

# Wall Paintings as Documents: An Example from the Atrium of S. Maria Antiqua, Rome

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## Article abstract

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# Wall Paintings as Documents: An Example from the Atrium of S. Maria Antiqua, Rome\*

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## RÉSUMÉ

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L'article prend comme sujet une fresque, représentant cinq saints nimbés, qui couvre la longueur d'un passage qui sort de l'atrium de l'église de S. Maria Antiqua à Rome. Des particularités de l'habit ecclésiastique, l'emploi de la forme vernaculaire « sancto », et la présence de saint Blaise (dont le culte n'est arrivé à Rome qu'au milieu du x<sup>e</sup> siècle), suggèrent une date d'environ l'an 1 000. Malgré l'exécution de qualité inférieure et le

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This paper has two aims. In part it is intended to report on one aspect of the research undertaken over the past few years in the atrium of S. Maria Antiqua, an early medieval church situated in the Roman Forum,<sup>1</sup> and in part it is polemical, arguing a case *for* an archaeological approach to the history of art and *against* one based on critical judgments or aesthetics. In other words, it is intended to move from a specific instance to a more general statement about methodology, which seems appropriate at a time when discussions of methodology are becoming increasingly prominent in art historical circles.

The focus of this study is a mural depicting five standing saints, located in a short narrow passageway (2.45 m in length) leading from the atrium of S. Maria Antiqua through the west wall to an

adjoining structure.<sup>2</sup> The nature and function of this neighbouring building has never been determined, although a recent study combined with new archaeological excavation confirms its first-century date and suggests that it may have been used as a *horreum* (storehouse).<sup>3</sup> This building, like the church, received extensive modifications during the Middle Ages, and these included, at some unknown date, the cutting of the passage in question, presumably to provide direct access between the two areas.

The mural, which occupies the full length of the north wall of the passage (on the right as one leaves the atrium of the church), does not represent one of the great moments in the history of medieval painting—at least not from the point of view of stylistic quality. Indeed, the very opposite may be true: it may be one of the poorest and most

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\* A version of this paper was presented to the Seventh Canadian Conference of Medieval Art Historians, York University, in March 1987. The author's site research at S. Maria Antiqua was undertaken in collaboration with the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma and the British School at Rome, with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1 For a complete study of the atrium murals see J. Osborne, "The Atrium of S. Maria Antiqua, Rome: A History in Art," *Papers of the British School at Rome*, LV (1987), 186-233.

2 The narrowness of the passage does not permit photography of the wall as a whole. The best illustration is provided by J. Wilpert, *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1916), pl. 201:2.

3 For preliminary excavation results see H. Hurst, J. Osborne, and D. Whitehouse, "Santa Maria Antiqua: problemi e proposte," *Roma. Archeologia nel Centro* (Rome, 1985), I, 93-96.

crudely executed murals to have been painted in Rome in the entire Middle Ages. The passage and mural were first discovered in 1885, some 15 years before the demolition of the church of S. Maria Liberatrice and the subsequent full excavation of the site. Notices of the 1885 discovery appeared in both *Notizie degli Scavi* and the *Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana*,<sup>4</sup> but the mural attracted little attention before the excavations of 1900 that laid bare the entire group of buildings. Even then, it was generally passed over in favour of the stylistically superior paintings in the interior of S. Maria Antiqua. Those few who do include the painting in their studies of the monument tend to dismiss it quickly; for example, Wladimir de Grūncisen described the five standing saints in these words in 1911: “Les têtes longues et plates n’ont aucune expression artistique; le front très bas, les oreilles énormes qui dépassent de beaucoup par en haut la ligne des sourcils, font songer à une face plus simiesque qu’humaine.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Joseph Wilpert, in his 1916 book on medieval Roman mosaics and wall paintings, notes that the murals in the passageway reveal “die grösste Verwilderung. . . . Tiefer konnte die Kunst nicht mehr sinken.”<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult to disagree. But despite the mural’s amateurish appearance, it is nonetheless a valuable document that can provide useful information about the history of this part of the Forum, nestled into the slope of the Palatine hill, during the last centuries of its use. Precious little information is available on this subject from other sources. If we consider the mural as an historical document and not as a work of “art” (in the modern sense of that term), what information does it convey and what can it tell us about the individual or group that commissioned it?

The first steps in answering these questions are to identify the nature of the subject matter and to establish a chronological context. The first of these presents little difficulty: the haloes above the five figures in question clearly identify them as saints. But can their identities be determined more precisely? This too is easily accomplished, since all were named in inscriptions set in black letters above their heads, and four of these were still legible when the passage was first discovered and are thus on record. Only the second figure from the right remains anonymous (Fig. 1). The others are, from left to right, Blaise (Blasius), Basil

(Fig. 2), Lawrence (Fig. 3), and Christopher. A few faint traces of the identifying inscriptions still remain visible, in particular the letters SCO (the abbreviation for “sancto”) above the head of Basil and a good part of the name of Christopher. On the whole, their state of preservation is remarkable, given that they have been exposed to the elements for more than a century. Most parts of the figures survive intact, with areas of major loss being limited to the upper portions of Basil’s legs and the complete lower body of Christopher.

Although no medieval Michelangelo, our painter was certainly conversant with the language of art, since each figure is depicted in a fashion appropriate to his identity. Appearance, costume, and accessories are important signifiers of status and identity in medieval art, and this mural is no exception. The four saints at the left hold codices in their left hands, identifying them as clerics, while Christopher, who was not a cleric, holds some sort of cylindrical object, now barely visible. Lawrence also holds a long-handled processional cross, appropriate to his rank as a deacon; this is one of his standard attributes in medieval Italian art (compare for example the depictions of Lawrence in the sixth-century mosaic of S. Lorenzo fuori le mura, the tenth-century mural in the apse of S. Sebastiano al Palatino, or the twelfth-century mosaic on the triumphal arch of S. Clemente, all in Rome). Blaise and Basil, being bishops of the Greek church, are bearded and vested with an *omophorion* decorated with Maltese crosses. Their three companions, following the practice of the Western church, are clean-shaven. Lawrence and his unidentified neighbour (perhaps Stephen or Vincent?) are also robed in ecclesiastical vestments, notably the dalmatic, but have no pallium in keeping with their lesser rank as deacons. Only Christopher lacks any evidence of clerical costume. Given the overall stylistic quality of the painting, this strict iconographical accuracy may come as something of a surprise.

The four clerical saints also have one more feature in common: their right hands are held horizontally at the level of their chests, with the fingers extended to touch the books held in the other hand, in the process revealing the long border of the right sleeve of their dalmatics. These too are decorated with a series of Maltese crosses.

This detail provides the first indication of the approximate date of the mural, since dalmatics decorated in this fashion are characteristic of central Italian art of the tenth and eleventh centuries. For example, the Pontifical Rotulus from Benevento (Rome, Bib. Casanatense cod. 724 B I 13) depicts various clergy, and particularly deacons, with sleeves decorated with crosses composed of

4 R. Lanciani and L. Borsari, *Notizie degli Scavi* (1885), 156; O. Marucchi, “Conferenze della società di cultori della cristiana archeologia in Roma,” *Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana* (1884-85), 127-43, esp. 142-43.

5 W. de Grūncisen et al., *Sainte Marie Antique* (Rome, 1911), 380.

6 Wilpert, *Die römischen Mosaiken*, 722.

four *segmenta*.<sup>7</sup> Even closer to the S. Maria Antiqua figures are the depictions of Lawrence and Stephen in the tenth-century apse of S. Sebastiano al Palatino.<sup>8</sup> Here the sleeve of Stephen's dalmatic also has crosses of the Maltese type, although still composed of four *segmenta* like those in the Beneventan manuscript.

A few observations may be made with regard to technique. The concentric rings that define the outer borders of the haloes have been incised in the plaster, an unusual practice in medieval Roman painting. These incisions do not form complete circles; instead, they have been cut only where the halo was to be shown and are thus interrupted where they would have crossed the bodies of the saints. The haloes were painted in ochre, with the borders in red, except for that of Basil, which is red throughout. Elsewhere the colour scheme is uniformly simple: the details of faces and costumes are drawn in black, and reddish brown is used for the hair. There is no evidence of more than a single application of paint.

It seems evident that this mural on the north wall of the passage formed part of a larger scheme of decorations that once embraced the passage as a whole. At the time of the initial discovery, it was recorded that the south wall, directly opposite, was similarly painted with a series of standing saints. Very little plaster now survives on the south wall, but a few traces do remain of a single poorly preserved figure, clearly produced by the same individual or workshop. He too is depicted as a saint, with similar incised lines marking the contours of his halo. An inscription, no longer visible but recorded when still legible in the early years of this century, identified him as St. Benedict.<sup>9</sup> The nature of the object held in his left hand cannot now be determined, but it was clearly not a codex. There is no evidence of clerical vestments.

Fragments of painted plaster on the vault of the passage indicate that it too was once decorated. Unfortunately, almost nothing of this scheme has survived, apart from a few sections of blue ground adorned with rosettes composed of white dots, and fragments of a bearded saint holding a codex. No identification of this figure is possible, nor is there any suggestion that he was ever identified by an inscription.

Despite the many campaigns of decoration throughout S. Maria Antiqua, ranging in date from the sixth to the eleventh centuries, there is no other painting that resembles the passage mural in

either style or technique. It is thus impossible to link the decoration of the passage with any fixed point in the chronology of the site, and any hypotheses regarding its date must be based on internal clues contained within the mural itself. Apart from the previously mentioned decorations on the sleeves of the dalmatics, there are two such clues that merit some discussion.

The first involves language. The inscriptions that identify the saints use the vernacular form *sancto* as opposed to the Latin *sanctus*. The use of the vernacular in formal inscriptions is rare in early medieval Rome, and no other examples are known before the eleventh century.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, this may suggest an advanced date in comparison with the other murals in the church.

The second clue is provided by the presence in the group of the figure identified as St. Blaise, thought to have been a fourth-century bishop of Sebaste in Asia Minor. Blaise is not among those saints who appear in Roman church decorations of the eighth, ninth, and early tenth centuries. His cult was introduced to Rome during the reign of Prince Alberic (932-54) by a group of Greek-speaking nuns who had fled north in the wake of the Arab raids on the coast of Calabria,<sup>11</sup> and the earliest record of a Roman church with this dedication occurs in the year 955.<sup>12</sup> The cult rapidly prospered, and Blaise is included in the eleventh-century decorations in the lower church of San Clemente. His presence on the atrium passage wall thus implies a date after the middle of the tenth century.

It seems unlikely that one can be more precise. Joseph Wilpert cited the additional evidence of the crosses on the shoulders of Basil and Blaise as also indicating a late date.<sup>13</sup> This would be true if the liturgical vestment in question were the Latin pallium. However, as has already been noted, it is the Greek *omophorion*, which is known to have had shoulder crosses since at least the eighth century. Accordingly, its presence here is unhelpful in resolving the question of chronology, and there is no other internal evidence that may be adduced in this regard.

In the research project in the atrium of S. Maria Antiqua, the murals were treated as documents

7 For the illustrations of this manuscript see Roger Reynolds, "Image and Text: The Liturgy of Clerical Ordination in Medieval Art," *Gesta*, xxii (1983), 27-38.

8 Wilpert, *Die römischen Mosaiken*, pl. 224.

9 Wilpert, *Die römischen Mosaiken*, pl. 215:5.

10 On murals in the lower church of S. Clemente, Rome, see A. Monteverdi, "L'iscrizione volgare di San Clemente," *Studi Romani*, xxiv (1934), 5-18, and J. Osborne, "The 'Particular Judgment': An Early Medieval Wall-Painting in the Lower Church of San Clemente, Rome," *Burlington Magazine*, cxxiii (1981), 335-41.

11 See Bernard Hamilton, "The City of Rome and the Eastern Churches in the Tenth Century," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, xxvii (1961), 5-26.

12 C. Huelsen, *Le Chiese di Roma nel Medio Evo* (Florence, 1927), 221.

13 Wilpert, *Die römischen Mosaiken*, 722.

for the history of the use of the site in the period after S. Maria Antiqua disappears from the written records in the ninth century. Answers were sought for questions such as "How long did the site continue to be used?" and "What was the nature of that use?" In this regard, surprisingly useful evidence was provided by the atrium paintings, and the passage mural must be added to this group.

What do they tell us about the later medieval use of this group of imposing classical structures? First and foremost, they serve to demonstrate that both the atrium of S. Maria Antiqua and the adjacent building continued to be used well after the ninth century. The written sources are much less explicit on this question. The *Liber Pontificalis*, for example, implies that in the time of Pope Leo IV (847-55) the church was rebuilt on a new site, on the other side of the Forum adjoining the via Sacra, and that this new edifice was decorated by Leo IV's successors, Benedict III and Nicholas I.<sup>14</sup>

This new church is S. Maria Nova, later to be also known as S. Francesca Romana, near the Arch of Titus, and Richard Krautheimer's analysis of its fabric has confirmed a ninth-century date for its construction.<sup>15</sup> The *Liber Pontificalis* refers to it as "the church of the holy mother of God and perpetual virgin, Mary, which was formerly called 'Antiqua' but is now called 'Nova.'" <sup>16</sup> "The memory of the older title seems to have persisted until at least the eleventh century, since some variation of the same phrasing ("olim Antiqua vocabatur nunc autem Nova") is used to refer to the new church in a series of property documents that have survived in the S. Maria Nova archive. The last to do so is dated to the year 1093.<sup>17</sup> Thereafter, it is referred to in the documents simply as S. Maria Nova. To judge from the written sources, therefore, the history of the older church (S. Maria Antiqua) ends about the year 850. The wall paintings thus supply vital evidence that can be used to demonstrate that the written sources do not provide the full story.

While none of the atrium murals can be precisely dated, since none can be linked to any specific historical patron, their approximate dates can be determined from a variety of internal clues, as well as from stylistic comparisons to murals else-

where in the city and region. Most appear to fall into the general context of the tenth and eleventh centuries and, as has been seen, this also applies to the row of standing saints in the passage. Thus, there can be no doubt that a large proportion of these murals were added well after the construction of S. Maria Nova by Leo IV. Some sort of activity must therefore have continued at the older site.

In addition to providing evidence for the continued use of at least part of the S. Maria Antiqua complex beyond the ninth century, the painted documents also furnish clues about the nature of this use. There can be little doubt that the site was occupied by a community of monks. This is revealed principally in the decorative programme of the east wall of the atrium, where there are remnants of a narrative cycle depicting episodes from the life of St. Anthony, one of the principal founders of Christian monasticism, and a painted inscription identifying the donor as a priest and monk named Leo. The inclusion in the passage mural of both St. Basil and St. Benedict, the chief legislators of Eastern and Western monasticism respectively, further reinforces this view. Elsewhere in medieval Rome, Benedict is depicted exclusively in monastic contexts.<sup>18</sup>

The S. Maria Antiqua passage mural thus demonstrates the importance of visual material for the documentation of history, regardless of the quality or visual appeal of that material. Art historians who downgrade or ignore this type of evidence, on the basis of modern definitions of what constitutes "art," do their discipline a great disservice. When it is a question of understanding the history of a building or region, paintings of poor quality may be just as useful as those produced by the most talented artists of the era. Indeed, they may be more so. One can only regret that those who published the S. Maria Antiqua murals at the time of their discovery did not pay more attention to recording the details of all the fragments of painting and not simply those that made the greatest visual impact. With the subsequent dramatic deterioration of the murals, much of this information has been lost forever.

A century ago, in 1887, the English archaeologist Pitt Rivers pointed out a new direction for his discipline when he wrote:

18 No examples are known before the mid-tenth century, when the Benedictine rule was introduced to Roman monasteries as part of the reforms undertaken by Odo of Cluny. Thereafter Benedict appears in S. Sebastiano al Palatino (eleventh century), S. Crisogono (eleventh century), and S. Ermete (twelfth century), all of which housed monastic communities or were associated with monastic patrons.

14 *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. I. Duchesne (Paris, 1886-92), II, 145, 158.

15 R. Krautheimer, "S. Francesca Romana," *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae* (Vatican City, 1937-77), I, 220-43.

16 "Ecclesiam . . . Dei genetricis semperque virginis Mariae, qui primitus Antiqua nunc autem Nova vocatur" (*Liber Pontificalis*, II, 158).

17 P. Fedele, "Tabularium S. Mariae Novae ab an. 982 ad an. 1200," *Archivio della R. Società Romana di Storia Patria*, XXI (1900), 171-237.

Excavators, as a rule, record only those things which appear to them important at the time, but fresh problems in Archaeology and Anthropology are constantly arising, and it can hardly fail to escape the notice of anthropologists . . . that on turning back to old accounts in search of evidence, the points which would have been most valuable have been passed over from being thought uninteresting at the time. Every detail should, therefore, be recorded in the manner most conducive to facility of reference, and it ought at all times to be the

chief object of an excavator to reduce his own personal equation to a minimum.<sup>19</sup>

As the discipline of art history moves increasingly to adopt the methodologies and goals of social science, I would propose that for “excavator” we substitute “art historian.”

19 A. H. L. F. Pitt Rivers, *Excavations in Cranborne Chase* (London, 1887-98), i, xvii.

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FIGURE 1. Anonymous saint, S. Maria Antiqua, Rome.  
(Photo: ICCD, Rome).



FIGURE 2. St. Basil, S. Maria Antiqua, Rome (Photo:  
ICCD, Rome).



FIGURE 3. St. Lawrence, S. Maria Antiqua, Rome  
(Photo: ICCD, Rome).