

## Preface

While archaeologists and art historians often discussed statues<sup>1</sup> and mosaics in apses of temples, imperial cult rooms, nymphaea, churches and chapels<sup>2</sup>, the apse as a space for images<sup>3</sup> has never been discussed in a monograph. This is my main focus.

The honour of the invitation from the University of Notre Dame, to deliver the Conway Lectures at the Medieval Institute opened up the possibility to me to sketch the topic 'apse as a space of images' in an understandable form. The original character of the lectures was maintained deliberately. To reach material completeness is a desirable virtue of each scholar, but, if I had tried to do so, this would have taken the wind out of my sails. My target was above all to introduce the new question and to check its importance by comparison with the known and less known monuments and texts. Because most of the apse mosaics of the Early Christian and Byzantine period are seemingly well known, new aspects appeared when I asked for the 'apse as a space for images'. Each designer of an apse mosaic had to sound out the width and height of an apse with respect to the iconography and the room to which it was connected. The earliest preserved apse and cupola mosaics with Christian themes – S. Costanza in Rome, S. Aquilino in Milan, Centcelles near Tarragona – were designed for private mausolea or representational rooms where there was no necessity of an altar. The privates had no problem in using Christian images. The 'explosion' of the Christian image takes place within the private realm, not within the official church. In churches, however, Christians erected an altar for the celebration of mass in or in front of each apse. This changed the ambition and the function of the apse into the sacred focus of the church, into the centre of the cult, influencing thereby the dynamics of the apse as a space for images, but not necessarily the apse programme. The themes of Early Christian apse mosaics have not much to do with liturgy.

The designer of an apse programme (or the consulting cleric) was first of all involved with the question of the representation of God the Father<sup>4</sup> and/or with the radical refusal of the figurative image. When the designers of apse mosaics finally forgot about the Second Commandment, they had to decide whether the apse should be accessible to other persons besides to Jesus Christ, the apostles and the angels, namely to the Virgin Mary, to the saints and even to the representatives of the clergy and to the layman. As early as the sixth century the apse lost its original exclusivity because from

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1 G. Hornbostl-Hüttner, *Studien zur römischen Nischenarchitektur*. Leiden 1979.

2 C. Ihm, *Die Programme der christlichen Apsismalerei vom vierten Jahrhundert bis zur Mitte des 8. Jahrhunderts*. Wiesbaden 1960.

3 B. Brenk, *Zur Apsis als Bildort*. In: *The Material and the Ideal. Essays in Medieval Art and Archaeology in Honour of Jean-Michel Spieser* (ed. A. Cutler, A. Papaconstantinou). Leiden 2007. 15–29.

4 J.-M. Spieser, *The Representation of Christ in the Apses of Early Christian Churches*. *Gesta* 27/1. 1998. 63–73.

then on clerics and layman started to represent themselves next to the Divinity without any qualm. Since the apse was not the only focus of Christian imagery, I thought it important to include other media of images, namely panel paintings, ex Votos, icons and murals in order to show the development of conflict among these media. Thus it could be shown that apse mosaics mutated from the sixth century on to more or less private ex Votos.

Most scholars have dealt with the apse as a category of its own whose influences were hypothetically detected on Early Christian sarcophagi, or, to put it in another way: sarcophagi with representational scenes were often considered to be influenced by lost apse mosaics<sup>5</sup>; but this hypothesis was never really substantiated.

Since the apse mosaics in parish churches, monastic churches, pilgrimage churches and cathedrals are to be considered as official ecclesiastical declarations, the question arises how the believers understood an apse mosaic, i. e. as a mere decoration, or as a form of propaganda or as a representational message which deserved respect, maybe veneration, worship or even an official cult. Furthermore, in many cases the apse evokes – thanks to its size and its artistic magnetism – something one could call a ‘visual cult’ which may not be mixed up with an official cult. With the notion ‘visual cult’ I tried to point out the viewpoint of the churchgoers.

Though liturgy is celebrated in front of nearly all preserved apses of churches, apse mosaics are basically never cult images. Their mission is, first of all, a theological one, that is to say apse mosaics tell something about God the Father and Jesus Christ. The centre of interest forms the doctrine of the two natures of Christ which passes through Early Christian and Byzantine theology like a red line. In the first decades of Christian art (i. e. during the fourth century) it was not so important to stress the human character of Jesus Christ, but it was much more important to convince the believers of the divine character of Jesus. The main question to resolve was how to show the Divinity of Christ without conflicting with the Graeco-Roman mythological Deities. It comes as a surprise that, as soon as the Roman imperial cult was abolished in the first decades of the fourth century, Christian designers helped themselves without qualms to Roman imperial iconographic elements in order to represent the Divinity of Christ. The doctrine that Jesus Christ was the son of God, encouraged theologians to speak of the Virgin Mary as a Theotokos; they believed that the Virgin had given birth to a God. This led the Christian designers to provide the Virgin with an imperial dress. Some authors spoke of an ‘imperialization’ of Christian art<sup>6</sup>, but I prefer to speak of single imperial iconographic motives. When the Virgin Mary with her Child was represented in an apse mosaic, the meaning was basically the propagation both of the

5 F. Gerke, Studien zur Sarkophagplastik der theodosianischen Renaissance. *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde* 42 (1934). 1–34; W. N. Schumacher, Dominus Legem Dat. *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde* 54 (1959). 1–39; W. N. Schumacher, Eine römische Apsiskomposition. *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde* 54 (1959). 137–202.

6 J. G. Deckers, Der erste Diener Christi. Die Proskynese der Kaiser als Schlüsselmotiv der Mosaiken in S. Vitale (Ravenna) und in der Hagia Sophia (Istanbul). In: *Art, Cérémonial et Liturgie au Moyen Âge. Actes du colloque du 3e cycle Roman de Lettres. Lausanne-Fribourg 2000* (ed. N. Bock, P. Kurmann, S. Romano, J.-M. Spieser) Rome 2002. 11–57; a critical approach to this problem is offered by Th. Mathews, *The Clash of the Gods*. Princeton 1992.

Divinity and the Humanity of Christ; there is no reason to talk of a cult of the Virgin. I have tried to detect the private roots of the cult of the Virgin which became official only from the seventh century on.

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