears in physical proximity with the real architectural openings which, at the bottom of the apse, admit natural light which is reflected by the golden conch above and illuminates the congregation of faithful assembled in the church. Here Mary truly appears as the gate through which the Christ-Light (John 8, 12) descends to redeem humanity, the gate to the living temple of Christ. In Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, in the late sixth-early seventh century, the famous Annunciation with the “angelo bello” was painted on the right wall of the newly opened apse, and another Annunciation was located on the South-East pilaster marking the threshold between the nave and the sanctuary; on the same pilaster, pope John VII (705–707) commissioned a new Annunciation, directly over the first, with Gabriel standing on the left and Mary seated on a high throne on the right.100 In Santi Nereo e Achilleo the Annunciation is on the left of the apsidal arch, while the Theotokos is on the right. In these instances, just to give a few examples, Mary’s presence embodies the “limen” between Heaven and Earth.

In some early Byzantine representations of the Annunciation, as in the mid-sixth-century ivory plaque on the episcopal throne of Maximianus (Ravenna, Museo Arcivescovile or the seventh-century ivory plaque with the Annunciation from the Trivulzio collection (Milan, Raccolte d’arte applicata del Castello Sforzesco, inv. nr. Avori 14) /Fig. 9/, architectural details such as columns and tympana have been interpreted as references to the portico of the fourth-century basilica built by Constantine and Helena on the supposed site of the house of the Virgin in Nazareth.102 In the middle Byzantine period, however, these architectural features are usually reduced, as is the case in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus (Paris, BNF, gr. 510, f. 3r)103. The earliest extant instances of the Annunciation with its protagonists depicted to either side of an architectural element is to be seen – to my knowledge – in the Rabbula Gospels (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, f. 4r) /Fig. 10/, anticipated to the Justinianic period, and in an almost contemporary Syriac Gospels (Paris, BNF, syr. 33, f. 3v – 4r)104. Gabriel stands on the left-hand side of an imposing canon table, and Mary stands on the suppedaneum of a throne on the right-hand side, while holding a purple thread unfurling from her working-basket; a building with a triangular tympanum and a door ajar, meant to represent her home, stands in the background. The detail of the slightly-open door may well allude to the entrance of the Holy Spirit into the womb of the Virgin, which opens to the Incarnation, visualizing the metaphor of Mary becoming the “door” to salvation. The miniature stands at the beginning of the canon tables – again marking a “limen”. The scheme of depicting Gabriel and Mary to the sides of an opening became standard, as a large number of comparisons demonstrates, for example in middle Byzantine Cappadocian mural paintings, in the twelfth-century mosaics of Norman Sicily105, and on middle and late Byzantine templon doors. Also in late Byzantine art, the Virgin, having borne the Son of God and become the gate of Heaven, is represented over important doors in ecclesiastical buildings, like the Chora church in Constantinople/Istanbul, where the Virgin orans with the infant Christ in a halo before her chest welcomes the faithful, and is accompanied by an inscription which reads “Mother of God, Container of the Uncontainable”.106 This was probably the consequence of the fact that middle Byzantine monastic writers stressed the supreme mediatory role of the Virgin in the history of Salvation, her role as ladder and gate to Heaven.

In Christian exegesis, the shut door of the Temple reserved only to the prince (Ezekiel 44, 2–3) is cited
as a metaphor for Mary’s womb, and associated with the two apparitions of the Resurrected Christ among his disciples (John 20, 19–29). In early Byzantine religious thought the shut door of the Old Testament “opens” in the New Testament narrative in order to allow entry to the Incarnation and the Salvation of humankind: Mary is regarded as the guardian or even the embodiment of the “limen” which separates Heaven and Earth. In his homily included in the acts of the Council of Ephesus, Proclus speaks of the mys-

61 Mitchell, “England in the Eighth Century” (n. 4), pp. 266–267, has noted that the idea of the Annunciation marking the threshold between the nave and the sanctuary eventually reached England. In fact, among late eighth – early ninth century sculptural elements from Breedon and Lichfield in Mercia, the imposing Gabriel “is most likely to have been set in an architectural context (…) presumably flanking an opening”.
62 Millet, Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'Evangile (n. 5), pp. 88–89.
65 In late Byzantine monumental painting the Annunciation is represented with the protagonists flanking the sides of niches, apsidal arches and archways. Although not defining the specific peculiarities of this “split” Annunciation, but rather describing the various attitudes and occupations of the Virgin, Millet, Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'Evangile (n. 5), pp. 81–84, offers a repertoire of late Annunciations depicted in various media. In Cappadocia, the Annunciation in the cave church of Eski Gümüş, is split between the two sides of an arcosolium showing the beholder the possibility of redemption, ca. 1060, see Lyn Roadley, Cave monasteries of Byzantine Cappadocia, Cambridge 1985, p. 117. The paintings of Eski Gümüş are an extraordinary point of reference for the exquisite style of the mosaics in the Martorana, Palermo, ca. 1140, where the Annunciation appears on the sides of the apsidal arch. Curiously, in the illustrated versions of the Akathistos dating to the late Comnenian and the Palaiologan period, despite the fact Mary is called as “key to the gates of Paradise” (vii, 9), and the “gate of salvation” (ix, 7), the Annunciation is always depicted as a compact, single scene, divided into three moments: the angel greeting Mary; the doubting Mary; the submission to God’s will; see Ioannis Spatharakis, The Pictorial Cycles of the Akathistos Hymn for the Virgin, Leiden 2005.
68 See for example the pseudo-augustinian Sermo cccv-De Annuntiatione Dominica ii, ii, pl. 39, cols 2107–2110: “Porta facta sum coeli; janua facta sum Filio Dei”.

9/Annunciation, ivory, Raccolte d’arte applicata del Castello Sforzesco, inv. avari 14, Milan, 7th century
tery of Mary’s womb, which gave birth to “God but not solely God, and man not merely man”, by whose birth “what was once the door of sin was made the gate of salvation. Through ears that disobeyed, the Word entered in order to build a living temple”.

Therefore the womb of a humble virgin is presented as the gate of Heaven, of salvation for humanity. The image of Mary as gate of Heaven appears between the fifth and the early seventh centuries in widely circulated texts, such as the Akathistos, in the hymn on the Nativity composed by Romanos the Melodist in the sixth century, in the edifying text Pratum Spirituale of John Moschos, and in the Life of Mary of Egypt attributed to Sophronios of Jerusalem, a companion of Moschos. In the Akathistos, and in a late sixth-century homily on the Annunciation by Anastasius of Antioch, Mary is called the ladder to Heaven and the gate of Paradise. Both these Marian metaphors were reiterated in the writings of iconophile authors during the first phase of the Iconoclasm. Among them, Andrew of Crete addresses Mary as “ladder” and “gate of Heaven”. Iconophile homiliists, in particular, in their attempts to defend Incarnational theology, developed Proclus’ Marian imagery and the epithets attributed to Mary in the Akathistos. Byzantine iconophile writings circulated in the eighth century, at least in Rome, as is clear from the presence of quotations from Dionysius and John of Damascus in florilegia collated at the papal court on the occasion of two iconophile councils held in the Lateran in 731 and 769. Owing to the considerable presence of Greek-speaking clerics at the papal court and in monasteries in Rome, it is very likely that the liturgy was celebrated there relying on Greek liturgical texts. Although the means of transmission of the Byzantine Marian tradition to the West are still a matter of speculation, it seems very likely that Ambrosius Autpertus came to know them, and embraced them in the western medieval Mariology. Contact with Byzantine liturgical texts is the only explanation for his adoption of a varied literary imagery for describing the Mother of God which had no precedent in the West. In both the Marian homilies securely written by Autpertus, the Byzantine tradition about the role of Mary is clearly echoed, in concepts and wording, with regard to the mysterious incarnation that did not involve sexual intercourse and which left Mary an undefiled virgin, and to many other Mariological and Christological doctrines. Like his Byzantine predecessors, in praising Mary, Autpertus adopts the rhetorical device of expolitio, that is an incremental synonymic repetition of concepts, which results in vivid literary “icons”. Among Latin authors of the period 300–800 AD the metaphorical expression porta coeli for Mary is only used when commenting on Jacob’s own interpretation of the dream of the ladder stretched between Earth and Heaven: the ladder is “the gate of Heaven” for humanity (Genesis 28, 17). Instead, in Autpertus’ Sermo de adsuntione sanctae Mariae, – the earliest

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69. Proclus, Homilies 1, ii, 26–31: Constas, Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin (n. 23), pp. 138–139.


76. On the circulation and the “afterlife” of eighth-century Marian homilies, see Cunningham, “Messages in Context” (n. 45).

extant western homily on the subject of the *Dormitio* – the humility of Mary is held responsible for opening the gates of Paradise, so that she becomes the “*porta Paradisii*”78. In the same passage, Autpertus praises Mary for being the “*scala caelestis*” – combining the two metaphors as in the Byzantine tradition – and quotes the opening verse of the *Magnificat*79. The novelty which appears in Autpertus’ Marian homilies is that although Mary’s womb remains “closed”, undefiled like the door of the Temple, even after giving birth to the Saviour80, in becoming His mother “she becomes the gate of Heaven” through which all humanity can find redemption81. Although the apostle Paul (1 Timothy 2, 5) had written that Christ is the sole mediator between God and humanity, Autpertus, like the Church Fathers, held that Mary also can be a privileged intercessor, since the Incarnation has taken place through her82. This conceit is already very clear in John of Damascus, who firmly believed that Mary was the connection between God and humanity83. While the tender Mother of God appears in Byzantine visual arts only after the Triumph of Orthodoxy84, John of Damascus85, Andrew of Crete86, and also later Autpertus, seem to anticipate the literary image of a devoted Mary nursing the Child in her bosom, suckling the “*tantillum infantem*”, i.e. the smallest baby, at a time when she was the only human aware of His divine immensity87. According to Autpertus, Mary can be a mother to all those who believe, since Christ is their brother, and out of the maternal affection she owes to the faithful, she can truly be their intercessor, the ladder through which they can ascend to Heaven, as well as their gateway to Heaven88.

**A new Mariology**

Autpertus introduced a new theological understanding of Mary to western Europe, drawing on a rich literary imagery based on a typology which had its origins in the homilies of Proclus of Constantinople and in fifth–sixth century hymnography, and which was further developed by influential iconophile homilists. There is another feature that associates Autpertus to the Byzantine Mariological tradition: a tendency – observed in eastern authors active in the period of the Council of Ephesus and during the iconoclastic controversy, and also apparent in the figurative arts89 – to transfer biblical typologies or metaphors usually applied to Christ to His Mother in order to reinforce her theological framing and her veneration90. In fact, it has been noted that late antique Marian imagery rooted in liturgical poetry and hymnography, their poetical language notwithstanding, came to be developed in anti-heretical contexts91. Although living in a period of heated debate over the sacred images, both in Byzantium and between Byzantium and Rome, Autpertus, like the majority of western authors did not “openly” take part in these deliberations. Yet he sought the political protection of Pope Stephen III (768–772), a Sicilian Greek who in 769 convened the iconophile council of Rome. More tellingly, Autpertus presents vivid mental images of Mary, Christ, the Father, the Trinity, through the use of refined rhetoric, of poetic metaphors, of an evocative apophatic language of pseudo-Dionysian origins, which reflect the Byzantine homiletic and hymnographic tradition, and the recent developments in the eastern cult of Mary. Indirectly Autpertus reveals an attention to arguments involved in the contemporary iconophile discourse in Byzantium that is “unparalleled” in western Christian writings of the period.

In his time, Autpertus was respected as a theologian and author in Italy and in Northern Europe. His sudden death in 784 while he was *en route* to Rome was reported in a letter by Pope Hadrian I to Charlemagne, suggesting that he was a person of some consequence for the paramount western monarch. In the West the “*iconomachy*” did not stir much debate among theologians until the last decades of the eighth century, and the most comprehensive response to it, the *Libri Carolini*, composed in the early 790s, had a very limited circulation92. Autpertus’ response, not conveyed through polemical writings but through sermons aimed at his brethren as well as at the laity community attending the liturgy at *San Vincenzo al Volturno*, seems complicated by the political disputes between Carolingians and Longobards which he experienced in his own monastery and which drove him into exile. His sermons, along with his commentary to the Apocalypse, were widely circulated in the West, although they were not included in the reformed homiliary collated by Paul the Deacon for Charlemagne in 782–786, at Montecassino, which became fundamental for Western liturgy. Paul the
Deacon’s cautious attitude towards controversial matters could also be an explanation for his decision to exclude from his new collection Autpertus’ Marian homilies, which addressed in innovative, Byzantine-derived discussion, fraught questions such as the humanity of Christ and the bodily assumption of Mary.

Concluding remarks

This brief study offered to Hans Belting aims to demonstrate that the artistic production of the monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno in the first half of the ninth century expressed an awareness of contemporary theological debates and their reflections in religious mentality and in the visual arts. The Annunciation in the crypt at San Vincenzo al Volturno, painted between 824–842, reveals in Mary’s royal attributes, in the spindle and the distaff, in her upright position and bold attitude, in the architectural setting, flanking an important liminal opening, more similarities with eastern rather than with western visual and literary imagery. These iconographic features appear to rely on a theological framing of the Annunciation which took into account recent developments in Byzantine thinking on the theme. The innovative visual developments of the Annunciation in the crypt can be understood within a frame of religious meditation in which mental images played an instrumental role and led to new associations. Art historians have often resorted to literary texts in order to explain iconographies. In the case of the crypt the connection between the Marian homilies of Autpertus and a correlated visual rendering is easy to demonstrate, given the physical presence of the author at the monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno some decades earlier, and the high esteem in which his heritage was held by Abbot Epyphanios and his followers through the following centuries.

Included by Jean-Paul Migne in pl. 39, a volume of pseudo-Augustinian works, and only recently recognised as authored by Ambrosius Autpertus, Sermo de adsumptione sanctae Mariae, cccm 7-8, pp. 1025–1036.


Ambrosius Autpertus, Sermo in Purificatione sanctae Mariae, 3, cccm 7-8, p. 986, II. 4–10. The idea, expressed with the same wording “turgo permissit”, is to be found already in the Church Fathers.

Idem, Sermo de adsumptione sanctae Mariae, 10, cccm 7-8, pp. 1033–1034, 4–11.

See for example the invocation at the end of Ambrosius Autpertus, Sermo de adsumptione sanctae Mariae, 12, cccm 7-8, pp. 1035–1036; See Catherine Oakes, Ora pro nobis. The Virgin as mediator in medieval art and devotion, London 2008, p. 22.


Kalavrezou, “Images of the Mother” (n. 20), p. 170.


Andreas Cretensis, In sanctissimae Deiparae Dominae Nostrae Annuntiationem, n. 97, col. 908c; trans. Cunningham, Wider than Heaven (n. 31), p. 216: “You will indeed become nurse of the One who has been conceived in you by a strange ordinance that transcends nature”.


Idem, Sermo in Purificatione sanctae Mariae, 7, cccm 7-8, p. 992, II. 20–21: “Ommes enim filios deputat, quos eius gratia Christo consociet. Quand o non ipsa mater electorum, quae fratrem genuit eorum? Si, inquam, Christus credidit fratrem, cuer non ipsa quae Christum genuit sit credidit mater?”.


In Christian exegesis the Incarnate God had already been associated with the metaphor of the salvific gate in John 10, 9 (“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved”), see Ambrosius Autpertus, Expositio in Apocalypsin, 10, 22, 14, cccm 7-8, p. 863, l. 49, where commenting this passage, he defines Christ as the “principalis ac singularis porta caelestis”.

Niki Tsironis, “From Poetry to Liturgy. The Cult of the Virgin in the Middle Byzantine Era”, in Images of the Mother of God. Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium, Maria Vassilaki ed., Aldershot 2005, pp. 91–102, about new ideas appearing first in poetry, then in homily, in visual imagery, and in liturgy; Tsironis, “Emotion and the Senses” (n. 42), pp. 180–181. See also Margaret Mullett, “Conclusion – Not the Theotokos Again?”, in The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium (n.), pp. 279–288, sp. p. 287: who wonders if cultural changes happen in this way, and concludes that “It certainly looks as though, with slight modification, it works for the study of the Theotokos: first pictures, then literature, then liturgy.”.

The only extant copy of the complete work is Paris, bnr-Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal Ms. 663.


Clayton, The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England (n. 77), p. 21: “The extravagance of his tribute is new in the West and must derive in some way from the Greeks”.


In the early twelfth-century Chronicon Valturense Autpertus is pictured, perhaps wrongly, as a man of Charlemagne, holding a prominent position on the stage of the Carolingian-Longobard-Papal politics. He is also remembered for being a strong devotee to Mary and as having been freed from stammering by a miraculous apparition of the Virgin, see Il Chronicon Valturense del monaco Giovanni. Fonti per la Storia d’Italia 58–60, Vincenzo Federici ed., Rome 1925–1940, vol. 1, p. 82; See Claudio Leonardi, “Spiritualità di Ambrogio Autperto”, Studi Medievali, s. 3, xlv/1 (1968), pp. 1–131, sp. p. 20.

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By acknowledging to the Christian homiletic and hymnographic tradition the power of shaping religious attitudes and mental and material images of the sacred, the common historiographical formula of “text influencing images” – which is difficult to demonstrate in the absence of specific witnesses, though demonstrably present in the case of the crypt of Epyphanus – may finally be overcome in the perspective of a wider Kulturgeschichte. Indeed, the analysis of religious art should always take into account a historical approach to religious experiences, aiming at a history of attitudes toward sacred images and mental visions97.


Vzhledem k předpokladu, že se Zvěstování shodovalo s okamžikem Vtělení, se Marie najednou stává limen mezi zemí a nebem. Ale jak Marie začala být ve výtvorném umění představována jako porta coeli? Při hledání odpovědi autorka bere v potaz cirkulování teologických konceptů a liturgických textů, vyjadřujících specifickou mariánskou textovou obrazotvornost. Bere také v úvahu možnost, že tato obrazotvornost ovlivňovala soudobou náboženskou mentalitu, a že byla také nakonec „přeložena“ do vizuálních obrazů mezi Východem a Západem, a to před a během období ikonoklastických sporů. Autorka analyzuje následující literární a vizuální motivy: předání purpurové niti, Vtělení skrze conceptio per aurem, Mariin postoj ke Gabrielovu zvěstování a ztotožnění Marie s porta coeli pro spásu lidstva.

Tato krátká studie, věnovaná Hansi Beltingovi, má za cíl ukázat, že umělecká produkce kláštera San Vincenzo al Volturno v první polovině 9. století vyjadřovala povědomí o soudobých teologických debatách a jejich odrazu v náboženské mentalitě a výtvarném umění. Zvěstování v kryptě San Vincenzo al Volturno, vytvořené mezi lety 824–842, vykazuje více podobností s východní než západní vizuální a literární obrazotvorností. To se projevuje jak v Mariíných královských atributech (ve vřetenu a přeslici) a v jejím vzpřímeném a neohroženém postoji, tak také v architektonickém zasazení scény, jež obklopuje důležitý liminální otvor. Tyto ikonografické prvky se zdají být závislé na takovém teologickém rámci Zvěstování, který bral v úvahu nedávny vývoj v byzantském uvažování o tomto tématu. Inovativní vizuální provedení Zvěstování v kryptě může být chápano v rámci náboženské meditace, v níž mentalní obrazy hrály pomocnou roli a vedly k novým asociacím.