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AN IMAGE OF AUTHORITY. THE IVORY PLAQUE WITH THE ENTHRONED VIRGIN FROM AACHEN, C. 800-810

UNA IMAGEN DE AUTORIDAD. LA PLACA DE MARFIL CON LA VIRGEN ENTRONIZADA DE AACHEN, CA. 800-810

FRANCESCA DELL'ACQUA
Università degli Studi di Salerno
dellacquaf@gmail.com
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5562-6033

ABSTRACT

An ivory plaque believed to have been carved in Aachen, the capital of Charlemagne, in c.800–825, shows the figure of the Virgin Mary sitting on a backless throne under an elaborate canopy (22 x 14.5 x 0.8 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 17.190.49). Her gaze is fixed firmly on the beholder; she holds a cross-topped staff in her right hand, almost a military *vexillum*, and a distaff and spindle in her left hand, a reference to her domestic activity of spinning. Over the past two millennia the figure of the Virgin Mary has been portrayed in various ways: some emphasise her spiritual strength, others her submissive, almost passive attitude. Overall, the ivory plaque, carved more or less at the mid-point of this time span, projects an image of strength, power, and authority. Hence, there is need now to explore the intended message of the plaque and, if possible, determine what kind of power and authority – spiritual, moral, or even doctrinal – was attributed to Mary in the Carolingian Empire by the year 800.

KEYWORDS: The Virgin Mary; image, power, and authority; heresies; Carolingian ivories.

RESUMEN

Una placa de marfil que se estima que fue tallada en Aquisgrán, la capital de Carlomagno, en torno al año 800-825, muestra la figura de la Virgen María sentada en un trono sin respaldo bajo un elaborado dosel (22 x 14,5 x 0,8 cm, Nueva York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n° de inv. 17.190.49). La figura fija su mirada en el espectador; sostiene un bastón con una cruz en la mano derecha, casi un *vexillum* militar, y una rueca y un huso en la mano izquierda, explícita referencia a su actividad doméstica de hilar. A lo largo de los dos últimos milenios,

la figura de la Virgen María ha sido representada de diversas maneras: algunas enfatizan su fuerza espiritual, otras su actitud sumisa, casi pasiva. En general, la placa de marfil, tallada más o menos en el momento intermedio del período medieval, proyecta una imagen de fuerza, poder y autoridad. De ahí que sea necesario explorar ahora el mensaje que pretende trasladar la placa y, si es posible, determinar qué tipo de poder y autoridad –espiritual, moral o incluso doctrinal– se atribuía a María en el Imperio carolingio hacia el año 800.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Virgen María: imagen, poder y autoridad; herejías; marfiles carolingios.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two thousand years the figure of the Virgin Mary – a unique figure with multifarious virtues – has been portrayed in various ways, emphasising either her spiritual strength or her submissive, almost passive attitude. An ivory plaque carved in the early ninth century possibly in Aachen, the capital of Charlemagne, shows the Virgin Mary sitting on a backless throne under an elaborate canopy. She is armoured and is holding a cross staff in her right hand and a distaff and a spindle in her left hand (22 x 14.5 x 0.8 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 17.190.49) (Fig. 1). What was her unusual combination of attributes aimed at communicating? An article in 1980 labels the figure as a *Virgo militans* o *mulier fortis*,¹ while on a dedicated webpage she is labelled as “Plaque with the Virgin Mary as a Personification of the Church” or as the “Triumph of the Church”.² But is the Virgin here actually representing the triumph of the Church or the Church itself?

Its stylistic features suggest a date circa 800,³ and scientific analyses confirms this. In order to establish what was the intended message and function of the plaque, we should look at how Mary was conceived of in the early ninth-century Carolingian world. By exploring connections with doctrinal dilemmas about the Virgin Mary and by reference to the image of her in the opening illustration of a liturgical book (the Gellone Sacramentary), I hope to demonstrate that the unique image of Mary on the MET ivory plaque was a visual response to local needs and interests related to the Mother of God and that, in the Carolingian world, this image could only have been conceived around the years 790-810.

¹ S. LEWIS, “A Byzantine *Virgo militans* at Charlemagne’s Court”, *Viator*, 11 (1980), pp. 71-94.

² Arrived at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a gift from the financier John Pierpont Morgan in 1917, the ivory had been recorded in previous collections, see F. SPITZER, ed., *La Collection Spitzer: Antiquité, Moyen-Age, Renaissance*, Mâcon, 1890, I, pp. 21-23; É. MOLINIER, *Collection du Baron Albert Oppenheim: Tableaux et objets d’art*, catalogue précédé d’une introduction, Paris, 1904, p. 27, no. 61, pl. XLVI; about the acquisition by J. Pierpont Morgan, see Anonymous, “The Oppenheim Collection at South Kensington Museum”, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 9.40 (Jul., 1906), pp. 226-229, esp. p. 228, pl. I.

³ L. NEES, “El elefante de Carlomagno”, *Quintana: revista de estudios do Departamento de Historia da Arte*, 5.5 (2006), pp. 13-49, esp. p. 25, refers an exchange with Charles Little, curator at the MET, about the results of C14 analyses pointing to a period around 790 for the death of the elephant.



Fig. 1. Enthroned Virgin Mary, ivory, Aachen?, early ninth century, 22 x 14.5 x 0.8 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 17.190.49; photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access

DESCRIPTION AND TECHNICAL FEATURES

While looking firmly towards the beholder, with her elbows up and pointed out, the Virgin holds a cross staff in her right hand, almost a military vexillum, and a distaff and a spindle in her left hand, a reference to her domestic activity of spinning the purple thread for the veil of the Temple. She is dressed in a tunic adorned with embroidered and bejewelled cuffs. She is also wearing an unusual, richly draped over-tunic with leather shoulder armour traditionally associated with Roman cuirasses. A veil is elaborately draped on her left shoulder and rather resembles a masculine chlamys.⁴ Her breasts, although emerging from the folds of the over-tunic, are not prominent (Fig. 2).

⁴ LEWIS, "A Byzantine *Virgo militans*", p. 79, offers a detailed examination of her garments.



Fig. 2. Enthroned Virgin Mary, detail; photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access

An elaborate canopy with colonnettes decorated with a scale pattern, openwork capitals, and an arch carved with palmettes circumscribe the Virgin. Elongated palm leaves displayed on each side of her bear a triumphalist allusion. In the spandrels of the arch, two peacocks revive early Christian visual associations with immortality.⁵ A strip carved with the classical motif of bead and reel runs all around the plaque and is surmounted by a horizontal pediment with three palmettes in high relief and two small lions in the corners.⁶ In 1960 Thomas Hov-

⁵ On late antique perception of peacocks and their symbolism, see recently M. HAZAKI, in "Peacocks, Rainbows and Handsome Men. Perceiving Physical Beauty in the Early Byzantine Mosaics of Thessaloniki", in *The Mosaics of Thessaloniki Revisited. Papers from the 2014 Symposium at the Courtauld Institute of Art*, A. EASTMOND and M. HAZAKI (eds.), Athens, 2017, pp. 62-75, esp. pp. 64-67.

⁶ A. GOLDSCHMIDT, *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen aus der Zeit der Karolingischen und Sächsischen Kaiser, VIII.-XI. Jahrhundert*, Berlin, 1914, 1, no. 12, p. 13, pl. VI.

ing noted that the plaque seemed to have been crudely cut above the palmettes; he proposed that it may have originally contained a *Maiestas Domini* above what he defined as an enthroned “Ecclesia–Virgin”.⁷

This is the second largest, and one of the thickest, preserved ivory plaques from the Carolingian period; it seems probable that it was carved from the tusk of an African elephant, usually wider than those from Indian elephants, from the portion of the elephant tusk next to the pulp cavity.⁸ This suggests that the workshop was trying to make best use of the available precious ivory.⁹ On the front, the cavity corresponds to the area between the Virgin’s breasts and her feet; the relative thinness of this area did not allow high relief effects (Fig. 3). The lacunae in the folds between her feet and next to her vexillum are the result of thinning the ivory and making it fragile.



Fig. 3. Enthroned Virgin Mary, back side; photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access

THE SCHOLARLY RECEPTION OF THE MET PLAQUE

Stylistically our plaque is very similar to the original cover of the Lorsch Gospels, produced in c.810, which features the enthroned Virgin with the Child on the front cover and Christ trampling on the beasts on the back.¹⁰ Like the Lorsch cover, the MET plaque can be regarded as an example of the high-level craftsmanship available at or around the Carolingian court, where artisans were trained to imitate the refinements of older, eminent objects, especially ivory carvings. This is what Adolph Goldschmidt, one of the most eminent schol-

⁷ T. HOVING, *The Sources of the Ivories of the Ada School*, PhD diss., Princeton University, 1960, pp. 201-210, fig. 93, esp. 203-204.

⁸ NEES, “El elefante”, pp. 23-25.

⁹ GOLDSCHMIDT, *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen*, p. 4.

¹⁰ On the history of the manuscript, the plaques, and their bibliography, see P. WILLIAMSON, *Medieval Ivory Carvings. Early Christian to Romanesque*, London, 2010, cat.no. 41, pp. 168-175.

ars in medieval ivories, believed.¹¹ In 1905, after grouping Carolingian ivories around the Lorsch cover, he noted that these ivories strove for a kind of “middle art” between painting and sculpture. He added that while some Carolingian ivories owe more to their sculptural models due to a clearer course of the folds, such as on the Lorsch plaques, others seem to gravitate towards their painted models due to a greater entangling and crossing of the folds. The latter, in his view, was the case with regard to the MET plaque and also of the one with Saint Michael triumphant over the dragon, cut on the verso of a late antique consular diptych (Leipzig, Grassi Museum für Angewandte Kunst, inv. no. 1953.50, 33.6 x 10 cm).¹² In the first volume of his famous series on medieval ivories, published in 1914, Goldschmidt went back to our enthroned Madonna and discussed it within the “Ada Group”, comprising ivories and related manuscripts which he tentatively associated with production centres such as the court school of Aachen, the episcopal sees of Trier and Cologne, and the monastery of Reichenau.¹³

In his 1929 article on the Lorsch covers, Charles Rufus Morey declared that “Iconographically, the figure [of the Virgin on the MET plaque] is unique”, and goes on to compare it with a figure of an enthroned woman holding a cross staff in the Petershausen Sacramentary (from Reichenau, 960-980, Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, Sal. IX b, fol. 40v), commonly identified as the personification of the Church. Morey maintained that the iconography of the MET ivory is derived from the Petershausen Sacramentary and accepted Goldschmidt’s idea that it had been used on the cover of the Gero Codex. However, while Goldschmidt dated the ivory to the early ninth century, Morey concluded that “If the Morgan ivory belongs to the original binding of the Gero Codex, it also was presumably carved at Reichenau, and its Virgin might have been adapted from the miniature of the Sacramentary while both manuscripts were still in the scriptorium,” that is in c.960-980.¹⁴

In 1966, a year after the exhibition on Charlemagne in Aachen promoted by the Council of Europe (Karl der Grosse – Werk und Wirkung, 1965), Hermann Fillitz published an assess-

¹¹ A. GOLDSCHMIDT, “Elfenbeinreliefs aus der Zeit Karls des Großen”, *Jahrbuch der Königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, 26 (1905), pp. 47-67, esp. no. 11, pp. 63, and 66-67.

¹² On the Saint Michael plaque, see: GOLDSCHMIDT, *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen*, pp. 12-13, no. 11 a, b; C.R. MOREY, “The Covers of the Lorsch Gospels”, *Speculum*, 4.4 (1929), pp. 411-429, esp. pp. 422-423, and LEWIS, “A Byzantine *Virgo militans*”, pp. 79-80, on its technical-stylistic affinity with the Virgin on the MET plaque. The bottom part of the Christ plaques from the Lorsch Gospels (Rome, Museo Sacro Vaticano) was also carved on the back of a leaf from a consular diptych (of Anastasius, consul in Constantinople in 517); see M.H. LONGHURST, C.R. MOREY, “The Covers of the Lorsch Gospels”, *Speculum*, 3.1 (1928), pp. 64-74, esp. p. 68.

¹³ GOLDSCHMIDT, *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen*, no. 12, pp. 4, 13, pl. VI. This is disputed by R. KAHSNITZ, “Die Elfenbeinskulpturen der Adagruppe. Hundert Jahre nach Adolph Goldschmidt”, *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft*, 64 (2010), pp. 9-172, esp. pp. 21-22, 157-160, fig. 64. Goldschmidt believed that the Aachen plaque belonged to the Gero Codex (Darmstadt, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek, Cod. 1948), since of all the manuscripts surviving from the ninth and tenth centuries this one has a recess in its wooden cover where our plaque would fit exactly. The Gero Codex is a Gospel Lectionary produced in Reichenau around 969, the model of which has been traced in the Lorsch Gospel. However, the ivory cover was not carved for the Gero Codex, which was produced c. a century and a half later.

¹⁴ MOREY, “The Covers of the Lorsch Gospels”, pp. 424-425 and 427-428 for his hypothesis on the Lorsch Gospels using diptychs of Alexandrian origins restored at Reichenau in the second half of the tenth century and on the carving of the MET Madonna at Reichenau in the same period.

ment of Carolingian ivories which had been exhibited side by side. He declared that the MET ivory did not match the style and quality standards of the court school of Charlemagne, but appeared to be inspired by them. Fillitz used his observations of the facial features of the Virgin and the ornamental details to support his argument. He concluded that while its iconographic peculiarities associated it with works of the Ottonian period, no conclusive evidence could be drawn as to the date of its carving. He also noted that the exhibition gave an opportunity to try the MET plaque on the book cover of the Gero Codex, and that only with difficulty it could be pressed in its recess, thereby showing that it had not been made to fit it.¹⁵

Neither an Ottonian dating, nor the idea of the plaque's derivative style, however, have been supported by later scholars, with the exception of Rainer Kahsnitz.¹⁶ In 1980, Suzanne Lewis dated it to the years around 800, offering a detailed and thought-provoking iconographic reading.¹⁷ Lewis suggested that the spindle and the distaff may have been used to signify Mary's role in the Incarnation which Adoptionism contested.¹⁸ (Originating in Islamic-ruled Spain, Adoptionism threatened to create a schism within western Christianity as it allegedly supported the idea that Christ was not a natural son of God, but had been adopted by God, with this implying a lesser divinity for Christ and no role for Mary in the economy of Salvation). As for the overall, multi-layered image of Mary projected by the MET plaque, Lewis suggested that it relied on new traits attributed to her by eighth- and ninth-century western theologians inspired by the rich Byzantine Marian tradition— a valuable insight as this connection was essentially unexplored at the time she was writing.¹⁹ However, since visual references to the Virgin as military commander are lacking in the eastern visual tradition, Lewis connected the invention of the *mulier fortis* of the MET plaque to an exchange of texts, views, and relics with the Byzantine court which may have inspired an image ultimately dependant on the armoured virgin Athena Parthenos, the ancient protectress of Athens.²⁰

DEFENSOR FIDEI

As mentioned, the way in which Mary is depicted on the MET plaque is, without doubt, unique. Here Mary holds the cross staff and the spindle and the distaff. Between late

¹⁵ H. FILLITZ, "Die Elfenbeinreliefs zur Zeit Kaiser Karls des Grossen", *Aachener Kunstblätter*, 32 (1966), pp. 14-45, esp. pp. 14 and 30. Fillitz does not quote Morey on this specific point, despite sharing the Ottonian hypothesis of the latter.

¹⁶ See, for example, HOVING, *The Sources of the Ivories*, p. 209; M. HOLCOMB, *The Function and Status of Carved Ivory in Carolingian Culture*, PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1999, pp. 159-160, fig. 71 ; but also R. KAHSNITZ, "Die Elfenbeinskulpturen der Adagruppe Hundert Jahre nach Adolph Goldschmidt", *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft*, 64 (2010), pp. 1-39.

¹⁷ Lewis association of the MET Virgin to the type of ruling Mary, as *Regina gloriosa* or *Ecclesia imperatrix*, is not supported by her visual attributes which do not include regalia; see LEWIS, "A Byzantine *Virgo militans*", pp. 74-75.

¹⁸ LEWIS, "A Byzantine *Virgo militans*", pp. 73 and 78-79.

¹⁹ LEWIS, "A Byzantine *Virgo militans*", 74-75, 79, 81-88. On the multi-layered image of Mary in the Carolingian period as it can be reconstructed through western and Byzantine liturgical texts, see F. DELL'ACQUA, M. CERNO, "The Earliest Homilies on Mary's Assumption: Ambrose Autpert and the Byzantine Tradition", *Viator*, 51.2 (2021), forthcoming.

²⁰ LEWIS, "A Byzantine *Virgo militans*", pp. 89-91.

Antiquity and the medieval period, the distaff and the spindle became a visual reference to the Annunciation but also to the Incarnation.²¹ According to the apocryphal Protoevangelium of James (10, 2-11, 1), when the archangel Gabriel arrived to bring God's message to Mary, she was spinning a purple thread for the veil of the Temple from a basket of wool. Upon receiving the message, Christ was incarnate of the Virgin Mary.²² The distaff and spindle on the ivory thus remind the beholder that Mary has received the message from Gabriel, and has agreed to cooperate in the history of Salvation by becoming the vessel of the Incarnation, that is the mother of the Redeemer who would die on the Cross. But the distaff and the spindle, combined with the cross staff, a military standard which alludes to her active role as protectress of correct faith once she became the Mother of God, define the Virgin's role as Mother of God and *Defensor fidei*.

In her wide-ranging study on the Cross in the Carolingian culture, Beatrice Kitzinger underlines the multi-temporality and *utilitas* of the sign of the Cross: "simultaneously commemorating sacred history, functioning in the present day, and preparing for the end of time".²³ On the plaque, the cross is part of a set of military insignia with the shoulder armour and chlamys which, combined with Mary's active pose, transmit the message that she is ready for assertive action.²⁴ Also, the small lions in the top corner of the plaque can be taken as a reference to courage. But is this militant iconography relating to the Virgin something new?

The Virgin enthroned and carrying a cross staff finds a precedent on the lid of a small silver casket, a relic container probably offered as ex-voto to the former patriarchal basilica of Grado (Grado, S. Eufemia, sez. Arte Sacra della Diocesi di Gorizia) (Fig. 4).²⁵ On the circular lid, the Virgin appears seated on an elaborate lyre-shaped throne with a fabric backdrop; she grasps a cross staff with her right hand and with the left gently holds the Christ Child on her lap; he, in his turn, holds a book in his left hand. Both the sceptre and the Constantinian monogram "XP" (from ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ, that is "Christ" in Greek) inscribed in Mary's halo have military associations, the latter appearing after the victory of Constantine at the Milvian Bridge in 312. Stylistic and iconographic elements suggest for the Grado box a late fifth or early sixth-century

²¹ M. EVANGELATOU, "The Purple Thread of the Flesh: The Theological Connotations of a Narrative Iconographic Element in Byzantine Images of the Annunciation", in *Icon and Word. The Power of Images in Byzantium*, A. EASTMOND, L. JAMES (eds.), Aldershot, 2003, pp. 261-279; M. LIDOVA, "XAIPE MAPIA: Annunciation Imagery in the Making", *IKON*, 10 (2017), pp. 45-62, esp. 49-53. Mary holds the distaff and the spindle while she stands in front of the Archangel Gabriel in the murals in the Crypt of Abbot Epyphanus (824-842) at the monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno.

²² The early Greek and Latin Fathers maintained that the Incarnation took place through the sense of hearing (*conceptio per aurem*) in the moment Mary received the salute by Gabriel; they drew 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); for the sources, see J. M. SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, "Per aurem intrat Christus in Mariam. An iconographic approach to the *conceptio per aurem* in Italian Trecento painting from patristic and theological sources", *De Medio Aevo*, 9-1 (2016), pp. 83-122.

²³ B. KITZINGER, *The Cross, the Gospels, and the Work of Art in the Carolingian Age*, Cambridge, New York, 2019, p. 3 *passim*.

²⁴ Her posture calls to mind the hands-on-hip posture, a universal gesture that humans have developed to appear stronger, bigger, and defiant, similarly to other animals.

²⁵ LEWIS, "A Byzantine *Virgo militans*", p. 77.

origin, possibly from Ravenna or Aquileia.²⁶ An enthroned, crowned Virgin holding the Child on her lap and bearing a cross staff is found also on the famous Roman icon of the Madonna della Clemenza (Rome, S. Maria in Trastevere, 200 x 133 cm), variably dated between the sixth and the early eighth centuries.²⁷

Judging from extant objects, the first time Mary appears in the visual arts of the Carolingian period she does not have military insignia but can still be seen as the Protectress of Faith. This is on the first folium of the Gellone Sacramentary, a liturgical book containing all the words spoken and sung by a priest during Mass (Paris, BnF, Lat. 12048, fol. 1v) (Fig. 5). Produced between c.790-804, this is an early testimony to the Gelasian Sacramentary composed in Francia in c.750 which also reflects aspects of the sacramentary reformed by Pope Hadrian in 784 and sent to Charlemagne soon after²⁸. By 804 the manuscript was recorded at Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, a monastery founded in southern Francia by William of Gellone, cousin of Charlemagne. On its opening page, Mary literally steps into the liturgy. Given the prominence accorded to her, it is worth exploring how she is presented and in what function.

In the Gellone Sacramentary her figure is part of the initial title letter, “i”, of the «incipit» of the book (“In nomine Domini nostri Iesu Christi. Incipit liber sacramentorum ...”) and is accompanied by the inscription s[AN]c[t]A MARIA to one side of her head. She wears a hood, a dress with geometrical patterns and embroidered wristbands, and she stares at the beholder while holding a censer in her right hand and a cross staff in her left one, as if putting the text under the protection of the signum crucis. After the incipit, a rubricated inscription declares



Fig. 4. Pyxis or relic container of the Virgin and other saints, silver, Grado, S. Eufemia; photo: ©Arcidiocesi di Gorizia-Edilizia ed Arte Sacra

²⁶ G. B. DE ROSSI, *Bullettino di archeologia Cristiana*, 2, ser. 3 (1872), pp. 41-42, 155-158; H. H. ÁRNASON, “Early Christian Silver of North Italy and Gaul”, *The Art Bulletin*, 20.2 (1938), pp. 193-226, esp. 212-215, 225; G. NOGABANA, *The Trophies of the Martyrs: An Art Historical Study of Early Christian Silver Reliquaries*, (Oxford Studies in Byzantium), Oxford, 2008, pp. 127-128 and 111-120.

²⁷ See M. LIDOVA, “Empress, Virgin, Ecclesia. The Icon of Santa Maria in Trastevere in the Early Byzantine Context”, *IKON*, 9 (2016), pp. 109-128, for a discussion of earlier literature.

²⁸ The Gellone Sacramentary is an early testimony to the Gelasian Sacramentary composed in Francia in c.750. It also reflects aspects of the sacramentary reformed by Pope Hadrian in 784 and sent to Charlemagne soon after; see A. CHAVASSE, *Le sacramentaire gélasien (Vaticanus Reginensis 316). Sacramentaire presbytéral en usage dans les titres romains au VIIIe siècle*, (Collection Bibliothèque de Théologie, série IV Histoire de la Théologie), Tournai, 1958; J. DESHUSSES, “Le sacramentaire de Gellone dans son contexte historique”, *Ephemerides liturgicae*, 75 (1961), pp. 193-210; C. R. BALDWIN, “The scriptorium of the Sacramentary of Gellone”, *Scriptorium*, 25.1 (1971), pp. 3-17.



Fig. 5. Incipit page, Sacramentary of Gellone, diocese of Meaux or of Cambrai, c.790-804, Paris, BnF, Lat. 12048, fol. 1v; photo: ©BnF

that the following prayer is one sung at the Christmas vigil in S. Maria Maggiore in Rome which was celebrated by the pope.²⁹

Celia Chazelle described the cross and the censor Mary holds in the Gellone Sacramentary as liturgical instruments for Mass bearing a reference to Christ's death and resurrection: in holding these instruments and marking the entrance to the liturgy, the Virgin appears as a mediator of the Eucharist, a quasi-personification of the Ecclesia. Combined with the Christmas vigil oration, Mary's depiction can be seen as a reference to "the Passion, resurrection, eucharist, and apocalypse while chiefly remembering the incarnation".³⁰

After noting the uniqueness of the iconography of Mary in this sacramentary, Chazelle paves the ground for its reading within theological debates at the court of Charlemagne. In fact, she sees this image as conceived to extoll Mary at a time when court theologians were battling the heresy of Adoptionism. It has been argued that Adoptionism stimulated Carolingian Mariology.³¹ When Alcuin, the learned Anglo-Saxon monk and theologian working in the circle of Charlemagne, wrote a treatise against Adoptionism in 799, he quoted the above-mentioned opening prayer of the Roman Christmas vigil Mass to defend the perfect union of the divine and human natures in Christ.³²

The uniqueness of Mary's role and iconography in the 'liturgical space' of the Gellone Sacramentary is indisputable and can only be explained by the fact that she was believed to be a unique figure combining virginity and motherhood.³³ However, here her cross staff appears more as a protective device rather than as a liturgical instrument. In fact, it pairs with the monograms ΑΩ and ΧΡ and opposes the dangerous siren between the first and the second line at the beginning of the sacramentary.³⁴ The idea of seeking protection from the Virgin Mary was not new, as it can be found already in the oldest known Marian prayer, the *Sub tuum praesidium*, attested in a papyrus of the third century CE from Coptic Egypt (Manchester, John Rylands Library, Rylands III 470).³⁵

²⁹ Christmas vigil prayer: *Deus qui nos redemptionis nostrae annua expectatione laetificas*, etc. that is rendered in the current Roman Missal as "O God, who gladden us year by year as we wait in hope for our redemption, etc."

³⁰ C. CHAZELLE, *The Crucified God in the Carolingian Era: Theology and Art of Christ's Passion*, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 82-86.

³¹ I. SCARAVELLI, "Teologia e venerazione mariana nella cultura carolingia", *Theotokos*, 16.2 (2008), pp. 15-38. On her growing importance in western theology and spirituality, see F. DELL'ACQUA, "Mary as *scala caelestis* in Eighth and Ninth Century Italy", in *The Reception of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Marian Narratives in Texts and Images*, M.B. CUNNINGHAM, T. ARENTZEN (eds.), Cambridge, 2019, pp. 235-256; EADEM, "Magnificat. L'impatto degli orientali sull'immagine di Maria Assunta al tempo dell'Iconoclasmo", in *Le migrazioni nell'alto Medioevo*, (LXVI Settimana di Studio, Spoleto, 5-11 April 2018), Spoleto, 2019, pp. 1025-1057.

³² ALCUIN, *Contra Felicem Urgellitanum Episcopum Libri Septem*, 7.13, MIGNÉ (ed.), PL 101, 227A; CHAZELLE, *The Crucified God*, p. 85.

³³ On the "valence sacerdotale" the Virgin Mary acquires in apocryphal writings and for references to the role of women in the early Christian Church, see I. FOLETTI, "Des femmes à l'autel? jamais! Les diaconesses (veuves et prêtresses) et l'iconographie de la Théotokos", *Micrologus' Library*, 78, Florence, 2016, pp. 51-92, esp. p. 62.

³⁴ On the function of the Cross in liminal spaces, see E. KITZINGER, «A Pair of Silver Book Covers in the Sion Treasure,» in *Gatherings in Honor of Dorothy Miner*, U. McCracken et al. (eds.), Baltimore, 1974, pp. 3-17.

³⁵ Ὑπὸ τῆν σῆν εὐσπλαγγίνων later translated in Latin as *Sub tuum praesidium*, and in English as "Beneath your compassion."

Already known in the eastern Mediterranean in the fourth century, the use of hand crosses as both liturgical and protective devices is attested later in the West but may, in fact, date back earlier³⁶. As Beatrice Kitzinger remarked, the use of hand crosses turned “the sign [of the Cross] into an object that accomplishes something”, referring specifically to the example in the Gellone Sacramentary.³⁷ Here, with her cross, Mary authenticates and protects the words the priest pronounces during liturgy, thus she is presented as having the authority to act as the guardian of the liturgical space against all forms of evil that can creep into the Church and its rituals. On a more general level, she appears here as the *Defensor fidei*, the protectress of faith.³⁸ Her protective function in association with the Cross matches her Son crucified on the *Te igitur* page, the other major illumination in the book (fol. 143v).³⁹ Christ appears on a bejewelled cross while angels above singing the hymn *Sanctus*, in Latin but using Greek letters. The *Sanctus* was sung by the whole congregation before meeting the Incarnate God through the Eucharist. It has been found inscribed on Greek papyrus amulets and jewellery from Coptic Egypt; it was eventually combined with invocations to Christ to heal the wearer through the intercession of the Virgin.⁴⁰ The hymn may have retained this protective association also in the Gellone Sacramentary, where it marks the beginning of the section about the celebration of Eucharist.⁴¹

VEXILLUM FIDEI

That a military standard surmounted by a cross was a symbol of the Christian faith can be seen already in the work of an early Christian apologist, Firmicus Maternus. In his treatise against paganism, written in the mid-fourth century, Maternus invites emperors Constantius and Constans to raise their standard of faith (“vexillum fidei”).⁴² Only a few decades earlier their father, Emperor Constantine I, had adopted the Christogram “XP” on his labarum as a protective emblem after having legitimised the Christian faith. In a treatise written in 377, Ambrose of Milan wrote of virgins who consecrate their life to God. He puts forth Mary as an

³⁶ O. NUSSBAUM, “Zur Bedeutung des Handkreuzes”, in *Mullus: Festschrift Theodor Klauser*, A. STUIBER (ed.), (Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband 1), Münster, 1964, pp. 259-67, esp. 266-267.

³⁷ B. KITZINGER, *Cross and Book: Late-Carolingian Breton Gospel Illumination and the Instrumental Cross*, PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012, pp. 76-78; see also EADEM, *The Cross*, p. 70.

³⁸ My interpretation of Mary holding the hand cross aligns with KITZINGER’s in *The Cross*, p. 73; see also *ibidem*, p. 78, on the reciprocity of “book-space and Church-space”.

³⁹ About the depictions of the crosses in this page and in the initial page of the Gellone codex, see KITZINGER, *The Cross*, pp. 69-81, esp. p. 70, where she remarks that “figuration coordinates liturgical instruments and actions”.

⁴⁰ T. DE BRUYN, *Making Amulets Christian. Artefacts, Scribes, and Contexts*, (Oxford Early Christian Studies), Oxford, 2017, pp. 191-195.

⁴¹ This reading of the *Sanctus* expands on KITZINGER’s notation that “The road to seeing the Crucified in the bread is paved by Mary/Ecclesia with her liturgical instruments”; see KITZINGER, *The Cross*, p. 76.

⁴² FIRMICUS MATERNUS, *De errore profanarum religionum*, 20.7, ll. 10-13, R. TURCAN (ed.), *Firmicus Maternus, L’Erreur des Religions Paiennes*, (Collection Budé), Paris, 1982, p. 125; trans. R. E. OSTER, *Julius Firmicus Maternus: De errore profanarum religionum*. Introduction, Translation and Commentary, MA thesis, Rice University, Houston, Texas, 1971, p. 90 (online: <https://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/89943/RICE0978.pdf>).

image of virginity in which many virtues shine, and speaks of her as “*vexillum fidei*”, (banner of faith).⁴³ However, later, the association of the cross with Mary becomes less frequent.

The cross as protective sign marked on the forehead as a “*vexillum fidei*” appears in *Rex aeterne Domine*, an ancient Latin hymn of the fifth-sixth century in honour of the Cross sung at matins during the Paschal Time.⁴⁴ The hymn *Vexilla regis* by the Italian poet Venantius Fortunatus active the Merovingian court, presents the Cross as the victory sign of Christ carried like a military standard in front of an army. He composed this hymn on the arrival of the relics of the True Cross in Poitiers in 569 gifted to Queen Rade Gund by the Byzantine emperors Justin II and Sophia. The Cross is presented not only as an instrument of death but also as the tree of life that offers redemption and salvation to humankind⁴⁵. Venantius’ hymns would feature prominently in focal celebrations of the liturgical calendar both in the Frankish and in the Roman milieu, during Lent, Easter, and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14). The impact of antiphons, hymns, and prayers, sung or recited by heart by many Christians, as well that of sermons, material objects and visual imagery, went well beyond being functional in the celebration of feasts: they nurtured mental images and religious attitudes, and may well have nurtured the vision of the Cross as *vexillum fidei*⁴⁶.

In the *Opus Caroli*, written in the early 790s as an official refutation of the support of holy images manifested by Pope Hadrian I and by the participants to the Council of Nicea II (787), Charlemagne’s theologians recommended that not “a material image” but rather the “mystery of the Cross of the Lord” should be the “*vexillum*” to be followed “onto the battlefield” of faith.⁴⁷ A few decades later Hrabanus Maurus composed and disseminated copies of *In honorem sanctae Crucis* (by 814, and again in the 830s), a collection of *carmina figurata* in praise of the Cross, where poems are accompanied by illustrations in which verses shape images.⁴⁸ The particular interest the Carolingians had in the *signum crucis* – as a concept/symbol in the *Opus Caroli* but also as a manufactured object of devotion and liturgy in Hrabanus – cannot be retraced here. It suffices to say that by the early 800 the Cross was seen as a polyvalent symbol of redemption and salvation, of triumph over death and evil, and of correct faith.⁴⁹

⁴³ AMBROSE OF MILAN, *De uirginibus*, 2.2.15, MIGNE (ed.), PL 16, 210D.

⁴⁴ *Rex aeterne Domine*, in *Early Latin Hymns*, A. S. WALPOLE (ed.), Cambridge, 1922, hymnus 42, pp. 211-217, esp. strophe 9; trans. L. VAN TONGEREN, *Toward the Origins of the Feast of the Cross and the Meaning of the cross in Early Medieval Liturgy*, (Liturgia Condenda 11), Leuven, 2000, p. 235.

⁴⁵ VENANTIUS FORTUNATUS, *Vexilla Regis*, in *Early Latin Hymns*, WALPOLE (ed.), hymnus 34, 173-177, vv. 1-4; trans. VAN TONGEREN, *Toward the Origins*, pp. 243-452.

⁴⁶ See F. DELL’ACQUA, *Iconophilia. Politics, Religion, Preaching, and the Use of Images in Rome c.680-880*, (Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies 27), Abingdon-on-Thames, New York, p. 112, passim; on “liturgical images” see É. Ó CARRAGÁIN, “Interactions between Liturgy and Politics in Old Saint Peter’s, 670-741. John the Archcantor, Sergius I and Gregory III”, in *Old Saint Peter’s*, R. MCKITTERICK ET AL. (eds.), Rome, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 177-189.

⁴⁷ *Opus Caroli Magni contra Synodum (Libri Carolini)*, II.28, A. FREEMAN with P. MEYVAERT (eds.), MGH, Conc. 2.2, Suppl. 1, Hannover, Leipzig, 1998, pp. 296-297; see also KITZINGER, *The Cross*, p. 9.

⁴⁸ HRABANUS MAURUS, *In honorem sanctae Crucis*, M. PERRIN (ed.), CCCM 100-100A, Turnhout, 1997. On the Carolingians and the Cross, I refer to KITZINGER, *The Cross*.

⁴⁹ C. CHAZELLE, “Crucifixes and the Liturgy in the Ninth-Century Carolingian Church”, in *Il Volto Santo in Europa. Culto e immagini del crocifisso nel medioevo. Atti del Convegno internazionale*, M. C. FERRARI and A. MEYER (eds.),

The Cross, the word *vexillum*, and the figure of Mary were combined on a precious cross-shaped container of relics of the Cross (*staurotheca*) commissioned by Pope Paschal I (817-824). The enamelled inscription running along its sides can be read as an invocation to the Virgin on the part of the pope: “Accept, I beg you, my sovereign, queen of the world [*regina mundi*], this standard [*vexillum*] of the Cross which Bishop Paschal has offered you”.⁵⁰ Erik Thunø observed that the term *vexillum* was used by early Christian authors to signify relics or objects taken around in processions.⁵¹ Indeed, a layer of encrusted balm found on the reverse of the *staurotheca* suggested the practice of ritual anointment and processional display, when it was probably paraded as *vexillum* of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and future salvation, of which Mary was the vehicle and guarantor. In circumscribing the *staurotheca*, the inscription becomes a metaphor for the ineffable mystery of the Incarnation: her womb circumscribed the uncircumscribable God and gave birth to his Son, who would die on a cross for the salvation of humankind.⁵²

THE AUTHORITY OF MARY AMONG THE CAROLINGIANS

In 1960 Thomas Hoving found it difficult to explain the combination of the cross staff (which he believed to be a reference to the iconography of the Byzantine empress), with the spindles and Mary’s “curious, hybrid costume” on the MET plaque. Noting “non-antique elements”, such as the confused lines of the drapery and the clumsy anatomy of the Virgin, he concluded that “this delicate balance of separate yet interdependent iconographic features did not exist at one and the same time in an earlier model but was brought about during the Carolingian period”.⁵³ In the absence of closely comparable earlier or later images of the Virgin, Hoving’s line of thought should be revisited and contextualised in Carolingian Francia.

The present attempt bypasses the fascinating though intricate and ultimately unconvincing explanation Suzanne Lewis offered about the iconography of MET plaque. She believed it to be a product of a circle close to Charlemagne trying to convey the sovereign’s “personal ambition to rival the power and prestige of the Byzantine empress [Irene]” by appropriating the image of the *Virgo militans*.⁵⁴ But while Mary as *Virgo militans* was indeed present in Byzantine literature, it was absent from its visual culture; moreover, according to the ancient Frankish Salic Law, in early medieval Francia women were traditionally deemed unfit to inherit or rule and we cannot imagine Charlemagne reversing this tenet and the prevailing view on women as unworthy of power and lacking authority.⁵⁵ This notwithstanding, Lewis’

Engelberg (13-16 settembre 2000), (Collana La Balestra 47), Lucca, 2003, pp. 67-93, esp. pp. 79-83; EADEM, *The Crucified God*, pp. 99-114; see also KITZINGER, *The Cross*, p. 209, n. 29.

⁵⁰ C. R. MOREY, “The Inscription on the Enameled Cross of Paschal I”, *Art Bulletin*, 19 (1937), pp. 595-596.

⁵¹ E. THUNØ, *Image and Relic. Mediating the Sacred in Early Medieval Rome*, (Analecta Romana Instituti Danici, Supplementum 32), Rome, 2002, pp. 25-26; DELL’ACQUA, *Iconophilia*, p. 203.

⁵² DELL’ACQUA, *Iconophilia*, p. 203.

⁵³ HOVING, *The Sources of the Ivories*, pp. 205, 207-208.

⁵⁴ LEWIS, “A Byzantine *Virgo militans*”, p. 86.

⁵⁵ For evidence on and references to Carolingian women and power, see R. STONE, “Political Culture and the Changing Role of Countesses, 750-1050”, *History*, 102 (2017), pp. 824-839; in Byzantium and especially on Irene, see J. HERRIN, *Unrivalled Influence. Women and Empire in Byzantium*, Princeton, 2013, esp. pp. 194-207.

suggestion that contacts with Byzantium did impact on the western theological framing and cult of Mary has been confirmed by recent explorations – although well before Charlemagne.⁵⁶

During the seventh and eighth-century theological controversies which opposed the popes and Byzantine emperors, the Virgin, her multifarious attributes, and the complex system of values she embodied had a pivotal role in symbolising the orthodoxy of Chalcedonian Christology, with the result that her theological framing became stronger as did her official cult. She came to be seen as a banner of correct faith,⁵⁷ and was adopted as main intercessor and spiritual authority by a series of popes in the eighth and ninth centuries.⁵⁸ She also gained prominence in treatises, liturgical hymns, and sermons written by Alcuin and other Carolingian theologians in Francia. This would be sufficient to explain the prominence she gains in the Gellone Sacramentary and on the MET plaque, where her holding of the cross staff, that is the banner of orthodoxy, is legitimised.

All the same, around 810 in the Carolingian domain Mary's exceptional standing came under scrutiny, at least in some circles. For example, in the early ninth century the celebration of feasts in her honour was not universally observed in the dioceses of the kingdom north of the Alps.⁵⁹ Does this point to the possibility that her spiritual authority had been questioned? Indeed, besides the two main controversies which vexed the Carolingians, that is the one over sacred images and Adoptionism, another polemic, although less prominent, about Mary's destiny after her transition to the afterlife agitated Carolingian theologians. The belief that the Mother of God did not suffer death and bodily decay as other mortals did, but was assumed into heaven, had been nurtured for centuries especially at pilgrimage sites in the Holy Land and transmitted by apocryphal texts and pilgrim's accounts, although it had no scriptural basis and no authoritative exegetical tradition. Envoys that Charlemagne sent to the Holy Land before 810 to verify the material needs of local churches and monasteries, may have realised that the idea of Mary's Assumption was only supported by beliefs accreted over the centuries at holy sites. This must have been difficult for the Carolingian establishment to accept. It was not only obsessed with the idea of correctness associated with authority in any field of public and private life, but was also in pursuit of establishing a correct, normative text for the Bible, as the efforts of Alcuin and others at the Tours school bear witness.⁶⁰ This may explain why in a capitulary that Charlemagne issued in c.810 listing the major liturgical feasts of the Frankish

⁵⁶ For brevity, I address to DELL'ACQUA, CERNO, "The Earliest Homilies".

⁵⁷ D. IOGNA-PRAT, D., É. PALAZZO, D. RUSSO, "La Vierge comme 'système de valeurs'," in EIDEM (eds.), *Marie. Le culte de la Vierge dans la société médiévale*, Paris, 1996, pp. 5-12; S. C. MIMOUNI, *Les traditions anciennes sur la Dormition et l'Assomption de Marie. Études littéraires, historiques et doctrinales*, (Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements 104), Leiden, Boston MA, 2011, pp. 321-322; T. ARENTZEN, *The Virgin in Song: Mary and the Poetry of Romanos the Melodist*, (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion), Philadelphia, PA, 2017, p. 36.

⁵⁸ DELL'ACQUA, *Iconophilia*, pp. 23-28, 41-43, 61-69.

⁵⁹ SCARAVELLI, "Teologia e venerazione mariana"; C. WOODS, "Inmaculata, Incorrupta, Intacta: Preaching Mary in the Carolingian Age," in *Sermo doctorum. Compilers, Preachers and their Audiences in the Early Medieval West*, M. DIESENBERGER ET AL. (eds.), (Sermo 9), Turnhout, 2013, 229-262.

⁶⁰ On the Frankish obsession with correctness, see M. DE JONG, *The Penitential State. Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 814-840*, Cambridge, New York, 2009, p. 112ff.; R. KRAMER, *Rethinking Authority in the Carolingian Empire (The Early Medieval North Atlantic)*, Amsterdam, 2019, pp. 106-121; in liturgy and

domains, he requested an investigation into the matter of the Assumption; the consequence was the withholding of its celebration on 15 August. Celebration of the Assumption resumed a few years later, but only in some dioceses of the Carolingian domain.⁶¹ In the homiliary compiled between 822-26 by Hrabanus Maurus, abbot of Fulda, for preaching to lay congregations in the diocese of Mainz, Mary does not have much space apart from the homilies for the feast days of her Purification in the Temple and Assumption. For example, she is absent when the author deals with the theme of the Incarnation during the Christmas cycle. However, Hrabanus deems her worthy of praise as Queen and as powerful intercessor under the influence – it has been suggested – of the Longobard Paul the Deacon.⁶² Does this scattered evidence reflect a lesser status for Mary in liturgy and popular piety in early ninth-century Francia? We should not come to hasty conclusions as our picture of Marian cult and devotion in Carolingian Francia is not yet clear.

That the question of the theological framing of Mary's Assumption was not solved is attested by the fact that later Paschasius Radbertus (d. 865), monk and then abbot of Corbie and St Riquier, forged a letter on the Assumption known as the *Cogitis me*. He adopted the identity of the Church Father Jerome, who had spent many years in Palestine and thus was seen able to provide an authentic account of the facts.⁶³ This Latin text was aimed at offering not only reflections on the Assumption, but also at warning the reader that the migration to heaven of Mary in body and spirit had been transmitted by unreliable sources.⁶⁴ Only by the late ninth century do we find the Assumption of Mary openly supported through texts and images in the Carolingian world. There, an ivory book cover carved by the monk Tuotilo of St Gall for the so-called *Evangelium Longum* has Christ's Ascension on the front cover and Mary's bodily Assumption on the back plate. Here, a haloed Mary is standing as orans, flanked by four angels showing her that her place is in heaven, and is accompanied by the inscription "Ascension of Saint Mary" (St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 53, 39.5x23.2 cm).⁶⁵ In adopting the expression "ascension" for Mary, Tuotilo seems to refer to the conceptual parallel traced in early Christianity between Christ's Ascension and his Mother's Assumption, therefore two supernatural transitions to the afterlife, and transmitted by the influential author Gregory of Tours.⁶⁶ Another monk of St Gall, Notkerus Balbulus (d. 912), offered a sort of a belated answer to the pseudo-patristic *Cogitis me* that warned those who believe in doubtful

prayer, see E. ROSE, "Emendatio and Effectus in Frankish Prayer Traditions", in R. MEENS ET AL. (eds.), *Religious Franks. Religion and Power in the Frankish Kingdoms. Studies in Honour of Mayke de Jong*, Manchester, 2016, pp. 128-147.

⁶¹ About the Carolingian controversy on Mary's Assumption, see DELL'ACQUA, *Iconophilia*, pp. 268-270.

⁶² HRABANUS MAURUS, *Holmiliae*, MIGNE (ed.), PL 90, 9A-134D; see WOODS, "Inmaculata, Incorrupta, Intacta," pp. 229-230 about Hrabanus and pp. 247-259 about Francia in general.

⁶³ PSEUDO-JEROME, *Cogitis me*, in Paschasii Radberti. De partu Virginis. De Assumptione Sanctae Mariae Virginis, E.A. MATTER, A. RIPBERGER (eds.), CCCM 56C, Turnhout, 1985, pp. 109-162.

⁶⁴ *Cogitis me*, II, 7, CCCM 56C, 111-12, ll. 46-57, esp. pp. 53-56.

⁶⁵ For a recent appraisal, see D. GANZ, C. DORA (eds.), *Tuotilo. Archäologie eines frühmittelalterlichen Künstlers*, Basel, 2017.

⁶⁶ GREGORY OF TOURS, *Glory of the Martyrs*, 3-4, B. KRUSCH (ed.), MGH, SRM 1.2, 39; trans. R. VAN DAM, *Gregory of Tours: Glory of the Martyrs*, (Translated Texts for Historians 4), Liverpool, 1988, p. 4.

accounts of Mary's passing: Notkerus says that "without doubt" she had been taken up into heaven "also with her body".⁶⁷

Even though this polemic may not have heavily affected the general perception of the Virgin and private devotion toward her, it may well have concerned court theologians, in whose circle the MET plaque was probably conceived and crafted. Therefore, the unique iconography of the MET plaque, reflecting some of the multifarious attributes of the Mother of God, could be more easily understood in years preceding the uncertainties about her public celebrations and Assumption into heaven, which somehow must have led learned minds to questioning her exceptional transition to the afterlife and possibly also her spiritual authority.

As for the function of this plaque, it should be noted that the most prominent parts in the carving, that is the Virgin's nose, her hands, the muzzle of the two lions in the upper corner of the plaque, and the two capitals of the canopy, are worn out as if by repeated contact. This suggests that the plaque was mounted for a long time on a frequently handled object which often touched a hard surface. It is tempting to see it as being used as a book cover, which was the function attested for many Carolingian ivories. As noted by Anne-Orange Poilpré, the Christian book is an instrument by which the Church expresses its terrestrial presence and its intentions on the assembly of the believers⁶⁸ – therefore, such covers and the messages they conveyed must have been carefully studied. While the eccentric iconography of the MET ivory does not make it a plausible cover for the Gospels or other canonical Scriptures, it may have been conceived for a sacramentary. There are two facts which may support this hypothesis. Firstly, in the years following the arrival of the reformed papal sacramentary, the Hadrianum, in c.785, this liturgical book also underwent a reform in the Carolingian domain which may have prompted the production of new manuscripts and new covers. Secondly, on the first folium of the Gellone Sacramentary, which attests to the first stages of the Carolingian reform of the sacramentary in a milieu close to the court, Mary is invested with the prominent role of *Defensor Fidei*. Thus, in the years preceding the polemics on her Assumption into heaven, Mary may have been promoted as a strong and authoritative *Defensor fidei* on the cover of a sacramentary to safeguard its contents.

CONCLUSIONS

The iconography of the MET plaque, combining references to the Incarnation as well as to the protection of faith, is unique – as unique is the very figure of the Virgin–Mother Mary in the Christian economy of salvation. The fact that the northern regions of the Carolingian Empire were undoubtedly distant from the Mediterranean Christian figural tradition, may have favoured a selective and innovative approach to that tradition, as well as a certain freedom in formulating a visual response to local needs or interests in representing the Virgin. In the late eighth-century Carolingian kingdom, as seen in the Gellone Sacramentary, Mary was invested

⁶⁷ NOTKERUS BALBULUS, *Martyrologium*, MIGNÉ (ed.), PL 131, 1141B-1142B, esp. 1142A-B; but also, IDEM, *Liber sequentiarum*, 19, In *Assumptione sanctae Mariae*, PL 131, 1015D-1016C, esp. 1016A.

⁶⁸ A.O. POILPRÉ, "Le royaume de Charlemagne comme Ecclesia? Le témoignage d'un manuscrit liturgique et de ses images (l'Évangélaire de Godescalc)", *Pecia. Le livre et l'écrit*, 14 (2012) pp. 37-55.

with authority, possibly because as a reaction to Adoptionism. In remarking her protective presence counterbalancing the siren, I believe that in the Gellone Sacramentary Mary acts as the custodian of liturgical practices. Her role as *Defensor fidei* had grown in importance in western theology: two centuries of debate in the East and in the West determined that, in being the container of the Incarnation, she was viewed as a banner of orthodoxy and a custodian of values. This perception might have impacted on those who conceived the image of Mary on our plaque. But rather than appealing to the model of the Athena Parthènos, as suggested by Lewis to explain her military attitude, I believe they invented this image ad hoc, adding the military elements of the cross staff and leather bands to the veiled Virgin in order to attribute the role of active defendant of faith to her. The key-elements on the plaque, the cross staff and the distaff and the spindle, have equal weight in determining her role: the cross staff is the banner of faith that the armoured Mary is entitled to raise since she is the Mother of God, a fact alluded to by the distaff and the spindle.

In light of C14 analyses and of the above considerations, a date around 800 could be confidently confirmed. In fact, only a few years later, in c.810s, there seems to appear a growing concern among Carolingians about Mary's transition to the afterlife being based only on apocryphal texts and pilgrim's account. In these circumstances, which appear to have lasted until the late ninth century, it seems difficult to see the eccentric figure on the MET plaque being conceived and used on a liturgical book cover. Its iconography, to judge from extant evidence, did not become widespread and in the West, where, in the long run, the image of Mary as tender mother prevailed over the powerful, armoured, and authoritative Virgin-*Defensor fidei*.