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XAIPE MAPIA
Annunciation Imagery in the Making

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The paper provides an overview of the earliest surviving images of the Annunciation. It demonstrates that the iconography of this scene went through a number of formative stages in early Christian period and this transformation is indicative of the changing perception of the event and the development of the theological tradition in relation to the theme of incarnation. In the 3rd and 4th centuries, images of the Annunciation are exceptionally rare, and the rendering of the scene is dependent on the Roman visual tradition. From about 400, the representation of the basket with loom and the purple thread held by Mary become indispensable elements of the Annunciation imagery, a shift reflected in the monuments coming from both Eastern and Western parts of the Empire. This change reveals not only the growing cult of Mary, but also the great role played by the apocryphal sources in the creation of the visual "texture" of narrative compositions connected to the Virgin. Furthermore, it coincides with and echoes the contemporary homiletic tradition, which attributed deep religious meaning to the process of weaving, and the making of the garments, and of the temple veil, all associated with Christ's body and the mystery of incarnation. Finally, it is demonstrated in the paper that the apocryphal Annunciation at the Spring was equally popular at the time and regularly substituted for images of the Annunciation in the House in the narrative cycles focused on the figure of Mary.

Keywords: Annunciation, Mother of God, Early Christian iconography, purple thread, incarnation

The Annunciation is one of the central images associated with the Virgin Mary in Christian art. According to the Gospel of Luke (Lk I: 26-38) and apocryphal sources, Mary learns that she has been chosen to become the Mother of God from Archangel Gabriel, the heavenly messenger, who enters her house to convey the divine will. The story is focused on a dialogue between just two figures, but the instant assumes great symbolic value as it marks, and at the same time mysteriously coincides with, the moment of incarnation. The earthly life of Christ and his mission start at the time of the Annunciation which explains why from an early stage this event was integrated into the calendar and liturgical framework of the church. Very little is known about the very first instances of the celebration of this event as a separate feast, but towards the middle of the sixth century the day of commemoration was already established as 25 March and recorded as having taken place in Constantinople.¹ However, multiple references to the Annunciation found in earlier sermons clearly testify to the importance of the Gospel event in the theological discourse long before Justinian's reign and the feast must have been celebrated in some form in previous centuries.²

Numerous studies were dedicated to the visual rendering of the Annunciation both on the basis of Eastern and Western material.³ In the Renaissance, for example, this subject became particularly popular among artists and various renderings allow us to study the innovations of the time and the transformations of the visual language.⁴ Indeed, the imagery of the Annunciation and its development over the centuries helps to unveil the consecutive evolution of Christian art reflected in a great variety of iconographic solutions applied to a seemingly straightforward subject of a dialogue between the earthly woman and the heavenly being. However, the very early stage of this development has received relatively little attention and the scope of this paper is to cover the late antique artistic testimonies of Annunciation imagery.⁵ Instead of drawing an artificial historical line of con-

secutive progress, inevitably filled with numerous gaps due to the missing material, the paper focuses on three different iconographic examples: the rendering of the Annunciation in Roman catacombs, the popularity of Mary with the loom in 5th-century art, and the Annunciation at the Spring, as an alternative but equally popular image in the early Christian period.

Images of the Annunciation in the catacombs of Rome

Whenever the earliest images of the Annunciation are discussed, the decoration of the famous chapel in the catacombs of Priscilla is brought to the fore.⁶ The small chamber situated in the oldest part of the cemetery was adorned with a few scenes taken from the Old and New Testaments, and the paintings are currently dated to the middle of the 3rd century.⁷ The centre of the vault is occupied by a circle within which a seated woman in white robes directs her gaze towards a standing male figure (fig. 1). The latter is portrayed addressing her with words, and his speech is expressed through the gesture of his raised right hand pointing in the direction of the seated female interlocutor. On the whole, the decoration of this *cubiculum* is very simple and primarily based on the graphic design constituted by various shapes (circles, ovals, rectangles) and lines replicating the architectural profiles of the interior (arches, niches, etc.). The uniform white background dominates the space. Elements of vegetation and garlands are arranged evenly on the surfaces in between the lines together with individual images of birds, fishes, and a rampant goat. Besides the scene in the centre of the vault, there are several other compositions in the lower part of the decoration, including the fragmentary remains of the Good Shepherd and several narrative scenes placed in the burial compartment of the chamber, in proximity to the *loculi* once containing the bodies of the deceased. They were focused on the theme of Salvation and consisted of The Resurrection of Lazarus (on the central axis) and three moments in the story of Jonah on the sides: The fishermen throwing the body of Jonah to the maritime monster, The moment of his rescue when spewed from the throat of the sea creature, and a now missing scene showing Jonah under the gourd-tree.

The interpretation of the central image of the vault, with a seated woman and a standing male, has caused some serious debate among scholars. On the one hand, the identification of the scene with the Annunciation is widely known, which predetermined the common definition of this space, formally categorized by the letter P, as the *Cubiculum of the Annunciation*. However, the first scholars studying this decoration had already raised concerns about the religious reading of the mural and pointed out numerous elements, which, in their view, precluded association with the Gospel event.⁸ Indeed the attire of the two protagonists and the nature of their interaction do not fit perfectly with the subsequent rendering of the Annunciation. The supposed figure of the Virgin wears a white tunic with *clavi* (transversal bands), fixed by a belt above waist level, and her head is covered by a transparent veil leaving in view her dark locks fashioned into the hairstyle of a Roman noblewoman. The male figure, who according to the religious reading would represent an angel, is shown wingless, in a *tunica clavata* with *pallium* looking more like a Roman nobleman than a heavenly messenger. Their postures are stiff and voluminous robes contribute to the feeling of the heavy stature of the figures. The woman seems to respond to the message with her gaze alone without betraying any emotions with her gestures, since her hands are positioned calmly on the armrests of her high-backed chair.

Various arguments and doubts have been summarized in publications by Paul-Albert Février who offered an alternative reading of the scene as a dialogue between members of the family one of which represents a deceased person.⁹ He defends his interpretation by arguing for the apparent visual similarity of the scene with numerous ancient Roman and Greek representations and funerary reliefs, which took the tender moment of communication with a departed family member as a common theme. Convinced of his interpretation, Février dismissed Wilpert's argument in support of the religious reading of the scene based on its similarity with the mural found in the *cubiculum* 17 (formerly 54) in the catacombs of Sts Peter and Marcellinus.¹⁰ The vault of the latter cubicle is covered by a sequence of images surrounding the central scene with Christ teaching before eight men

(fig. 2). The four standing figures are represented on diagonal trajectories in the vault, while four narrative scenes are placed on the main axes. The sequence opens with the composition above the entrance showing a woman seated in a chair talking to a man standing before her. The next scene on the right can be certainly identified as The Adoration of the Magi, followed by Three Magi pointing to a star (across the room from the entrance), and finally The Baptism of Christ, on the left. The first scene appears very similar to the one decorating the centre of the vault in cubicle P of the Priscilla catacombs, with the same wide chair, the positioning of the female figure to the left, the characteristics of her attire, and the moment of dialogue reflected in gestures, but this time the woman responds to the male's *acclamatio* with her raised hand. As the scene is integrated into the Christological cycle and does not feature on its own as in the catacombs of Priscilla, its meaning acquires greater clarity and the association with the famous announcement from the Gospel becomes most verisimilar.

Despite being aware of Wilpert's argument, Février still believed in the secular reading of the scene and that it could easily function on its own within the general decoration of the chamber. In recent studies, the prevailing tendency has been to question the previous identifications and interpretations of female figures in the catacomb painting with Mary.¹¹ Many scholars are inclined to consider various representations of mothers with children and *orantes* as images of the deceased or relatives of the donors.¹² These authors find Février's reading more compelling and renounce the religious meaning of the few known compositions of the Annunciation.¹³ However, one more scene discovered since Wilpert's time strengthens the religious interpretation of the image under discussion. *Cubiculum A* of the so-called Dino Compagni catacombs in Via Latina is adorned with an extensive cycle.¹⁴ The vault is divided into nine compartments: four corners are occupied by images of decorative frames and the centre is conventionally dedicated to the figure of the Good Shepherd surrounded by four narrative compositions. One of them is completely destroyed, while of the other three the first depicts a female figure seated in a high-back chair to the right of the scene prostrating her right hand towards a standing male interlocutor (fig. 3); the next scene shows a seated woman holding a Child on her lap and accepting gifts from the three *magi*, and the last composition with two figures facing each other is very ruinous and variably interpreted as the Trial by Bitter Water or Baptism, although in the past it was associated with the story of Job. The first scene once again represents a female figure, this time placed on the right side of the composition. Her head is veiled and she sits in a large chair. With the prostrated gesture of her right hand she welcomes a man who approaches her holding a stick in his left raised hand. The state of preservation of this mural is very poor and at some point archaeologists discerned another figure behind the first man, which led them to believe that the image may actually represent The meeting of Judah and his shepherd with Tamar (Gen 38:12-18). However, following the recent restoration, the scene's identification with the Annunciation has been reconfirmed.¹⁵

The dependence of this early Christian rendering of the Annunciation on Roman models is undeniable. Mary is represented as a Roman matron while the angel is still deprived of his most characteristic features, such as wings, which was not uncommon at the time,¹⁶ scepter and clothes folded in such a way as to convey a sense of movement. Once these models had been appropriated for Christian purposes, nothing prevented these catacomb murals from having double or multiple meanings for late antique viewers, especially considering that these scenes were part of larger decorative cycles on the walls of funerary chambers meant to visibly portray the Christian faith of their owners and in some cases potentially highlight the virtues of the departed female members of the family.¹⁷ The laconic nature of their renderings, which art historians have sometimes found perplexing, could, in fact, simply be attributed to the fact that they are the earliest extant attempts to render Annunciation in art, since the Priscilla image is dated to the third century and the murals in the Sts Peter and Marcellinus and Via Latina catacombs to the early fourth. The depicted scenes seem to concentrate on encounter and dialogue, and the late antique artists may have simply adopted the most suitable pictorial formula of communication between the members of the family already in use.¹⁸ Nonetheless, it remains true that the catacomb paintings provide very scant evidence for the image of the *Annunciation* in comparison with other Christian themes. Besides the three murals described above, there are no other early examples of the visual rendering of Luke (Lk I: 26-38) in the decoration of the sarcophagi or other artworks.



1 *Annunciation*, 3rd c., catacomb of Priscilla, Rome (from: Bisconti, 2003)



2 Ceiling decoration with the Annunciation, early 4th c., catacombs of Sts Peter and Marcellinus, Rome (from: Deckers-Seeliger, Mietke, 1987)



3 *Annunciation*, early 4th c., Cubiculum A, catacombs of via Dino Compagni, Rome (from: Bisconti, 2003, p. 56, fig. 54)

It is noteworthy how the late antique scenes in the catacombs are in fact devoid of any additional elements, such as the loom, the staff in the angel's hand, the basket, etc. However, it is worth remembering that these elements of entourage were adopted primarily from the *apocrypha*. We find the description of the Virgin spinning at the time of her mysterious encounter with the divine messenger already in the *Protevangelium of James* (second century AD). If the identification of the catacomb scenes with the *Annunciation* is accepted, it can therefore be argued that the earliest visual interpretations of the scene were still primarily dependent on the concise description of Luke's Gospel.¹⁹ It was only subsequently and perhaps under the influence of the Eastern tradition that the image became enriched with multiple elements and details, above all the representation of the loom which in 5th-century artworks acquired the importance of the central element in the scene.

Mary holding the purple thread and making the Temple veil

One of the earliest representations of the Annunciation in monumental church decoration is found in the mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore church in Rome (432-440).²⁰ The program of this church has been extensively studied and I will not discuss it here at length, choosing instead to focus exclusively on a few aspects related to the *Annunciation* scene.²¹ The cycle running on the arch above the main altar of the basilica consists of four large and two minor compositions: the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation to the Temple and an enigmatic scene of the Holy Family before the gates of a city,²² and, in the lower zone, the Massacre of the Innocent and the Magi before Herod. The Annunciation appears on the top left side and shows Mary seated on the throne wearing princely attire: a white *tunica* and golden *dalmatica*, precious jewels and a diadem (fig. 4). The scene is unconventionally filled with angelic figures – in total five surround Mary on both sides and one more is depicted above the Virgin descending from heaven together with the white dove, most likely representing the Holy Spirit. All the angels have wings, their facial and carnal parts are rendered in orange hue while their garments follow the conventional male costume consisting of a white tunic with black transversal bands and *pallium*, a mantle covering one shoulder and brought together at waist level. Only one of the standing angels addresses Mary, an action reflected in the gesture of his right hand. It is not fully clear which of the angels – the one flying above or the one standing in front of Mary – is actually Gabriel or whether the two aim to represent the same figure at different moments in time. The way the Gospel events are rendered on the arch of Santa Maria Maggiore remains unique in the history of Christian art, however, I would like to concentrate here on one particular detail – the appearance of the loom in the hands of Mary. Indeed, to the left of her seat is a huge basket filled with purple wool from which the Virgin selects a thread, raises it in the air and holds it with both hands. Because her hands are busy, Mary barely responds to the message conveyed to her by the angels. The prominent size of the thread and its scarlet colour transform this element into an important feature that visually stands out and captures the attention of the viewer.

The image from Santa Maria Maggiore is proof that by the early 5th century the apocryphal element of the loom and the spinning of the temple veil had become integrated into the iconography of the Annunciation assuming the role of a central and theologically charged element. Other late antique artworks confirm this transformation and the dominance of the above mentioned visual motif in 5th-century art. For example, a prominent piece of textile from the Victoria and Albert Museum collection, tentatively dated by scholars to the 5th or 6th century, shows Mary seated on the left holding the loom vertically with both hands, which she has picked up from the small chest beside her and raised high into the air (fig. 5).²³ It is possible to distinguish the loop at the top of the thread, which is represented as a thick line of wool flowing down into the basket. In front of Mary is the figure of the archangel, depicted wearing a beautifully folded garment with two wings spread wide behind its back. Mary's garments consist of a tunic and *palla* and her head is covered by a cap. Notwithstanding the peculiar nature of Mary's attire, the identification of the subject is certain thanks to the inscription with the name *MAPIA* written in Greek, placed in proximity of the Virgin. The raised loom is rendered in such a way as to become a prominent element of the composition, where Mary is depicted not only busy with her work but as if showing the thread to the angel.

This attitude is very similar to the way the Annunciation is depicted on the so-called *Pignatta sarcophagus* in Ravenna (fig. 6).²⁴ The famous marble tomb is attributed to the late 4th to early 5th century and bears the only surviving example of the Annunciation in the decoration of late antique sarcophagi. The scene occupies the lateral shorter side where Mary is once again seated on the left, wearing the garments of a Roman noblewoman which together with the type of chair she is sitting on and the general craftsmanship of the reliefs, betray great dependence on the classical tradition. In front of the Virgin is a basket full of wool. Mary raises a thick thread from the loom high up above her head and must have originally held it in both hands, of which only the left survives. The angel is standing next to the basket with his wings spread widely, his head and pose slightly inclined to the left and his right hand in a conventional expressive gesture, revealing the moment of the divine announcement.

The iconographic similarity between the two images is quite remarkable considering the different provenance and clear stylistic incongruity of both artworks – the textile most plausibly comes from Akhimi in Egypt, while the sarcophagus is often attributed to the capital workshops of the Eastern Roman empire or Italy. The fluidity of forms and artistic solutions is further revealed in the rendering of the baskets, not only in these two images but also in the Annunciation from Santa Maria Maggiore – in all three cases the container with wool is depicted as a large tatted basket characterized by a diagonal design made out probably of twigs and rods. It can be only tentatively suggested that the nature and ornament of the basket in these cases recalled the loom weaving process with stitches placed one after another in accordance with a regular pattern. Hence, the contrast between the delineation of the container and the freely flowing thread in a certain sense prefigured the transformation awaiting the amorphous wool in the hands of the maiden.

The prominence of the thread held by Mary in late antique images of the Annunciation is further confirmed by other examples, such as the wooden relief from the Louvre (late 5th century ?) and a pyxis from the Museum of Byzantine art (Bode) in Berlin. The first represents a wooden panel of which only the part with the figure of the Virgin survives (fig. 7).²⁵ She is seated on a throne and holds a basket with the loom at the level of her knees. Both of Mary's hands are raised and must have originally held the thread in front of the angel. The Virgin's gaze is oriented towards the viewer while her head is once again covered by a cap. The same circular cap can be seen covering the hair of Mary on the pyxis from Bode where the Virgin is represented seated on a *curule* seat – one leg is set firmly on the ground while the knee of the other is slightly raised, creating a characteristic dynamic pose often repeated in early Christian representations of the Annunciation (fig. 8).²⁶ The Virgin's dress is tightened by a girdle above the waist level. Running transversely for the total height of the pyxis, from the bottom edge to the top, is the profile of the thread held by Mary with both hands. The basket is substituted in this case by a small round bowl serving as the base for a spindle underscoring the actual process of spinning and the making of the veil. The archangel is portrayed in a dynamic pose and the emphatic gesture of his right hand, conveying the message of the incarnation, is positioned in such a way as to allow Gabriel to almost touch the central part of the loom with his two outstretched fingers and at the same time to point straight in the direction of Mary's womb. Another pyxis of a similar type but probably of a slightly later date, today in the Cleveland museum, further strengthens the associations between the thread and the womb by showing the loom actually crossing the body of the Virgin at waist level creating a diagonal line over her robes, allowing the artist to render explicit the connection between the thread and Mary's body (fig. 9).

The tendency to display the thread prominently in the hands of the Mother of God is justified by several reasons. On the one hand, it can be considered an almost literal reproduction of the description provided by the *Protoevangelium of James*, according to which the angel appeared to Mary at the moment she sat on her "throne" and took the loom in her hands: "...she went to the house and put down the pitcher and taking the purple she sat down on her seat and drew out the thread. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before her..."²⁷ It is interesting how the author of the *Protoevangelium* returns to the theme of the veil right after the announcement: "And Mary said, 'Behold, (I am) the handmaid of the Lord before him: be it to me according to your word.' And she made ready the purple and the scarlet and brought them to the priest."²⁸ Therefore the reference to the thread



4 *Annunciation*, 432-440, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome (photo: R. Novikov)



5 *Annunciation*, 5th c., resist-dyed linen, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (© Victoria and Albert Museum)



6 *Annunciation*, late 4th-early 5th c., so-called *Pignatta sarcophagus*, Ravenna (photo: M.C. Carile)



7 *Annunciation*, late 5th c., wood, Louvre, Paris (photo: M. Lidova)



8 *Annunciation*, 5th c., ivory pyxis, State Museums, Berlin (photo: M. Lidova; © Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin)



9 *Annunciation*, 5th-early 6th c., ivory pyxis, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchased from the J.H. Wade Fund 1951.114 (© The Cleveland Museum of Art)

and preparation of the temple veil “frames” the event of the Annunciation in this text, while the transformation of the thread into a completed fabric becomes a sort of an allegory combining temporal and symbolical connotations of the accomplished incarnation and the period of growing of the body of Christ in the womb of the Virgin. On the other hand, as has been wonderfully demonstrated and thoroughly discussed by Nicholas Conostas, the idea of weaving and the loom became central to the official theological discourse of the time. The patriarch of Constantinople, Proclus (434-446) constantly returns to this metaphor and the notion of garments in his homilies on the Virgin: “She is the awesome loom of the divine economy on which the robe of union was ineffably woven. The loom-worker was the Holy Spirit; the wool-worker the ‘overshadowing power from the high’. The wool was the ancient fleece of Adam; the interlocking thread was the spotless flesh of the Virgin. [...] therefore do not rend the robe of the incarnation which was ‘woven from above’. What sort of loom was your womb, upon which you wove this ‘tunic without seam’?”²⁹

The account of the Annunciation and references to purple garments are also common in the sermons on Nativity attributed to John Chrysostom (340-407): “Greetings, blessed one, weaving by nature a crown not woven with hands.”³⁰ and “Behold, the virgin is with child. The writing of the synagogue, the possession of the church. The church found the twofold, she discovered the pearl of great price, she dipped the wool, she put on the purple robe.”³¹

The same thought attempting to compare the flesh of Christ to the precious linen is echoed in the works by Cyril of Alexandria (376-444): “The beauty and multiform ornament of the church is Christ, who is one yet understood by many riddles, such as the ‘fine-spun linen’, for the bodiless Word was ‘spun’ who he was knitted together with the flesh; and not just ‘linen’ but ‘blue linen’, for he is not only from earth but from heavens ... and ‘purple’, for he is not a slave but a King from God; and ‘woven from scarlet’, to indicate, as we said, his being knitted together with the flesh...for scarlet is a symbol of blood.”³²

In light of these and similar sources, the attention given to the thread and making of the fabric in late antique artworks becomes justifiable and fully in line with the contemporary understanding of the theme of incarnation. The metaphoric thinking of the 5th century allowed the loom to be interpreted as a complex image of the “body”.³³ The purple thread in the hands of the Mother of God alluded simultaneously to Mary’s “flesh”, which provides the “building material” for divine incarnation, and to the “body” of Christ, who thus becomes mystically present and integrated in the scene, “disguised” in the visual motif of the loom. The thread assumes this way the symbolic meaning of “umbilical cord” uniting the body of Mary with that of Christ. The way this complex theological understanding of Mary’s actions and of the loom is rendered in early Christian artworks differentiates the images of the Annunciation from the common visual motif of antiquity, showing women engaged in various domestic activities and foremost textile production referring to their female virtue.³⁴

Judging from the surviving material, it can be argued that the image of the Annunciation underwent significant transformation in the late 4th to early 5th century, resulting in the integration of the apocryphal details in the visual rendering of the subject. The iconographic similarity between the images analyzed above is so great as to suggest that a particular type of Annunciation became widespread at the time across the territories of the empire. This type was characterized by the placement of the Virgin to the left, the absence of the staff in the hands of the angel, the depiction of the basket and the thread, rendered in a prominent size and held by Mary with both hands as if exhibited before the eyes of the angel and the viewer. Considering the reliable early dating of the Santa Maria Maggiore program and of the *Pignatta sarcophagus* and the remarkable consonance of this imagery with the writings and preaching of the 5th century, most of the other artworks discussed above, i.e. the Louvre relief, the pyxis from Bode and the London textile, as well as one more woven fabric with a similar composition from the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 10),³⁵ can all be tentatively attributed, in my view, to the 5th century. The latter argument is confirmed by the fact that the surviving imagery of the Annunciation from the following century is predominantly characterized by a different approach and shift in emphasis from the demonstration of the thread to the dialogue between the two figures. The loom is still present in the scene but becomes somewhat marginalized and a secondary element. As can be seen in some 6th-century ivories, such as five-part gospel

covers,³⁶ the plaque on the throne of Maximian, and other minor works, the accent falls on the interaction and moment of the dialogue between Mary and Gabriel. It is the gesture of Mary's right hand with her palm open or placed near her face, indicating either her acceptance of the divine message or a moment of concern, that underlines the dramaturgy of the scene and the focus of attention. The loom is still present but the Virgin no longer holds it with both hands, instead she either raises it with just one or the wool in the basket is shown set aside near to the maiden. These various iconographic differences and minor changes in the rendering of the position of Mary's hands or the direction of her gaze may seem insignificant to a contemporary viewer and be deemed the result of mere artistic momentous decisions. However, when considered in relation to contemporary theological discussion concerned with identifying the particular sense (smell, sight, taste, or hearing) that granted Mary the capacity to accept God inside of her, it becomes clear that similar nuances emphasizing various aspects of her activity were not accidental.³⁷

Interestingly enough, these various approaches continued to define images of the Annunciation in subsequent centuries, and the early Christian pattern showing Mary seated and holding the thread with both of her hands reappears in the most emphatic images of the Middle Byzantine period, including the two famous icons of the Annunciation featuring the image of baby Jesus in the womb of the Virgin (one on Sinai and another one in Moscow; fig. 11),³⁸ and representations in mosaic church decorations from the 11th-12th centuries, such as Hagia Sophia in Kiev and Martorana in Palermo, where the Mother of God is represented on the pillar flanking the altar space and overlooking the *naos* (fig. 12).

The Annunciation at the Spring

Notwithstanding the prominent role that the Annunciation played in the homiletic and theological discourse and Marian hymnography of the early Christian period, its appearance in the art of the 4th and 5th centuries is relatively rare. However, the range of existing examples cannot be reduced to canonical images of the scene alone. Interestingly, the surviving evidence indicates that the apocryphal version of the event, showing Mary receiving the message of the angel originally at the spring,³⁹ regularly features in late antique artworks of both Eastern and Western parts of the empire: "And she took the pitcher and went out to draw water, and behold, a voice said, 'Hail, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you, you are blessed among women.' And she looked around to the right and to the left to see where this voice came from".⁴⁰ (*Protoevangelium of James*, 11:1-4)

The famous Marian silk from the Abegg-Stiftung collection near Bern is decorated with several consecutive scenes reproduced in multiple rows, starting from Mary at the Temple before the High Priest, the Selection of Joseph, the Annunciation at the Spring and the Nativity (fig. 13).⁴¹ The precious fragment must have originally formed part of a tunic-like vestment and its imagery is characterised by the nuanced design of the narrative cycle and the extensive use of inscriptions accompanying almost every scene. In the composition of the Annunciation at the Spring, Mary is conventionally represented leaning on one knee and collecting water in a pitcher while the archangel addresses her from behind. Gabriel's words are conveniently incorporated into the scene and read as *XEPE MAPIA* [sic], or Hail Mary, with the name *MAPIA* placed precisely above the Virgin's head. The verbal formula derives from words recorded in the *Protoevangelium of James* (11:1-3), *Luke's Gospel* (1:26-38), the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (Ps-Mt 9). Although the dating of the Abegg-Stiftung textile is uncertain, its archaeological and typological characteristics lead most scholars to give it an early dating of around 400 or even before. The Abegg-Stiftung fabric represents one of the earliest testimonies of a narrative cycle focused specifically on the figure of the Virgin, while the selection of the apocryphal subjects indicates a particular focus on the events preceding the Nativity. Gabriel's first attempt to approach Mary with the divine message does not feature here as a complementary image nor as an additional moment in history, on the contrary, it actually substitutes the representation of the principal Annunciation which takes place inside the house. According to Conostas, the two Annunciations



10 *Annunciation*, 5th-early 6th c., woven textile (public domain © The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



11 *Annunciation*, ca 1200, icon, tempera on wood, St Catherine's monastery, Sinai (from: *Holy Image, Holy Ground*, 2007, p. 152).



12 *Mother of God, right of the Annunciation on the pillars flanking the altar*, 11th c., St Sophia, Kiev (photo: M. Lidova).



13 *Annunciation at the Spring*, 4th c., silk, The Abegg-Stiftung collection (from: Kötzsche, 1993, p. 185)



14 *Annunciation at the Spring, Mary with two women, Mary enthroned, Adelpia sarcophagus, late 4th c., marble, Archaeological Museum, Syracuse (from: Dresken Weiland, 1998, no 20)*



15 *Annunciation at the Spring, 5th c., ivory diptych (fragment), Milan cathedral (from: Frantová, 2014)*



16 *Christological cycle and Scenes from the Life of John the Baptist, ca 800, imitating a 5th-c. original, so-called Werden casket, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (© Victoria and Albert Museum)*

described in the apocrypha were not treated at the time as two separate events, but rather “two interrelated moments within the single, unique event of the Incarnation”.⁴² However, the choice of the first approach of Gabriel over the second and more important one is indicative and reveals that this side of the story must have had particular significance for the late antique audience.

Another image of the Annunciation at the Spring can be found in the decoration on the lid of the so-called *Adelphia sarcophagus* from Syracuse, marked by a sequence of four scenes, all of which include the figure of the Virgin (fig. 14).⁴³ The short narrative develops from left to right and opens with the Annunciation at the Spring – Mary is kneeling on one leg while the other is bent, and above her a wingless male figure holds up his right hand in a gesture of speech. Unlike the Abegg-Stiftung textile, in which Mary is depicted with a pitcher placed beside her on the ground, here the maiden actually holds a vessel under the waters of the spring issuing forth from the high rock, on top of which a male face can be seen – probably an allegorical representation of the source. The narrative continues with the scene showing Mary standing upright in three-quarters with gaze directed to the right; two female figures flank her and gently hold her arms. It can be tentatively argued that the scene represents the Visitation but the exact meaning remains somewhat vague. In the following composition, Mary is represented seated on a throne surrounded and adored by four women. The story continues on the other side of the dedicatory inscription with a joint composition of the Nativity and Adoration of the Magi. The theme of the rock featured at the start is echoed by the rock on which Mary is shown seated, flanking the manger with Christ and receiving the *magi* in the final part of the frieze. The narrative portrayed in sculptural reliefs tells the story of the gradual transformation of Mary from a maiden caught by surprise when collecting water for the house to the Mother of Christ. Besides the logical historical development sequence, this shift in meaning is well reflected in the alternating attire of the Virgin whose dress mutates from a belted *tunica* with her hair left uncovered in the first two scenes to the image of a Roman *matrona* wearing a heavily folded garment with *palla* covering her head in the rest of the cycle.

One of the best preserved late antique examples of the Annunciation at the Spring survives on the ivory diptych, now in the treasury of Milan cathedral, most recently attributed to 460s (fig. 15).⁴⁴ The orientation of the scene is reversed in relation to *Adelphia sarcophagus*: the spring is placed on the right, gushing forth from a high rock. Mary kneels before it holding a vessel in her left hand underneath the source waters. Her attention, however, is caught by the angel standing behind her back and addressing her with the gesture of his right hand. In previous scholarship, the corresponding scene on the other side of the central plaque, depicting the Virgin standing before the angel pointing at a star above a temple with a hanging veil, has sometimes been identified with the Annunciation in the House. However, the iconographic peculiarity of the scene and the presence of temple architecture indicates a different identification of the subject, probably connected to the Trial by Bitter Water. Hence, the Annunciation at the Spring is the only composition of the narrative cycle that tells the story of the divine message announced by Gabriel to Mary. The characteristic feature of the Milan diptych relief decoration is the coexistence within one narrative cycle of two divergent types of the Mother of God. In two scenes – the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi, in the top registers of the two leaves of the diptych, Mary wears a typical and more familiar *maphorion*. Meanwhile, in the compositions of the Annunciation at the Spring and the Trial by Bitter Water (?), the Virgin is represented in a rich garment tied at the waist by a girdle with her hair gathered in a bun on top of her head. The ivory master has carefully rendered every tiny detail of the sumptuous dress, literally carving each and every square of the jeweled collar. Moreover, the Milan diptych demonstrates that in the 5th century there was seemingly no rigorous distinction between different iconographic types of the Virgin, which could organically complement each other in one work of art.

The imagery of the Milan diptych finds a close counterpart in the decoration of the so-called *Werden casket* from the Victoria and Albert Museum (fig. 16).⁴⁵ The two surviving long plaques once formed part of a shallow ivory box covered with images of the *Infancy cycle* of an unusual kind. Various stylistic characteristics and technical peculiarities indicate that this work is most probably a Carolingian production made on the basis of and closely following a 5th-century original. In this cycle, once more, the story opens with the Annunciation at the Spring (fig.

17) followed by the Dream of Joseph with the Virgin standing nearby, the Visitation, and Mary before the angel pointing towards the temple, in front of which is a bearded male figure holding an open book. The latter scene is often identified with the preparation of Mary before the Trial of Waters, although other readings are also possible (cf. with the *Milan diptych*). Like the arrangement of the *Syracuse sarcophagus*, the other side of the *Werden casket* continues with a detailed Nativity, starting with the *magi* seeing the star on the left, the manger with Jesus protected by Joseph and Mary seated on either side, and finally the Adoration before the Virgin and Child. Only one plaque, dedicated to John the Baptist, survives from the two other, much shorter sides of the casket. The fact that the Annunciation at the Spring was not a marginal theme nor popular exclusively in the West is further confirmed by a later artifact – a 6th-century representation on a clay medallion from the Holy Land (fig. 18),⁴⁶ which besides providing another example of this iconography, demonstrates that the Annunciation at the Spring may have circulated as an independent visual motif used on pilgrims' tokens and therefore might also have been associated with a particular sacred site in Nazareth.⁴⁷ Indeed, we learn that the site of Mary's first encounter with the angel was known in late antiquity and pilgrims would visit it on their journey to the Holy Land and celebrations held on that site may have inspired both the liturgical framework and the visual rendering of the Gospel event.⁴⁸

The surviving evidence is imperative for the understanding of the Annunciation in late antiquity and the significance that the apocryphal sources had for the formation of the visual tradition around the figure of the Mother of God. After Iconoclasm, the image of the Annunciation at the Spring is a relatively rare motif, although it does feature in a number of central artworks, such as for example the famous 12th-century manuscript with Homilies of Iakovos Kokkinobaphos (Vat. Gr. 1162) and decorations of St Sophia in Kiev, church at Daphni, Monreale in Sicily, and others. However, the subject only became really popular again in Palaeologan art, when it was commonly included in developed Marian cycles.⁴⁹ The principal difference in these later versions of the theme is the substitution of the spring with the representation of the well. Nicholas Conostas argues for the importance of the well motif in relation to the developed Old Testament tradition associating life-changing moments, in particular linked to the fecundity, marriage and childbirth of the protagonists with the location in proximity to the water source.⁵⁰ Suffice to remember the remarkable citation from the writings of Caesarius of Arles (468/470–542), in which the Latin author plays with the ideas commonly encountered in the Eastern theological tradition as well, in particular early commentaries on the Bible: "Moreover, how Christ was to come into the world to be joined to the church was prefigured also in blessed Jacob when he traveled into a distant country to choose a wife. [...] Blessed Rebekah who was to be united to blessed Isaac was found at the well; and Zipporah who was joined to Moses was found at the well. [...] Since all three of those patriarchs typified our Lord and Saviour, for this reason they found their wives at fountains or wells, because Christ was to find his church at the waters of baptism" (FC 47:34-35).⁵¹

The sacred meaning of water in the Christian tradition is well known and may have contributed to the popularity of the Annunciation at the Spring in the late antique period. Just as the thread and the process of weaving assumed the significance of the sacred material and act, revealing the divine mystery of incarnation, so the collection of water and the pitcher serving as a container were most probably read in symbolic, as well as historical terms.⁵² Nevertheless, the appearance, spread, and popularity of this theme, encountered in the works produced in the East and West, speak of a particular moment in the perception of the event in which the apocryphal Annunciation at the Spring could fulfill the role ascribed to one of the central Gospel narratives.

Conclusions

The overview of the earliest imagery of the Annunciation provided in this paper allows us to conclude that the representation of this feast went through a number of formative stages in the early Christian period. The catacombs in Rome, in the absence of equivalent material of the same date from the East, testify to the relative scarcity of this visual motif in the 3rd- and 4th-century art and the limpid simplicity of the first artistic renderings focused primarily on depicting a dialogue and largely dependent on classical prototypes. These early renderings



17 *Annunciation at the Spring*, so-called *Werden casket* (fragment), Victoria and Albert Museum, London (photo: M. Lidova)



18 *Annunciation at the Spring*, 6th c., clay medallion, Monza cathedral (from: Grabar, 1958, pl 31)

are in sharp contrast to the great symbolic significance of Annunciation images in the 5th century. Whether or not they were influenced by the decisions of the Ephesus council (431) and the growing popularity of the figure of the Virgin, the artists of the 5th century expanded the range of their literary sources and introduced a number of iconographic details into the treatment of the Annunciation scene. The basket with wool and the thread raised by Mary with both of her hands assume the role of the principal elements of the composition, interfering with the dialogue between the two protagonists. The process of communication becomes secondary to the symbolic value of the spinning of the temple veil, while the reading and correct understanding of these images presupposes not only knowledge of the apocryphal stories of Christ's infancy but also acquaintance with contemporary theological tradition and complex interpretations of the weaving and making of the "body of Christ" and the garments of salvation. Furthermore, the apocryphal version of the Annunciation at the Spring is equally popular, often opening narrative sequences focused on the story of incarnation in which the figure of the Virgin assumes a privileged position. In both kinds of Annunciation the rendering of Mary's garments can also be indicative of her changing role from maiden to the Mother of God. Most vividly, this aspect is revealed on the *Bode pyxis*, showing Mary in a belted tunic and her hair gathered under a simple undercap in the Annunciation, followed by the scene of the Flight to Egypt where Mary appears with her head covered by a *maphorion*. This principle of singling out the figure of the Virgin at the time of conception through the specific elements of her costume is reflected in some later artworks, for instance the sixth-century mosaic decoration in the Euphrasius basilica in Poreč. The precise meaning of this change in the attire of the Mother of God within the visual framework of the same decoration cannot be determined with absolute certainty at this stage, but the fact that this was a standard artistic approach to the Annunciation appearing within larger narrative cycles is well reflected in the artworks discussed in this paper. Finally, it needs to be highlighted that the changing visual logic underlying representations of the Annunciation in late antiquity underwent simultaneous transformation in the East and West, indicating much greater transparency, as well as artistic and cultural interaction between the two parts of the empire at the time. From the 6th century onwards, preference was given to slightly different versions of the Annunciation in which the gesture of Mary's acceptance and interaction with the angel once again came to the fore; however, late antique patterns, deep symbolic role of the objects featured in the scene, and even the basic iconographic solutions and gestures would continue to reappear in the Byzantine art of the subsequent centuries and predetermine some of the most spectacular renderings of the mystic encounter in which the message of divine incarnation was conveyed, realized and embodied.

- 1 On the feast of the Annunciation: R. FLETCHER, *The Festival of the Annunciation: Studies of the Festival from Early Byzantine Texts*, D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1955, esp. pp. VIII, 18-28, 111-172. On Byzantine imagery of the Annunciation: H. PAPASTAVROU, *Recherche iconographique dans l'art byzantine et occidental du XIe au XVIe siècle: l'Annonciation*, Venise, Institut hellénique d'études byzantines at post-byzantine de Venise, 2007, pp. 28-34.
- 2 It can be reconstructed that at some stage the commemoration of the event was held in connection with the Nativity (i.e. during the celebrations around 25th of December), while in other traditions, it coincided with the time of Christ's death and Easter (around 25th of March). See note 1. On the early sermons, see: M. FASSLER, "The First Marian Feast in Constantinople and Jerusalem: Chant Texts, Readings, and Homiletic Literature", in: *The study of Medieval Chant. Paths and Bridges, East and West*, P. JEFFERY (ed.), Cambridge, The Boydell Press, 2001, pp. 25-88; N. CONSTAS, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2003.
- 3 Among selected publications, see: F. CABROL-H. LECLERCQ, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, Paris, 1907, vol. I/2, pp. 2242-2267, vol. X, pp. 1989-1992; Th. SCHMIT, "Blagoveschenie" (Annunciation)", in: *Izvestia Russkogo Archeologicheskogo Instituta v Konstantinopole (Proceedings of the Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople)*, 15, 1911, pp. 31-72; G. SCHILLER, *Iconography of Christian Art*, Bradford-London, New York Graphic Society, 1971, pp. 33-52; H. PAPASTAVROU, *op. cit.*, 2007. See also a short overview: F.P. MASSARA, "Annunciazione", in: *Temi di iconografia Cristiana*, Città del Vaticano, PIAC, pp. 111-113.
- 4 D. ARASSE, *L'Annonciation italienne: une histoire de perspective*, Paris, Hazan, 1999.
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- 6 For the best overview of this decoration and its interpretation, on which this study is largely based, see: B. MAZZEI, "Il cubicolo dell'Annunciazione nelle catacombe di Priscilla. Nuove osservazioni alla luce dei recenti restauri", in: *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, vol. 75, 1999, pp. 233-80 (with detailed bibliography). On the state of the catacombs and recent restorations: F. BISCONTI-R. GIULIANI-B. MAZZEI, *La catacomba di Priscilla: il complesso, i restuari, il museo*, Todi, Tau Ed., 2013.
- 7 B. MAZZEI, *op. cit.*, 1999, p. 276.
- 8 A. BOSIO, *Roma Sotterranea*, Roma, Grignani, 1632, pp. 539-541; P. ARINGHI, *Roma sotterranea*, II, Roma, 1651, pp. 295-299.
- 9 P.-A. FÉVRIER, "Les peintures de la catacombe de Priscille; deux scènes relatives à la vie intellectuelle", in: *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome. Antiquité*, vol. 71, 1959, pp. 301-319, in part. pp. 309-316.
- 10 J. DECKERS-H.R. SEELIGER-G. MIETKE, *Die Katakomben "Santi Marcellino e Pietro". Repertorium der Malereien*, Città del Vaticano, PIAC, 1987, pp. 223-226. J. WILPERT, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms*, Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder, 1903, pp. 202-203; J. WILPERT, *Ein Cyclus christologischer Gemälde aus der Katakomben der Heiligen Petrus und Marcellinus*, Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder, 1891, pp. 19-20.
- 11 On the image of Mary in Roman catacombs, see: H.F.J. LIELL, *Mariendarstellungen in den Katakomben. Die Darstellung der allerseligsten Jungfrau und Gottesgebärerin Maria auf den Kunstdenkmälern der Katakomben*, Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder, 1887 (on the representations of the Annunciation, pp. 198-215); N. KONDAKOV, *Ikonoграфия Bogomateri*, St Petersburg, Imperatorskaia academia nauk, 1915 (reprinted in 1998), pp. 13-59. This work has been recently translated into Italian: *Iconografia della Madre di Dio*, I. FOLETTI (trans.), Roma, Viella, 2014. For a good overview of late antique imagery of the women in the catacombs: S.M. SALVADORI, *Per feminam mors, per feminam vita. Images of Women in the Early Christian Funerary Art of Rome*, PhD thesis, New York University, 2002, pp. 268-353.
- 12 G. PARLBY, "The Origins of Marian Art in the Catacombs and the Problems of Identification", in: *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, C. MAUNDER (ed.), London, Burns & Oates, 2008, pp. 41-56; A. AHLQVIST, "Maria, madre di Cristo, e altre madri presenti nell'arte funeraria paleocristiana", in: *Acta archaeologica et artium historiam pertinentia*, vol. 7, 2009, pp. 9-31; G. PARLBY, *What can art tell us about the cult of the Virgin Mary in the early Roman Church? A Re-evaluation of the Evidence for Marian Images in Late Antiquity*, PhD thesis, Roehampton University, 2010, pp. 33-35.
- 13 For example, in connection with Priscilla catacombs Parlby writes: "In my view this is yet another example of Bisconti's funerary portrait of a dead woman together with her living relative", *Ibid.* p. 34. When referring to the image in the

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- 32 Cyril of Alexandria, *De Adoratione* 9 (PG 68:633D-636A); N. CONSTAS, *op. cit.*, 2003, note 34, p. 330.
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XAIPE MAPIA
Prikaz Navještenja u nastajanju

Ovaj tekst sadrži pregled najranijih sačuvanih prikaza Navještenja te pokazuje kako je ikonografija ovog motiva prošla kroz velik broj formativnih etapa u ranokršćanskome periodu. Ovo preoblikovanje ukazuje na promjenu percepcije događaja i razvoj teološke tradicije u odnosu prema inkarnaciji. U 3. i 4. stoljeću prikazi Navještenja su iznimno rijetki i zavisni o rimskoj vizualnoj tradiciji. Nakon 400. godine košara s preslicom i purpurnom vunom koju drži Marija postaju sastavni elementi Navještenja, što se zapaža na spomenicima istočnog i zapadnog dijela Carstva. Ova promjena otkriva ne samo jačanje Marijina kulta, već i važnost apokrifnih izvora u stvaranju vizualnih narativnih kompozicija vezanih uz lik Djevice. Štoviše, podudara se s odjecima suvremene homelitičke tradicije, koja je dodala duboko vjersko značenje procesu tkanja i izradi odjeće i crkvenog zastora - sve je to dovedeno u vezu s Kristovim tijelom i misterijem utjelovljenja. Konačno, pokazuje se da je apokrifno Navještenje kod bunara (Anđeoski pozdrav na bunaru) bilo jednako popularno u to doba i redovito mijenjano s prikazom Navještenja u kući u narativnim ciklusima koji su u fokus postavljali lik Marije.

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