

[Recepción del artículo: 20/10/2024]  
[Aceptación del artículo revisado: 11/01/2025]

**A WINDING PATH TO THE STARS:  
ANCIENT ACANTHUS, MARY, AND CHRISTIAN AESTHETICS**  
**UN SINUOSO CAMINO HACIA LAS ESTRELLAS:  
EL ACANTO ANTIGUO, MARÍA Y LA ESTÉTICA CRISTIANA**

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<https://doi.org/10.61023/codexaq.2024.40.005>

ABSTRACT

A comparison of the thirteenth-century *Virgen de las Batallas* with a first-century marble statue of Psyche and Eros introduces questions about the continuity, revival, and evolving meaning of ancient ornament during the Middle Ages. The paper examines ways acanthus glossed representations of young women in art and texts, simultaneously likening Mary's beauty to that of pagan goddesses and differentiating it. Drawing on Vitruvius, the *Ara pacis Augustae*, Campana plaques, the Timaeus, Santa Maria Maggiore and John VII's oratory in Rome, the Flabellum of Tournus, images of the Tree of Jesse, and the Master Gregorius, it argues that acanthus ornament's inherent vibrancy and regeneration not only marked several moments of classical revival but also glossed the Annunciation and Mary's Assumption through an aesthetic of anagogical ascent.

KEYWORDS: acanthus ornament, Mary, Venus, Tree of Jesse, Calcidius.

RESUMEN

La comparación de la *Virgen de las Batallas* del siglo XIII con una estatua de mármol de Psique y Eros del siglo I plantea diversas cuestiones sobre la continuidad, el renacimiento y la evolución del significado del ornamento antiguo durante la Edad Media. Este artículo examina el modo en que el acanto glosaba las representaciones de mujeres jóvenes en el arte y los textos, asemejando simultáneamente la belleza de María a la de las diosas paganas y diferenciándolas entre sí. Basándose en Vitruvio, el *Ara pacis Augustae*, las placas de Campana, el Timoteo, la basílica de Santa María Mayor y el oratorio de Juan VII en Roma, el Flabellum de Tournus, imágenes del Árbol de Jesé, y el Maestro Gregorio, se argumenta que el ornamento de acanto, por su inherente vibrancia y regeneración, no solo marcó varios momentos de revival clásico sino que también glosó la Anunciación y la Asunción de María a través de una estética de asenso anagógico.

Timeo, Santa María la Mayor y el oratorio de Juan VII en Roma, el Flabellum de Tournus, las imágenes del Árbol de Jesé y el Maestro Gregorio, sostiene que la vitalidad y regeneración inherentes al ornamento de acanto no sólo marcaron varios momentos de renacimiento clásico, sino que también glosaron la Anunciación y la Asunción de María a través de una estética de ascensión anagógica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: acanto, ornamento, María, Venus, Árbol de Jesé, Calcidio.

A first-century marble statue portraying Psyche with Eros seated on a pedestal overgrown with acanthus (Baia, Museo archaeologico del Castello; Fig. 1)<sup>1</sup> is enough like a reliquary or Host container fashioned as the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child produced in Limoges twelve centuries later (Madrid, Museo del Prado, Fig. 2)<sup>2</sup> to raise two questions central to a conference devoted to medieval experience of antiquity. First: How is the long continuity of depicting a young woman with an infant boy atop acanthus ornament to be explained? And second: How do the aesthetics, that is, the understanding of the motif in very different cultures transform the meaning of quite similar figurations?



Fig. 1. Psyche and Eros, 2nd century (Baia, Museo archaeologico del Castello)

Fig. 2. Virgen de las Batallas, 1225-35 (Madrid, Museo del Prado)

<sup>1</sup> Paul ZANKER, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (trans. A. Shapiro), Ann Arbor MI, 1990, pp. 172-195. I wish to thank Elisabetta Scirocco for the photograph.

<sup>2</sup> Juan Carlos ELORZA and Joaquín YARZA LUACES, *La Virgen de las Batallas*, Madrid, 1998.

## ACANTHUS AND WOMEN

Ubiquitous in Hellenistic and Roman art, the hybrid of a natural cabbage-like calyx and grafted coils was richly varied already in ancient ornament.<sup>3</sup> The scrolls were sometimes pictured growing from a crater or other type of container, as on the back of the *Virgen de las Batallas* (Fig. 3). They were naturalistic, or symmetrical and geometric. And the symbol of earth's fertility generating ineluctable life was frequently shown bearing fruit, or inhabited with animals and human figures.<sup>4</sup> On the *Ara pacis Augustae* in Rome, for instance, a matron, often identified as Tellus, holding a child personified Rome's golden age described in Virgil's *Georgics* and *Aeneid*; and more than half of the exterior is covered with vines including acanthus.<sup>5</sup> The motif abounds on first-century funerary urns such as that of Allius Priscus in the Museo Centrale Montemartini in Rome where calyxes emerging from withered sepals thematize renewal of life (inv. MC 2111), as well as on Roman altars that received the life force of sacrificed animals.<sup>6</sup> It animates diverse subjects



Fig. 3. *Virgen de las Batallas*, 1225-35 (Madrid, Museo del Prado), back

<sup>3</sup> Alois RIEGL, *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*, Berlin, 1893; Loretta VANDI, *La trasformazione del motivo dell'acanto dall'antichità al XV secolo: Ricerche di teoria e storia dell'ornamento*, Berlin, 2002; Finbarr B. FLOOD, "'God's Wonder': Marble as Medium and the Natural Image in Mosques and Modernism", *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture*, 23-2 (2016), pp. 168-219; Gerhard WOLF, "Vesting Walls, Displaying Structure, Crossing Cultures: Transmedial and Transmaterial Dynamics of Ornament", in Gülru NECİPOĞLU and Alina PAYNE (eds.), *Histories of Ornament. From Global to Local*, Princeton, 2016, pp. 96-105; Antonella BALLARDINI, "La vita tra le foglie: forme e racconto del tralcio abitato (VIII-XII secolo)", in Francesco CARTA, Raimondo MICHETTI, Carla NOCE (eds.), *Sacra Silva. Bosco e religione tra tarda antichità e medioevo*, Rome, 2024, pp. 289-313.

<sup>4</sup> Jocelyn M. C. TOYNBEE, John B. Ward PERKINS, "Peopled Scrolls: A Hellenistic Motif in Imperial Art", *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 18 (1950), pp. 1-43.

<sup>5</sup> David CASTRIOTA, *The Ara Pacis Augustae and the Imagery of Abundance in Later Greek and Early Roman Imperial Art*, Princeton, 1995, 202; ZANKER, *Power of Images*, pp. 179-202; Gilles SAURON, *L'histoire végétalisée: ornement et politique à Rome*, Paris, 2000; John POLLINI, *From Republic to Empire. Rhetoric, Religion, and Power in the Visual Culture of Ancient Rome*, Norman OK 2012, pp. 271-308; Giulia CANEVA, *Il codice botanico di Augusto, Roma-Ara Pacis. Parlare al popolo attraverso le immagini della natura*, Rome, 2010. A cast of the Baia sculpture is displayed in the Museo dell'Ara Pacis in Rome.

<sup>6</sup> Daniele MANACORDA, "Volusio ritrovato. Le reliquie dei martiri nel sepolcro dei 'sacerdos Geni'", *Bullettino dei Musei comunali di Roma*, 25 (1978-80), pp. 60-82; Stefano RICCIONI, "Gli altari di S. Galla e di S. Pantaleo. Una 'lettura' in chiave riformata dell'Antico", *Hortus Artium Medievalium*, 11 (2005), pp. 189-200; Id., "Epigrafi e immagini nella Roma di Gregorio VII", in *Gregorio VII, vescovo di Roma e pontefice universale: atti del LX Convegno storico internazionale, Todi, 8-10 ottobre 2023*. Spoleto, 2024, pp. 449-494.

on contemporary terracottas known as “Campana reliefs” produced mostly in Lazio,<sup>7</sup> on which the plant appears in various forms but often is shown shedding dead outer leaves at the base and growing into geometric coils that rise heavenward. As Sophie Crawford-Brown has argued, vegetal ornament of the type repeated on the reliefs was deployed along the roof lines of buildings, for example on the Temple of Janus in Rome’s forum pictured on Nero’s widely circulated sestertius of 64-68, the scrolling acanthus creating a liminal zone between the masonry and the sky.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Campana reliefs also associate acanthus ornament with men, many combine the omnipresent motif young women. One in Portaferraio (Elba), for instance, features Psyche (as on the marble in Baia), her toes balanced on the calyx and with symmetrical tendrils—blossoming into flowers and generating leaves—rising to her arms, whence the fluttering butterfly wings propel further ascent (Museo Archeologico della Linguell; Fig. 4). The willowy peplos-clad woman and the framing spiral-grooved columns bearing capitals that replicate the plant’s outer leaves suggest inspiration from Vitruvius’ (contemporary) *De architectura*.<sup>9</sup>

The Corinthian column imitates the slenderness of a young girl, on account of the tenderness of their age because young girls can be seen to have even more slender limbs and obtain even more charming effects when they adorn themselves... A young Corinthian girl (virgo) of marriageable age was struck down by disease and passed away. After her burial, her nurse collected the few little things in which the girl had delighted in life and, gathering them in a basket, placed this basket on top of the grave and covered it with a roof tile which she happened to put down on top of an acanthus root. By springtime, the acanthus root, which had been pressed down in the middle all the while by the weight of the basket, began to send out leaves and tendrils, and its tendrils, as they grew up along the sides of the basket, turned outward, when they met the obstacle at the corners of the roof tile, first they began to curl over at the ends and finally, they were induced to create coils at the edges. Callimachus, who was known for his elegance and refinement of his work in marble, passed by this monument and noticed the basket and the fresh delicacy of the leaves enveloping it. Delighted by the nature and form of this novelty, he began to fashion columns for the Corinthians on this model, and fixed the rule of their proportions.<sup>10</sup>

Acanthus’s popularity increased during the Severan period. Deeply cut scrolls emerging from richly carved calyxes framing the portraits of Septimius Severus and Julia Domna perpetuated the theme of imperial benefice on the arch of the Argentarii in Rome.<sup>11</sup> The

<sup>7</sup> On average 40 cms<sup>2</sup>. Hermann VON ROHDEN, Hermann WINNEFELD, *Architektonisch römische Tonreliefs der Kaiserzeit*, Berlin, 1911; Stefano TORTORELLA, “Le lastre Campana. Problemi di produzione e di iconografia”, *Publications de l’École Française de Rome*, 55 (1981), pp. 61-100; Sophie CRAWFORD-BROWN, “Down from the Roof: Reframing Plants in Augustan Art”, *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 35(1) 2022, pp. 33-63.

<sup>8</sup> CRAWFORD-BROWN, “Down from the Roof”, pp. 56-57.

<sup>9</sup> Both may draw from a common tradition.

<sup>10</sup> VITRUVIUS, *On Architecture*, F. GRANGER (trans.), Cambridge MA, 1931, pp. 208-209; Carol H. KRINSKY, “Seventy-Eight Vitruvius Manuscripts”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 30 (1967), pp. 36-70; Stefan SCHULER, *Vitruv im Mittelalter: Die Rezeption von “De architectura” von der Antike bis in die frühe Neuzeit*, Cologne, 1999; Wim VERBAAL, “The Vitruvian Middle Ages and Beyond”, *Arethusa*, 49 (2) (2016), pp. 215-225; Id., “Medieval Vitruvius”, in Ingrid D. ROWLAND and Sinclair W. BELL (eds.), *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Vitruvius*, Leiden, 2024, pp. 137-164.

<sup>11</sup> Jaś ELSNER, “Sacrifice and Narrative in the Arch of the Argentarii in Rome”, *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 18 (2005), pp. 83-98.



Fig. 4. Psyche, Campana relief, 1st century (Museo Archeologico della Lingua)

ornament abounds in the Severan basilica of Leptis magna, sometimes growing from craters, sometimes framing naked women, and mostly inhabited by animals.<sup>12</sup> Early third-century pilasters in the *grotte vaticane* are filled with the rich acanthus ornament abounding in fruit and animals and centered on Tellus and Carpus ringed by the four seasons (Fig. 5).<sup>13</sup>

In turn, acanthus came to be associated specifically with Venus on works big and small. The main tympanum of the fourth-century Atrium House in Aphrodisias (the city of Aphrodite) depicts the goddess on a shell, raised by two tritons (one holding an anchor and the other an oar) flanked by another tympanum featuring a solitary acanthus leaf with

<sup>12</sup> Ranuccio BIANCHI BANDINELLI, ETHEL VERGARA CAFFARELLI, Giacomo CAPUTO, *The Buried City: Excavations at Leptis Magna*, New York NY, 1966; John B. WARD-PERKINS, Barri JONES, Roger LING, *The Severan Buildings of Leptis Magna: An Architectural Survey*, St. Paul MN, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> I thank both Pietro Zander, Head of the Necropolis and Artistic Heritage Section of the Fabbrica di San Pietro, and Dott.ssa Antonella Ballardini for accompanying me to examine the pilasters in spring 2024 and for discussing them with me. TOYNBEE, WARD-PERKINS, "Peopled Scrolls", pp. 20-23; Antonella BALLARDINI, "Un oratorio per la Theotokos: Giovanni VII (705-707) committente a San Pietro", in *Medioevo: i committenti*, Arturo Carlo QUINTAVALLE (ed.), Parma, 2011, pp. 98-116; Dale KINNEY, "Spolia" in *St. Peter's in the Vatican*, William TRONZO (ed.), New York, 2003, pp. 16-47; Antonella BALLARDINI, Paola POGLIANI, "A Reconstruction of the Oratory of John VII (705-7)", in TRONZO (ed.), *Saint Peter's*, pp. 190-213; John OSBORNE, *Rome in the Eighth Century*, Cambridge, 2020, pp. 23-36; BALLARDINI, "Vita tra le foglie".





Fig. 5. Tellus and Carpus, Pilasters from Oratory of Pope John VII, early 3rd century (Vatican, grottoes of St. Peter's)

exceptionally beautiful coils that are masterpieces of openwork carving.<sup>14</sup> The association of Aphrodite with acanthus is condensed on a pilaster capital from the north temenos house (Aphrodisias, Museum; Fig. 6).<sup>15</sup> The cauliculi and volutes are deeply undercut; Callimachos, it must be remembered, was renowned as the inventor of the stone drill (Pausanias, *Ἑλλάδος Περιήγησις*, 1.26.7).<sup>16</sup> And between them, the city's patroness, clasping a towel and covering her pudendum, rises from the primordial sea symbolized by the pearl-like element of the

<sup>14</sup> R. R. R. SMITH, «Late Roman Philosopher Portraits from Aphrodisias», *Journal of Roman Studies*, 80 (1990), 127-155; IAN LOCKEY, *The Atrium House at Aphrodisias, Caria* (unpub. Ph.D. dissertation at New York University), New York, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> SMITH, «Late Roman Philosopher»; LOCKEY, *The Atrium House*.

<sup>16</sup> ANDREW STEWART, *One Hundred Greek Sculptors, Their Careers and Extant Works*, Perseus Digital Library.



Fig. 6. Venus, fourth-century pilaster capital (Aphrodisias, Museum). New York University Excavations at Aphrodisias (G. Petruccioli)

traditional egg-and-dart necking on which she stands, her head haloed by a shell that doubles as the abacus's rosette. The goddess famous for her hair was also featured on Roman hairpins atop Corinthian capitals, likely an allusion to Vitruvius's "charming effects when [young girls] adorn themselves."<sup>17</sup> A first-century bronze pin with silver highlights is exhibited in a case in the Louvre devoted to the goddess (Paris, Louvre, NIII 3099 ; Br 382). Kneeling on a Corinthian capital, the goddess wrings out her tresses. A Romano-British example in the Victoria and Albert attests to the motif's wide distribution (Acc. Number 244-1868).<sup>18</sup>

During the same period, Christians appropriated acanthus along with its several associations for their religious use. The intrados of the third-century "Cappella greca" in Rome's Priscilla catacomb, for instance, are adorned with stuccoes which (as on some Campana reliefs) deploy molded clay plants with shriveled sepals generating robust calyxes onto which vital tendrils are grafted that curl into flowers and sprout twisting sprigs to effect a transition between spaces of dead bodies and sought-after heaven itself.<sup>19</sup> Scriptural and other images pace the ornament's transition, Daniel in the lions' den, Moses drawing life-saving water from the rock, the Three Hebrews in the furnace, and a phoenix rising from the fire.<sup>20</sup> The

<sup>17</sup> Hérica VALLADARES, "Translating Aphrodite: The Sandal-Binder in Two Roman Contexts", *Classical Antiquity*, 43-1 (2024), pp. 167-216. I am grateful to Ann Kuttner for animated and informative discussions of the material.

<sup>18</sup> See also: *L'Ornamento prezioso: una raccolta dioreficeria popolare italiana ai primi del secolo*, Rome, 1986; pl. 29, fig. 172. Perhaps inspired by such well-known representations, Calcidius likened the planet Venus' retrograde orbit to an acanthus coil in his fourth-century Latin translation of Plato's *Timaeus*. I take up acanthus's astronomical aspect in my forthcoming pendant article to this one: "'Like a winding acanthus coil': Romanesque Ornament's Meaningful Demeanors," in *L'art roman au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle. L'avenir d'un passé à réinventer*, Éric PALAZZO, Cécile VOYER, and Marcello ANGHEBEN (eds.), Rennes, 2025.

<sup>19</sup> The actual living plant, it was understood, dried up during the summer and then generated new growth.

<sup>20</sup> Philippe PERGOLA, *Le catacombe romane. Storia e topografia*, Rome, 2002, pp. 130-138.

atrium of the Lateran baptistery decorated under Pope Sixtus III (r. 432-40) was adorned with conches filled with the ornament derived from the *Ara pacis*.<sup>21</sup> In the fifth-century tomb of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, acanthus figures the fountain of life in the celestial paradise and the Church of his saints growing toward Christ.<sup>22</sup> Diverse monuments decorated during the Justinianic period deployed acanthus ornament. In the nave mosaic of the basilica at Sabratha, for instance, a large acanthus calyx generates grape vines occupied by birds, including a phoenix near the base, several peacocks, eagles, and others, which Henry Maguire has scrutinized in terms of Christian salvation and imperial victory.<sup>23</sup> In Ravenna, the cathedra of Maximianus also doubles cabbage and crater, acanthus and grapevine;<sup>24</sup> and, above the altar in the San Vitale, a mosaic featuring acanthus figures the Sacraments' elevating transformation that restores life.<sup>25</sup> Most evocative are the *transenne* from Sant'Apollinare in Classe, which engage the Callimachan drilling technique to enact acanthus's transmorphic potential (Ravenna, Museo arcivescovile di Ravenna).<sup>26</sup> On the frame, chalices replace the traditional craters and the scrolls rise to a disk embossed with a cross (most likely the Host), while the central interior screen abstracts the motif to form a lacy membrane around crosses that figure eucharistic dematerialization.

## MARY

The apse of Sta. Maria Maggiore in Rome decorated under Sixtus III likely featured Mary with her Son amid acanthus plants, as did the mosaic in the Basilica Suricorum in Santa Maria di Capua Vetere which survived longer (Fig. 7).<sup>27</sup> If the Virgin and acanthus were in fact, displayed in Mary's principal basilica in Rome, an association with the ornament would need no further justification. Perhaps because of it, Pope John VII put acanthus to use in the

<sup>21</sup> Sible DE BLAAUW, *Cultus et Decor. Liturgia e architettura nella Roma tardoantica e medievale*, Vatican, 1994, pp. 149-155; Maria ANDALORO, *La pittura medievale a Roma (312-1431)*, Corpus I, Milan, 2006, pp. 348-352; Serena ROMANO, "Rome et l'antique: XI<sup>e</sup>-XII<sup>e</sup> siècles. Remarques, souvenirs, considérations éparses", *Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa*, 39 (2008), pp. 23-30; Lex BOSMAN, Ian P. HAYNES, Paolo LIVERANI (eds.) *The Basilica of Saint John Lateran to 1600*, Cambridge, 2020; BALLARDINI, "La vita tra le foglie", pp. 297-329.

<sup>22</sup> Deborah M. DELIYANNIS, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 70-84.

<sup>23</sup> Henry MAGUIRE, *Earth and Ocean. The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art*, University Park PA and London, 1987, pp. 76-80.

<sup>24</sup> Giuseppe BOVINI, *La cattedra eburnea del vescovo Massimiano di Ravenna*, Faenza, 1957.

<sup>25</sup> Paola NOVARA, *Le collezioni del Museo Arcivescovile di Ravenna*, Ravenna, 2011, pp. 22-23.

<sup>26</sup> Antonio IACOBINI, "L'albero della vita nell'immaginario medievale: Bisanzio e l'Occidente", in *L'architettura medievale in Sicilia: la cattedrale di Palermo*, Angiola M. ROMANINI, Antonio CADEI (eds.), Rome, 1994, pp. 241-290.

<sup>27</sup> The speculation is based largely on an eighteenth-century description of the Capuan apse; Eugène MUNTZ, "Mosaïque de la Cathédrale de S. Maria di Capua", *Revue archéologique*, ser. 3, 17 (1891), pp. 79-81; Christa IHM, *Die Programme der christlichen Apsismalerei 4.-8. Jahrhundert*, 2nd ed. Frankfurt 1992, pp. 56, 177-178; Maria ANDALORO, Serena ROMANO, "L'immagine nell'abside," in *Arte e iconografia a Roma: da Costantino a Cola di Rienzo. Di fronte e attraverso*, Maria ANDALORO, Serena ROMANO (eds.), Milan, 2000, pp. 177-178; Maria MENNA in Maria ANDALORO, *L'orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immanini. 312-468*, p. 354. When Jacopo Torriti replaced the Early Christian apse in the thirteenth-century mosaic, he included generous acanthus framing; Julian GARDNER, *The Roman Crucible. The Artistic Patronage of the Papacy 1198-1304*, Munich, 2013, p. 261; Serena ROMANO, *Apogeo e fine del medioevo 188-1431*, Milan, 2017, p. 124.



Fig. 7. Mary, apse  
mosaic in Santa  
Maria di Capua  
Vetere, Basilica  
Suricorum,  
reconstruction  
from Belting Ihm



burial chapel he had prepared for himself in St. Peter's dedicated to the *Dei Genetrix*.<sup>28</sup> Consecrated a year before he died in 707 and remodeled for diverse purposes throughout the Middle Ages, the oratory is known primarily from scattered spolia (including the Severan pilasters in the Vatican grottoes) and a nearly three-meters high mosaic fragment now in Florence (San Marco; Fig. 8). Giacomo Grimaldi's renderings made in 1609 just before the oratory was demolished enable a reconstruction, preserved in the *Instrumenta autentica* (Biblioteca Vaticana, Arch. Cap. S. Pietro A. 64ter; Fig. 9) and transmitted also through autograph copies, including one Grimaldi sent in 1621 to Charles Borromeo (Milan, Bib. Ambrosiana, MS A 168 inf., fol. 97<sup>r</sup>; Fig. 10).<sup>29</sup> A major element of the "*decus omne*" noted in the Pope's epitaph inscribed on the altar face, the pilasters embodied the "*prisco squalor remoto*" inserted in a new arrangement and purpose-made mosaics and furnishings:

<sup>28</sup> Giacomo GRIMALDI *Instrumenta autentica; Decorazione della basilica antica di S. Pietro in Vaticano*, Reto NIGGL (ed.), Vatican, 1972, pp. 126-127. See also: Stephan WAETZOLDT, *Die Kopien des 17. Jahrhunderts nach Mosaiken und Wandmalereien in Rom*, Vienna-Munich 1964, pp. 69-71; William TRONZO, "Setting and Structure in Two Roman Wall Decorations of the Early Middle Ages", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 41 (1987), pp. 477-492; Herbert L. KESSLER, *Old St. Peter's and Church Decoration in Medieval Italy*, Spoleto, 2002; Anne VAN DIJK, "The Angelic Salutation in Early Byzantine and Medieval Annunciation Imagery", *Art Bulletin*, 81(3) (1999), pp. 420-436; EAD., "Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, and Constantinople: The Peter Cycle in the Oratory of Pope John VII (705-707)", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 55 (2001), pp. 305-328; and EAD., "Reading Medieval Mosaics in the Seventeenth Century: the Preserved Fragments from Pope John VII's Oratory in Old St. Peter's", *Word & Image*, 22 (2006), pp. 285-291; Eileen RUBERY, "Pope John VII's Devotion to Mary: Papal Images of Mary from the Fifth to the Early Eighth Centuries", in *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, Chris MAUNDER (ed.), London, 2008, 155-199; Henry MAGUIRE, "What is an Intercessory Image of the Virgin? The Evidence from the West" in Leena M. PELTOMAA, Andreas KÜLZER, Pauline ALLEN (eds.), *Presbeia Theotokou. The Intercessory Role of Mary across Times and Places in Byzantium (4th-9th Century)*, Vienna, 2015, pp. 219-32; Antonella BALLARDINI, "Alle origini dell'Album del Grimaldi (Arch. Cap. S. Pietro A. 64ter). Il *Liber pictuarum* di Domenico Tasselli e altri disegni dell'antico San Pietro", in *The Vatican Library Review*, 1 (2022), pp. 53-90.

<sup>29</sup> Eleanora TOSTI, "Disegno dell'oratorio di Giovanni VII in Roma medievale. Il volto perduto della città (cat. of an exhib.)", Marina RIGHETTI, Anna M. D'ACHILLE (eds.), Rome, 2002, p. 183.



Fig. 8. Mary, mosaic from oratory of Pope John VII (Florence, San Marco)

Here bishop John determined to be buried  
and ordered that he should be placed under the feet of the domina  
entrusting his soul to the protection of the Holy Mother,  
the unmarried Virgin who gave birth to God.  
Here, the place delivered from its ancient squalor,  
brought together every decoration to astonish squanderer posterity  
not for the vainglory which shall be extinguished under the sky  
but for the devout passion for the one who bore God . . .  
O Holy Mother, everything that was precious I offered you without sparing  
I gave to the poor all that remained, as demonstrated by the stranger who,  
exhausted from the ocean, reaches the city  
finding the nourishment that the vase of life dispenses;  
Therefore, before the Most High, hope is placed in you, O alma Mother.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Hic sibi constituit tumulum iussitque reponi/Presul Johannes sub pedibus domine/Committens animam sancte sub tegmine matris/Innuba quae peperit virgo parensque Deum/Hic decus omne loco, prisco squalore remoto/Contulit, ut stupeat prodiga posteritas/Non pompe studio, quae defluit orbe sub ipso/Sed fervore pio pro genitrice Dei./Non parcens opibus, pretiosum quicquid habebat/ In tuo distribuit munera, sancta parens. Pauperibus reliquum munus dedit; indicat hospes/Fessus ab oceano qui tenuis Urbe venit/Cum victum inveniet, quo vitae seria sumat: Hinc apud excelsum spes erit, almae, tibi.* The text was recorded in the *Sylloge Cantabrigiensis* (Cambridge, University Library, Kk.4.6); Wilhelm LEVISON, "Aus Englischen Bibliotheken II", *Neues Archiv der Gesellschaft für Ältere Deutsche Geschichtskunde*, 35 (1910), pp. 363-364; Angelo SILVAGNI, "La silloge epigrafica de Cambridge", *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, 20 (1943), pp. 111-112. trans. BALLARDINI, POGLIANI, "A Reconstruction", p. 204.

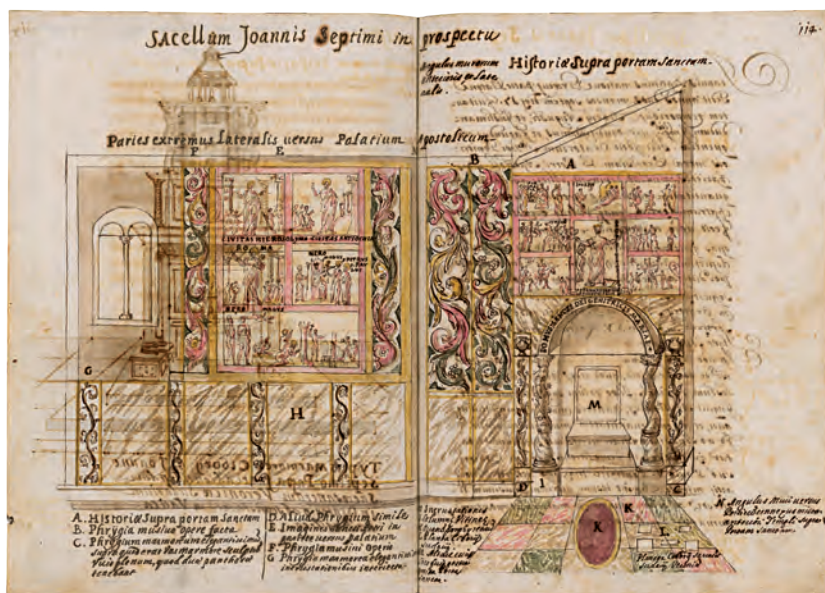


Fig. 9. Oratory of Pope John VII, drawing in Giacomo Grimaldi, *Instrumenta autentica* (Biblioteca Vaticana, Arch. Cap. S. Pietro A. 64ter)



Fig. 10. Oratory of Pope John VII, drawing in Giacomo Grimaldi, *Instrumenta autentica* (Milan, Bib. Ambrosiana, MS A 168 inf., fol. 97r)

Pope John may well have had Vitruvius in mind when he (literally) resurrected the ancient acanthus architecture to honor the young Mother of God portrayed in the mosaic. Presumably because the spolia were not sufficient for his chapel program, he also had at least one new pilaster made.<sup>31</sup> The imitation suggests that not just the antiquity but also the ornament was important. So too the meaning; the largest of the Severan pilasters featuring Tellus and Carpus abutted the central mosaics, as Ballardini has suggested, glossing the *alma mater* as a new *mater terrae*.<sup>32</sup>

The chapel was dedicated on the Sunday before the Feast of the Annunciation,<sup>33</sup> and the three Gospel scenes along the top featured Mary, beginning with the Annunciation where the Virgin is enthroned at the center. Except for names, Gabriel's "AVE GRATIA PLENA DOMINUS TECUM" are the only inscribed words, echoing the rites within the oratory,<sup>34</sup> while acanthus scrolls adorning Mary's footrest mimed the inspiring of matter through the angelic salutation. The acanthus spolia amplified the effect. They incorporated several lions attacking deer and other creatures, tying the ancient ornament to Psalm 21(22): "Save me from the mouth of the lion" recited during the Mass for the Dead and hence suited to the Pope John's funerary chapel.<sup>35</sup> More important, moving from pagan sculpture to newly-made mosaic, they glossed Mary's role in the economy of salvation, whose undergarment is a kind of acanthus textile that elevates the Pope's soul literally *sub tegamine matris*.<sup>36</sup> The Queen of Heaven occupied a niche flanked by precious black columns, moreover, from which Ballardini has argued, curtains would have been suspended.<sup>37</sup> With a belt cinched high on her abdomen, the Virgin appears to be pregnant; she is the inscription's "vase of life", the manna jar kept in a new Ark of the Covenant to which she was likened.<sup>38</sup> What is more, Francesca Dell'Acqua is persuasive that, with raised arms stretched out in a gesture of acceptance, the figure evokes Mary's ascension to heaven as pictured in a contemporary textile in Sens (Trésor de la Cathedral).<sup>39</sup> The continuity with the ASCENSIO SANCT[A]E MARI[A]E on the cover of the *Evangelium longum* is also striking, carved by Tuotilo at the end of the ninth century, there flanked by paired angels

<sup>31</sup> Per J. NORDHAGEN, "A Carved Pilaster in the Vatican Grottoes: Some Remarks on the Sculptural Techniques of the Early Middle Ages", *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Atrium Historiam Pertinentia*, 4 (1969), pp. 113-119.

<sup>32</sup> BALLARDINI, POGLIANI, "A Reconstruction", p. 193.

<sup>33</sup> Ballardini proposed that the date of the Chapel's consecration on 21 March 706 referred to the Feast; BALLARDINI, "Un oratorio", p. 110, n. 3; OSBORNE, *Rome in the Eighth*, p. 23, n. 4.

<sup>34</sup> As VAN DIJK, "The Angelic Salutation" demonstrated, several of the pictured narratives engaged the Oratory's function, the Adoration for instance thematizing the Pope's gift represented by the miniature chapel he is shown presenting to Mary in the main mosaic.

<sup>35</sup> See: WALDEMAR DEONNA, "Salva me de ore leonis, À propos de quelques chapiteaux romans de la cathédrale Saint-Pierre à Genève", *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 28(2), 1950, pp. 479-511; JAVIER MARTÍNEZ DE AGUIRRE, "Sálvame de la boca del león: imágenes de combate espiritual e intercesión en monasterios románicos hispanos", in *Conflicto y violencia en los monasterios hispanos medievales*, Aguilar de Campoo, 2021, pp. 53-90.

<sup>36</sup> Known as acanthinus; cf. SERVIUS, *Ad Aen.* I.649; ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, *Etym.*, VIII.21.

<sup>37</sup> These may have resembled those of the tabernacle in the contemporary Ashburnham Pentateuch trimmed in acanthus (Paris, BnF, MS Nouv. acq. lat. 2334, fol. 2<sup>r</sup>); cf. BEZALEL NARKISS, *The Ashburnham Pentateuch*, Valencia, 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Frequent in Early Christian writings, the metaphor was codified ca. 1200 in the *Pictor in Carmine*; see: HERBERT L. KESSLER, "Sacred Light from Shadowy Things", *Codex Aquilarensis*, 32 (2017), pp. 237-269.

<sup>39</sup> *Iconophilia, Religion, Politics, and Sacred Images in Italy c. 680-880*, London-New York, 2020, pp. 241-259.



(Fig. 11).<sup>40</sup> It is not out of the question that the Tuotilo ivory was actually based on the esteemed Roman work and not simply an iconographic counterpart, even though the deeply-cut acanthus scrolls representing the heaven to which Mary ascends are inhabited by a lion attacking a deer depicted earlier in the century on the ivory covers of St. Gall, Cod. 60).<sup>41</sup> The result, in any case, evokes the Venus shown on the Aphrodisias capital rising between acanthus. Whatever the precise sources, the mosaic of the Virgin Mary embodied Pope John's funerary chapel in her very person, as Ballardini rightly concluded, itself "a place where the mystery of Mary's motherhood transforms humankind's ancient aspiration . . . to the certainty of eternal life."<sup>42</sup>

John VII's oratory achieved renown immediately, and its fame increased over the centuries. Already in his *De temporum ratione* of 725, Bede praised the "oratorium sanctae dei genetricis pulcherrimo intra ecclesiam beati Petri apostoli".<sup>43</sup> It was among the sources Pope Paschal I deployed for the tomb of his mother Theodora in Sta. Prassede.<sup>44</sup> Joanna Story has compared the paired black columns at the entrance to those flanking the Virgin icon in the Oratory.<sup>45</sup> Cued, perhaps, by John VII's own replicating



Fig. 11. Ascension of Virgin Mary, ivory cover, 894-96  
(St. Gall, MS 53)

<sup>40</sup> Hatto I. *Glanz der späten Karolinger: Erzbischof Hatto I. von Mainz (891-913). Von der Reichenau in den Mäuseturm*, Winfried WILHELMY (ed.), Regensburg, 2013, pp. 169-171; *Tuotilo. Archäologie eines frühmittelalterlichen Künstlers*, David GANZ, Cornel DORA (eds.), Basel, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Acanthus traditionally harbored conflicts between animals and men and other signs of evil lurking in paradise, including on the *Ara pacis*. Uninhabited perfectly symmetrical acanthus figures heaven on the Tuotilo cover's recto which represents Christ enthroned in heaven flanked by cherubim of the celestial city with Earth and Ocean below and sun and moon above. *Hatto I*, p. 170.

<sup>42</sup> BALLARDINI, POGLIANI, "Reconstruction", p. 204.

<sup>43</sup> MGH. Auct. ant. 13, T. Mommsen (ed.), Berlin, 1898, p. 317; OSBORNE, *Rome in the Eighth*, p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> Caroline J. GOODSON, *The Rome of Paschal I. Papal Power, Urban Renovation, Church Rebuilding and Relic Translation, 817-824*, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 166-172. In this, she follows Gillian MACKIE, "Abstract and Vegetal Design in the San Zeno Chapel, Rome: The Ornamental Setting of an Early Medieval Funerary Programme", *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 63 (1995), pp. 159-182. The oratory's importance continued after it was transformed into the chapel of Christ's sudarium and fitted with an elaborate ciborium for the sacred relic associated with Veronica, another beautiful woman; Ann VAN DIJK, "The Veronica, the *Vultus Christi* and the Veneration of Icons in Medieval Rome", in *Old Saint Peter's, Rome*, McKitterick et al. (eds.), pp. 229-256.

<sup>45</sup> *Charlemagne and Rome. Alcuin and the Epitaph of Pope Hadrian I*, Oxford, 2023, pp. 205-206.



of the ancient pilasters, the mosaic in the lunette over the altar, which marks and makes the transition between the (later) image of Mary flanked by Prassede and Pudenziana and the Deesis, features acanthus growing from stylized calyxes inhabited, as in the Severan pilasters, with birds, cervids, and half-length lions. As Caroline Goodson characterized the results: “The ornaments of the mosaics, echoing the motif of the socle bases of the columns, are flowing vines and scrolls of acanthus peopled with figures and animals, motifs which speak to the rebirth promised in the world to come, in this case, through the intercession of Christ and the saints.”<sup>46</sup>

John VII's *oratorium sanctae dei genetricis pulcherrimo* precipitated acanthus's revival also north of the Alps.<sup>47</sup> Prompted perhaps by Bede's praise, both Alcuin and Charlemagne likely visited the chapel during visits to Rome in 781; and when Pope Hadrian I died in 795, they had an epitaph of black Aachen marble bordered with acanthus sent to the Eternal City. Acanthus signaled ancient Rome more broadly at the Carolingian court,<sup>48</sup> reinforced by revived knowledge of Vitruvius<sup>49</sup> and Calcidius.<sup>50</sup> It was deployed on the balustrade the Frankish king installed on the second level of his palatine chapel;<sup>51</sup> and on a ivory chalice produced at the court (Utrecht, Catharijneconvent). Carolingian interest in acanthus ornament continued especially at Tours, where Alcuin had retired after he left Charlemagne's court in 796.<sup>52</sup> As Éric Palazzo has shown through an eloquent analysis of a Sacramentary still in Tours (Bib. mun., MS 184), it was used to animate images of the consecration of the Host.<sup>53</sup> Acanthus was also richly developed at Carolingian Metz, especially in the mid-ninth-century Drogo Sacramentary (Paris, BnF, MS lat. 9428) where it adorns title pages, initials, and numerous *VD* ligatures of the *Vere dignum* preface.<sup>54</sup> The ornament functioned meaningfully on the comb of St. Heribert in Cologne most likely made for Charles the Bald's coronation as King of Lotharingia at Metz in 869, (Schnütgen Museum).<sup>55</sup> The throne made for the King about the same time, abounds in the ornament where it retains its ancient cosmological

<sup>46</sup> GOODSON, *Rome*, pp. 166-172.

<sup>47</sup> VANDI, *Trasformazione*, pp. 125-151.

<sup>48</sup> *Charlemagne and Rome*.

<sup>49</sup> Alcuin alluded to *De architectura* in a letter he wrote to Charlemagne between 801 and 804; and the tract is preserved in a “court school” manuscript now in the British Library (Harley MS 2767). Cf. Andrew WALLACE-HADRILL, *Rome and the Colonial City: Rethinking the Grid*, Oxford, 2022. The manuscript was discovered in St. Gall.

<sup>50</sup> Bernhard Bischoff ascribed the earliest surviving *Timaeus* to the court's orbit (Paris, BnF, MS 2164). *Katalog der festländischen Handschriften des neunten Jahrhunderts* (mit Ausnahme der wisigotischen), vol. 3, Padua-Zwickau, aus dem Nachlaß, B. EBERSPERGER (ed.), Wiesbaden, 2014, no. 4139, p. 61; Herbert L. KESSLER, “Weeds Growing on Earth, Stars Wandering in Heaven; Calcidius's Planetary Plant”, in *Luceat Lux Vestia. Essays in Honour of Michelle P. Brown* (forthcoming).

<sup>51</sup> Completed before the turn of the ninth century; Wolfgang BRAUNFELS, “Karl des Grossen Bronzwerkstatt”, in Wolfgang BRAUNFELS and Herman SCHNITZLER (eds.), *Karl der Grosse*, Düsseldorf, 1965, vol. 3, pp. 168-202.

<sup>52</sup> Wilhelm Koehler and Florentine MÜTHERICH, *Die karolingischen Miniaturen*, Berlin, 1933ff., vol. 1, p. 364.

<sup>53</sup> *L'invention chrétienne des cinq sens dans la liturgie et l'art au Moyen Âge*, Paris, 2014, pp. 286-294.

<sup>54</sup> Koehler and Müttherich, *Kar. Min.*, vol. III, pp. 143-162; Éric PALAZZO, “L'enluminure à Metz au haut Moyen Âge (VIII<sup>e</sup>-XI<sup>e</sup> siècle)”, in *Metz enluminée. Autour de la Bible de Charles le Chauve. Trésors manuscrits des églises messines*, Metz, 1989, pp. 23-27; Id., *L'invention*, pp. 294-299; Lawrence NEES, *Frankish Manuscripts. The Seventh to the Tenth Century*, London-Turnhout, 2022, vol. 1, vol. 2, pp. 251-58 KESSLER, “Winding acanthus coil”.

<sup>55</sup> Philippe CORDEZ, “Golgotha im Kopf: Karl der Kahle und die karolingischen Elfenbeinkämme”, *Convivium*, 8(1), 2021, pp. 102-131.



Fig. 12. Reliquary of Virgin Mary, ca. 815,  
(Hildesheim, Cathedral Treasury)



Fig. 13. Flabellum of Tournus, ca. 868  
(Florence, Museo del Bargello)

implications.<sup>56</sup> And acanthus continued to be elaborated, especially in the so-called “Franco-Saxon school” of Carolingian manuscript illumination.<sup>57</sup>

As on the Tuotilo ivory, it resumed its traditional association with Mary. A silver reliquary fashioned for relics of the Virgin, which according to legend was Louis the Pious’s gift to Hildesheim in 815,<sup>58</sup> is adorned with acanthus that closely resembles the ornament framing Pope Hadrian’s epitaph (Hildesheim, Dom Museum; Fig. 12). The paired gold coils emerging in mirrored branches from central stalks mime the Virgin’s ascent. The Flabellum of Tournus is surely the most remarkable perpetuation of acanthus’s ancient association with Mary and reinterpretation (Fig. 13).<sup>59</sup> Inscribed IOHEL ME S[AN]C[T]AE FECIT IN HONORE[M] MARIAE, its cylindrical bone handle is itself a kind of acanthus plant with scrolls inhabited by

<sup>56</sup> *La cattedra lignea di S. Pietro in Vaticano*, Michele MACCARRONE et al. (eds.), Vatican, 1971, in particular, Florentine MÜTHERICH, “Der Elfenbeinschmuck des Thrones,” pp. 253-273; Rainer KAHNITZ, “Goldschmidt Addenda,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft*, 68 (2014), pp. 21-27. Cf. Lawrence NEES, *A Tainted Mantle. Heracles and the Classical Tradition at the Carolingian Court*, Philadelphia, 1991.

<sup>57</sup> Fabrizio CRIVELLO, *Die karolingischen Miniaturen*, 7: *Die frankosächsische Schule*, Wiesbaden, 2009.

<sup>58</sup> The helmet-shaped cover that Michael Brandt has called the cathedral’s “*Herzstücke*” may have been inspired by such Late Antique reliquaries as those in the Lateran Sancta Sanctorum; Michael BRANDT, “Heiligtum Unserer Lieben Frau”, in *Bernward von Hildesheim und das Zeitalter der Ottonen: Katalog der Ausstellung*, Hildesheim, 1993, vol. 2, pp. 445-448; Id., *Kirchenkunst des Mittelalters, erhalten und erforschen: Katalog zur Ausstellung des Diözesan-Museum Hildesheim*, Hildesheim, 1989, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> Lorenz E. A. EITNER, *The Flabellum of Tournus*, New York, 1944; Danielle GABORIT-CHOPIN, *Flabellum di Tournus*, Florence, 1988; Isabelle CARTRON, “Le flabellum liturgique carolingien de Saint-Philibert: du don d’un souffle à

birds and animals rising from a green calyx and blossoming into a green capital featuring Mary flanked by saints. Two sides of the ivory box atop it depict scenes from Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, reiterating the claim introduced on the *Ara pacis* of a golden age that is here revitalized by two alternating plaques featuring scrolls inhabited by men, birds and animals. One scroll is acanthus, tethered by a single beaded man at each end (who recalls a figure at the top of the main Vatican pilaster); the other, framed by paired beardless men, is grape issuing from a central bucranium (also featured inside the *Ara pacis*). Such details as the lioness turning upward suggest that the immediate source may have been the John VII oratory pilasters; and the juxtaposed schemes suggest an ascent, as in the chapel, from antiquity to Christian redemption. Indeed, when the fan is opened, Virgil's golden age is realized as a prophecy of Christ. Punning the *virga* of Isaiah's prophecy, the Virgin presents her Son at the center as the beneficiary of the magnificent gift: VIRGO PARENS CHRISTI.

### GENERATION AND REGENERATION

Acanthus ornament continued to flourish at Winchester,<sup>60</sup> and Hildesheim, where it channeled ancient Rome through Carolingian revivals.<sup>61</sup> It was an aspect of the Gregorian Reform and ultimately engendered the "Cosmatesque" style.<sup>62</sup> Portal sculptures of S. Apollinare in Agone and Sta. Pudenziana revived the ancient tradition preserved in the John VII oratory and elsewhere.<sup>63</sup> In the St. Hubert Bible produced ca. 1080 at the Abbaye de Saint-Pierre en Ardennes, the theme was returned to an explicitly Calcidian context (Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS II. 1639, fol. 6<sup>v</sup>).<sup>64</sup> The apse mosaic installed in the church of San Clemente ca. 1118 after the early Christian basilica (lower church) was destroyed is, perhaps, the most original revival.<sup>65</sup> Fifty coils filled with flying creatures and other figures

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la geste des moines", *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 88(2) (2010), pp. 153-176; Herbert L. KESSLER, "Borne on a Breeze: the Function of the Flabellum of Tournus as Meaning", in Philippe CORDEZ (ed.), *Charlemagne et les objets. Des thésaurisations carolingiennes aux constructions mémorielles*, New York, 2012, pp. 57-85; Carol LONG, "Virgilian Imagery and Meaning on a Carolingian Flabellum: Contradiction or Continuity?", *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture*, 7-1 (2020), pp. 1-42.

<sup>60</sup> Robert DESHMAN, *The Benedictional of Æthelwold*, Princeton, 1995, pp. 232-246.

<sup>61</sup> Jean-Pierre CAILLET, "Et magnae silvae creverunt... Observations sur le thème du rinceau peuplé dans l'orfèvrerie et l'ivoirerie liturgiques aux époques ottonienne et romane, *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 38 (1995), pp. 23-33; Ittai WEINRYB, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages*, New York NY, 2016; Isabelle MARCHESIN, *L'arbre & la colonne. La porte de bronze d'Hildesheim*, Paris, 2017; Eng. trans. by Janice BERTRAND OWEN and Ester ZAGO, Ithaca NY, 2024.

<sup>62</sup> Peter C. CLAUSSEN, *Magistri Doctissimi Romani. Die römischen Marmorkünstler des Mittelalters*, Wiesbaden, 1987; RICCIONI, "Altari".

<sup>63</sup> BALLARDINI, "Vita tra le foglie"; EAD., "Rinascere antichi: tralci e scalpelli nella Roma di Gregorio VII", in A. C. QUINTAVALLE (ed.), *La cattedrale di Piacenza e la civiltà medievale* (Convegno internazionale di studi, 20-24 September 2022), Piacenza, 2024, pp. 1-28; RICCIONI, "Epigrafi".

<sup>64</sup> Harry BOBER, "In Principio. Creation before Time", in Millard MEISS (ed.), *De artibus opuscula XL Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, New York, 1961, pp. 13-28; Conrad RUDOLPH, "In the Beginning: Theories and Images of Creation in Northern Europe in the Twelfth Century", *Art History*, 22(1), pp. 3-55; Herbert L. KESSLER, "Above Iconography", in Michele BACCI, Fabrizio CRIVELLO, and Vesna ŠČEPANOVIC (eds.), *Images in Premodern Societies. A Dialogue about the State of the Field on the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of «Iconographica»*, Florence, 2023, pp. 3-56.

<sup>65</sup> Serena ROMANO, *La pittura medievale a Roma. Corpus*, Vol. IV (*Riforma e tradizione*), Milan, 2006, pp. 209-218; Hélène TOUBERT, *L'art dirigé. Réforme grégorienne et iconographie*, Paris, 1990; Stefano RICCIONI, *Il mosaico absidale di S. Clemente a Roma. Exemplum della chiesa riformata*, Spoleto, 2006; BALLARDINI, "Vita tra le foglie," p. 308.

convey the notion of Christ's death as a return to Paradise and regeneration of both the church and the Church.<sup>66</sup>

For all its flexibility and ubiquity, acanthus ornament retained a specific connection to the Virgin Mary. The early eleventh-century Bernward Bible (Dom-Museum Hildesheim, DS 61), for instance, features a sort of Annunciation to the Virgin in which a Gabriel-like Evangelist John writes the opening words of Genesis onto a book while Mary listens and an enormous gold cross rises above them, adorned with a gold acanthus lattice on light blue that figures the incarnation's intermediacy.<sup>67</sup> In the church of Sta. Maria Immacolata at Ceri outside Rome (earlier San Felice II),<sup>68</sup> acanthus scrolls figure the burning bush in the scene of Moses on Mt. Horeb as a Marian typology. Perhaps by evoking the early apse of Sta. Maria Maggiore, the entwined coils capture the mysterious amalgam of spirit and flesh asserted in the titulus: D[EU] S E[T] HOMO QUE[M] SACRA FIGURA IMAGO.<sup>69</sup> An early twelfth-century French ivory in the Bode Museum in Berlin represents Gabriel alighting on cloud of acanthus as he greets the Virgin with the news *Ave Maria gratia plena*.<sup>70</sup> And the ornament fills the background of the late twelfth-century relief depicting the same subject in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Cloisters; Inv. 60.140; Fig. 14).<sup>71</sup> Beneath arches supported on Corinthian columns, Gabriel enters at the left, generating acanthus that grows from his left foot and spills into the spaces between his leg and wing. As in the John VII chapel, the coil visualizes the inspiring divine words which Mary at the right accepts, framed by reciprocal scrolls. The setting and focus on a (listening) young woman recalls nothing so much as the Campana Psyche relief, a similarity that is not easily dismissed as a mere pseudomorphism,<sup>72</sup> because Vitruvius's well-known text and the association of Mary with acanthus (specifically with the Annunciation) in the St. Peter's oratory favor direct, albeit complicated, actual connections.

Not surprising, the ornament was particularly abundant in the Holy Land where it adorned the lintel of the Holy Sepulcher and the tympanum of the chapel of the Nativity in Bethlehem.<sup>73</sup> The mid-twelfth-century fresco recently discovered in the Benedictine Abbey of

<sup>66</sup> RICCIONI, *Mosaico*, pp. 41-49 et passim.

<sup>67</sup> WEINRYB, *Bronze Object*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>68</sup> Nino ZCHOMELIDSE, *Santa Maria Immacolata in Ceri. Pittura Sacra al tempo della Riforma Gregoriana*, Roma, 1996; Chiara Paniccia, *I cantieri della Bibbia. Pittura e miniatura. Il dialogo tra libro e parete in Italia centro-meridionale, secoli XI-XIII*, Rome, 2019, pp. 50-61.

<sup>69</sup> ZCHOMELIDSE, *Santa Maria Immacolata*, pp. 165-168; EAD., "Das Bild im Busch. Zur Theorie und Ikonographie der alttestamentlichen Gottesvision im Mittelalter", in Bernd JANOWSKI and Nino ZCHOMELIDSE (eds.), *Die Sichtbarkeit des Unsichtbaren. Zur Korrelation von Text und Bild im Wirkungskreis der Bibel*, Stuttgart, 2003, pp. 147-164; Herbert L. KESSLER, *Neither God nor Man. Texts, Pictures, and the Anxiety of Medieval Art*, Freiburg im Breisgau, 2007, pp. 47-53.

<sup>70</sup> Inv. 2787; <https://id.smb.museum/object/1719650/verk%C3%BCndigung-an-maria>.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas P. F. HOVING, "A Long-Lost Romanesque Annunciation", *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 20 (1961), pp. 117-126; Konrad HOFFMANN (ed.), *The Year 1200* (cat. of an exhib.), New York, 1970, pp. 37-38.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Yve-Alain BOIS, "The Uses and Abuses of Look-alikes", *October*, 154 (2015), pp. 127-149; Carolyn WALKER BYNUM, "Interrogating 'Likeness'. Fake Friends, *Similia Similibus*, and Heavenly Crowns", in *Historische Anthropologie*, 28(1), (2020) <https://doi.org/10.7788/hian.2020.28.1.31>.

<sup>73</sup> Nurith KENAAN-KEDAR, "The Two Lintels of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem", in Silvia ROSENBERG (ed.), *Knights of the Holy Land, Knights of the Holy Land. The Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem*, Jerusalem, 1999, pp. 176-185; Avital HEYMAN, "Fulcher's Bestiary at the Door of the Holy Sepulchre", *Ad limina*, 6 (2015), pp. 99-147.



Fig. 14. Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, Florence ca. 1180-1200 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art).

the Virgin in the Valley of Jehosaphat attests to its persistent deployment to figure Mary's liminality between humankind and God, and word and image (Fig. 15).<sup>74</sup> Jon Seligman reconstructed three tiers in what remains of the abbey's refectory. The dado comprises a magnificent panel of fictive embroidery, before which the abbot presumably sat, and symmetrical, pulled back white curtains, outside of which donors are portrayed. The upper zone originally portrayed Christ, the source of the abbot's authority, enthroned between Mary and John the Baptist and other saints identifiable only in fragments. Particularly beautiful acanthus ornament in between connects and separates the earthly and celestial worlds, its confronted scrolls emphasizing

ing the axis from the bishop and Christ. In her interpretation, Avital Heyman quoted the transcription of the epigraph at Mary's tomb in John of Würzburg's *Description terrae sanctae*, which again alludes to the Virgin's ascension to her Son's side as a paradigm of hope:

Here is the Valley of Jehoshaphat; from here, a path leads to the stars. Here Mary was buried, trusting in the Lord. From here, lifted up inviolate, she sought the Heavens. Hope of captives, their way, light and mother.<sup>75</sup>

Acanthus's richest Marian development and the most original, the Tree of Jesse, emerged about the same time.<sup>76</sup> Foreshadowed by the flabellum of Tournus, the earliest examples of the flexible and ever-transfiguring iconography appeared in the Cîteaux lectionary

<sup>74</sup> Jon SELIGMAN, "A Wall Painting, a Crusader Flood Diversion Facility and other Archaeological Gleanings from the Abbey of the Virgin Mary in the Valley of Jehoshaphat", in L. Daniel CHRUPCALA (ed.), *Christ is Here!: Studies in Biblical and Christian Archaeology in Memory of Michelle Piccirillo*, Ofm, Milan, 2013, pp. 185-220; Avital HEYMAN, "A Fresco in the Valley: The Jehoshaphat Deësis", *Israel Museum Studies in Archaeology*, Occasional Publications, 1 (2023), pp. 5-46.

<sup>75</sup> HIC IOSAFAT VALLIS, HINC EST AD SYDERA CALLIS/IN DOMINO FULTA FUTT HIC MARIA SEPULTA/HINC EXALTATA CAELOS PETIT INVIOLEATA/SPES CAPTIVORUM, VIA, LUX ET MATER EURUM; JOHN OF WÜRZBURG, *Peregrinationes tres*, Chap. 18 (R. B. C. HUYGENS [ed.], CCL 139), Turnhout, 1994, p. 128.

<sup>76</sup> Dorothy M. SHEPARD, *Introducing the Lambeth Bible. A Study of Texts and Imagery*, Turnhout, 2007, pp. 143-151.



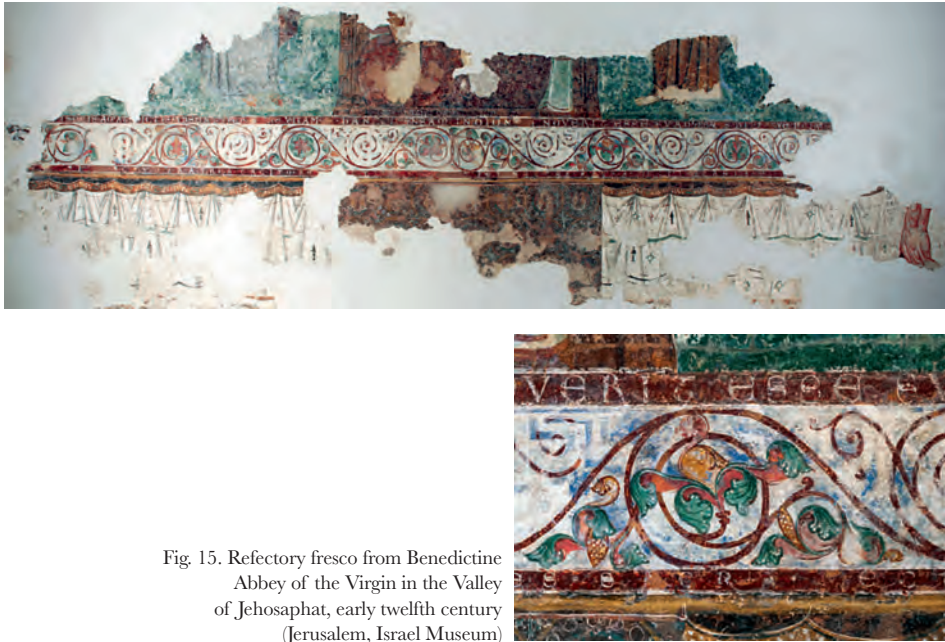


Fig. 15. Refectory fresco from Benedictine Abbey of the Virgin in the Valley of Jehosaphat, early twelfth century (Jerusalem, Israel Museum)

produced near Dijon during the first half of the twelfth century on which the plant distinguishes Jesse from the “THEOTOKOS” and sets off Old Testament types in the folio’s corners and the Holy Spirit ascends phoenix-like from the uppermost coil.(Dijon, Bib. mun., MS 641, fol. 40<sup>v</sup>).<sup>77</sup> The ornament controls the imagery still more emphatically in the more-or-less contemporary Bible of Saint Benigne (Dijon, Bib. Mun. MS 2, fol. 406<sup>r</sup>; Fig. 16).<sup>78</sup> Elaborating acanthus initials used throughout the manuscript, the *L* of *Liber* at the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel exploits the motif’s diagrammatic potential to elaborate the genealogy.<sup>79</sup> On the arm, a man harnessing a griffin is entangled in an acanthus outgrowth, while the stem deploys acanthus’s diagrammatic potential, as Marie-Pierre Gelin has emphasized, to underscore not Christ’s genealogy so much as his mother’s.<sup>80</sup> The lowest acanthus scroll encloses one of Mary’s Jewish ancestors grasping a green and blue tendril in each hand symbolizing Christ’s dual priestly and royal descent and looking upward toward the circle in which

<sup>77</sup> Diane J. REILLY, *The Cistercian Reform and the Art of the Book in Twelfth-Century France*, Amsterdam, 2018, pp. 95-111.

<sup>78</sup> Yolanda ZAŁUSKA, *L’enluminure et le scriptorium de Cîteaux au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Cîteaux, 1989; REILLY, *The Cistercian Bible*; Herbert L. KESSLER, “The Montalcino Bible’s Steep Mountain of Mysteries”, *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 65 (2020), pp. 308-372.

<sup>79</sup> On Matthew’s genealogy and the feast of Mary’s birth, cf. Margot E. FASSLER, “Mary’s Nativity, Fulbert of Chartres, and the Stirps Jesse: Liturgical Innovation circa 1000 and Its Afterlife”, *Speculum*, 75-2 (2000), pp. 389-434.

<sup>80</sup> “*Stirps Jesse in capite ecclesiae*: Iconographic and Liturgical Readings of the Tree of Jesse in Stained-Glass Windows” in Pippa SALONIUS and Andrea WORM (eds.), *The Tree: Symbol, Allegory, and Mnemonic Device in Medieval Art and Thought*. *International Medieval Research*, Turnhout, 2014, pp. 13-33.



Fig. 16. Opening of Gospel of St. Matthew, Bible of Saint Benigne, ca. 1130 (Dijon, Bib. Mun. MS 2, fol. 406r)

the stalks germinate leaves in which the Virgin and Child are nested. The almost geometric frame, in turn, buds a tendril that grows into a smaller, gold circle containing the Holy Spirit in the form of a large standing bird preening his wing. The Flabellum of Tournus includes a similar bird cleaning its wing,<sup>81</sup> as well as parallels to the entangled man and Mary with Christ, so the possibility should not be excluded that the initial was actually constructed, in part at least, from the fan itself. Dijon is, after all, only some ninety kilometers from Tournus; both were Benedictine abbeys.<sup>82</sup>

Never stable, the Tree of Jesse iconography spread throughout Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, always responsive to new contexts and occasionally refreshed with

<sup>81</sup> Cf. EITNER, *The Flabellum*, Fig. 17.

<sup>82</sup> Christ on the frontispiece to Matthew's Gospel produced in Helmarshausen later in the century (Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art, 1933.445) makes a like claim through acanthus that fills the gold orb behind him and generates scrolling tendrils that form a trellis; the Nativity itself is pictured on the verso. Cf. Jeffrey F. HAMBURGER, Joshua O'DRISCOLL, *Imperial Splendor. The Art of the Book in the Holy Roman Empire, 800-1500*, New York, 2021, pp. 89-91; KESSLER, "Like a winding acanthus coil".

appropriations of ancient acanthus.<sup>83</sup> Suger's St. Denis stained glass of 1144 is well known; Margot E. Fassler has studied the one at Chartres's interactions with Fulbert's sermons and the liturgy;<sup>84</sup> Dorothy M. Shepard has analyzed the innovative frontispiece of the Book of Isaiah in the Lambeth Bible illuminated in Canterbury during the third quarter of the twelfth century (Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3, fol. 198r).<sup>85</sup> Always available, the classical motif served, foremost as a genealogical diagram but, secondarily, also as art's tether to Roman antiquity. Sta. Maria della Stella at Orvieto attests to a continuous renewal that is, itself, acanthine (Fig. 17). A preliminary sketch for the facade (made ca. 1290) depicts the Virgin and Child over the portal, the Coronation of the Virgin in the pediment, and the acanthus of the Tree of Jesse on the second of the four piers.<sup>86</sup> When Lorenzo Maitani realized the sculptures a generation later, he not only applied the ornament to four main compositions but also referred back to ancient models. Pippa Salonijs has maintained, in fact, that through a "deliberate citation of the classical model . . . [including] the five pilasters of Pope John VII's oratory," Maitani engaged specific papal politics and, in so doing, indexed papal Rome's ancient origins, and also art's.<sup>87</sup>



Fig. 17. Tree of Jesse, early fourteenth century, Sta. Maria della Stella, Orvieto

<sup>83</sup> Arthur WATSON, *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse*, London, 1934; FASSLER, "Mary's Nativity".

<sup>84</sup> FASSLER, "Mary's Nativity"; EAD., *The Virgin of Chartres. Making History through Liturgy and the Arts*, New Haven, 2010, pp. 324-334.

<sup>85</sup> SHEPARD, *Introducing the Lambeth Bible*, pp. 143-151.

<sup>86</sup> Michael D. TAYLOR, "The Prophetic Scenes in the Tree of Jesse at Orvieto", *Art Bulletin*, 54 (1972), pp. 403-417; Julian GARDNER, "The Façade of the Duomo at Orvieto", in *De l'art comme mystagogie. Iconographie du jugement dernier et des fins dernière à l'époque gothique. [Actes du colloque de la Fondation Hardt, Genève, 13-16 février 1994]*, Poitiers, 1996, pp. 199-209; Elio CIOL, Stefano CIOL, *La facciata del Duomo di Orvieto. Teologia in figura*, Cinisello Balsamo, 2002, Fig. 1; Anita F. MOSKOWITZ, *The Façade Reliefs of Orvieto Cathedral*, London, 2009, pp. 48-51; Pippa Salonijs, "Arbor Jesse—Lignum vitae. The Tree of Jesse, the Tree of Life, and the Mendicants in Late Medieval Orvieto", in *The Tree*, pp. 213-241.

<sup>87</sup> On the continued importance of the Oratory, see: VAN DIJK, "Veronica"; Antonella BALLARDINI, "Piccola ma aurea: la Porta Santa nell'antico San Pietro", in Assunta DI SANTE (ed.), *Quando la Fabbrica costruì San Pietro. Un cantiere di lavoro, di pietà cristiana e di umanità (XVI-XIX secolo), in occasione del Giubileo della Misericordia*, Foligno, 2016, pp. 9-41.

## ORNAMENT AS RHIZOME

The classical renewal at Orvieto scrolls back to the first question posed at the beginning of this paper about the long continuity of depicting a young woman with an infant in relation to acanthus. So common in antiquity and available in diverse forms and contexts throughout the Middle Ages, the flexible and ever-transfiguring ornament could be tapped whenever a crafter or patron wished. Moreover, these sources had their own histories. Tiber flooding eventually buried the *Ara pacis*, for example, though precisely when is not certain.<sup>88</sup> Before it did, however, the association of acanthus with beautiful women was fully established—as on the Baia Psyche, Campana tiles, widely dispersed hairpins, and Severan architectural sculpture. Luxurious symmetrical acanthus had already been incorporated and its meaning transformed in the fifth-century apse of the Lateran baptistery,<sup>89</sup> whence it remained available for such later reconfigurations as the San Clemente mosaic. Kurt Weitzmann concluded from a careful comparison of the Throne of Charles the Bald with the Flabellum of Tournus and other works that “the ultimate source of the peopled rinceaux leads us back to imperial Rome”; and Story reached much the same conclusion from her analysis of earlier Carolingian deployment of the ornament and other “Classical aesthetic” aspects on the Hadrian epigraph.<sup>90</sup> At the same time, acanthus’s ancient association with young women came to be applied to the Virgin Mary in Rome’s most important Marian church Santa Maria Maggiore and the site of the Feast of the Assumption.<sup>91</sup> The reconfigured thirteenth-century apse amplified the tradition; as Gardner has shown, Jacopo Torriti’s vegetal scrolls inhabited by realistic animals are paralleled in second-century North African mosaics and more recent works.<sup>92</sup> Whatever the ornament’s formal source, its meaning belongs within a continuous tradition of Mary’s ascension, which is depicted at the center of the narrative below the Coronation and spelled out in the inscription: MARIA VIRGO ASVMPTA AD ETHEREN THALAMUS IN QUO REX REGNUM STELLATO SEDET SOLIO. Mary’s ascension guided by acanthus’ growth provides a path to the stars. Vitruvius’s *De architectura* had its own story of reception and reconfiguration. At the start of the twelfth century, for example, it was bound in the earliest surviving manuscript of Theophilus Presbyter’s *Schedula diversarum artium* assuring the availability of the first-century BCE myth of the origins of the Corinthian order to twelfth-century artisans.<sup>93</sup>

Recontextualization continuously complicated meaning. Applying the inherent notion of generation from earth and ascent toward heaven to life after death that had been appropriated on ancient cinerary urns and altars, John VII’s epitaph and the renewed association

<sup>88</sup> ROMANO, “Rome et l’antique,” pp. 29–30; SIMONA DOLARI, “Riscoperta e fortuna dei rilievi dell’Ara Pacis nell’età della Rinascita,” *Rivista di Engramma*, 75 (2009), pp. 201–214; BALLARDINI, “Vita tra le foglie,” pp. 294–295.

<sup>89</sup> MARIA ANDALORO (ed.), *L’orizzante tardoantico e le nuove immagini 312–468*, Milan, 2006, pp. 348–352; BALLARDINI, “Vita tra le foglie,” p. 297.

<sup>90</sup> KURT WEITZMANN, “The Iconography of the Carolingian Ivories of the Throne,” in *Cattedra lignea*, pp. 217–245, at p. 241; STORY, *Charlemagne and Rome*, p. 5 et passim.

<sup>91</sup> GERHARD WOLF, *Salus Populi Romani. Studien zur Geschichte des römischen Kultbilder im Mittelalter*, Weinheim, 1990.

<sup>92</sup> *Roman Crucible*, p. 262–263.

<sup>93</sup> HEIDI C. GEARHART, *Theophilus and the Theory and Practice of Medieval Art*, University Park PA, 2017, pp. 17–21; VERBAAL, “Medieval Vitruvius”.



with Mary in St. Peter's reframed the trope in a way that created a new paradigm, spotlighted almost immediately by Bede that was transformed and imitated; and the oratory itself mutated over the centuries. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, acanthus-adorned antiquities were appropriately appropriated, while Christian versions were emulated to fashion continuity. In turn, the reconfigured meaning seems to have inspired the Tree of Jesse, but from the early St. Bénigne Bible to the Orvieto facade, it continually also cross-referenced earlier uses. Evoking ancient Rome, the papacy, Carolingian ambitions, or Gregorian Reform revival, an essentially *arborescent* visual trope (in the Deleuzian-Guattarian sense) spread rhizomically.<sup>94</sup>

Which leads to the second question: How did differences of subject, material, scale, and function fundamentally transform the aesthetics of acanthus? The ornament's equation with ancient associations with beautiful young women, especially Venus implicated a *paragone* whenever Christians appropriated it for Mary. Famously, in the *Opus Caroli*, Theodulf of Orleans claimed that inscribed names alone distinguish Venus from the blessed Virgin.<sup>95</sup> Pope Leo IV's decision to build Sta. Maria Nova on the site of the Temple of Venus may not be innocent; as with the Eva/Ave trope, Mary implicated her seductive counterpart.<sup>96</sup> Closer in time to the Virgen de las Battalas, Lucas Bishop of Tuy, still recorded disgust at heretics singing hymns to Venus in front of images of Mary.<sup>97</sup> The risk was real. An ancient statue of Venus (likely the Praxitilian marble now in the Capitoline Museum) famously seduced the Master Gregorius during a visit to Rome in the mid-twelfth century:

The image is made from Parian marble with such wonderful and intricate skill that she seems more like a living creature than a statue; indeed she seems to blush in her nakedness, a reddish tinge coloring her face and it appears to those who take a close look that blood flows in her snowy lips.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Gilles DELEUZE, Félix GUATTARI, *Mille Plateaux*, Paris, 1980; trans. B. MASSUMI, *A Thousand Plateaus*, London and New York, 2004; J. David ARCHIBALD, *Aristotle's Ladder, Darwin's Tree. The Evolution of Visual Metaphors for Biological Order*, New York NY, 2014, which considers several of the monuments discussed here.

<sup>95</sup> *Opus Caroli regis contra synod (Libri Carolini)* A. Freeman (ed.), (MGH. *Concilia* vol. II, suppl. I) Hannover, 1998, p. 529; Francesco STELLA, *Il testo dell'immagine. Fonti letterarie per lo studio dell'arte medievale*, Florence-Milan, 2021, p. 47; Id., "The Carolingian Answer to the Iconoclastic War and the Birth of Western Art," *European Review*, 30-1 (2022), pp. 533-546.

<sup>96</sup> A gloss in a tenth-century manuscript of Martianus Capella notes that the goddess's beauty "cuts two ways (ambifarius), like [Ariadne's] thread, the end and the beginning, the end of the murkiness of the air here below, the beginning one of pure aether"; Henry MAYR-HARTING, *Church and Cosmos in Early Ottonian Germany. The View from Cologne*, Oxford, 2007, pp. 215 and 226.

<sup>97</sup> *De altera vita*, 3.4; Alejandro GARCÍA AVILÉS, "Imágenes 'vivientes': Idolatría y herejía en Las Cantigas de Alfonso X El Sabio", *Goya. Revista de arte*, 321 (2007), pp. 324-342.

<sup>98</sup> *Narratio de mirabilibus urbis Romae*, (CCCM, 171, Robert B. C. HUYGENS [ed.]), Turnhout, 2000, sec. 12, p. 290; John OSBORNE (trans.), *Master Gregorius, The Marvels of Rome*, Toronto, 1987, p. 20; Cristina NARDELLA, "L'antiquaria romana dal 'Liber Pontificalis' ai 'Mirabilia urbis Romae'", *Roma antica nel Medioevo: Mito, rappresentazioni, sopravvivenze nella 'Respublica Christiana' dei secoli IX-XII*, Milan, 2001, pp. 423-447; Peter Scott BROWN, "As Excrement to Sacrament: The Dissimulated Pagan Idol of Ste-Marie d'Oloron", *The Art Bulletin*, 87(4) (2005), pp. 571-588; William KYNAN-WILSON, "Subverting the Message: Master Gregory's Reception of and Response to the Mirabilia urbis Romani", *Journal of Medieval History*, 44(3) (2018), pp. 347-368; Julian GARDNER, *Fracta Docet Thirteenth-Century Insular Visitation to Rome*, Rome, 2022, pp. 64-66.



Julian Gardner rightly underscored Master Gregorius's "emphasis on the aesthetic effect."<sup>99</sup> The Baia Psyche and other early Augustinian period female nudes would have exerted such "*magica quaedam persuasio*", its fine-grain marble mimicking smooth flesh and the twisting pose and animated child expressing vitality. The deeply carved calyx beneath Psyche's left foot parts suggestively and the blossoming coils intensify the physical appeal as they direct the gaze upward and around.<sup>100</sup> And on the Aphrodisias capital, vaginal cauliculi spread to give birth to the goddess of beauty. By contrast, the *vase of life* in John VII's mosaic was a "callis ad sidera", not the focus of carnal yearnings; and the epitaph accompanying it is a precocious essay in Christian aesthetics. Exalting Mary as *mater ecclesiae* through which ancient ornament's beauty has been transformed, it realizes, quite literally, the metaphor of church decoration as embroidery that Palazzo has advanced.<sup>101</sup>

Made half a millennium later, the Virgen de las Batallas concentrates the effect. Cued there, too, by an Annunciation on the left and right sides that includes inspiriting acanthus (as also in the New York relief), the crowned Mary is wrapped in layers of reflective textiles that completely obscure her anatomy. Originally she held a budding scepter as well as the Child, twin flowers germinated by the enamel acanthus beneath her feet and inspiriting the matter. On the back, acanthus emerges from a domed stone edifice (supported by Corinthian columns), quite like the celestial Jerusalem on the Romanesque marble and commonly used on enamels to represent the celestial Jerusalem.<sup>102</sup> An early eighteenth-century inventory records that St. Peter, heaven's "ianitor", was portrayed holding the keys on the lost door (as on a Limoges enamel in New York).<sup>103</sup> Mary contained a relic (as in the Hildesheim box) or, more likely, consecrated Hosts (as Marie-Madeleine Gauthier proposed). Gems, gold, and ornament elevate the sensual interaction and mitigate carnal appeal; the true spirit, however, remained hidden within.<sup>104</sup> Naturally, on the Campana relief, acanthus rises only as far as Psyche's arms. Here, by contrast, it situates the vessel of divine Incarnation (literally) at the very interface of earth and heaven.

Five years ago I concluded the paper I gave in this very forum with the words: "The incarnation through Mary and the material images it enabled offered a 'greater beauty' of

<sup>99</sup> GARDNER, *Roman Crucible*, p. 393.

<sup>100</sup> A century later, another Englishman, Geoffrey Chaucer, expressed a yet more subtle response to the portrayal of Venus in the *Knights Tale*. There, as Sarah Stanbury has noted, shaking and making a sign, the depiction of the ancient goddess becomes like a Christian object; *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England*, Philadelphia, 2008, pp. 102-103.

<sup>101</sup> Eric PALAZZO, *Broder la splendeur. La théologie chrétienne de l'ornement dans l'Antiquité et le haut Moyen Âge*, Paris, 2024.

<sup>102</sup> Also on the "Halberstädter Schrank", for instance; Johannes TRIPPS, "Der Schrank aus dem Marienstift zu Halberstadt: Überlegungen zu Form und Funktion", <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2011/1694>. See: Ilene H. FORSYTH, *The Throne of Wisdom: Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France*, Princeton, 1972; Anna PAWLİK, *Das Bildwerk als Reliquiar? Funktionen früher Großplastik im 9. bis 11. Jahrhundert*, Petersberg, 2013; Elina GERTSMAN, *Worlds Within: Opening the Medieval Shrine Madonna*, University Park PA, 2015.

<sup>103</sup> Marie-Madeleine GAUTHIER, *Émaux méridionaux. Catalogue international de L'œuvre de Limoges*, Paris, 1987, pp. 147, 184-185.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Marie-Madeleine GAUTHIER, "Les Majestés de la Vierge «limousines» et méridionales du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle au Metropolitan Museum of Art de New York", *Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France*, 1968, pp. 66-95.

the sort that Hugh of Saint-Victor hoped might replace the ‘desire for temporal goods’.<sup>105</sup> In “Faithful Attraction”, I paid some attention to ornament, but not to acanthus because it is so common and seemed to me, then, simply a part of the pagan heritage from which Christian art had emerged and therefore not very significant. That turns out to be too simple. Often, perhaps even most of the time, the ubiquitous ornament conveyed only the general meaning of generation or *joie de vivre*. In some works, however, symmetrical coils grafted onto the rooted plant also rhymed with Christ’s dual nature by precipitating alternating perceiving with the senses and mental contemplation. And, in an important subset of acanthus-adorned art, the ornament specifically engaged the instrument of the Incarnation, the Virgin Mary, distinguishing images as instruments of ascent beyond the mortal earth from much-feared ancient idols, Mary from Venus.

Matthew in the Dijon Bible personates the process. To record Christ’s *human* genealogy through Mary on a codex made of flesh, the Evangelist dips a quill into the inkwell sprouting from the acanthus coil that frames and mimics the God-Made-Man. The same ornament, however, also blocks Matthew’s direct vision of the *Divinity*, his unfocused gaze reminding the reader/viewer of the impossibility, even for a saint, to see God face to face in this life. Animating the initial leading to the sacred words *Liber generationis IHS XPI filii David filii Abraham*, acanthus’s dynamic interweaving of matter and spirit, picture and word, human and divine, chimes celestial beauty embodied by the Virgin Mary. The *ornatus* is not, however, itself the ultimate destination of the contemplation.

<sup>105</sup> Herbert L. KESSLER, “Faithful Attraction”, *Codex Aquilarensis*, 34 (2019), pp. 59-84. On the expansion in later art, see now: Klaus KRÜGER, *Figura als Bild. Streiflichter zu Dürer und zum Mediendiskurs in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, Göttingen, 2024, especially pp. 58-67.

