Marco D'Attanasio

The 'Renouveau Paléochrétien' at the Periphery of the Holy See: Two Examples in Ascoli Piceno

The medieval appearance of St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican is nowadays known thanks to the *Instrumenta autentica* written in 1605 by Giacomo Grimaldi and supported by watercolour sketches made by Domenico Tasselli [16]. It shows the surviving pictorial program — commissioned by Pope St. Leo the Great in the middle of the 5th century — that decorated the walls of the nave: in the clerestory windows, there are painted prophets; in the central register, in two bands, there is a New Testament cycle on the left and an Old Testament cycle on the right with scenes divided by an architectural frame made of little columns and architraves; in the bottom, there are two rows of clipeate portraits of the Popes[1].

Pope St. Leo the Great patronised a similar pictorial program in St. Paul's outside the walls, where the New Testament scenes were replaced by stories from the life of St. Paul [36, pp. 372–374].

This last cycle was destroyed in 1823 by fire, but it is abundantly documented both by the watercolours commissioned by Francesco Barberini[2] and by other sources[3]. The drawings prove that the architectural framework in St. Paul's was in stucco; hence, it is possible that it was made of the same material in St. Peter's as well [17, pp. 123–124].

The cycles painted in the two basilicas immediately became the source of iconographic inspiration, as shown by different decorations: the frescoes in the Neon's triclinium, the mosaics in the Oratory of Pope John VII in the Vatican Basilica and the Carolingian painted cycle in St. John's in Müstair [19, p. 51; 20, p. 458].

The reference to a pictorial model from the Early Christian Age and the use of an antiquarian decorative vocabulary was a common pictorial language in Rome and in the Latium in the second half of the 11th and in the following century. Art became the way to express the specific

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[1]   During the early years of the 17th century most of the two walls were already destroyed. Based both on visual and documentary witnesses, we can determine that on the right wall only twenty-two episodes of the Old Testament cycle were preserved — some of the histories of Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Moses — whereas on the opposite wall there were: the Baptism of Christ, the Raising of Lazarus, the Crucifixion, the Harrowing of Hell and two scenes with the Apparition of Christ to the Apostles [35, p. 411; 38, pp. 69–71].

[2]   Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV), Barb. lat. 4406, ff. 23–128 [38, pp. 55–64].

[3]   Among the figurative testimonies, description and bibliographic sources the following are important to remember: the drawing by Jean Baptiste Seroux d'Agincourt (BAV, Vat. lat. 9843, f. 4r), the longitudinal section of the nave made by Andrea Alippi in the work of Nicola Maria Nicolai *Della Basilica di S. Paolo, opera di Niccola Maria Nicolai romano votante della segnatura di grazia con piante, e disegni incisi*, plate II, and the plates 99, 100 and 101 in the work of Luigi Rossini *Le antichità romane ossia raccolta delle più interessanti vedute di Roma antica* published in 1823 that document the situation of the Basilica after the burning [36, p. 378].

meaning typical of the Gregorian Reform: the revival of the Christian roots starting the figurative tendency known as *Renouveau Paléochrétien,* as Hélène Toubert called it [21; 29; 33].

The cycles in St. Peter's and St. Paul's became a privileged source of inspiration: both in the iconography, with scenes of the New and Old Testament juxtaposed on the wall, and in the decoration that is the columnar frames around the episodes.

It is possible to recognize this tendency in Rome in frescoes of Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella, in the lower basilica of San Crisogono, in San Benedetto in Piscinula, and in the basements of the *Sancta Sanctorum*. The same compositional solutions were also used in painted cycles outside of Rome: in Santa Maria Immacolata in Ceri, in Santa Maria Montis Domini in Marcellina, in San Pietro in Valle in Ferentillo, and in the St. Thomas Becket oratory in the Cathedral of Anagni. In these cases, it is evident that art is involved in a markedly symbolic operation: to show the political and cultural dependency from the Holy See [13; 17, pp. 126–132; 19, pp. 55–62; 20, pp. 460–468; 18; 28, pp. 138–145; 34, pp. 362–363].

I would like to introduce two less-known painted cycles in Ascoli Piceno, one of the most important cities of the March of Ancona, the territory in the periphery of the Holy See that overlooks the Adriatic Sea.

The city of Ascoli Piceno is located in the area of the March of Ancona, the area which Popes and emperors vied for. In the Langobardic period, it was part of the Duchy of Spoleto, an Umbrian territory, but following the conquest of Charlemagne, the Spoletini preferred to be subjected to the Pope. The Frankish emperor accepted this decision and assigned the March to the Holy See. However, the donation remained a purely formal act, and in the following centuries Popes and emperors continued to claim these territories [5; 14, pp. 112–114]. Popes could actually affirm their domination on the Marca Anconitana only in the second half of the 13th century, after the defeat of Manfred at Benevento in 1266 and the consequent domination of the Angevins in the south of Italy[4].

Popes and emperors granted several privileges to obtain the loyalty of the towns of the March of Ancona, and Ascoli Piceno was one of the most contested, because it was the capital of homonym countship and the Episcopal See [2, pp. 49–187; 27]. The town repeatedly showed its belonging to the Holy See, as the frescoes that I will show you prove.

The first cycle that I want to analyse is that in Saint Hilarius, a small church outside the walls of Ascoli, probably already existing in the 11th century but documented for the first time in 1137, when the Bishop of Ascoli assigned it to the Hermitage of Fonte Avellana[5].

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[4]   Summarizing quickly the events, the territories of the Italian peninsula — and among these that of the Marches — were inherited by the emperors of different dynasties which succeeded to the lead of the Holy Roman Empire: Carolingian, Ottonian, Salian and Hohenstaufen. However, the popes continued to affirm that the Marches were part of the Holy See; they tried to face the power of the emperors, especially when, with Frederick II, the territories of the *Patrimonium Petri* were enclosed by imperial properties both on North and on South of the peninsula. In order to eliminate definitely the threat of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, in 1264 Pope Urban IV became allied with Charles of Anjou, promising him the Sicilian thrones. In 1266, after the defeat of Manfred by Charles, every imperial resistance collapsed and finally no one was able to affirm his power on the Marches except the pope [39, pp. 173–175].

[5]   In the *Passio Sancti Emigdii* written at the end of the 10th or at the beginning of the 11th century, it is recorded that Saint Emygdius, after his beheading, took his head and went "*usque ad montem coenobitarum*". This place is identified with the location of the church of Saint Hilarius and the reference to a cenobitic community can be related to the monastery annexed to the church [4, p. 80]. The assignment to Fonte Avellana

The church has a Latin cross plan, which is the result of two different construction phases: the nave was a part of the original building of the 11th century, whereas the transept was added in 1165 [4, p. 83], as it is possible to read in the inscription on a stone[6].

The frescoes are now preserved only on the right wall, and they are distributed on two registers (Ill. 88); probably in the past there was another upper register, but it was destroyed in the 19th century, when an additional floor was built in the church [4, p. 83].

Today only five episodes have been preserved: four from Christological cycle and one that represents the Martyrdom of Saint Hilarius.

The story begins with the episode on the upper tier on the left representing Christ waking up the Apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane[7] (Ill. 89). Following this, there is the Kiss of Judas, and in the lower tier, there are the Martyrdom of Saint Hilarius[8] and two scenes from the Passion of Christ: the Deposition from the Cross and the Entombment of Christ.

Other episodes could have been painted on the same wall, and, considering the vacant space, it is possible that there was only the Gospel cycle painted on that wall, whereas the Old Testament cycle probably was on the opposing wall.

Plausibly, the lost episode of the life of Christ before the Deposition from the Cross was the Crucifixion. This explains why the Martyrdom of Saint Hilarius is painted between these two scenes: the intention was to create a typological parallelism between the supreme sacrifice of the Son of God and the sacrifice of the dedicatory Saint of the church.

Unfortunately, there are no particular documents that can provide further details on the realization of these frescoes[9], so we must resort to stylistic analysis: this shows a two-dimensional space, a restricted colour range — although very intense — the absence of chiaroscuro, the predominance of a graphic technique to realize draperies, bodies, and faces. It is now necessary to find a similar figurative background to position the Ascoli paintings. We can propose

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was confirmed later by Pope Innocent II (1139), Gregory VIII (1187), Celestine III (1196) and Innocent III (1202) [25, pp. 399–401, 408; 26, pp. 232, 313, 378].

[6]   The inscription says: HOC OPVUS E(st) FACTV(m) POST PARTVM VIRGINIS ANNO QVINTO MILLENO DECIMO BIS TER(que) TRICENO [31, pp. 89–90].

[7]   So far this episode has been identified as Nativity [4, p. 86]. I disagree with Furio Cappelli and my identification proposed here is further confirmed by the inscription under the scene that says: [illi]S AIT CRISTUS SUR[gite].

[8]   Unfortunately, it is impossible to identify precisely to which Saint Hilarius the martyrdom scene is referred. For sure he is not the famous Bishop of Poitiers because he did not die as a martyr. There are some other martyrs bearing the name of Hilarius: the Bishop of Aquileia, Hilary of Bremur, Hilary of Viterbo and Hilarion of Espalion. But none of them matches the painted episode, where the saint is not dressed as a bishop and is martyred with other two companions. Furio Cappelli has suggested that the scene is similar to the Byzantine menologies, where in a miniature plural saints commemorated in the same month are painted. Probably the episode of Martyrdom can be related to the painted inscription next to it where different saints are recorded. The inscription says: ✠ IIII K(a)L(endas) FEBR(uarii). DEDICATIQ BEATI YLARII MAR(tiris) ET YLARIY CONFESSOR<is> ẸT GILỊỊ ET NICOLAI ET VALERII EP(iscop)I ET SAVINA VIR(ginis) ET OMNIUM S(an)C(t)ORU(m) IN DEDICATIO<ne> EORU(n)DE<m> CONFIRMAVIT PONTIFEX [4, pp. 86–87].

[9]   Furio Cappelli tried to find a connection between the painted inscription and the realization of the frescoes. According to him, the epigraph can be related to the confirmations of the church of Saint Hilarius to Fonte Avellana, either that made by Pope Gregory VIII in 1187 or that by Celestine III in 1196 [4, p. 87]. In my opinion, the inscription reports only the confirmation of the dedication of the church, and there is no correlation with the papal confirmation to the belonging of Fonte Avellana.

a comparison with the Gospel cycle in the crypt of Saints Isacco and Marziale in the Church of Sant'Ansano in Spoleto (Ill. 90). These frescoes date back to the first half of the 12th century, or even earlier [6]. Even though the paintings in Spoleto precede those in Ascoli, the memory of the pictorial manner of Spoleto is still intense in Saint Hilarius. The connection with the Umbrian town appears even more convincing when we consider that Spoleto is not only near Ascoli from a geographical point of view, but that it was also the capital of the homonym duchy, on which the March of Ancona still depended in the 12th century.

The painting in Spoleto was not the only model, because the frescoes undoubtedly also recall the Roman context of the Gregorian Reform, as the decorative system which frames the episodes shows us.

The tiers are divided horizontally by a yellow architrave decorated in the front with an egg-and-dart motif. There is a blue stripe between the two mouldings, where there was an inscription. The architraves are sustained by solomonic columns, overlapping a red stripe.

The painted gallery in Ascoli is very close to the *exempla* of San Crisogono in Rome, Marcellina and Ferentillo. Nonetheless, it is partially different, because it replaces the central line of dentils with an inscription, a change that destabilizes the architectural sense of decoration.

I consider the message that the frescoes convey more important than the formal comparison: the paintings, using Roman decorative system from the Early Christian age, prove their dependency on Rome both artistically and politically.

There is another element that joins the cycle in Ascoli with the Roman prototype: the way the paintings are arranged on the wall. The story starts from the apse and goes toward the facing wall. This was the Roman Early Christian codification, and in the 12th century it was possible to find it only in St. Hilarius and in San Pietro in Valle in Ferentillo [18, p. 93].

It is possible to find a stylistic comparison with a Roman painted cycle: some of the clipeate Patriarchs in the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem commissioned by Pope Lucius II (1144–1145) [7].

The Roman figures seem to have left a remote echo in the operative atelier in Ascoli[10], where the model was submitted to a graphic process which decreases its monumental nature.

The proposed comparisons with Spoleto and Rome lead us to a dating not so far away from these two references.

Considering both the way the cycle is arranged on the wall and the existing gaps, I believe with no doubt that frescoes were connected with the construction of the transept in 1165.

The few missing episodes between the Kiss of Judas in the upper tier and the Deposition from the Cross in the lower tier suggest that the entire Gospel cycle had to be painted when the transept had already been present, and the latter represented for the pictorial cycle an interruption before the presbytery.

The construction of a transept built in order to make the church more majestic was an important work of renovation. It is possible that the church underwent a period of prosperity and could afford a painted cycle to seal the end of the works. Based on these data and on the

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[10]   A comparison is possible between the Patriarch Arfaxad and Peter sleeping in the Garden of the Gethsemane.

formal arguments, I believe that it is possible to date the frescoes to the year 1165 indicated in the stone inscription[11]; probably in the very same decade or a few years later.

It is, furthermore, possible to connect to the same Roman roots, but with a later dating, the fragmentary frescoes in Sant'Angelo Magno in Ascoli Piceno, the seat of a female Benedictine community and one of the most powerful ecclesiastical institutions in town[12].

The only medieval painted decorations preserved in the lateral walls of the presbytery attic are now hidden by the ceilings built in the second half of the 15th century[13].

The frescoes represent the Prophets with their names inscribed within niches: on the right wall, there are Sophonias, Nahum, Amos and Jeremiah (Ill. 91); on the opposite wall, there are Hosea, Joel, Ezekiel, and Daniel (Ill. 92). Everyone is easily identifiable, because the names are written in elegant capitals next to them [31, pp. 72–77].

Most likely, the painted decoration had a lower tier, and it has been reasonably supposed that a New and Old Testament cycle had to be painted there, considering the concordance with the decoration of San Peter's Basilica and St. Paul's outside the walls [1, p. 164; 3, p. 22].

Compared with the frescoes in St. Hilarius, the plastic and monumental anatomies, and the balanced connection between figures and space, let us suppose a later dating[14].

Let's examine deeply the cultural influence of these frescoes. The links with Rome appear clearly, as the reference to the Prophets painted in the clerestory windows in the Early Christian Basilica suggests.

This is an ideological reference that could be easily positioned in the *renouveau paléochrétien*; but not only the iconography and composing themes are linked to Rome, the formal aspects seem to drive to the same conclusion too.

I want to propose a comparison with some parts of the painted cycle in San Giovanni a Porta Latina achieved in the end of the 12th century (Ill. 93) [37].

Unfortunately, these frescoes were very badly preserved, so it is better to use the photographic documentation that precedes the restoration works realized in the 1930s[15].

The Elders of the Apocalypse painted in the choirs are similar to the Prophets in many ways: in the physiognomy, or in the way the paint layer is applied; the latter is characterized by a compact background on which graphic lines are traced (Ill. 93–94).

These parallelisms demonstrate how both cycles were a part of the same figurative culture, probably occurring at the same time in two different geographic areas or, as I think more persuasive, in Rome before Ascoli Piceno.

Therefore, Prophets are formally and ideologically very close to the *Urbe*, and in continuation with the figurative production expressed in St. Hilarius.

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[11]   The same conclusion has been proposed by Daniela Ferriani [9, p. 63].

[12]   In 1239 Pope Gregory IX granted that the Benedictines could pass to the Order of St. Damian [15, p. 365].

[13]   In 1460 Pope Pius II ordered the Poor Clares who lived in the monastery to move to Santa Maria delle Donne; the Olivetans took place in Sant'Angelo Magno and they commissioned the restoration of the church. In 1469 the timber roof truss was substituted with a new ceiling with groin vault [8, p. 64; 23, p. 24].

[14]   There is no concordance among the art historians on the chronology of the paintings up to date. It has been proposed that the frescoes could date back either to the second half of the 12th century [1, pp. 162–165; 3, pp. 42–46; 4, pp. 77–79; 12, pp. 14–15; 22, p. 195; 23, pp. 14–15; 28, pp. 202–203] or to the first half of the 13th century [9; 32, pp. 378–379].

[15]   For photographic reproductions before the restoration works see [37, pp. 368–369, figg. 24–26].

Sant'Angelo Magno and San Giovanni a Porta Latina have another point in common: both of them are seats of Benedictine community, and it seems that the spread of typological Old and New Testament cycles between 12th and 13th century could be related to that [37, p. 370]. Unfortunately, in Ascoli Piceno the Testament cycle is not preserved, so this must remain just a supposition.

The frescoes of Sant'Angelo Magno, just like those in San Giovanni a Porta Latina, could be dated to the end of the 12th century, and documents seem to confirm that. This was a very lucky period for Sant'Angelo Magno: in July 1187, the Emperor Henry VI took the monastery under his protection [10, pp. 128–132], and, more importantly for our reasoning, on June the 11th of 1199, Pope Innocent III granted the apostolic protection to the abbess Marsebilia and her sisters [11, p. 75].

Certainly, the bulla by Innocence III does not indicate a sure reference *ad annum*, but it allows us to propose a similar dating.

The two examined cases, little known to the specialists, are an important piece of figurative culture of the second half of 12th century. In fact, they emphasize the force of the Roman model which is capable to impose itself not only in time, with the recalls after several decades, but also in space, sealing through art the political authority of Rome.

Author. Marco D'Attanasio — Ph. D. University "G. d'Annunzio" Chieti-Pescara, Via dei Vestini 31, 66100 Chieti (CH), Italy. marco.dattanasio@gmail.com
Abstract: Pope St. Leo the Great (440–461) commissioned the painted decoration of St. Peter's Basilica and St. Paul's Outside the Walls with a New and Old Testament cycle on the walls of the nave and Prophets on the clerestory. These paintings became a reference model over the coming centuries, especially between the 12th and 13th centuries during the Gregorian Reform, thus starting the figurative tendency known as *Renouveau Paléochrétien*; that system of images was imitated in many churches in Rome as well as in the dependent territories of the Holy See and art became the privileged way to spread a specific meaning: the cultural and political belonging to the Holy See.

At the eastern end of the *Patrimonium Petri*, there was the March of Ancona, a region that Popes and emperors vied for since the assignment by Charlemagne to Pope Adrian I. One of the most important towns of the March of Ancona was Ascoli Piceno, where there are only a few frescoes dating back to the second half of the 12th century: the fragmentary New Testament cycle in Sant'Ilario and the Prophets in Sant'Angelo Magno. Both those frescoes recall the iconography of St. Leo's painted cycles in Rome and reproduce the formal point of view that can be found in Rome: the painted architectonic frame that separates the episodes of the Passion of Christ is a poor translation of the frame in stucco present in the painted cycle in St. Paul's and probably in St. Peter's Basilica, whereas the Prophets in Sant'Angelo Magno are stylistically similar to the Elders of the Apocalypse painted in the presbytery of the Roman church of San Giovanni a Porta Latina.

Therefore, it is possible to recognize in both painted cycles the two important cases of *Renouveau Paléochrétien*, and interpret them as figurative evidence of the way in which Rome was capable to exercise its power also in its peripheral domains.

Keywords: *Renouveau Paléochrétien*; Sant'Angelo Magno in Ascoli Piceno; Sant'Ilario in Ascoli Piceno; Rome; paintings; March of Ancona; New Testament cycle; Prophets.

Сведения об авторе. Д'Аттаназио Марко — Ph. D., ассистент. Университет имени Габриэле Д'Аннунцио, ул. Вестини, 31, Киети, Италия, 66100. marco.dattanasio@gmail.com
Аннотация. Папа Лев Великий (440–461) выступил заказчиком фресок римских базилик Св. Петра и Св. Павла за городскими стенами — новозаветного и ветхозаветного циклов на стенах нефа и фигур пророков в клеристории. В последующие столетия к этим образцам нередко обращались, особенно в XII–XIII вв., во время григорианской реформы. Эти сюжеты повторялись во многих церквях в Риме и на зависимых от него территориях, причем обращение к живописным образцам раннехристианско-

го времени стало особым символическим актом, свидетельствовавшим о культурной и политической принадлежности Святому Престолу (явление, получившее название *Renouveau Paléochrétien*).

На востоке Патримониума св. Петра находилась Анконская марка — регион, где папы и императоры соперничали за власть со времени передачи его Карлом Великим папе Адриану I.

Одним из важнейших городов Анконской марки был Асколи Пичено, где до наших дней дошли лишь несколько фресок, относящихся ко второй половине XII в.: фрагментарно сохранившийся новозаветный цикл в церкви Сант-Иларио и изображения пророков в церкви Сант-Анджело-Маньо. Оба повторяют иконографию римских циклов эпохи папы Льва Великого и воспроизводят их формальные черты. Живописная рама, обрамляющая эпизоды Страстей Христовых, — это скромное повторение рамы из стука в базилике Св. Павла и, возможно, в базилике Св. Петра, в то время как пророки из церкви Сант-Анджело-Маньо стилистически сходны со старцами Апокалипсиса, изображенными в пресбитерии римской церкви Сан-Джованни-а-Порта-Латина.

Таким образом, в обоих живописных циклах можно распознать проявления *Renouveau Paléochrétien* — одного из способов, какими Рим мог демонстрировать свою власть на периферийных территориях.

Ключевые слова: *Renouveau Paléochrétien*; Сант-Анджело-Маньо в Асколи Пичено; Сант-Иларио в Асколи Пичено; Рим; фрески; Анконская марка; новозаветный цикл; пророк.

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