

Embodied Word. Telling the Story of Mary in Early Christian Art

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The veneration of the Mother of God and the imagery dedicated to her developed gradually in the Early Christian church. Scholars still struggle to single out the earliest and most relevant evidence for the cult of the Virgin and to determine the starting point of devotion that is specifically Marian in focus. The standard narrative, which links the rise of the Marian cult to the decisions of the Council of Ephesus (431), has been seriously questioned in recent years, with most criticism stemming from disagreements about the significance of the council itself.¹ While the Council remains the common point of reference for the absolute majority of authors, certain scholars reject the relevance of the council to the cult of the Virgin and consider the figure of Christ as the main focus of ecclesiastical discussion, viewing the attention given to Mary as being conditioned by her instrumental role in God's Incarnation.² Another group of specialists, proponents of the early cult of Mary, doubt that the council needs to be seen as the prerequisite of the worship's development; according to them, the council might have simply played a transformative role – it was not the starting point of the cult but rather a chapter in a longer tradition.³

Therefore, questions regarding the origins and influence in the cult of Mary are still difficult to answer. Extensive research is currently being done on the textual and more specifically liturgical sources, which clearly indicate that the profound religious interest in Mary has ancient roots.⁴ The present study aims to complement this larger discussion with

¹ On the council, see B. Studer, 'Il Concilio di Efeso (431) nella luce della dottrina mariana di Cirillo di Alessandria' in S. Felici (ed.), *La mariologia nella catechesi dei Padri (età postnicena)* (Rome: LAS, 1991), 49–67; J. A. McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004).

² T. Klauser, 'Rom und der Kult der Gottesmutter Maria', *JACHr* 15 (1972): 120–35, esp. 126–35; R. M. Price, 'The *Theotokos* and the Council of Ephesus' in C. Maunder (ed.), *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), 89–103; R. M. Price, 'The Virgin as *Theotokos* at Ephesus (AD 431) and earlier' (Oxford: Oxford University Press) (forthcoming).

³ S. J. Shoemaker, 'The Cult of the Virgin in the Fourth Century: A Fresh Look at some Old and New Sources' in Maunder (ed.), *The Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 71–87; S. J. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 166–229.

⁴ Ibid.; M. Fassler, 'The First Marian Feast in Constantinople and Jerusalem: Chant Texts, Readings, and Homiletic Literature' in Peter Jeffery (ed.), *The study of Medieval Chant. Paths and Bridges, East and West*,

observations on the treatment of the Marian figure in the visual and material traditions, with a focus specifically on the role played by narrative compositions in the promotion of the image of Mary in Early Christian art.

The task is complicated by the fact that the earliest visual evidence for the veneration of the Virgin has not yet been thoroughly categorised.⁵ The images that do survive are primarily found in the West and can be seen in catacomb paintings, representations on sarcophagi, reliquaries, gold glass vessel fragments, and some textiles. The exact dating of these monuments is not always easy to pinpoint but certain elements often indicate very ancient dates of production that precede the Council of Ephesus. Moreover, the contents of these representations are open to debate. For instance, a vast number of female representations from the Roman catacombs previously associated with Mary have recently been re-assessed, with the suggestion that not all images of a woman with child should be read as referring to the protagonists of the New Testament.⁶ Donors' portraits and images of the deceased do indicate that other identifications are possible and often more plausible.⁷ However, there are

(Cambridge: Boydell Press, 2001), 25–88; N. Constan, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003); S. J. Shoemaker, 'Marian Liturgies and Devotion in Early Christianity' in S. J. Boss (ed.), *Mary: The Complete Resource* (London: Continuum, 2007), 130–45; also see M. B. Cunningham's research on this topic, especially in relation to the Dormition of the Virgin, forthcoming in eadem and L. Brubaker, *The Virgin Mary in the Byzantine World, ca. 400–1200: Images, Texts, Relics and Ceremony* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

⁵ Kondakov's study of the early twentieth century still remains the most detailed analysis; see N. Kondakov, *Ikonographia Bogomateri* (St Petersburg: Imperatorskaia academia nauk, 1915; repr. 1998). The first volume of this work has been recently translated into Italian: I. Foletti (trans.), *Iconografia della Madre di Dio* (Roma: Viella, 2014). See also E. Jastrzebowska, *Bild und Wort: das Marienleben und die Kindheit Jesu in der christlichen Kunst vom 4. bis 8. Jh. und ihre apokryphen Quellen* (Warsaw: Institute of Archaeology at Warsaw University, 1992). For useful recent overviews of the early material in the West and in the East, see G. Parlbay, 'The Origins of Marian Art: The Evolution of Marian Imagery in the Western Church until AD 431' in S. J. Boss (ed.), *Mary, The Complete Resource* (London: Continuum, 2007), 106–29; A. Effenberger, 'Maria als Vermittlerin und Fürbitterin. Zum Marienbild in der spätantiken und frühbyzantinischen Kunst Ägyptens' in L. M. Peltomaa, A. Külzer and P. Allen (eds.), *Presbeia Theotokou: The Intercession Role of Mary across Time and Places in Byzantium (4th–9th Century)* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015), 49–108.

⁶ On the images of Mary in catacomb painting, 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); Kondakov, *Ikonographia*, 13–59.

⁷ S. M. Salvadori, 'Per feminam mors, per feminam vita. Images of Women in the Early Christian Funerary Art of Rome' (unpubl. PhD thesis, New York University, 2002), 268–353; G. Parlbay, 'The Origins of Marian Art in

cases in which a figure can be securely identified with Mary: these are the representations accompanied by the captions with her name and the narrative compositions that feature the Virgin as one of the fixed protagonists.

Mary – ‘what’s in a name’?

Unlike the easily recognisable Marian figures of the sixth century, when the cult of Mary acquired its full extent, the female representations of the fourth and fifth century are not always easy to identify and thus cause debates.⁸ Indeed, captions that become compulsory in Byzantine art after Iconoclasm, appear only sporadically in early Christian art.⁹ Thus, the instances where the figure of Mary is clearly defined by a name placed in proximity to her figure are in fact surprising and significant exceptions. The standard formula used in the earliest instances is limited to the simple version of just the name.¹⁰ The practice of

the Catacombs and the Problems of Identification’ in Maunder (ed.), *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 41–56; A. Ahlqvist, ‘Maria, madre di Cristo, e altre madri presenti nell’arte funeraria paleocristiana’, *Acta archaeologica et artium historiam pertinentia* 7 (2009): 9–31; G. Parlbay, ‘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’ (unpubl. PhD thesis, Roehampton University, 2010), 17–54.

⁸ The most prominent example of this characteristic ambiguity is provided by the fifth-century mosaic decoration of Santa Maria Maggiore church in Rome, where the image of Mary has been associated with several different figures in the visual narrative on the triumphal arch: M. R. Menna, ‘I mosaici della basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore’ in M. Andaloro (ed.), *L’orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini: 312–468. Corpus della Pittura Medievale a Roma* (Milan: Jaca, 2006), vol. 1, 306–46; M. Lidova, ‘The Imperial *Theotokos*: Revealing the Concept of Early Christian Imagery in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome’, *Convivium* 2/2 (2015): 60–81.

⁹ An early example of an extensive use of captions in mural painting, which includes the figure Mary accompanied by name, can be found in the decoration in the Chapel of Peace at the El Bagawat necropolis in Egypt: M. Zibawi, *Bagawat. Peintures paléochrétiennes d’Égypte* (Paris: Picard, 2005), 95–132, esp. 124–7.

¹⁰ Similar simplicity is generally characteristic of the fourth-century Christian art, which privileges the use of names for captions, omitting the indication of the saintly status of the figure (*Sanctus* in Latin and *Hagios* in Greek). Later on, similar prefixes become obligatory. On the use of captions, see: B. Kiilerich, ‘A che cosa serve un nome? Iscrizioni di nomi e di epiteti nelle immagini bizantine: usi e significati’ in A. C. Quintavalle (ed.), *Medioevo: Immagine e racconto* (Milano: Electa, 2003), 87–95; H. Maguire, ‘Eufraasius and Friends: On Names and Their Absence in Byzantine Art’ in L. James (ed.), *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 139–60. The choice of the name Mary is also conditioned by the way it appears in sacred texts both canonical and apocryphal. In subsequent centuries the captions and epithets pertinent to Mary will undergo through a substantial transformation, shifting from ‘Maria’ and ‘Saint Mary’, to ‘*Theotokos*’ and ‘*Meter Theou*’, specific titles of venerated icons, and many others; see I. Kalavrezou, ‘Images of the mother, when the Virgin Mary became *Meter Theou*’, *DOP* 44 (1990): 165–72; B. L. Shilling, ‘Apse Mosaics of the

captioning does not seem to depend on the medium of the artwork, nor is logic of the use of captions evident. Sometimes textual identifiers are omnipresent in a given artwork or decoration, whereas in others, only single images are granted an accompanying inscription.

The spread of the caption tradition is particularly well attested in early textiles. The Victoria and Albert Museum collection, for example, includes two fragments deriving from the same work, which bear narrative scenes featuring Mary in the Annunciation and the Nativity.¹¹ In the first instance, Mary is seated on the left holding a loom with both hands, which she picks up from the small chest besides her and raises into the air.¹² (**Fig. 1**). In front of Mary is a figure of an archangel depicted wearing a beautifully folded garment with two wings spread wide behind the back, which are characteristically marked by the outlines of separate dotted feathers. Although the torso of the angel is oriented in the direction opposite to Mary, he turns his head towards the Virgin, as if preparing to address her with the message that she will become the Mother of God. The name MAPIA is written in Greek letters between these two figures in three rows, due to the limited space and the large scale of the script. The second textile fragment also depicts an archangel in a dialogue with Mary, but this

Virgin Mary in Early Byzantine Cyprus' (unpubl. PhD thesis, John Hopkins University, 2013), 149–56. The development of the name and captions is itself demonstrative of the gradual change in the cult and theology of the Mother of God.

¹¹ Inv. 723-1897 (55 cm x 68 cm) and Inv. 1103-1900 (47 cm x 92.5 cm). P. Williamson, *The Medieval Treasury. The Art of the Middle Ages in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1986), 46–9, pl. 1; H. M. Rutschowskaya, *Coptic Fabrics* (Paris: Editions Adam Biro, 1990), 132; L. Woolley, 'Medieval Mediterranean Textiles in the Victoria and Albert Museum: Resist Dyed Linens from Egypt Dating from the Fourth to the Seventh Centuries A.D.', *Textile History* 32/1 (2001): 106–13; R. Cormack and M. Vassilaki (eds.), *Byzantium: 330–1453*. Catalogue of the Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London (25 October 2008–22 March 2009) (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2008), No. 160, 188, 419 (only *Nativity* fragment); C. G. Taylor, 'Burial Threads: A Late Antique Textile and the iconography of the Virgin Annunciate Spinning' in M. Harlow and M.-L. Nosch (eds.), *Greek and Roman Textiles and Dress. An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2014), 399–414; *Egypt: Faith after the Pharaohs* (London: British Museum, 2015), 174–5 (only *Annunciation* fragment); C. G. Taylor, *Late Antique Images of the Virgin Annunciate Spinning. Alotting the Scarlet and the Purple* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 169–72 (some of the dates and scene identifications used by the author need to be treated with caution).

¹² This iconography accentuating the loom in the hands of the Virgin is characteristic of other fifth-century representations of the Annunciation (cf. Bode pyxis and Pignatta sarcophagus). It probably reflects a particular iconographic pattern popular at the time and, judging on the provenance of the surviving images, used both in the East and the West: M. Lidova, 'XAIPÉ MARIA: Annunciation Imagery in the Making' *IKON* 10 (2017): 45–62.

time the heavenly messenger stands on the left and communicates with the Virgin who is lying on a couch besides an altar-like manger with the baby Jesus represented inside. The arrangement of the scene clearly indicates the subject of the Nativity. Once again, the name MARIA appears in proximity to the Virgin's halo, making her identity explicit and singling her out among the characters of the scene.

Unfortunately, without technical analyses the exact dating of these textiles cannot be established with any certainty and the range of possibilities extends from the late fourth to the sixth century. The use of resist-dyeing technique best corresponds to certain non-Christian textile examples of the fourth and early fifth century.¹³ The method of execution, considered together with the style and subject matter, also helps scholars attribute the V&A pieces to the group of textiles from Akhmim in Egypt. Although the two scenes are currently in a fragmentary state, it is obvious that they formed part of a larger narrative where separate compositions were divided by representations of columns just as on some early Christian sarcophagi. Within this cycle the figure of Mary was highlighted both compositionally and with the help of inscriptions. Hence, the V&A fragments provide important material evidence for the seldom acknowledged early tradition of Mary-focused cycles and scenes in Eastern Christian textile production.¹⁴

To be added to the array of examples is another textile bearing the name of the Virgin, today preserved in the famous Abegg-Stiftung collection near Bern.¹⁵ The object in question is thought to have been used as a tunic-like vestment and is often called 'Marian silk' because of its imagery. The surviving fragment is decorated with several consecutive scenes that were

¹³ I would like to thank Dr Cécilia Fluck for sharing with me her opinion on the possible date of the textiles. According to her, the V&A fragments are more safely attributed to the fifth or sixth century.

¹⁴ A. Stauffer, *Spätantike koptische Wirkereien: Untersuchungen zur ikonographischen Tradition in spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Textilwerkstätten* (Bern: P. Lang, 1992), 158, note 69; *Textiles of Late Antiquity* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 13; M-H Rutschowskaya, 'The Mother of God in Coptic Textiles' in M. Vassilaki (ed.), *Mother of God. Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art* (Athens and Milan: Skira, 2000), 219–25. See the discussion in Andrea Olsen Lam's paper in this volume.

¹⁵ Inv. 3100b. L. Kötzsche, 'Die Marienseide in der Abegg-Stiftung. Bemerkungen zur Ikonographie der Szenenfolge' in *Begegnung von Heidentum und Christentum* (Riggisberg: Abegg-Stiftung, 1993), 183–94; S. McNally, 'Syncretism in Panopolis? The Evidence of the "Mary Silk" in the Abegg Stiftung' in A. Egberts, B. P. Muhs and J. Van Der Vliet (eds.), *Perspectives on Panopolis. An Egyptian Town from Alexander the Great to the Arab Conquest* (London, Leiden and Cologne: Brill, 2002), 145–64; S. Schrenk, *Textilien des Mittelmeerraums aus spätantiker bis frühislamischer Zeit* (Riggisberg: Abegg-Stiftung, 2004), 185–9; Taylor, *Late Antique Images*, 164–8.

reproduced multiple times in rows that cover all the available space. The order of the sequence is: Mary at the Temple before the High Priest (which could represent the commission of the Temple veil because of the basket depicted behind the Priest's figure), the Selection of Joseph, the Annunciation at the Spring and the Nativity. The use of inscription was rather extensive in this case and small captions accompany almost every scene. The easiest of the scenes to identify is the composition of the Annunciation at the Spring, where Mary is conventionally represented leaning on one knee and collecting water in the pitcher while the archangel addresses her from behind. The words of Gabriel are conveniently incorporated into the scene and read as XEPE [sic] MAPIA, or 'Hail Mary', with the name MAPIA placed exactly above the Virgin's head. While clearly the text is a variation of the words recorded in the *Protoevangelium of James* (11:1–3) and the Gospel of Luke (Lk 1:26–38), this particular formula reveals an intentional interpolation of the name of Mary, characteristic only of the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (Ps-Mt 9).¹⁶ On another occasion within the fragment, the name MAPI again appears next to the female figure in the composition that shows Mary at the Temple before the High Priest, thus justifying the identification of this fabric with 'Marian silk', since the Virgin clearly becomes the main protagonist of the whole cycle.¹⁷ Although the dating of the Abegg-Stiftung textile is uncertain, its archaeological and typological characteristics lead most scholars to give it an early dating around 400 or even before, which is quite plausible considering that it was found together with an early fourth-century tapestry representing Dionysus.

Yet textiles are not the only medium in which early images of Mary are identified by name. Further evidence is provided by gold medallions found in the Roman catacombs. These gold glass fragments originally formed the central piece of bowls or vessels that were broken in such a way as to leave the bottom part with precious figurative representation made with gold leaf that could be used as markers near the *loculi* of Christian tombs in the underground cemeteries.¹⁸ Among the surviving examples several pieces bear images of a female figure represented frontally, sometimes as an orant, dressed in a belted-tunic with

¹⁶ J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 61.

¹⁷ Kötzsche, 'Die Marienseide', 186.

¹⁸ On gold glass, see C. R. Morey, *The Gold-Glass Collection of the Vatican Library: with Additional Catalogues of Other Gold-Glass Collections* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1959); S. L. Smith, *Gold Glass Vessels of the Late Roman Empire: Production, Context and Function* (unpubl. PhD thesis, The State University of New Jersey, 2000).

jewelled collar. This conventional type was used for different saints, but in several cases the identity of the Virgin is indicated by small captions recorded in the two different Latin spellings MARIA or MARA.¹⁹ Although some scholars have attempted to interpret the misspelled version as a possible reference to an unknown Roman saint or a deceased donor, it is evident that both versions refer to the Mother of God.²⁰ The rather unconventional representation of Mary with her hair gathered on top of her head, wearing pearl earrings and a jewelled collar, would complicate the identification of this figure were it not for the name inscriptions. The gold glass vessels can be securely dated to the fourth century, when they were extensively produced and used by the Christians, pagans and Jews. Thus, the Roman artifacts provide an incontestable proof of the spread and use of specifically Marian images long before the Council of Ephesus.

Another example that I would like to discuss here also dates back to the fourth century and survives on the surface of a reliquary box found in Novalje, on the island of Pag in contemporary Croatia.²¹ (**Fig. 2**). The wooden container, in the shape of a rectangular box (27,5 x 18 x 16,5 cm), is covered with embossed copper sheets, representing multiple scenes

¹⁹ On images of Mary on golden glass, see Kondakov, *Iconographia Bogomateri*, 76–82; Brenk, *The Apse, the Image and the Icon. An Historical Perspective of the Apse as a Space for Images* (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 2010) 66–8, n. 225, 229; E. Rubery, 'From Catacomb to Sanctuary: The Orant figure and the Cults of the Mother of God and S. Agnes in Early Christian Rome, with Special Reference to Gold Glass', *SP* 73 (2014), 169–214, esp. 197. Although Rubery refers to the lack of specific Marian studies on gold glass vessels, it was Kondakov who first discussed extensively this material in connection with the early iconography and cult of the Mother of God.

²⁰ The use of inscriptions on the gold glass is contemporary with some of the epigraphical evidence found in the Roman catacombs. Margarita Guarducci suggested that the letter 'M' found in the graffiti of the Roman catacombs could stand for the name of Mary. Today, Guarducci's argument is found unlikely and criticized by the epigraphers. However, the first example that she discusses, which sparked the whole theory (the inscription in the Catacombs of St Peter) does read clearly as 'Maria' and can be taken as an invocation to the Mother of God. See M. Guarducci, 'Maria nell'epigrafia paleocristiana di Roma', *Marianum* 25 (1963): 248–61. Furthermore, it is believed that the abbreviation 'XMI' in most cases should be read as 'Christon Maria genna', which means that in this case as well, 'M' would stand for the name of the Virgin. See Brenk, *The Apse*, 69–71; D. Mazzoleni, 'La mariologia nell'epigrafia Cristiana antica', *VetChr* 26 (1989): 59–68. I would like to thank Prof. Antonio E. Felle for consultation on the matter.

²¹ A. Badurina, 'Ranokršćanski relikvijar iz Novalje [Early Christian Reliquary from Novalja]', *Materijali* 12 (1976): 283–95, reprinted in B. Ilakovac et al. (eds.), *Novalja Grad* (Novalja: Centar za kulturu grada Novalje, 1997), 13–37. See also B. Ilakovac, 'Ranokršćanski relikvijari kesenske (Cissa) biskupije iz Novalje na otkou Pagu', *VAMZ* 26–27 (1993–94): 47–65.

taken from the Old and New Testaments. Each composition is enclosed in a vertically oriented rectangular frame. These individual compartments are arranged in sequences of five and are repeated several times on the surface of the metal cover. The Biblical part consisted of the following subjects: Moses strikes water from the Rock, Moses takes off his shoes before the Burning Bush, Noah, Daniel in the lions' den, The Sacrifice of Isaac. The Gospel group was more unusual and combined narrative compositions with the representations of individual figures. It opened with the Multiplication of the loaves, or alternatively the Miracle at Cana (the two scenes were iconographically similar), followed by the Resurrection of Lazarus. Next to the latter the viewer could see the image of the Good Shepherd, depicted as a male holding a ram on his shoulders, and defined by an inscription as PASTOR. Adjacent to this image is a compartment with a female figure standing frontally with both hands raised in the pose of an orant, her head turned to the right side in direction of the following scene of the miraculous healing of the blind man, which concluded the sequence. A nearby Latin inscription identifies the female figure as MARIA.

The archaeological context of the casket, as well as other objects found together with it and similar metal covers in other collections, all indicate the late fourth century as the most probable date of production. The appearance of Mary in the carefully selected repertoire of scenes on the Novalje casket is extremely important. Within this cycle, she is the only female figure and clearly functions as a counterpart to the image of the Good Shepherd. Incorporated into the series of Christ's miracles and Old Testament events, the image of the Virgin assumes an independent value of particular importance. Moreover, the nature of casket's technical execution, which presupposes the use of moulds and mass production, indicates just how common and widespread the image of Mary may have been at the time.

Gospel Narratives

Even more diverse and prominent material for the pre-Ephesian representations of Mary is provided by narrative compositions portraying various events described in the canonical and apocryphal Gospels. The murals of the Roman catacombs and the sarcophagi reliefs, for instance, preserve a vast selection of examples.²² In this article, I limit my focus to three subjects: the Annunciation, the Nativity, and the Adoration of the Magi. Due to the specificity of the scenes and to repertoire of iconographic conventions they employ, Mary's identity in these compositions is undisputed. Scholars disagree, however, on whether or not

²² J. Wilpert, *Roma sotterranea. Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1903).

the figure of Mary has independent relevance in the depictions of Christ's Incarnation and childhood. In other words, can certain narrative compositions be read not only in Christological, but also in Marian terms? If they can, then can the development of the narrative representations supply further evidence for the Virgin's changing religious significance in the early Christian church?

The representations of the Annunciation based on the Gospel of Luke (Lk 1:31–38) are extremely rare in the art of the third and fourth century.²³ Among the paintings of the Roman catacombs, only three scenes have been identified with the event on the basis of their iconographic similarity to later examples.²⁴ The murals in question represent a wingless male figure standing before and in dialogue with a woman seated on a chair. The absence of additional details, such as the inclusion of the loom or casket and the male figure's winglessness has led numerous scholars to doubt the Christian content of these representations.²⁵ The alternative reading stresses the iconographic dependence of these compositions on Roman models, which often depict the deceased seated before a standing male interlocutor. I would like to argue, instead, that nothing impedes these catacomb murals from having contained 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 that were meant to make visible the Christian faith of their owners.²⁶ The laconic nature of their renderings, which art historians have sometimes found perplexing, could in

²³ For a general overview of the *Annunciation* iconography in the Eastern Christian tradition, see N. Pokrovskiy, *Evangelie v pamyatnikakh ikonographii [Gospels in the Iconographic Evidence]* (St Petersburg, Tipographia Departamentov Udelov, 1892; repr. 2001), 89–130; H. Papastavrou, *Recherche iconographique dans l'art byzantin et occidental du XIe au XVe siècle: l'Annonciation* (Venice: Institut hellénique d'études byzantines et post-byzantines de Venise, 2007). See also M. Lidova, 'XAIPE MARIA'.

²⁴ The catacombs in question are those of Priscilla, Peter and Marcellinus, Dino Compagni: H.F.J. Liell, *Mariendarstellungen*, 198–215; A. Ferrua, *Le pitture della nuova catacomba di via Latina* (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1960), 41–3; J. Deckers, H. R. Seeliger and G. Mietke, *Die Katakomben "Santi Marcellino e Pietro". Repertorium der Malereien* (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1987), 223–6; B. Mazzei, 'Il cubicolo dell'Annunciazione nelle catacombe di Priscilla. Nuove osservazioni alla luce dei recenti restauri', *RACr* 75 (1999): 233–80; F. Bisconti, *Il restauro dell'ipogeo di via Dino Compagni: Nuove idee per la lettura del programma decorativo del cubicolo 'A'* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2003), esp. 56, 84.

²⁵ M. P.-A. Février, 'Les peintures de la catacombe de Priscille; deux scènes relatives à la vie intellectuelle', *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome. Antiquité* 71 (1959): 301–19; G. Parlbj, 'What Can Art Tell Us', 33–5.

²⁶ This view is in line with the most recent interpretations of the compositions: B. Mazzei, 'Il cubicolo', 263–5.

fact simply be attributed to the fact that they are the earliest extant attempts to render New Testament subject in art. Since the depicted scenes seem to concentrate on encounters that can be depicted in dialogue formats, the artists may have simply adopted the most convenient ancient Roman compositional conventions already in use.²⁷ Nonetheless, it is true that the catacomb paintings provide scarce evidence for the image of the Annunciation in comparison with other Christian themes.

As for the Roman sarcophagi, the Annunciation is totally absent from their marble relief decorations, with the exception of the late fourth-/early fifth-century tomb in Ravenna, the so-called Pignatta sarcophagus, which bears a clearly identifiable composition of the winged Gabriel before the Virgin spinning the veil on the shorter lateral side of the vasque.²⁸ Thus, while the scarcity of the material evidence does not suggest that the Annunciation was little known in early Christian art, it does indicate that it was not as popular as other scenes from the Infancy of Christ – at least until the fifth century, when we encounter more numerous examples, which range from the unconventional representation in the mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (432–440),²⁹ to those made on various minor artifacts, such as the Milan ivory diptych,³⁰ a wooden relief with the figure of the Virgin spinning from the Louvre,³¹ or a

²⁷ For similar thoughts, see B. Mazzei, 'Il cubicolo', 266–8.

²⁸ G. Bovini, *Sarcophagi paleocristiani di Ravenna* (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1954), 22–6; J. Kollwitz and H. Herderjürgen, *Die ravennatischen Sarkophage* (Berlin: Mann, 1979), No. B:1, 54–5; I. Baldini Lippolis, 'S. Lorenzo in Cesarea e il problema di lettura iconografica del sarcofago Pignatta' in *1983–1993. Dieci anni di archeologia cristiana in Italia. Atti del VII Congresso nazionale di archeologia cristiana* (Università degli Studi di Cassino, 2003), vol. I, 225–40; C. G. Taylor, 'The Pignatta Sarcophagus: Late Antique Iconography and the Memorial Culture of Salvation' *Biblical Reception* 3 (2015): 30–56; C. G. Taylor, *Late Antique Images*, 188–200.

²⁹ See note 8 and also G. de Spirito, 'L'Annonciation de Sainte-Marie-Majeure: image apocryphe?' in *Apochrypha. International Journal of Apochryphal Literature* 7 (1996): 273–92; G. Steigerwald, *Die frühchristlichen Mosaiken des Triumphbogens von S. Maria Maggiore in Rom* (Regensburg: Schnell and Steiner, 2016), esp. 33–52.

³⁰ Z. Frantová, *Heresy and Loyalty. The Ivory Diptych of Five Parts from the Cathedral Treasury in Milan* (Brno: Muni Press, 2014).

³¹ M.-H. Rutschowskaya and D. Bénazeth (eds.), *L'art copte en Égypte: 2000 ans de christianisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 179, 185, No. 198.

pyxis from the Bode Museum, all dated tentatively to the fifth century on the basis of style.³² (Fig. 3).

We can draw several conclusions from these disparate examples. First, in the early Christian art, the iconography of the Annunciation had not yet been fixed with the result that different visual patterns were applied. The surviving material indicates that a clear iconographic evolution took place in the fourth and fifth centuries, which transformed the laconic examples of the Roman catacombs into more detailed and variegated compositions, usually characterized by inclusion of a basket and loom and by the depiction of Mary making the temple veil.³³ Secondly, where contexts of use are concerned, while the appearance of the divine messenger before the Virgin could be depicted individually – highlighted as a self-standing subject – it is far more common to see the scene as part of larger Christological cycles.

Although the identification and circulation of Annunciation scenes in Early Christian art are problematic, in part because the examples are scarce, the surviving material of the fourth and fifth century also offers a comparatively wide selection of another version of the Annunciation: the Annunciation at the Spring.³⁴ Recorded only in the apocryphal texts, this account narrates the Archangel's attempt to approach Mary with the divine message while she is collecting water (*Protoevangelium of James* 11:1–4). In addition to the composition on the 'Maria silk', previously mentioned, we encounter this scene on the fourth-century Adelfia sarcophagus,³⁵ the early fifth-century Milan diptych,³⁶ and the so-called Werden casket from the Victoria and Albert Museum (which is most probably a Carolingian replica of

³² For a good reproduction, see M. Vassilaki (ed.), *Mother of God. Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art* (Athens and Milan: Skira, 2000), 170; W.F. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters* (Mainz a. Rhein: Von Zabern, 1976), Nr. 174, 110.

³³ M. Lidova, 'XAIPE MARIA'.

³⁴ A clear list of surviving examples is provided in Jastrzebowska, *Bild und Wort*. See also E. Jastrzebowska, 'New Testament Angels in Early Christian Art: Origins and Sources' in *Mediterranean and Non-European Archaeology*, *Światowit* 8 (49) (2009–10) (2011), 153–64, esp. 153–5; McNally, 'Syncretism in Panopolis?', 154, note 30.

³⁵ S. L. Agnello, *Il sarcofago di Adelfia* (Vatican City: Società 'Amici delle catacombe' presso Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1956), 49–71; M. Sgarlata, 'Il Sarcofago di Adelfia' in G. Greco and S. Capella (eds.), *Et lux fuit. Le catacombe e il sarcofago di Adelfia* (Palermo: Arnoldo Lombardi, 1998), 15–54.

³⁶ See note 29.

the fifth-century original).³⁷ Later renditions include a sixth-century representation on an ampulla from the Holy Land,³⁸ which besides providing another example of this iconography, demonstrates that the Annunciation at the Spring could 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.³⁹

When considered together, these artworks attest to the popularity of apocryphal narratives associated with Mary in early Christian art – on par with the representations of the crucial events of the canonical Gospels. Furthermore, in the case of the Annunciation in particular, the preference for the apocryphal account might be of certain relevance to the problem of how early Christians, at least after Constantine, constructed Mary's image and role in religious history and art. On the one hand, the account of the angel approaching the maiden collecting water is full of details reminiscent of daily routine and domestic life. On the other, in the theological tradition the Annunciation at the Spring has received relatively small attention and was always secondary to the dialogue between Mary and Gabriel as it is described in the Gospel of Luke.⁴⁰ For the theological treatment, then, it is the latter scene that marks the moment of Incarnation that occurred when the heavenly messenger addressed the Virgin. The Annunciation at the Spring by comparison was only an anticipatory event, to an extent temporally and contextually detached from the solemn and mysterious moment of Lord's coming into the world. This means that the images of the Annunciation at the Spring – unlike those of the Annunciation – cannot be read or explained exclusively in Christological terms, as a scene in which God's agency in the world is realized via the medium of the Virgin. Instead, the Annunciation at the Spring possesses a narrative edge that privileges Mary; it is unsurprising, then, that it is this variant of the Annunciation that comes to be

³⁷ (inv. 149-1866) J. Beckwith, 'The Werden casket reconsidered', *Art Bulletin* 40/1 (1958): 1–11; Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, Nr. 118, 83–4; P. Williamson, *Medieval Ivory Carvings. Early Christian to Romanesque* (London: Victoria and Albert Publishing, 2010), 156–8.

³⁸ A. Grabar, *Ampoules de Terre Sainte* (Monza, Bobbio) (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1958), 52, pl. 31.

³⁹ T. Schmit, 'Blagoveschenie [Annunciation]', *Izvestia Russkogo Archeologicheskogo Instituta v Konstantinopole [proceedings of the Russian Archeological Institute in Constantinople]* 15 (1911), 31–72, esp. 34–5. On the archaeological state of the site associated with the place of the Annunciation at the Spring today: A. Yardenna et al., *Mary's well, Nazareth: The Late Hellenistic to the Ottoman Periods*, vol. 49 (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2012).

⁴⁰ On the theological discourse around the *Annunciation at the Spring*, see M. Conostas, *The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography* (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2014), 113–24.

primarily associated with her story in the subsequent visual tradition, where it almost exclusively appears in the cycles dedicated to Mary.⁴¹

The Nativity is a central moment of the New Testament and the event which gave rise to one of the earliest Christian feast-days, recorded in the sources at least as early as the fourth century.⁴² Judging from the extant material in Rome, there is a noteworthy difference between the use of this image in painting and in sculpture decoration.⁴³ While the walls of the catacombs do not preserve representations of Christ's birth, with the only exception found in the catacombs of San Sebastiano,⁴⁴ the sarcophagi provide a wide range of examples,⁴⁵ leading scholars to believe that the iconography of the scene itself was created in one of the sculptural workshops of the Western capital.⁴⁶ As has been demonstrated in previous research, the common features of the early iconography consist in the depiction of the manger containing the body of the baby Jesus often flanked by the ox and ass and figures of the shepherds. In the majority of the surviving examples, the scene of the Nativity occupies the surface of the lid and is placed at the left or right edge of the marble cover. Whenever Mary appears in the scene, she is never represented lying on a mattress as she is commonly portrayed in the depictions of later centuries, but instead she is seated upright near the cradle with Christ, often placed underneath an open shed. **(Fig. 4).**

Much more popular than the Nativity was another composition closely connected to the Bethlehem events – The Adoration of the Magi.⁴⁷ Material attestations of this scene exist in

⁴¹ H. Papastavrou, *Recherche iconographique*, 97–8

⁴² S. K. Roll, *Towards the Origins of Christmas* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995). H. F. Stander, 'Christmas' in E. Ferguson (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York and London: Garland, 1997–98), 251–2 (with bibliography).

⁴³ For a general overview of the Nativity iconography, see Pokrovskiy, *Evangelie*, 138–90; G. Ristow, *Die Geburt Christi, in der frühchristlichen und byzantinisch-ostkirchlichen Kunst* (Recklinghausen: A. Bongers, 1963).

⁴⁴ C. Conidi, 'L'arcosolio del presepe nel cimitero di San Sebastiano. A proposito di una pittura recentemente restaurata', *RAChr* 73 (1997): 95–112.

⁴⁵ D. Milanović, 'L'origine de la scène de la Nativité dans l'art paléochrétien (d'après les sarcophages d'Occident). Catalogue et interprétation', *Antiquité Tardive* 7 (1999), 299–329.

⁴⁶ D. Milanović, 'L'origine', 318–320; F. Bisconti (ed.), *Temi di iconografia cristiana* (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2000), 225–8, esp. 226.

⁴⁷ D. Milanović, 'L'origine'. On the sarcophagi, the Adoration features independently in forty-five examples and is fused with the Nativity in about twenty or more cases.

the catacomb mural decoration (ca. 19 scenes),⁴⁸ multiple representations on the sarcophagi (ca. 45),⁴⁹ Teano mosaics (fourth-century),⁵⁰ the silver ewer from the Traprain Law hoard (late fourth- or early fifth-century),⁵¹ the crater from the National Museum in Rome (late fourth century),⁵² the panel of Santa Sabina doors (early fifth-century),⁵³ and many others. **(Fig. 5).** This range of images demonstrates that the composition of the Epiphany was incredibly popular before the Ephesus council. It can be argued that this scene more than any other contributed to shaping of perception of Mary and to the promulgation of her figure in the fourth century.

The story of the three wise men visiting and honouring the new-born King is described in only one of the four canonical Gospels, that of Matthew: ‘... and going to the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh’ (Mt 2:10–11). The mention of Mary is very brief in this account, where she is specified only as the mother of Christ; the story is supplemented, however, by the description of the magi’s pious behaviour before the Child. Already from the earliest representations, such as the mural in the catacombs of Priscilla (Cappella Greca), dated to the late third century,⁵⁴ the figure of Mary begins to assume some stature. In them, she is represented seated in a solemn pose with Jesus on her knees accepting the gifts and honours of the wise men.⁵⁵ This iconography remains

⁴⁸ The Adoration of the Magi is found in the decoration of the following catacombs: Priscilla, Balbina, San Callisto, Domitilla, dei Giordani, Coemeterium maius, Sts. Marco e Marcelliano, Pietro e Marcellino, di Via Latina, Dino Compagni; see A. Nestori, *Repertorio topografico delle pitture delle catacombe romane* (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1993), 191–2, 194–5; F. Bisconti, *Il restauro*.

⁴⁹ J. Wilpert, *I sarcofagi cristiani antichi*, 3 vols. (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1929–1936), vol. 2, 279–91; vol. 3, 48–50, 52–5; F. W. Deichmann, G. Bovini, H. Brandenburg, *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage, I, Rom und Ostia* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1967); D. Milanović, ‘L’origine’, Salvadori, *Per feminam mors*, 275–310.

⁵⁰ R. Calvino, ‘Il mosaico di Teano con la scena dell’Epifania e l’epigrafe di Geminia Marciana’, *Rendiconti dell’Accademia di Archeologia, Lettere e Belle Arti di Napoli* 58 (1983): 317–23.

⁵¹ D. Buckton, *Byzantium. Treasures of Byzantine art and culture from British collections* (London: British Museum, 1994), 51; J. Spier and M. Charles Murray (eds.), *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 253–5.

⁵² Brenk, *Apse*, 78; C. Gasparri and R. Paris (eds.), *Palazzo Massimo alle Terme. Le collezioni* (Milano: Electa, 2013), 358–9.

⁵³ I. Foletti and M. Gianandrea, *Il nartece di Santa Sabina a Roma, la sua porta e l’iniziazione cristiana* (Rome: Viella, 2015), 158–60.

⁵⁴ L. de Bruyne, ‘La “capella Greca” di Priscilla’, *RACr* 46 (1970): 291–330.

⁵⁵ Wilpert, *I sarcofagi*, vol. 2. 286–87.

essentially the same for centuries, with only minor variations in the number of magi, the typology of the vestments or Mary's chair, etc. Multiple interpretations have been provided for the scene's iconography: some scholars highlight the dependence on imperial representations, whereas others offer sophisticated theological and exegetical propositions to describe its visual structure.⁵⁶

Whatever the case, the straightforward message of the Adoration image and its popularity guaranteed its accessibility for Christian viewers. Yet the appearance of this scene within the murals of the catacombs and on sarcophagi is particularly interesting because unlike various Old Testament compositions, this portion of Gospel narrative does not contain a clear funerary message, nor does it offer a promise of resurrection. The popularity of the Adoration, then, must be explained on different grounds, primarily for its connection to the Nativity and the coming of the Lord. Indeed, fourth-century sculptors often combined the two subjects together on the sarcophagi. The seated pose of Mary from the late antique version of the Nativity fits with the complex compositions that unite her figure, the manger and the three magi approaching the place of Christ's birth. Furthermore, the fusion of the Nativity with the Epiphany is not surprising, since both events follow one another in the Gospel account and were most probably often celebrated together in the early church.⁵⁷ In the fourth century, the Adoration was often visually linked to the Nativity theme, which means that when represented in isolation it could nevertheless have also referred to the totality of the Bethlehem events. A question arises, though: why did early Christian artists give preference to the scene of the Adoration over the seemingly more important moment of Christ's birth?

It has already been suggested that the Adoration of the Magi scene was an important visual motif in the Early Church that helped convey the idea of reverence for the newborn King.⁵⁸ On numerous occasions, early Christian theologians invited congregation members to follow

⁵⁶ There have been several explanations for the popularity of the Adoration of the Magi in early Christian art. Some scholars argued that it represents Incarnation, whereas others consider it to be an image of the conversion of the gentiles. A third group sees it as a mere reproduction of an imperial iconography. For various points of view with further bibliography, see Salvadori, *Per feminam mors*, 292–3. See also a controversial idea by Thomas Mathews, who suggested that the theme promoted the claim that Christ was a supermagician: T. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods. A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 85.

⁵⁷ On the cycle of Epiphany feasts in Jerusalem, see R. Avner, 'The Initial Tradition of the Theotokos at the Kathisma: Earliest Celebrations and the Calendar' in L. Brubaker and M. B. Cunningham (eds.), *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium. Texts and Images* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 9–30, esp. 19–20.

⁵⁸ Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 80; Brenk, *The Apse*, 78–9.

the example of the Eastern wise men who, according to the story, were the first to recognize and worship Jesus as Lord. The canonical Gospel account of the Adoration is clearly focused on the figure of Christ and indeed the narrative aspect of the Bethlehem events is well transmitted in the combined versions of the scene, when the Adoration was fused with the Nativity. In the case of the latter, the centre of the composition is occupied by the manger, with the baby Jesus depicted as the recipient of the eastern kings' veneration. However, whenever the Adoration appears on its own and shows the magi before the Virgin seated on the chair with Christ on her lap, the image inevitably acquires additional connotations. This Marian dimension of the Adoration, so clearly expressed visually, has often been denied or overlooked in the previous scholarship.⁵⁹ At the same time, earlier scholars have acknowledged that the image of the enthroned Virgin known from later Byzantine art must have derived from the earliest representations of the Virgin seated in a chair found in the Adoration of the Magi compositions.

Arguably, it is impossible to prove this last point that the Adoration of the Magi scenes influence later depictions of the Virgin directly, especially taking into account that the image of a goddesses seated frontally on a throne was typical in the ancient world; it is true that early Christians could have adopted the general iconography from representations of the Roman gods or of ruling emperors and empresses. Nevertheless, it can also be argued that the late antique iconography of the Epiphany did emphasize the figure of Christ's mother and gave her particular relevance within the scene.⁶⁰ In fact, the images of the Adoration show how the visual narrative could complement and enrich textual accounts by shifting what is accented or even sometimes by creating additional meanings. The fact that the presence and importance of Mary in the Adoration scene was well acknowledged and intentionally highlighted in art finds confirmation in other artworks. A sixth–seventh-century gold brooch from a grave near Medellín, now in Madrid, bears an image of the Adoration accompanied by a short Greek prayer, addressed not to Jesus, as might be expected, but to the Virgin: 'Hagia, Maria, help the wearer. Amen.'⁶¹ Even more significant in this regard are literary sources that

⁵⁹ For the necessity to see the Marian dimension of this image, see Salvadori, *Per feminam mors*, 268–71.

⁶⁰ Interestingly enough, in a number of cases in the scene of the Adoration on the sarcophagi Baby Jesus is represented facing Mary and not the magi which contributed to the impression that it was the Virgin who accepted the gifts of the wise men

⁶¹ H. Schlunk and T. Hauschild, *Die Denkmäler der frühchristlichen und westgotischen Zeit* (Mainz am Rhein: Zabern, 1978), 156, pl. 49a; J. D. Dodds, B. F. Reilly and J. W. Williams, *The Art of Medieval Spain. AD 500–1200* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), 42; B. Ager, 'Byzantine Influences on Visigothic

provide commentary on the Bethlehem events. In his commentary on the Gospel of Mathew, for example, John Chrysostom (349–407) underlines that Mary is important and deserves to be honoured together with her Son: ‘And this makes the Virgin also in no common degree glorious and distinguished; that the very thing which was the whole people’s special endowment in the way of praise, she also might henceforth have for her own. [...] He makes this pre-eminence belong to the Virgin likewise.’⁶²

To state that the narrative compositions featuring Mary in fourth-century art indicate the existence of an independent cult of the Virgin would be too bold, especially since understandings of what constitutes the ‘cult’ remain sufficiently vague and polarised in scholarship.⁶³ In spite of this, the individual representations of the Annunciation, the Nativity and the Adoration do demonstrate that Mary gradually became indispensable to narrations of the Christ’s story. Some earlier version of the Nativity and the Miracle at Cana, for example, do not include the figure of the Virgin, who is introduced only at a later stage when the related iconographies acquire their more definite forms. Alternative iconographic solutions and visual patterns did exist and the development of the theological and liturgical traditions connected to Mary must have influenced the appearance and promulgation of her image in art. Simultaneously and inversely, the narratives created on the walls of the churches and surfaces of the sarcophagi also told and popularised the story of Mary, paving the way for the later, fully developed forms of Marian worship.

Infancy and Marian cycles in Early Christian art

Besides their appearance in individual compositions in the catacombs and in sarcophagi decoration, images of Mary were often incorporated into larger narrative cycles. In some ways, the construction of visual sequences of different historical moments Christian art can be compared to the creation of human biographies: a story could acquire particular meanings beyond its basic plot via the choice of subjects depicted and their arrangement in a space or on the surface of an artwork. Viewers, in turn, were expected to participate in the

Jewellery’ in C. Entwistle and A. Noël (eds.), *Intelligible Beauty: Recent Research on Byzantine Jewellery* (London: British Museum, 2010), 72–82, esp. 74–5.

⁶² P. Schaff (ed.), *A Selected Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Vol. 10, Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Mathew* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark), 53.

⁶³ For some general considerations on the matter see A. Cameron, ‘Introduction. The Mother of God in Byzantium: Relics, Icons, Texts’ in L. Brubaker and M.B. Cunningham (eds.), *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 1–5.

construction of a multifaceted message, through the movement of their gazes from one representation to another. At the same time, the sequence could – because of its realisation within a given space – also achieve an effect of an all-encompassing vision of a complete narrative, enriched by multiple minor details and intentional compositional and iconographic parallels incorporated into the pictorial ‘text’. Furthermore, once the same figure appears in several compositions, it inevitably acquires the role of the protagonist of the cycle, holding the narrative together and helping the viewer to identify key moments in the sacred story and to find connections between the different scenes.

Often, the Infancy cycles are seen as being primarily focused on Christ, with Mary’s role limited to a mediatory function in the mystery of Incarnation.⁶⁴ In the first Roman church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Santa Maria Maggiore, the choice was made to decorate the arch, framing the space of the altar, with the narrative cycle dedicated to Christ’s Childhood. Four major scenes of this cycle feature Mary: the Annunciation, Adoration of the Magi, Presentation to the Temple, and the enigmatic scene showing the Holy family before the gates of a city.⁶⁵ Two scenes in the lower register of the decoration complement the cycle with the Massacre of the Innocent and the Magi before Herod. Since the Santa Maria Maggiore decoration has been exhaustively studied I will limit myself to a few important observations. Within the mosaics of the church, Mary’s rich attire, a white tunic and golden *dalmatica*, emphasise her position as a high-ranking woman of aristocratic family.⁶⁶ Irrespective of whether or not Mary was also depicted in the conch of the apse, which remains a matter of debate in scholarship, this rendering, together with other visual and compositional devices, helps to highlight her representation within the pictorial narrative. It

⁶⁴ J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, ‘Iconography of the Cycle of the Infancy of Christ’ in P. A. Underwood (ed.), *The Kariye Djami*, 4 vols. (London: Routledge, 1975), vol. 4, 197–241.

⁶⁵ The suggestion made at the end of the nineteenth century identifies the scene with the Encounter with Aphrodisius, governor of Soutinen in Egypt (Ps-Mt 22–24); see N. Kondakov, *Histoire de l’art byzantin considéré principalement dans les miniatures*, trans. M. Trawinski, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie de l’Art, 1886–91) vol. 1, 105–6. For detailed historiography and an alternative, though even less convincing, interpretation, see S. Spain, ‘“The Promised Blessing”: The Iconography of the Mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore’, *Art Bulletin* 61 (1979), 518–40, esp. 519–25, note 7. Most recently, Steigerwald has suggested another interpretation of this composition as a meeting between Christ and Emperor Augustus; see G. Steigerwald, *Die frühchristlichen Mosaiken*, 96–111.

⁶⁶ For a detailed discussion of this type of costume characteristic of a number of Late Antique female representations, see K. Schade, *Frauen in der Spätantike – Status und Repräsentation: eine Untersuchung zur römischen und frühbyzantinischen Bildniskunst* (Mainz am Rhein: Zabern, 2003), 107–12.

can be said that the Marian figure obtains a relevance in the cycle beyond that required by an attempt to visualise the Gospel story. But was the importance of her figure actually acknowledged at the time of image creation?

Today, the mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore remain the only surviving evidence for the *Infancy* cycle in the monumental art of the pre-iconoclastic period. However, minor works of art, above all ivories, textiles, and metalwork, as well as textual sources, indicate that the multi-compositional arrangements must have been quite common in early Byzantine church decoration. Important evidence is provided by the sixth-century description of Choricus of the painted cycle on the ceiling of the St Sergius church in Gaza:

I shall set aside the pictures (*historiai*) that are on the walls, and shall pass up to the ceiling. A winged being has just descended from heaven in the painter's [fancy] and comes to her who will be a mother without a husband; she is not yet a mother as he finds her modestly spinning and greets her with the good tidings. [...] Startled by the unexpected vision, she suddenly turns round in her confusion and nearly lets fall the purple from her hand, the joints of her fingers weakened by fear. Her female sex and the innocence of her years – she was a maiden of marriageable age – trouble her and make her suspicious of the salutation. The angel having accomplished his mission, has flown away. She now goes out of her chamber to visit a kinswoman and friend, and is about to tell her what has happened; the latter anticipates her through premonition and falls on the maiden's breast. Indeed, she strives to go down on her knees, but the Virgin, in her humility, holds her up.⁶⁷

This account of the Annunciation and Visitation scenes is followed by descriptions of the Nativity, Presentation, and Miracle at Cana, in which the author stresses the presence and actions of the Virgin at each event.⁶⁸ The Choricus text is unique because it provides an ekphrasis with an interpretation of a visual narrative that dates nearly to the works discussed in this paper. While the Choricus evidence and the monument he described are dated to the sixth century, when the veneration of the Virgin was already fully established in the Roman Empire, it can be argued that earlier cycles would have been read similarly by late antique viewers as acknowledging the Virgin's individual agency within broader visual frameworks.

⁶⁷ C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453. Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972), 64–6.

⁶⁸ J. Reil, *Die altchristlichen Bildzyklen des Lebens Jesu* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1910), 112; T. Polański, 'The Cycles of Childhood and Miracles in Saint Sergius' Church of Gaza in the *Ecphrasis* of Choricus' in *Hortus Historiae. Studies dedicated to Prof. Jozef Wolski* (Krakow: Historia Jagellonica, 2010), 737–57.

The existence of early Christian cycles that were specifically Marian in their choice of subjects further substantiates this point.⁶⁹ The earliest and most revealing example is found in the Adelpia sarcophagus from Syracuse, dated to the fourth century.⁷⁰ (**Fig. 6**). The lid of the tomb is decorated with a sequence of four scenes, which all feature Mary. The short narrative develops from left to right and opens with the Annunciation at the Spring. The next scene shows Mary standing upright with her steps and gaze directed to the right; two female figures flank her and gently hold her arms. In the next composition, the garments of Mary are different, she is no longer wearing a belted tunica and her head is covered by a veil. She is represented seated on the throne surrounded by four women. Judging by their gestures, the three figures on the left venerate the Virgin while a woman on the right is represented in a contemplative and thoughtful mood, touching her chin with the fingers of her right hand. The sequence is interrupted by a dedicatory inscription carried by two putti and is concluded on the other side by a composition of the Nativity combined with the Adoration of the Magi. The figure of Mary seated on a rock and wearing vestments similar to those worn by the woman on the throne in the previous scene becomes the final image of the sequence.

The uniqueness of the second and third scenes makes it difficult to associate them with any particular Gospel event. Furthermore, the iconographic solutions of each are heavily dependent on non-Christian prototypes and do reappear widely in subsequent centuries, which has led scholars to debate the subjects of the scenes and the heroine's identification as Mary. When the cycle is carefully studied as a whole, however, it becomes clear that the frieze is not a combination of random scenes, but instead follows a particular logic and takes Mary as its unifying figure and central focus.

The existence of cycles from the fourth and early fifth century that represent the Virgin as the principal character in their programmes is also confirmed by the Abegg-Stiftung textile, mentioned in the first part of this essay, and the carvings of the Werden casket at the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁷¹ (**Fig. 7**). The Werden casket is an ivory box covered with images of the Infancy cycle of an unusual kind. In this cycle, once more, the story opens with the

⁶⁹ J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, *L'iconographie de l'enfance de la Vierge dans l'Empire byzantine et en Occident* (Brussels: Palais des académies, 1964–65); *eadem*, 'Iconography of the Cycle of the Life of the Virgin', 163–94. It is noteworthy how Lafontaine-Dosogne also connects the interest in the events of the life of Mary with the spread of the cult of the Virgin after the Council of Ephesus (see *ibid.*, 164). However, several Marian cycles discussed in this paper were made in the fourth century or at the turn of the fifth.

⁷⁰ See note 35 and also the discussion in Brenk, *The Apse*, 64–6.

⁷¹ See note 37.

Annunciation at the Spring followed by the Dream of Joseph with the Virgin standing nearby, the Visitation, and Mary before the angel pointing towards the temple, before which we can see a bearded male figure holding an open book. The latter scene is often identified with the preparation of Mary before the Trial of Bitter Waters, although other readings are also possible.

The so-called Visitation is rendered in an unconventional way, with three figures represented instead of two. Mary is depicted standing in the centre and communicating with a woman before her, who must be Elizabeth. Another woman, most likely the maid, if we accept the identification of the scene, stands behind the Virgin. This composition bears a great similarity to the arrangement of the second scene on the lid of the Adelfia sarcophagus which shows Mary in the company of two female figures. Like the arrangement of the Syracuse sarcophagus, the other side of the Werden casket also continues with the detailed Nativity, starting with the magi seeing the star (or possibly the shepherds) 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.

Subsequently, and despite the paucity of surviving examples in church decoration, the Marian cycles became very popular and widespread in Christian art. The sixth-century Byzantine ivory covers bear witness to the development of this tradition.⁷² **(Fig. 8).** According to convention, one leaf showed Christ surrounded by representations of the miracles, the Entry into Jerusalem, and other scenes. However, the counterpart frontal panel would have borne the image of the Virgin enthroned with the Child on the central plaque accompanied by approximately six narrative compositions. The choice of subjects for the plaques, besides the Nativity and the Annunciation, often includes the Trial by Water, the Flight to Egypt, the Visitation and, at least in one case, even the Annunciation to St Anne.⁷³ The selection for the Gospel ivory covers was clearly made in such a way as to represent Mary in all the narrative compositions on one side and Christ's actions on the other, which means that the artists were consciously creating 'Marian' and 'Christological' narrative series in their treatments of the codex covers of the Gospel texts.

⁷² J. Lowden, 'The Word made Visible: The Exterior of the Early Christian Books as Visual Argument' in W. E. Klingshirn and L. Safran (eds.), *The Early Christian Book* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of American Press, 2007), 13–47.

⁷³ K. Weitzmann (ed.), *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to seventh Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1977), 511–12.

An extremely interesting Marian cycle once decorated the Chapel LI in Bawit.⁷⁴ Four walls of a rectangular room at the heart of the monastery complex were richly decorated with murals tentatively dated either to the sixth-seventh or eighth-ninth century. The apse was situated in the centre of the Eastern wall and contained the image of Christ surrounded by four living creatures. The northern wall consisted of a two-register decoration: in the top register, the father Apollo and his friends Anoup and Phib were represented seated on a bench and accompanied by the figures of standing saints and monks. Below this composition was a narrative frieze depicting four Gospel events, the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Journey to Bethlehem, and the Nativity. The cycle in general was characterized by an extensive use of captions and the figure of the Virgin was accompanied by the name 'Η ΑΓΙΑ ΜΑΡΙΑ'. In every moment of the story, Mary was depicted as a protagonist of the scene, an impression achieved by the slightly enlarged proportions of her figure and the compositional arrangement. The Virgin also becomes the principal character because the figure of Child Christ is absent from the cycle. Given that the northern wall was situated opposite the entrance, the composition of the Marian cycle would have confronted the viewer upon entering. The Bawit cycle is remarkable as an example of early medieval Marian narrative in monumental decoration because it distinctly demonstrates that the Infancy cycles were, at times, treated as stories about the figure and agency of the Mother of God.

Conclusions

This article has attempted to bring together material evidence for imagery of the Virgin dated to the period before the Council of Ephesus, that is, to the fourth and early fifth centuries. The surviving images come from both the eastern and western parts of the Empire and testify to the early development of Marian representations in Christian art. At times Mary can be identified by an inscription, appearing alone or in the company of other saints; more commonly, the Virgin is represented in narrative compositions connected either to the Infancy of Christ or stories from the apocrypha. While neither type of evidence can be taken as proof of a developed Marian cult, especially because the surviving material is fragmentary and uneven in terms of both quality and function, it would nonetheless be incorrect to deny Mary's relevance in the period before the Council of Ephesus. On the contrary, the textual

⁷⁴ J. Clédat, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouît* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1999), 109–32; G. J. M. Van Loon, 'The Virgin and the Midwife Salomé', *Eastern Christian Art* 3 (2006): 81–104, esp. 82–9.

and material evidence counters the popular viewpoint that early visual culture and theology are characterised exclusively by Christological concerns. Although we cannot know if the figure of Mary was chosen to help substantiate claims for the human nature of Christ or for another reason, it is evident that by the end of the fourth century her image had become indispensable to representations of Gospel story.

From the vantage point of the present, it is impossible to reconstruct the motivations and ideas behind the cycle of the Adelfia sarcophagus or the Marian apocryphal stories that decorate late antique vestments and textiles. Tentatively, however, it is possible to suggest that in some cases commissions made by women or for women could have influenced the choice of Mary-related subjects, particularly where funerary settings are concerned. For the most part, however, our knowledge of what motivated early Christian Marian iconography is limited, especially because we are missing the crucial chapter of material attestations from the Holy Land, where numerous pilgrimage sites in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth were associated with Mary and were in active use in the fourth century.⁷⁵

Since the disparate examples collected in this paper could give the misleading and inaccurate impression that imagery featuring the Virgin was already central in the fourth century, it must be reiterated that the quantity of Marian representations that survive is rather modest in comparison with the overall legacy of early Christian art. Moreover, the span of Marian themes is variegated and represents the development of only one of many trajectories of late antique visual culture. It is clear, however, that by the time of the Council of Ephesus, the visual thesaurus of Marian representations was developed sufficiently to allow for the creation of sophisticated monumental decorations and individual representations. Interestingly, we do not witness any major transformation in Marian imagery in the aftermath of the Council, apart from the increased number of the churches dedicated to her and the growing popularity of her image.

In other words, the artistic evidence does not seem to point to the radical modification of an already existing image in order better to reflect the theological concept of Mary as *Theotokos*.⁷⁶ In spite of this, the devotional significance of the representations of the Virgin and Child did gradually change after the Council, to the point that by the sixth century the images of Mary enthroned had become one of the principal icons of the state. Following the logic of this transition, then, it can be established that in the early Christian period more

⁷⁵ F. Cabrol, *Les églises de Jérusalem, la discipline et la liturgie au IV^e siècle* (Paris: H. Oudin, 1895); Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith*.

⁷⁶ On the concept and its scarce relevance for the council: R. M. Price, 'The Virgin as Theotokos at Ephesus'.

narrative treatment of Mary's figure developed towards the formulation of more iconic and sacred representations of the Virgin – a shift which reflects the passage in the perception of Mary from maiden of the Gospel accounts to protagonist of Christian worship.