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## In Praise of Archaeology: Icons before Iconoclasm

*With four Tables*

### 1. ICONS FOR THE DISPLAY OF VOTIVE GIFTS

In an article published in 1987, the present author put forward the postulate that some Early Medieval icons had been designed with the purpose of having valuable votive gifts displayed on them.<sup>1</sup> My conclusions were drawn on the basis of material, admittedly scanty, found in Rome. One important piece of evidence came from a “fresco icon” of the mid-seventh century in S. Maria Antiqua at the Forum Romanum (Fig. 1). In the fresco, an old repair to the surface below the Virgin’s curiously held “crossed hands” would seem to indicate that a votive gift, possibly a chain or rosary of precious metal, once hung here. Another clue comes from a “real” icon painted in encaustic technique on wood which is kept in the church of S. Maria in Trastevere (Fig. 2); this icon, of pre-Iconoclastic date, was assigned by C. Bertelli to the time of Pope John VII (A.D. 705–707).<sup>2</sup> In it, the Virgin enthroned holds a golden cross in her raised right hand; the cross, however, is painted in *tempera* and not in the encaustic technique in which the icon is executed. In the laboratory no trace of an encaustically painted cross could be found in the area of her hand; inevitably, the conclusion must be that a *real* cross originally was positioned at this point.<sup>3</sup>

Due to the fact that the Trastevere icon includes a donor, i.e. the figure kneeling in adoration at Mary’s feet below the throne, an answer, partial at least, can be given to the question as to how this striking devotional assemblage came about. It seems to have combined, in an ideal fashion, the display of an opulent votive gift with visual statements that would further testify to the piety of its donor. The element of resplendent self-promotion expressed by this group of objects points to it having sprung from the most exalted contemporary circles, probably imperial, to be emulated by popes and, presumably, by other notables of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. With my article from 1987 I could present two examples, based on mere archaeological *minutiae* and both pertaining to the cult of the Virgin, of the visual scenarios offered by such exclusive icons-cum-votary gifts. Persuasive as my arguments might seem, they lacked all verification since material for collation and control was non-existent.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> P. J. NORDHAGEN, Icons designed for the Display of Sumptuous Votive Gifts. *DOP* 41 (1987) (= Festschrift Ernst Kitzinger) 453–460 (reprinted in IDEM, *Studies in Byzantine and Early Medieval Painting*, Selected articles. London 1990, 356–365).

<sup>2</sup> C. BERTELLI, *La Madonna di S. Maria in Trastevere. Storia, iconografia, stile di un dipinto romano dell’ottavo secolo*. Rome 1961.

<sup>3</sup> Presumably this cross was fixed to the boards of the icon with metal cramps. The damage seen along the edges of the boards in the area of the right arm and hand of the Virgin may have been caused when the cross was removed.

<sup>4</sup> NORDHAGEN, Icons designed for the Display of Sumptuous Votive Gifts was, understandably, not listed in the bibliography concerning the S. Maria Maggiore icon (The *Salus Populi Romani*) with its “Madonna with Crossed Hands” in the catalogue made for the 1988 icon exhibition in Rome: P. AMATO, *De Vera Effigie Mariae. Antiche icone romane*. Rome 1988. It is, however, referred to in H. BELTING, *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*. Munich 1990, 143, where my conclusions are referred to as a matter of fact. The hypothesis was then taken up and its scope substantially broadened by C. BARBER, *Early Representations of the Mother of God*, in: M. VASSILAKI (ed.), *Mother of God. Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*. Milan 2000, 259ff. BARBER, *Early Representations*, in fact, is the first to have used

To hunt for the soil from which sprang this remarkable variant of known icon practices, is, evidently, an idle pursuit. No doubt, however, the identification proposed by C. Bertelli for the donor in the icon in S. Maria in Trastevere with that great patron of painting, Pope John VII, would point to the “Byzantine connection” so often suggested in literature with regard to this pontiff.<sup>5</sup> Another factor which may point in the same direction is the striking use of votive gifts reflected in S. Maria Antiqua with its many Byzantinizing frescoes; here, the marks left by these objects have been discovered on many panels, not only on the one representing “The Madonna with the Crossed Hands” mentioned initially (above, p. 101). Examples drawn from this material will be studied in the following paragraphs; few of them, however, will seem to have possessed the dramatic effect, almost of an inverted *trompe-l’oeil*, which the Trastevere icon and its closest copies must have radiated with their gleaming gifts held high.

## 2. THE CULT OF ICONS BEFORE A.D. 700

When did the worship of icons have its inception? This question, vigorously debated but still awaiting a definite answer due to the lack of reliable, early source material, is linked to another, equally disputed issue: was it the upsurge of such worship, with its alleged “aberrations” and “abuses”, which unleashed iconophobia and led to Iconoclasm? The thesis put forward by E. Kitzinger in 1954 in his classic survey on the rise of the cult of images was a weighty contribution to this discussion.<sup>6</sup> It was later axiomatically summed up by him as follows: “We hear of it [the veneration of images by Christians] from the end of the fourth century on. But it was the second half of the sixth century which saw arise the great vogue of iconodulism that was to culminate and break in the crisis of the eighth century”.<sup>7</sup> His theorem has come under fire from several quarters, and in recent years the dual postulate spelled out in it has been challenged by L. Brubaker, who in her “Icons before Iconoclasm?” (1998) set out to demolish some of its premises.<sup>8</sup>

Critique of the sources is her main instrument, and she can point to the fact that in the years since the appearance of Kitzinger’s pioneering study a majority of the acts on which he based his conclusions have had question marks appended to them. Interpolations, not a few of them probably introduced by eager iconodules during the ensuing conflict, will seem to have been the corruptive factor. Up to the very threshold of the eighth century, Brubaker insists, textual evidence concerning the existence of “adorational practices” that can be said to amount to an actual worship of pictures are insubstantial and extremely scant.

Yet, Brubaker accepts Kitzinger’s thesis that Canon 82, voted in Constantinople by the Quinisext Council shortly before A.D. 700, may have been a turning point.<sup>9</sup> With its restrictions on the use of the Lamb symbol and the requirement that it was to be replaced by depictions of Christ in human

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the material of “votive-gift-carrying icons” pointed to by me as the spearhead in a critique of L. Brubaker’s dictum that there was no icon worship before A.D. 700 (see below).

<sup>5</sup> E. KITZINGER, On some Icons of the Seventh Century, in: *Late Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend, Jr.*, ed. K. WEITZMANN *et alii*. Princeton, N.J. 1955, 138 pointed to the art of John VII as reflecting a wave of Byzantine influence on Rome. His thesis on a renewed and strong recurrence of such trends is supported by the present author on the strength of the material restudied in S. Maria Antiqua, but also from what can be learnt from the fragments of John’s lost mosaics in the Old St. Peter’s, Rome; cf. P. J. NORDHAGEN, *The Mosaics of John VII (705–707 A.D.). The Mosaic Fragments and their Technique. Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia II* (1965) 121–166. The thesis is still controversial, cf. note 40.

<sup>6</sup> E. KITZINGER, *The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm. DOP 8* (1954) 83–150 (reprinted in *IDEM, The Art of Byzantium and the Medieval West: Selected Studies*, ed. E. KLEINBAUER. Bloomington – London 1976, 91–156).

<sup>7</sup> KITZINGER, On some icons 140.

<sup>8</sup> L. BRUBAKER, *Icons before Iconoclasm?* In: *Morfologie sociali e culturali in Europa fra tarda antichità e alto medioevo (Settimana di studio del centro Italiano di studi sull’Alto Medioevo XLV)*. Spoleto 1998, II 1215–1254.

<sup>9</sup> KITZINGER, *The cult of images* 121, 142 f.; BRUBAKER, *Icons before Iconoclasm* 1252.

form, Canon 82 may reflect that, at that moment, an apology for “holy portraits” was in the making: “portraits” of Christ were now to be accepted as a veritable proof of the Incarnation and thus worthy of adoration. Still, she flatly rejects the idea, endemic in Byzantine scholarship, of a cult of images that in the years prior to A.D. 720 had “gone out of control” so as to precipitate the reaction known as Iconoclasm. The reasons for this upheaval must be found elsewhere. In her re-evaluation of the whole issue of the *Bilderstreit* L. Brubaker is in good company; revisionism raises its head also in the field of Byzantinology.<sup>10</sup>

The material presented in the first part of the present article is relevant to this topic, but in a general and not fully decisive way. A tendency, among people of high status, to adorn the icons they donated with rich gifts for the sake of prestige, does not necessarily imply an increase in the intensity of the rites connected with them. Still, the phenomenon no doubt points to an increased awareness of the potency of icons.<sup>11</sup> These images, one had discovered, could be utilized to relay pointed messages which in addition to the purely religious ones would serve also personal and even political ends, and the display of luxurious gifts on them gave added glory to the benefactors. The possible link to the ruler cult for the origin of this custom (see above) is a point to be noted. Here, at least, we may perceive one of those “aberrations” on which so much ink has been previously spilled, in this case the use, in church art, of blatant and undisguised promotional, not to say propagandistic, practices which to the eyes of purists may have appeared blasphemous and hence unacceptable. If my observations are valid concerning the votive apparatus once exhibited by the “Madonna with the Crossed Hands” in S. Maria Antiqua, the use of icons for such ends can be documented from as early as the middle years of the seventh century A.D. The possible germs of what would, shortly, amount to a full-fledged drive to eradicate errors of this kind, may have been detected here.

Our Lady with crossed hands brings us back to the material in S. Maria Antiqua, which is of paramount significance for the present discussion. Students of the paintings in that church have pointed to the signs found there of advanced devotional practises, signs that are visible in frescoes both from the seventh and the early eighth century. However, before turning to the archaeological facts pertaining to these cases, let us review the iconographical evidence which can be drawn from the same frescoes and which tells of a well-organized cult of images before A.D. 700. Our main lead is the proliferation of iconic types of the Virgin which is reflected here, and which points to the establishment, well before Iconoclasm, of a veritable “grammar of images” designed for a wide spectrum of private and official use by the devout, lay or clerical. Some of these images must have been radical new inventions, since they are not recorded anywhere else before their appearance in this church, and several even had a long afterlife in Byzantine art.<sup>12</sup>

Among the most remarkable, not least because of its early date, is “Deesis with a donor” (nave, seventh century) in which the figure of a donor is placed at Mary’s side; this composition was prob-

<sup>10</sup> According to P. SCHREINER, *Der byzantinische Bilderstreit: Kritische Analyse der zeitgenössischen Meinungen und das Urteil der Nachwelt bis heute*, in: *Bisanzio, Roma e l’Italia nell’alto medioevo (Settimana di studio del centro Italiano di studi sull’Alto Medioevo XXXIV)*. Spoleto 1988, I 319–407 the dimensions of the historical episode called Iconoclasm may have been exaggerated by the Byzantines and overrated by Byzantinists. My own angle of attack is determined by my conviction that the iconographical *canon* of the Byzantines had been established, in its larger lines, already well before A.D. 720, and that its rules and principles as well as a majority of its most cherished motif categories survived the conflict to become the backbone of the image world of the Middle Byzantine period and beyond; cf. P. J. NORDHAGEN, *Iconoclasm: Rupture or Interlude? A Reassessment of the Evidence. Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Pertinentia XVIII* (N.S. 4, 2005) 205–215. In a forthcoming work I explore with P. O. Folgerø / University of Bergen, the causes of the wave of image-making which erupted in the seventh century A.D.

<sup>11</sup> This is a point also underlined by BARBER, *Early Representations* 260.

<sup>12</sup> A summary of the arguments which follow is given in my *Constantinople on the Tiber. The Byzantines in Rome and the Iconography of their Images*, in: J. SMITH (ed.), *Early Medieval Rome & the Christian West. Essays in Honour of Donald A. Bullough (The Medieval Mediterranean 28)*. Leiden 2000, 113–134.

ably created for use by the highest echelons within Church and State.<sup>13</sup> “St. Anne with the Infant Mary” (presbytery, seventh century) seems, however, to have been designed for a function the nature of which will remain unknown to us; still, it was the subject of an intense cultic activity since it had had a lamp hung by it (see later), and, in addition, it was deliberately rescued from being painted over when a redecoration of the church under Pope John VII (705–707) was to take place.<sup>14</sup> One could add to these samples the occurrence, in the mosaics executed for the same pope in the Vatican Basilica, of what is perhaps a very early example of the “Blachernitissa”, a Virgin *orans* possibly in the role of Protectress.<sup>15</sup> Even “The Annunciation” (nave, seventh century, painted anew in the eighth), here lifted out of the Cycle of the Life of Christ and rendered as a separate iconic picture, may well have been an invention of this period. Further, if my deductions are correct, an example of “The Eleousa” – “The Compassionate Virgin” – also appeared among the frescoes in the church (column in the nave, seventh century), several centuries before the first specimens of it are recorded in Byzantine art.<sup>16</sup> In the same series is to be classified the subtype (apparently short-lived) of the Hodegetria discussed above, “The Virgin with Crossed Hands”, which may have been appositely designed for the purpose I have postulated for it.<sup>17</sup>

This multiplication of Madonna types, I repeat, does not seem to have happened at random, i.e. as a series of mere improvisations, but may represent a conscious and systematic process of picture-making which had as its aim, assumedly, to provide a full gallery of iconic alternatives by which to direct the prayers of the righteous. Icons, their form and use, may thus have been decided on well before A.D. 700 and probably by a central authority.<sup>18</sup> New types were created in increasing numbers, and among them, as we have seen, were some highly extravagant examples destined for special use. Yet, arguments based on iconography cannot give a definite answer to the question as to when “iconodulism” according to Kitzinger had its inception, nor can they tell us when this contingency had its point of culmination. Even so, the examples presented in this paragraph should be granted some weight in the matter.

### 3. ARCHAEOLOGY AND SOURCE STUDIES

Turning now to the archaeological bits and pieces which can be adduced in support of Kitzinger’s conclusions, a note on method is not inappropriate. Admittedly, a problem of *documentation* plays its part here: how can the precise character of a material made up of diminutive components, mostly recovered from frescoes badly smashed and half obliterated, be appropriately described and illustrated?<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the discourse to which this brand of argument is indispensable has, in fact,

<sup>13</sup> Deesis: cf. P. J. NORDHAGEN, *S. Maria Antiqua: the Frescoes of the Seventh Century. Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia VIII* (1978) 109ff.

<sup>14</sup> St. Anne: cf. *ibidem* 100 ff. For the evidence concerning the “reuse” of this fresco panel in the redecoration of A.D. 705–707, cf. P. J. NORDHAGEN, *The Earliest Decorations in S. Maria Antiqua and their Date. Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia I* (1962) 60f. The conscious “salvage” of the St. Anne panel and a host of other frescoes of the seventh century in the same church tells of a veneration of *wall frescoes* which, at that date, was as inordinate as that devoted to “real”, free-hanging icons: their sacredness forbade their erasure.

<sup>15</sup> The Virgin Blachernitissa: cf. BERTELLI, *La Madonna* 58.

<sup>16</sup> The Virgin Eleousa: cf. NORDHAGEN, *Frescoes of the Seventh Century* 130.

<sup>17</sup> Another testimony to the systematic creation, in the century preceding Iconoclasm, of a wide range of iconic types of saints, is the gallery of Medical Saints, each fully individualized as regard to type and apparel and with their names given, which is seen in the diaconicon of S. Maria Antiqua (A.D. 705–707). The belief is widespread, however, that such “mass creation” of figures of saints was to take place only *after* Iconoclasm; cf. my discussion of this material, which is largely overlooked in literature, in NORDHAGEN, *Iconoclasm* 210ff.

<sup>18</sup> These conclusions challenge the thesis by H. BELTING, *Bild und Kult* 39 which rejects categorically the notion that any fixed rules for iconic usage existed prior to Iconoclasm.

<sup>19</sup> See my reflections on the problems connected with the documentation and presentation of such evasive categories of facts, in P. J. NORDHAGEN, *Is Empiricism really worth that Trouble? On the Documentation Techniques employed in the Study of*

no room for it. Discussions on Iconoclasm unfold against a background of much larger portent, the full drama of Byzantine culture with its crises and conflicts, and in the tracing of these larger lines the tools of “high” historical scholarship are inevitably given first rank, such as source research or the exegesis of texts by Christian authors old and new.

What were the distinguishing marks of image worship? The want of criteria by which to attack this question is yet another, and almost inevitable, consequence of our lack of reliable sources. Still, the material of cultic devices registered from S. Maria Antiqua, to which I have briefly pointed earlier, may furnish some clues. Among these signs of a deep involvement with images the most noticeable is the embellishment of the frescoes there with a whole range of different types of votive gifts. The marks left in the fresco surface are proof of such gifts. One type is in the form of objects attached not directly onto the figures which were the *foci* of veneration but fixed to the wall surface next to them, in a manner resembling the practice still seen in churches of the Catholic cult. Nail holes left by this kind of gift cluster in great number around the Virgin in the niche (date A.D. 705–707, but possibly repeating an earlier image here, see below) on the inner face of the NE pillar of the nave;<sup>20</sup> similar holes are visible close to the figure on the “fresco icon” representing St. Barbara on the other face of the same pillar and also near that of St. Demetrius on the pillar across the nave (both seventh century A.D.).<sup>21</sup>

Another category, related to that initially studied in this essay, consists of objects fixed directly to the figures represented in the paintings so as to look as if being worn by them. This type has left its marks on the fresco which depicts “The Maccabeans” (nave, seventh century A.D.; incidentally the finest in the group of paintings to which Kitzinger has accorded the label “Early Medieval Hellenism”). There the figure of Solomone, the mother of the Maccabean brothers and an early *typos* of the Virgin, had a brooch fastened to it at the neckline of her dress; at the time when the church was excavated in 1900, the remains of the four silver nails by which it was fastened were still seen in the holes left by them (Fig. 3).<sup>22</sup>

Now, the earthquake which destroyed S. Maria Antiqua and closed it definitively to the cult happened as late as around A.D. 850, a full two hundred years after the fresco decoration of the nave from which so many of our examples are drawn.<sup>23</sup> In the 840s Iconoclasm had spent itself and the worship of pictures was on the rise. Therefore, theoretically at least, all of the votive objects mentioned here might well have found their way to the walls of the church in this late period, shortly before it collapsed. The paintings themselves, it must be stressed, can give nothing but a *terminus post quem* date for the setting up of the gifts enumerated. Thus, the material presented above cannot be taken, by itself and at face value, as evidence of an icon veneration that flourished before Iconoclasm.

The next category of objects to be examined has features in common with two of the types listed above. As in the Maccabean fresco an item of precious metal was fixed to the fresco panel to

Santa Maria Antiqua, in: Santa Maria Antiqua. Cento anni dopo, ed. J. Osborne – R. Brandt – G. Morganti. Rome 2004, 213–222.

<sup>20</sup> Nail holes left by votive gifts near niche with panel of the Virgin: cf. P. J. NORDHAGEN, The Frescoes of John VII (705–707 A.D.) in S. Maria Antiqua in Rome. *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* III (1968) 75. The assemblage of votive gifts once concentrated in this area is a feature that was also observed by E. TEA, S. Maria Antiqua. Milan 1937, 114, 292; further, she gave a description of the hole left by the lamp inside the niche, cf. note 34 below.

<sup>21</sup> Nail holes left by votive gifts in panel of St. Barbara: cf. NORDHAGEN, Frescoes of the Seventh Century 121, pl. XLV. Panel of St. Demetrius: *ibidem* 106, pls. XXVIII a and LXIII.

<sup>22</sup> Nail holes left by brooch in panel with “The Maccabeans”: NORDHAGEN, Frescoes of the Seventh Century 117 and pls. XXXIX–XL. On the use of votive gifts as reflected in the material of frescoes from the seventh century in the church, see also the summary *ibidem* 141 f. The observations concerning the remaining silver nails (“bottoni”) from the brooch are from TEA, S. Maria Antiqua 289.

<sup>23</sup> On the date of the final destruction of the church, cf. the discussion cited in NORDHAGEN, The Frescoes of John VII, 3f. (Introduction)

enhance its visual splendour, yet its primary function was to inform the picture with “a magic reality” that would surpass the limits of the medium and increase its immediacy to the beholder. As a cultic phenomenon this kind of objects deserves our particular attention. The marks from such appendages distinguish the figures of Sts. Barbara and Demetrius mentioned above, both from the seventh century, and consist of *nail holes found at the corners of their mouths* (Figs. 4, 5). C. Bertelli, who was the first to notice this phenomenon, gave a fully plausible interpretation of it: these nails held sheets of precious metal, probably of gold, which overlaid the lips of the two saints so as to give them “a golden mouth”.<sup>24</sup> From the realm of “real” icons the use of gold to accentuate particular parts of saints’ figures is known from a very early date; in most cases, however, this adornment is posterior to the actual manufacture of the icon.<sup>25</sup> Still, the seventh century A.D. offers some extraordinary instances of colouring with gold in painting, in which the intention seemingly was to create supernatural or “magical” effects of a kind related to the instances studied here; thus they seem to have a direct bearing on the occurrence of such usage in S. Maria Antiqua.

In a mosaic panel in the church of Hagios Demetrios in Thessaloniki the figure of the titular saint, depicted in an attitude of prayer, displays golden hands; these are set massively with gold tesserae.<sup>26</sup> A similar hand, executed with gold paint and clearly part of the original work, is registered from the Madonna del Pantheon in Rome, an icon on wood datable to c. A.D. 600; the golden hand is here the one by which she holds/points to the Christ Child.<sup>27</sup> H. Belting has stressed the connection between these two instances of such practice.<sup>28</sup> The “golden mouths” which once embellished the fresco icons in S. Maria Antiqua should be included in the same group, as they seem to reflect intentions that were part of the original design of the pictures they adorn; this would point overwhelmingly to their being contemporary with them. As observed by several scholars, these paintings are in themselves votary: the nave frescoes in the Forum church have the character of being votive panels set up by individual donors, and the date of their execution is c. 650 A.D.<sup>29</sup> There is every reason to assume that the devotional apparatus which was part of them was set up by their original donors.

<sup>24</sup> C. BERTELLI, *Icone di Roma*, in: *Stil und Überlieferung in der Kunst des Abendlandes. Akten des XXI. Internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte*, Bonn 1964. Berlin 1967, 102 and n. 16 (panel of St. Barbara).

Nail holes in corners of mouth, panel of St. Barbara: cf. NORDHAGEN, *Frescoes of the Seventh Century* 121 and pls. XLV–XLVI. Panel of St. Demetrius: *ibidem* 106 and pls. XXVIII a, and XXIX. The significance of these observations for our knowledge of the cultic practices of the period is stressed in BELTING, *Bild und Kult* 133. Nail holes close to the mouth of the Crucified Christ in the Chapel of Theodotus in S. Maria Antiqua (A.D. 741–752) show that the embellishment with “golden mouths” of figures in wall paintings continued beyond the seventh century; cf. W. DE GRÜNEISEN, *Sainte Marie Antique*. Rome 1911, pl. XL. (reproduced in P. ROMANELLI – P.J. NORDHAGEN, *S. Maria Antiqua*. Rome 1964, tav. 35). This, however, seems to be the latest example known from the Roman material.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. the “Madonna Avvocata” in S. Sisto, Rome: jewellery and hands overlaid with goldfoil; see C. BERTELLI, *L’immagine del “Monasterium Tempuli”*. *Archivium Fratrum Praedicatorum* 31 (1961) 82ff.; also noted in BELTING, *Bild und Kult* 141.

<sup>26</sup> R. CORMACK, *Writing in Gold. Byzantine Society and its Icons*. London 1985, 80f., fig. 23. For another example of “golden hands” (St. Stephen) from the mosaic at Dyrachium (Albania), sixth/seventh century A.D., *ibidem*, fig. 24. The “golden hands” of Demetrius are, aptly, cited by C. BARBER as a parallel to the examples of “golden mouths” in S. Maria Antiqua, *ibidem* 260.

<sup>27</sup> C. BERTELLI, *La Madonna del Pantheon*. *Bollettino d’arte* 46.4 (1961) 24ff.

<sup>28</sup> BELTING, *Bild und Kult* 141.

<sup>29</sup> On the paintings of the seventh century in the nave of S. Maria Antiqua and their character of being votive panels set up in the course of one decoration campaign datable to around A.D. 650, cf. NORDHAGEN, *Programs, papal and private*, in: *Frescoes of the Seventh Century* 136 ff. The votary character of this part of the decoration was stressed by A. GRABAR, *Martyrium*, II. Paris 1946, 102, who compared the material to that seen in the decoration of St. Demetrius at Thessaloniki. Relevant comments on the “wall painting icons” in S. Maria Antiqua are given in K. WEITZMANN, *Some Remarks on the Sources of the Fresco Paintings of the Cathedral of Faras*, in: *Kunst und Geschichte Nubiens in christlicher Zeit*. Recklinghausen 1970, 338.

## 4. THE LAMPS

In her 1998 article, L. Brubaker provided a much-needed redefinition of the symptoms by which one might gauge the temperature and intensity of the cult of images. She argues that *the illumination of pictures* is one such unmistakable criterion of icon worship; documents from before A.D. 700 offer few references, ambiguous and open to critical assessment, to such practices.<sup>30</sup> In light of her welcome quest for new angles of research her neglect of the evidence of the lamps once hung at the Forum church, is not easy to explain, especially since the empirical material concerning these lamps has been available in published form for many decades.<sup>31</sup>

In S. Maria Antiqua the definitive marks left by lamp-holding fittings are three in number, while there are at least two surface indications of the *flames* of either lamps or candles; the evidence concerning the latter was retrieved in the course of the recent campaign of cleaning the frescoes in the church (2006–2008). In the panel with “St. Anne with the Infant Mary” in the presbytery, referred to above as belonging to the series of new types of the Virgin which occur in the seventh century, a heavy iron bar, presumably for holding a lamp, was inserted into the fresco surface at the throat of Anne: in a photograph taken before the larger cracks and holes in the frescoes were filled with modern cement, one can see the size and depth of this hole as well as the square form left by the bar inserted in it (Fig. 6).<sup>32</sup> The lamp’s direct and rather irreverent intrusion on the figure of the Mother can be explained by its function, to illuminate the tiny Mary held in her arms. Still, this technical detail showing, seemingly, a lack of respect for the figure it disfigures could, not unreasonably, be taken as evidence that its placement there is largely *posterior* to the execution of the fresco itself.

Another deep hole was visible, before it too was filled with cement, very close to and a little above the head of St. Demetrius in the panel whose arsenal of devotional trappings we have just mentioned<sup>33</sup> In this case, however, in light of the other evidence pertaining to this fresco, it is less obvious that one should reject the notion that the appliance once positioned there was a part of the original ritual set-up; yet it is open to the same archaeological “source criticism” as that regarding the St. Anne panel. Still, a more substantial indication of a pre-Iconoclastic employment of such devices for illumination comes from another of the frescoes mentioned above, the one that is surrounded by the largest number of signs of a veneration with votive gifts that can be registered from the church, “The Virgin in the Niche” on the NE-pillar in the nave. This fresco, as stated earlier, belongs to the decoration executed for Pope John VII (A.D. 705–707). Scholars have reflected on a feature in it which has been hard to explain, the cut or shorn upper right corner of the panel (Fig. 7).<sup>34</sup> In this corner, conspicuously left outside the dark border of the panel, there is today a fill of cement, a repair made during the same work of consolidation which was carried out when the excavation had been completed in 1901. What was behind this fill?

Eva Tea, who in 1937 published the work notes of the excavator Giacomo Boni, provides his observations on this fresco, that “the upper right angle of the panel frame is cut, perhaps to hang there a [votive] gift or a lamp. One still sees the hole left by a big square nail [chiodo]”.<sup>35</sup> This large,

<sup>30</sup> BRUBAKER, *Icons before Iconoclasm* 1243, 1246.

<sup>31</sup> A summary was given in my article NORDHAGEN, *Icons designed for the Display of Sumptuous Votive Gifts* 454. Cf. also note 36 below.

<sup>32</sup> Lamp, panel with St. Anne: NORDHAGEN, *Frescoes of the Seventh Century* 101; the early photograph showing the large hole from the lamp-hook is reproduced in DE GRÜNEISEN, *Sainte Marie Antique*, pl. LXIX.

<sup>33</sup> Lamp, panel with St. Demetrius: NORDHAGEN, *Frescoes of the Seventh Century*, cf. especially detail of the head, pl. LXI-II.

<sup>34</sup> Lamp, Virgin in niche: NORDHAGEN, *The Frescoes of John VII* 75f., pl. XCIII.

<sup>35</sup> TEA, *S. Maria Antiqua* 292: “L’angolo destra superiore della cornicetta è smussato, forse per appendervi un dono o il lume. Si scorge ancora il buco lasciato dal grosso chiodo quadrato”.

square “nail” was probably of the same kind as that which held the lamp hung on the fresco with St. Anne. But it seems that the painters, by cutting the corner of the panel in this particular manner, respected an object *that was already hanging there*; this means, consequently, that the lamp may have been placed in the corner of the niche before the painting of A.D. 705–707 was executed. An earlier panel, a focus of particular veneration, had had the fixture for illumination set up for it, and this arrangement was left unchanged when the new panel was painted in the niche. This may be the solution to the archaeological puzzle which confronts us here.<sup>36</sup>

Here, then, are the arguments for the hypothesis that such illumination not only played a part in the cult of images around A.D. 700, but that, at that time, it was a devotional practice which had a solid tradition behind it. The material drawn from the church seems, in fact, to indicate that it had been in use at least as far back as the middle years of the seventh century A.D., from the time, it should be stressed, when S. Maria Antiqua had undergone one of its most comprehensive, early phases of decoration.<sup>37</sup> It is not far-fetched either to link this practice closely to some of the other advanced devotional practices which we have mentioned above, and which can be registered among the frescoes from the same decoration layer. Of these customs, as we have seen, the most striking is the embellishment with gifts which conferred upon the frescoes the effect of a “magic” otherworldliness. The introduction of lamps will seem to belong to the same phase in the unfolding of the devotional techniques pertinent to images: they would not only illuminate the saintly figures but also bring to life the shining objects with which these figures had been enhanced.<sup>38</sup>

To be handled with care as to the date to ascribe to them, but still of relevance to the theme discussed here, are the surface signs left by *flames* of either lamps or candles on some of the frescoes in S. Maria Antiqua. These signs were discovered during the recent campaign of cleaning the frescoes; the material is kindly put at my disposal by chief restorer Werner Schmid. In several places such marks, caused by open flames, can be observed, and particularly strong ones are found at the lower edge of some key frescoes in the nave. These marks in strong red occur where lamps or candles had been placed so close to the fresco surface that their heat has changed the ochre colours used in these areas into a deep red.

One mark of this kind, pointed and flame-like, is found at the bottom of the panel with the “Deesis” in the nave (seventh century A.D.) (Figs. 8, 9). Its position in the area beneath the figure of Mary underscores the role of illumination in the veneration of the Virgin expressed by this votary

<sup>36</sup> In my publication of 1968 I identified the mark left by the object in the corner as that caused by a *votive gift* (NORDHAGEN, *The Frescoes of John VII 75*); from later studies of the site I have come to the conclusion that its placement tallies with that of a device for illumination. BELTING, *Bild und Kult* 136, for his part, sees the object which once hung here as a “Bildlampe”, a view he shares with A. WEIS, *Ein vorjustinianischer Ikonentypus in S. Maria Antiqua. Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 8 (1958) 60.

<sup>37</sup> As note 29.

<sup>38</sup> Two more instances of illumination with lamps are found among the frescoes of the seventh century, but the archaeological evidence is not conclusive for either of them. One is a *hole*, probably from a lamp hook, visible on photographs of the St. Barbara panel taken immediately after the excavation when the panel had not yet been removed from the wall; this hole is seen in a *lacuna* in the broad, upper border of the panel directly above her halo and corresponds in its placement to the mark of the lamp seen above the head of St. Demetrius opposite; cf. NORDHAGEN, *Frescoes of the Seventh Century*, pl. XLV. The subsequent removal of the panel and the ensuing surface destructions will prevent further studies of this detail. A second instance consists of the marks of a veneration with votive gifts and lamps (or candles) on a badly damaged panel to the left of the main apse in the church. Set up as a pendant either to the enthroned *Maria Regina* (sixth century A.D.) or to the “The Annunciation” with the “Schöne Engel” (seventh century) directly opposite, it depicts Mary enthroned and venerated by a saint, possibly St. Peter; on it there are the marks left by votive gifts. Further, in the area between the figure of the Virgin and the edge of the wall towards the apse there was, at the time of my investigation 1958/59, an abundance of *wax* on what remained of the fresco surface; cf. my *Frescoes of the Seventh Century* 95ff. and fig. 2. This fresco surface is *pickmarked* as a preparation for the next mortar layer, presumably that of John VII, the very latest decoration layer put up on this wall. This would give a *terminus ante quem* of A.D. 705–707 for the devotional trappings discussed here. For the sequence and date of the painted layers in the presbytery, including those mentioned here, see my *The earliest Decorations in S. Maria Antiqua* (as note 14).

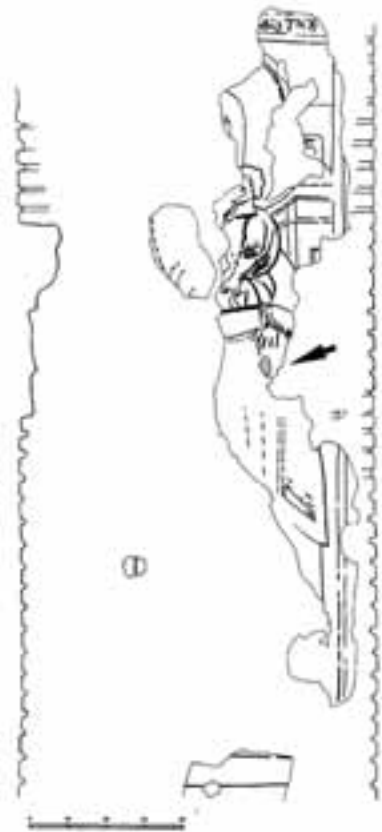


panel.<sup>39</sup> Several such marks are found on the panel with “The Annunciation” (the second of the two panels with identical subject, dated A.D. 705–707) from the SE pillar of the nave; it attests to the devotion directed also to this variant of the iconography of the Virgin. With these examples added to the others found at the site, the position of S. Maria Antiqua as a veritable “laboratory” for iconographical research – but also for liturgical and theological inquiry – assumes an ever-increasing importance in scholarship.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> W. Schmid writes (February 2009): “The signs caused by candle flames are found where, due to the heat, yellow ochre has altered to red ochre. [...] This reaction occurs above 330 degree C and involves the transformation of hydrated iron oxide into anhydrous form”.

<sup>40</sup> The chapters on the pictorial arts in L. BRUBAKER – J. HALDON, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (ca. 680–850): The Sources. An Annotated Survey (Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Monographs 7)*. Aldershot 2001, do not contain references to the Byzantinizing early material in Rome.



1 “The Virgin with Crossed Hands”, fresco panel in the nave, S. Maria Antiqua, Rome (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.): below the hands is an ancient repair to the surface (tracing and reconstruction by the author, 1987)



2 Enthroned Virgin with angels and a kneeling donor, icon painted on cypress wood (early 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). Encaustic technique, the Cross held by the Virgin, however, is in tempera (photo Istituto Centrale del Restauro, Rome)

3 Panel with “The Maccabeans” (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.): head of Solomone with nail holes from brooch fastened to the fresco surface. S. Maria Antiqua, Rome (photo by the author)



4 St. Barbara (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.): nail holes at the corners of the mouth. S. Maria Antiqua, Rome (photo by the author)



5 St. Demetrius (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.): nail holes at the corners of the mouth. S. Maria Antiqua, Rome (photo by the author)

6 St. Anne (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.): hole from lamp hook. Photograph taken shortly after the excavation of 1900/1901. S. Maria Antiqua, Rome (from W. DE GRÜNEISEN, *Sainte-Marie-Antique*, 1911, Pl. LXIX)



7 Virgin in the niche (A.D. 705–707): ‘shorn’ upper right corner of panel and hole (covered) left by lamp hook. S. Maria Antiqua, Rome (photo by the author)





8 "Deesis" panel (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) in nave, S. Maria Antiqua, Rome: mark left by open flame at lower part of panel (photo by Werner Schmid, 2009)



9 "Deesis" panel in nave (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), S. Maria Antiqua. Tracing, with position of flame mark indicated

