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The Art of Recycling Fresco-Icons At the Roots of the Cult of Images

Abstract

Of the observations made during the author's research in S. Maria Antiqua (1957-1960), the most baffling were some which indicated that efforts had been made in the early eighth century A.D. to preserve and safeguard the older fresco-images in the church. The procedure discovered here, which had served to incorporate important earlier iconographical matter into the program designed for Pope John VII (A.D. 705-707), was a phenomenon then wholly unknown from church art of the period. However, that a systematic labour of image-reuse according to such principles had been carried out, could be established with certainty on the basis of some very precise archaeological facts. These facts had to do, above all, with the absence on many of the earlier fresco panels in the church of the hatchings or indentures thickly applied to frescoed walls wherever they were to receive new coats of mortar. As proved by meticulous study of the panels in S. Maria Antiqua on which no chisel marks are found, none had had newer strata of painting applied to them. Evidence of these picture-protecting exertions is abundant in the church and prompted conclusions like the following (1968): "Now it becomes possible also to gauge the fervour with which the individual frescoes were worshipped. The reluctance to obliterate a picture, the efforts made to preserve it, and also the eventual repainting of it with strict adherence to the original subject, all reflect an attitude characteristic of the cult of the icon".¹

Introduction

Recent research on the Byzantine Iconoclasm of AD 732-847 has added new facets to the debate on its causes, to the enrichment of a *Forschungsgeschichte* rife in contrasting opinions. Did the ban on images in the eighth century come about, as suggested by recent contributions, as one among many emergency measures, political and military, with which one wanted to stabilize the empire in a time of crisis?² The onslaught of the Arab hordes which tore the Byzantine realm apart called for drastic means, and able emperors met the predicament with a string of reforms on all levels. Or, as prominent byzantinists have insisted since the dawn of our discipline, did Iconoclasm happen because of picture abuse, widely practiced, as veneration of images fanned by superstitious and popular credence came out of con-

¹ Nordhagen 1968, 90.

² Brubaker and Haldon 2011.

trol and had to be forcibly restrained? A paradigm with a long history behind it is here being assailed, a fact which in itself tells significantly of method reorientation. It has led to a sifting of the sources which so vividly tell of alleged 'excesses' in image-worship in the period before Iconoclasm, and has disclosed the spuriousness of many of them. Similarly, the tales of the evil deeds committed by the Iconoclast rulers are found to be grossly exaggerated, spread by the victorious iconodules for the sake of discrediting their opponents. The trend opens for a more critical evaluation of this event in early Byzantine history, as it sees Iconoclasm as a phenomenon not exclusively linked to the sphere of religion, but posited among the mundane political and administrative affairs of the state. Picture regulations were weapons in an armed conflict.

Still, the use and misuse of religious pictures will remain at the core of the question. To dismiss altogether, as some scholars seem inclined to do,³ the icon-adoring practices accrued before Iconoclasm as a cause for the conflict, goes against what the archaeological material has to say in the matter. In particular, the protection of older images as it was carried out by the fresco painters in S. Maria Antiqua shortly after AD 700, is indicative. It shows that a consciousness about pictures and their sacredness had found its expression in a 'ceremonial of holy images' well before the conflict broke out. According to its regulations even an ordinary wall painting would transmit the miraculous power of its prototype. This gave rise to some extraordinary devotional habits and observances, and men of the Church participated in them.

The hatching technique and the marks left by it

The hatchings made with the chisel or pick to make the fresco surface more rough and thereby to have a new stratum of mortar stick better to it, can be seen in many early medieval churches. In S. Maria Antiqua they are found in several places, above all in the presbytery. Here, the painters who laid out the fresco decoration for Pope John VII (AD 705-707) used this technique and covered the pre-existing paintings densely with such marks before spreading the mortar for the new frescoes. On the right (W) wall in particular, patches of the earlier fresco layer with its muster of hatchings are seen in places where John's frescoes have fallen (FIG. 1).⁴ Hatching was then used when the same team put up a new layer of frescoes on the *transennae* in the nave.⁵ This kind of marks, in other words, gives us an extraordinary tool by which to measure the extent of the activity of John VII's group of painters in the church. And where the marks do not occur, as in a series of panels from the seventh century in the nave and in the aisles, this indicates that the paintings here were deliberately rescued from being covered over. The conclusion, outlined in my work on the fresco decoration of Pope John VII, was that the paintings which had no hatchings on them had been spared with the intent to integrate them in the large iconographical program laid out by this pope.⁶

³ Brubaker 1998, *passim*.

⁴ Nordhagen 1968, pls. XXII, a; XXXVII, a.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pl. XC, b.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 87-90.

Presbytery

The 'iconographic strategy' of John VII is not without contradictions. Despite the respect in which he held the paintings which embellished the church at the time when he was to begin his work, a reverence so deep that he had many of them incorporated into the grand scheme of his own, he obliterated some of the most important of them. Of the apse picture which stood there before his time, a section can still be seen in places where natural destruction (helped by the prying of the archaeologist Joseph Wilpert c. 1901) have brought it to light; it is covered with the hatchings dealt it by John VII's masters when they were to substitute it for what must have been an updated version of the apse Virgin.⁷ Unhappily, John's own version, which could have informed us about the significant new features which he must have wanted to introduce with this Virgin,⁸ became lost when yet another decoration was added to the apse in the ninth century.⁹ John's team also covered with new frescoes the triumphal arch walls flanking the apse; here they hid from view, ruthlessly as it will seem, some important religious-political statements placed there about A.D. 650 which denounced the aberrant Monotheletism.¹⁰ Of some of the figures which stood there, however, he set up replicas in his own decoration.¹¹

On the side walls of the presbytery he substituted a Cycle of the Life of Christ for another cycle with the same general theme. Of the earliest cycle one scene only can be identified, that of The Carrying of The Cross (The Road to Golgotha),¹² while from John's cycle the content of 11 scenes can be registered. The two series will seem to have been of about equal length, with two rows of panels on each wall, each row consisting of five panels. The intentions which lay behind the repainting of these scenes are difficult to fathom, but it may again have had to do with the need for an iconographical update. An intensified work of motif-creation can have taken place in the course of the seventh century, spurred by the theological battle caused by Monotheletism, thus among John VII's Christ scenes in the presbytery there are several which must have been freshly created and some which had had important new features added to them.¹³ The militancy released by the Monothelete conflict may have left its

⁷ Nordhagen 1978, 90-93 and pl. XIV, a-b.

⁸ Nordhagen 1968, 54, diagram pl. CXXXV, b and 22. John's lost apse Virgin was probably of the *Maria Regina* type, and may have been the prototype upon which his two other large Madonna figures, that in his mosaics in the Vatican basilica (presently at Florence) and the one seen on the icon in S. Maria in Trastevere (cf. n. 39), were modelled; see Nordhagen 2014, 193-205.

⁹ The apse decoration of Paul I (AD 757-767) is seen on the 1702 drawing of the main wall, pl. XLI. Paul had himself depicted as a donor under the protection of the Virgin, both dwarfed by a large figure of Christ which fills the apse almost to its apex; this impressive Christ was possibly designated as a counter-argument against the sanctions imposed upon representations of the Saviour by contemporary Iconoclasm; Nordhagen 1978, pl. XIII, a-b. For W. de Grüneisen's reconstruction of Paul's apse picture see Romanelli/Nordhagen 1964, pl. 22.

¹⁰ Nordhagen 1978, 97-100 and pls. III-XI. The four Church Fathers who stood here, and their rôle as carriers of important tenets relevant to the anti-Monothelete synod of A.D. 649, were first identified in Rushforth 1902, 68ff.

¹¹ Gregory Nazianzus and Basil, two of the Church Fathers depicted in the earlier fresco, were included by John VII among the Fathers he set up in exactly the same area, while he included Leo among the Holy Popes higher on the wall; an additional Leo displaying a scroll with his cardinal tenets he placed on the wall of the Oratory of the 40 Martyrs outside the church. For Gregory and Basil, cf. Nordhagen 1968, 40-41 and pls. XLIV-XLV; for the two representations of Leo, *ibid.*, 42 and pl. XLVI; 84, pls. CIII and CVI, a.

¹² Nordhagen 1978, 102, fig. III and pl. XVI, b.

¹³ Nordhagen 2016, 95-109.

mark on the selection and shaping of Biblical pictures and made a renewal of the cycle a matter of necessity.¹⁴

In the presbytery, one single figure panel from the earlier, seventh century embellishment survives; it was included with great care into John's decoration. It is the fresco with the standing St. Anne, Mother of the Virgin, who holds the Child Mary in her arms.¹⁵ From the text of 1968: "The panel with St. Anne holding the infant Mary, in the lowest decorative zone on the right side wall, was regarded by Wilpert as a work of John VII since it was situated among his paintings. It has, however, been justly attributed to the seventh century by Kitzinger. The latter attribution was confirmed by the stratigraphic investigations undertaken by the author, which further revealed the care with which the panel had been incorporated into the decoration of John VII: by grading the layer of plaster at the points of overlap, the transition from one stratum to the other was made almost imperceptible. There cannot remain the slightest doubt that the panel with St. Anne was singled out as being too precious (and possibly also too well-preserved) to be covered over, and therefore was retained and embodied, at considerable effort, in the new program".¹⁶

Nave

John VII's main contribution to the imagery in the nave of the church were the frescoes he added to the low *transennae* which divide the central bema and nave space from that of the aisles. On the inside of these barriers he placed a series of scenes drawn from the Old Testament; the best preserved among them have a lettering which classify them firmly with John's work in the presbytery.¹⁷ Of the twenty or more panels which once covered these *transennae*, two survive more or less intact while three others have large parts of their surface missing. A total of three can be identified; these are David slaying Goliath, Isaiah admonishing King Hezekias in his Sickness and Judith with the Head of Holofernes;¹⁸ Judith is a common prefiguration of Mary. According to a thesis by P. O. Folgerø a possible interpretation of the two first-mentioned would be to see them as typological commentaries on the Nature of Christ and thereby as arguments relevant to the concomitant theological debate.¹⁹ The two unidentified scenes were in all likelihood also drawn from the The Old Testament.²⁰

Earlier authors have likened the sequence of scenes on the *transennae* to the stories drawn from The Old Testament which in Western basilicas were placed in large numbers alongside

¹⁴ The frieze (holding a salutation to Mary?), which ran immediately above the seventh century Christ cycle in the presbytery and was meticulously spared by John's team, remains one of the unsolved mysteries of the church, cf. Nordhagen 1968, 38-39 and pls. CXXXIII-CXXXIV, x.

¹⁵ Nordhagen 1978, 100-101 and pls. XVII-XX.

¹⁶ Nordhagen 1968, 89. A fragment of the seventh century *dado* with its marble imitation survives below the panel with St. Anne; it contains no hatchings and was thus spared by John VII's painters together with the panel containing her figure.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 67-74 and pls. LXXXV-XCI, XCV-XCVII, a; pls. CXXIII-CXXIV (palaeography).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 68-71 and pls. LXXXVI-XCI.

¹⁹ For Judith as a type of the Virgin, cf. Künstle 1928, 302. For David Fighting Goliath and The Sickness of Hezekias and the unidentified Old Testament scenes, see Folgerø 2015. In the David and Hezekias panels he sees a strong christological bias, i.e. an extolling of Christ's human ancestry which is pointedly anti-Monotheistic. Further, the *military symbolism* contained in these frescoes (Hezekias, 'The Warrior King') may have had a direct bearing on the contemporary grave threat to Byzantium, with Constantinople constantly under the onslaught of the Arabs.

²⁰ Nordhagen 1968, 72-74 and pls. XCV-XCVI.

or opposite cycles based on The New Testament, the series in the nave of S. Maria Antiqua being an accompaniment to John's Christ Cycle in the presbytery.²¹ The most famous example of such juxtaposition of pictures was that which existed in the long nave of Old St. Peter's in the Vatican, a decoration documented by drawings and descriptions from the seventeenth century.²² In conformity with this view, the scenes on the *transennae* in S. Maria Antiqua will seem to represent an Old Testament cycle of the Western type, which, albeit reduced in size compared to that seen in the larger churches, was wholly transfused with typology.²³ This thesis, however, is in need of some modification, for which arguments can be drawn from the very material under scrutiny. In fact, John's *transenna* frescoes should be seen as an effort to supplement and build out a condensed series of Old Testament scenes which existed in the nave and aisles before his time, a few panels of which are still visible due to the efforts he made to preserve them. This cycle was probably canonical and of East Christian, not Western, origin, with the set of scenes put up by John's painters to increment it having been selected as particularly forceful carriers of a typological matter relevant to the religious contention of his day (below).

Another of John's interventions in the nave is found in the small niche on the S face of the NW pillar in the nave; it depicts the bust of the Virgin, with the Child held in a mandorla-like halo.²⁴ Dated by its palaeography and the consistency of the mortar to the time of John VII, it may well represent an act of copying, trait by trait, a cherished and venerable icon that had occupied the niche before his time, but now damaged and in danger of becoming lost. It may have been repainted with the aim of preserving its iconography for further cultic practice, in a manner similar to that known from the realm of 'real' icon painting.²⁵ But it may also be another example of iconographical updating, or of John's personal preferences regarding the inherited stock of icon forms. A deep hole in the niche's upper right corner, covered with cement after the excavation, held a lamp that shone light on the picture. It must have existed here before John made his addition, cf. the 'shorn' edge of his panel, done to avoid interfering with this lamp. This piece of archaeological deduction is yet another which substantiates the claim that the usage of illuminating the icons of holy figures with lamps had its inception as early as the seventh century.²⁶

Below and to both sides of the Virgin niche John added a new coat of mortar upon which he let depict, to the left, a figure in ecclesiastical robes.²⁷ This figure was probably another representation of John VII himself in adoration of the Virgin, a category of images which he disseminated both inside and outside of the church.²⁸ Below the niche and on the same stra-

²¹ van Dijk 2004, 113-127.

²² *Ibid.*, 115.

²³ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

²⁴ Nordhagen 1968, 75-76 and pls. XCII-XCIII.

²⁵ This was the opinion of Weis 1958, 17-23.

²⁶ Nordhagen 2010, 108, n. 38.

²⁷ Nordhagen 1968, 77, pls. XCIV, a and XCVII, a.

²⁸ Three more frescoes in the church represented John VII in veneration of the Virgin, one on the triumphal arch and two at the gates; *ibid.*, 42 and pl. XLVI-XLVII; 80-81 and pl. C, a; 84-85 and pl. CIII. A fifth example once stood as the focus in Pope John's mosaics in Old St. Peter's, cf. Nordhagen 2014, figs. 1-2, XVIII-XIX. The encaustic *Maria Regina* icon in S. Maria in Trastevere, in which a kneeling donor is seen at the Virgin's feet, should also be linked to his patronage as suggested in Bertelli 1961, *passim*.

tum is a fragment of the scene with Daniel in the Lions' Den.²⁹ John here added another important component to the string of Old Testament representations with which he engirdled the *schola cantorum* of the church.

Two scenes remain of what was probably an older cycle of Old Testament prefigurations put up in the seventh century in the peripheral areas of the church. They are found on the rear wall surface of the SE pillar, both are devoid of hatchings. The scenes are interpreted as The Three Young Men in The Fiery Furnace and Manasse Raising the Idols, the first of them bearing a *titulus* with characters which firmly link it to the decoration of the seventh century.³⁰ W. de Grüneisen, who in his volume on S. Maria Antiqua commented upon these scenes and their iconographical affiliations, observed that in some manuscripts of the Middle Byzantine period, notably the Paris gr. 510, these two Old Testament scenes appear together with Daniel in the Lions' Den and The Sickness of Hezekias.³¹ Their emergence in these manuscripts in what appears as a fixed series can possibly be ascribed to the redaction of the psalters, veritable mines of typology, since some of the same scenes appear in Byzantine luxury editions of this category of manuscripts, the best known of which is the Paris gr. 139 with its superb rendering of Hezekias' Sickness.³² In the course of this process of selection some of the scenes may even have undergone transmutations, to become invested with a new meaning. A case in point is Daniel in the Lions' Den, which in John VII's rendering of it has the nude figure of Daniel seen in Early Christian art, substituted by a figure dressed in the costume of a Persian. Originally one of the many symbols of the Resurrection, it was later seen as a prefiguration of the Conception Immaculate; it is probably in this function it appears in John's fresco below the Virgin niche on the NW pillar.³³ A regular cyclus of such Old Testament types related to central Mary-extolling concepts may have been formulated by the East Christian Church already in pre-Iconoclastic times, this as a corollary of the fertile climate of image-production in the period under discussion.

In pointing to the two instances of prefigurations of Mary found among John's pictures in the nave, the Judith scene and Daniel in the Lions' Den, one could postulate that in the earliest Old Testament cycle in the church there might have been a preponderance of types pertaining to the cult of Mary, fit for a church dedicated to her. This cycle may have drawn upon the Akathistos Hymn and its rich gallery of veiled allusions to the Virgin, among these The Burning Bush, The Ark of the Covenant and other foremost examples of the deep sophistication which characterize this school of iconographical thinking.³⁴ John VII's *transenna* frescoes in all probability represented a cycle of this type, blending christological and Marian references orchestrated in harmony with the earlier array of such selected typologies depicted on the aisle walls.

In the nave and aisles of the church a total of 14 older panels can be recorded, all datable to the seventh century AD; they are in different states of preservation but have one thing in

²⁹ Nordhagen 1968, 76, pls. XCII and XCIV, a.

³⁰ Nordhagen 1978, 111-114, figs. 7-8 and pls. XXXV-XXXVII; palaeography pl. LXVI, 11.

³¹ Grüneisen 1911, 102-103.

³² Reproduced in a splendid plate in Grabar 1953, 168.

³³ The Daniel scene and its metamorphosis was first studied by Mâle 1961, 149.

³⁴ A late series of Virgin types, sprung from the same source, was painted in the *parecclesion* in The Church at Chora (Kariye Djami) in Istanbul, cf. der Nersessian 1975, 331-343.

common – no hatching marks are seen on them. A list of them is given in the note below.³⁵ Twelve of these frescoes seem to have been votive, and, at our present state of knowledge, two of them appear to be the very first known instances of their type, the *Deesis* and the *Eleousa*.³⁶ With their explicit new ways of extolling the Virgin, as a *Vorbeterin* but also as the Compassionate Mother, they may be the product of the religious crisis in the seventh century, created as visual counter-arguments against the dogma propagated by the Monotheletes which denied the human nature of Christ.³⁷ To John VII these older pictures would have given added strength to the Mary-adulating statements broadcast by his own ensemble of paintings, which may be why he saw to their maintenance.

The clearest impression of the close-fitting and rather chaotic lay-out of the earlier decoration in the nave area was that found on the S face of the NW pillar as it emerged during the excavations of 1900-01; the old photographs show three of these panels standing together in an almost carpet-like fashion (all three later separated from the wall).³⁸ Like all the other paintings on our list (except for one, see below), none of these three have hatchings. Still, John VII's attitude towards the pre-existing paintings in the nave cannot be seen as a merely passive one, solely motivated by his respect for their age and venerability. He enlisted them in what was an extension of the ambitious program he had laid out for the presbytery; by availing himself of these pre-existing images he could extend it into the nave and the aisles.

The thesis suggested by A. Grabar and endorsed by other authors, that the bulk of early panels in the nave of S. Maria Antiqua were votive, set up by individuals,³⁹ is supported by archaeological evidence. Their votive character is proven by the presence, in some places, of the holes left by the lamps which illuminated them; a further testimony of personal devotion are the traces left on the fresco surface by the adornments, probably of precious metal, which were once fixed to their surface.⁴⁰ In recent years, their status as objects of intense devotion has been further verified by the discovery, on the surface of some of the panels, of flame marks left by candles or lamps.⁴¹

³⁵ The Annunciation, St. Demetrius, The Virgin with Crossed Hands, The *Deesis*, Three Men in the Fiery Furnace, Biblical Scene with Ruminant (Manasse Raising the Idols), Solomone and the Maccabeans, Enthroned Virgin between Angels, St Barbara, Unidentified female Saint, St. Panteleimon (?) with two unidentified Medical Saints, Christ Healing the Blind Man (on column), The Virgin *Eleousa* (on column), The Forty Martyrs of Sebasthe (left aisle). In the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs outside the church proper, on the facade of which John VII added frescoes (Nordhagen 1968, 84-86), the apse fresco of the seventh century with the Martyrdom of the 40 Martyrsholds no hatchings; cf. Nordhagen 1978, pls. LX-LXI

³⁶ Cf. the examples listed in Princeton Index of Christian Art.

³⁷ Nordhagen 2017.

³⁸ De Grüneisen 1911, pl. XII. The panels were: Solomone and her Sons, Enthroned Virgin with Angels and St. Barbara. The votive panels of the seventh century stand against a preparatory layer of *arriccio* (fine mortar) specially prepared for them, cf. Nordhagen 1978, 135-136.

³⁹ Grabar 1946, 100-102; Belting 1990, 131-132. Weitzmann 1970, 338, drew the same conclusion in his study on the series of the votive pictures found in the Faras excavations.

⁴⁰ *Appended adornments*: Solomone in Maccabean panel, nave; St. Demetrius and St. Barbara, nave; Virgin with Crossed Hands, nave. For the lamps and adornments, see Nordhagen 1978, 141-142, further Nordhagen 2010, 105-107. Among the pickmarks which surround the niche on the NW pillar there are thinner holes which tell of the multitude of votive gifts which were attached to the wall in this area; these objects pertained either to the present Virgin in the niche or to its predecessor.

⁴¹ *Lamps*: St. Anne, presbytery; Virgin in small niche, nave; Sts. Barbara and Demetrius, nave.

In addition to his *transenna* frescoes and the repainting of the Virgin in the niche, John's own work in this area of the church comprised another case of a full repainting of a pre-existing image. Some years after the excavations in S. Maria Antiqua (1900-01), an Annunciation fresco which stood in the lowest row of votive panels on the SE nave pillar was separated from the fresco layer behind it;⁴² it revealed an earlier panel with the same motif, its surface pockmarked by hatchings.⁴³ The Annunciation on the outer layer, with its massively built angel, is identical in its outline to the corresponding scene in the lost mosaics of John VII in Old St. Peter's, known to us through a reliable drawing of the 17th century;⁴⁴ this is the major rationale for ranking it among John's works in the nave.⁴⁵ Both versions of the Annunciation were put up as separate, iconic representations taken out of their cyclical context. The marks made by flames found on John VII's version of the scene is further proof of its cultic function.⁴⁶

The most spectacular demonstration of John's concern as an iconographer is seen in the repair work he carried out on one of the prominent early fresco panels in the central part of the church. The fresco in question is "The Virgin with the Crossed Hands" found on the left (SE) pillar where it flanks the entrance to the bema.⁴⁷ This is a fresco replica of a version of the Hodegetria of which a famous instance is the icon on wood called the "*Salus Populi Romani*", still on display in the church of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome and venerated there since the Early Middle Ages. Also this fresco bears no hatchings. As suggested by the present author, the unique position of the Virgin's hands in the image, e.g. their crossing, must be explained as part of an illusionary trick or device designed to make a precious votive gift (a golden rosary or a necklace) appear as if it is being held by her lower, left hand.⁴⁸ The mark left by such an object on the fresco surface immediately below her hand indicates that the votive gift in question was set up at the time when the fresco was made. This constitutes another argument in favour of the notion that such devotional practices, even applied to ephemeral wall paintings, were commonplace long before Iconoclasm.

Below the red lower frame of the panel with "The Virgin with the Crossed Hand" a section of the panel's original dado is visible. It shows a pattern consisting of small squares holding tiny ornaments in imitation of veined marble. Over this layer was spread, at a later date, another coat of mortar; this has the surface characteristics typical of the frescoes made for John VII and bears a blue-grey medallion on a white ground (*velum*?) which contains the letters XC painted in white. These letters have a palaeography which tallies with that found on the Pope's layer elsewhere in the church.⁴⁹ I find no other explanation for this strengthening of the older fresco surface but the intention to keep the mortar, which must have been on the point of disintegrating, from falling, thereby saving a picture of outstanding religious value from destruction. What could be a similar case is seen in the left (E) aisle, in the adding of a *velum* on a coat of new mortar below the seventh century panel with "The Martyrdom of

⁴² Nordhagen 1968, 78-79 and pls. XCVIII-XCIX.

⁴³ Nordhagen 1978, 107-109 and pls. XXIV-XXV.

⁴⁴ van Dijk 1999, fig. 8 on p. 247.

⁴⁵ As n. 43.

⁴⁶ Information from Chief Restorer W. Schmied (2013).

⁴⁷ Nordhagen 1978, 103-105, fig. 5 and pls. XXIV, XXVI-XXVII.

⁴⁸ Nordhagen 1987, 453-460.

⁴⁹ Nordhagen 1968, 79 and pls. XCVII, b, and CXXVII, 52.

the 40 Martyrs” (‘The small 40 Martyrs’). It may have had the same function, that of protecting a venerable image from crumbling.⁵⁰ The velum pattern, however, differs from that used in the frescoes of John VII in the presbytery, and the intervention could be posterior to him.

Conclusion

By setting up a large visual manifesto on the triumphal arch, a many-figured Adoration of the Crucified, John VII made S. Maria Antiqua a theatre for the propagation of the religio-political precepts pursued by the Papacy.⁵¹ His choice of type for the head of Christ, which reflects the *Pantokrator* then current on the coinage struck by his Byzantine overlord, the emperor Justinian II,⁵² is a point in favour of the thesis that the world of images seen in John’s Roman works – not only his frescoes in the church at Forum but also the mosaics he set up in the Vatican basilica – was essentially Byzantine.⁵³ His work as an iconographer is further highlighted by the material studied in this article, which illuminates the care with which he treated the display of fresco icons that was present in the church before his time; but it also demonstrates his will, testified by his *transenna* decoration, to extend it with elements which enhanced its iconological depth and impact.

As indicated by archaeological and palaeographical data, the bulk of these earlier images belonged to the work done by one of John VII’s predecessors, Pope Martin I (649-655 A.D.), a staunch anti-Monothelite and a defensor of the Roman Creed; in his vast triumphal arch picture John let him be depicted as a saint and a martyr.⁵⁴ The respect in which John held the earlier paintings in the church could be seen partly as a tribute to Martin and his opposition to the theological signals that had emanated from Byzantium at the height of the Monothelitic confrontation. The double significance of the work carried out by John VII should be kept in mind.

Still, the attitude towards holy images which comes to the fore in his embellishment – and which can be reconstructed from the marks which indicate with precision where he did intervene and where he did not – must have sprung from common Byzantine image usage shaped in the troubled pre-Iconoclastic times. The icon-adoring leanings behind John’s work cannot be overlooked, nor the fact that several of the seventh-century images he saved from destruction, not only the “The Virgin with the Crossed Hands” but certainly also the *Deesis*, St. Anne and the *Eleousa* painted on a column in the nave, were replicas of ‘real’ icons, which, with the exception of the first-mentioned, went on to become canonical in all later Byzantine art. Their springing forth, frozen in their near-final form, in this epoch, is a further argument for the notion that the nature of icons, notably their *immutability*, had found its definition in a code of images established well before the end of the seventh century AD. Unquestionably, it

⁵⁰ Nordhagen 1978, 132 and pl. LVII, a-b.

⁵¹ The thesis regarding ‘The Crucifixion/Lamb Adoration’ was first presented in a brief note in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1967, 388-390, before being treated in depth in Nordhagen 1968, 50-54 and pls. LIII-LXX.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 52-53., ill. 7, pls. LII and LIV. See now also Andaloro 2016, 392, Fig. 24.

⁵³ Some of these scenes I have characterized as “proto-byzantine”; Nordhagen 1968, 93.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 43, pls. XLIX-LI; pls. CXI, 13, a and CXII, 13, b (inscription).

was this code which released the efforts of safeguarding and upkeep which, as we have witnessed, went into the preservation of paintings in S. Maria Antiqua in the early eighth.⁵⁵

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⁵⁵ Whether the attempts by the Isaurian emperors to quell these adoration excesses were in any way integral to their strategy of state reform, is a point which awaits exploration; cf. Herrin 2014, 859.

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FIG. 1 – S. Maria Antiqua, presbytery. Fresco layer of John VII (705-707 A.D.). Digitalized 3-D map based on Nordhagen 1968, Pls. CXXXIII-CXXXV (Alf E. Andresen 2018).