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The Representation of Christ in the Apses of Early Christian Churches*

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Abstract

In this paper, I address the evolution of the pictures in the main apses of early Christian churches. Considering the data gathered by Christa Ihm, I propose a new evolutionary classification of these pictures. We have no secure evidence of such images before the last third of the fourth century. At this time, images of Christ acquired a new meaning emphasizing his divinity. I concur with T. Mathews's thesis that Christ is represented as God and not as emperor; my affirmation introduces some nuances to this position. In funeral art, the change is exemplified by the replacement of images of Christ performing miracles by images like the central scene on Junius Bassus's sarcophagus and the so-called *Traditio Legis.* It is related to discussions from the end of the Arian controversy about the relation between the Father and the Son. The issue of anthropomorphism, which arose in Jerusalem by the end of the century but was particularly vexed in Egypt, gives indications of the relation between representation and adoration. The apse of Santa Pudenziana may be considered typical of this stage of the evolution. Later, by the middle of the fifth century, but especially in the sixth century, we notice some reluctance to directly represent God as present in the church and the desire to introduce distancing imagery (*e.g.,* San Vitale in Ravenna, Hosios David in Thessalonike). This evolution comes to an end with the introduction of new images in the apses, like the Transfiguration and the image of the *Theotokos.*

In a recent book, T. Mathews raised the issue of the meaning of the images of Christ in early Christian times.[1] I would like to try to question his conclusions, concentrating on the representations of Christ in apses, tracing the development of these images and attempting to understand it. The apsidal representation of Christ was not only one of the hallmarks of early Christian church decoration, it was a focus of both decoration and liturgy.[2] To begin with, therefore, we should review the meaning of this picture. We should then ask whether it is possible to speak of an evolution of the image, to show, that is, that the changes it underwent occurred over the course of time and were not (or not simply) a matter of geographical distribution; and, finally, we should try to find meaning in this evolution. The end of the predominance of this apsidal image in the Byzantine empire can be linked to other innovations in the imaging of Christ and his resurrection, beginning *ca.* 700 as described in a stimulating book by A. Kartsonis.[3]

Some preliminary points should be made. Several facts make this examination especially difficult. First, few apses are left; in the book which remains the starting point for everyone addressing this topic, fifty-nine examples, including preserved apses and others known through more or less accurate descriptions, are listed.[4] This represents, of course, a small proportion of the basilicas and other churches that existed in the early Christian world. Second, I will not take into account every fresco or mosaic found on an apse-shaped vault, but only those which are located in apses related to both an altar and the celebration of the liturgy. This is why I do not mention some apses that are usually cited in connection with this topic. For example, the mosaic with Christ and the apostles in Sant'Aquilino in Milan is usually dated in such a way as to connect it with our problem, but we do not know the function of this chapel. It is certain, however, that the small apse in which this mosaic is preserved was not the apse of a sanctuary where the liturgy was celebrated.[5] As for the small apses of Santa Costanza, neither the date of their original decoration, nor the extent to which they have been restored is sure; and, again, neither apse had anything to do with a sanctuary or an altar.[6]

For different reasons, the preservation of these monuments is not uniform over the late Roman and early Byzantine empire. Italy is by far the most studied region. A fairly large number of decorated apses is to be found in Egypt, but as is well known, the dates of most pictures in the apses of Bawit, for instance, are not yet firmly established.[7] On the other hand, very few early apse decorations are left in the central part of the empire—Constantinople, Asia Minor, the Balkans, including Greece—with one very important exception in Thessalonike (Fig. 7).[8] This distribution is usually said to be a result of iconoclasm. What matters is to know whether the preserved images give an accurate idea of those that once existed in the parts of the empire where they are now lacking. I assume that we may give a positive answer to this question, although the assumption lies beyond feasible demonstration. In a longer paper it would be possible to point to the facts that support this hypothesis. Here I will start with the assertion that, without denying the possibility of local or regional preferences, apse decoration all over the empire played its part in a general evolution, affecting representation and religion, that was uniform in both east and west, more or less until the end of the sixth century.

Key to Figure 1

1. Christ seated
2. Seated apostles
3. Standing Christ
4. Christ seated on globe
5. Standing apostles
6. Saints (but not apostles), donors, bishops, etc.
7. Angels
8. The four *zodia*
9. *Theotokos*
10. Cross
11. Transfiguration
12. Titular saint of the church
13. Bust of Christ
14. Apse with two zones

MONUMENT	DATE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Naples, Severiana	*ca.* 400	■	■												
Milan, Aquilino	toward 400	■	■												
Rome, Pudenziana	*ca.* 400	■	■												
Rome, Sabina	422–432	■	■												
Rome, Giustizia	toward 400	■				■									
Cimitile	400–402										■				
Fundi	400–402										■				
Ravenna, Giovanni Ev	*ca.* 425	■													
Capua Vetere, Maria	*ca.* 430									■					
Ravenna, Bas. Apost.	*ca.* 450					■					■				
Rome, Andrea	470–480				■	■									
Rome, Agata dei Goti	460–470				■	■									
Kartmin, Mar Gabriel	end 5th–beg. 6th c.										■				
Rome, Cosma e Dam.	526–530			■		■	■						■		
Ravenna, Agata	toward 550?	■		■					■						
Ravenna, Michele	545			■				■							
Ravenna, Vitale	toward 540				■		■		■				■		
Thessal., David	toward 540				■		■			■					
Vercelli, Eusebio	*ca.* 550										■				
Ravenna, Apoll. Cl.	toward 550										■	■			
Naples, Salvatoris	*ca.* 550										■				
Mt. Sinai	548–565											■			
Ravenna, Maria Magg.	toward 535						■		■						
Gaza, Sergius	toward 535						■	■							
Poreč	toward 550						■	■		■					
Lythrankomi	*ca.* 550									■					
Kiti	toward 600?							■		■					
Constant., Odalar C.	after 600?							■		■					
Jerusalem, Adam	beg. 7th c.										■				
Rome, Teodoro	590–604				■		■								
Rome, Agnese	625–638												■		
Rome, Stefano Rot.	642–649?										■			■	
Rome, Venanzio	642–650													■	
Rome, Eufemia	*ca.* 688												■		
Rome, Felicità	7th c.?						■							■	
Zromi	7th c.			■		■									
Latmos	7th c.	■						■	■						■
Dodo	7th–8th c.	■						■	■						■

FIGURE 1. *Iconographic analysis of early Christian apse compositions.*

Of course, the evolution of pictures as complex as those found in the apses of early Christian churches cannot be traced as easily as the evolution of an archaeological artifact. Creations in which meaning and symbolic value are more important than practical use may or may not be accepted quickly, and their meaning may or may not be immediately understood. The designer of a decorative program might want to reproduce a traditional picture or even to give new mean-

ing to it. This kind of evolution requires much more than the superficial observation of similarity and dissimilarity.

Using the catalogue established by Christa Ihm, but not her classification, we can make the following observations that are also set out in our table (Fig. 1).[9] The earliest attested apses of around 400, such as that of the Basilica Severiana in Naples (366–412/3) and Santa Pudenziana in Rome (Fig. 2), show Christ sitting amidst his apostles.[10] About a

generation later, while the apse of Santa Sabina in Rome may also have represented Christ sitting among the apostles, it is more likely that it showed the apostles standing around Christ.[11] This iconography had already been used in an older church, the oratory on Monte della Giustizia (below the Stazione Termini) in Rome, possibly dating from the end of the fourth century.[12]

In the first half of the fifth century, Christ seated among the apostles disappeared from apse decorations. Between the middle of the fifth and, roughly, the middle of the sixth century, we find Christ standing; thus in Sant'Andrea Catabarbara in Rome (470–480), where Christ stands on the rock with the four rivers of paradise, surrounded by six apostles,[13] and, later, in SS. Cosma e Damiano (526–530), also in Rome, where he is represented standing amidst clouds.[14] These pictures also have in common that only some of the apostles are represented, no longer all of them. The standing apostles are also found associated with a cross as the main apsidal picture.[15] We can assume that both images, with Christ and with a cross, have the same meaning. With SS. Cosma e Damiano as the first known instance, saints other than the apostles, as well as ordinary people are to be found represented in the apse. In most cases, these "ordinary" people belong to the ecclesiastical hierarchy; usually it is the founder or a donor who is depicted there. In San Michele in Africisco (Ravenna), the standing Christ has two angels at his side, possibly the oldest known representation of angels in an apse picture.[16] Simultaneously, we find apses in which Christ is again seated, clearly represented in a celestial setting, although the location is expressed in what might be called a symbolic manner, in opposition to the apse of Santa Pudenziana, where the celestial Jerusalem is represented in the image of terrestrial Jerusalem (or, at least, as a terrestrial city). San Vitale in Ravenna (Fig. 5) and Hosios David in Thessalonike (Fig. 7) are the best known examples of this program.[17]

We have now reached the middle of the sixth century. By this time, apsidal decoration had become more varied. The *Theotokos* was quite often depicted there. An older, but very isolated, example is Santa Maria in Capua Vetere, usually dated *ca.* 430.[18] But this image did not become customary until such churches as Santa Maria Maggiore in Ravenna, St. Sergius in Gaza and the Basilica Eufrasiana in Poreč.[19] In Poreč the *Theotokos* is accompanied by the same attendants who occur in contemporary pictures of Christ, that is, saints, churchmen and angels. Alongside these new *Theotokos* pictures, we find representations of various forms of the Transfiguration (Sant'Apollinare in Classe, the Ecclesia Salvatoris in Naples, St. Catherine at Mount Sinai), which at first glance look like a kind of variant of the traditional Christ picture.[20]

Before looking at the changes and trying to explain them, we should ask whether it is possible to find some general meaning in these apse pictures. I have shown elsewhere that early Christian pictures of Christ often were used to represent God.[21] This is also one aspect of the thesis put forward by Thomas Mathews, who emphasizes this level of

FIGURE 2. *Rome, Santa Pudenziana, apse mosaic (photo: after Volbach, Early Christian Art).*

meaning against the traditional view, first developed by André Grabar, that the iconography of Christ is to be explained as dependent on imperial iconography.[22] Having set out this thesis and shown in a very interesting way how the promoters of the assimilation of Christ to the emperor—especially Grabar, Ernst Kantorowicz and Andreas Alföldi—reflected their own roots in modern imperial histories, Mathews devotes two chapters to demonstrating that most sarcophagus images, principally the Entry into Jerusalem and the Miracles, have nothing to do with the imperial mystique.[23] It is only in the third chapter, entitled "Larger-than-Life," that he deals with apsidal images. He carefully scrutinizes the one in Santa Pudenziana (Fig. 2), noting a number of details which distinguish representations of Christ from those of emperors: the apostles are represented seated before Christ; he lacks a crown; even when dressed in clothes adorned in gold and purple, the imperial colors *par excellence*, he wears civilian dress and not the military costume in which these colors were used in an imperial context; Christ's throne is clearly the throne of a god and not that of an emperor, which remained essentially the *sella curulis*, still attested in the sixth century.[24]

These arguments seem quite convincing and it is difficult to avoid Mathews's conclusion that emphasis on the divinity of Christ was the prime concern behind these images. But does his position absolutely contradict the older interpretation that Christ is represented as an emperor? Mathews's demonstration has to be corrected or nuanced in two ways. First, we must insist on the fact that the meaning of Christ's image changed during the fourth century. Christ as magician holding his wonder-working rod and Christ as "cosmocrator" do not belong to the same stage of evolution, even though one type of representation did not pass out of use immediately after the other appeared. Second, although these new images of Christ, beginning with the one on the Junius Bassus sarcophagus, express, above all, his divinity, the god who

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is represented from then on is obviously not only a god invested with many powers; he is the almighty God, the sovereign of the cosmos, the *pantocrator*. The task of the Christian artist was to represent Christ not as a Roman emperor but in such a way as to ensure that believers understood his sovereignty, without incurring ambiguity; the spectator had to know whether he stood before a picture of God or one of his terrestrial emperor. This goal could be achieved only through a subtle play of similarities and dissimilarities. Structuralists have taught us to decode such correspondences, even if today it is unfashionable to cite such views. Proceeding in this manner, we can retain all of Mathews's comments on the absence of imperial signs from pictures of Christ, without adhering to all of his conclusions. Christ actually is represented as a sovereign, but in such a way as to avoid confusion with a merely human emperor. It is possible to interpret the Entry into Jerusalem according to this model as well. This scene lacks most of the peculiar features which characterize the Adventus, and some of them are inverted (civilian versus military dress, ass versus horse); as Mathews says, "it is in a pacific, non-imperial guise that Christ is presented to us."[25] But again, this conclusion leaves unexplained those images in which the Entry is clearly associated with a sovereign Christ, as on the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus or on the lintel of Al-Moallaka.[26] Would the Entry have been represented in this context without an intended parallel to the Adventus picture, even if its iconography deliberately stressed the contrasts between the imperial Adventus and Christ's entry into his own city? The homology between God and emperor, that is, the idea that the behavior of a simple human being towards God should be a model for his behavior toward the emperor, is taught and stressed by means of an iconography with imperial connotations. Any human power needs to be legitimated, and the evolution of the late Roman empire led to a model of legitimation in which a unique God justified the power of a unique emperor in a unique empire.[27]

It should by now be accepted that the purpose of Christ's image in the apse was to convince the worshipper that his God was truly present in the sanctuary.[28] The way in which his image made him present in the church, we could say, is not essentially different from the way the statue of a pagan god imposed his presence in his temple. I have described elsewhere some aspects of this point, which I briefly recall here. When we compare what we quite generally call "pagan" with Christian worship, it may be said that one of the important, perhaps the most spectacular, though not often noted innovations was the possibility for the worshipper to be admitted into the presence of his God and of his God's image.[29] This aim was achieved by a hierarchical organization of sacred space.[30] Its climax is the sanctuary with its apse, where the glimmering picture of God dominates the congregation in the nave. The architectural setting, with stoas progressing toward the altar all the way from the lateral porticoes of the atrium, and sometimes even from the porticoes on both sides

of an arcuated street, led the believer to this very image.[31] Moving in the opposite direction, from sanctuary to entrance, the mosaics on the clerestory walls of the great basilicas were like words proceeding from the mouth of God.[32] But this situation is attested only toward the end of the fourth century.

What then about St. Peter's or even St. John Lateran? It seems possible to have some clear idea of the early Christian decoration of the apse in the second of these churches, but it is not possible to date it securely, nor would its probable decoration—the bust of Christ possibly represented above a cross—become a standard subject of apse decoration.[33] Concerning St. Peter's the very abundant literature is linked to another, not yet satisfactorily resolved question, of the so-called "Traditio Legis." Eventually I will try to show that the "Traditio Legis" belonged to the same evolutionary stage as the decor of, for example, Santa Pudenziana (Fig. 2). Whatever decoration, if any, was seen in the apse of St. Peter's at the time of its construction or soon after, cannot be reconstructed by comparison with mosaics belonging to the last third of the century.[34]

It should be considered not merely accidental that we have no secure evidence about apsidal images before the end of the fourth century, as we also have no evidence earlier for great narrative cycles in church decoration.[35] In the case of the apsidal images, we might link the innovation with a major change that occurred in Christian doctrine during the fourth century, caused by the struggle between Arian and non-Arian teaching. To understand its possible impact on visual representations of Christ, we must remember that this debate, like most of the later ones said to oppose orthodoxy and heresy, resulted not from an intentional departure from orthodoxy but from the need to elaborate a point which had remained unexplicated.[36] The relation of such a situation to visual art is complex. Nobody today thinks (or at least no one should think) that developments in the visual arts are only reflections of the evolution of ideology. But when new questions are asked, existing visual production is looked at in a new way, and previously meaningless features may take on new meaning. This dynamic will generate images that respond to new interpretations, or it will lead to the rejection of images no longer congruent with the ideology of the times.

We may assume that for Christians in the time of Constantine and after, people accustomed to representing their gods and to whom beings of composite nature—sometimes more god than man, sometimes less—were familiar, it was easy to admit the representation of Christ, both god and man, without exactly clarifying the relation between the two. But when the controversy between Arians and non-Arians made it necessary to define more precisely the relationship between man and god, and when the definition that was adopted divided people into one or the other of two opposed camps, the problem of representation became acute.[37] It may again be no coincidence that at the same moment, around 400, as a part of a larger issue, debates arose about the possibility of

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representing God, even as a mental image to oneself.[38] The larger controversy began in Jerusalem with an opposition between Jerome on one side and the city's patriarchs, Cyril and his successor John, on the other.[39] The story can be understood at different levels, including as an expression of ecclesiastical politics, as one of the many episodes of the competition between the patriarchs of Jerusalem, Alexandria and Constantinople.[40] We do not need to deal here with this political aspect. The dispute, which concerned the doctrines of Origen, spread to Egypt because of frequent contacts between monks in that country with those of Jerusalem. In one of its aspects, the controversy touched upon the question of representation. In his festal letter of 399, Theophilos, then patriarch of Alexandria, who played an important part and was at first, like John of Jerusalem, an "Origenist," denounced what he called "anthropomorphism," *i.e.*, imagining God as having human form. This attitude provoked strong monastic opposition, as exemplified by the exclamation of an older monk reported by John Cassian: "They took my God away . . . I no longer know whom I should adore."[41] The strength of the monks' reaction may have caused the change in Theophilos's position. After a dramatic dialogue reported by Sozomen and Socrates ("As I see you," he told the monks, "I see the face of God"), in 400 he held a synod in Alexandria at which Origenism was condemned.[42] The few Origenist monks were dispersed and the most famous of them, the so-called Tall Brothers, went to Constantinople. Subsequently the affair became one aspect of the contest between Theophilos and John Chrysostom.[43]

Viewed superficially, this was only a minor issue in a large controversy, which seems to have arisen only in Egypt.[44] The sources, most of them hostile to what was called anthropomorphism, are sometimes confused and do not really let us know if the monks believed merely that they had the right to have mental images of God in human form, or that God really had human characteristics. Not only Origenists, but also their opponents, like Epiphanius or Jerome, who accepted that man kept the image of God even after the Fall, refused the possibility of representing God in human form.

Neither in the sources nor in the secondary literature is a connection drawn between the arguments over anthropomorphism and the representation of God in the form of Christ ("Qui filius diceris et pater inveneris," as was said in an inscription discussed below), or between affirmations of the equality of Father and Son and the new apse and sarcophagus pictures. But the issue throws much light on the utility or the necessity of images. Whether manufactured or existing only in the mind, images are a very efficient means by which to adore a god.[45] This is not the place to discuss the anthropological evidence for such an assertion or to examine its general validity in human cultures; but it can easily be accepted as true of a culture in which images had as long a tradition as they had in the Graeco-Roman world. The necessity of a picture of God was also strongly felt in the Christian church. The obvious contradiction between a God doctrinally held to be
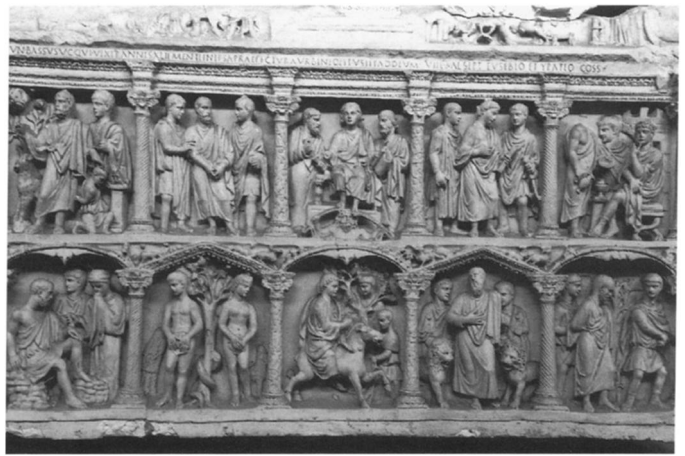

FIGURE 3. *Vatican Museums, Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (photo: author).*

without form and thus not representable, and anthropomorphic pictures of him had to be resolved. This was done in different ways. Images were created which responded to expectations, without, as far as we can know, any corresponding doctrinal discussion of the matter; it even seems that theologians, as we can see from the Origenist controversy, debated about representation without referring to actual representations. Nevertheless, theological discussions using the notion of the incarnation and the prophetic visions of the Old Testament justified such images *a posteriori*:[46] God cannot be reduced to a single form, he cannot be said to have one form, but he can take any form if he wishes to be seen by men. In this way, Christ can be considered as one of the forms taken by God. The visions described in the Old Testament confirm that God could show himself in various guises. If my description is correct, this is a clear example of images developing by their own impetus. Theologians argued on their side, but in an intellectual context which, in the end, allowed pictures and theological development to be linked without causal effects from one to the other.[47]

It may, then, be no coincidence that the last third of the fourth century witnessed the development of images that no longer showed Christ as a mere magician holding his rod in order to perform miracles, as sarcophagus reliefs and catacomb frescoes did earlier. This older iconography can be linked to that of Moses holding his rod, showing that it was the miracle-worker who was represented.[48] The new images instead emphasize his appearance. By this time, representations of Christ were expected to show that the spectator who looks at him, looks at the Father.[49] The earliest preserved and securely dated monument that can be interpreted in this way may be the famous sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, of 359, especially the central part of the upper register (Fig. 3). A young, beardless Christ is represented seated on a bench, surrounded by two apostles and dominating what is usually identified as a personification of the cosmos.[50] The invention and the frequent use in the following years of the scene

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FIGURE 4. *Rome, catacomb of Domitilla, Christ enthroned with SS. Peter and Paul (photo: Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra).*

traditionally called *Traditio Legis* has to be understood as part of this same development. Christ, holding an open scroll sometimes inscribed with the words "Dominus legem dat," is flanked by two apostles whom we can identify as Peter and Paul. The literature on this scene is as abundant as it is contradictory.[51] This is not the right place to discuss the topic, but it is necessary to stress the points on which agreement can be reached. Almost ninety years ago it was clearly demonstrated that what we see is not Christ giving an open scroll to Peter, but Peter raising a scroll that is held by Christ.[52] In an article published more than thirty years ago, Schumacher recalled this interpretation and proposed a meaning for the scene in which, he believed, the words "legem dat" had a technical and legal sense. Therefore, he could assert that Christ is shown promulgating his law. Whatever we may think of this hypothesis and of his other conclusions, Schumacher confirmed that Christ does not give anything to Peter, and that his gesture, with his right hand raised as high as his shoulder or higher, is not a gesture of speech but of power.[53]

The several known variants, found principally on sarcophagi, make it likely that some common, very general meaning underlay all of these representations. These images share certain features which make them basically different from earlier images. In all of the examples Christ is represented in a dominant position. In most cases, he raises his hand in the gesture of power already mentioned. He is standing on the rock from which flow the four rivers of paradise.[54] Palm trees and the phoenix are frequently part of the picture. All of these features lend new value to the image of Christ and are consistent with the affirmation that Christ was not created by God. The same idea, as we have seen, allowed the creation of apse pictures like that in Santa Pudenziana (Fig. 2). The assumption that the image we call Christ actually represents God informs those pictures that had become the principal decoration in church apses around 400, in which the Lord is represented in the midst of his apostles.

Must we raise the question whether such images appeared first in sarcophagi or whether their development can

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be understood only if we accept a prestigious model, a splendid apse, specifically the one in St. Peter's?[55] If my argument is accepted, this question loses its priority. If we agree that these pictures attach a meaning to figures on which it was not possible or necessary to insist before the last forty years of the fourth century, there is no reason to suppose that the image was anticipated thirty, or even twenty years earlier in St. Peter's. If that apse did play a role in the invention and diffusion of the *Traditio Legis*, it should have been not much earlier than or even contemporary with Junius Bassus's sarcophagus. Transposing a usual model of diffusion, I would like to suggest that such an important innovation could have developed first in a more private sphere, and won its place in an official and prominent apse picture only when it had been generally understood and accepted. The presence in a catacomb, that is in a funerary context, of what we may call an intermediary image lends credibility to this supposition. A mosaic showing Christ sitting between the seated figures of Peter and Paul was discovered in the catacomb of Domitilla (Fig. 4).[56] Some features of this mosaic belong to what was then the traditional picture of Christ talking with his apostles, with a bucket full of scrolls in front of him. But other features announce developments to come: the presence of only two apostles may be one of them; Christ's isolation in a mandorla is surely another. The meaning of the mosaic is stated by the inscription which encircles it: "Qui filius diceris et pater inveneris"; in Mathews's translation: "You are said to be the Son and are found to be the Father." The location of the picture in the catacomb suggests that it may have been created in the time of Pope Damasus (366–384). The inscription could be used as a motto for all of the pictures with which we are concerned, but even if, as I already suggested, a straight-line evolution is improbable, it is tempting to suggest a date close to the beginning of their currency, that is, close to the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus. The corresponding image in the middle of the upper register of the sarcophagus could also be called intermediary.

A compromise between the opposed positions, that the so-called *Traditio Legis* was created for St. Peter's and that it was created in the context of funerary art, may be imagined. Images of Christ with a new meaning appeared in funerary art; they were what I have called "intermediary images," like the mosaic in the catacomb of Domitilla, the Junius Bassus sarcophagus, and also the sarcophagus Vatican 174.[57] This new meaning was then expressed in a new image for St. Peter's, the very picture we call "Traditio Legis." The new iconography afterwards found its way back into funerary art, especially sarcophagi. To see the evolution in this way explains why the oldest pictures do not conform to the supposed model. What leaves me unsatisfied in this hypothesis is this: we know that the pictorial program of other parts of St. Peter's had a large influence on later churches;[58] why was this not true of the apse? The *Traditio Legis* is not securely attested in early Christian apses.[59] The question remains whether we can be sure of one in St. Peter's.

FIGURE 5. *Ravenna, San Vitale, apse mosaic, detail (photo: author).*

It is also noteworthy that the physical appearance of Christ differs considerably from one image to the other. The main difference is between a young, beardless Christ and an older, bearded one. The most striking confrontation between the two can be seen on the famous sarcophagus in Sant'Ambrogio in Milan.[60] The same contrast occurred in several later monuments. Can it be explained? We do not know the reasons behind the choice of a particular form in any picture. But I think it is possible to say that whenever we find two different representations of the so-called Christ in one and the same monument, *e.g.*, in the apse (Fig. 5) and on the triumphal arch (Fig. 6) of San Vitale, the author of these pictures asserts that he does not believe he has represented God as he really is; that his pictures represent only appearances assumed by God.

By the middle of the fifth century, the late fourth-century way of representing Christ no longer satisfied the

FIGURE 6. *Ravenna, San Vitale, triumphal arch mosaic, detail (photo: author).*

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FIGURE 7. *Thessalonike, Hosios David, apse mosaic (photo: Hirmer Verlag).*

designers of church decorations. Apses preserved from this period give the impression that no satisfactory solution had been achieved; it is a period when the cross was used quite often,[61] and when the *Theotokos* was first represented in an apse. It was also during this period that Christ was first represented sitting on the globe. It seems to me that this new iconographic feature fundamentally changes the perception of the image; of course it is still the Lord who is represented to believers, but it is no longer possible to see him seated in a space that could be perceived as a continuation of the space in which the believer is standing, as if the real space of the church might be part of heaven. In an image like that in the apse of Santa Pudenziana, nothing in the picture breaks the feeling of continuity with the real space of the church, where the bishop sat among his clergy, immediately below Christ amidst his apostles (Fig. 2). The changes give the believer a new impression; and the gold background, when used, plays its part. But the most striking feature could be that a Christ surrounded by apostles or angels was replaced by a Christ

participating in an image that has, in a way, become a scene; in Hosios David, the picture may be interpreted as the vision of a prophet, who is himself represented (Fig. 7). In SS. Cosma and Damiano, two apostles introduce several saints as well as the founder of the church. The same duty is performed by angels in San Vitale (Fig. 5). Whatever can be said about the meaning of these apses, from a strictly visual point of view this device makes the image of the Lord seem more distant, as if, with time, preference turned to making his presence sensible and to suggesting it rather than representing it realistically. The use of the cross as the principal decoration in some apses conforms to this disinclination to represent God.

This may also be the explanation for the introduction of the theme of the Transfiguration, which also appeared in the middle of the sixth century and did not survive this period. It is no longer the Lord who is represented, but Christ demonstrating his divinity, in an image that introduces another filter between the believer and God. It is no coincidence that the

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most conspicuous instance of this representation is located in the Mount Sinai monastery, although the choice of the scene was not made for this reason alone. I do not mean to say that the Transfiguration was viewed as were later European pictures, as a scene observed from the outside by believers; here again, the golden background closes the pictorial space behind the represented figures, who can be perceived as moving in the same space as the believers.[62] By this means, the congregation is also invited to experience the same feelings and even to behave like the apostles prostrate before Christ.

Without engaging in the debate about the date of the Bawit apses, it is easy to see that the numerous two-zoned apse pictures there belong to the same stage of evolution. The Lord is no longer represented surrounded by the apostles; they are depicted below him, in an obviously subordinate position, while he is shown as the Lord described by the prophets in their visions. The Lord as seen by the prophets became one of the main themes used in apses. The mosaic in Hosios David is a forerunner; its landscape setting and the absence of celestial powers still connect the image with the congregation. But the new form taken by this picture, as at Bawit, clearly shows a mysterious God, well above the terrestrial world.[63] This new picture had a rival, the picture of the *Theotokos*, which also appeared in the middle of the sixth century. In this case, the forerunner is the apse of Santa Maria in Capua Vetere; we then find preserved apses including, besides the ones already mentioned, those at Lythrankomi and Kiti in Cyprus.[64] One of the oldest, in Poreč, is almost a duplicate of the apse of San Vitale. The distribution of the figures is the same, but the enthroned *Theotokos* holding the Child replaces Christ sitting on the globe. This is a new image in an old form.

This expression could lead to a conclusion. When Christians chose to put in the apses of their churches the picture of their God, this was done in what we might agree to call a traditional manner. It was painting rather than sculpture, but this too was not completely new. The God was shown as present without any peculiarities that would make him look other or out of this world. With time, the necessity to suggest greater distance was felt; a new pictorial language had to be invented for a God who was not like his predecessors. The development was completed when the Lord of the prophets' visions and the *Theotokos* came to predominate. The transformation took more than a century, and this time can be considered as the end of a period when forms and conceptions derived from antiquity were used to express Christian belief, then, little by little, were abandoned.

NOTES

1. T. F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods. A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton, 1993).

2. See S. Sinding-Larsen, *Iconography and Ritual. A Study of Analytical Perspectives* (Oslo, 1984), esp. 100–102.

3. A. D. Kartsonis, *Anastasis. The Making of an Image* (Princeton, 1986).

4. C. Ihm, *Die Programme der christlichen Apsismalerei*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden, 1992). This number corresponds to Ihm's main corpus as reprinted from the first edition (1960). She gives as "Zusätze" some more pictures at the end of her book (239–246). These additions do not change the general picture. Except for these pages and additional bibliography (246–250), the pagination remains the same as in the first edition.

5. Ihm, *Programme*, 5–10, 158–159.

6. For Santa Costanza, the standard work remains H. Stern, "Les mosaïques de Sainte-Constance à Rome," *DOP*, XII (1958), 160–218; see now A. A. Amadio, *I mosaici di S. Costanza. Disegni, incisioni e documenti dal XV al XIX secolo* (Rome, 1986). Neither pays attention to the apse mosaics, for which see D. J. Stanley, "The Apse Mosaics at S. Costanza," *Römische Mitteilungen*, XCIV (1987), 29–42, a systematic and well documented attempt to distinguish the restored areas of these mosaics, concluding that they do not belong to the same campaign as the vault mosaics. All of the decoration of S. Costanza may be interpreted, it seems to me, in the context of funerary art; the program of the mosaics is an extended sarcophagus program. For quite new conclusions which raise many discussions, see now D. J. Stanley, "New Discoveries at Santa Costanza," *DOP*, XLVIII (1994), 257–261.

7. See, for instance, P. Van Moorsel, "The Coptic Apse-Composition and its Living Creatures," *Études Nubiennes* (Cairo, 1978), 325–333. For Saqqara, see the studies, especially that of M. Rassart-Debergh, in *Miscellanea Coptica* (Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia, IX) (Rome, 1981). The small apses of Bawit with their paintings are part of monks' cells. I will not raise the question whether the liturgy could have been celebrated in them. The decoration obviously is an imitation of the decoration of churches, so it is possible to use the evidence they give in our discussion.

8. Ihm, *Programme*, has 37 entries for Italy, 1 for Greece, 3 for Constantinople, 2 for Cyprus, 1 for Asia Minor (outside of Constantinople), 2 for Georgia, 3 for Palestine, 5 for Egypt and Sinai (but the "chapels" in the monasteries of Bawit and Saqqara are not each counted as a separate entry), 5 for Syria and Mesopotamia.

9. Ihm, *ibid.*, 5–120, proposes eight main types of apse decoration, most of them subdivided. This breakdown of a group of 59 cannot indicate a clear evolution. There are other weaknesses in her classification. It is necessary to apply a hierarchy of criteria and not to rely on what seems most obvious; for instance, the apse of Sant'Agata dei Goti at Rome is classified with apses in which Christ is shown seated amidst standing apostles. To me it seems more important that Christ is seated on a globe, Sant'Agata being the first instance of this iconography. In the table (Fig. 1), each line represents one apse. Their exact chronological sequence cannot be known, and may not be very important; therefore, I draw attention to large groups that may be considered chronologically equivalent. Each column represents what can be called a criterion of discrimination; the validity of each deserves to be discussed further. It is of course not possible here to examine all of the evidence for each apse, and the data collected by Ihm seem well enough established that the overall picture would not be changed by closer study. Note, however, that she confuses the apse mosaic with a mosaic located over the main door inside the church of Santa Croce in Ravenna: F. W. Deichmann, *Ravenna*, II, pt. 1 (Wiesbaden, 1974), 57; Ihm, 171. When a monument appears only in Fig. 1 and not in the text, I have followed Ihm's description. The table does not include the apse of St. John Lateran, whose date is not surely established.

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10. Ihm, *Programme*, 175–176; for Santa Pudenziana, see O. Feld, "Das Apsismosaik in S. Pudenziana als Bild der Gemeinschaft mit Christus," in *Gemeinsam Kirche sein, Theorie und Praxis der Communio* (Freiburg in Breisgau, 1992), 253–262; F. W. Schlatter, "The Text in the Mosaic of Santa Pudenziana," *Vigiliae Christianae*, XLIII (1989), 155–165; idem, "A Mosaic Interpretation of Jerome, In Hiezechielem," *ibid.*, XLIX (1995), 64–81. For this apse, but also more generally, G. Hellemo, *Adventus Domini* (Leiden, 1989), is important.

11. Ihm, *Programme*, 151–153, Pl. I, 2.

12. *Ibid.*, 15–16 (Fig. 1), 149–150. For this oratorium, see P. Testini, "Osservazioni sull'iconografia del Cristo in trono fra gli apostoli," *RINASA* XI/XII (1963), 230–300. We should also mention S. Giovanni Evangelista at Ravenna which presented, as far as we can tell, a very unusual decoration (twelve books, said to signify the twelve apostles, around the enthroned Christ): *ibid.*, 15, 17, Fig. 2, 169–171; see Deichmann, *Ravenna*, II, pt. 1, 107–124.

13. Ihm, *Programme*, 154–155.

14. *Ibid.*, 137–138.

15. For instance, in Ravenna, but in a *domus* built by Neon and not, as usually stated, in the Basilica Apostolorum (Ihm, *Programme*, 173); F. W. Deichmann, *Ravenna*, II, pt. 2 (Wiesbaden, 1976), 309.

16. Ihm, *Programme*, 161–163; Deichmann, *Ravenna*, II, pt. 2, 39–40. It is important to note that John 14:9 (*qui vidit me vidit et patrem*) and John 10:30 (*ego et pater unum sumus*) are quoted on the codex held by Christ.

17. For San Vitale, Deichmann, *Ravenna*, II, pt. 2, 178–180; for Hosios David, J.-M. Spieser, "Nouvelles remarques sur la mosaïque de l'abside de Osios David à Thessalonique," in *Byzantinè Makedonia* (Thessalonike, 1992), 295–306. Sant'Agata in Ravenna, with Christ seated on a throne between angels, may also belong here; Ihm, *Programme*, 174–175 argues for the middle of the sixth century; Deichmann, *Ravenna*, II, pt. 2, 293 allows a broad dating between the middle of the fifth and the end of the sixth century.

18. D. Korol, "Zum frühchristlichen Apsismosaik der Bischofskirche von 'Capua Vetere' (SS. Stefano e Agata) und zu zwei weiteren Apsisbildern dieser Stadt (S. Pietro in Corpo und S. Maria Maggiore)," in *Bild- und Formensprache der spätantiken Kunst. Hugo Brandenburg zum 65. Geburtstag* (Boreas. Münstersche Beiträge zur Archäologie, XVII), ed. M. Jordan-Ruwe and U. Real (Münster, 1994), 121–148.

19. Ravenna, Santa Maria Maggiore: Deichmann, *Ravenna*, II, pt. 2, 343–348; Gaza, St. Sergius: Ihm, *Programme*, 193–194 (for a translation of the text of Choricius, see C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire* [rpt. Toronto, 1986], 60–68); Poreč, Basilica Eufrasiana: Ihm, *Programme*, 167–169. For Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, see Brenk, *S. Maria Maggiore*, 3–4; a representation of the Virgin in its apse is widely accepted, but actually not demonstrated, as recognized by U. Nilgen, "Maria Regina. Ein politisches Kultbildtypus?" *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, XIX (1981), 16–19.

20. Ravenna, Sant'Apollinare in Classe: Deichmann, *Ravenna*, II, pt. 2, 245–272; Naples, Ecclesia Salvatoris: Ihm, *Programme*, 176–177; Mount Sinai, St. Catherine: *ibid.*, 195–197.

21. Spieser, "Nouvelles remarques," 295–296. F. Boespflug, "'Du Père au Fils ne voit nulle différence.' A propos du christomorphisme de la représentation de Dieu à la Renaissance," in A. Girard and D. Le Blevec, *Les Chartreux et l'art, XIVe–XVIIIe siècle*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1989), 332, makes general remarks about this question for the first millennium; see also F. Boespflug and Y. Zaluska, "Le dogme trinitaire et l'essor de son iconographie en Occident," *CCM*, XXXVII (1994), 181–240.

22. A. Grabar, *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin* (Strasbourg, 1936, rpt. London, 1971).

23. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 12–22, 23–92.

24. *Ibid.*, 93–109. But see, for instance, a mid-fourth-century Roman medallion representing an emperor seated on a throne: A. Grabar, *Le premier art chrétien* (Paris, 1966), 197, Fig. 213. See also the polemical review of Mathews's book by J. G. Deckers, *BZ*, LXXXIX (1996), 478–488, esp. 483 and n. 22.

25. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 38.

26. The lintel is definitely dated to 735 by L. MacCoull, "Redating the Inscription of Al-Moallaqa," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, LXIV (1986), 230–244; confirmed by J.-L. Fournet, "L'inscription grecque de l'église Al-Mu'allaqa. Quelques corrections," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale*, XCIII (1993), 237–244 (with excellent photographs); see also J.-M. Spieser, "A propos du linteau d'Al-Moallaqa," in *Orbis Romanus Christianusque (Mélanges N. Duval)* (Paris, 1995), 311–319.

27. This homology was partly seen by Grabar, *L'empereur*, 98–106, but he did not insist on it and did not clearly present his evidence for this idea.

28. For nuances in this meaning, that is whether these representations allude to the eternal kingdom of God—which I think is the right explanation—or if they represent (also) the second coming of the Lord, see J. Engemann, "Auf die Parusie Christi hinweisende Darstellungen in der frühchristlichen Kunst," *JAC*, XIX (1976), 139–156 (the title makes Engemann's position clear). This article refers to previous literature on the issue, especially the work of Y. Christe, who does not agree with Engemann's conclusions. For a valuable theological reflection about the relation, as elaborated in the first centuries of Christianity, between eschatology and liturgy and eschatology and the Eucharist, and the very central position of this relation for the development of Christian cult, see D. E. Aune, *The Cultic Setting in Early Christianity* (Leiden, 1972), esp. 16–18.

29. J.-M. Spieser, in *La storia dell'alto medioevo italiano (VI–X secolo) alla luce dell'archeologia*, ed. R. Francovich and G. Noyé (Florence, 1994), 738–739.

30. *Idem*, "Portes, limites et organisation de l'espace dans les églises paléochrétiennes," *Klio*, LXXVII (1995), 433–445.

31. For the description of such a setting in St. Peter's at Rome, see A. Arbeiter, *Alt-Sankt-Peter in Geschichte und Wissenschaft* (Berlin, 1988), where the goal of the architectural composition was not the sanctuary but the tomb of the apostle. In early Christian ekphraseis the word "stoa" is used also for the aisles of churches.

32. Spieser, "Portes limites." Roman examples are cited by H. Kessler, "Pictures as Scriptures in Fifth-Century Churches," *Studia Artium Orientalis et Occidentalis*, II (1985), 17–31; see also Brenk, *Die frühchristlichen Mosaiken in S. Maria Maggiore zu Rome* (Wiesbaden, 1975); Deichmann, *Ravenna*, II, pt. 1, 155–157.

33. Y. Christe, "A propos du décor absidal de Saint-Jean Latran à Rome," *CA*, XX (1970), 197–206; R. Warland, *Das Brustbild Christi* (Römische Quartalschrift, Sonderband XLI) (Fribourg, 1986), 31–41.

34. J. G. Deckers, "Konstantin und Christus. Der Kaiserkult und die Entstehung des monumentalen Christusbildes in der Apsis," in *Costantino il Grande*, ed. G. Bonamente and F. Fusco, I (Macerata, 1992), 357–362, still supposes that the apse of St. Peter's already contained a representation of the *Traditio Legis* in the second quarter of the fourth century and was the source of the small apses in Santa Costanza.

35. See H. L. Kessler, "Caput et speculum omnium ecclesiarum: Old St. Peter's and Church Decoration in Medieval Latium," in *Italian*

Church Decoration of the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance, ed. W. Tronzo (Villa Spelman Colloquia, I) (Bologna, 1989), 119–146.

36. This process is very well described in J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago, 1971).

37. It is sometimes difficult for a twentieth-century Christian to be fully aware that even the most fundamental concepts of Christianity have had to develop, and only gradually could some of those concepts be expressed in words that were no longer those of the traditional world. A very deep insight into this problem is given by C. Mango, "Constantine's Mausoleum and the Translation of Relics," *BZ*, LXXXIII (1990), 51–62, who shows how the Christianity of Constantine was not that of his successors. Constantine also thought of his relationship to Christ in a very traditional way, trying to be identified with this new god. For the development of a Christian rhetoric, see A. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Berkeley, 1991).

38. See now E. A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy. The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, 1992); the author is fully aware of the importance of this debate for the status of representation (see her introduction). The older bibliography is to be found there; especially useful remain E. D. Hunt, "Palladius of Helenopolis: A Party and its Supporters in the Church of the Late Fourth Century," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. XXIV (1973), 456–481 and D. J. Chitty, *The Desert as a City* (Crestwood, 1966).

39. Hunt, "Palladius of Helenopolis"; Chitty, *The Desert*, 46–61.

40. For the various ways and levels of reading the Origenist controversy, see especially Clark, *Origenist Controversy*, 3–10.

41. Cassianus, *Collationes*, X, 3 (Sources Chrétiennes, LIV) (Paris, 1958), 76–77.

42. Socrates, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. G. C. Hansen (Griechische Christliche Schriftsteller, n. F. I) (Berlin, 1995), VI, 7; Sozomenos, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. J. Bidez and G. C. Hansen (Griechische Christliche Schriftsteller, n. F. IV) (Berlin, 1995), VIII, 11.

43. See K. G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1989), 73 and n. 100.

44. Clark, *Origenist Controversy*, links it with the specific context of Egyptian idolatry.

45. It is striking to find in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (I, pt. 2 [Paris, 1931], 1367–1370), s.v. "anthropomorphisme" (A. Chollet) the same conclusion that anthropomorphic representations of God "[évitent] que l'homme, s'il restait trop longtemps sans rencontrer la divinité, ne tombât totalement dans le marasme spirituel."

46. A. Grabar, *Martyrium. Recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art chrétien antique*, II (Paris, 1946), 129–234, has already accorded much importance to the issue of theophany and visions of the prophets.

47. We can notice the same process in Finney's description of the Christians and their relation to art in the third century: P. C. Finney, *The Invisible God. The Earliest Christians on Art* (New York, 1994), 290–293.

48. For Christ as a magician and relations to images of Moses and Daniel, see Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 54–91. Mathews points to the reluctance of Catholic historians to use the word "magic" in connection with the miracles of Christ, which surely prevented the topic from being fully explored. In opposition to Mathews, I would say that these images are non-imperial, not, as he has it, anti-imperial.

49. John 14:9.

50. See E. S. Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* (Princeton, 1990), which does not fully supersede F. Gerke, *Der Sarkophag von Junius Bassus* (Berlin, 1936).

51. A brief survey of this topic is given by J. Engemann, "Gesetzübergabe," in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, IV, pt. 7 (1988), 1391–1392, but he does not challenge the traditional interpretation. K. Berger, "Der traditionsgeschichtliche Ursprung der 'Traditio Legis'," *Vigiliae Christianae*, XXVII (1973), 104–122, deserves to be added to the literature quoted by Engemann. See also below, n. 53.

52. T. Birt, *Die Buchrolle in der Kunst* (Leipzig, 1907). See, for some preliminary remarks, J.-M. Spieser, "Les portes de Sainte-Sabine de Rome," *Journal des Savants* (1991), 47–81, esp. 63–69.

53. W. N. Schumacher, "Dominus legem dat," *Römische Quartalschrift*, LIV (1959), 1–39. This argument seems to be not yet generally accepted. See, for instance, C. Pietri, *Roma christiana* (Rome, 1976), 1413–1442; and Engemann, "Gesetzübergabe."

54. For the reasons why I prefer to speak of a rock instead of the more usual "mountain of paradise," see Spieser, "Nouvelles remarques," 300.

55. In an article which is the continuation of the one cited in n. 53, Schumacher tried to demonstrate the dependence of all *Traditio Legis* pictures on the decoration of the apse of St. Peter's, which he attributed to the second quarter of the fourth century: W. N. Schumacher, "Eine römische Apsiskomposition," *Römische Quartalschrift*, LIV (1959), 137–202. The same filiation was accepted by T. Buddensieg, "Le coffret en ivoire de Pola, Saint-Pierre et le Latran," *CA*, X (1959), 157–200 and by C. Davis-Weyer, "Das Traditio-Legis-Bild und seine Nachfolge," *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, s. 3, XVII (1961), 7–45, but with a date for the apse in the second half of the century.

56. See Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 118 and 122, Fig. 92; A. Ferrua, "'Qui filius diceris et pater inveneris,' mosaico novellamente scoperto nella catacomba di S. Domitilla," *Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia, Rendiconti*, XXXIII (1960–1961), 209–224.

57. For the sarcophagus Vat. 174, see *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage*, I, *Rom und Ostia*, ed. F. W. Deichmann (Wiesbaden, 1967), No. 677, pp. 274–277, and Pl. 106.

58. Kessler, "Caput et speculum."

59. See Ihm, *Programme*, 33–39.

60. See J.-P. Caillet, *La vie d'éternité* (Paris, 1990), 97, Fig. 85 and 102, Fig. 92.

61. For some remarks about the use of the cross in apses, see Korol, "Zum frühchristlichen Apsismosaik," 141.

62. On this fundamental device of Byzantine painting, see O. Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration* (London, 1948), 9–10. For St. Catherine, see J. Miziolek, "'Transfiguratio Domini' in the Apse of Mount Sinai and the Symbolism of Light," *JWCI*, LIII (1990), 42–60; and the pages devoted to this mosaic in J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer* (Cambridge, 1995), 99–123.

63. See above, n. 7. This image, also known in Asia Minor in a Latmos cave, should be considered a predecessor of the iconography found in some Cappadocian churches of the late ninth or tenth century: M. Restle, *Die byzantinische Wandmalerei in Kleinasien* (Recklinghausen, 1967), III, Pl. 542.

64. See A. and J. Stylianou, *The Painted Churches of Cyprus* (London, 1985), 43–51; A. H. S. Megaw and E. J. W. Hawkins, *The Church of Panagia Kanakaria at Lythrankomi in Cyprus, its Mosaics and Frescoes* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies, XIV) (Washington, 1977).