

THE FRESCO CYCLE IN THE LOMBARD  
CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA DI CASTELSEPRIO

by

HELENE-MARIE PAULINE GOULET  
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We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

  
John L Osborne, PhD

  
John P Oleson, PhD

  
S Anthony Welch, PhD

  
Gregory P Andrachuk, PhD

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University of Victoria

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## ABSTRACT

The church of Santa Maria outside the walls of the ruined town of Castelseprio has been the focus of a controversy since its discovery in 1944. Its architecture and most importantly its fresco cycle in the east apse deserve a lot of attention in the study of early medieval art. The monument's date and origin are still debated, and many theories have been proposed, but the lack of documentary evidence has not allowed to determine any conclusive statement.

A mid-tenth century *terminus ante quem* has been established on the basis of one of the graffiti carved in the plaster on the frescoed wall. It refers to the consecration of a deacon during the episcopate of Ardericus of Milan (*circa* 941-945). Paleography of the painted inscriptions within the scenes points loosely to the early eighth century as a date of execution, but this approach is limited by the damaged state of the frescoes.

The history of the site seems to indicate that the construction of the church could have taken place between the sixth and the ninth centuries. The architectural structure of Santa Maria can be ascribed to approximately the eighth century, on the basis of comparisons with other northern Italian monuments such as, for instance, San Salvatore in Brescia, the Lomello baptistery and the church of San Satiro in Milan.

The decoration of the church appears to be nearly contemporary with the architecture, since the plaster rests directly onto the masonry. No exact parallel could be found for the whole fresco cycle, neither for its iconography nor its style. Comparative monuments have been looked for in many parts of the Christian world, thus providing analogous works of different dates and origins to individual scenes or

pictorial details. Notably, early Christian ivories, tenth-century wall paintings in Cappadocia (central Turkey), early medieval mural decorations in southern Italy, Rome and northern Italy, as well as Carolingian and Ottonian paintings have been associated in one way or another to the frescoes of Castelseprio.

Their style recalls the Hellenism which had survived in the East until the burst of the iconoclastic controversy (A.D. 726). Therefore, they are seen as part of an artistic tradition which developed before iconoclasm and was adopted in the West, as Eastern influences were spreading into Italy, in the seventh and eighth centuries. Examples of those influences are seen in Rome, namely in the works commissioned by the Eastern popes, particularly John VII (705-707).

Upon examination of the style which developed in Lombardy in the eighth and early ninth centuries, Castelseprio appears to be part of the formative stages of a northern Italian school. The possible influence of Lombard art on Carolingian painting may explain the analogies which exist between the Castelseprio frescoes and some Carolingian works.

The socio-religious context of Lombardy in the Middle Ages is another factor which ought to be taken into consideration. Until the second decade of the eighth century the political situation was turbulent, both within the Lombard kingdom and in its relations with its neighbours, the religious establishment was very unstable until a few years after the synod of Pavia (698), as the Arian heresy and the schism of the Three Chapters previously had many adepts in Lombardy, and the scarcity of artistic patronage before the reign of King Liutprand (712-744) renders the commissioning of Santa Maria rather unlikely. Political disturbances from 730 onwards also limit the possibility of such a production, given the geographical location of the church, outside

the walls of a fortified town near the passage of the Alps. Therefore, King Liutprand, known for his strong religious devotion and his active building campaign, seems a likely candidate for the patronage of Santa Maria di Castelseprio.

Examiners:

[Redacted]

John L. Osborne, PhD

[Redacted]

John P. Oleson, PhD

[Redacted]

Anthony Welch, PhD

[Redacted]

Gregory P. Andrachuk, PhD

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## INTRODUCTION

The topic of this thesis was chosen mainly because of its particularly puzzling character. The small church of Santa Maria di Castelseprio, in the pre-Alpine hills of northern Italy, is one of the most enigmatic monuments of the early Middle Ages. Since its accidental discovery in 1944, the church, with its remnants of fresco paintings in the east apse, has attracted the attention of many scholars who could not, and still cannot, quite agree as to the origin and dates of the building, and of the frescoes that decorate it.

Consequently, one encounters numerous methodological problems in the study of this monument. No written records remain which give precise information on the early medieval settlement at Castelseprio. The only secure fact is the sacking and subsequent abandonment of the settlement in 1287, after an injunction by the archbishop of Milan. Archaeology has revealed some information about the site and the church of Santa Maria, but much of the work, study and research on the subject remains hypothetical. For instance, the study of style and of details of the fresco paintings has not, thus far, led to any conclusive results concerning the dating or the origin of the church. Many elements, taken separately, could be individually compared to a number of works from several parts of the world, thus increasing the mystery that surrounds the monument.

This paper will begin with a survey of the history of the site, a description of the frescoes, and a brief analysis of the architecture. However, the main intent is to follow an iconographical and historical approach. The origin and evolution of the themes which are represented in the frescoes will be studied, as well as the dogmatic

content of the cycle

In line with the idea of placing Castelseprio within its political, social and religious contexts, monuments from other parts of northern Italy and Rome believed to be contemporary with this church will be introduced into the discussion for comparison. Some of the monuments bearing similarities to the art of Castelseprio are securely dated in the eighth century on the basis of documentary evidence or inscriptions, thus providing a starting point for the historical study. This will lead to a discussion of theological ideas which were current in the eighth century, and which influenced the content of representative arts.

Finally, an attempt at identifying the patron of Santa Maria di Castelseprio will be made in light of the historical, political and religious contexts in Lombardy during the early Middle Ages.

## I

## THE SITE

The History of the Town

Castelseprio was a fortified town from the Roman era onwards. Archaeology has revealed that the site had also been inhabited in prehistoric times,<sup>1</sup> thus demonstrating that at all times this area was favoured as a dwelling place, being strategically located.<sup>2</sup> It is situated south of the Alps, on a route between central Europe and the Italian peninsula, in the present-day province of Varese, north of Milan.

In late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, Castelseprio was a busy town on the trading and pilgrimage route. Its location, as well as its defensive walls and watchtowers, indicate that it was part of a system of fortified towns spreading from the Alps towards the Olona valley.<sup>3</sup> The role of Castelseprio might have been of considerable importance, not only for its military functions but also for the administrative and judicial responsibilities that were carried out in the stronghold and its settlement, the latter being twice as large as the castle itself.

At the time of Lombard supremacy (569-774), there was a garrison at the castle.<sup>4</sup> Coins were also minted there, as demonstrated by the finding of Lombard coins from "Flavia Sebrio," believed to be the Castelseprio mint, and that of a silver coin of the Carolingian period (ninth century) from the same origin.<sup>5</sup>

The name "Sebrio" appears in other instances besides coinage: there are a few documents from the eighth century referring to a town or a district by the name

"Sebrio," which is close, but not identical to the name "Castelseprio" <sup>6</sup> No conclusions can be drawn from this since the etymology of the name "Sebrio" is not known. The connection is uncertain, but plausible. On the other hand, a ninth-century document mentions a "castro seabrienses" and indicates its importance as the centre of a large district with dependencies <sup>7</sup> It seems that this reference comes closer to the name of Castelseprio, and it is safe to assume that it was the town in question in the documents. Yet, this does not invalidate the earlier documents as being references to Castelseprio: the names "Sebrio" and "Seprio" have an obvious closeness. In phonetics, B and P are produced at the same place of articulation, they are both bilabials. The phenomenon of interchanging them in different regions or over a time span is not uncommon <sup>8</sup> The omission of "Castel" or "Castro" might indicate that the eighth-century documents were alluding to the settlement, not necessarily the fortified section, or "Castro." However, few documents survive from that period, and it is not possible to reach firm conclusions on such little evidence.

The ninth-century documents indicate that Castelseprio was then a centre of considerable importance, and it may be suggested that it became such from its growing power in the course of the seventh and eighth centuries under the Lombard kings. The role of Castelseprio during that period should not be underestimated. Although the Lombard kings were Arian heretics at first, they had been converted to orthodoxy by the beginning of the eighth century. They enjoyed peaceful relations with the Franks and with the ecclesiastical authorities in Rome in the early years of the eighth century. King Aripert II (700-712) and his successor King Liutprand (712-744) both maintained cordial relationships with the pope, whom they recognized as sole head of the Church <sup>9</sup> Political tensions arose in 727, but until then, no trouble of any kind disturbed their

friendly terms. This temporary absence of strife may have allowed for building activities in Lombardy, since there was no fear of an invasion from either side <sup>10</sup>

After the Carolingian period, there is no evidence of coining nor any other significant activity at Castelseprio. Its decline started in the tenth century, when political and religious powers shifted to Milan.

Around the year 1000, the bishops of Milan and Como became involved in a dispute regarding ecclesiastical supremacy and sovereignty over the adjacent territory, part of which was the Seprio. The town and castle were attacked on a number of occasions by both sides, and the final blow came in 1287, at the hands of Ottone Visconti, archbishop of Milan. This brought Castelseprio to an end: the settlement, the fortifications and the castle were sacked and razed to the ground by Visconti and his vassals, who had come from the Ossola Alps. Following the ravaging of the area, he issued an injunction forbidding its habitation or reconstruction. Anyone who remained at or returned to Castelseprio would be subject to the death penalty. This law gave rise to a number of legends about the region and its past. It was generally obeyed and enforced even as late as the eighteenth century <sup>11</sup>

Visconti and his troops did not go so far as to ravage the sacred buildings of the town, therefore, only the three churches were left standing. Two were inside the walls: the basilica of St. John the Evangelist with the adjacent octagonal baptistery dedicated to John the Baptist, and the hexagonal church of St. Paul, neither of which survived the many years of neglect. The third, Santa Maria, was situated outside the walls.

A few references to Santa Maria di Castelseprio were made in the late thirteenth century, one of which speaks of an "altare sancti stephani in ecclesia sancte marie" <sup>12</sup>

Other mentions appeared sporadically thereafter, and the church was called "foris portas Castrii Seprii" as early as the fourteenth century <sup>13</sup> Pastoral visits are also recorded between 1566 and 1747 <sup>14</sup>

#### The Discovery of a Tombstone

A burial stone was uncovered beneath the floor of Santa Maria by the nineteenth-century owners of the site. This find was not well recorded at that time, and both the present location of the stone and the nature of its inscription are unknown. It is known to have been carved with an epigraph naming Wideramm, and a study of the paleography suggested a date in the seventh or eighth century <sup>15</sup> Since eleventh-century coins were also found beneath the pavement, it may well have been a reused piece <sup>16</sup> It is also known that the original floor survived only partially until the nineteenth century, there were three subsequent elevations over it <sup>17</sup>

The unfortunate lack of information on this subject, and on the content of the Wideramm tombstone, renders it useless as evidence for the Church's dating.

#### The Church of Santa Maria (ill. 1)

The church of Santa Maria is located outside the walls of the settlement, to the northeast (ill. 2). It is the only building from the town which has survived to any considerable extent. Archaeological surveys have been carried out at Castelseprio, and the site itself is of considerable interest, but most of the attention has been directed to the small church of Santa Maria *foris portas*, undoubtedly because of its preservation and its controversial fresco cycle.

At the time the church was discovered, the roof and windows were missing,

and the overall preservation was rather poor, mainly due to exposure to the elements. During the fifteenth century, when the church might still have been in a relatively decent shape, the frescoes were whitewashed, and an unknown artist, presumably from Lombardy, painted a Nativity scene on the new plaster in the middle of the apse. This covering layer of plaster allowed the original early medieval frescoes to survive, at least in part, until our century. Restorations of the structure have been carried out since 1944. As part of this campaign, the fifteenth-century plaster has been stripped off the walls and its fresco removed and carried to the church of Carnago.

### The Frescoes

As a result of this process, a now incomplete and quite damaged cycle of beautiful frescoes was revealed beneath. These have also been restored, but as they are badly damaged and quite brittle, the best that could be done was to try to retard further disintegration.

When first approaching the site, one is struck by the oddity of finding such a sophisticated set of paintings in such a remote area. They are located in the east apse, opposite the main entrance wall of the church. One enters the apse through an archway in the wall at the east end of the nave (ill. 3).

The frescoes represent what is commonly agreed to be a Christological cycle, with the main focus on the early life of Christ. However, it has been recently suggested that the cycle should more properly be described as Marian, since the Virgin Mary appears in the majority of the scenes, and she seems to have a dominant role.<sup>18</sup> This idea will be discussed in a later chapter on the dogmatic meaning of the program.

The decorations are arranged as follows (ill. 4, 5, 6) the wall is divided

horizontally into three zones, the two upper sections decorated with the narrative cycle and the lower with designs. The lowest section is the most damaged, making its decorations virtually unidentifiable. The inside of the arch wall facing the apse is also divided in the same way. There are three windows in the middle horizontal zone, facing north, east and south.

For the purpose of clarity, the scenes will be presented here in their usual order, that is from top left to top right, and then from bottom right to bottom left.<sup>19</sup> Only a brief description of the scenes will be given here. Their interpretation, origin and meaning will be discussed in subsequent chapters on the origin of the themes and the dogmatic content of the cycle.

#### The Annunciation (ill. 7, 8)

The first scene on the upper left (north side) is the Annunciation. Set in what seems to be a porch opening onto a garden through an arch, the episode shows Mary having made preparations for spinning wool. She is seated, holding the two spindles. Next to her are the baskets of fabric and a water jug. The archangel enters from the right. Mary's expression is one of surprise, as she holds one finger towards her mouth and lifts her other hand. Both the angel and Mary have haloes. Mary's is ochre with a red borderline, and the angel's is plain blue. One interesting feature is the additional female figure in the left corner. This figure has not been identified, but it is generally believed to have been a servant who may have witnessed the event. Her presence in this scene is quite rare.

In the same frame, to the right, there is a fragment of the Visitation. This particular representation shows Elisabeth touching Mary's womb. The top part of

Elisabeth's body is totally obliterated, so it is not possible to determine if she had a halo

To the right of this scene, above the north window, a section is missing because of deterioration. It seems likely that there was once a medallion in this space, balancing the one on the other side above the south window. These two would thus have flanked the larger medallion over the east window.

#### The Trial by Water (ill 9,10)

Towards the centre of the apse, to the right of the damaged area, is a fragment of the Trial by Water. Mary is dressed and haloed as in the previous scenes. She bends forward to drink the bitter water given to her by the high priest. As she holds the jewelled ewer, the richly dressed, bearded old priest bends down towards Mary. His halo is blue. His wide open eyes, his intent look and his bent posture give his figure an expressionistic quality.

One can still see a fragment of the lower part of a barefoot figure to the left of Mary. The scene takes place in an architectural setting, inside an atrium or a temple. To the right, there is a round altar covered with a purple cloth, and behind it is a high semi-circular bench, or *synthronos*, at the top of which a red cushion is placed on a blue cloth.

#### The Christ Pantocrator (ill 11)

Interrupting the narrative cycle to the right of the Trial by Water, a medallion of the Christ Pantocrator, or Ruler of the World, is painted above the east window. His young, soft face is bearded. His right hand is lifted in a gesture of blessing, and he

holds a scroll in the left. A dark ochre halo around his head contains a pale inscribed cross and is bordered by a wide red line. The medallion is blue and its outer ring is red. Christ's head, the cross inside the nimbus and the halo itself all have white contours.

### The Dream of Joseph (ill. 12)

Next to the *Pantocrator*, towards the south, is the Dream of Joseph. The scene represents the first of four apparitions to Joseph by an angel, in this instance to reassure him of Mary's virginity. It must be the angel's first apparition, because the scene is placed between the Trial by Water and the Journey to Bethlehem. It is not, however, placed in correct chronological sequence, since in the apocryphal texts (the Protoevangelium of James, ch. XVI and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, ch. XII), the Dream occurs before the Trial by Water. There is no obvious reason to explain this.

Joseph, who is identified by an inscription in white paint below his bed, is represented in the foreground of a rocky landscape, with a large building in the background. He reclines on a mattress on the ground, in a posture recalling that of classical river gods: his weight is on one elbow, with the other arm on his side, and one leg is bent beneath the other. Unfortunately, Joseph's head did not survive.

The haloed angel flies in vigorously from left to right, contributing to the diagonal arrangement of the scene. The two figures are placed between two architectural features: an arched gateway on the left and a small column or a large urn on the right. Both of these are decorated with what appear to be paintings or carvings. The archway on the left is supported by a column which has a cloth tied around its shaft in a classical manner. On the right, some vegetation grows out of, or next to, the small

column or large urn

Next to this scene, above the south window, there are traces of a medallion. Only parts of the sides and contours remain. It may have been ochre or of a golden colour, and its contours were pale blue. It is fair to assume that the first medallion, over the north window, was of the same colours, but attempts at identifying who, or what, was represented in them are only speculative.

### The Journey to Bethlehem (ill. 13)

The scene at the far end of the south wall in the apse is the Journey to Bethlehem. Again in a semi-architectural, semi-landscape setting, the figures cross the picture plane from left to right. The group seems to be coming out of an archway similar to the type seen in the Annunciation and in Joseph's Dream. A twisted tree grows through the opening of the arch. In the middle section of the frame, as the background recedes further in the hills, a cityscape appears in the distance, presumably Bethlehem. Mary is riding on the ass, led by a figure of which only a part of one leg survives. Mary is seated sideways, and turns toward Joseph, who is following her. He holds a cane in one hand, and gestures in her direction with the other, thus indicating that they are communicating. Joseph is not nimbed, while Mary is represented as in the other episodes already described.

### The Nativity and Related Events (ill. 14)

One of the most fascinating scenes of the cycle is the Nativity, partly because of its almost complete preservation, but mostly because of its very interesting iconography. It is located in the middle register, beneath the Journey to Bethlehem.

The setting is a rocky landscape which shows the interior of the grotto in the foreground, and the exterior in the background, thus providing the context for four scenes in the same frame. Three events are taking place at once in the foreground: the central group is that of the Nativity, with the reclining figure of Mary next to whom runs the inscription SCA MARIA. At her side the infant Christ lies in the manger, being adored by the ox and the ass (ill. 15). On the left, the doubting midwife, who had suffered a withered hand because of her refusal to believe in the miraculous conception, moves in Mary's direction, holding up her hand in the hope that she might be cured (ill. 16). She is identified as EMEA by a white inscription above her head, although her name is actually known as Salome. She is presented here as "the midwife."

Moving to the foreground in front of Mary's bed, the scene of the bathing of the infant Christ is shown (ill. 17). The two midwives flank the basin, the one on the left sits on the ground and holds the child by the waist and shoulder, while the other bends down to pour water over him. Christ wears a nimbus with a peculiar nail-headed type of cross inside it.

To the right of this scene sits Joseph, with his elbows on his knees and one hand on his face, looking distractedly in the direction of the Bath (ill. 18). He wears the same garments as in the Journey to Bethlehem, still without a halo. Another painted inscription clearly reveals his identity: IOSEPH.

In the background, outside the grotto, is the Annunciation to the Shepherds (ill. 19). An angel appears from behind a rock, his wings outstretched, carrying his staff in one hand and with the other gesturing to the shepherds in the pasture. One of them is reclining, the other standing, leaning on a staff. Their sheep are grazing,

guarded by a dog. A crenellated city wall occupies the distant background of this outdoor scene. The star of Bethlehem shines in the cloudy sky, directly above the group of the Nativity. It is an eight-pointed star, with two auras and four longer rays which expand in the shape of a cross, the longest ones extending towards the figures of Mary and Christ in the manger.

The amalgamation of the three subsidiary episodes with the Nativity is uncommon, and there are few known parallels.<sup>20</sup>

#### The Adoration of the Magi (ill. 20, 21)

The far right corner of the Nativity is bordered by a tall tree, and the main division between this scene and the next is the angle where the apse wall meets the arch wall. In this way, it almost blends in with the Adoration of the Magi, located on the south side of the arch wall, in the middle register. This scene is set against an architectural background on the left,<sup>21</sup> and a rocky landscape on the right with a tree growing in the distance. Mary is seated on a rock, in an elevated position with respect to the other figures in the group. She holds the Christ Child in her lap, and both of them lean downwards to welcome the offerings brought by the three magi. They are introduced to the Holy Family by a haloed angel who hovers behind Mary, wings outstretched, pointing to the child and holding his staff with the other hand. The foremost magus lifts his present to the child, while the other two seem to be communicating, glancing at each other with their gifts in their hands (ill. 22). Two bundles lie at their feet, perhaps as an indication of their journey. All three magi wear the same kind of short garments, footwear and high Persian hats. Cast shadows are clearly painted on the ground beneath the magi, an interesting feature in the context of

medieval art

The Christ child has the same transparent nimbus with a nail-headed cross which was described in the Bath scene

The figure of Joseph is somewhat isolated in one corner, he is present in the episode but does not participate. He sits humbly below the high rock where the Virgin and child are seated, simply witnessing the event as he rests his head on one hand.

#### The Presentation in the Temple (ill. 23, 24)

The presentation in the Temple is on the other side of the Nativity, between the east and the south windows in the apse. The focus is on the figure of Mary and Simeon, with the Christ child being presented to the latter. A painted inscription runs below the figure of the old priest, giving his identity as ZVMEON.<sup>22</sup> Simeon is depicted with his back exaggeratedly curved, his long white hair and beard indicating his very advanced age. According to the Apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, he was then one hundred and twenty years old.

Christ still wears the rayed nimbus, as in the scenes described above. He is moving eagerly toward Simeon (ill. 25). The priest receives him with one bare hand, the other covered by his garment.

On the left side of the scene, the event is witnessed by Anna. She holds her garment around her head and shoulders. Three bearded men stand on the other side, behind Mary. The barefoot man moving toward the centre is Joseph, holding his garment to present the offering of a dove. Of the two men with him, the elder looking one holds a large book or a flat object in front of his body. The other man who stands in the archway behind Joseph is only partly visible.

The episode is set indoors, in front of a large conch shell niche supported by a column on one side and a pier on the other. The spandrels on either side of the conch are decorated with painted or carved haloed figures, one of them holding a staff, calling to mind the representations of angels above archways on triumphal arches, and that of the angels of the Castelseprio *Hetoimasia* (described below) on the arch wall. The conch is reminiscent of an apse, or maybe of an altar canopy<sup>23</sup>. A gold Latin cross hangs from the conch, giving the setting a specifically Christian tone. Below the conch, two arched passageways open through the wall, and on the right side is a complex of piers and columns. In the foreground on the left, a low decorated cube may be the altar, and between Simeon and Mary, a stepped platform may refer to the steps of the altar.

The Presentation is the last of the identifiable narrative scenes that have been preserved. To its left, between the north and east windows, are remnants of another scene, of which only a small section of an architectural element can be seen on one side, and what looks like a draped, animated figure moving in the opposite direction on the other side. Unfortunately, this area is damaged beyond recognition, as is that next to it on the north side of the apse. The lower registers are in much worse condition than the upper registers. The decorations of the north side of the arch wall, opposite the Adoration, are also lost.

#### The *Hetoimasia* (ill. 26)

The space above the arch facing the apse, opposite the Christ *Pantocrator*, is decorated with a *Hetoimasia*. It consists of the vacant throne with the attributes of

Christ: the cushion, the cross, the imperial purple cloth and the crown (ill. 27). The stepped throne is studded with four clusters of gems arranged in flower designs. The knotted cloth rests on the large red cushion on the top of the throne. The base of the nail-headed Latin cross surmounts the crown, which is placed on the cushion and purple cloth. The crown is simple: two rows of pearls adorn the circular gold band.

The entire group is encircled by a blue halo with a red borderline, and set within a larger golden medallion. It is flanked by two haloed flying angels with their wings outstretched, each carrying a sceptre and an orb surmounted by a nail-headed cross. The *Hetoimasia* follows a tradition which was already established in early Christian art, for example in the fifth-century mosaics at Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, and the Baptistery of the Orthodox in Ravenna. Its purpose was to symbolize the expectation of the second coming of Christ, and as such it differs from the narrative episodes depicted elsewhere in the apse.

#### Other Symbolic Elements (ill. 28)

Below the east window, parts of another symbolic element remain: a closed book decorated with gems rests on a flat, round cushion on a draped structure. The way the drapery hangs suggests that it probably is on a throne with arms and a back.

To the right of this section is an arched opening. Two doves are perched on a rod which runs between the pilasters, from which a curtain is hanging. Between the doves is a pendant gold cross similar to the one hanging from the conch in the Presentation, which is situated directly above this curtained arch.

These elements remain only in a fragmentary state, and consequently it is virtually impossible to draw any conclusions regarding their meaning in this particular

context

### Borders

Little remains of the borders which separated the lowest register from the upper ones. An dentil frieze with abstract designs runs beneath a dark blue garland with a light blue and yellow leaf motif. A ribbon is twisted around the garland in alternating colours. The garland motif on the arch wall is slightly different from the one in the apse. The borders follow an exact straight line throughout the apse and arch wall, indicating that the artist (or artists) may have used a straight edge, and followed exact measurements <sup>24</sup>

The scenes and pictorial elements described above are the only ones to survive at Castelseprio. Their study is complicated by the considerable damage which the buildings and frescoes have suffered, and unfortunately are still suffering in spite of the restorations which have been undertaken in an attempt to save them.

The symbolic representation of the *Hetoimasia*, the sophisticated narrative cycle, the iconic figure of Christ *Pantocrator*, and the two presumably iconic medallions constitute evidence of a decorative programme which combined at least two pictorial traditions: the narrative and the iconic.

The prototype for this cycle has not yet been found, although the combination of these elements is not uncommon.

### The Painted Inscriptions (see ill. 4, 5, 6)

The presence of painted inscriptions was noted in the descriptions of the frescoes. These are almost invisible now, but those which had survived were recorded

in the 1940's. They are IOSEPH, in the Dream of Joseph and the Nativity, EMEA, near the midwife Salome, and SCA MARIA next to the reclining figure of Mary, in the Nativity, and ZVMEON in the Presentation in the Temple. All run horizontally, except for the word MARIA which runs vertically. All the letters are square capitals except for the E, which is a rounded capital, or uncial letter. Other painted inscriptions may originally have been included, but do not survive<sup>25</sup>

These inscriptions are of interest since the study of their paleography is one of the possible approaches to a determination of the date and place of origin of the painter. Since they are painted, and refer directly to the scenes, they most likely are contemporary with the frescoes. However, it must be noted that the paint has never been scientifically tested in order to test this hypothesis. One of the scholars who studied the frescoes in the 1940's first interpreted the inscriptions as being contemporary with the painting, but later said that they had been added in a white oil paint<sup>26</sup>. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the inscriptions would be much later than the frescoes or that they would have been done by somebody else. As an integral part of the paintings, they may have been added shortly after the completion of the scenes, either by the artist himself or by an assistant.

At first glance, the inscriptions seem to be the work of a Greek trying to write in Latin<sup>27</sup>. The identification of Salome as EMEA, which is a fusion of the article and the noun for the Greek H MAIA (the midwife), looks like a literal translation from Greek to Latin, since the same Greek label is used in the bathing scenes in Byzantine Nativity frescoes in Cappadocia<sup>28</sup>.

Yet this fact does not assuredly indicate a Greek origin for the artist. He may have been following a model given to him by his patron or advisor<sup>29</sup>. He would then

have simply copied the words to the best of his ability, whether he knew how to write or not

ZVMEON (ZYMEON?) is written with a Z rather than the Latin S, which is thought to be another eastern feature since it appears in Egypt<sup>30</sup> However, this phenomenon is common in northern Italy, the S is often replaced by a Z in front of a vowel<sup>31</sup> If the artist or writer had actually been Greek, we can legitimately assume that he could have used the sigma (C) instead of the S in Joseph's name<sup>32</sup> He might also have written SCA MARIA as HAGIA MAPIA with the Greek rho (P) instead of the Latin R.

The round form of the capital E, the angular shape of the crossbar in the A, and the combination of capital and uncial letters are common in the Middle Ages<sup>33</sup> Thus, the painted inscriptions do not establish any definite source of reference that would enable us to identify the artist's provenance. "The Z for S before a vowel is a common North Italian phenomenon [e.g. 'zulfuro' for 'sulfuro' (note 16)] and the fusion of noun and article in EMEA is as likely to be the act of an Italian as of a provincial Greek. The forms of the letters can all be matched in Latin writing, it is their accomplished character, the quality of the strokes, that suggest an early Greek script."<sup>34</sup> This last argument is questionable. The artist who painted the inscriptions, whether Greek or Italian, proved himself to be quite able to produce works of great quality, with accomplished character. The linear quality of his paintings, the dramatic expression of his figures and the vibrant brush strokes with which he depicted every element of the frescoes show that he certainly was in a position to make these inscriptions in such an accomplished manner.

The unfortunate state of preservation of the frescoes no longer allows a careful

study of the paleography. When the inscriptions were still visible, they were not adequately recorded and analyzed, and the evidence is now lost forever. The exclusive use of paleography cannot lead to any decisive conclusions, but it is a valuable tool which could eventually buttress a theory based on other evidence.<sup>35</sup>

From the little that is known on the Castelseprio inscriptions, it has been reported that "According to the paleographers [*sic*] (Loewe [*sic*], Marichal) they cannot be later than the VIII century, and, moreover, the analogies with the numerous writings in white on the frescoes of S. Maria Antiqua, lead to the attribution to the time of John VII (705-707) at the latest."<sup>36</sup>

The lack of comparisons with local monuments in the north does not allow us to substantiate this dating or the *terminus ante quem* suggested by Lowe and Marichal, but if indeed there was a connection between Rome--more precisely the works commissioned by Pope John VII--and Castelseprio, these paleographic analyses, in spite of not being unmistakably conclusive, support at least in good part the iconographic and stylistic connections between the two groups.<sup>37</sup>

### The Graffiti (ill. 28)

Ten graffiti<sup>38</sup> are carved in the plaster at eye level, following the horizontal lines of the narrative cycle. Eight of these are so damaged that only a few letters remain, giving little if any information on their date. Most of the graffiti are located beneath the scenes of the Presentation and the Adoration. They are all written in Latin, by different hands,<sup>39</sup> mostly in capital letters with some uncial and minuscule letters. One graffito is a musical notation, two are obituaries, two others refer to indictions and

three more mention consecrations. The other two are too fragmentary to indicate anything specific. Since they obviously were scratched in the wall after the frescoes were completed, their date is of crucial importance. Only two graffiti give us sufficient information to speculate on their date, and of these two only one is specific enough: it refers to the ordination of a deacon during the episcopate of Ardericus, that is to say between 941 (or 938) and 945.<sup>40</sup> Another graffito mentions a Milanese bishop, but D is the only visible letter. It was suggested that it could refer to Tadone (863-865) or to Landulfi (979-998), but this second graffito is still ambiguous and unreliable. The references to Tadone and Landulfi being uncertain, we can only consider the Ardericus graffito to establish a *terminus ante quem*, that is, the latest date possible for the frescoes, as 945. There was only one Ardericus as Archbishop of Milan and none in Como, which suggests that this identification must be correct.<sup>41</sup> This inscription was made either during Ardericus' episcopate, or shortly after his death.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, it may have been written by the deacon in question after Ardericus' death.<sup>43</sup> This possibility puts the *terminus ante quem* in approximately the middle of the tenth century, and although not totally certain, this view is now commonly agreed.<sup>44</sup> Whatever the *terminus ante quem*, the frescoes could have been made centuries before the graffito. In this case, as in that of the painted inscriptions, paleography alone cannot clarify the enigma.

### The architecture

The church of Santa Maria di Castelseprio was built on a three-apse plan (ill. 2). The church is accessible only through a small porch (approx. 6,50 x 4,50 m) on the west side. The nave (approx. 9,60 x 9,30 m) has openings in both the middle of

the south, east and north walls, all of which lead to a horseshoe-shaped apse. Of these, only the east apse (which houses the frescoes) has survived. At the time of discovery only the foundations remained of the north and south apses.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Archinto family, who then owned the site, excavated in and around the church. More recently, Carbon-14 dating of two samples taken from the nave roof shows that at least a part of it is a reconstruction, as it dates to the period A D 1797-1887<sup>45</sup>. These dates are consistent with the time of the Archinto family's activity. During the excavations of the 1940's, it was also observed that the partially existing nave roof looked like a restoration<sup>46</sup>. The destruction of the north and south apses may have been part of the same project in the nineteenth century. They were finally reconstructed only in the middle of this century, following the shape of the original foundations and of some fragments that were still attached to the remaining walls<sup>47</sup>.

The most recent large-scale restorations were conducted between 1981 and 1984. These included repairs of the fresco paintings, re-roofing and further excavation of the church.

Archeological studies reveal that the technique is different in five separate sections in the foundations of the church<sup>48</sup>. Building materials and workmanship vary from one section to another, but they all share a characteristic rough and irregular masonry. It is difficult to ascertain whether the church was originally built in one program or in a series of different phases, since the varieties of technique do not allow a clear indication of chronology. For instance, groups of masons could have worked on their respective section of the church foundations, or, depending on availability or proximity of building materials, they could have changed their technique from one area

to another

In elevation the church is rather simple. Both the exterior and interior nave walls are unarticulated, made of rubble masonry. The corners are built of squared stones, as are the buttresses, which were erected around the apses only. All the interior walls are flat and suitable for painting.

Many reconstruction and restoration campaigns have, however, altered details in the structure. In the sixteenth century, the church was transformed into a custodian's residence, and some elements of the building were then modified.<sup>49</sup> The top part of the east nave wall, between the roof and the beginning of the gable, is made of tufa rubble. Tufa was also used in the mushroom-shaped arches of the nave, which are part of the original structure. But the east gable section is evidently a later addition, since it is considerably thinner than the lower part of the same wall, which is composed of rubble masonry and regular rows of brick.<sup>50</sup>

Changes in structure and thickness appear as well in all the other nave walls at the same height as that of the east wall. These elevations must have occurred in order to accommodate the construction of a new roof. Wooden planks were found in the east wall of the apse at the level of the gable. There are two theories that attempt to explain their presence: that the nave was vaulted,<sup>51</sup> or that it had a wooden roof.<sup>52</sup> Whatever the case, the ceiling was originally lower than the present one.

In the nave, there are two large windows in the upper register of each of the north, west and south walls, and a smaller one in the lower register at the east end of the north and south walls. These windows are horseshoe-shaped arches made of stone.

In the east apse, three large windows are evenly spaced in the middle register

They face north, east and south. The east window was the only one to survive in its original form – a round brick arch, different from the horseshoe-shaped stone arches of the nave windows. The modern reconstruction of the side apses allows an idea of their basic shape, but the original arrangement of their windows is unknown. They once may have followed the same scheme as the east apse windows, but in their present form they have only one window each.

The south wall also seems to have been considerably modified, as indicated by a severed joint at the south-west angle of the nave and the porch<sup>53</sup> (ill. 29). The original structure may not have had the arched doorway and windows at the end of the south wall.

Since much of the west section of the church has been modified sometime before and during the sixteenth century, it is unknown whether the tripartite entrances to the porch and to the west wall of the nave are part of the original plan or not. Rather, in the course of the most recent excavations, it was found that there was a double entrance at the west end of the porch. The tripartite entrances have been compared to churches in Syria and Asia Minor dating between the fourth and the sixth century,<sup>54</sup> thus serving as evidence for an Eastern origin and an early date. However, the recent discoveries demonstrate that the evidence is possibly invalid, since "the tripartite entrances, ... do not securely belong to the original elevation and cannot be used for purposes of dating the original building."<sup>55</sup>

The date of the construction of the church, as well as the origin of its type are highly controversial. Parts of the structure have been compared with similar monuments from both the East and the West, ranging from the early fifth to the late

eleventh century. The first theory to be proposed, shortly after the discovery of Castelseprio,<sup>56</sup> suggested a late seventh to early eighth century date for the architecture. The combination of a number of seemingly Eastern architectural elements is rather puzzling. The triapsidal plan, with its horseshoe-shaped apses, the horseshoe-shaped and mushroom-shaped arches of entrance ways, and the round arches of some of the windows, create an unusual type. "Esse [le forme architettoniche] sembrano piuttosto suggerire l'idea che questa costruzione, in pianta ed in alzato, costituisca un'isolato e singolare caso di importazione."<sup>57</sup> On the basis of these particular features, it was thought that the builders were local craftsmen who followed an eastern idiom. The plans of several churches and monuments in many parts of the Byzantine empire were compared to Castelseprio,<sup>58</sup> yet no specific prototype could be found. "Si ha piuttosto l'impressione che la basilichetta di Santa Maria *foris portas* sia stata costruita quasi nel ricordo d'un edificio siriano o microasiatico da maestranze comunque di lingua greca."<sup>59</sup>

Following the theory of an eastern influence, the date attributed to the construction of the church does not go beyond the early eighth century. These eastern influences, though, may have come indirectly through a tradition which had been established in northern Italy in the preceding three centuries. The Greek church had been officially recognized at the time of Saint Ambrose of Milan (340-397), thus allowing an oriental influence to spread in the arts and architecture from the fourth century on.<sup>60</sup> Yet this influence was not so homogenous and exclusive as was the Byzantine style in Ravenna in the fifth and sixth centuries. In Lombardy, artistic forms were mixed with early local idioms and the previously established Roman traditions. A new style began to emerge and by the seventh century Lombard architecture had "une

physionomie propre, et pas vraiment 'barbare' "61

The Castelseprio monument could thus come from a synthesis of oriental and occidental forms, and be representative of "l'architecture des Lombards au VIIe siècle, c'est à dire son manque d'idéal novateur et la survivance de schèmes traditionnels trouvés sur place, voir l'accueil passif et sans discrimination d'idées apportées de l'Orient chrétien."62 Hardly any early medieval monuments are known to us, but accounts relate that in the seventh century, Queen Theodolinda commissioned the church of Santa Maria alle Pertiche in Pavia. It was a complex structure, built on a central plan, adorned with several large niches, and covered with a dome supported by a circular colonnade. This architecture was far from being barbaric. It indeed followed the Byzantine tradition of centrally planned churches, its construction was probably executed or supervised by builders and/or architects from the East.63

A seventh-century date for Castelseprio is still debatable. The main methodological problem in the study of this church is the lack of surviving monuments from the same period in the same area. Until recently, attention has been focussed outside of Italy to find the necessary parallels.64 It may well be that other monuments similar to Santa Maria have existed, and that this church, unique to us now, may have been one of many. "Del resto non pochi altri edifici, tardo-classici od altomedioevali, a causa delle molte distruzioni, si presentano ai nostri giorni quali unica, mentre è probabile non lo fossero un tempo"65

One must then look within a local geographical area in order to try to reconstruct the context out of which Castelseprio emerged. Recent studies show that such an approach has yielded valuable information on early medieval Lombardy. Castelseprio alone could not give a clear idea of the state of architecture in Lombardy

around the seventh and the eighth centuries.<sup>66</sup> Before it was studied in this context, it was considered a unique and peculiar case.

For instance, parallels can be found between the horseshoe-shaped apses of Castelseprio and the eighth-century crypt of San Salvatore in Brescia (ill. 30), which is geographically close to Castelseprio.<sup>67</sup> Plans with multiple apses also appear at the eighth-century baptistery of Lomello in Lombardy,<sup>68</sup> at the church of S. Satiro in Milan (dated before the tenth century), as well as at San Benedetto in Civate, presumed to be tenth century.<sup>69</sup> Horseshoe-shaped arches also existed elsewhere in Lombardy in the eighth century, notably at Ferentillo.<sup>70</sup>

The remnants of the pavement at Castelseprio indicate that it was made of pieces of white and black marble arranged in a geometrical design. It has been dated to the fifth or sixth century on the basis of similarities with buildings anterior to the Lombard invasions.<sup>71</sup> Since this idiom was in existence in Lombardy from the sixth through the ninth century,<sup>72</sup> a date later than the sixth century seems more plausible. An eighth-century date has been suggested,<sup>73</sup> because the type of floor found at Castelseprio appears to be a later development of the type found in the earlier monuments. The same pavement design was utilized in eighth-century monuments, notably at S. Thecla in Milan and in a chapel linked to the basilica of S. Ambrogio in Milan.<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, an eighth-century pavement at Santa Maria Antiqua in the Roman forum was executed in a similar pattern<sup>75</sup>: "il pavimento di Castelseprio ha un suo riscontro molto vicino nel pavimento ad 'opus sectile alexandrinum' esistente nella cappella grande di S. Maria Antiqua ed attribuibile al sec. VIII, poichè ivi è percepibile

anche la posteriore pavimentazione del tempo di Leone IV "76 Although no other architectural similarities with Santa Maria Antiqua are recorded, a great many comparisons can be drawn between the Castelseprio frescoes and those commissioned by Pope John VII (705-707) in this Roman church. 77 That the eighth-century floor follows the same scheme as the one at Castelseprio adds to the importance of Santa Maria Antiqua as a comparative monument. The parallels between the two buildings cannot be purely coincidental. ✱

Aside from comparative studies, scientific analyses of building materials have served as an approach to dating the building. Recently, Carbon-14 dating and dendrochronological analyses were conducted with samples of wood and mortar. 78 Various available data yielded diverse results. For instance, one of the wood wall plate samples tested with Carbon-14 was dated A D 6 +/- 40 - that is 46 B C to A D 36 79 - a very unlikely date for the building. Further, a sample of charcoal from one beam, dated with Carbon-14, turned out to be 865 +/- 40, that is 825 to 905 80, at best, this is an approximate date calculated on a very low plus-minus factor. Dendrochronological analysis, a method by which tree ring patterns are compared with other samples of established date (master graph), was also carried out, but gave no valid results. The core samples analyzed by this technique "cannot be said to be securely crossdated" 81 with the Carbon-14 analysis of core samples. Moreover, no precise dating of the tie beam subjected to dendrochronological analysis was possible, as there exists no master graph for Northern Italy. 82 The scientific dating techniques applied to Castelseprio became even more confusing when mortar was analyzed with Carbon-14. The results showed dates of A D 1103 + 56, or A D 1047 to 1159 83 This is definitely

inconsistent with the mid-tenth-century *terminus ante quem* mentioned earlier. Yet, the author who carried out this study believes the ninth-century dates to be accurate.<sup>84</sup> Because of the lack of consistency in crossdating, it seems that such an approach has proved thus far to be inadequate for this monument. It has undergone a great many changes in the past, most of which were not recorded. For instance, the rebuilding and remodelling of the structure carried out between the time of its construction and the sixteenth century were never properly documented. It is indeed very difficult to assert which parts of the building are original and contemporary to the frescoes, and which parts are later alterations or restorations. Further and more technologically advanced research in this field may one day afford a secure dating for the building materials.

The eighth-century date remains a plausible one, as demonstrated by a comparative study between the plan and elevation of Santa Maria di Castelseprio and the crypt of San Salvatore in Brescia, and other eighth-century monuments in and around Lombardy. The type of floor found at Castelseprio belongs to a tradition that started around the sixth century and lasted for at least three centuries in Lombardy. Further, resemblance of this pavement with an eighth-century floor at Santa Maria Antiqua supports the eighth-century date. It is as part of a developing form of architecture within Lombardy that Castelseprio ought to be interpreted. "In somma il nostro edificio appare come un anello di passaggio fra l'architettura tardo imperiale e dell'alto M. Evo e la protoromanica, e perciò la sua data più convincente è l'VIII secolo."<sup>85</sup>

## Notes to Chapter I

<sup>1</sup> A detailed analysis of the subject is presented in G. P. Bognetti, G. Chierici and A. de Capitani d'Arzago, *Santa Maria di Castelseprio* (Milano, 1948), 15-510

<sup>2</sup> M. Mirabella Roberti, "Le mura di Castelseprio," *Rassegna Gallaratese di Storia e d'Arte* 32 (Gallarate, 1973) 57-64. Mirabella Roberti reaffirms that the occupation of the site during the Iron and Bronze ages is certain, and that use and reuse of a site of this type is frequent, a fact for which he cites several other examples (58).

<sup>3</sup> G. P. Bognetti, "Aggiornamenti su Castelseprio III (1959)," *Sibrium* IV, 1958-59 (19-81), 20; Mirabella Roberti, "Le Mura" "Anche all'esame della cerchia murale Castelseprio appare un castrum tardo antiquo, assai prima dell'età longobarda. Un posto di guardia, prima e poco dopo un castello fortificato, che ha accolto la gente della pianura vessata dalle invasioni e dalle scorrerie" (64).

<sup>4</sup> For the military role of the Seprio at the beginning of the Lombard takeover (569-590), see P. G. Sironi, "Alcuni quesiti sul Seprio nella prima età longobarda," *Sibrium* XVI (1982, 193-198), esp. 195.

<sup>5</sup> Bognetti, in *Santa Maria* (259-261 and 333-334), explains that the coins come from the castle of Seprio. The provenance of these coins is disputed by P. Leveto in her Ph.D. dissertation *Castel Seprio: Architecture and Painting* (Indiana University, 1985). Leveto says of Bognetti's theory that "the coins of Desiderius and Charlemagne, bearing the legends 'Flavia Sebrio' and 'SEBR,' were minted at Castelseprio is unsubstantiated" (12-13, note 8). However, she does not suggest any other place of origin for these coins, nor does she explain her judgement on Bognetti's theory, which makes her own statement even more unsubstantiated.

<sup>6</sup> These documents refer to two "civis Sepriasca, viris devotis germanis" and "Gisulfi de Sebrio." The former is dated 721, the later is dated 769 (Leveto, *Castel Seprio*, 2, 13, notes 9-10.) Leveto does not believe that the place mentioned in these manuscripts would be the Seprio. Yet she does not suggest any other town or district that would bear this name.

<sup>7</sup> Leveto, *Castel Seprio*, 3, 13, note 12.

<sup>8</sup> This is not a conclusive statement in this particular case. Generally, the voiced P would gradually be transformed into an unvoiced B. Yet, local dialects adopt various forms in different areas of Italy. It may be erroneous to judge one phenomenon on the basis of general rule: this instance may be an exception.

<sup>9</sup> J. T. Hallenbeck, *Pavia and Rome: The Lombard Monarchy and the Papacy in the Eighth Century* (Philadelphia, 1982), 21.

<sup>10</sup> Particularly in the beginning of the eighth century, from the start of the reign of King Liutprand in 712. "Liutprand ouvre son règne en instaurant une politique de

paix, bien nécessaire après tant d'années de bouleversement " G. L. Barni, *La Conquête de l'Italie par les Lombards* (Paris, 1975), 259

<sup>11</sup> G. P. Bognetti, *Castelseprio Artistic and Historical Guide* (Vincenza, 1968), 13-14

<sup>12</sup> Leveto, *Castel Seprio*, 4, 14, note 20, citing G. da Bussero, *Liber Notitiae Sanctorum Mediolani*, ed. M. Magistretti and U. Monneret de Villard (Milan, 1917), col. 344 B. For other mentions of "ecclesia sancte marie" at "castrum seprium," see *ibid.*, col. 256 B.

<sup>13</sup> Leveto, *Castel Seprio*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Bognetti, *Santa Maria*, 342.

<sup>16</sup> Leveto (*Castel Seprio*) rightly assesses that "the Wideramm stone can be excluded from evidence for dating the church" (31) because of the lack of knowledge on its subject. The context in which the eleventh-century coins were found was not recorded either.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, In her sixth chapter (192-220), Leveto explains that according to her theory, the missing scenes would be related to the life of Mary. She suggests that they would have been Joachim's Rejected Offerings, the Birth of the Virgin (although she is not sure about this greatly damaged section) and the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple.

<sup>19</sup> Different authors suggest various ways to read the cycle. The most common order is as described here, but Kurt Weitzmann, in his book *The Fresco of Castelseprio* (Princeton, 1951), explains that the cycle should be viewed from left to right in both registers (84-85). This different interpretation depends on what Weitzmann thought the missing scenes had been, in the middle zone. Again for the same reasons, Leveto (*Castel Seprio*) brings forth another theory on the missing paintings (see above, note 18). According to her, it should be read in a sort of zigzag way, from the lower register on the left to the middle of the apse, then up to the left section of the upper zone, and from there, all around the apse going right, and then back to the lower register, from the right to the centre of the apse. This pattern follows the chronology of events which she believes were represented there. However, she does not provide another comparative example of this type of complicated arrangement.

<sup>20</sup> Comparative monuments may be found in early eighth-century Rome. These analogous cycles will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

<sup>21</sup> Leveto (*Castel Seprio*) believes that the architecture design in this section is another crenellated wall (130, 159, note 79). My observations, like those of previous

scholars (among others Bognetti et al., Weitzmann) lead me to believe that the structure on the left is too close to the protagonists in this scene to be viewed in its entirety and identified as a crenellated wall. It looks, rather, like the side of a building.

<sup>22</sup> An analysis of this inscription will be presented in another section of this chapter.

<sup>23</sup> Capitani d'Arzago (*Santa Maria*) related the background with the conch to an early tradition, comparing it to the sixth-century mosaics (602-606). Leveto (*Castel Seprio*) compares the conch to a canopy on folio 34 r in the early ninth-century Drogo Sacramentary (Paris, Bibl. Nat. Ms. lat. 9428) in order to suggest that the Castelseprio backdrop is a canopy, not a conch apse (135).

<sup>24</sup> Rulers and compasses were used in Byzantine painting, see D. C. Winfield, "Middle and Later Byzantine Wall Painting Methods: A Comparative Study," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 22 (1968, 61-139), 98. The approach of following exact measurements was also used in Italy in the course of the Middle Ages.

<sup>25</sup> Capitani d'Arzago, *Santa Maria*, 621-625.

<sup>26</sup> Bognetti, *Guide*, 68.

<sup>27</sup> Most scholars believe that the Greek character of the inscriptions reveals a Greek origin for the artist. Among others: Bognetti and Capitani d'Arzago, *Santa Maria*, 15, 294, 623-625; Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 27; C. R. Morey, "Castelseprio and the Byzantine Renaissance," *Art Bulletin* 34 (1952, 173-210), 194. This view is opposed mainly by Meyer Schapiro in "Review of Kurt Weitzmann's 'The Fresco Cycle of Santa Maria di Castelseprio,'" *Art Bulletin* 34 (1952, 147-163); "Notes on Castelseprio," *Art Bulletin* 39 (1957, 292-299); "The Frescoes of Castelseprio," *Late Antique, Early Christian and Mediaeval Art* (New York, 1979, 67-114, 130-137).

<sup>28</sup> See Morey, "Castelseprio and the Byzantine Renaissance," 194.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. P. Lemerle, "L'archéologie paléochrétienne en Italie, Milan et Castelseprio: Orient ou Rome," *Byzantion* 23 (1952, 184-199). Although Lemerle thinks that the Castelseprio artist was Greek, he suggests that this type of inscription would have come from "un prototype grec latinisé" (196).

<sup>30</sup> Capitani d'Arzago, *Santa Maria*, 623.

<sup>31</sup> Shapiro, "The Frescoes," 109.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>33</sup> Morey, "Castelseprio and the Byzantine Renaissance," 194; Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 27; Shapiro, "The Frescoes," 87, 109.

<sup>34</sup> Shapiro, "The Frescoes," 109

<sup>35</sup> This view is further developed in P J Nordhagen, "The Use of Paleography in the Dating of Early Medieval Frescoes," *Jahrbuch der Osterreichischen Byzantinistik* 32/4 (1983, 168-173).

<sup>36</sup> Bognetti, *Guide*, 68. E. A. Lowe is also quoted in Morey, "Castelseprio and the Byzantine Renaissance," 194, note 64. No publication by Lowe is referred to in either Bognetti's or Morey's articles, but references to their communications with him are indicated.

<sup>37</sup> Comparisons with the monuments commissioned by Pope John VII will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

<sup>38</sup> Bognetti (*Santa Maria*) found nine graffiti, but in her more recent study, Leveto (*Castel Seprio*, 15, note 25) found another incomplete one on the north wall.

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed description of the graffiti, see Bognetti, *Santa Maria*, 342-345, and plates 11, 50, 62.

<sup>40</sup> Capitani d'Arzago, "Le recenti scoperte di Castelseprio," *Bollettino d'Arte* (1951, 17-23), 18.

<sup>41</sup> According to A. Paredi, director of the Ambrosian Library in Milan, Ardericus was archbishop between 936 and 948. Leveto, *Castel Seprio*, 17, note 32.

<sup>42</sup> Bognetti, *Santa Maria*, 344-345.

<sup>43</sup> Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 5, note 7.

<sup>44</sup> In correspondence with Leveto (*Castel Seprio*, 7, 17, note 35), T. J. Brown explained that he saw the Ardericus graffito as the latest of the group, and that basing his observations on paleography, he thought they were twelfth century. He also discussed the other inscriptions which he dates at different times between the eighth and the fifteenth centuries, but for which he could not point to any specific geographical origin (Leveto, 18, note 38).

<sup>45</sup> Leveto, *Castel Seprio*, 33. Leveto did a carbon-14 study of many sections of the church.

<sup>46</sup> Bognetti, *Santa Maria*, 373, 375.

<sup>47</sup> Gino Chierici, who was a member of the team of Italian scholars who first worked on the church shortly after its discovery, proposed the reconstruction of the building as it appears today. He thought the original structure had a low porch, with a higher nave and apses (see ill. 1). The east apse is higher than the north and south apses.

48 Those five different types of foundations were examined during recent excavations. Leveto, *Castel Seprio*, 24.

49 Some of the changes which were made from the sixteenth century on were recorded. See Bognetti, *Santa Maria*, 373-378.

50 Leveto, *Castel Seprio*, 27-28.

51 According to Bognetti (*Santa Maria*, 23), that wood served as evidence that the Byzantine practice of vaulting was followed.

52 Chierici, in *Santa Maria*, 517.

53 This has been observed by Bognetti and a detail is shown in *Santa Maria*, plate 26a.

54 Chierici, *Santa Maria*, 525-526. This view is shared by Capitani d'Arzago, *Ibid*, 698.

55 Leveto, *Castel Seprio*, 29.

56 Bognetti and Chierici, *Santa Maria*.

57 Capitani d'Arzago, "La scoperta di Castelseprio," *Rassegna Storica del Seprio* (fasc. IX-X, 1949-50, 5-11), 7. This view is further explained by the same author in "Le recenti scoperte di Castelseprio," *Bollettino d'Arte* 33 (1948, 17-23), 19.

58 A. Alpago Novello, "Precisioni su possibili suggestioni orientali nell'architettura di S. Maria foris portas," *Rassegna Gallaratese di Storia e d'Arte* 32 (Gallarate, 1973, 35-45). A number of church plans are compared to Castelseprio: Georgian triple basilicas (Gurdjani, VIII c., Bolnisi Kapanaktchi, V c.?), triapsidal and trifoiled plans (twelve churches, ranging from the fifth to the tenth century), oriental paleochristian basilicas (Nicopolis, Paramythna, Dodona, Gortyna). The author comes to the conclusion that the influence at Castelseprio is eastern, but not from Byzantium: "Mi pare comunque certo che siano da escludere influssi di provenienza dalla capitale, Bisanzio, mentre più logici mi paiono certi apporti tratti dalle fertili esperienze maturate negli ambiti provinciali dell'impero d'oriente" (45).

59 S. Tavano, "Architettura Altomedioevale in Friuli e in Lombardia," *Atti della terza settimana di Studi Aquileiesi* (Udine, 1973, 319-364), 338.

60 E. Arslan, "Remarques sur l'architecture lombarde du VIIe siècle," *Cahiers archéologiques fin de l'Antiquité et Moyen Age*, 7 (Paris, 1954, 129-137), 136. "Ainsi, les basiliques 'ambrosiennes,' les basiliques de Sainte-Thècle, de Saint-Laurent, des Saints-Apôtres, de Saint-Simplicien reflétaient des formes de l'Asie Mineure, de la Grèce, de Byzance, de l'Afrique du Nord, peut-être même de la Syrie" (136).

61 *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 132. The author supports the seventh-century date by saying that the east apse window, which is of a type also found at the Baptistry in Lomello (dated from the seventh century), and at San Lorenzo and San Simpliciano in Milan, is the most archaic example of this form. However, he does not give any precise reasons for this assertion, nor does he state any specific dates for the comparative monuments.

<sup>63</sup> P. Delogu, *Longobardi e Bizantini* (Torino, 1980), 112.

<sup>64</sup> This was pointed out and criticized by G. Giacomelli, "Rassegna bibliografica. Santa Maria di Castelseprio," *Felix Ravenna* 533 (fasc. 2, 1950), 58-76.

<sup>65</sup> C. Perogalli, "Contributo per S. Maria 'foris portas' a Castelseprio," *Rassegna Gallaratese di Storia e d'Arte* 32 (Gallarate, 1973, 51-56), 54.

<sup>66</sup> G. Galassi, "Il romano e il ravennate nell'architettura lombarda," *Palladio. Rivista di Storia dell'Architettura* 6 (1956, 97-116), 110. The author explains the spreading of eastern influence, while stressing the equally important evolution of Roman architecture in Lombardy. The formation of Lombard architecture is traced through these influences, and he comes to the conclusion that "Castelseprio fu, in altre parole, una sorta di interpolazione che si fece in terra lombarda, di qualsivoglia provenienze ne fossero gli artisti, sia i pittori, sia gli stessi architetti" (110).

<sup>67</sup> C. Cecchelli, "Weitzmann, the Fresco Cycle of S. Maria di Castelseprio," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 45 (1952, 97-104), 103.

<sup>68</sup> A. Alpago Novello, "La Basilica di Tanaat nello Zanghezur (Armenia Meridionale) e il problema dell'arco oltrepassato nell'ambito dell'architettura protocristiana armena" *Atti del II Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Cristiana* (Roma, 1971, 59-79), 67.

<sup>69</sup> Cecchelli, "Weitzmann, the Fresco Cycle," 104.

<sup>70</sup> Bognetti, *Santa Maria*, pl. XXXIV, 2. Schapiro believes that the architecture can be dated between the seventh to the tenth century, on the basis of the coarse masonry and the general use of the horseshoe form. "The Frescoes of Castelseprio," 86.

<sup>71</sup> S. Mazza, P. G. Sironi, *La Chiesa tardo-antica di Santa Maria di Castelseprio* (Como, 1980), 267-268.

<sup>72</sup> Morey, "Castelseprio and the Byzantine Renaissance," 190.

<sup>73</sup> M. Salmi, "Stucchi e litostrati nell'altomedioevo italiano," *Internationalen Kongress für Frühmittelalterforschung* 8th, I (Ceschina, 1962, 21-51), 47.

<sup>74</sup> L. Crema, "Il pavimento di S. Maria di Castelseprio," *Arte del primo*

*millennio* (Torino, 1953, 194-198), 196

<sup>75</sup> Morey, "Castelseprio and the Byzantine Renaissance," 189-190

<sup>76</sup> Cecchelli, "Weitzmann, the Fresco Cycle," 103. The author refers to del Gruneisen, *Sainte Marie Antique* (Rome, 1911)

<sup>77</sup> This aspect will be further discussed in a subsequent chapter.

<sup>78</sup> Leveto carried out those studies in 1980. Her results are briefly discussed in *Castel Seprio*, 32-41. The Carbon-14 dating results are partially presented in a subsequent article by the same author "Carbon-14 Dating of Wood from the East Apse of Santa-Maria at Castelseprio," *Gesta*, 26 (1987), 17-18

<sup>79</sup> Leveto, *Castel Seprio*, 33. The author explains this result by the bad quality of the fragment.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 36. However, in her more recent article ("Carbon-14 Dating," 17-18), Leveto gives another factor: 865 ± 87, that is, 778 to 952, after having been informed by P. Kuniholm that "30 years should probably be added to any dendrochronological or radiocarbon date" (note 10, p. 18). It should be stressed here that these dates are not absolute, as Kuniholm pointed out. The plus-minus factor may be of a wider range.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 37

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 36

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 38

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 45

<sup>85</sup> Cecchelli, "Weitzmann, *the Fresco Cycle*," 104.

## II

## THE THEMES

The Literary Background

The origins of the themes represented in the Castelseprio frescoes are tied to both the literary and the pictorial traditions. Within the literary sources, not only the canonical texts of the Gospels, but also the Apocrypha were used as sources of Christian narrative imagery.

In this particular fresco cycle, the Apocrypha are of great importance. The word "Apocrypha" translates from the Greek as "to gather," "to preserve," or, by extension, "to hide," "to withdraw from the clutches of publicity" <sup>1</sup> The term was originally attributed to the secret writings of certain sects, who thus preserved their own revelations and mystical speculations on Christianity. The early Church considered these scriptures false doctrine, and therefore forbade and condemned them. Subsequently, other texts which did not fall in the category of inspired writings (such as canonical Gospels) were not included in the collection of Holy Scriptures. Rather, they were termed "apocryphal." Hence the title "Apocrypha" was extended to these Christian writings, which imitated the Holy Scriptures in form but were never recognized as canonical

The Apocrypha are of dubious origin, and may be accounts of popular beliefs and legends. Shortly after the death of Christ, a number of events and miracles related to the lives of the Virgin Mary, Jesus and his early disciples were recorded by eye-witnesses. These memories were carried through oral tradition at first, and they circulated at large before finally being crystallized in writing between the first and the

sixth centuries. They complemented the Gospels, which have very little to say about the life of Mary and the childhood of Christ, adding more facts and lively anecdotes. They most likely came as a response to a need and to the curiosity of the faithful and the faithful-to-be.<sup>2</sup> The events in the Apocrypha sometimes reached legendary dimensions: "the further away in time we get from the roots, the more unrestrained becomes the application to Jesus of what is recounted about the birth and infancy of sons of the gods and children of supernatural origin."<sup>3</sup> The main purpose for the creation of such literature was to defend the virginal motherhood of Mary. In the second century,<sup>4</sup> the Jews began to attack accounts of the virgin birth, and spread the rumours that Jesus had an illegitimate earthly father, a soldier called Panthera.<sup>5</sup> These slanders had to be dealt with, and the Gospels of Luke and Matthew were not considered substantial enough against such attacks. The protoevangelium of James is almost a treatise on the virginity of Mary, which attracted a lot of interest in the Eastern church from the start. "first especially among the Ebionites, but also among the Greek fathers, and in the Syrian Coptic and Armenian churches it was highly valued because of its praise of the ideal of virginity."<sup>6</sup>

Because of its glorification of Mary, the doctrinal role of the Apocrypha was particularly important in the development of Mariology, as well as that of the Catholic Church. they may be seen as a reflection of the Scriptures, and as they were written by the Christian mind, they are somewhat in line with Christian dogma and theology. According to those who believe in the Apocrypha, the message of God is as authentic there as in the New Testament, they are an echo of the "Word of the Master."<sup>7</sup>

At Castelseprio, the narrative themes which remain visible relate to the episodes between the Annunciation to Mary and the Presentation of Christ in the

temple. The Apocryphal writings about the events in that period of the lives of Mary and Jesus are found in the protoevangelium of James and in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. These are dated to the first half of the second century, and to the eighth or ninth century respectively.<sup>8</sup> The now commonly used title of "protoevangelium" was coined by two sixteenth-century scholars, Michael Neander and Guillaume Postel, who translated the gospel which was originally called *The Narrative of James on the Birth of the Holy Mother of God*.<sup>9</sup> It contained the story of the whole life of Mary. The word protoevangelium means "book which precedes the Gospel." Neander and Postel thought this name appropriate because the narrative was a sort of preface to the first chapter of Luke, which is about the events related to the birth of Jesus. The narrative, now protoevangelium, is a collection of stories which began to circulate at the beginning of the second century. They were believed to have originated among the Apostles, but historical details and legends soon became confused. When this "gospel" was written in the middle of the second century,<sup>10</sup> it was attributed to the Apostle James. This pseudonym was used, in accordance with the custom of attributing works to an important person of the past, in order to give them a sense of authority. Thus the protoevangelium could also be called the gospel of Pseudo-James.<sup>11</sup> The work might contain several later additions,<sup>12</sup> and it is difficult to point to an author, but elements such as ignorance of Jewish customs and of Palestinian geography suggest that the author was not a Jew.<sup>13</sup> It is still not known when the protoevangelium passed from the eastern world to the western world. No early Latin version has been found.<sup>14</sup> The original Greek and several Oriental versions are well documented, but a Latin translation only "seems to have existed, for a book identifiable with ours is condemned in the Gelasian decree"<sup>15</sup> (late fifth century).

The gospel of Pseudo-Matthew deals with the same subject as the protoevangelium, parts of the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Thomas, but it is an altered and expanded version of the older works. It might date from the eighth or ninth century, but the earliest known manuscript has been attributed to the eleventh century.<sup>16</sup> The Pseudo-Matthew was first entitled *Book on the Birth of the Blessed Mary and of the Saviour's Infancy*. It first appeared in Latin, presumably as a translation by Saint Jerome who, in the fourth century, had translated the whole Bible into Latin and, as well, had worked on Apocryphal gospels.<sup>17</sup> At least it was presented as such by the compiler who added to the document pretended letters to and from Saint-Jerome, a feature which gave it credibility and made its acceptance more likely.<sup>18</sup>

This "gospel" was introduced as a supplement to the Gospel of Saint-Matthew. No mention is made of the presumed Greek original. In fact, details and traditions in the Pseudo-Matthew suit the Latin western traditions more adequately than the old eastern ones.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, nothing indicates that a Greek version may have existed. "On a vu qu'il n'y a pas de traductions latines du Protoévangile. Ce qui en tient lieu en Occident, c'est l'Évangile du Pseudo Matthieu, ainsi qu'on l'appelle ordinairement, qui à son tour, ne paraît pas avoir été connu en Orient."<sup>20</sup>

It may be, then, that this book was written in the West, based on the protoevangelium, the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Thomas to which modifications were brought,<sup>21</sup> and that new episodes were added, either from translations of other sources or from local legends.<sup>22</sup>

The canonical Gospels of Luke and Matthew give accounts of the life of Mary and of the early childhood of Christ,<sup>23</sup> but some of the events depicted at Castelseprio

are not mentioned in the Holy Scriptures. The Gospels do not omit altogether the character of Mary, nevertheless, they give no actual description or detailed narration of her childhood or her adult life. The Gospels, which originated in the second half of the first century,<sup>24</sup> carry the message of Christ through the narration of his life and of specific events related to miracles. In serving the interests of the Church, the Evangelists' purpose was to concentrate on the life of Christ rather than that of Mary.

Since the Castelseprio frescoes contain scenes of the life of Mary shortly before the birth of Jesus and an infancy cycle, it is understandable that the main textual source is the Apocrypha, and that the canonical Gospels are a secondary source. This was not an unusual choice, since the Apocrypha exerted a major influence on literature and art from early Christian times to the Renaissance. "Ancient and mediaeval Christian art showed a special interest in the infancy gospels, in the miracles performed by the child Jesus, in His birth in the cave, and above all in Mary spinning for the temple curtain."<sup>25</sup>

One section of the Nativity scene - Christ's first bath - is not referred to in any Christian writing, either canonical or Apocryphal. Rather, it stems from a pictorial tradition established in antiquity. This will be discussed later in this chapter.

The Christ *Pantocrator* and the *Hetoimasia* are obviously not from the same tradition as the narrative scenes of the cycle. They belong to an iconic tradition whose purpose is devotional rather than informative. They appeal more to spirituality than to emotions, as they refer to the second coming of Christ, and are therefore linked to theology and worship in a broader sense.

The narrative scenes. Their Origins and Evolution

The Annunciation (ill. 7, 8) as it is represented here cannot be entirely explained by the narration of events in the opening chapter of Luke (1:26-38). The setting in which Mary is found refers directly to the story told in the protoevangelium of James: she had been chosen as one of the seven virgins who were to weave a veil for the temple of the Lord. Mary was going to spin the scarlet and the purple for it. As she was on her way to fill the water pitcher, she heard the voice of the Archangel saying "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women" (prot. 11:1). Fearful and trembling, Mary returned home, where she began her task. As she sat with the spindle and fabric, the water at her feet, Gabriel appeared to her. At this point he announced that she would conceive, according to the word of the Lord. Then a conversation ensued between Mary and the Archangel. She was concerned about the way she would conceive and give birth while remaining a virgin, as she had vowed: "Shall I conceive of the Lord, the living God, and bear as every woman bears? And the angel of the Lord said: Not so, Mary, for the power of the Lord shall overshadow thee..." (prot. 1:2-3). Mary's reaction as described in the protoevangelium is one of deep surprise, as she worries that her virginity will be impaired by childbearing. In the Apocrypha, the angel's message is expanded with explanations of the virgin conception. This is consistent with the purposes of the Apocrypha as defenders of Mary's virginity. In the Gospel of Luke, no detail is given, and the event focuses on the angel's announcement of Christ's birth (Luke 1:35-37). Aside from her initial perplexity at hearing the Archangel speak to her, Mary's reaction is not described there as it is in the protoevangelium. The inspiration for the Castelseprio Annunciation can be easily traced back to the Apocrypha, notably in the

physical expression of Mary's emotional reaction. †

However, no reference to the female figure on the left can be found, either in canonical or in Apocryphal texts. She is witnessing the event, lifting her hand in an attitude of surprise. She could be one of the six other maids<sup>26</sup> who had been chosen for making the veil, but this cannot be proved. According to the protoevangelium, Mary was already living alone in Joseph's house when these events occurred. On the other hand, we understand from the Gospel of Matthew that there had been an interval of time between Mary's betrothal to Joseph and his taking her to his house. He would have found Mary "with child, by the power of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 1:18), and then, after the mystery was explained to him (Matt. 1:24), he would have taken charge of her. In this case, Mary would have been living in the temple, but nothing in the setting of the Castelseprio Annunciation indicates specifically whether the scene takes place in the temple or in Joseph's house.<sup>27</sup> The Gospels of Luke and Matthew do not state precisely what Mary is doing at that moment. In any case, the figure on the left remains enigmatic, since she is not mentioned in any literature. Could it be that at the time the frescoes were painted, oral traditions, now forgotten, included such a witness?

A maiden is sometimes depicted in other representations of the Annunciation. She occurs on the sixth- or seventh-century gold encolpium from Adana in the museum of Istanbul,<sup>28</sup> the late eighth-century Genoels-Elderen ivory in Brussels, the early ninth-century silver case of the enamel cross in the Sancta Sanctorum in Rome, as well as on some Carolingian works.<sup>29</sup> In later instances, the figure of a spinning maiden, seated near the Virgin, appears in Byzantine monuments, thirteenth-century manuscripts, and paintings of the Palaeologan renaissance.<sup>30</sup> The specific type of listening maid as found in the Castelseprio Annunciation occurs in an eleventh-century

fresco in the Roman church of Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella (ill 31). Elsewhere, in a Carolingian ivory of the Annunciation (ill 32), two female figures can be seen, both attending to something else and not paying particular attention to the event

The scene of the Visitation, usually next to the Annunciation in a pictorial cycle,<sup>31</sup> often includes a maid. Therefore, this has been proposed as the origin of the third figure in the Castelseprio Annunciation, the assumption being that starting from the Visitation, the figure of the witness would have been gradually transferred to the Annunciation scene. "Questo ragionamento presuppone dunque che il particolare dell'ancella sia originario della Visitazione e che questa sia passata all'Annunciazione."<sup>32</sup> There is insufficient evidence in support of this theory. It is therefore doubtful that the representation of the maid originated in the Visitation.

It has been suggested that the Castelseprio maiden could be an invention by the artist wishing to emphasize, in a classical manner,<sup>33</sup> Mary's relatively calm expression, by showing it in contrast to that of the shocked maiden in the background. "Così mi sembra che tali figure di ancelle che sottolineano con il loro gesto e con la loro impersonale presenza un grande evento pregno di futuro siano profondamente tratte dalla tradizione greco-romana."<sup>34</sup>

Within the context of Christian art, one may question whether an artist would have taken the liberty of adding such elements to a set iconographic type, thus disregarding the potentially altered meaning or the message implied. The patron's involvement should not be overlooked, nor should the purpose of the cycle itself: an established theme was to be conveyed through the juxtaposition of the cycle's elements. The maiden's role as a witness to the Annunciation reinforces the Apocryphal aim to prove Mary's virginity.

The Visitation is on the right of the Annunciation, in the same frame. Unfortunately, it remains in a fragmentary state, Elisabeth's head is missing. The Visitation is described both in the first chapter of Luke (1 39-56) and in the protoevangelium of James (ch. 12 1-2). However, the narration of events is quite different in the two sources. In the Gospel of Luke, Mary goes in haste to visit her cousin Elisabeth immediately after the Annunciation. Mary is anxious to elucidate the last few words of the angel, "nothing can be impossible with God" (Luke 1 36). She wishes to discuss this with her cousin who, in spite of being old and barren, is miraculously destined to bear a child (Luke 1 36-37). At the moment Elisabeth sees Mary, she instantly recognizes her as the mother of the Messiah and says "And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1 43-44). In the protoevangelium, Mary goes to Elisabeth's house after she has finished weaving and has brought her work to the priest in the temple. By the time she sees Elisabeth, she has forgotten what the archangel has told her (prot 12 2). After Elisabeth has spoken to her, Mary sighs, and, looking up into heaven, says "Who am I, Lord, that all the women [generations] of the earth count me blessed?" (Luke 1 48 and prot 12 2).

The Castelseprio Visitation may come from either literary source. However, if it is drawn directly from the Apocrypha, the scene of Mary delivering her weaving to the temple has been omitted.

This particular depiction of the Visitation shows Elisabeth touching Mary's abdomen. The episode is illustrated in various other ways in early Christian art in the now lost mosaics of the Oratory of John VII (705-707) in Old St Peter's in Rome,

known to us through Grimaldi's drawings (ill. 34),<sup>35</sup> Mary and Elisabeth are tied in a close, affectionate embrace. The two women have one hand on each other's shoulder or forearm. This type was also found on a plaque of the throne of Maximian (sixth century),<sup>36</sup> in the above-mentioned eighth-century Genoels-Elderen ivory (which also included the maid in the Annunciation),<sup>37</sup> and in the tenth-century frescoes at Kılıçlar, Cappadocia (ill. 35), in central Turkey.

The same motif as that of Castelseprio was found on a Coptic textile of the sixth or seventh century.<sup>38</sup> The closest parallel to the Castelseprio Visitation appears in the lost frescoes of the catacomb of San Valentino on Via Flaminia in Rome. These are known to us through the sixteenth-century drawings of Antonio Bosio (ill. 36). The San Valentino frescoes are dated to the early eighth century on the basis of documentary evidence as well as iconographic and stylistic comparisons with other Roman mural decorations securely ascribed to the early eighth century.<sup>39</sup> A direct connection between the frescoes at Castelseprio and those in San Valentino remains to be proved, but the possibility is not ruled out. Other comparisons in the context of early eighth-century art could bring light to their possible link.

The Trial by Water (ill. 9, 10) has its textual origin only in the Apocrypha. It takes place after Joseph has returned to his house and found Mary, by then six months pregnant. In the Gospel of Matthew, Joseph, after his initial shock, has a dream in which an angel informs him of the miracle of the immaculate conception. Thereafter, the union of Joseph and Mary is sealed and their life together begins (Matt. 1:24). In the protoevangelium of James and the Pseudo-Matthew, Joseph ponders for a long time on what he should do about Mary's status: should he hide her sin - which would be

disobeying the law - or should he expose her to the law, in which case he would be putting Mary's life at risk (prot 14 1). In Jewish law, capital punishment was the punishment for adultery and for a virgin who let herself be defiled before her legal marriage<sup>40</sup> However, the protoevangelium clearly indicates that Joseph ultimately did not doubt Mary's virginity and the supernatural origin of her pregnancy. In the Gospel of Pseudo Matthew, the episode is amplified by a major scandal. Joseph, the man in charge of protecting her consecration to the Lord, is said to have seduced the Virgin Mary.

In the Apocrypha, the outcome of the situation is that Mary is brought for judgement before the same priests who had previously been in charge of her. On the other hand, the canonical Gospels emphasize that Mary was not judged. The Apocrypha's version is consistent with their defense of Mary's virginity. An emissary of the high priest, Annas the scribe, had noticed Mary's pregnancy during a visit to Joseph's house, and had begun to spread the news in the temple of their alleged sin (prot 15 2). Consequently, the couple had been arrested and taken to the temple, where they had both been questioned. Pseudo-Matthew tells of a multitude present at the trial, "so numerous that they could not be counted" (Ps -Matt 12 1). Mary and Joseph had not betrayed their secret revelation, and the judgement had been entrusted to God by the test of the water of conviction. The Jews had adopted this rite from antiquity<sup>41</sup> A handful of dust from the tabernacle floor is put into a jar of clear water and the accused has to drink the contents. If the bitter drink does not cause sickness - in the case of a woman, if she is not made sterile - it is seen as a proof of innocence by divine decree. This is precisely what happens to Mary and Joseph<sup>42</sup> After her innocence has been proven through the trial by water, Mary declares her perpetual

virginity in a solemn declaration (Ps -Matt 12 4)

The theme of the trial by water is rarely evoked in pictorial arts. This rarity renders a comparative study inconclusive. On the sixth-century cathedra of Maximian (ill 37), the Virgin is about to drink out of a flat bowl while the priest raises one hand, as if making a speech. Other sixth-century ivories<sup>43</sup> follow the same idiom. While early Christian representations of the Trial by Water known to date have no obvious similarities with the Castelseprio type, analogous depictions of the scene are found in tenth-century frescoes in the churches of Tokalı and Kılıçlar, in Cappadocia. At Kılıçlar (ill 35) the nimbed priest, identified as Zacharias, offers the drink to the Virgin in a beaker-shaped vessel. This representation is particularly close to Castelseprio: in both scenes the priest is nimbed, he makes Mary drink while she bows towards him, one of Mary's hands is covered by the paenula, the episode takes place against an architectural background,<sup>44</sup> and Joseph is on the side of the main group, also drinking of the water of conviction. It is commonly agreed that in the Castelseprio Trial, the incomplete figure to the left of Mary is Joseph.<sup>45</sup> This interpretation is based on Joseph's presence in this event being an integral part of the Apocryphal accounts.<sup>46</sup> One original trait of the Castelseprio fresco is the richly decorated, classical-type pitcher from which Mary is drinking, for which no parallels have been found in the same context.<sup>47</sup> The architectural setting in the Castelseprio scene is also unique.<sup>48</sup>

The Trial by Water also appears in twelfth-century manuscripts.<sup>49</sup> Castelseprio is undoubtedly earlier than these manuscripts, and obviously later than the early Christian types mentioned above. The frescoes at Castelseprio and in Cappadocia may derive from a similar prototype, or be part of the same tradition. What we see at Castelseprio then, may be one of the earliest surviving representations of this type of

Trial by Water - possibly an example of the beginning of a tradition. In this instance, the scarcity of surviving early medieval monuments is particularly regrettable. Thus the introduction and spread of this iconographic type in the West cannot be fully analyzed, and no conclusion can be reached without further evidence.<sup>50</sup>

The Dream of Joseph has multiple literary sources: the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew (1:18-25),<sup>51</sup> the protoevangelium of James (14:2) and the gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (ch. 11). In the Apocryphal writings, the dream takes place before the Trial by Water. However, since the scene of the dream is situated before the trip to Bethlehem, it is safe to identify it as the first apparition of an angel to Joseph, that is, when he is assured of Mary's virginity. He had two other dreams: after the birth of Jesus when he is advised to flee to Egypt (Matt. 2:13), and later when he is told that they can return (Matt. 2:19). Neither dream is mentioned in the Apocrypha.

The pictorial representation of the Dream of Joseph is not common. (There are a few early Christian and later parallels, and their iconography is basically the same as that of Castelseprio.) One is found on the sixth-century throne of Maximian, on the same plaque as the Journey to Bethlehem (ill. 37).<sup>52</sup> An ivory carving of the Dream decorated an early Christian casket now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (formerly in Werden).<sup>53</sup> In the fifth- or sixth-century Coptic church of Deir Abu Hennis,<sup>54</sup> one of Joseph's dreams was painted, but it is not clear which one, as the fresco next to it is not securely identified. The Dream appears twice in the Cappadocian frescoes: in Kiliçlar and in the New Church of Tokalı. In all of these early examples, the type of flying angel is more or less standard, but the representation of Joseph varies considerably either in costume or in posture, although he is invariably reclining on a

mattress on the ground<sup>55</sup> A representation of Joseph's posture more closely similar to that in the Castelseprio fresco is found in a middle Byzantine Lectionary of Mount Athos (Dionysiu Ms. 740), in a passage of the Gospel of Matthew<sup>56</sup> This is however a different medium, a different context (illustration of a canonical Gospel), the position of the angel in the two scenes is extremely different,<sup>57</sup> and there is no background setting in this miniature's illustration. In the other works mentioned above, there is either a landscape or an architectural background. The Dream at Castelseprio is set against both a land and architecture scape. The second dream of Joseph as illustrated in the Menologium of Basil II<sup>58</sup> is set in an open landscape, which comes somewhat closer to the Castelseprio fresco<sup>59</sup> Later examples of the Dream of Joseph from the eleventh and twelfth centuries<sup>60</sup> do not reveal much about the date and origin of the Castelseprio type.

The journey to Bethlehem (ill. 13) is narrated in both the Gospels of Luke (ch. 2) and Matthew (ch. 2), as well as in the Protoevangelium (ch. 17) and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (ch. 13). The Roman Empire had decreed that all inhabitants of Bethlehem and Judaea must be recorded. Joseph then sets out for the journey with Mary and his sons. In the Pseudo-Matthew, an angel is said to have led the ass on which Mary was seated. The protoevangelium says that one of Joseph's sons led the ass and Joseph followed it (prot. 17.1). On the way to the town of Juda, Joseph wondered whether he should enroll Mary as his daughter or wife; his embarrassment and shame are revealed in his monologue. During this time, Mary sees "two peoples, one weeping and lamenting and one rejoicing and exulting" (Prot. 17.2 and Ps -Matt.

13 3) When Joseph notices her changing expressions, he asks her why she looks sad at one moment, and happy at the next. The Castelseprio Journey to Bethlehem may correspond to this episode in the Apocrypha when Mary, seated on the ass led by Joseph's son<sup>61</sup> (the figure remains only partially on the fresco), communicates with Joseph who seems to be talking to her. It may also represent the moment when Mary, feeling that she is about to give birth, asks Joseph to take her down from the ass.

The theme of the Journey is represented in early Christian ivories,<sup>62</sup> but the textual origin of these early scenes appears to be the Pseudo-Matthew, since an angel leads the ass<sup>63</sup>. Most of these ivories show Joseph about to take Mary off the ass<sup>64</sup>.

The appearance of Joseph's son leading the group seems to have taken place sometime after the sixth century on the ivory cover of the Etchmiadzin Gospels (sixth century), one of the figures in the Journey could be identified as Joseph's son<sup>65</sup>. Parallels to the Castelseprio Journey are found in the early ninth century,<sup>66</sup> but more frequently in Cappadocia where this theme occurs more than a dozen times. Most of the Cappadocian frescoes are badly damaged and judgment of the scenes is rendered difficult. However, in all instances, as for example at Karanlık Kılıse,<sup>67</sup> the Virgin's face is turned towards Joseph who is following her. Such iconography also appears later, notably in the fourteenth century Paleologan mosaic in the Kariye Djami in Istanbul<sup>68</sup>.

This iconography obviously spread and was standardized in the East, but a similar type of representation is found in the city of Brescia, also in northern Italy. There, a *sinopia* of the Flight into Egypt, on Layer I in the crypt of San Salvatore (ill. 38), offers the closest parallel to the Castelseprio Journey to Bethlehem. "Indeed, the

Brescia sketch appears to be almost a tracing of the Castelseprio representation."<sup>69</sup> There is an almost exact correspondance in the whole composition, even to the smallest details and features, between the two scenes: the posture of Mary, the zigzag pattern of drapery folds on her dress, her large halo, the shape and size of her figure in proportion to the animal, as well as the anatomical details of the ass, its gait and shape, all are strikingly similar to the Castelseprio group. The resemblance of the two scenes is certainly more than coincidental. Layer I at San Salvatore is plausibly dated to the mid-eighth century<sup>70</sup> on the basis of historical evidence as well as iconographic and stylistic comparisons with numerous monuments. Moreover, it has been suggested that the San Salvatore *sinopia* draftsman may have followed the Castelseprio artist either as a pupil,<sup>71</sup> or as part of the next generation of artists.<sup>72</sup>

The links between Castelseprio and Brescia can throw more light on the problem of assessing a date for the Castelseprio frescoes. Comparisons with a monument which belongs to the same society, in the same geographical area, can lead to a better understanding of the context in which the frescoes were produced.

The story of Christ's birth as shown at Castelseprio is told in the protoevangelium (chs. 18-19) and in the Pseudo-Matthew (chs. 13-14). Both the Apocrypha and the canonical Gospels (Matt. ch. 2) tell of the great star shining above the place where Christ was born.

After Mary was led into a cave, she miraculously gave birth to Christ in the midst of a great light. She was attended to by a Jewish midwife called Zalomi (Pseudo-Matthew) whom Joseph had providentially found outside the cave. Having witnessed the event, Zalomi did not doubt the miraculous nature of the birth. On her

way out, she met another midwife, Salome, to whom she related the event. Incredulous, Salome insisted on testing Mary's condition. She said: "As the Lord my God lives, unless I put (forward) my finger and test her condition, I will not believe that a virgin has brought forth" (prot. 19-3). Upon doing so, Salome's hand withered as a punishment for her disbelief. Distressed, she began to pray, asking for mercy. An angel then appeared to her, and instructed her to touch the Child, so that she might be healed.

The protoevangelium and Pseudo-Matthew add further that Mary wrapped the Child in clothes and laid him in a manger, after hearing of Herod's command that all children under the age of two should be killed. At Castelseprio, the Child is laying in the manger, with the adoring ox and ass on his side. Joseph is seated in the foreground, in an attitude of attentive meditation, as a witness to the event.<sup>73</sup>

Although the Castelseprio Nativity follows the narration of the Apocrypha, Salome - identified as "the midwife" (EMEA) - is holding her hand towards Mary, rather than Christ, in order to have it cured. The Annunciation to the Shepherds is taking place in the background of the Nativity scene, outside the grotto.<sup>74</sup> This is paralleled in the lost mosaics of the early eighth-century oratory of John VII, where the Annunciation to the Shepherds is separated from the Nativity by a rock (ill. 44, 47).<sup>75</sup>

Christ's first bath, included in the Nativity, is not part of any literary source either apocryphal or canonical. The search for its origin in pictorial art must then be directed elsewhere. It is known that a cult of the bath developed at some time since the bishop Arculf, a pilgrim from Gaul who travelled to Bethlehem in the late seventh century, recorded the sight of the holy Water of Christ's first bath in a rock outside the wall of the cave.<sup>76</sup> But this cult must have originated from the classical tradition of

depicting the bath scene. The theme of the washing of the child is common in Antique art, for example in depictions of the births of Dionysos, Achilles or Alexander the Great. It was subsequently adapted into Christian art to become a part of the Nativity iconography.<sup>77</sup> Christian artists could draw from a wealth of earlier models such as the birth of Dionysos on a second-century sarcophagus in the Capitoline Museum (ill. 39), and a fresco in the Domus Aurea in Rome, known to us through a nineteenth-century engraving by Mirri (ill. 40).<sup>78</sup>

The integration of the Bath scene into Christian art has been documented as having taken place in the Eastern Mediterranean region by at least the middle of the sixth century during the reign of Justinian I (527-565). The Washing scene is represented on a censer from the Sion Treasure now in the Antalya Museum, and a rock crystal in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Both of these date from *circa* 550.<sup>79</sup> From then on, the theme gradually spread. Therefore, the veneration of Christ's first bath water must have emerged after the development of the theme's representation in visual arts.<sup>80</sup> Arculf's account of the sight in Bethlehem would eventually have reinforced the importance of the water in contemporary oral traditions.

The representation of the bath became an integral part of later Nativity scenes as seen in tenth-century ivories in the Louvre (ill. 41) and in Museo Sacro in the Vatican (ill. 42), as well as in the Cappadocian frescoes (ill. 43).<sup>81</sup> When the midwives are identified, one of them is always called MEA or HMEA.<sup>82</sup> This is different from the names given in the Apocrypha, but the identification seems to have become standardized "from the very first appearance of this scene."<sup>83</sup> There is actually no definitive date for this first occurrence, but several connections can be made with the painted veil of Antinoé, now in the Louvre museum and generally ascribed to the fifth

century on the basis of style<sup>84</sup> The denomination MEA appears on the veil in the washing scene This points to a tradition of identifying the midwife which would precede early Byzantine art,<sup>85</sup> and confirms that the birth of Dionysos may have served as a model for the Christian Nativity scene

This could explain how, in the Castelseprio Nativity, Salome is identified as EMEA in the miracle of the midwife scene the name was probably transferred from the bath scene to the miracle scene, which involves the same midwife and is located within the same pictorial frame In fact, the combination of both the miracle of the midwife and the washing of the Child in the same pictorial cycle is known in only two other pre-Iconoclastic cycles, both of which are in Rome the eighth-century frescoes in the catacomb of San Valentino, recorded by Bosio (ill 36), and the lost mosaics of the oratory of John VII (705-707) in Old St-Peter's,<sup>86</sup> which are known to us through Grimaldi's drawings (ill 44) Of these mosaics, there remains a tracing of the miracle of the midwife (ill 45) and a fragment of the bath scene (ill 46)<sup>87</sup> The Washing of the Child in the Oratory of John VII is the first securely dated example of this theme in Christian monumental art<sup>88</sup>

In the San Valentino fresco, the unidentified midwife approaches the infant Christ, in order that he may heal her hand This is consistent with the Apocryphal account However, in the mosaic of John VII, she seems to be moving towards the Virgin Mary (ill 45), although Grimaldi's drawings lack in clarity of detail (compare ill 44 and other drawings by Grimaldi ill 47, 48)<sup>89</sup> At Castelseprio the midwife is clearly advancing towards the Virgin, her hand outstretched, much like the fresco commissioned by John VII in Santa Maria Antiqua (ill 49, 50) Because of the serious damage to the S Maria Antiqua fresco, it is not known whether the early eighth-century

wall painting included a washing scene, as do the other early eighth-century Roman cycles

In early Christian art, the doubting Salome is seldom acknowledged. When she is represented, she is moving either towards the crib as in San Valentino,<sup>90</sup> or, as in Santa Maria Antiqua and Castelseprio, directly towards the Virgin. This latter type occurs in the sixth-century ivory panel on the Cathedra of Maximian (ill. 51). After the eighth century, the doubting midwife does not occur in many monuments.<sup>91</sup> The reason for the disappearance of this motif is not well known. It may be that the subject was seen as being crude,<sup>92</sup> but it is more likely because the integration of Christ's first bath displaced the Salome scene as a reference to Mary's miraculous childbirth.<sup>93</sup>

Thus, Castelseprio, the mosaics of John VII and the San Valentino catacomb can be interpreted as part of a formative stage of the Nativity iconography, when the ending of one tradition (the representation of the doubting midwife) and the beginning of another (the integration of the washing of the Child) overlapped. An eighth-century date for the three cycles seems highly plausible, not only because of their common iconography, but also in light of their closely similar style.<sup>94</sup>

Also originating in the Protoevangelium of James (ch. 21), the gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the Gospel of Matthew (ch. 2) is the Adoration of the Magi (ill. 20, 21). After following the direction of the star in the East, the Magi find the Child with his mother and bring out of their bags gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, which they offer to their new-born king. According to the textual sources, an angel then warns them not to go back to their countries through Judea (Prot. 21.3, Matt. 2.12). An angel is often shown introducing the Holy Family to the Magi. His presence

must also be a reference to the story, as is the outdoor setting frequently depicted outside the grotto of the Nativity.

The Epiphany became a popular representation in early Christian art, where it is found in several media, such as catacombs wall paintings and sarcophagi reliefs.<sup>95</sup> In those monuments, the type of representation became fairly homogenous, but the number and position of the Magi varies.

Unusual features appear in the Castelseprio Adoration: Joseph is sitting in the foreground, below the rock on which the Virgin and Child are seated. In the literature, the presence of Joseph is referred to only in the Pseudo-Matthew: "Digno también de notar que los magos encuentran al niño con María y con José 'et ingentibus muneribus muneraverunt Mariam et Ioseph.' El original griego... como el evangelio, hablan sólo de María y del niño."<sup>96</sup> Joseph's position finds a parallel in the early Christian ivory cover of the Etschmiadzin Gospels.<sup>97</sup>

The position of Mary and Christ, elevated on a rock formation, is not a very common one: on the early sixth-century wooden door of Santa Sabina in Rome, the Virgin is raised on a higher plane, but whether she is seated on a rock or on a throne is not clear.<sup>98</sup> Other instances of the Virgin sitting on a rock are found both in early Christian art, for example a sarcophagus in Arles,<sup>99</sup> and in later works.<sup>100</sup>

The unusually high position of the Virgin can be compared to the Adorations in the Drogo Sacramentary and in a Carolingian ivory.<sup>101</sup> A drawing in a Homiliary of 1072 in Monte Cassino is very close to the Castelseprio Adoration: the Virgin is in a landscape, the Magi wear robes of the early Christian period and archaic Persian hats, and their grouping is arranged in depth.<sup>102</sup>

Within the context of monumental art, a type of Adoration, different from early

Christian models, emerged in the early eighth century. This type is found in the frescoes of John VII (705-707) in the church of Santa Maria Antiqua (ill. 53) and in the mosaics of the oratory of John VII (see ill. 47). A fragment of the oratory Adoration remains, now in the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin in Rome (ill. 54). One magus genuflects while offering his gift to Christ, and the other two Magi stand behind him, seemingly talking as they proceed with their presents towards the Holy Family.<sup>103</sup> Joseph stands behind the Virgin's throne while an angel who flies in the direction of the Holy Family rotates the upper part of his body to introduce them to the Magi. The Santa Maria Antiqua and Oratory Adorations are very similar: the Magi wear the same type of robes and Persian hats, and they interact in the same way, the Holy Family and the angel are shown in the same fashion, as is Christ's movements towards the Magi. The scenes are reversed as in a mirror, probably because of their spatial position within the cycle.

The Castelseprio fresco closely follows the same scheme as these Roman works, with the exception of Joseph's position and Mary's seating arrangement.<sup>104</sup> The resemblance of the angel and of the group of Wise Men overshadows these differences. The high vertical extension at Castelseprio may be due to the narrow space in which the scene was painted<sup>105</sup>: the figure of Mary was thus lifted in the top corner, and that of Joseph was accommodated where space allowed, in the foreground.

The presentation in the Temple (ill. 23, 24, 25) is based on the Gospel according to Luke (2:22-39). Mary and Joseph have brought the Christ Child to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. According to the Gospel, Mary's Purification occurred simultaneously with the Presentation in the Temple. Simeon, the old priest to

whom the Holy Spirit had revealed that he should not die until he had seen Christ in the flesh, welcomes the Child in the temple. He takes Jesus in his arms, thanks God and says "At last, Lord, You dismiss Your servant in peace, as You promised! For with my own eyes I have seen Your Salvation which You have made ready for every people" (Lk. 2:29). Anna, an eighty-four year old prophetess, comes into the temple at the moment of the Presentation, and also thanks God for the sight of the Saviour.

The celebration of the meeting of Christ with Simeon was first recorded in Jerusalem at the end of the fourth century by the abbess Aetheria Sylvia.<sup>106</sup> This feast, known as the *Hypapante*, was integrated in Rome probably by Pope Gelasius I towards the end of the fifth century, although this date is not certain.<sup>107</sup> In the Western Church, the purification of Mary became increasingly important as the cult developed. The ceremony grew more elaborate at the end of the seventh century under Pope Sergius I.<sup>108</sup>

Since the feast of the Presentation was observed in Rome only from the late fifth century on, depictions of the event did not occur in early Christian Western art: there was no pictorial tradition or set iconography for the Presentation. The decision as to what part of the narrative should be illustrated was left up to the artist. The iconography of the Presentation developed in a way that reflects the chronological evolution of the festival which it illustrates.<sup>109</sup>

Three principal iconographic types of Presentations occur. The earliest known type is the Eastern form of *Hypapante*, in which the emphasis is placed on the Holy Family and Simeon. Their meeting takes place outside the temple and there is no indication of either an altar or a canopy. Such a setting thus precludes any association of the scene with the Presentation in the Temple proper. This characteristically Eastern

type of *Hypapante* was depicted in the mosaics in Santa Maria Maggiore,<sup>110</sup> in *circa* 430-440, before the Feast of the Purification of Mary was introduced in Rome at the end of the fifth century.

Another form of Presentation occurs in the eighth or ninth century: the scene is located inside or in front of the temple, around or near an altar, thus connoting the actual Presentation in the temple. The main focus is still the meeting of Christ and Simeon. The four protagonists, Mary, Simeon, Joseph and Anna, are placed symmetrically on either side of the Christ Child who is being presented to Simeon. Such a scene is depicted in the ninth-century enameled reliquary cross of Paschal I in the Sancta Sanctorum.<sup>111</sup> In this iconographical type, the Purification of Mary is sometimes alluded to by showing her offerings of birds, which either Joseph or an attendant carries.<sup>112</sup> However, this is a minor episode within the scene.

The two early types of Presentations coexisted: the *Hypapante* survived in the Eastern tradition, and the type just described above developed in the West. Since Eastern art continued to influence Western art, elements from the two groups were intermingled. Therefore, although the iconography of the Presentation was established around the eighth century in the West, a great many variations occurred from one scene to another. For instance, according to Grimaldi's drawings (ill. 47, 48), in the Oratory of John VII in Old St. Peter's, the group of figures was not symmetrically arranged (the Baptism occupies the right part of the same frame), and the altar is omitted. In other representations,<sup>113</sup> the altar bears no direct relationship to the action of the figures.

The third major type of iconography for this scene emerged around the eleventh century: it illustrates the presentation of the Child at the altar, that is, to the

Lord. Although Simeon (and later, the high priest) is always present, the attention is focused on Christ at the altar rather than on the meeting with Simeon.<sup>114</sup>

The Castelseprio Presentation in the Temple corresponds to the type which emerged in the eighth or ninth century: the main event is the meeting of Simeon with Christ who is carried by his mother (ill. 25). The three are flanked by the other figures: Joseph, who carries offerings in his hands (alluding to the Purification of Mary), two elders following Joseph, and Anna who raises her hand, about to start her speech.<sup>115</sup> The scene takes place within the Temple, and the cube in front of Anna, on the left, may be interpreted as an altar.<sup>116</sup>

Although a number of pictorial details occur in other Presentations, no exact parallel to the Castelseprio fresco could be found: the arrangement and postures of the figures, their expressions, the relations between them, the ritual covering of Simeon's and Joseph's hands and the setting of the scenes, all vary.<sup>117</sup>

### Summary of Iconographic Comparisons

A number of parallels can be found for each scene in the Castelseprio frescoes. Iconographic details can be compared to many works of art from different periods and various parts of the Christian world, and many of these comparisons, taken individually, can be debated. This is reflected in the great controversy surrounding the date and origin of this monument: depending on the importance given to each analogy, different conclusions can be and have been reached. Therefore, iconography alone cannot provide solid grounds for the identification of date and origin of the Castelseprio cycle. For instance, comparison with the cave churches of Cappadocia show that the two groups share common themes: the Trial by Water; the Journey to Bethlehem, the

Washing of the Child, and, to some extent, the Adoration of the Magi and the Presentation. However, in most of these Cappadocian representations, iconographic details vary considerably from Castelseprio, and their styles can hardly be related. It is only in terms of content that parallels can be established, except for the scene of the two midwives washing the Christ Child, which follows a standard type in both locations.

Comparisons with early eighth-century mural cycles in Rome brought to light examples of both thematic and iconographic types similar to several Castelseprio paintings: the particular gesture of Elisabeth in the Visitation (in the catacomb of San Valentino), the doubting Salome (in Santa Maria Antiqua, the Oratory of John VII and the catacomb of San Valentino), the Annunciation to the Shepherds (in the Oratory of John VII), the Washing of the Child (in the Oratory of John VII and the catacomb of San Valentino), the Adoration of the Magi (in Santa Maria Antiqua and the Oratory of John VII), and the eighth-century type of Presentation in the Temple (in the Oratory of John VII).

The concentration of thematic, iconographic and stylistic<sup>118</sup> similarities in Roman mural decorations of the seventh and eighth centuries has led to the theory that the artists of Castelseprio could have belonged to the same school<sup>119</sup> in the early eighth century, they may have been called or sent from Rome to the Lombard region, where they would have been commissioned to decorate Santa Maria di Castelseprio. However, the lack of documentary evidence, the appearance of certain themes at Castelseprio which have no parallel in Rome, and the differences between the Lombard and Roman cycles cannot support this theory. The two groups may have emerged from the same tradition, but how closely connected they are cannot be fully assessed.

The presence of an artistic tradition related to that of the Castelseprio workshop

can be felt elsewhere in northern Italy, most notably in the mid-eighth-century church of San Salvatore in Brescia <sup>120</sup> Unfortunately, the precise extent of this influence in and around Lombardy remains unknown. It may be presumed that an artist of the quality of the Castelseprio master would have obtained a good number of commissions, but any estimate of his work and direct influence remains highly hypothetical. Further research in this geographical area may yield more evidence of the survival and dissemination of this artistic idiom.

Iconography can serve in finding comparative works with which certain links can be established. However, it cannot be used as the only methodological approach. Style, meaning of the whole program, history, and the patron's involvement are all aspects which contribute to the creation of a monument. All elements of the program should therefore be studied as a whole, as the artist painted a cycle which followed a set dogmatic content. "Non si può basare una analisi iconografica sulla comparazione di pose e di gesti delle singole figure, esulando dal contenuto ideologico di questa o di quella scena" <sup>121</sup> Parallels in meaning can pinpoint the religious ideas of the period, the artistic trends attending them and the socio-historical context from which the paintings emerged. It is from this perspective that close links with other monuments can be established. The scarcity of early medieval fresco cycles reduces the chances of finding a complete group of paintings which could be related to Castelseprio, but a more global approach in the study of this monument may throw light on its position within medieval art.

## Notes to Chapter II

<sup>1</sup> E Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, v 1 (Philadelphia, 1963), 25

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 364

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 366

<sup>4</sup> J Hervieux, *The New Testament Apocrypha* (New York, 1960), 22

<sup>5</sup> Hennecke, *N T Apocrypha*, 367

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 373-74.

<sup>7</sup> Hervieux, *The N T Apocrypha*, 10

<sup>8</sup> Hervieux thinks that the Pseudo-Matthew dates from the sixth century. The eighth-ninth century date is better documented in M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: 1966), 70.

<sup>9</sup> Several names were given to this work, depending on the translations and copies. All titles refer to Mary and to James (Hennecke, *N T Apocrypha*, 371).

<sup>10</sup> Hennecke, *N T Apocrypha*, 372

<sup>11</sup> Hervieux, *The N T Apocrypha*, 17

<sup>12</sup> Hennecke, *N T Apocrypha*, 372

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 372

<sup>14</sup> James, *The Apocryphal N T*, 38. A seventh- or eighth-century document, the Montpellier manuscript, was originally thought to be an early copy of the protoevangelium, but was found to be a version of the Gospels. See J. M. C. Sánchez, "San José en los libros apócrifos del Nuevo Testamento," *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 19 (Montréal, 1971, 123-149), 147.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> Hervieux, *The N T Apocrypha*, 19

<sup>18</sup> James, *The Apocryphal N T*, 70.

<sup>19</sup> Hervieux, *The N T Apocrypha*, 19.

20 C Michel, *Evangelies Apocryphes* (Paris, 1924), p. xix, quoted in Giacomelli, "Santa Maria di Castelseprio," 72.

21 Hervieux, *The N T Apocrypha*, 18-19

22 James, *The Apocryphal N T*, 70

23 These episodes must have been preceded by an oral tradition before being included in the Gospels (Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 363). The theological interest is stronger than the purely narrative interest, most of the stories about Jesus' birth and infancy deal with the Nativity and related event (*Ibid*, 364).

24 Hennecke, *N T Apocrypha*, 30

25 *Ibid*, 368

26 The protoevangelium talks of seven maids (ch. 10), but the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew mentions that there were five maids with Mary in Joseph's house (ch. 8). They knew of the angel's communication with Mary, but they are not mentioned in the actual episode of the Annunciation.

27 For a discussion of the architectural setting in the iconography of the Annunciation, see J. Fournée, "Architectures symboliques dans le thème iconographique de l'Annonciation," *Synthronon Art et archéologie de la fin de l'Antiquité et du Moyen-Age* (Paris, 1968, 225-235), esp. 227.

28 C. R. Morey, "Castelseprio and the Byzantine Renaissance," *Art Bulletin* 34 (1952, 173-210), 180.

29 Schapiro, "The Frescoes," 88.

30 Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 45.

31 For example, in the Parenzo mosaic and in later Cappadocian frescoes (Capitano d'Arzago, *Santa Maria*, 550).

32 *Ibid*, 550.

33 Capitani d'Arzago (*Ibid*, 553-555) explains his theory that the artist followed a classical idea of showing a calm protagonist in contrast to a disturbed figure as in *The Story of Ulysses* (ill. 33).

34 *Ibid*, 553.

35 Grimaldi drew sketches of the mosaics before they were destroyed in 1609. These mosaics are fully described in E. Müntz, "Notes sur les mosaïques de l'Italie IV

L'"Oratoire du pape Jean VII," *Revue archéologique* 34 (1877, 145-162.

36 Weitzmann (*The Fresco Cycle*, 47) mentions a drawing of that plaque

37 Schapiro, "The Frescoes," 90.

38 Morey, "Castelseprio," 181.

39 J Osborne, "Early Medieval Wall Paintings in the Catacomb of San Valentino, Rome," *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 49 (1981), 82-90.

40 Hervieux, *The N T Apocrypha*, 66.

41 *Ibid* , 69

42 Pseudo-Matthew goes further in its intention to emphasize Mary's virginity. It states: "some upheld their holiness while others, out of bad conscience, continued to accuse her" (Ps -Matt. 12:4). It is undoubtedly referring to the Jews who refused to recognize the miracle.

43 Weitzmann (*The Fresco Cycle*, 48) mentions the cover of the Etchmiadzin Gospels, the cover of the Lupicinus Gospels in Paris, a plaque formerly in the Stroganoff collection and the pyxis from Kertch.

44 The round altar in the Castelseprio scene is however not included in the Kiliçlar Trial by Water, but a similar altar is found in the Presentation in the temple in another Cappadocian fresco (*Ibid* , 50).

45 E Cattaneo, "Testimonianze iconografiche medioevali su San Giuseppe in Lombardia," *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 19 (Montreal, 1971, 714-722), 718.

46 P Testini, "Le origini dell'iconografia di S. Giuseppe (sec. IV-VI)," *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 19 (Montreal, 1971, 684-713), 694-696.

47 Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 49.

48 Schapiro, "The Frescoes," 90.

49 Jacobos Kokkinobaphos, Paris, Bibl. Nat. cod. gr. 1208, fol. 251 v and Vatican, cod. gr. 1162, fol. 188 r. Weitzmann (*The Fresco Cycle*, 49) sees a close connection between the origins of those manuscripts and that of the Castelseprio frescoes.

50 Schapiro ("The Frescoes," 90) points out that there is no reason to believe that the Trial at Castelseprio is post-iconoclastic, as was suggested by Weitzmann.

51 E Rasco, "El anuncio a José (Matt. 1, 18-25)," *Cahiers de Joséphologie*

19 (Montreal, 1971, 84-103). The author points out the role of the oral traditions which preceded the Gospels, and draws links between the Gospels Matthew and Luke in regard to the importance of Joseph and his integration in the texts (89-91)

<sup>52</sup> Capitani d'Arzago (*Santa Maria*, 567) believes this representation to be the earliest. "non saprei trovare esempio più antico e più tipicamente conforme agli apocrifi di questo perchè nella scena del Viaggio compare come guida di Maria e di Giuseppe proprio quell'Angelo che troviamo solo nella redazione di Ps. Matteo."

<sup>53</sup> Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 51

<sup>54</sup> Capitani d'Arzago, *Santa Maria*, 567

<sup>55</sup> For a detailed study of the different poses and clothing, see Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 51-21 and Capitani d'Arzago, *Santa Maria*, 565-569

<sup>56</sup> Weitzmann (*The Fresco Cycle*, 52) considers this representation one of the proofs of a later date for Castelseprio

<sup>57</sup> Schapiro, "The Frescoes," 90

<sup>58</sup> Vatican, cod. gr. 1613, p. 273, ca. 1000

<sup>59</sup> Morey, "Castelseprio," 181

<sup>60</sup> Leveto (*Castel Seprio*, 121-122) adds the Ottonian Codex Egberti (Trier, Stadtbibliothek, fol. 12, 977-993) and an eleventh-century ivory book cover now in London. Schapiro ("The Frescoes," 90) mentions the twelfth-century manuscript in Paris, Bibl. Nat., Ms. Copte 13 in which the frequent landscapes reflect early Christian models.

<sup>61</sup> Cattaneo, "Testimonianze iconografiche," 719

<sup>62</sup> The cathedra of Maximianus, a pyxis in Berlin, the cover of the Etchmiadzin Gospels and the cover of the Lupicinus Gospels in Paris. (Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 52)

<sup>63</sup> P. Testini, "Alle origini dell'iconografia di Giuseppe di Nazareth," *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana* 48 (1972, 271-347), 310

<sup>64</sup> In one plaque, formerly in the Stroganoff collection, Joseph walks behind the Virgin and they are communicating, but the types of figures are different from those at Castelseprio (see Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 52). Schapiro ("The Frescoes," 95) notes similarities in the way Joseph holds his mantle, and in the depiction of the ass

<sup>65</sup> Leveto, *Castel Seprio*, 124

<sup>66</sup> The enameled cross of Paschal I (817-824) in the Museo Cristiano from the treasure of the Sancta Sanctorum is decorated with this scene although it is not identical to Castelseprio: the Virgin and Joseph do not look at each other and the figures are not depicted in the same way. See Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 53.

<sup>67</sup> M. Restle, *Byzantine Wall Painting in Asia Minor*, v. II (Shannon Ireland, 1969), plate 226.

<sup>68</sup> P. A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami* v. I (London, 1967), 87-88, v. II, plates 155-158.

<sup>69</sup> B. B. Anderson, *The Frescoes of San Salvatore at Brescia* (Berkeley, 1976), 134.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>71</sup> This view has been expressed by O. Demus in "Byzantine Art and the West," *Wrightsmen Lectures*, III (N. Y., 1970), 224, note 21.

<sup>72</sup> Anderson, *San Salvatore*, 136. This is also discussed in D. H. Wright, "The Shape of the Seventh Century in Byzantine Art" (*Abstracts: Byzantine Studies Conference*, Cleveland, 1975, 9-28), 26.

<sup>73</sup> Cattaneo, "Testimonianze iconografiche," 719.

<sup>74</sup> Weitzmann (*The Fresco Cycle*, 57-59) compares the Annunciation to the Shepherds to a number of early Christian examples of this scene, but he ultimately makes a connection between the Castelseprio scene and Middle Byzantine representations of this theme on the grounds of similar types of shepherds, particularly one shepherd (and the figure of Joseph in the foreground) in the eleventh-century mosaic at Daphni near Athens.

<sup>75</sup> Weitzmann did not mention the appearance of this theme in the Oratory, in spite of its importance. According to him, the association of this episode with the Nativity does not occur before the Middle Byzantine period. However, this statement has been proven wrong. P. J. Nordhagen has proven that the Annunciation to the Shepherds was represented in the Oratory of John VII, and that the integration of this theme with the Nativity was pre-iconoclastic. "The Integration of the Nativity and the Annunciation to the Shepherds in Byzantine Art," *Actes du XXII congrès international de l'histoire de l'art*, I (Budapest, 1972, 253-257), 257.

<sup>76</sup> J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades* (Warminster, 1977), 104. Schapiro gave the iconography of the washing scene a Palestinian origin on the basis of Arculf's account ("The Frescoes," 96).

<sup>77</sup> For a detailed study of this development, see Per Jonas Nordhagen, "The Origin of the Washing of the Child in the Nativity Scene," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* LIV (1961), 333-337, Ernst Kitzinger, "The Hellenistic Heritage in Byzantine Art,"

*Dumbarton Oaks Papers* XVII (1963), 95-115, Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 53-57

78 The scene in the Domus Aurea is indeed very similar to the Castelseprio Nativity, especially the reclining figures of Semele and of Mary. Weitzmann (*The Fresco Cycle*, 37) suggests that the Domus Aurea fresco may have been the model for this scene at Castelseprio. Moreover, Nordhagen says that the reclining figure of Semele in the Birth of Dionysos in the fifth-century (or earlier) veil of Antinoë is "the possible prototype for the representation of the Virgin of the Nativity" ("The Origin," 335).

79 Osborne, "Medieval Wall-Paintings," 86.

80 This view is also expressed in Nordhagen, "The Origin," 334, note 9.

81 It is interesting to note that the theme of the doubting midwife does not appear in Cappadocia where old iconographic types are preserved. See Schapiro, "The Frescoes," 95. In Cappadocia, the iconography of the Nativity is fixed on the early types. See N. Thierry, "Un décor pré-íconoclaste de Cappadoce: Açikel Aga Kilisesi (Eglise de l'Aga à la main ouverte)," *Cahiers Archéologiques* 18 (Paris 1968, 33-69), 46-47.

82 Nordhagen, "The Origin," 335.

83 *Ibid*, 335.

84 Nordhagen ("The Origin," 336) thinks that it may be somewhat earlier than the fifth century.

85 Nordhagen ("The Origin," 336) mentions that the veil of Antinoë may have been copied "more directly than one would have dared to suggest."

86 For a detailed description of the different postures of Mary, the midwives and the child Christ in each of these cycles, see Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 54-55. Cecchelli ("Weitzmann," 99) stresses the importance of the similarity between the Nativity scenes in the Oratory of John VII and Castelseprio.

87 Muntz ("Notes sur les mosaïques chrétiennes") gives a description of the bath scene in the oratory of John VII (150-51) and he also mentions an unsigned colour drawing of it, now in the Barberini Library, XLIX, n. 19, fol. 12, with the inscription "Ex ruinis antiquissimi sacelli Joannis papae VII in veteri basilica MDCVIII in sacris cryptis Vat" (151).

88 Osborne, "Medieval Wall-Paintings," 86.

89 The discrepancies between various drawings by Grimaldi are further discussed in P. J. Nordhagen, "The Integration of the Nativity and the Annunciation to the Shepherds in Byzantine Art," 254-256. For a full description of Salome in front of the crib and the history of John VII's frescoes, see P. J. Nordhagen, "The Mosaics of

John VII," *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* II (1965), 142-43

<sup>90</sup> Weitzmann affirms that she is moving towards the crib in the lost mosaics of the oratory of John VII as well (*The Fresco Cycle*, 55). As examples of this he mentions a *pysix* in Berlin, a *pysix* in Vienna, and two sixth-century plaques in the British Museum and Manchester (p. 55 note 57).

<sup>91</sup> Capitani d'Arzago (*Santa Maria*, 581) says that the theme disappeared after the eighth century. Weitzmann (*The Fresco Cycle*, 55) thinks he found two later examples: a lost tenth-century fresco from S. Sebastiano al Palatino and a twelfth-century panel of the bronze door of the cathedral of Benevento (ill. 52). The latter example is contested by Schapiro who says that the midwife holds both arms extended in the same fashion as the angels beside her: "she is not clearly the subject of the miracle and does not support a withered arm as does the apocryphal Salome of the Castelseprio fresco, the mosaic of John VII, the contemporary frescoes in Sta. Maria Antiqua and S. Valentino in Rome, and the ivories of the sixth and seventh centuries" ("The Frescoes," 95).

<sup>92</sup> Capitani d'Arzago, *Santa Maria*, 584.

<sup>93</sup> Nordhagen, "The Origin," 333, 336.

<sup>94</sup> V. N. Lasareff "Gli affreschi di Castelseprio," *Sibrium* III (1956-57, 87-102), 92-93; D. H. Wright, "Sources of Longobard Wall Painting: Facts and Possibilities," *Atti del VI° congresso internazionale di studi sull'alto medioevo* II (Spoleto, 1980, 727-739), 738.

<sup>95</sup> Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 59.

<sup>96</sup> Sánchez, "San José en los libros apócrifos," 147. Joseph has more importance in the Apocrypha than in the Gospels. It was suggested that "Di Giuseppe si scrisse assai negli Apocriphi quasi per compensare le magre notizie degli Evangelisti" (B. Bagatti, "Il culto di San Giuseppe in Palestina," *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 19 [Montreal, 1971, 565-575], 564).

<sup>97</sup> Schapiro, "The Frescoes," 101.

<sup>98</sup> Weitzmann (*The Fresco Cycle*, 60) thinks that she is on a podium, but Schapiro ("The Frescoes") sees her on a "stratified stepped rock formation" (101).

<sup>99</sup> Schapiro, "The Frescoes," 101. Schapiro thinks that this type of seating arrangement derives from an early Christian type of the Nativity, for example, that of the ivory diptych in the Milan Cathedral, where both Joseph and Mary sit on rocks (note 61). Weitzmann overlooked these examples and states that the Virgin is always seated on a throne or a chair in early Christian times (*The Fresco Cycle*, 60).

<sup>100</sup> Weitzmann (*The Fresco Cycle*, 60) and Capitani d'Arzago (*Santa Maria*, 598-599) found this to be of a later date, comparing the Castelseprio type with a

miniature in the Menologium of Basil II (975-1024) and an eleventh-century fresco at Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella

101 Schapiro, "The Frescoes," 101

102 *Ibid* , 101 Schapiro says that this is the closest parallel to Castelseprio he has seen. It may be a copy of a Byzantine work, in which case it would preserve a very old model

103 Weitzmann (*The Fresco Cycle*, 59) proposes that two actions are shown at Santa Maria Antiqua the arrival of the Magi and the offering of their presents. According to him, such a depiction is the fusion of two scenes shown separately in early Christian art, and again divided later such as in the Cappadocian fresco at Tokali Kilise (see A. Wharton Epstein, *Tokali Kilise, Tenth-Century Metropolitan Art in Byzantine Cappadocia* [Washington, 1976], fig 64) This is not so obvious though, because the two Magi who are waiting bear their presents in their hands, they do not look as if they were still on the journey

104 Cecchelli, "Weitzmann," 100

105 Morey, "Castelseprio," 195

106 D. Shorr, "The Iconographic Development of the Presentation in the Temple," *Art Bulletin* 28 (1946, 17-32), 17

107 Shorr (*Ibid* , 18) mentions that it may have been adopted "as a counter-attraction to the pagan festival of the Lupercalia "

108 For an elaborate description of the festival and of its origins, see *Ibid* , 18-19

109 *Ibid* , 19

110 *Ibid* , 19 Shorr later mentions that the particular iconographic disposition of the S. Maria Maggiore Presentation is unique

111 *Ibid* , fig 2

112 In one instance, the eleventh-century Hitda Evangelistary, the Virgin holds the birds while Joseph carries the child (*Ibid* , fig 3)

113 For instance, the tenth-century Menologium of Basil II (fig 4 in Shorr), a tenth- or eleventh-century ivory plaque in Leningrad, and a twelfth-century Evangelistary (Bib Nat Copt 13), *Ibid* , 21

114 *Ibid* , 21-22

<sup>115</sup> Weitzmann interprets Anna's gesture as her "contemplating the handing over of the Christ Child to Simeon" (*The Fresco Cycle*, 63). He adds that the artist sacrificed the original meaning of Anna as the utterer of a prophecy by depicting her in a classical pensive gesture with her hand under her chin. In view of the damaged state of the fresco in that section, this interpretation cannot be taken for granted.

<sup>116</sup> Shorr says that when it appears, the altar is a "small, square, isolated table" ("The Iconographic Development," 26). This "cube" is also seen as an altar by Capitani d'Arzago (*Santa Maria*, 603-604) and Weitzmann (*The Fresco Cycle*, 30, 34-35, 40).

<sup>117</sup> For a detailed listing of these differences, see Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle* (62-64), and Schapiro, "The Frescoes" (103-105). In trying to support a tenth-century date for Castelseprio, Weitzmann compares the Presentation to that of a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century Psalter in Berlin (Kupferstichkabinett, Cod. 78 A 9, Fol. 265r, fig. 68 in *The Fresco Cycle*). He proposes that the scenes are very close parallels, although the backgrounds and styles are very different. Their only similarity seems to be the arrangement of the main figures (this could however be coincidental), Anna's gesture and Christ's pose. Weitzmann says that this manuscript was probably a copy of a tenth-century model, since copying of earlier models was often practised during the fourteenth century. It is through this indirect link that Weitzmann ties Castelseprio with the tenth century. Schapiro suggests an earlier parallel for the similar poses of Christ and Anna in the Utrecht Psalter (fol. 89v) ("The Frescoes," 104). He also provides a wealth of earlier examples in which pictorial and iconographical details analogous to those at Castelseprio can be found (103-105).

<sup>118</sup> Style will be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>119</sup> Morey, "Castelseprio and the Byzantine Renaissance," 192.

<sup>120</sup> This point will be examined in subsequent chapters.

<sup>121</sup> Lasareff, "Gli affreschi di Castelseprio," 95.

## III

## STYLISTIC COMPARISONS

The frescoes at Castelseprio are stylistically associated with the classical tradition. Many elements of form and content can be traced back to Greco-Roman art: the illusionistic landscapes and architectural backgrounds, the sharp contrast of light and shadow, the lively atmosphere, the vigorous modelling of the figures, their animated movement and posture, the flowing, folded drapery, the cast shadows, and, above all, the expressionistic rendering of the figures. These all recall the Hellenistic forms of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Classical idioms are adopted and depicted in a natural, unified fashion. The representation of landscapes, the way figures are depicted and the spatial composition of the scenes characterize the frescoes as related to antique art.<sup>1</sup> Even though classical forms are dominant, the frescoes also suggest the presence of medieval artistic forms by the nervous use of brushstrokes and interrupted lines which form schematic patterns in draperies and highlighted surfaces.<sup>2</sup> Stylization of postures and gestures, together with the rhythm of lines, evoke the more methodical style and spiritual character of early medieval art.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the outlines, painted in the same rapid and vigorous brushstrokes as the highlights, indicate that a highly achieved form of Hellenism is successfully combined with the early medieval idiom qualified as the "outline style".<sup>4</sup>

At Castelseprio, the classical style seems to be a renaissance rather than a derivation of antique art.<sup>5</sup> Whether the Hellenism of Castelseprio came from a continuing tradition or from a revival is not yet clearly established. For instance, landscape painting, one of the hallmarks of Hellenistic art, was carried from Antiquity

to Byzantine art, mainly through Old Testament illustrations<sup>6</sup> This can be explained by the fact that Old Testament iconography was developed relatively early, certainly earlier than New Testament iconography, and likely at a time when narrative depictions followed Hellenistic standards<sup>7</sup> But even in elaborate Byzantine landscapes, the sense of nature is not as unified as in Hellenistic art: "The imitation remains labored and self-conscious"<sup>8</sup> Therefore, if we consider Castelseprio in light of what remains of Byzantine art, it appears to be an exception. Not only are the Hellenistic landscape motifs adequately rendered, but the feeling of nature creates a gentle, compatible setting for the human figures. "Here, as nowhere else in Byzantine art, the Gospel story is endowed with a poetic, dreamlike quality"<sup>9</sup> However, there may have existed other Gospel cycles of the same quality, the lack of comparative material simply does not allow us to reach any definite conclusions regarding the singularity of Castelseprio. Comparing this monument with works of a different size and technique can lead to a false interpretation. The medium has to be taken into consideration, as techniques such as ivory carving, silver relief or manuscript illustration do not have the same versatility as fresco painting. The coloristic modelling will vary, be limited (or non-existent), forms will necessarily be adapted to the medium, and so will content, such as backgrounds and naturalistic details.

The illusionism in the Castelseprio frescoes, closer to the classical type than to what we know of the Byzantine interpretation, may be the result of "a new, vigorous infusion of 'Hellenism' into Italy"<sup>10</sup> This presupposes that the original Hellenistic idiom was kept almost intact in another centre for a number of generations, and later developed on its own after its introduction into Italy. Even though very little is known about pre-iconoclastic art in Constantinople,<sup>11</sup> it is generally thought that Hellenism

was kept alive there until the iconoclastic controversy broke out in 726. Stylistic influences which prevailed in Constantinople have to be looked for elsewhere because of lack of evidence in the capital itself.

The Castelseprio cycle may be a rare instance of the type of fresco painting which was practised in pre-iconoclastic years in Constantinople, but there is no actual proof of this. Therefore, a great number of works and monuments which can offer some kind of comparative elements are used in tracing analogies with the Castelseprio frescoes. However, these comparisons are rather limited, as there exists no known cycle like that of Castelseprio: neither its iconography nor its style can be associated with one single complete work. Depending on the associations referred to, many conclusions can be reached, and all are debatable. The controversy concerns how this style was brought to the small Lombard church, where it came from, who was the artist (at least, where did he originate), and when the frescoes were executed. The comparative monuments discussed range widely, from regions as diverse as the Middle East, south Italy, Rome, northern Italy and Europe.

#### Comparisons with Eastern Monuments

Mosaics and frescoes executed in Palestine and Syria under the Umayyad Caliphate (661-749)<sup>12</sup> probably reflect the stylistic development of Constantinopolitan art. The Great Mosque in Damascus, built between 705 and 715 by the Caliph ad-Walîd, was decorated with mosaics of naturalistic landscapes, palaces and villas. These employ a style which was then current in Constantinople, and it is known from documentary evidence that the Byzantine emperor (presumably Justinian II) sent both materials and craftsmen to Damascus for this purpose.<sup>13</sup>

The eighth-century frescoes of Qusayr'Amra, a pleasure-house erected by one

of the Umayyad princes<sup>14</sup> in the Jordanian desert, show an interpretation of Hellenistic art. Court scenes, a number of nude figures, dancers, musicians, craftsmen at work, animals, hunting scenes, royal personages, symbolic figures, heads in medallions and foliage all form part of the varied decoration of this building. Although the style of these Arab frescoes has generally been considered "provincial" (attested by the strictly linear contours<sup>15</sup>), the actions of the figures, their plasticity and their spatial arrangement are analogous<sup>16</sup> - yet not identical - to the style adopted by the Castelseprio artist. In spite of their typically Eastern accent, the spontaneity of narration and the Hellenistic heritage of the Qusayr'Amra frescoes allow their association with the Lombard cycle.

The Damascus and Qusayr'Amra decorations were surely preceded by other classically influenced monuments now lost. For example, fresco paintings of landscapes, mountains, herds of animals, dogs, shepherds and elaborate buildings existed in Gaza in the sixth century, as described by Procopius of Gaza<sup>18</sup>. The decorations of Great Mosque in Damascus and Qusayr'Amra originated during a period frequently referred to in a Byzantine context as the "Justinianic Renaissance". This "Renaissance" was initiated by the emperor Constantine IV in 681 and further developed by his son, Justinian II, from 685 onwards<sup>19</sup>. It had run its course by about 740, about the time that the construction of the palace of Khirbet al-Mafjar was abandoned (in 743 or 747). In this palace, the floor mosaic of the audience chamber exhibits a style more schematically composed and less naturalistic than that of the earlier monuments<sup>20</sup>.

The Great Palace in Constantinople is adorned with mosaics which have also been thought to date from the "Justinianic Renaissance"<sup>21</sup>, although this view is not

universally accepted. This possibility was suggested in part from stylistic evidence, such as classical genre scenes, linked to motifs in the frescoes of Qusayr'Amra. Notwithstanding the difference of medium, and the provincial quality of execution in the desert murals, figure style can be compared. Another comparison may be made between frontal male faces in the border of the Great Palace mosaics and the best heads of the apostles in John VII's frescoes in Santa Maria Antiqua (705-707). These comparisons seem to show "the adaptation for the Pope in Rome and for an Arab prince at Qusayr'Amra, with varying degrees of success, of the Justinianic Renaissance style from Constantinople, which for this repertory of motifs survives in only one metropolitan example, but that of superb quality, the Great Palace mosaic" <sup>22</sup>

In line with these stylistic comparisons, the Castelseprio frescoes have been considered as one of the monuments of the "Justinianic Renaissance" <sup>23</sup>. This style can be recognized in the plasticity and monumentality of the Christ *Pantocrator*, and the three-dimensionality of the hyperactive figures in the narrative scenes. These figures can be compared to those of the Great Palace in Constantinople and Qusayr'Amra. However, they are more elegantly painted at Castelseprio than in Qusayr'Amra, and they are more elaborate than the figures of the Great Palace mosaic in their energetic postures, smaller proportions, coloristic modelling, brilliant highlights and activated drapery folds and patterns. These characteristics may qualify the Castelseprio frescoes as "a Mannerist enhancement of the High Renaissance style of Justinian II," <sup>24</sup> dating from approximately the 720's <sup>25</sup>. However, these same characteristics can be used to demonstrate the differences between the two styles, thus reasserting the uniqueness of Castelseprio among remaining monuments.

Comparisons with a Monument in Southern Italy

Traces of an artistic style which has been compared to that of Castelseprio are found in a monument to the south-east of Rome, in the province of Molise. The paintings of a crypt church in the monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno are dated between 826 and 843 by an inscription which refers to the commissioner, Abbot Epiphanius, who is represented kneeling at the Virgin's feet. These frescoes depict scenes from the Gospels which are set against landscapes and architectural backgrounds thought to be reminiscent of the Castelseprio frescoes. One particular figure at San Vincenzo, the angel of the Annunciation (ill. 55), has been compared to the angel in the Dream of Joseph at Castelseprio (ill. 12)<sup>26</sup>. The angels' moving postures and their animated, billowing robes are thought to be similar, "though the forms are more schematic"<sup>27</sup> at San Vincenzo. It has been suggested from this comparison that this work of the ninth century shows that "the style of the Castelseprio frescoes was not represented uniquely by this one find, but existed in the seventh and eighth century within Italian art."<sup>28</sup>

The comparison with San Vincenzo al Volturno is not convincing, since a close examination of the two angels reveals considerable differences. Although both figures are depicted in movement, their postures vary greatly. At Castelseprio, the angel is in full profile, his body is inclined to an angle of about forty-five degrees, extending in an energetic movement. His wings are flowing horizontally, the drapery folds of his robe are naturalistically depicted, and, above all, his expression is very intense. In contrast, the San Vincenzo angel is in a vertical position with his back arched and his head turned in three-quarter view, his more static position is compensated by the very stylized, patterned folds of his dress, and his expression is gentle and relaxed. The brushstrokes are also very different in the two cycles.

Notably, no other scene from San Vincenzo has been associated with the Castelseprio frescoes. Therefore, the frescoes of San Vincenzo al Volturno cannot serve as evidence for the existence of a style to the south of Rome associable with that of Castelseprio<sup>29</sup>

### Comparisons with Roman Monuments

Hellenistic trends appeared in Roman art in the course of the seventh and eighth centuries, under the patronage of a series of Greek and Syrian Popes. A number of Oriental artists, fleeing from the Arab conquests in Alexandria, took refuge in Rome in the seventh century, and others came from Constantinople in the early eighth century at the start of the iconoclastic controversy<sup>30</sup> Eastern art forms can, to a certain extent, be assessed by the study of early Medieval Roman art. "The history of Roman painting of the seventh and eighth centuries is primarily that of the reception, absorption, and transformation of the Hellenistic elements imported from the East at that time."<sup>31</sup>

A limited number of Roman monuments can be used for the purpose of comparison with the Castelseprio frescoes. These are principally the decorative cycles commissioned by Pope John VII between 705 and 707<sup>32</sup>

Because of the destruction of the Oratory of John VII in Old St. Peter's, little can now be said about the style of its mosaics.<sup>33</sup> Grimaldi's drawings (ill. 47-48) give an idea of the general aspect of the cycle, but no stylistic detail can be ascertained. Some features are of interest: in the Nativity scene (ill. 44), the Annunciation to the Shepherds seems to be taking place in a landscape setting, as at Castelseprio, and the remains of the scene of the Adoration of the Magi (ill. 54), today preserved in the Roman church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, give some indication of their style. Although it is not identical to the style at Castelseprio (ill. 21), and in a different

medium, some analogies can be drawn: the figures are outlined with a narrow, darker colour, the drapery folds are clearly indicated, the angel wears a large blue halo, and Mary a golden one, while Joseph's head is unadorned, and the Christ Child has a cross nimbus and bends towards the first Magus in an expressionistic posture. Differences can also be observed in the absence of background, the straighter, static postures of the angel, Mary and Joseph, and their quiet expressions.

Thus the stylistic comparisons with the Oratory of John VII's mosaics do not yield enough evidence to establish a secure link with the style of Castelseprio.

The frescoes commissioned by John VII in Santa Maria Antiqua in the Roman Forum<sup>34</sup> are generally recognized as being stylistically closest to those of Castelseprio.<sup>35</sup> Both cycles share the same classic quality, strong figure modelling, contour lines, animated highlights, angularity of faces and energetic brushstrokes. "Negli affreschi di Castelseprio e di S. Maria Antiqua ci troviamo di fronte a un unico sistema di invenzione pittorica, e questo prima di tutto li fa considerare storicamente vicini gli uni agli altri."<sup>36</sup>

Among the very few surviving monuments from the early middle ages, Santa Maria Antiqua is a precious parallel in the study of Castelseprio. "Chi cerchi, tra il secolo VI e il X, altrove in Italia dipinti da comparare con questi non riesce al alcun raffronto più convincente che con gli affreschi del principio del secolo VIII in S. Maria Antiqua."<sup>37</sup> However, there are also important differences between the two cycles<sup>38</sup>: the animated postures of the figures in the Castelseprio frescoes are lacking at Santa Maria Antiqua. Although some movement is conveyed in the personages of the Roman murals, it is not as elaborate as that of the Castelseprio figures. Landscape

backgrounds and complex architectural setting, which are prominent features at Castelseprio, are also absent in the Roman cycle<sup>39</sup> These disparities limit comparisons between the two groups their artistic levels and differences in conception are too great to allow further comparisons<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, it cannot be concluded that the frescoes of John VII and Castelseprio are from the same school their differences are too obvious Yet their similarities do allow some comparisons If the frescoes of the early eighth century in Santa Maria Antiqua are contemporary to those of Castelseprio, it can be considered that "they belong to another tributary of the same classic stream"<sup>41</sup>

#### Comparisons with North Italian and European Monuments

Stylistically, Castelseprio was certainly not an isolated phenomenon, as has been suggested<sup>42</sup> It would indeed be surprising that the Castelseprio master would have worked, cut off from the mainstream, in a remote region of Italy He may have been Greek, either from Constantinople or sent from Rome, but this does not necessarily imply that his presence in the Lombard region was singular<sup>43</sup> Building activity and artistic productions took place from the beginning of the Lombard reign onwards Paul the Deacon enumerates a number of buildings commissioned by the court in his *History of the Langobards*, yet he does not mention the names (or nationalities) of the artists who were in their charge Other documents such as legal and diplomatic texts - for instance, the laws of Rothari and Liutprand, and the *memoratorium de mercedibus magistris commacinorum* written in the region of Como - give information about the various activities of artists and artisans in the seventh and eighth centuries<sup>44</sup> Their names, listed in the charts, give an idea of their origins Thus we learn that "au VIIIe siècle, on assiste dans le royaume lombard à la création d'une

société nouvelle, où les distinctions sont fondées, non plus sur la nationalité, mais sur les talents et la richesse "45

The production of a fresco cycle was not uncommon and Castelseprio may be seen as one of many. It was contemporary with a number of other decorated monuments in Lombardy, and painters are known to have been quite active.<sup>46</sup> The painting style of Castelseprio may represent one trend of the artistic idiom adopted in Lombardy in the early Middle Ages. Whether the artist himself had a lasting influence on other painters is another question.<sup>47</sup>

Among the monuments which have been compared to Castelseprio, the geographically closest is the early church of San Salvatore in Brescia,<sup>48</sup> or Basilica I, commissioned by King Desiderius (757-774) and his Queen Ansa, in 759. The remains of this church are now in the crypt of the present structure. Comparisons between the Journey to Bethlehem (at Castelseprio, ill. 13) and the Flight into Egypt (in the crypt of San Salvatore in Brescia, ill. 38) have already been established.<sup>49</sup> Also located in the crypt, fragments of nimbed heads of Saints painted on a blue background set in medallions (ill. 56), and scenes of the life of Christ (ill. 57, 58) show a classical style reminiscent of Castelseprio. Subtle effects of light and shade, a wide selection of colours, the use of energetic lines which define movement,<sup>50</sup> and the overall composition of the Christological scenes give the Brescia frescoes their classical aspect. "Nella composizione, nella monumentalità, nella serena calma delle figure, nelle architetture stesse, vi è una sensibilità potremmo dire ancora classicheggiante."<sup>51</sup>

From these observations, there emerged the theory that the Castelseprio artist and the painter(s) of the walls in the early basilica of San Salvatore in Brescia had direct

links. The iconography, the way of representing spatial arrangement of the figures, the drawing technique and style are so similar that the Brescia draughtsman may have been a pupil of the Castelseprio artist.<sup>52</sup> This does not imply that the two cycles are identical, they do have differences,<sup>53</sup> which would inevitably exist between the work of a master and that of a follower. The study of the two monuments in the context of early medieval Lombardy suggest links which seem to carry more weight than the dissimilarities. "Gli affreschi bresciani costituiscono quindi l'importante anello di congiunzione, che fino ad ora mancava, fra i cicli di S. Maria Antiqua, di Castelseprio, gli affreschi di Cividale, di Malles, di Munstair."<sup>54</sup>

The church of Santa Maria in Valle (the so-called Tempietto) at Cividale in the Friuli is not securely dated and its origins are still debated.<sup>55</sup> It has often been compared to the early church of San Salvatore in Brescia. There are significant architectural similarities, but the important links between the two cycles are in their decorations. Both their stuccoes, inscriptions and paintings are considered to be the work of artists who probably came from the same workshop. The relationships between the two cycles do not depend only on general comparisons of style and technique, but mainly on intimate similarities of the artists' approach to the artistic forms which they developed.<sup>56</sup>

The Cividale frescoes' poor state of preservation (ill. 59-60) does not allow a very precise evaluation of their style, but the modelling and plasticity of forms, gradations of colours and chiaroscuro effects can be discerned from what remains. The unfortunate deterioration makes them look flatter than they originally were.<sup>57</sup> These stylistic characteristics, along with iconographic and paleographic similarities, have led to comparisons with the mid-eighth-century frescoes in Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome,

particularly those in the Theodotus chapel, executed under Pope Zacharias (741-752).<sup>58</sup> Other frescoes in Santa Maria Antiqua, commissioned by Pope Paul I shortly after the middle of the eighth century, have also been associated with Cividale. The line of standing saints flanking the figure of Christ, from the left aisle of Santa Maria Antiqua, is thought by Gioseffì to represent, "dal punto di vista della strutturazione della figura umana, *il parallelo esatto* di ciò che si vede a Cividale."<sup>59</sup>

It is through these comparisons with Santa Maria Antiqua that links between Cividale and Castelseprio were first established.<sup>60</sup> This "triangular" connection has led to the first quarter of the eighth century as a suggested date for Castelseprio, since its style must have preceded that of the mid-eighth-century frescoes of Santa Maria Antiqua by at least one generation.<sup>61</sup> This assumption cannot be substantiated: nothing can prove such a connection between Castelseprio and Santa Maria Antiqua. Therefore, any speculation on the relationship of the artists is merely hypothetical.

The church of St. John the Baptist at Mustair in the Graubunden, on the Swiss border, is also included in the Castelseprio controversy. Remains of a fresco cycle were discovered in 1894, and some fifty years later more frescoes were found under a layer of plaster. They represent scenes of the Old Testament, of the life of Christ and of the four patron saints (Peter, Paul, John the Baptist and Stephen), and a Last Judgement. The paintings were heavily restored between 1947 and 1951. Their date is uncertain: the earliest documentation of the convent attached to the church dates to the year 805. This however does not give any secure information about the frescoes themselves, as they could have been executed before 805 or anytime after, if they are not contemporary with the building. In fact, they are loosely placed between 800 and

1000.<sup>62</sup> The building is generally recognized as Carolingian, and it is likely that the decorations were executed very shortly after its construction, as was the norm in the Middle Ages.<sup>63</sup>

The Mustair paintings offer a number of similarities with Carolingian monuments,<sup>64</sup> and it is compelling to assess their precise stylistic origins: the north, or Lombardy. Major differences with works from the region of lake Constance<sup>65</sup> redirect attention to the Lombard tradition of painting as the provenance of the stylistic idiom found at Mustair. The lively narrative type, the monumentality of the shapes, the movement of the figures and the balanced framing of compositions recall pictorial forms found in Lombard art. Mustair may be of a northern Italian origin, since it can be compared to a number of Lombard works, for instance, the Lombard frescoes at Galliano (*circa* 1007), the Codex Egberti in Cividale,<sup>65</sup> the golden altar in Sant'Ambrogio in Milan,<sup>66</sup> the Egino Codex (Berlin, Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, Phillips 1676), made for Egino, bishop of Verona (796-799), the *Homilies of S. Gregory* and the *Isidorus Hispalensis* (Ms. CCII) in the Vercelli archives (both late eighth century).<sup>67</sup> Thus the Carolingian frescoes at Mustair are ascribed to an advanced stage of the Lombard, rather than northern school.<sup>68</sup>

Therefore the ties between Castelseprio and Mustair may be seen as a result of works belonging to the same school: "Castelseprio would then be interpreted as the starting point of the characteristic north Italian development which includes Brescia, Cividale, Mustair."<sup>69</sup> It is doubtful that Castelseprio alone would have exerted such a wide influence, given its remoteness and humble size. But an art of this kind must have been widespread, and several fresco cycles of the same type may have existed in Lombardy.<sup>70</sup>

The study of northern Italian manuscripts of the eighth and ninth centuries can also throw light on the painting style which developed in that period. The miniatures of the Egino Codex exhibit a lively, energetic style with expressive figures in moving postures, bending in the same "hunchback" way as Mary in the Trial by Water, the midwife in the Washing of the Child and Simeon in the Presentation. The flowing drapery is depicted with great curving lines, in patterned motifs, reminiscent of, but more stylized than, the drapery in the Castelseprio frescoes.

The development of northern Italian miniature painting can be traced through other late eighth- and ninth-century illustrated manuscripts. For instance, the *Isidorus Hispalensis* in the Vercelli archives is characterized by its solid composition and monumental, yet active figures, "privi dell'irrequietudine e della vivacità di mosse proprie delle opere carolingie d'oltr'alpe."<sup>71</sup>

Chronologically, in relation to the northern Italian school of painting, it seems apparent that Castelseprio should be placed at a very early stage, probably in the early eighth century. The later eighth, ninth and tenth centuries saw the establishment of a school in the north, with a definite style. These works are indeed different from the art of Castelseprio, yet they show borrowings of classic forms and concepts. A later dating for Castelseprio (ninth or tenth century)<sup>72</sup> seems erroneous, since few parallels can be drawn with the wealth of art production in northern Italy in that period.<sup>73</sup> Why, during those centuries, would a foreign artist - perhaps from the East - have been commissioned to decorate, in a highly classical fashion, the humble church of Santa Maria, when a number of local artists must have been available? The art of Castelseprio should not be interpreted as a product of the northern Italian school in full

bloom but, rather, as part of its formative stages <sup>74</sup>

### Northern Italian Influence on Carolingian Art

Comparisons between Castelseprio and Carolingian art form the basis on which later datings have been proposed.<sup>75</sup> A number of stylistic elements are paralleled in some Carolingian miniatures from the Reims school, particularly the Utrecht Psalter (816-835) nervous movements and positions of the figures and angels,<sup>76</sup> landscape backgrounds with views of distant buildings, trees and sheep, and the overall conception of the paintings are reminiscent of Castelseprio.<sup>77</sup> Architectural backgrounds and the style of draperies in the Castelseprio frescoes are also found in earlier Carolingian ivories and miniatures of the Ada school <sup>78</sup>

The relations between Castelseprio and Carolingian art, based on commonly adopted classical elements, can be interpreted in two ways the artists could have borrowed from the same models (or models from the same tradition),<sup>79</sup> or an artistic style like that of Castelseprio, formed in the early years of the eighth century in northern Italy, may have influenced Carolingian artists <sup>80</sup> Although the possibility that both groups of painters drew from similar models cannot be ruled out, historical evidence supports the theory that Carolingian artists were inspired - and maybe trained - by northern Italian masters whose art already carried a number of elements imbued with the classical heritage. Classical forms and motifs may well have been borrowed by Carolingian artists upon their contact with northern Italian art <sup>81</sup>

Little is known of Lombard art in the seventh and eighth centuries, but the importance of its two major cities, Pavia and Milan, should not be underestimated  
Documentary sources suggest that Pavia, the seat of the Lombard kings, had its

monuments and churches commissioned by the court. Greek influences were recorded in Pavia where King Bertarido (686-688) and his successor Cunibert (688-698) entrusted the palatine church of San Michele to Greek missionaries. Church services were celebrated according to Greek rituals, and the church was decorated with themes of Greek iconography.<sup>82</sup> Milan, the religious capital, may have been a relatively important Greek centre. This is attested by the presence of Eastern missionaries involved in the conversion of the Lombards to Catholicism in the seventh and eighth centuries: they had been sent from Rome by the Popes who were also of Eastern origin.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, connections between Ambrosian rituals and Eastern liturgy point to a Greek influence in the Lombard religious establishment,<sup>84</sup> as does the appearance of liturgical texts of Eastern origin in Ambrosian books between the fifth and the ninth centuries.<sup>85</sup> In Milan, the Greek influence was still manifest in the second half of the ninth century when the Hamilton Psalter (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Hamilton 552) was produced in both Latin and Greek by the Monk Simeon from Sant'Ambrogio, under Abbot Peter (851-897).<sup>86</sup> Milan also became Charlemagne's centre in north Italy, and the contacts between the Carolingian court and Lombard culture were direct and frequent. The influence of the Greek culture was readily available in both Lombardy and the regions of Italy where Byzantine art was dominant. The Carolingians could borrow the artistic forms and motifs necessary for the formation of their Renaissance.<sup>87</sup>

Therefore, the classical and Byzantine forms adopted by Carolingian artists may be traced through the existence of a northern Italian school which includes Castelseprio, San Salvatore in Brescia, the Tempietto at Cividale, and other monuments now lost. They carried classical and Byzantine elements into the eighth century, and comprised Italy's contribution to the formation of Carolingian art. "L'Italia, sia per

conto proprio, che quale intermediaria, dovrebbe aver avuto un ruolo preminente nella creazione della prima arte aulica carolingia, più che in ogni altra attività culturale fiorita durante gli ultimi decenni dell'VIII secolo."<sup>88</sup>

#### Additional Elements Used in the Dating of Castelseprio

Several pictorial details which appear in the fresco cycle have been studied in the controversy over the date and origin of Castelseprio. These elements are: the cloth tied around a column in the Dream of Joseph (ill. 12), the cross in the nimbus of Christ *Pantocrator* (ill. 11), the nail-headed cross in Christ's halo in the Infancy scenes (ill. 17, 21, 25), and the rare motif of the ornamental *clavus* on the angels' robes (ill. 8, 12, 26).

The knotted drapery around the column is common to the miniature of David Composing the Psalms in the Paris Psalter (Paris, Bibl. Nat. cod. gr. 139 fol. 1 v., ill. 61) and the scenes of Gregory's life in the Paris Gregory (Paris, Bibl. Nat. cod. gr. 510)<sup>89</sup>. Both these miniatures have been compared to Castelseprio on the basis of style, but the frescoes are the more classicizing. The same motif appears in the Temple of Isis in Pompeii, which indicates that it had been used for many centuries. Moreover, the cloth tied around a column is seen in the early eighth-century frescoes of John VII at Santa Maria Antiqua (ill. 62). Therefore, this pictorial detail can hardly demonstrate a direct, exclusive link between Castelseprio and the miniatures. This motif may have been borrowed by the frescoists and miniaturists from models which followed an established tradition or revived pictorial elements of older types. Such peculiarities could plausibly recur in medieval manuscripts as a result of artists copying older documents.

The cross in the halo of the Christ *Pantocrator* is of a particular type rather than being parallel, the arms of the cross flare towards the edge of the nimbus<sup>90</sup> This kind of cross is found in the early Christian era, for instance, in the figure of *Christos Helios* in the Julii tomb in the Vatican grottoes. It also appears in the apse mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna (*circa* 525-547), the mosaics of the monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai (*circa* 550), and at Daphni in Greece (*circa* 1100).

In the Castelseprio fresco, the cross has another distinguishing trait: the lower part of the horizontal arm and the right side of the vertical arm are shaded in a darker colour, thus creating a three-dimensional effect. Parallels for this type of cross are found in Rome: in the nimbus of Christ between saints in the seventh-century fresco in the catacomb of Generosa<sup>91</sup>, in the early eighth-century fresco of the Saviour in the catacomb of San Valentino<sup>92</sup>, in the mid-eighth-century fresco of the crucifixion in the lateral chapel of Santa Maria Antiqua, and probably in the Oratory of John VII in Rome, if the wood cut copy of the Crucifixion, executed by Rocca in 1609 (ill. 63), is accurate. This device was used in central Italy between the seventh and the ninth centuries, and reappeared sporadically thereafter<sup>93</sup>. It may also be found in Byzantine art<sup>94</sup> and in Germany during the Ottonian renaissance<sup>95</sup>.

The extensive variety of comparative monuments does not permit any conclusions. Such a feature may appear at a certain time, in a certain region, and be re-used at a later date by artists who drew from older models. This does not mean that works which offer some stylistic or iconographic parallels have to be contemporary or from the same school: artists from different regions and periods may have borrowed from works which belonged to the same tradition.

The nail-headed cross in the halo of the Christ Child has been studied at length, and is frequently compared to works of the Ottonian renaissance, where this motif is also found <sup>96</sup> A tenth-century miniature from Ratisbon (Regensburg) (Ms 780, Morgan Library, New York) was cited as one of the Ottonian parallels, a date which is too late to permit contemporaneity of the two works <sup>97</sup> However, the nail-headed cross is not an exclusively Ottonian motif, since it appears in Carolingian manuscripts as well for example, the Stuttgart and Utrecht Psalters, a fragment of a manuscript from the same school or centre as the Utrecht Psalter, now in Dusseldorf (Ms B 133), and the Canons of Councils in the Chapter Library in Vercelli (Ms CLXV) <sup>98</sup>

The nail-headed cross cannot be used as a definite dating element in the study of Castelseprio. The direct Ottonian relation can be discarded, and, as Schapiro has noted, "Future discoveries may disclose examples of this cross older than the Carolingian works" <sup>99</sup> The origin of this type of cross cannot be fully assessed without further evidence <sup>100</sup>

The other particular feature at Castelseprio is the ornamental *clavus* on the angels' robes at the level of the thigh. The origin of this motif is not ascertained, and it does not appear in any securely dated work before the eighth century. Schapiro speculates

"It could have been a fashion in Constantinople (or some other center) for a short time in the eighth century, from which little of the art produced in the capital has come down, such a form might have persisted longer in the art of provincial regions, like Italy and France, where it had been accepted as a pictorial element rather than

as part of a real costume "101

Parallels are found in late eighth- and ninth-century Italian works such as the altar panels at Cividale, commissioned about the year 737 in memory of Duke Pemmo (d. 734) by his son Ratchis, a manuscript of laws in La Cava (Badia Ms 4) on images of Lombard kings<sup>102</sup>, and ninth-century Canons of Councils where the same type of *clavus* as the one found at Castelseprio is painted below the knee on figures whose thighs are not visible<sup>103</sup>. Carolingian works in which this motif appear might be copies of older models from the sixth or seventh centuries. They include an illustrated *Sedulius* in the Musée Plantin in Antwerp (Ms 126), the late eighth-century Trier Apocalypse (Stadtbibliothek Ms 31)<sup>104</sup>, and the Genoels-Elderen ivory in Brussels, which may belong, or be close to the Ada School, in the late eighth century. In Ottonian art, the *clavus* appears on the costumes of crowned Magi and Kings.

These observations could point to a *terminus post quem* for Castelseprio only if it were certain that this motif had not appeared previously<sup>105</sup>. However, there is no assurance that the earliest example of this form has been found, or even remains to be found. The uncertainties about the appearance, spread and survival of pictorial details render any conclusion speculative and unreliable.

Style alone cannot provide solid grounds for the dating of Castelseprio. It has to be studied in conjunction with the iconography and the context from which the works emerged. Artists may have borrowed from more than one model according to what was available to them, their capacities and external circumstances such as the patron's wishes, and the space which they had to decorate.

Although a great number of stylistic and iconographic parallels can be found, not one single work or monument can be undeniably and entirely related to the Castelseprio frescoes. However, the concentration of comparative examples from the eighth century in Rome and northern Italy helps to trace certain traits, and may indicate connections between Castelseprio and an art of the same tradition. On the basis of these comparisons, an early eighth-century date appears to be the most plausible. Historical and socio-religious circumstances of that period must be evaluated in order to reach any conclusive statement about the date of Castelseprio.

## Notes to Chapter III

<sup>1</sup> A Rózycka-Bryzek, *Les peintures de l'église de Santa Maria de Castelseprio* (Nadbitka, 1962), 156

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* , 156

<sup>3</sup> M. Schapiro, "Review of G P Bognetti, G Chierici, A de Capitani d'Arzago, *Santa Maria di Castelseprio*, Milan, 1948," *Magazine of Art* 43 (Dec 1950, 312-313), 312

<sup>4</sup> P J Nordhagen, "New Research in Santa Maria Antiqua," *Akten des XI Internationalen Byzantinisten-Kongresses* (Munche n 1960, 410-415), 412

<sup>5</sup> Cecchelli, "Weitzmann," 101

<sup>6</sup> Kitzinger, "Hellenistic Heritage in Byzantine Art," 105-106

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* , 106

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* , 105

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* , 105 Kitzinger adds "But Castelseprio is an exception and I strongly suspect was an exception in its own time. For, in general, it was much more in the illustration of Old Testament, rather than of the Gospel story, that the repertory of Hellenistic landscape painting survived at all" (105-106)

<sup>10</sup> Nordhagen, "New Research in Santa Maria Antiqua," 413. The author sees the possibility of two waves of Hellenism in Italy: one in about 650, and another in about 705. According to him, it is the second wave which was influential in the art of John VII and of Castelseprio (413-415).

<sup>11</sup> Lasareff, "Gli affreschi di Castelseprio," 92

<sup>12</sup> Wright, "Sources of Longobard wall painting," 732. Publications on the specific subject of Umayyad art are referred to. They include: O Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, 1973); R Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting* (Geneva, 1962, 19-40); K A C Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture, Umayyads, A.D. 622-750*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1969).

<sup>13</sup> H A R Gibb, "Arab-Byzantine Relations Under the Umayyad Caliphate," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958, 221-233), 225; K A P. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture, Umayyads, A.D. 622-750*, v. I, part I (Oxford, 1969), 152

<sup>14</sup> These frescoes are dated after the conquest of Spain in 711 because in one of the court scenes, Roderick, the last king of the Visigoths, is represented. The prince who commissioned the frescoes was familiar with Greek language and culture, on the

basis of circumstantial evidence, the frescoes have been attributed to the time of the Caliph Hishâm (724-743) (Wright, "Sources of Longobard Wall Painting," 733), but the portrait of a prince in a niche may be that of the Caliph Walid I (705-715) who could also have commissioned the frescoes (T. Arnold, *Painting in Islam* [New York, 1965], 30). Much speculation has been devoted to this problem. For a complete, detailed study and bibliography, see Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, v I, part II, 390-415.

15 Wright, "Sources of Longobard Wall Painting," 733, 736.

16 Capitani d'Arzago, *Santa Maria*, 647.

17 Giacomelli, "Santa Maria di Castelseprio," 75.

18 Schapiro, "The Frescoes," 85.

19 Wright, "Sources of Longobard Wall Painting," 729-732.

20 *Ibid*, 733-734. The whole palace of Khirbet al Mafjar is described in Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, v I, part II, 545-577.

21 Wright ("Sources of Longobard Wall Painting", 734-736) gives a summary of the sources and archaeology of this monument.

22 *Ibid*, 736.

23 *Ibid*, 737.

24 *Ibid*, 738.

25 *Ibid*, 738. Wright adds that they may be the work of a Greek painter who left Constantinople at the beginning of the iconoclastic controversy.

26 Schapiro, "The Frescoes," 111. The author states: "We cannot see the angel of the Annunciation without thinking of Castelseprio."

27 *Ibid*, 111.

28 Schapiro, "Review of *Santa Maria di Castelseprio*", 313. The author also refers to other ninth-century works, such as Carolingian miniature paintings in the Rhineland, to reach this conclusion.

29 Another monument, the church of Santa Maria di Minuta in Scala, near Salerno (on the Amalfi coast) has been compared to Castelseprio by C. D'Amato in "Gli affreschi di S. Maria di Minuta in Scala (Salerno)," *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana* 49 (Vaticano, 1973, 111-120). D'Amato dates the Scala frescoes to the ninth or tenth century (118), but they seem to be much later (thirteenth century?) on the basis

of stylistic evidence. Thus this monument cannot be used as a comparison either

<sup>30</sup> J.-M. Sansterre, *Les moines grecs et orientaux à Rome aux époques byzantine et carolingienne (milieu du VI<sup>e</sup> s - fin du IX<sup>e</sup> s)* t. 1 (Bruxelles, 1982), 42-43.

<sup>31</sup> Kitzinger, "On Some Icons of the Seventh Century," *Late Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend, Jr.* (Kurt Weitzmann, editor Princeton, 1955, 132-150), 136.

<sup>32</sup> Frescoes in the church of San Saba in Rome are also considered in the study of Castelseprio by Giacomelli in *Santa Maria di Castelseprio* (75) and Cecchelli in "Weitzmann" (102). Giacomelli does not give any date for the S. Saba frescoes while Cecchelli assigns them to the mid-eighth century. However, the validity of comparisons with S. Saba is debatable since little remains of those frescoes, their actual date is still unknown, and it is not evident that their style is compatible with that of Castelseprio.

<sup>33</sup> The iconography of the scenes which could be associated with Castelseprio was discussed in Chapter II.

<sup>34</sup> For a full description of these frescoes, see P. J. Nordhagen, "The Frescoes of John VII (A.D. 705-707) in Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome," *Acta ad archaeologiam et aruum historiam pertinentia* III (Rome, 1968), J. M. Harris, "The Frescoes of John VII (705-707) in Santa Maria Antiqua" by Per Jonas Nordhagen" (review), *American Journal of Archaeology* 74 (1970), 118-119.

<sup>35</sup> Stylistic resemblances are discussed further in: Capitani d'Arzago, "La scoperta di Castelseprio," 7, "Le recenti scoperte di Castelseprio," 20, *Santa Maria*, 680-682, Cecchelli, "Weitzmann," 102, G. De Francovich, "Problemi della pittura e della scultura preromanica," *Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo* II (Spoleto, 1955, 455-474), 473, G. Galassi, "Gli affreschi di Castelseprio," *Roma o Bisanzio* 2 (Roma, 1953), 336, Kitzinger, *Hellenistic Heritage in Byzantine Art*, 108, Lasareff, "Gli affreschi di Castelseprio," 93, Morey, "Castelseprio and the Byzantine Renaissance," 184, Nordhagen, "New Research in Santa Maria Antiqua," 412-413, Schapiro, "Notes on Castelseprio," 299, "The Frescoes," 83, 88, "Review of *Santa Maria*," 312, P. Toesca, "Gli affreschi di Castelseprio," *L'Arte* n. s. 18 (1948-51, 12-19), 15.

<sup>36</sup> Lasareff, "Gli affreschi di Castelseprio," 93.

<sup>37</sup> Toesca, "Gli affreschi di Castelseprio," 15.

<sup>38</sup> Weitzmann discusses differences of stylistic details at great lengths (in order to validate his tenth-century dating of Castelseprio) in *The Fresco Cycle*, 19-27.

<sup>39</sup> The Adoration of the Magi and David and Goliath do have landscape backgrounds, but they are not as elaborate as those at Castelseprio. The other scenes commissioned by John VII do not have such landscapes.

40 A Rózycka-Bryzek, *Les peintures murales de Castelseprio* (Nadbitka, 1962), 156

41 Schapiro, "The Frescoes," 83

42 Kitzinger, "Hellenistic Heritage in Byzantine Art," 105

43 P. Reuterswärd, "Malingarna i Castelseprio," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 47 (Stockholm, 1978, 1-26), 26

44 M. C. Bournand, "Les artisans dans le royaume lombard (VII et VIII siècles), *Arte Lombarda* 4 (1959), 13-16. The author summarizes the type of commissions the artists obtained, their travel and their payments. These charts do not give a full listing of specific commissions, but add to a general study of Lombard society

45 *Ibid*, 15-16

46 Records of a particular painter, Auripert, tell of his popularity among commissioners. He was first in the service of the Church of San Martino in Lucca, and became a court painter under King Astulf (749-756). He had a workshop of masters and was well paid for his work. Unfortunately, not much is known about what he actually painted. *Ibid*, 14.

47 Demus in *Byzantine Art and the West*, suggests that the frescoes of Castelseprio "had no effect on subsequent developments in Lombardy" (23-24) and that the artist was isolated in the "barbarian" surroundings of Lombardy. These conclusions cannot be readily accepted if we consider that the scarcity of comparative monuments in Lombardy may be due to factors other than the lack of production.

48 For a description of San Salvatore in Brescia, see G. Panazza, "La Chiesa di S. Salvatore in Brescia," *Atti dell'ottavo congresso di studi sull'arte dell'alto medioevo II* (Milano, 1961), 1-205, "Le scoperte in S. Salvatore a Brescia," *Arte Lombarda* V (Milano, 1960), 13-21, B. Anderson, *The Frescoes of San Salvatore at Brescia*, A. Peroni, "San Salvatore di Brescia," *Arte Medievale* I (Roma, 1983), 53-80, Wright, "Sources of Longobard Wall Painting," 739.

49 See chapter II

50 Anderson in *The Frescoes of San Salvatore*, stresses that this "outline style" used to animate gesture and make forms more expressive, resembles the style of John VII's frescoes in Santa Maria Antiqua (124-125).

51 Panazza, "Le scoperte in S. Salvatore a Brescia," 17. The author suggests an eighth-century date for these frescoes, based on similarities with Castelseprio and Santa Maria Antiqua, and on paleographic studies confirmed by Bischoff, Campana and Torp.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, *The Frescoes of San Salvatore*, 136 This theory is wholeheartedly supported by Wright in "Sources of Longobard Wall Painting (739) and "The Shape of the Seventh Century in Byzantine Art" (27) However, it is strongly refuted by Peroni in "San Salvatore di Brescia" (74-75) who, in spite of finding similarities between Castelseprio and Brescia, considers their analogy a "confronto abusato" (74) Demus, in "Byzantine Art and the West," suggested (without elaborating further) that the Brescia artists could have been followers of the Castelseprio painter (244, note 21)

<sup>53</sup> Mainly in terms of physiognomical details, figures' expressions and shades of colours. These are pointed out by Peroni, "San Salvatore di Brescia," 74-75. Panazza also discusses differences between the two cycles in "La chiesa di San Salvatore" (173), but he also recognizes their important similarities (173-176)

<sup>54</sup> Panazza, "Le scoperte in S. Salvatore a Brescia," 17

<sup>55</sup> Panazza, "La chiesa di San Salvatore," 176 The author gives a summary of the controversy on the Tempietto at Cividale. For a full description of the Tempietto, see H. P. L'Orange e H. Torp, "Il Tempietto longobardo di Cividale," *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia*, vol. VII 1-2 (Roma, 1977). L'Orange and Torp suggest the second half of the eighth century as a date for the Tempietto (141)

<sup>56</sup> H. Torp, "Due opere dell'arte aulica longobarda," *Congrès international pour l'étude du Haut Moyen Age, Actes* 8 1 (Milan, 1962, 61-64), 61 These two monuments are also compared in Panazza, "La chiesa di San Salvatore," 176-179

<sup>57</sup> Panazza, "La chiesa di San Salvatore," 176

<sup>58</sup> Torp, "Due opere dell'arte aulica longobarda" 61, D. Gioseffi, "Cividale e Castelseprio," *Atti della terza settimana di studi Aquileiesi* (1972-73, 365-381), 372

<sup>59</sup> Gioseffi, "Cividale e Castelseprio," 373 (Compare fig 12 and 13 in Gioseffi's article)

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 367, 373

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 376

<sup>62</sup> For a summary of this controversy, see G. De Francovich, "Il ciclo pittorico della chiesa di San Giovanni a Münstair (Müstair) nei Grigioni," *Arte lombarda* 2 (Milano, 1956, 28-50), 28-32

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 32 The author informs us that "è norma costante nel Medioevo, ovunque osservabile, che la decorazione pittorica, concepita per ragioni didattiche quale complemento necessario dell'organismo architettonico, viene eseguita contemporaneamente o quasi a quest'ultimo." This norm is further discussed by De

Francovich in "Problemi della pittura e della scultura preromanica," 408-410

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid* , 32-34

<sup>65</sup> A page of this manuscript (Archbishop Egberto) is illustrated in *Ibid* , 43, fig 27

<sup>66</sup> For illustrations, see *Ibid* , 44-45, fig 32-34

<sup>67</sup> These are discussed and illustrated, *Ibid* , 36-47. From these comparisons, De Francovich adds: "Ne deriva logica la conclusione che i pittori operosi a Munstair dovettero provenire dalla Lombardia, o meglio dalla Val Padana che aveva il suo centro artistico propulsore a Milano " (36)

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid* , 47

<sup>69</sup> D. Wright, "Review of *Early Medieval Painting from the Fourth to the Eleventh Century* " *The Art Bulletin* 43 (1961, 245-255), 254, note 26

<sup>70</sup> Reuterswärd, "Malningarna i Castelseprio," 26

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid* , 40. Late eighth- and early ninth-century miniatures are further discussed in De Francovich, "Problemi della pittura," 447-448

<sup>72</sup> A. Grabar, "Les fresques de Castelseprio," *Gazette des beaux-arts* 37 (1950), 107-114, "A propos du nimbe crucifère à Castelseprio," *Cahiers archéologiques* 7 (1954), 157-159, "Les fresques de Castelseprio et l'Occident," *Fruhmittelalterliche kunst in den Alpenländern* (Olten and Lausanne, 1954), 85-93, Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, Levetto, *Castel Seprio*

<sup>73</sup> Very little monumental art survives, but records of large-scale commissions as well as a number of surviving manuscripts and metal work give evidence of a great artistic activity in that period

<sup>74</sup> Schapiro, "Review of *Santa Maria* " 313, Giacomelli, "Review of *Santa Maria* " 76

<sup>75</sup> Weitzmann (*The Fresco Cycle*) is an exception to this. He based his tenth-century dating on comparisons with Middle Byzantine miniatures of the Joshua Roll in the Vatican Library (cod. Palat. gr. 431) and the Paris Psalter in the Bibliothèque Nationale (cod. gr. 139), both of which he dates to the tenth century. Weitzmann's approach was criticized by Schapiro in "The Frescoes" (70-80) and in *The Fresco Cycle of S. Maria di Castelseprio* (1952, 147-153, esp. 150). Schapiro points out that earlier Byzantine painting is virtually unknown, and also criticizes Weitzmann for not looking for parallels beyond Byzantine art, in the West

<sup>76</sup> Tselos, "A Greco-Italian School," 27. These similarities are described in detail.

77 These are described in *Ibid*, 27, Grabar, "Les fresques," 111-113, E. Arslan, "La pittura dalla Conquista longobarda al Mille," *Storia di Milano* II (1954, 631-661), 651, Schapiro, *The Fresco Cycle*, 149, "The Frescoes," 111, Giacomelli, "Review of *Santa Maria*," 76. The validity of these comparisons is argued by Capitani d'Arzago, "Problemi della Pittura," 470, and Wright, "The Shape of the Seventh Century," 27.

78 Schapiro, *The Fresco Cycle*, 150.

79 Morey, "Castelseprio and the Byzantine Renaissance," 200; Arslan, "La pittura," 652, Tselos, "A Greco-Italian School," 26-27, Rozycka-Bryzek, "Les peintures murales," 156.

80 Schapiro, "Review of *Santa Maria*," 313, "The Frescoes," 111-114; Giacomelli, "Review of *Santa Maria*," 76.

81 J. Porcher, "Les débuts de l'art carolingien et l'art longobard," *Stucchi e Mosaici altomedievali. Congrès international pour l'étude du Haut Moyen Age, Actes* 8 1 (Milan, 1962, 55-60), 59.

82 G. Penco, *Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, v 1 (Milano, 1977), 136.

83 E. Cattaneo, "La discussione sull'età e l'origine degli affreschi di Santa Maria F P," *Sibrium* 14 (1978-79, 219-221), 220; Penco, *Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, 106.

84 Cattaneo, "La discussione", 219.

85 *Ibid*, 221.

86 Schapiro, "The Frescoes", 114, Penco, *Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, 143.

87 Gioseffi, "Cividale e Castelseprio," 380; A. M. Romanini, "Note sul problema degli affreschi di S. Maria foris portam a Castelseprio" *I Longobardi e la Lombardia* (Milano, 1978, 61-74), 64.

88 H. Torp, "L'architettura del Tempietto di Cividale," *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia*, v VII, 2 (Roma, 1977), 141.

89 Weitzmann (*The Fresco Cycle*, 31) mentions these manuscripts in order to provide comparative evidence for his tenth-century dating of Castelseprio.

90 For a detailed study of the literary source of the cross in Christ's nimbus, see Schapiro, "Notes on Castelseprio," 292-293.

91 Morey, "Castelseprio and the Byzantine Renaissance," 192. Morey

establishes the seventh-century date on the basis of stylistic comparisons with the Greek frescoes of Santa Maria Antiqua. The Generosa frescoes had previously been attributed to the sixth century by Wilpert in *Roma Sotterranea. Le pitture delle catacombe romane* (Roma, 1903), I, 519.

<sup>92</sup> Morey (*Ibid*, 192) dates the San Valentino fresco *circa* 650. This date is rectified by Osborne ("Early Medieval Wall Painting") who attributes them to the early eighth century (see Chapter II).

<sup>93</sup> Morey, "Castelseprio and the Byzantine Renaissance," 192. Morey however forgot to mention this appearance of this motif in Byzantine art.

<sup>94</sup> For instance, the Kariye Djami, *circa* 1310.

<sup>95</sup> Grabar, "Les fresques de Castelseprio et l'Occident," 88.

<sup>96</sup> Grabar, "Les fresques de Castelseprio," 112, "Les fresques de Castelseprio et l'Occident," 88-89, "A propos du nimbe crucifère à Castelseprio," *Cahiers archéologiques* 7 (1954, 156-159), 156-157.

<sup>97</sup> Grabar, "Les fresques de Castelseprio", 113, fig. 7. In this article, Grabar had discussed Castelseprio as a work of the ninth century, or even of an earlier date in the Carolingian period. Subsequently, Grabar suggested that the frescoes were contemporary to the Ottonian works he compared them to. This fluctuation of ideas shows some misunderstanding of the problem and invalidates this theory.

<sup>98</sup> Schapiro, "Notes on Castelseprio," 296.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 296.

<sup>100</sup> For a detailed discussion of the controversy over the nail-headed cross, see G. P. Bognetti, "Un nuovo elemento di datazione degli affreschi di Castelseprio," *Cahiers archéologiques* 7 (1954), 133-156.

<sup>101</sup> Schapiro, "Notes on Castelseprio," 297.

<sup>102</sup> These miniatures are believed to have followed ninth-century models. *Ibid*, 298.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 298.

<sup>104</sup> Schapiro (*Ibid*, 298) points out that the *clavus* does not appear in the Carolingian manuscript in Cambrai (386), which is called the sister manuscript to the Trial Apocalypse and "which surely descended from the same prototype." This leads Schapiro to doubt that the *clavus* was part of the original model.

<sup>105</sup> In fact, a motif that might be the *clavus* has been observed on a work of the sixth century: fragments of the ivory panel which was the counterpiece of the leaf of

the Murano diptych now in Ravenna. On one fragment, the motif appears in the painted ornamentation, which is of a doubtful date. On the other fragment (formerly in the Stroganoff Collection, now in private hands) the lines are incised: they might be the clavus, or folds in the drapery (*Ibid*, 299).

IV  
THE MEANING OF THE PROGRAM  
AND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Reconstruction of the Missing Scenes

The narrative scenes of the Castelseprio frescoes have been interpreted as depicting a Christological cycle<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, speculations on the missing scenes have associated them with episodes related to the birth or the Infancy of Christ, depending on how the cycle was read. One theory proposes that the viewer should follow the events in the top register from left to right, then in the middle register from right to left, provided that the Nativity and Adoration are seen together as one frame<sup>2</sup> (appendix 1). Thus, the missing scenes could be: to the left of the Presentation, the Massacre of the Innocents<sup>3</sup> or the Flight of Elisabeth with the Death of Zacharias, further to the left, the Preaching of John the Baptist, or the Meeting of John the Baptist and Christ, or even the Disputation of Christ in the Temple, and on the arch wall (opposite the Adoration of the Magi), the Baptism.

Another theory invites the viewer to read both registers from left to right<sup>4</sup> (appendix 2), thus obliging him to turn round on himself twice in order to follow the events in a somewhat chronological order. For this theory to make any sense, the Nativity and Adoration would have to be considered as part of the top register: one would first view the top register from left to right, then below to the Nativity and Adoration (taken as one scene), and then across to the opposite side of the arch, to end with the Presentation almost in the middle of the apse. The scene on the arch wall would be the Arrival in Egypt, and on the apse, the Circumcision and the Flight of

Elisabeth and Death of Zacharias. This last scene however would be totally out of chronology with the other events, since it should normally be placed after the Nativity

Although both are debatable, these two theories tie in with the Christological nature of the events which have survived in the church

A third hypothesis was formulated on the assumption that the frescoes should be interpreted as a Marian rather than a Christological cycle.<sup>5</sup> The organization of the episodes would have been based on analogies between the lives of Mary and Christ. Symbolic associations of the themes, and the direction of the compositions, would point to the relationships between the scenes<sup>6</sup> (appendix 3) the Adoration of the Magi on the arch wall would find its counterpart on the other side of the arch with Joachim's Rejected Offerings, the Nativity would be diametrically opposed to the Birth of the Virgin, and the Presentation of Christ in the Temple would correspond to the Presentation of Mary in the Temple on the other side of the central window. Consequently, according to this theory the arrangement of the scenes suggests a complicated zigzag. Chronological viewing would have to start at the left apse wall with Joachim's Rejected Offerings, then move right to the apse in the middle register, for the Birth of the Virgin and the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple. From there, the viewer would have to direct his sight to the top left register for the Annunciation and Visitation, then right, all the way across the top register, and down to the Nativity, right to the Adoration, and further to the left for the Presentation of Christ in the Temple.<sup>7</sup>

Not only is the interpretation of the program as a Marian cycle open to debate, but the proposed reconstruction is even more questionable. It was suggested that Mary was the most important figure, as she appears in all of the preserved scenes, whereas

Christ is shown in only three episodes<sup>8</sup> (he actually appears four times twice in the Nativity) Other considerations were Mary seems to be the protagonist in the scenes, she is glorified in the Nativity, the Adoration and the Presentation for the fulfillment of her destiny, the Presentation of Christ alludes to her Purification, and the role of the angels "encourages the view that the focus of the program is Mary, for they nourish, address, defend, guide and protect her"<sup>9</sup>

However, all these elements could be part of any Christological cycle Mary does indeed have a prominent role in the story of Christ's birth, she would inevitably appear in the episodes which precede and announce his imminent birth, and she would be necessarily present in the scenes of his Infancy The participation of angels is not exclusive to interactions with Mary (for instance, the Dream of Joseph, the Annunciation to the Shepherds), and they are also mentioned in the literary sources upon which the iconography is based

Leveto gives no parallels for this type of complex pictorial arrangement, she suggests that it would have been originally and ingeniously adapted to the monument by the artist<sup>10</sup> The background for such an esoteric invention by the frescoist is explained thus "It is possible that a liturgical or homiletic source existed which would explain the Castelseprio cycle, but the relation between source and cycle more likely would have been one of inspiration than one of illustration."<sup>11</sup> This possibility remains purely speculative Given the total lack of evidence of either literary or artistic prototypes for this interpretation, it serves at best as an interesting theory Why would a patron wishing to commission a Marian cycle want it depicted in such a complex manner, incomprehensible without lengthy explanations? A straightforward, easy-to-read group of paintings would have been much more desirable, at a time when

art was still used as an educative and propagandist tool.

Therefore, the interpretation of the whole cycle should be based only on what remains, since any proposed reconstruction of the missing scenes cannot in any way lead to a better and clearer understanding of the program. "Ogni ricostituzione di ciò che poteva esservi è soltanto una brillante ipotesi."<sup>12</sup>

### The Dogmatic Meaning

The fusion of both narrative and iconic representations in the apse<sup>13</sup> has to be considered in the study of this monument. The divine nature of the Christ *Pantocrator* and the symbolic meaning of the second coming of Christ in the *Hetoimasia* are integrated among the narrative scenes. Each of these offers a visual message on the divinity of Christ's incarnation, and the witnessing of miracles: the divine prophecy of the Annunciation is witnessed by a maid, Elisabeth attests to the virginal conception by touching Mary's womb in the Visitation, Mary's chastity is proved in the Trial by Water and testified to in the Dream of Joseph, the dialogue between Mary and Joseph is illustrated in the Journey to Bethlehem, the witnesses to the miraculous birth are all present in the Nativity (the midwife, the doubting Salome, Joseph, the ox and the ass), the shepherds are told of the miracle by an angel, the Magi of the Adoration are introduced to their new-born king after being warned by celestial signs, the old Simeon takes the Christ Child into the Temple, thus fulfilling the prophecy on the salvation of humanity in the Presentation. The fundamental idea underlying the narrative content seems to be the dogma of the divine Incarnation, with an emphasis on the dual nature of Christ human and divine.<sup>14</sup>



### The Socio-Religious Context

Interest in this dogma grew as the Lombards were gradually converted from Arianism and paganism (or a mixture of the two<sup>15</sup>) to Catholicism. The Arians followed the doctrine of a fourth-century bishop called Arius. They believed in the existence of only one God who has absolutely no equal, and can put forth nothing of His own essence, because His essence is uncreated. What He created is a separate substance, consequently the "Son" is unrelated to and different from the Father. Christ is not truly God, nor does he have divine attributes. He is not eternal, his knowledge is not perfect, but he has a special relation to God because he is a perfect creature. The Holy Ghost was also interpreted as a second, independent substance, on the same level as Christ. Therefore, the dogma of the Incarnation of Christ and the recognition of his two natures was of crucial importance in the Lombard religious establishment of the seventh and eighth centuries. A succession of Arian and Catholic kings and bishops made the conversion rather unstable until the end of the seventh century<sup>16</sup>. There was also religious dissent among the Catholic Lombards since a number of them, including important members of the court and the clergy, ascribed to the doctrine of the Three Chapters<sup>17</sup>.

This schism was based on the anti-Cyrrillian writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia (*circa* 350-*circa* 428), Theodoret of Cyrus (*circa* 393-*circa* 466) and Ibas of Edessa. They promulgated the idea that Christ had only one nature, that if Jesus was deified, he could no longer be man, therefore he must simply be human, the son of Mary<sup>19</sup>. Cyril of Alexandria's writings on the dual nature of Christ ("the divine nature incarnated") were reasserted in Chalcedon in 451, and redefined as the "two natures of Christ united in one hypostasis"<sup>20</sup>. The Three Chapters were condemned again in 553

at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople,<sup>21</sup> but by then this schism was too deeply rooted in certain parts of the Christian world (Egypt, Syria, North Italy<sup>22</sup>), and the anathemas had little or no consequences in those areas

In Lombardy, Arianism and the doctrine of the Three Chapters existed side by side until the beginning of the eighth century. For instance, in 589, Queen Theodolinda, a Catholic by birth and a strong supporter of the Three Chapters, was married to Autharis, an Arian. Upon his death (590), she chose as her husband Agilulph, another Arian, who became king of the Lombards. Throughout the sixth and seventh centuries, Arians and Catholics, both strongly devoted to their respective religious groups, tolerated each other<sup>23</sup>. Paul the Deacon recorded in his *Historia Langobardorum* that at the time of Rothari (d. 652), in almost all the cities in the kingdom, there were two bishops, one Arian, the other Catholic<sup>24</sup>. However, Arianism was superseded by a great number of Catholic conversions which took place in the second half of the seventh century, due in part to the influence of missionaries<sup>25</sup>. The schism of the Three Chapters was also losing popularity, as the Lombard religious structure was becoming closer and more unified to the Roman Church. In 698, King Cunibert summoned to Pavia both representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and adepts of the Three Chapters, in the hope of putting an end to their disagreements. The result was as Cunibert wished. It was celebrated by a *Carmen* composed for the occasion by a poet (Stefano Magister), in which the schism was repudiated and the recognition of only one religion, one baptism and one eucharist was praised<sup>26</sup>. A delegation was subsequently sent to Rome in order to inform Pope Sergius I of the results of the Pavian synod. Cunibert also asked the Pope for forgiveness of his sins, which he obtained with the request from the Pope to burn all the works of Theodore of

Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrus and Ibas of Edessa, as well as those of the two Constantinopolitan patriarchs (Paul and Pyrrhus) who had instigated the Monothelitic heresy<sup>27</sup> Upon Cunibert's death in 700, an Arian heretic, Raghempert, who was a son of one of the old Arian kings, took the throne from Cunibert's successor, Liutpert, who was still a child. Raghempert's reign was shortlived and, in 701, the throne was disputed by a series of candidates<sup>28</sup>, until Aripert II (a Catholic) took power. He ruled Lombardy for eleven years, and most of his personal and political undertakings were aimed at securing his own power,<sup>29</sup> since there were many struggles within the Lombard court, and threats from neighboring duchies and countries<sup>30</sup>. In order to prevent any attacks, Aripert went as far as hosting foreign ambassadors in a very frugal way, with the intention of portraying to them an image of poverty, so that they would not perceive Lombardy as a rich land worth fighting for.

Thus the late seventh and early eighth centuries witnessed great socio-religious changes in Lombardy: the Arian heresy was rapidly coming to an end, the schism of the Three Chapters was repudiated, the kings were making laws obliging citizens to adopt the Roman Catholic faith, and the missions to convert the Lombards were almost completed<sup>31</sup>. Under these circumstances, a need must have arisen to promulgate the religious ideas and concepts which the Lombard political and ecclesiastical authorities had decided to accept wholeheartedly. The equality of Christ "son of God" and "God the Father" had to be demonstrated to the converted Arians, who had previously recognized Christ only as a secondary divinity,<sup>32</sup> while the schismatic followers of the Three Chapters must comprehend the dual nature of Christ, human and divine.

It is in this context that Santa Maria di Castelseprio can be best understood. It

is possible, although not probable, that the three-apsidal plan may symbolize the dogma of the Trinity, thus conveying an anti-Arian significance<sup>33</sup> More importantly, the focus on the Incarnation of Christ in the fresco cycle can be interpreted as an orthodox statement directed toward both the heretics and schismatics. The paintings contain a number of pictorial elements from which specific religious concepts may be construed: the translucent halo of Christ (in the Bathing of the Child and the Presentation in the Temple) contains three rays of a thin cross, the arms ending in a "T" shape and projecting beyond the circle of the nimbus. One may associate the cross with the Crucifixion, but its thinness and peculiar shape are "more suggestive of the luminous and emanatory",<sup>34</sup> thus leading to another possible understanding: since it emanates from the translucent halo, it may be seen as three rays of light issuing from a circle of light. This imagery could be based on the theological concept of the divine nature of the human Christ: in the writings of a Syrian mystic, the pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (*circa* 500), light is a central theme in descriptions of the Godhead. Blinding rays, radiance, beams of light, flames, and brightness qualify the essence of God and the Trinity. These conceptions were known in Italy from at least the seventh century, since Pope Martin I (649) quoted pseudo-Dionysius' writings. Martin I, assisted by Greek monks and priests (among them, Maximus the Confessor, a disciple of the pseudo-Dionysius), directed the Roman Council of 649 in which the doctrine of dyothelitism was opted for<sup>36</sup>: the human and divine natures of Christ were distinguished in two wills and two operations. This doctrine was readily accepted in the West.

Therefore the type of cross-nimbus found at Castelseprio may symbolize the dual nature of Christ, a concept which needed to be spread among the faithful in Lombardy.

Both the Arians and the followers of the Three Chapters had recognized only the human nature of Christ. Therefore, the role of the Virgin Mary had also been interpreted at a human level. "The logical consequence of this teaching was that Christ's virginal Mother could not be called Mother of God, but only Mother of Christ."<sup>37</sup>

In the Castelseprio frescoes, the representation of Mary seems to go beyond the human aspect of her accomplishment. In agreement with the orthodox beliefs, she appears as *Theotokos*, or Mother of God<sup>38</sup> her role is dominant since she is inseparable from the theme of the Incarnation and the dual nature of Christ, and her physical depiction is endowed with an attribute of divinity, a golden halo. The cross nimbus of the Christ *Pantocrator* is also golden, whereas the angels and Simeon have blue haloes. Gold seems to be exclusive to the figures of Mary and Christ, perhaps as a symbol of their higher divinity, or proximity to God. Incidentally, Joseph, whose role is secondary, is not nimbed in any of the scenes where he appears. Could this omission stress his human condition as opposed to Mary's and Christ's divine nature?

The choice of the scenes also refers to the miraculous and divine aspect of Mary's involvement in the Incarnation, particularly in the Trial by Water and the Miracle of the Midwife.

The dogma of Mary *Theotokos*, which is closely connected to the dogma of dyothelitism, may also have been part of the religious doctrines which the Lombards accepted upon their conversion to Roman Catholicism. The unification of the Church became a major issue in Lombardy, particularly in the early eighth century, when contacts between Rome and Pavia relaxed, both religiously and politically.

### Patronage

The high artistic quality of the Castelseprio frescoes suggests that the patron was in a favourable social and financial position: he had found and recognized the talent of the artist, and had the means to hire him for the commission.

It is doubtful that a patron would have taken the risk of erecting such a beautifully decorated monument, in a precarious location outside the fortress walls, if the political, social and religious climate had not been relatively stable. Conflicts of a social or religious nature are known to have usually resulted in massive destruction of monuments, particularly in Lombardy. Therefore, it is legitimate to believe that the frescoes - and the buildings - were executed at a time of peace, as artistic production is normally more abundant in times of social and religious stability. The seventh-century battles over the throne of Lombardy and the religious controversies on Arianism, paganism, orthodox Catholicism, the schism of the Three Chapters and Monothelism do not appear as a favourable background for the execution of these paintings. Rather, a date later than the synod of Pavia (698), when the religious matters were partly settled, seems more plausible for this commission. By then, most princes and the majority of the population had become Roman Catholics.

As for the social situation, the second decade of the eighth century, after Aripert II, seems to be the earliest possibility: the reign of Aripert (701-712) was characterized by unrest, civil wars, conflicts and violence.<sup>39</sup> Although Aripert arranged to be in the Pope's good graces,<sup>40</sup> he is known as neither a fervent Catholic nor a great patron of the arts. In fact, only one commission - a church in Pavia - was recorded during his reign. In 712, Ansprand, one of the allies of Cunibert (d. 700), came back from his exile in Bavaria to Lombardy with an army of Bavarians, in order to defeat Aripert and take the throne of Lombardy. Although Aripert was stronger, he retired

from the battle too early and lost the support of his troops. He tried to escape to the Frankish kingdom with the royal treasure, but the weight of the gold caused him to drown while swimming across the Ticino river. Consequently, Ansprand succeeded to the throne, but only for three months, as he died on June 13, 712. His son Liutprand was his successor.

The reign of Liutprand was one of the longest in Lombard history, from 712 to 744.<sup>41</sup> Upon his accession to the throne, Liutprand established peace, order and coherence in his kingdom. He was a skillful legislator who claimed to be divinely inspired "because the king's heart is in the hand of God". Liutprand had great ascendancy over his subjects and excellent relations with the papacy,<sup>43</sup> except for a short-lived conflict in 727.<sup>44</sup> While recognizing the full ecclesiastical authority of the Pope, he promoted conditions which brought peace and wealth to the Lombard kingdom. In the early 730's, however, the Lombards and the Eastern Empire were in conflict, and from then until 741, numerous rivalries and battles resumed between the Lombards and the duchies of Rome, Spoleto and Benevento.

Elsewhere, Liutprand's relations with the Franks were very friendly. Charles Martel and Liutprand were brothers-in-law, as their wives were daughters of the duke of Bavaria,<sup>45</sup> and Charles' son Pepin was also the adopted son of Liutprand.<sup>46</sup> In 737, when help was needed in the battle against the Moslems in Septimania, Liutprand and his army supported Charles immediately.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore, the early years of Liutprand's reign seem to be the most auspicious for his building activity. His commitment and devotion to Catholicism<sup>48</sup> was demonstrated by the considerable artistic production under his patronage. The exact number and location of churches which he commissioned was not recorded, but Paul

the Deacon wrote: "This most glorious king built many churches in honor of Christ in the various places where he was accustomed to stay"<sup>49</sup> Paul mentions the establishment of the monastery of St. Peter, called the "Golden Heaven", outside the walls of the city of Ticinum (Pavia), the monastery called "Bercetum" on the top of Bardo's Alp; a beautifully decorated dwelling to Christ in honor of the martyr Anastasius and a monastery in Olonna, where he had his suburban manor, a chapel to our Lord the Saviour within his palace (where daily services were performed), and many other churches to God in different places<sup>50</sup>

Given the geographical location of Castelseprio, close to the Alps, on the route between the Frankish kingdom and Pavia (and between the north and Rome), very close to Olonna where Liutprand had his suburban manor, it seems plausible that the church of Santa Maria would have been one of the numerous monuments for which he was responsible. During the peaceful early years of his reign, approximately between 712 and 730, the King could have commissioned the small church outside the walls of the fortress at Castelseprio, a settlement where a number of pilgrims and travellers - perhaps Liutprand himself - may have stopped before or after crossing the Alps. The anti-Arian decoration of the church may have served to propagate the newly-adopted doctrine of the dual nature of Christ. The strong adhesion of the Lombards to the orthodox Roman Church was thus clearly demonstrated. Liutprand, known as the legislator Catholic King,<sup>51</sup> may have desired such a statement to be illustrated at Castelseprio.

## Notes to Chapter IV

<sup>1</sup> All scholars agree on this, except Leveto (*Castel Seprio*) who interprets it as a Marian cycle. This will be discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> Capitani d'Arzago, *Santa Maria*, 647.

<sup>3</sup> Order would not be followed, but the Castelseprio artist has already reversed the sequence of the Trial by Water and the Dream of Joseph. Possibly, he could have reversed these two scenes as well.

<sup>4</sup> Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 84-85.

<sup>5</sup> Leveto, *Castel Seprio*, 192-204.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 197. Leveto suggests that the compositions "kept the eye from wandering", that because of them, "the viewer was encouraged to look to the adjacent apse wall", and asserts that onlookers would naturally associate the scenes that should be viewed as echoes of one another.

<sup>7</sup> Leveto stresses the secondary meaning of the Purification of Mary within the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (*Castel Seprio*, 193, 195), in order to give more weight to the Marian aspect of the cycle.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 200.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 201.

<sup>12</sup> Cecchelli, "Weitzmann," 102.

<sup>13</sup> This type of decorative cycle is very unusual. Grabar ("Les fresques de Castelseprio et l'Occident," 86) points out that there are no Byzantine parallels of an Infancy cycle in apses, whereas several examples can be found in the West (S. Maria Maggiore, S. Maria Antiqua, Oratory of John VII, S. Maria in Trastevere in Rome, La Daurade in Toulouse, Parenzo, St. Gall, etc.). He concludes that this choice of subject for an apse decoration is a Latin tradition. He forgets to mention, however, that most of the monuments he cites were under strong eastern influence. Moreover, if no Byzantine parallel can be found, it is not because there never was any. Schapiro ("The Frescoes," 108) mentions other examples of Infancy cycles in Bawit and Deir Abu Hennis in Egypt (sixth or seventh century) and the Red Church of Perustica in Bulgaria (seventh century).

<sup>14</sup> This idea was first expressed by Capitani d'Arzago in *Santa Maria*,

544-701, esp. 616-621, 655, 671. It was subsequently agreed upon by most scholars, including Weitzmann, *The Fresco Cycle*, 69-90. Capitani D'Arzago interprets the scenes as a "theophany-vision" while Weitzmann stresses the importance of the witnesses.

<sup>15</sup> For a description of the religious cults, beliefs and superstitions, see G. Barni, *La conquête de l'Italie par les Lombards* (Paris, 1975), 124.

<sup>16</sup> Penco, *Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, 105-106, 127-128, Barni, *La conquête de l'Italie par les Lombards*, 114-139.

<sup>17</sup> Penco, *Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, 112-122.

<sup>18</sup> Theodore was recognized in the East as the true author of the heresy called Nestorianism. He was thus personally condemned as a heretic. See G. Every, *The Byzantine Patriarchate 451-1204* (London, 1962), 49; J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York, 1974), 35; A. Harnack, *History of Dogma* (New York, 1958), 245-248.

<sup>19</sup> Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 23, 32-35.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 33; Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 248.

<sup>21</sup> F. Dvornik, *The Ecumenical Councils* (New York, 1961), 32; Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 249.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Barni, *La conquête de l'Italie par les Lombards*. Numerous examples of the coexistence of the two groups are listed, p. 244-258; P. Lemerle, "L'archéologie paléochrétienne en Italie. Milan et Castelseprio, 'Orient ou Rome'." *Byzantion Revue internationale des études byzantines* 22 (1952), 165-206), 168.

<sup>24</sup> Penco, *Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, 124.

<sup>25</sup> Oriental missionaries sent from Rome may have been largely responsible for the conversion of the Lombards. See Cattaneo, "La discussione," 220; Schapiro, "The Frescoes," 109, for a full discussion of the Greek and Syrian presence in Lombardy; Bognetti, *Santa Maria*, 203-319; and for an account of the Oriental influence in Milan from the fourth to the sixth century: Lemerle, "L'archéologie paléochrétienne," 184-185.

<sup>26</sup> Penco, *Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, 137; Barni, *La conquête de l'Italie par les Lombards*, 131, 257-258.

<sup>27</sup> Barni, *La conquête de l'Italie par les Lombards*, 132. For the Monothelitic heresy, see Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 31-35; Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 257-261.

28 Barni, *La conquête de l'Italie par les Lombards*, 135-136

29 See *Ibid*, 136-138, P. Delogu, A. Guillou, G. Ortali, *Longobardi e Bizantini* (Torino, 1980), 121-124

30 The second half of the seventh century was very unstable in Lombardy. The death of Rothari (652) was followed by a dark, violent and decadent period of sixty years "quando non si hanno notizie di guerre contro popoli confinanti, quel po' di storia Langobarda che si intravede nelle tenebre è sola storia di lotte fratricide." G. Pepe, *Il Medio Evo barbarico d'Italia* (Torino, 1959), 187

31 Barni informs us that by the end of Haribert's reign in 712, "le système des missions était dépassé" (*La conquête de l'Italie par les Lombards*, 139). Bishops and archbishops were striving for more ecclesiastical power, as illustrated by Benedict, the archbishop of Milan, who tried in 711 to obtain the right to consecrate the bishop of Pavia. The Pope then refused, but after 712, the kings Ansprand and Liutprand themselves chose the Pavian bishops (139)

32 Lasareff, "Gli affreschi di Castelseprio," 89-90

33 Penco, *Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, 138

34 Schapiro, "The Frescoes," 99. See also "Notes on Castelseprio," 292-296, Grabar, "A propos du nimbe crucifère à Castelseprio," 156-159

35 *De divinis nominibus*, quoted by Schapiro ("The Frescoes," 99), after a translation by C. E. Rolt. See also Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 27-31, 202-203, 208-210.

36 This council had been called in protest against Monothelitism (belief in one will) which had been spreading in the East since the third decade of the seventh century. Pope Martin I's protest in 649 led to his arrest by the Emperor's police, his trial in Constantinople, maltreatment and exile, where he died. Other defenders of orthodoxy were also persecuted, and Maximus died a martyr. This increased the discontentment with the Eastern empire in Italy. When Constantine IV felt the danger, he saw the need to pacify the West and the Church and called for the Sixth Ecumenical Council (Trullan Council) in Constantinople. It took place in 680-681, and resulted in the readoption of the creed accepted at Chalcedon: the dual nature of Christ. (Dvornik, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 33-34)

37 *Ibid*, 22

38 Rózycka-Bryzek, "Les peintures murales de l'église de Santa Maria de Castelseprio," 157. The author speculates on the missing medallions and suggests that they formed a Deesis, with St. John the Baptist and Mary flanking Christ. Mary would thus be represented as both *Theotokos* and protector of humanity.

<sup>39</sup> Delogu, *Longobardi e Bizantini*, 122-124, Barni, *La conquête de l'Italie par les Lombards*, 136-138.

<sup>40</sup> He gave the Cottian Alps back to the Pope between 705 and 707. Aripert's own interest in this "donation" was to prevent the Pope from supporting his own enemies. Delogu, *Longobardi e Bizantini*, 124, Barni, *La conquête de l'Italie par les Lombards*, 137.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of King Liutprand's reign, see Paul the Deacon, *History of the Langobards* (Transl. Dudley Foulke, Philadelphia, 1907) 281-308. Unfortunately, Liutprand's story is at the end of Paul's last book of his history, which was left unfinished at his death. Therefore it is incomplete, and contains a few errors (corrected by Foulke in his notes). See also Barni, *La conquête de l'Italie par les Lombards*, 140-168, Delogu, *Longobardi e Bizantini*, 125-144, Hallenbeck, *Pavia and Rome*, 12, 21-51.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Deacon, *History of the Langobards*, 306, n. 4.

<sup>43</sup> The *Vita Gregori II* informs us that "The Romans and Lombards were united as brothers ..." (Hallenbeck, *Pavia and Rome*, 24).

<sup>44</sup> Liutprand seized the fortress of Sutri on the Via Cassia, in the duchy of Rome (approximately sixty kilometres northeast of Rome). Paul Deacon, *History of the Langobards*, 293. The tensions between the King and the Pope did not last very long after Liutprand transferred Sutri back to Gregory II, and the reasons for the attack are not clear. See Hallenbeck, *Pavia and Rome*, 24-27.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Deacon, *History of the Langobards*, 285.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 296. This was according to a long-standing custom among Germanic people.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 296-297.

<sup>48</sup> Paul the Deacon informs us of Liutprand's Christian existence: "He was indeed a man of much wisdom, very religious and a lover of peace, shrewd in counsel, powerful in war, merciful to offenders, chaste, modest, prayerful in the night-watches, generous in charities, ignorant of letters indeed, yet worthy to be likened to philosophers, a supporter of his people, an increaser of the law." (*History of the Langobards*, 306).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 303-304.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 304. For a discussion of the artistic production under Liutprand, see Delogu, *Longobardi e Bizantini*, 136-137.

<sup>51</sup> Barni, *La conquête de l'Italie par les Lombards*, 140.

## V

## CONCLUSION

The lack of early medieval documentary evidence on Castelseprio does not permit one to arrive at any concrete conclusions about the church of Santa Maria. All the results obtained from research and studies on the architecture of the monument, the iconography and style of its fresco cycle, the paleography of its inscriptions, the reconstruction of its lost scenes and its historical context, must remain essentially hypothetical.

However, when the various lines of exploration are brought together, they may lead to a clear estimation of the context in which the building and its decorations were produced. Within what is known of the development of architecture in Lombardy, and considering the structural analogies with San Salvatore in Brescia, a late seventh- or early eighth-century date seems plausible for the erection of the church of Santa Maria. Paleographic studies tend to support this date, although the damaged state of the inscription does not allow further investigation of this subject.

As for the iconography of the Christological scenes in the apse, no exact parallel could be found for the whole cycle, but individual scenes have been likened to numerous comparative examples. The density of similarities with early eighth-century frescoes in Rome makes the association of the two groups seem like an attractive theory, but the differences which exist between them do not permit further elaboration on their relationships. The Greek presence is felt in both groups: they probably emerged from a similar artistic tradition.

Links have also been established between the Castelseprio frescoes and other northern Italian mural decorations. These analogies throw more light on the place of

Castelseprio in connection to San Salvatore in Brescia, the Tempietto at Cividale and St. John at Mustair it may find its origin at the dawn of the Lombard style which developed in the eighth century and subsequently inspired Carolingian artists

Artistically, the concordance of the eighth-century date for all aspects of the monument's production seems more than coincidental. Moreover, the study of Lombard society and religion in the early Middle Ages reveals that the early eighth century was relatively peaceful, and thus a favourable time for building constructions and painting commissions. The themes of the scenes suit the religious ideas which were being propagated at that period: the dogma of the Divine Incarnation of Christ and his dual nature.

Historical accounts on King Liutprand's great enterprising character, his active patronage of the arts and his determination in unifying the religion in Italy make him a good candidate for the patronage of Santa Maria, about the second decade of the eighth century. its strategic location on the trading and pilgrimage route between central Europe and Italy supports the possibility of a royal commission at Castelseprio.

The importance of this small Lombard church is not founded only on the artistic value of the monument itself, it also compels modern scholars to reassess a domain of art history left in obscurity until recently. In spite of the modern restorations and the protection of the frescoes, they are rapidly deteriorating. As time goes by, the loss of monuments and the disappearance of others remind us of the urge to record and study them while they still exist.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

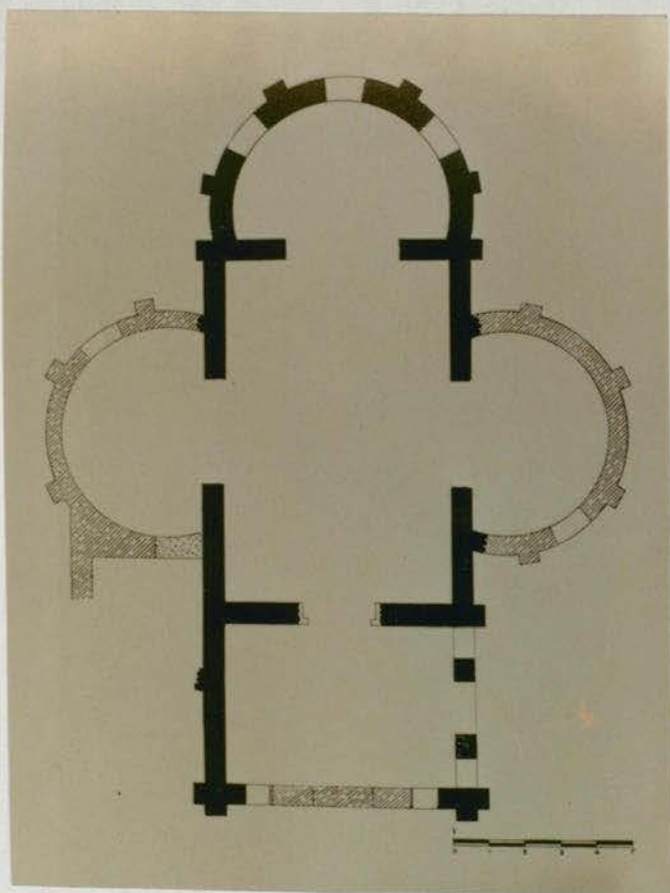
1. *Santa Maria foris portas*, Castelseprio: outside view



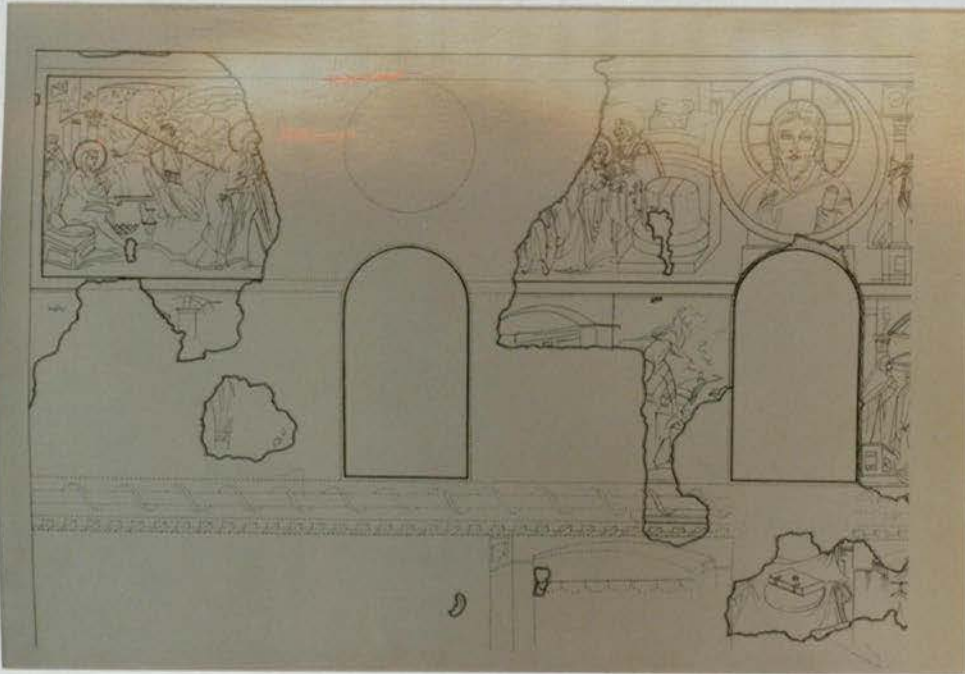
## 2. Town and castle: plan



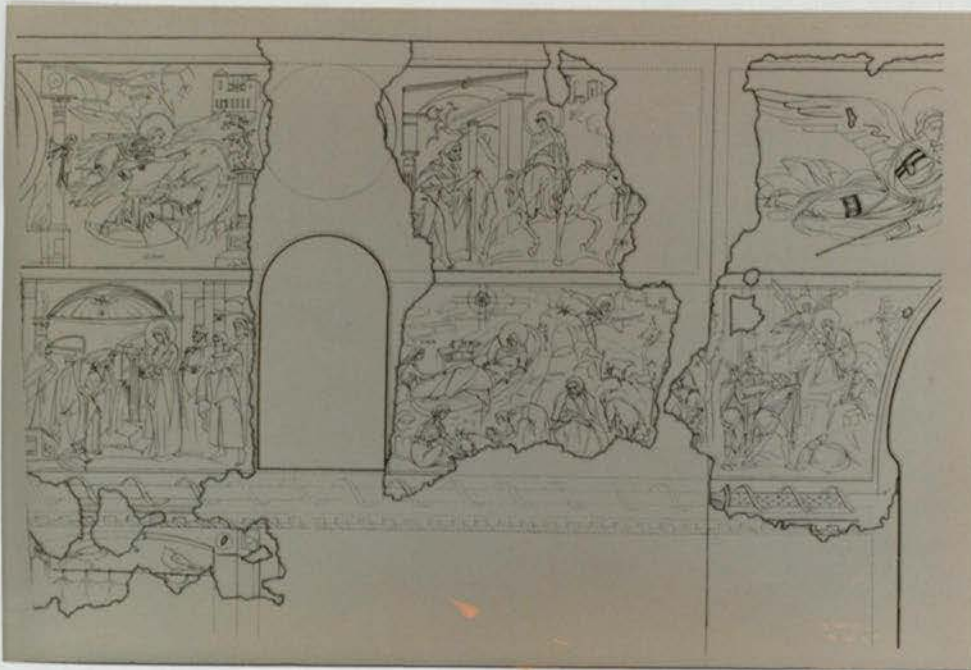
## 3. Santa Maria: ground plan



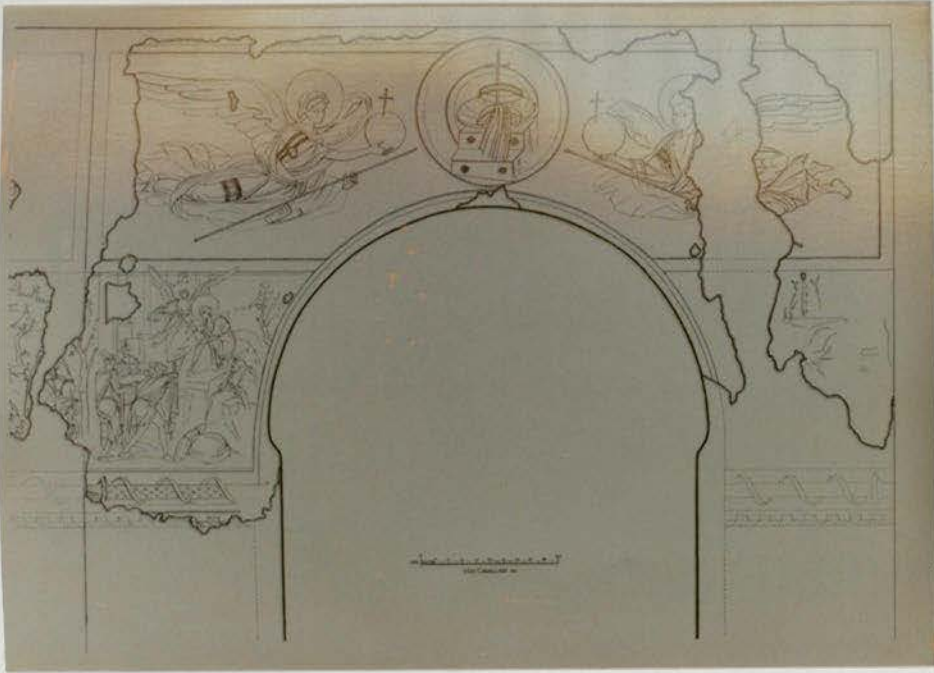
## 4. Left apse wall, after Capitani d'Arzago



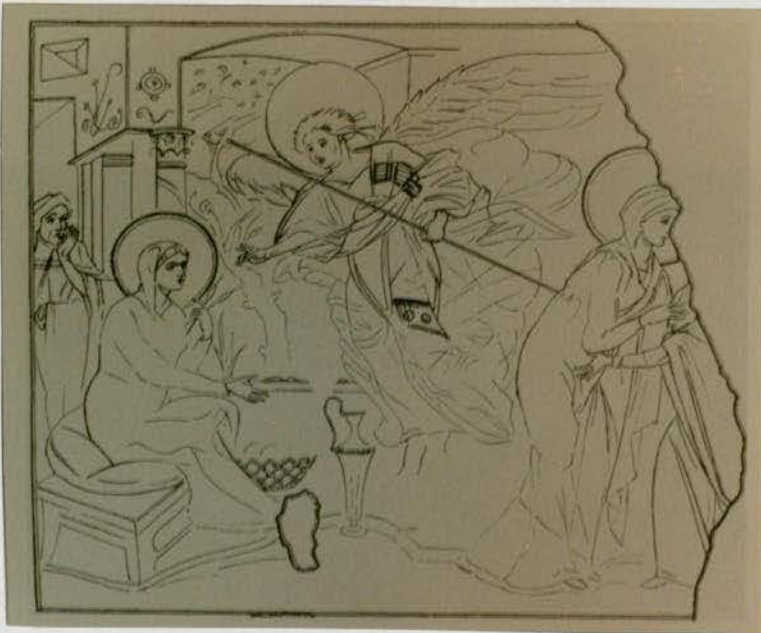
## 5. Right apse wall, after Capitani d'Arzago



6. Inside of arch wall, seen from inside the apse, after Capitani d'Arzago



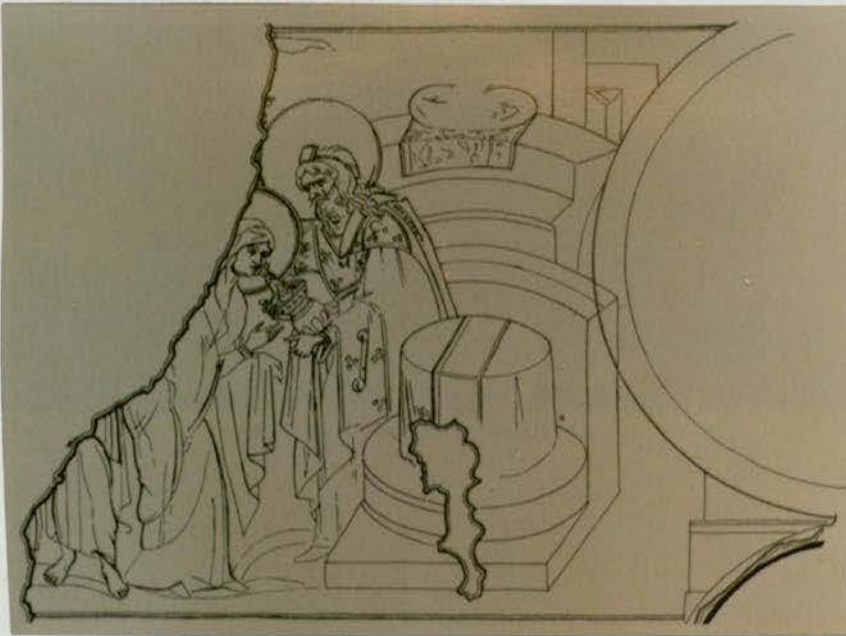
7. The Annunciation, after Capitani d'Arzago



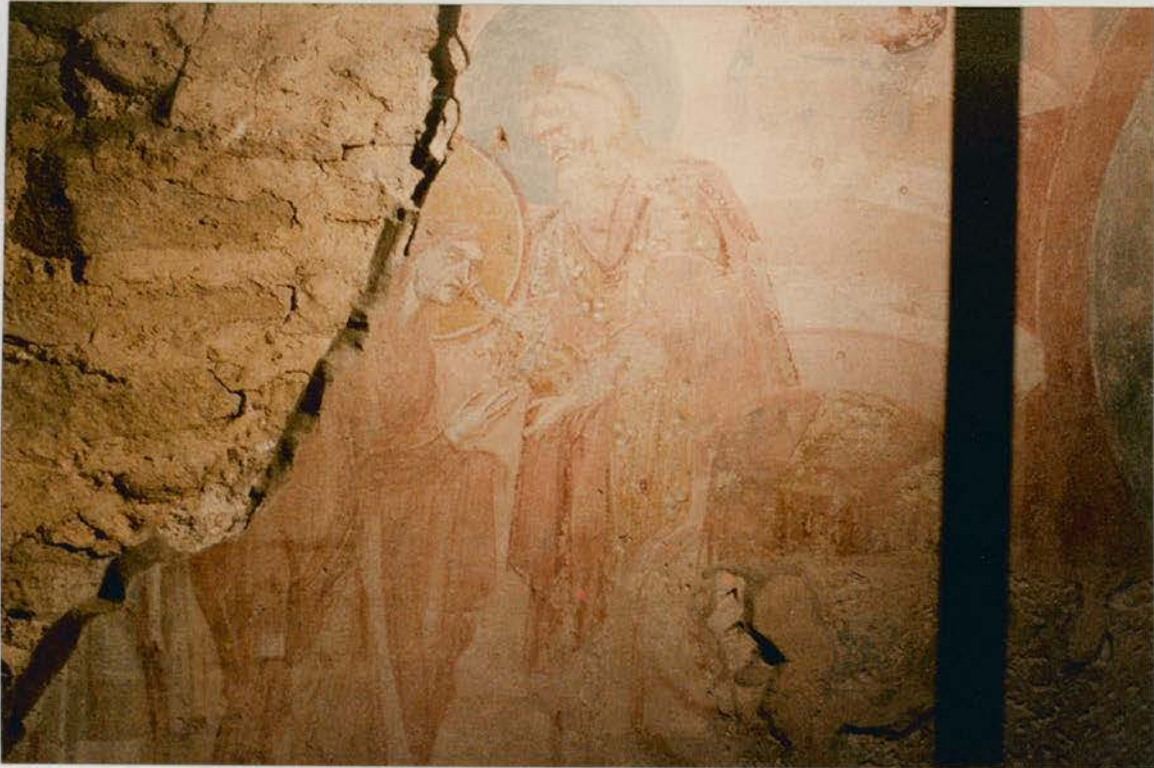
8. The Annunciation



9. The Trial by Water, after Capitani d'Arzago

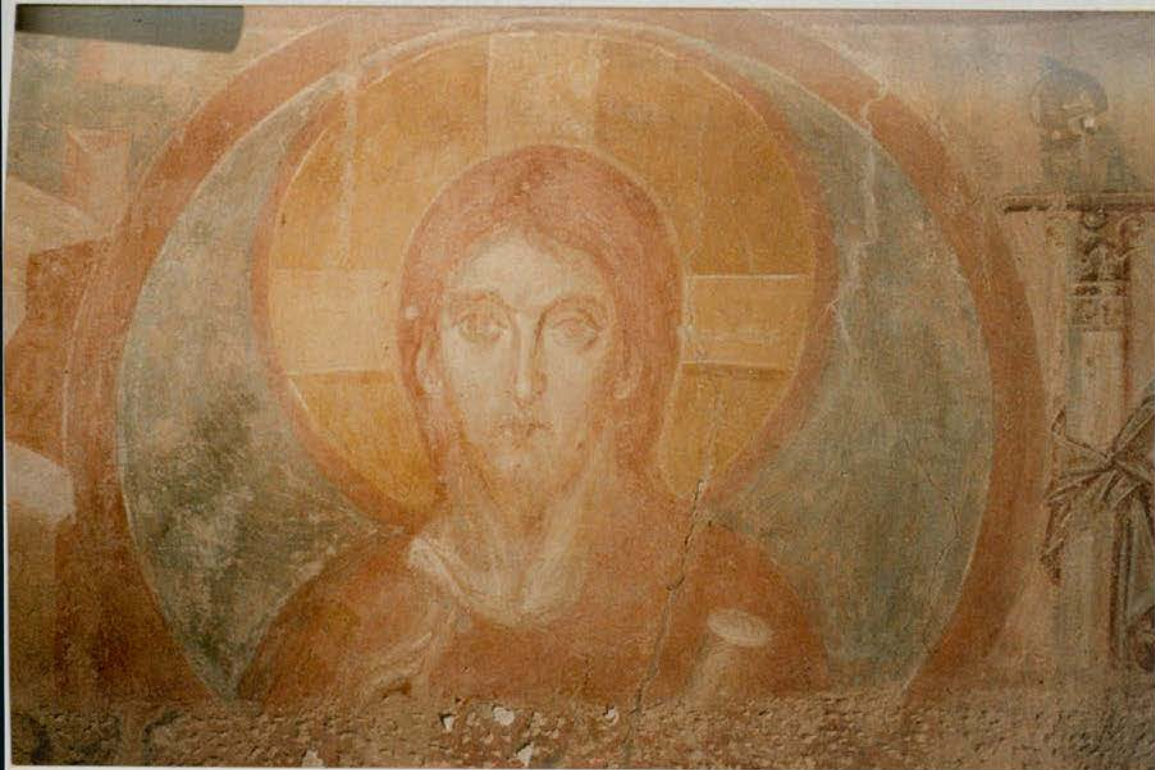


10. The Trial by Water



COLONIAL

11. Christ *Pantocrator*



12. The Dream of Joseph



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13. The Journey to Bethlehem

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14. The Nativity



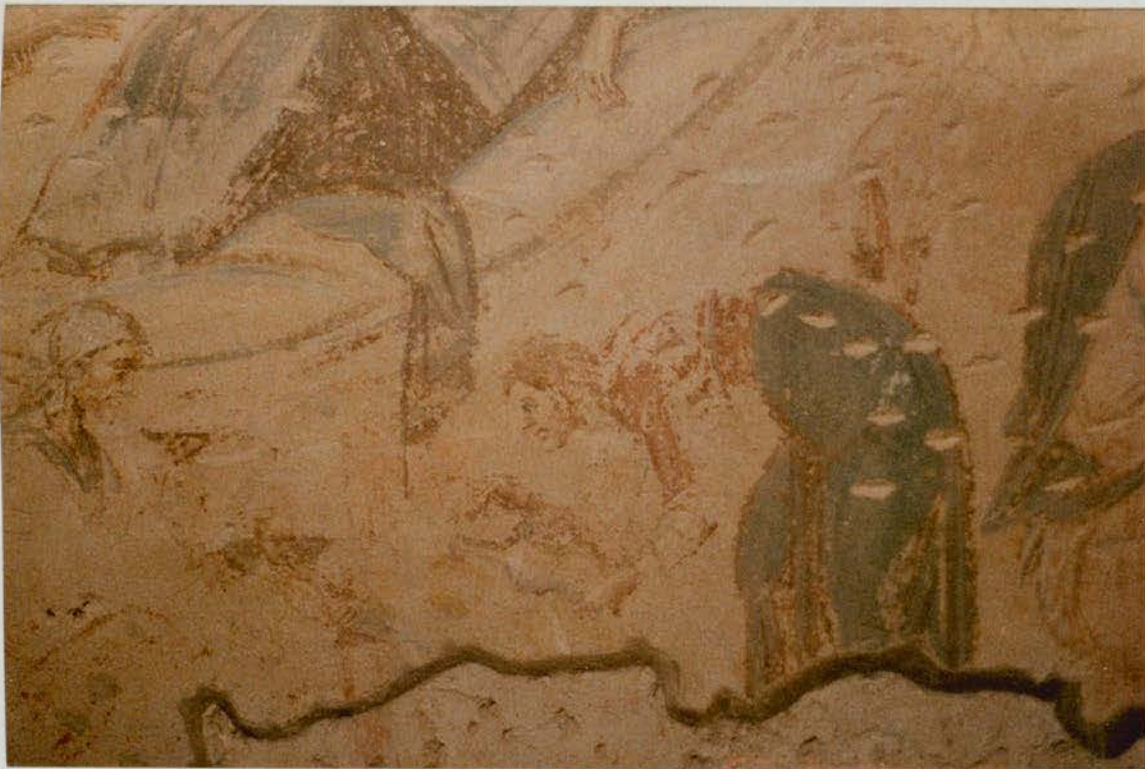
15. The Nativity: detail of Mary and Christ



16. The Nativity: detail of the Doubting Midwife



17. The Nativity: detail of the Washing of the Child



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ASSOCIATION WITH

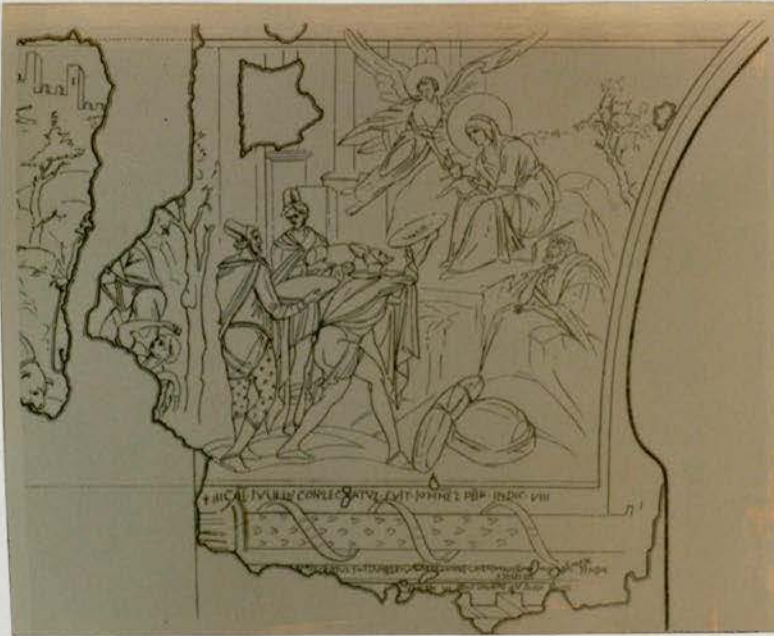
18. The Nativity: detail of Joseph



19. The Nativity: detail of the Annunciation to the Shepherds



20. The Adoration of the Magi, after Capitani d'Arzago



## 21. The Adoration of the Magi



BOND

221 SOUTH BOSTON CHURCH

22. The Adoration of the Magi: detail of the Magi



Rolland  
COLONIAL

## 23. The Presentation in the Temple, after Capitani d'Arzago



24. The Presentation in the Temple



25. The Presentation in the Temple: detail of Christ



BOND

ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE

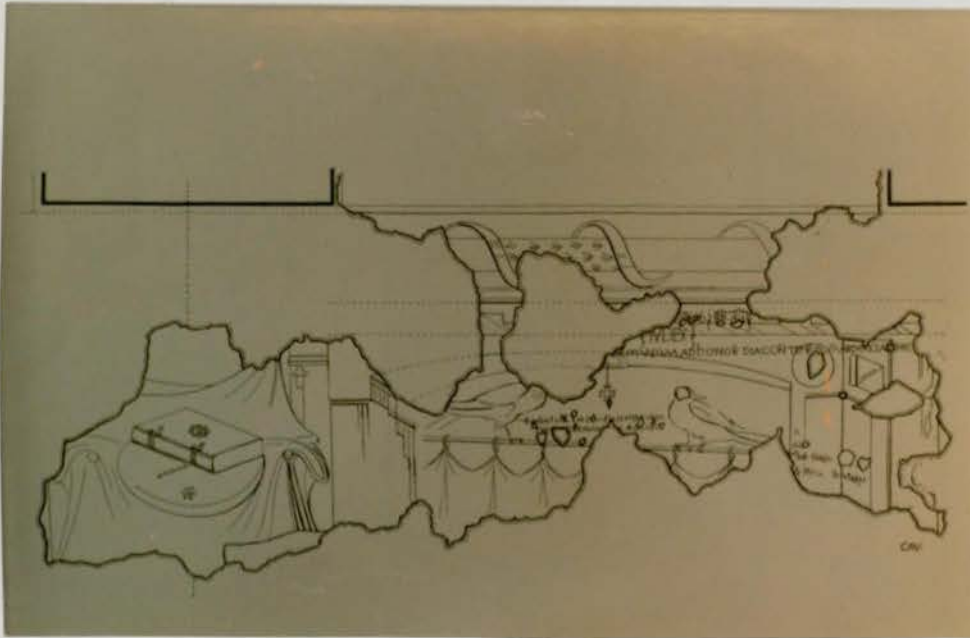
26. The *Hetoimasia*: left side



27. The *Hetoimasia*: detail of the attributes



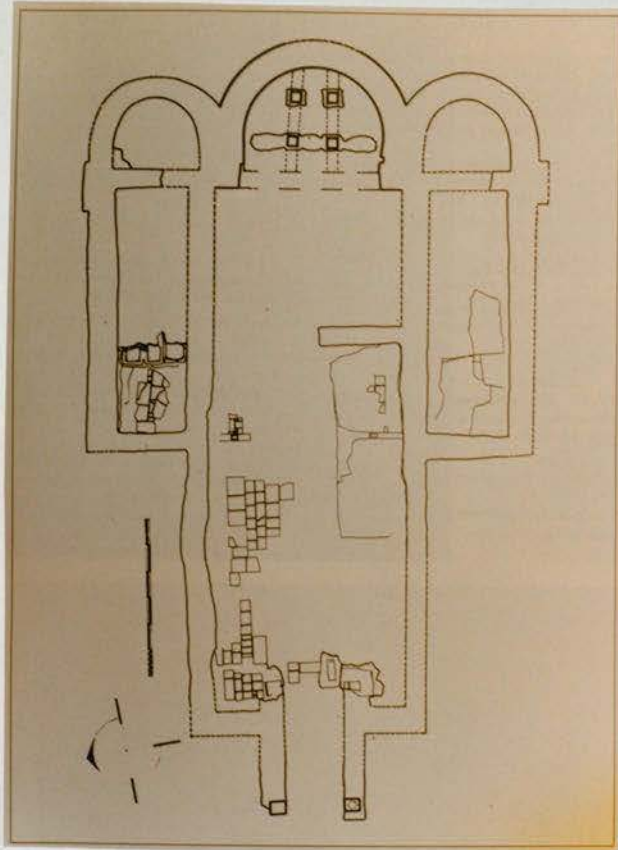
## 28. Symbolic elements and graffiti, lower part of apse wall, after Capitani d'Arzago



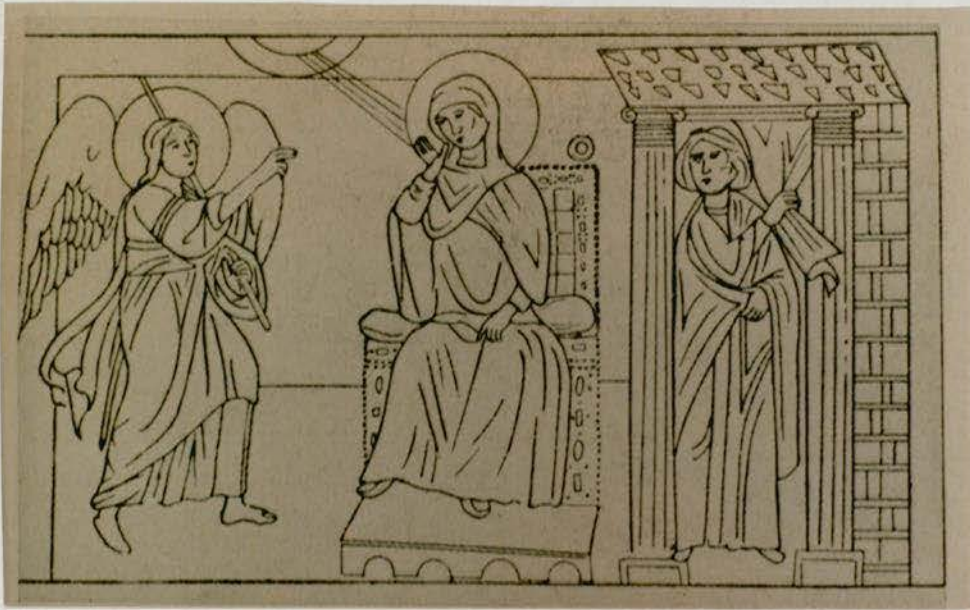
29. South-west angle, porch and nave



30. Brescia: plan of the San Salvatore crypt



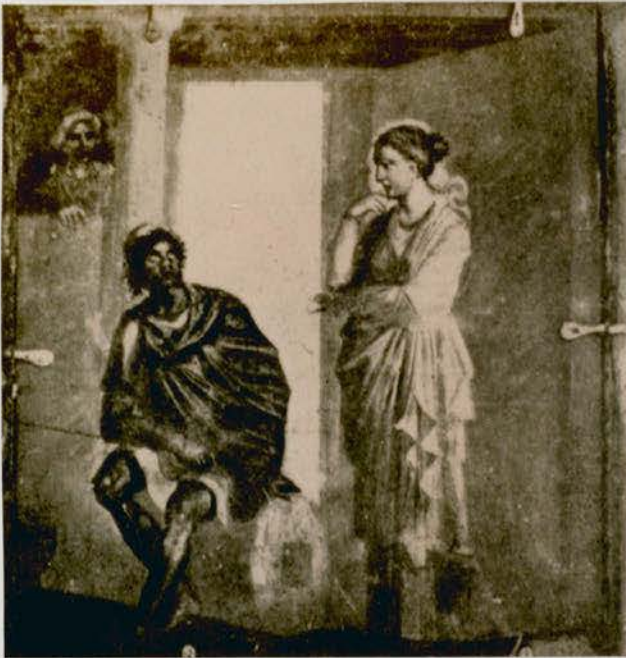
31. S. Urbano alla Caffarella: Annunciation, after Millet



32. Paris, Bib. Nat. lat. 9393: Carolingian Ivory of the Annunciation



## 33. Pompeii: Story of Ulysses



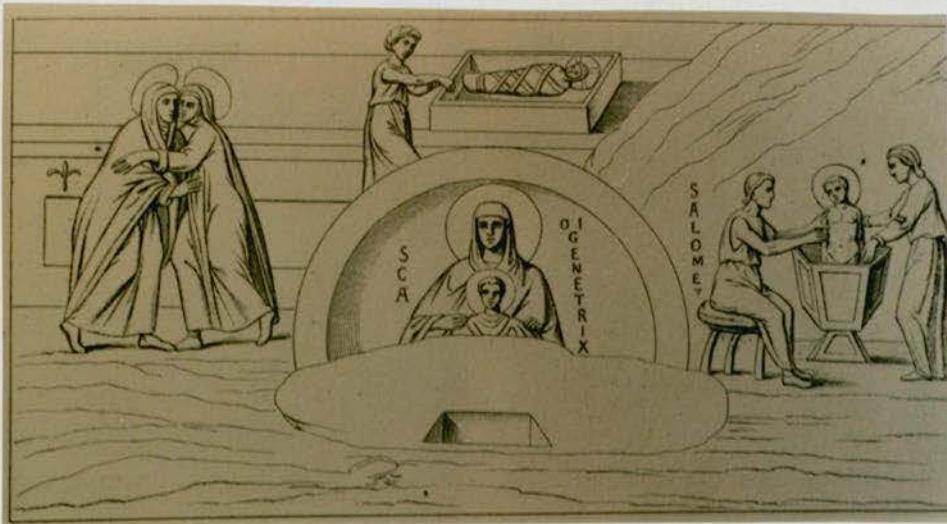
## 34. Oratory of John VII: Annunciation and Visitation (Grimaldi's sketch)



35. Cappadocia, Kiliçlar: Visitation and Trial by Water



36. Catacomb of San Valentino: Nativity and Visitation



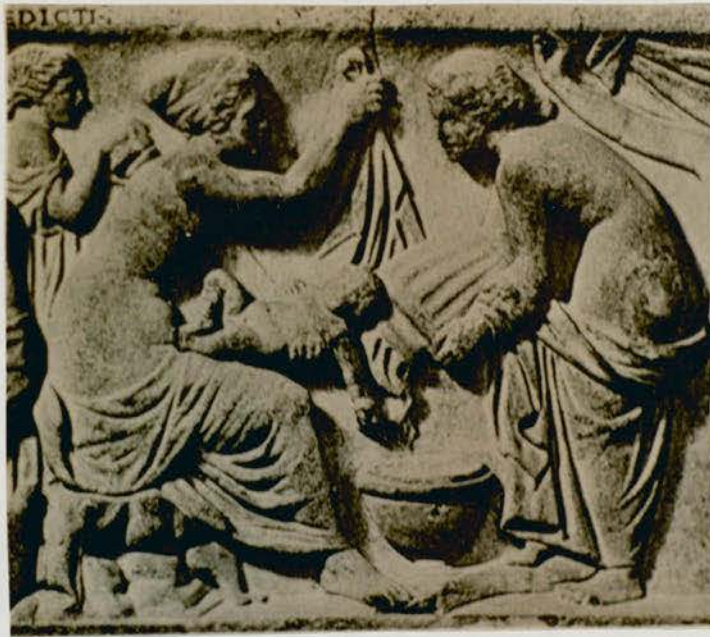
37. Ravenna: Throne of Maximian (VI-C. Ivory)



38. Brescia: San Salvatore Crypt: The Journey to Bethlehem or the Flight into Egypt.



39. Rome, Museo Capitolino: Sarcophagus, II C., Birth of Dionysos



40. Rome, Domus Aurea fresco: Birth of Dionysos (engraving by Mirri)



41. Paris, Louvre: Ivory Nativity, X C.



42. Vatican, Museo Sacro: Ivory Nativity, X C.



43. Cappadocia, Soganli Karabas Kilise: Bathing of the Child



## 44. Oratory of John VII: Nativity, Grimaldi's sketch



45. Oratory of John VII: Nativity, tracing of the Miracle of the Midwife

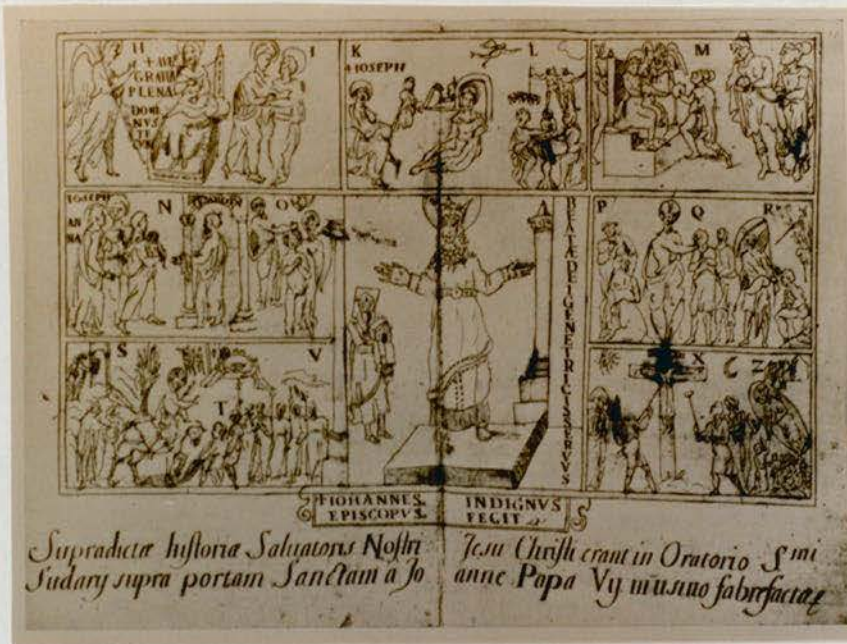


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46. Oratory of John VII: fragment of the Bathing of the Child



## 47. Oratory of John VII: Grimaldi's drawing



## 48. Oratory of John VII: Grimaldi's drawing



49. S. Maria Antiqua, fresco of John VII: Nativity



50. S. Maria Antiqua, fresco of John VII: Nativity



51. Ravenna: Throne of Maximian: Nativity panel



52. S. Benevento bronze door: Nativity



53. S. Maria Antiqua, fresco of John VII: Adoration of the Magi



54. Oratory of John VII: Adoration of the Magi (fragment)



55. S. Vincenzo al Volturno, crypt: Angel of the Annunciation



56. Brescia, San Salvatore crypt: head (fragment)



57. Brescia, San Salvatore crypt: frescoes, VIII-IX C., theme unknown



58. Brescia, San Salvatore crypt: *sinopia*, VIII-IX C.: Christ and the Virgin



59. Cividale, Tempietto: lunette fresco; Christ with Archangels Michael and Gabriel



60. Cividale, Tempietto: saint



61. Paris Psalter (Paris, Bibl. Nat. cod. gr. 139 fol. 1 v.): David Composing the Psalms



62. Rome, Santa Maria Antiqua: zone of popes, column and velum



63. Rome (fragment formerly in Biblioteca Angelica, from Rocca, 1609):  
Oratory of John VII; Crucified Christ



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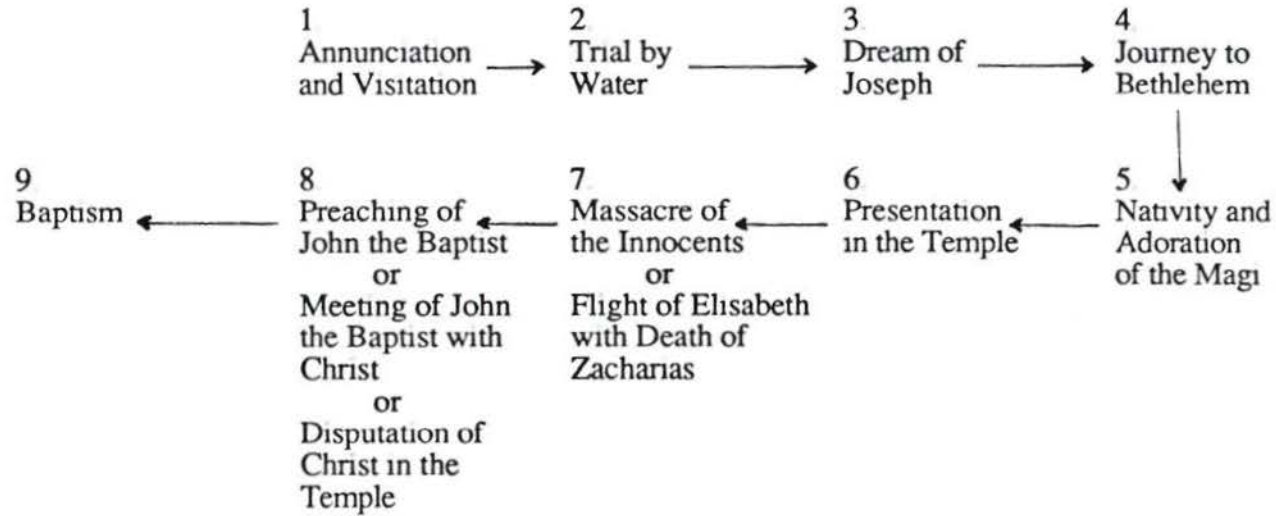
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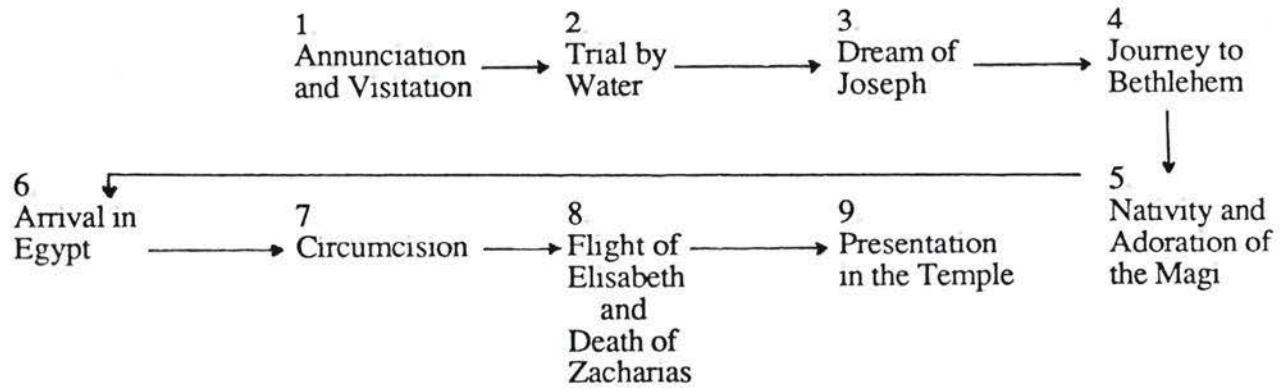
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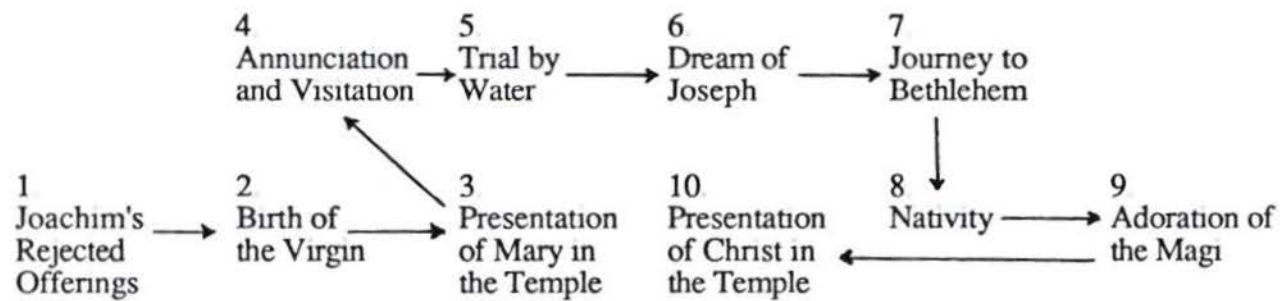
Appendix 1. Capitani d'Arzago's Reconstruction



Appendix 2 Weitzmann's Reconstruction



Appendix 3 Leveto's Reconstruction



## VITA

Surname Goulet

Given Names H el ene-Marie-Pauline

Place of Birth Qu ebec, P Q

Date of Birth March 12 1957

### Educational Institutions Attended, with Dates of Entering and Leaving

C E G E P DE MERICI, QUEBEC, P Q 1974 to 1976

UNIVERSITA DI FIRENZE, FLORENCE, ITALY 1980

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA, B C 1979 to 1988

### Degrees and Diplomas Awarded, with Dates and Names of Institution

Dipl me en Etudes Coll giales 1976 C E G E P De M eric, Qu ebec, P Q

Diploma in Italian Language 1980 Universit  di Firenze, Florence, Italy

Bachelor of Arts 1983 University of Victoria, B C

### Scholarships and Awards

Federal Government Scholarships 1979/80, 1980/81 and 1981/82

Teaching Assistantships 1983/84 and 1984/85

Graduate Studies Bursary 1984/85

### Conferences

Canadian Conference of Medieval Art Historians, the University of Winnipeg, Manitoba March 1986

Paper "The Iconography of the Fresco Cycle at Santa Maria di Castelseprio."

Universities Art Association Conference, The University of Victoria, B C November 1986

Paper "Sources and Evolution of the Themes in the Castelseprio Frescoes"

Canadian Conference of Medieval Art Historians, York University, Toronto, Ontario March 1987

Paper "Links between Castelseprio, San Salvatore in Brescia and other Related Churches in and around Lombardy"

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Title of Thesis

The Fresco Cycle in the Lombard Church of Santa Maria di Castelseprio

Author



HÉLÈNE-MARIE-PAULINE GOULET

April 21<sup>st</sup> 1988