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The Frescoes of Pope John VII (A.D. 705-707) in S. Maria Antiqua in Rome *Supplementum*

Abstract

This contribution is a supplement to the author's publication of the frescoes of John VII (A.D. 705-707) in the church of S. Maria Antiqua in Rome (1968). For reasons of economy, the inscriptions were included in the book only as tracings. The photographs of the material are here finally published, showing the inscriptions as they appeared sixty years ago, at a time when they were relatively untouched by air pollution.

The Painted Inscriptions

Presented here is a selection of the photographs I took sixty years ago of the painted inscriptions in the frescoes of John VII (A.D. 705-707) in S. Maria Antiqua. Many of these *tituli*, of an exceptional quality, appear to have been crafted by masters in calligraphy coming from some good scriptoria. However, there is every reason to believe that it was the able painters of the figure scenes who made them; the virtuoso fluency and the sureness of hand characteristic of both kinds of work speak for this thesis. This material, collected in the years 1957-1960, was not, for reasons of economy, included in my treatise on the frescoes of John VII (1968)¹. This was a well-illustrated volume, in which a wealth of details concerning style, iconography and technique could be shown for the first time, yet the funds available for the printing did not allow a full documentation of the large mass of material. The part on epigraphy was to suffer, as one chose to reproduce merely the tracings that were relevant to it. My intention, then, was to bring out the photographs as a separate instalment later, but in the years which followed, this plan was thwarted as my job as a university lecturer with its multiple commitments absorbed all my energy. And new projects ensued which led to further, and lasting, delay.

To have this series published today, when with superior technical means, i.e. better cameras and improved lighting, an upgraded photographic coverage of the site will be established, is still imperative. The black-and-white photographs were taken as close-ups of the

¹ Nordhagen 1968. A few of the photographs were printed in Nordhagen 1962, 53-72.

epigraphy at a time when little more than fifty years had elapsed since the excavation of the church had taken place. Therefore, my pictures document the frescoes at a time when, assumedly, their physical state had not been essentially altered since their discovery. In many places, in fact, they looked as if freshly painted. The semi-darkness and balance of humidity in the empty church may have been beneficial, but also, heavy air pollution due to car fumes had not yet begun. This changed dramatically already shortly after my studies had ended, when exposure to gases became many-doubled due to that colossal traffic artery, the *Via dei fori imperiali*, which ran not many hundred metres from where the church is located. What is needed now is a material for collation, to see what destructions to the painted surfaces may possibly have been brought about by this sinister onslaught, but one which may also help in the mapping and assessment of any future damage.

The painted inscriptions in John VII's frescoes are of three different kinds. Those seen in the medallions with the Twelve Apostles, in the lower zone on the presbytery side walls, are all in a Latin lettering and are made with a grey or blackish paint on the yellow ground. The brushwork is relatively thin, in a few places almost transparent.

In the panels with the scenes from the Life of Christ on the presbytery side walls (Latin lettering) and in the Old Testament scenes on the *transennae* (Latin), as well as in the names of the Church fathers in the lower part of the decoration on the triumphal arch (Latin and Greek), together with the names of the Medical Saints in the diaconicon (Greek), the letters are white and made with a loaded brush on a dark blue background. Since the thick paste with which they are painted, easily slips from the surface on which they sit, these letters are susceptible to flaking. Whether the means with which the surfaces have been treated during the restoration attempts over the years have made their adherence to the wall stronger and more lasting, is a crucial question. A gradual degradation, or – as a worst-case scenario – a full obliteration of this part of the splendid epigraphic material in S. Maria Antiqua, would mean a grave loss not only for the study of palaeography but for cultural history as well.

The large inscription in Greek on the triumphal arch is painted in white on a red ground, the intention being, in the opinion of several *studiosi*, to emulate manuscript pages of purple vellum with silver letters on them,² a contrivance without parallels in medieval art.³ The brushstrokes forming the letters are fairly thick, but their adherence to the red background plane appear solid.

Technically brilliant and of the greatest importance to the study of medieval epigraphy, this body of inscriptions are historical documents in their own right. In his study on the Byzantine epigraphy known from Italy, G. Cavallo saw the material from John VII's frescoes in S. Maria Antiqua as a highpoint within this class, insisting that it reflects the calligraphy of an atelier close to the Byzantine emperor: on Roman soil the use of this script form expressed 'the highest imperial pretensions on John VII's behalf'.⁴ Thus it provides us with what seems to be an affirmative answer to that long-discussed problem, the possible presence of Byzantine artists in Rome in the Early Middle Ages.⁵ As examples of the calligrapher's art on the

² Cavallo 1988, II, 487.

³ It brings to mind the use of silver letters on a red ground seen in the inscription in the apse mosaic in the church of Hosios David at Thessaloniki.

⁴ Cavallo, *op. cit.*, *ibid.*

⁵ Cf. Nordhagen 2000, 113-134.

highest level, these inscriptions have few contenders; yet, as suggested above, their *ductus*, i.e. the way in which the letters are fashioned by the brushstrokes, has a dynamic pattern closely related to how such strokes render details in the Biblical scenes to which they are applied: the white 'impressionistic' highlights which model faces and costumes exhibit the same quick and slashing stabs as those which draw the straight or rounded lines of the letters and the serifs which embroider them.

The large inscription on the triumphal arch, which holds a *catena* of Biblical quotations, brings some of the finest specimens of this craft (FIGS. 24 a-c), as do the series of Medical Saints in the diaconicon (FIGS. 7-11). To the same group belongs the writing which renders the names of the Church fathers on the lowest part of the triumphal arch (FIGS. 5-6). The Latin inscriptions found on the Apostle medallions are less flamboyant although well crafted (FIGS. 1-4). A slightly pedestrian version of the Greek script is found in one single location, above the heads of the medical saints in the altar niche on the S. wall in the diaconicon (FIGS. 12-13); this attests to there being different levels of competence within the workshop of John VII. The palaeography seen in the medallion with St. Euthymius on the façade of the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs (FIG. 23) constitutes a main argument for the thesis that this wall, which lies outside the central complex of S. Maria Antiqua, was decorated by the workshop employed by John VII. This will seem to prove that the figure of Pope Leo I (fragmentary) on the same wall, who holds a page containing one of his fundamental tenets, was part of John's programme.⁶

While it is in the Greek lettering the graphic skill of these masters brings the most spectacular results, the Latin labels also have many fine examples; see, for instance, the tiny *tituli* in the scenes from the Life of Christ on the presbytery side walls and in the Old Testament scenes on the *transenna* frescoes, as well as on the panel with the Virgin in the niche on the NW pillar in the nave;⁷ some have beautiful ligatures (FIGS. 14-18).

To the series of photographs presented here I have added one set of the tracings published in the volume of 1968. It documents the crucial inscription which reveals the identity of the figure which stands next to John VII in the row of popes on the triumphal arch.⁸ There are special reasons for my republishing of it. It comes from an area in which surface destructions are particularly harmful. Here the rubble, i.e. the fragments of brick and stone which filled the interior of the church after the vaults collapsed in the ninth century, has nearly scrubbed the wall clean of its fresco layer; still, it was possible to discern some remains of what had been written here. To the left of the head of this figure could be seen the letters **LE.**, which, judged by their position on the wall, form part of the word *Leo*; to the right of the head could be read **PP** for *Papa* and **.O.A.VS** for the word *Romanus* (FIG. 27). The inclusion in the catalogue of the tracings of these letters is meant to highlight the condition in which much of our material survives. The Leo inscription, which identifies a central protagonist within what I have called 'the combative imagery of John VII',⁹ is an extreme case. In 1958, when my investigation reached this particular point in the church, I found that the inscription could not be photographed. The paint of the remaining letters barely stood out from the heavily scratched mortar

⁶ Nordhagen 1968, 84, Pl. CVI,a. The Euthymius inscription is today almost obliterated due to exposure.

⁷ Virgin in the Niche; cf. Nordhagen 1968, Pl. XCIII.

⁸ For the papal figure and its place on the wall, see *ibid.*, Pl. XLVI; description on 42.

⁹ Nordhagen 2017, 7.

surface surrounding them, and could be recorded on tracing paper only with difficulty. Whether these fragments still sit there must be verified, and a new attempt to photograph them should be made.¹⁰

Included are some illustrations which tell of the decayed state of a part of the inscriptions and of the difficulties connected with the documentation and dechiffring of them (FIGS. 10-11).

¹⁰ For the other, main epigraphic clue to the religio-political programme of John VII, the inscription which labels the papal figure standing on the far right in the same zone as SCS MARTINUS PP ROMANUS, i.e. the martyred Pope Martin I, cf. Nordhagen 1968, 41 (description) and Pls. XLIX, LI, CXI 13 a, CXII 13 b.

CATALOGUE

(Numbers in brackets refer to the plate numbers in Nordhagen 1968)

I. Apostle medallions, presbytery W wall.

FIG. 1. a-b – Apostle Paul. Presbytery W wall (V, CVII, 2).

FIG. 2. a-b – Apostle Andrew. Presbytery W wall (VI, CVII, 1).

FIG. 3. a-b – Apostle John. Presbytery W wall (VII, CVIII, 4).

FIG. 4. a-b – Apostle Bartholomew. Presbytery W wall (CVIII, 5).

II. Church Fathers, lower part of triumphal arch.¹¹

FIG. 5 – St. Basil. Triumphal arch (CX, 10).

FIG. 6 a-b – St. Gregor Nazianzus. Triumphal arch (CXI, 12).

III. Medical Saints, W. wall of diaconicon.

FIG. 7 – St. Barachisius. W wall, diaconicon (CXV, 18).

FIG. 8 – St. Dometius. W wall, diaconicon (CXV, 19).

¹¹ For the inscription relevant to St. Augustin, lower part of triumphal arch, cf. Nordhagen 1968, Pl. XLIII.

FIG. 9 – St. Panteleimon. W wall, diaconicon (CXVI, 21).

FIG. 11 a – St. Abbacyrus. N wall, diaconicon (CXVI, 20).

IV. Medical Saints, N. wall of diaconicon.

FIG. 10 – Unidentified saint. W wall, diaconicon (CXVII, 24).

FIG. 11 b – St. Abbacyrus. N wall, diaconicon (CXVI, 20).

V. Medical Saints, S. wall of diaconicon.

FIG. 12 – St. Cosmas. S wall, diaconicon (CXXI, 33).

FIG. 13 – St. Damian. S wall, diaconicon (CXX, 32).

VI. Panels with scenes from the Life of Christ. Presbytery side walls.

FIG. 14 – (ap)ostoli, Incredulity of Thomas. Presbytery (CXXII, 39).

FIG. 15 – apostoli, Incredulity of Thomas. Presbytery (CXXII, 40).

FIG. 16 – (m)agi, Adoration. Presbytery (CXXII, 35).

FIG. 17 – simon curinensis, Carrying of the Cross. Presbytery (CXXIII, 43).

FIG. 18 – *Ioseph*, Presentation. Presbytery (CXXII, 37).

VII. Panels with Old Testament scenes, transennae.

FIG. 19 – *Hezekias rex*, Sickness of Hezekias. Transennae (CXXIV, 50).

FIG. 20 – Pronouncement of Jeremiah. Hezekias. Transennae (CXXIII, 43).

FIG. 21 – *Goliath*, David panel. Transennae (CXXIV, 48).

FIG. 22 – *Hagia Maria*, Virgin in the niche (CXXIV, 49).

VIII. Medallions with saints, façade of the Oratory of The Forty Martyrs.

FIG. 23 – St Euthymius. Oratory of The 40 Martyrs (CXXIV, 53).

*IX. Catena of Biblical quotations on triumphal arch.*¹²

Figs. 24. a-c – Sections of the inscription, triumphal arch (CXXV).

¹² Nordhagen 1968, 47,48. G.M. Rushforth identified the passages; cf. Rushforth 1902, 60.

*X. Inscription of John VII, apse wall left side.*¹³

Fig. 25 – Inscription of John VII. Apse wall (CXIII).

Fig. 26 – (Mari)AE, final letters. Inscription of John VII (CXIII).¹⁴

*XI. Leo inscription on triumphal arch. Tracing.*¹⁵

Fig. 27 – Leo inscription on triumphal arch. Tracing.
(sanctus) **LE(o) PP (r)O(m)A(n)VS** (CIX, 9).

¹³ Nordhagen 1968, 39. Published by Rushforth (as n. 12), 62.

¹⁴ The fragment displays the marks of *the snapping line* used by painters in the marking of the lay-out for the decoration: cf. Nordhagen 1962.

¹⁵ Nordhagen 1968, 42.

A note on the photographs

The photographs which illustrate my works on the frescoes in S. Maria Antiqua (Nordhagen 1962, 1968, 1978) come partly from Italian archaeological photo archives, the bulk of them, however, are my own, taken during the campaign in the church 1957-1960. They are made from 6 x 6 cm. negatives obtained with a Rolleicord camera on Ilford rollfilm. The Nannini brothers, whose laboratory in Rome was located in the Via Capo delle Case, taught me how to give the negatives of this relatively small size a quality that allows high-solution enlargements to be taken from them. I was to use a very fast (sensitive) type of film which had to be systematically underexposed; treated with a special developer this film procured astonishingly grain-less, ultra-sharp negatives. Complicating the matter, however, were the vibrations which shook my scaffoldings whenever anyone stood on them; these disturbances had to be eliminated. Thus exposures could take place only by a toilsome procedure of climbing up and down ladders, up (in some places to a height of 10 metres) for the setting of lights and camera, and down for distance-controlled takes made at floor level with the help of a light switch. The results were altogether satisfying. Kay Berg, Hasselblad Master 2005, helped in preparing the pictures for the present article; his effort made it possible to bring this long photographic story to a happy end.

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