Ascension of Christ or Ascension of Mary? Reconsidering a Popular Early Iconography

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This essay argues that an early Christian iconography that art historians today typically identify as the "Ascension of Christ" was instead originally understood as a scene from the Six Books Dormition narrative about the ascension of Mary. This art depicts Jesus inside a sphere in the sky above his arms-raised mother, who is herself usually flanked by twelve apostles, including Paul. Subsequent changes to both the Dormition text and the iconography resulted in the loss of this scene from Christian memory, but two ascension scenes carved on the early fifth-century doors of S. Sabina Basilica in Rome support the argument.

One of the most evocative early Christian iconographies depicts Mary, the mother of Jesus, standing with her arms raised in prayer directly beneath her son, who is seen in the sky inside a circle or oval. Most sixth- and seventh-century artifacts show twelve men flanking Mary and art historians identify these as the eleven apostles who remained after the betrayal of Judas, plus the apostle Paul, who is identified by his balding head and placement opposite Peter. Despite the unexpected prominence of Mary and the completely improbable presence of Paul in these scenes, this iconography is today nonetheless called the Ascension of Christ. This

identification is in part due to the fact that the Greek word used for the ascension of Jesus in Luke 9.51—*analēpsis*—is also occasionally found as a title on the scene.[1] In some Greek Dormition manuscripts about the death of Mary, however, Mary's assumption was also termed *analēpsis*.[2] I propose that this ascension iconography was originally intended to portray a scene of the assumption—or "ascension"—of Mary in a narrative tradition that survives in the text of the two oldest Dormition manuscripts. Later scribal redactions of this text as well as later innovations in Dormition iconography led to the loss of this scene within Christian memory and ultimately, to this scene's misidentification as the ascension of Christ.

Most of the surviving sixth- and seventh-century artifacts with ascension iconography were portable and easily traveled around the Mediterranean. These artifacts include ampoules that European pilgrims carried home from Palestine,[3] silver and gold jewelry,[4] a small terracotta plaque from Jerusalem,[5] a Coptic ivory icon,[6] a painted wood reliquary box from Jerusalem,[7] as well as paintings in Coptic monastery chapels.[8] The most

1. Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, ed., *Ivoires médiévaux: Vᵉ–XVᵉ siècle* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 2003), 76, 98–100, cat. 19 and 19 detail.

2. Brian E. Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, Popular Patristics Series 18 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 14.

3. André Grabar, *Les ampoules de Terre Sainte (Monza–Bobbio)* (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1958), figs. 3, 5, 7, 17, 19, 21, 27, 29, 30, 44, 47, 53. Grabar lists five more that ended up in other lands, one in the British Museum, one at Dumbarton Oaks, one at the Detroit Institute of Arts, and two in German museums.

4. For a silver armband and a gold marriage ring, see Gary Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection Publications 5 (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2010), 67, fig. 45 and fig. 46. For a gold medallion inscribed with Greek, see John Herrmann and Annewies van den Hoek, "'Two Men in White': Observations on an Early Christian Lamp from North Africa with the Ascension of Christ," in *Early Christian Voices: In Texts, Traditions, and Symbols, Essays in Honor of François Bovon*, ed. David H. Warren, Ann Graham Brock, and David W. Pao, Biblical Interpretation Series 66 (Boston: Brill, 2003), 293–318, fig. 11.

5. Mario D'Onofrio, *Romei e Giubilei: Il pellegrinaggio medievale a San Pietro (350–1350)* (Milan: Electa, 1999), 327, cat. 78.

6. Dorothy Eugenia Miner and Marvin Chauncey Ross, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art: An Exhibition Held at the Baltimore Museum of Fine Art, April 25 to June 22, 1947* (Baltimore: Trustees of the Walters Art Gallery, 1947), pl. 21, fig. 157; Joseph Breck, "Two Early Christian Ivories of the Ascension," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 14.11 (1919): 242–44.

7. John Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 210–11, fig. 118.

8. André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins*, Bollingen Series 35: The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 10 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 134, figs. 323, 325.

widely published example of this iconography is an illumination of the Rabbula Gospels that a Syriac scribe in a monastery near Zagba, Mesopotamia dated 586.[9]

In the Rabbula Gospels illumination, seen in Figure 1, Mary is flanked by two archangels, then by Peter and Paul, then by ten more men. Peter, on the right, is identified by his keys and on the left, Paul by his bald pate.[10] Above Mary, Jesus stands inside a sphere that is surrounded by four seraphim and held aloft by red wings and wheels of fire, a hint that it may have been intended to represent a chariot in the sky. Faux tesserae as a frame may indicate it was copied from a mosaic exemplar.[11] As is almost invariably seen in this iconography, Jesus' right hand is slightly raised as if giving a blessing or waving to the people below, or perhaps, as the hand of judgment. Likewise, as is usually the case, this artist painted Mary larger than the men around her. Her prominence in the center of the composition emphasized its core verticality and focused the viewer on the woman praying with her arms raised.

The orante woman in ascension iconography is always identified as Mary the mother of Jesus.[12] This identification is not controversial. Not only does this woman look like Mary in other art of the period, but also some artifacts have adjacent scenes where she is depicted as the mother of Jesus. Two more full-page illuminations in the Rabbula Gospels, for example, depict Mary dressed in the same black *maphorion* at the foot of the cross opposite the beloved disciple (John 19.25–26) and in the upper

9. Jeffrey Spier, *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Kimbell Art Museum, 2007), 276–82, fig. 82E.

10. Regarding the common portrayal of Paul as balding, see David R. Cartlidge and J. Keith Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 138–39; for examples, see Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, 247–48, cat. 70 and 71.

11. Kurt Weitzmann, *Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination* (New York: George Braziller, 1977), 101.

12. By ascension iconography, I mean the classic iconography where an orante woman stands beneath Jesus, who is himself depicted inside a sphere. I know of only two cases where Jesus is not inside a sphere, both in the city of Rome. One is the mid-seventh century apse mosaic in the S. Venantius chapel in the Lateran baptistery where Mary is depicted orante beneath a large bust of Christ in the clouds; see Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, 133, fig. 322. The other is the sole artifact that depicts an orante woman *other* than Mary beneath Jesus; the orante Roman matron Felicitas flanked by her seven martyred sons in the S. Felicitas chapel, dated variously fourth- to sixth-century, where Jesus is again depicted as a bust; the martyrs' names are written above their heads, perhaps to eliminate any confusion; Alessandra Cerrito, "Sull'oratorio di S. Felicita presso le terme di Traiano a Roma," in *Domum tuam dilexi; miscellanea in onore di Aldo Nestori*, ed. Aldo Nestori (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia cristiana, 1998), 155–84, fig. 4.

Figure 1. Rabbula Gospels illumination. Biblioteca Laurenziana, Florence.
Scala/Art Resource, NY. ART52517.

room at Pentecost surrounded by the male apostles (Acts 1.14).[13] In similar fashion, a painter depicted Mary in four scenes on a painted reliquary box dated as early as the sixth century. This painted box was manufactured in Palestine and probably a pilgrim carried it to Rome; today it is in the Vatican's Museo Sacro. As seen in Figure 2, in its top right frame Mary, wearing a black *maphorion*, stands with her arms raised, again larger than the twelve solemn men who flank her. In the top left frame, she is depicted in the same black garb, this time approaching the empty tomb with another woman. In the center frame she is depicted standing at the foot of the cross opposite John. In the bottom left frame—and making it impossible to confuse her identity—she rests after the birth of her son in a cave.[14]

The identification of Paul in this iconography is likewise not controversial among art historians. The description of Paul as bald is first found in the second-century *Acts of Paul* 2–3 and the artists of these ascension scenes followed in the footsteps of fourth-century catacomb craftsmen, such as the sculptor of the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, who depicted Paul bald and Peter with bangs.[15]

The popularity of ascension art with Mary in late antiquity is amply illustrated by the small silver-colored ampoules for holy oil or water that pilgrims to the Holy Land carried home. These are dated sixth or seventh century and two large caches survived in Italy, one in the Monza Cathedral treasury outside Milan and the other in a grave near Bobbio, approximately three hundred miles northwest of Rome. As seen in Figure 3, six of these ampoules have ascension scenes that depicted Mary as a front-facing orante. Five more, as seen in Figure 4, depicted Mary with her arms raised, but facing sideways in semi-profile.[16] In the city of Rome the semi-profile orante Mary became known as the *Madonna advocata* and was used for some of the earliest surviving icons of Mary, such as the Madonna of San Sisto dated sixth to eighth century.[17]

13. Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, 276–82; figs. 82D, 82E, and 82F.

14. Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, 210–11, fig. 118.

15. Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Apocrypha*, 134–71, figs. 5.4 and 5.17 for Paul and Peter on the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus.

16. Grabar, *Ampoules*; the front-facing orante Mary is on Monza ampoules 1, 2, 10, 11 and Bobbio 13 and 20; the semi-profile orante Mary is on Monza ampoules 14, 15 and 16 and Bobbio 14 and 19. See also Raffaele Garrucci, *Storia della arte cristiana nei primi otto secoli della chiesa*, vol. 3 (Prato: Gaetano Guasti, 1876), vol. 3, figs. 433.10 and 435.1.

17. Gerhard Wolf, "Icons and Sites: Cult Images of the Virgin in Mediaeval Rome," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 23–49, esp. 39–41, figs. 3.9 and 3.10.

Figure 2. Reliquary box painted with Mary in four scenes. Vatican Museo Pio Cristiano. David Edward Kateusz.

Figure 3. Mary as a front-facing orante. Monza Cathedral Treasury Museum. Raffaele Garrucci, *Storia della arte cristiana*, vol. 3 (1876), fig. 433.10.

Though the most common rendering of the ascension scene depicted Mary flanked by twelve men, this was not invariable. In the Coptic monastery chapel 17 in Bawit, Egypt, for example, Mary is flanked by twelve men plus Ezekiel.[18] Sometimes the core verticality of Mary orante beneath Jesus was emphasized by the marginalization of some or all of the apostles. For example, seen in Figure 5, a sixth-century ampoule found in the Bobbio grave depicts Mary flanked by just two men and two small angels.[19]

18. Jean Clédat, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouît*, Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, vol. 12 (Cairo: L'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1904), plate 40; niche in monastery chapel 17.

19. Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, 132, fig. 319; Grabar, *Ampoules*, 43–44, fig. 53. Grabar identifies the two men as Zacharia and John the Baptist.

Figure 4. Mary as a *Madonna advocata* orante. Monza Cathedral Treasury Museum. Raffaele Garrucci, *Storia della arte cristiana*, vol. 3 (1876), fig. 435.1.

This economical rendering of Mary standing beneath Jesus without the twelve apostles apparently sufficed to represent the scene, for this pared down vision lingered for centuries. On these rare artifacts, when the apostles were included, they were relegated to the distant margins of the composition, squeezed to the sides or far below, as if the artist considered them insignificant to the main scene. Examples include a fresco in old Saint Clement's dated ninth century that is sometimes identified as a scene of Mary's assumption,[20] a panel on a tenth-century Byzantine ivory

20. Joseph Wilpert, *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1916), vol. 4, pl. 210.
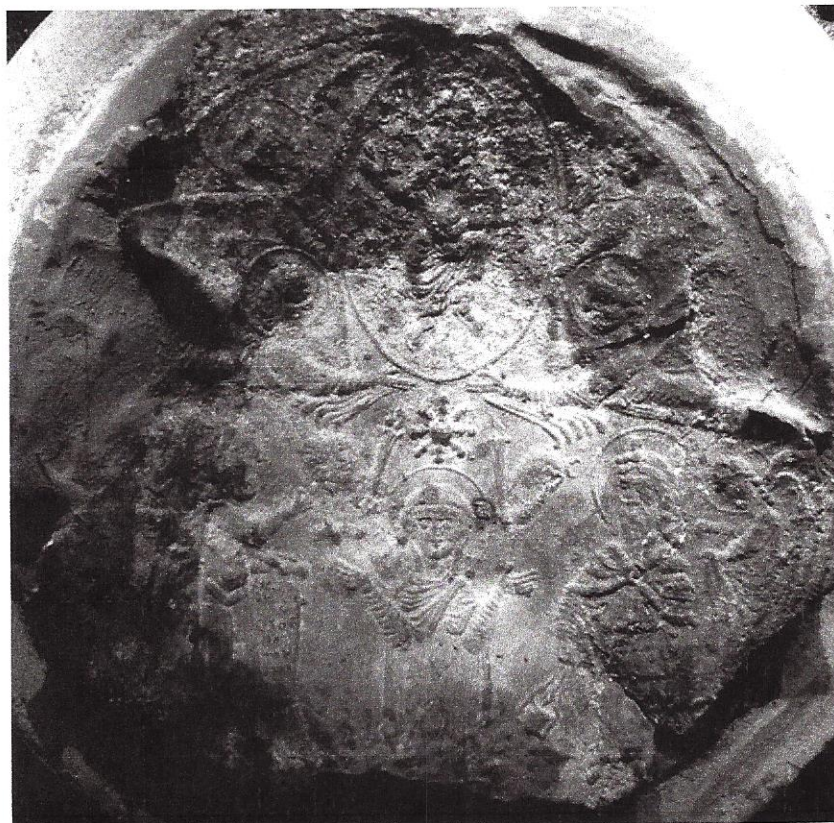
Figure 5. Two men flank Mary. Museo dell'abbazia di S. Colombano, Bobbio. David Edward Kateusz.

reliquary that has "the ascension" written in Greek over it,[21] a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century steatite panel in the Monastery of Vatopedi, Mount Athos,[22] and, as seen in Figure 6, an ivory tusk dated around 1100 that was probably carved in southern Italy. Its master depicted Mary flanked by two angels. Out of sight on the back of the tusk are two narrow columns with twelve tiny portraits.[23]

21. Gaborit-Chopin, *Ivoires médiévaux*, 76, 98–100, Cat. 19 and 19 detail.
22. Ormonde M. Dalton, *Byzantine Art and Archaeology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), 241, fig. 150.
23. Ernest T. Dewald, "The Iconography of the Ascension," *AJA*, Second Series, 19.3 (1915): 277–319, 319 n.1, fig. 26.

Figure 6. Two angels flank Mary. Musée national du Moyen Âge—Thermes et hôtel de Cluny, Paris. Claus Wawrzinek.

THE EXTRACANONICAL NARRATIVE TRADITION
INFORMING ASCENSION ICONOGRAPHY

This ascension iconography has long puzzled scholars because the canonical gospel account of Jesus' ascension in Luke 24 does not say any woman was there, much less that Mary was the central figure. Furthermore, why depict twelve apostles instead of the canonical eleven after the betrayal of Judas? And, as Kurt Weitzmann notes, Paul's presence is the most problematic since according to Acts, Paul did not became an apostle until several years after the ascension of Jesus.[24] Due to the presence of Mary and Paul in these scenes, a century ago Ernest Dewald, who made a detailed study of ascension iconography, said that these images "do not comply with the canonical descriptions, for these do not mention Mary's presence and make Paul's impossible," and suggested that a hitherto unidentified extracanonical source probably lay behind this iconography.[25]

I propose that the extracanonical source behind ascension iconography was the Dormition narrative about the death and ascension of Mary. Greek manuscripts about the Dormition or "falling asleep" of Mary were occasionally titled "the ascension" of Mary, employing the same word—*analēpsis*—used for Jesus' ascent in Luke 9.51.[26] Virtually all the Dormition text traditions recount that just before Mary died, the twelve apostles—including specifically Paul—came from their missions around the Mediterranean to be with her. One Dormition text tradition, however, called the Six Books tradition, additionally depicted Mary praying with her arms raised while surrounded by the apostles. Not long after, Jesus descended to Mary's side and took her up to heaven.[27]

The traditional view of Dormition narratives is that they were composed after the Council of Chalcedon (451), a position still defended in some circles, most recently by Simon Mimouni.[28] Dormition manuscripts, however,

24. Kurt Weitzmann, *Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination*, 101.

25. Dewald "Iconography of the Ascension," 284.

26. Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 14.

27. Agnes Smith Lewis, ed. and trans., "Transitus Mariae," in *Apocrypha Syriaca: The Protevangelium Jacobi and Transitus Mariae*, Studia Syriaca 11 (London: C. J. Clay, 1902), 12–69, esp. 32, 55–56; William Wright, trans., "The Departure of My Lady Mary from This World," *Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record* 7 (1865): 129–60, 140–41, 150–51, 157.

28. Simon Claude Mimouni, *Les traditions anciennes sur la Dormition et l'Assomption de Marie: Études littéraires, historiques et doctrinales*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae: Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language 104 (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

were popular very early and are extant in nine ancient languages[29]—and some of these manuscripts retain literary artifacts that suggest their composition took place very early in the Christian era. The "gnostic" concept of angel Christology, for example, is found in the "Palm" or *Liber Requiei* Dormition text tradition, which said that after his ascension Christ appeared to Mary as the "Great Angel" and gave her a secret book of mysteries. It is called the "Palm" tradition because in most manuscripts scribes changed the scene so that Jesus gave Mary a palm branch instead of the secret book.[30] In the last decade, Stephen J. Shoemaker has taken the lead in arguing that if the Palm narrative with the Great Angel and Mary's secret book was dated in the same way that other texts with heterodox elements (such as those in the Nag Hammadi Library) are dated, then the composition of the Palm narrative could likewise be dated at least to the fourth century, if not earlier—to the third or perhaps second century.[31] A variety of other scholars have reached similar conclusions about the Palm narrative.[32] The Palm narrative, however, does not contain the central element of this iconography—Mary praying arms-raised with the apostles. That scene is only in the Six Books Dormition text tradition, so called because its introduction says the apostles wrote six books about the end of Mary's life.[33] Some of its events took place in Bethlehem, so sometimes

29. Michel van Esbroeck, "Les textes littéraires sur l'Assomption avant le Xᵉ siècle," in *Les actes apocryphes des apôtres: Christianisme et monde païen*, Publications de la faculté de théologie de l'Université de Genève 4, ed. François Bovon (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1981), 265–85, 66–68.

30. Stephen J. Shoemaker, "From Mother of Mysteries to Mother of the Church: The Institutionalization of the Dormition Apocrypha," *Apocrypha* 22 (2011): 11–47, 21–22, 35–36; Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6–7, 32–46, 232–56; for Shoemaker's translation of what he considers the earliest surviving Palm text, see "The Ethiopic *Liber Requiei*," in *Ancient Traditions*, 290–350.

31. Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Jesus' Gnostic Mom: Mary of Nazareth and the Gnostic Mary Traditions," in *Mariam, the Magdalen, and the Mother*, ed. Deirdre Good (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 162; Shoemaker, "New Syriac Dormition Fragments from Palimpsests in the Schøyen Collection and the British Library," *Mus* 124 (2011): 259–78, 266; Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 238–45.

32. Édouard Cothenet, "Traditions bibliques et apocalyptiques dans les récits anciens de la Dormition," in *Marie dans les récits apocryphes chrétiens*, ed. Édouard Cothenet et al. (Paris: Médiaspaul, 2004), 155–75; Enrico Norelli, "La letteratura apocrifa sul transito di Maria e il problema delle sue origini," in *Il dogma dell'assunzione di Maria: problemi attuali e tentativi di ricomprensione*, ed. Ermanno M. Toniolo (Rome: Edizioni Marianum, 2010), 121–65; Shoemaker lists more scholars in "New Syriac Dormition Fragments," 259 n.1.

33. Lewis, "Transitus Mariae," 17; Wright, "Departure," 131; Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 53.

the Six Books text is called the "Bethlehem" text, or the "Bethlehem and incense" text, because it also depicted Mary and other people using censers and burning incense.[34]

The Six Books text does not contain the scene of Christ as the Great Angel giving Mary a sacred book, but it nonetheless contains some relatively early literary artifacts. For example, in a series of recent articles, including one in *JECS*, Shoemaker has persuasively argued that when Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 310–403) complained about "Collyridian" women offering bread to the name of Mary, he was most likely criticizing a liturgical manual embedded in the Six Books text that provides instructions for an almost identical ritual of offering bread to Mary on the altar of the very church. For this and other reasons Shoemaker concludes that the Six Books narrative, in either its written or oral form, must have been composed no later than the mid-fourth century, though it could be earlier.[35] A third-century composition of the scene of Mary praying with her arms raised while surrounded by apostles seems plausible, because the *Gospel (Questions) of Bartholomew*, a text without controversy dated third-century, contains a similar scene.[36] Shoemaker cautions against dating the Six Books as early as that of the Palm narrative, but some scholars have proposed that some literary artifacts found in the Six Books appear to reflect second-century traditions.[37] For example, according to Richard Bauckham, the Six Books

34. Van Esbroeck, "Textes littéraires sur l'Assomption," 265–85, 269, 273.

35. Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Epiphanius of Salamis, the Kollyridians, and the Early Dormition Narratives: The Cult of the Virgin in the Fourth Century," *JECS* 16 (2008): 371–401, 398; Shoemaker, "Apocrypha and Liturgy in the Fourth Century: The Case of the 'Six Books' Dormition Apocryphon," in *Jewish and Christian Scriptures: The Function of 'Canonical' and 'Non-canonical' Religious Texts*, eds. James H. Charlesworth and Lee Martin McDonald (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 153–63, 158; Shoemaker, "The Cult of the Virgin in the Fourth Century: A Fresh Look at Some Old and New Sources," in *The Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Christ Maunder (New York: Burns & Oates, 2008), 71–87, 82.

36. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha, Volume 1, Gospels and Related Writings*, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Cambridge: James Clark, 1991), 537–40 for dating and 543–51 for *Gospel (Questions) of Bartholomew* II.1–14 that contains this scene; Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Mary the Apostle: A New Dormition Fragment in Coptic and Its Place in the History of Marian Literature," in *Bibel, Byzanz und Christlicher Orient: Festschrift für Stephen Gerö*, eds. Dmitrij F. Bumazhnov et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2011): 203–29, 217.

37. From different angles Hans Förster and I have argued that Dormition scenes of female leadership, such the scene of a woman leading the male apostles in prayer, were most likely composed in an era prior to Tertullian and others' proscriptions against Christian women behaving in such fashion. Hans Förster, *Transitus Mariae: Beiträge zur koptischen Überlieferung mit einer Edition von P. Vindob. K 7589, Cambridge Add 1876 8 und Paris BN Copte 12917 ff. 28 und 29* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), for

apocalypse, which describes the ascension of Mary into heaven, depicts the dead "in a state of waiting for the last judgment and the resurrection," and Bauckham argues that no other apocalypse with this view "can plausibly be dated later than the mid-second century."[38]

In any case, the two oldest largely intact Dormition manuscripts are both in the Six Books text family, and they provide a close parallel to the scene found in Ascension iconography.[39] Both are penned in old Syriac, with one generally dated fifth century and the other late sixth.[40] One is thus contemporaneous with the Rabbula Gospels illumination dated 586, and one is a century earlier. According to this Six Books text, when Mary was about to die the twelve apostles came from their missions around the Mediterranean to see her one last time. The text repeatedly names each apostle, identifying them as the eleven *plus* the apostle Paul.[41] After the twelve apostles—the eleven plus Paul—arrived, they told Mary what they had been doing. Mary then lifted her arms and prayed: "And when my Lady Mary heard these things from the Apostles she stretched out her hands to heaven and prayed."[42] After Mary prayed, chariot wheels thundered in heaven.[43] The text continues for a bit, then says that Jesus descended to his mother's side "on the chariot of the seraphim who were carrying Him."[44] Shortly Mary prayed again, blessed everyone, and then died.[45] Afterwards, Jesus and Mary sat in his "chariot of light" and "they ascended on wheels of fire that overpowered the sun."[46]

The text of these two Six Books manuscripts almost perfectly describes

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an English summary of his argument, see 225–29; for Shoemaker's rebuttal of Förster's argument, see Shoemaker, "Mary the Apostle," 203–29; for my counter-argument to Shoemaker's, see Ally Kateusz, "Collyridian Déjà Vu: The Trajectory of Redaction of the Markers of Mary's Liturgical Leadership," *JFSR* 29.2 (2013): 75–92.

38. Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 332–62, esp. 358–59; for Shoemaker's rebuttal of Bauckham's argument, see Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 55–57.

39. The Six Books Dormition homily attributed to John the Theologian also retained this scene, although some copyists of the homily later redacted where Mary raised her arms to pray. See A. Cleveland Coxe, trans., "The Book of John Concerning the Falling Asleep of Mary," in ANF 8:587–91, 589.

40. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 33, 46–48. Lewis dated her palimpsest late fifth or early sixth, but Shoemaker has recently begun to simply call it simply "fifth century." Lewis, *Apocrypha Syriaca*, x; Shoemaker, "New Syriac Dormition Fragments," 264.

41. Lewis, "Transitus Mariae," 27–32; William Wright, "Departure," 136–40. See also Shoemaker, "From Mother of Mysteries," 26.

42. Lewis, "Transitus Mariae," 32; Wright, "Departure," 140.

43. Lewis, "Transitus Mariae," 32–33; Wright, "Departure," 141.

44. Lewis, "Transitus Mariae," 55; Wright, "Departure, 151.

45. Lewis, "Transitus Mariae," 56–57; Wright, "Departure," 151–52.

46. Wright, "Departure," 157; the Lewis manuscript has a lacunae at the end.

the scene depicted in the iconography. This text explains why Mary is the focus of the composition—the scene was about her death and ascension. It explains why Mary was depicted orante—she raised her arms to pray. It explains why Mary was surrounded by eleven apostles and Paul—the event took place years after the ascension of Jesus. It explains why Jesus is seen in a sphere in the sky—he was descending in his chariot of light. Even his chariot's "wheels of fire" correspond to the wheels of red fire seen in the Rabbula Gospels illumination.[47]

The identification of this iconography as the Ascension of Mary instead of the Ascension of Jesus helps to clear up an art history mystery regarding two of the carved panels on the wooden doors of the S. Sabina basilica in Rome. The S. Sabina door panels were probably carved between 422 and 440, either just before or just after the Council of Ephesus.[48] These two panels provide additional evidence that the iconography with Mary orante was originally intended to depict Jesus *descending*.

Today the two carved panels on the S. Sabina doors are side-by-side. The right-hand panel, Figure 7, depicts Jesus inside a circle above a woman standing in the semi-profile *Madonna advocata* orante posture that became so popular for Mary in Rome. This woman is flanked by two men who hold a cross-filled circle over her head. One of the men has bangs and the other is balding, so they are often identified as Peter and Paul with Mary.[49] Two fourth-century gilded glass plates from the Christian catacombs of Rome depicted an orante woman titled "Maria" flanked by two men titled "Petrus" and "Paulus," suggesting that some early fifth-century Roman Christians, like modern art historians, could have identified the trio on this door panel as Peter and Paul with Mary.[50]

47. The oldest identified Ascension wall painting, in chapel 17 of the Coptic monastery in Bawit, Egypt, also shows red fire and wheels directly beneath the circle carrying Jesus; see Figure 11 below; for color see Clédat, *Monastère*, plate 41.

48. A photo of the doors is in Herbert L. Kessler, "Bright Gardens of Paradise," in *Picturing the Bible*, 110–39, 120–21, fig. 88.

49. Ernst H. Kantorowicz, "The 'King's Advent' and the Enigmatic Panels in the Doors of Santa Sabina," *The Art Bulletin* 26.4 (1944): 207–31, 223–24; Dewald, "Iconography of the Ascension," 285; Herrmann and van den Hoek, "Two Men in White," 302; Peter Maser, "Parusie Christi oder Triumph der Gottesmutter? Anmerkungen zu einem Relief der Tür von S. Sabina in Rom," *RQ* 77 (1982): 30–51; Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013), 565. Some suggest the orante could be called "the Church," but that would hardly distinguish her from Mary, who was called "the Church" from at least the time of Clement of Alexandria, who said of her, "I love to call her the Church," in *The Instructor* 1.6 (ANF 2:220).

50. Raffaele Garrucci, *Vetri ornate di figure in oro trovati nei cimiteri dei cristiani primitivi di Roma* (Rome: Tipografia Salviucci, 1858), plate 9, figs. 6 and 7 (flanked

Figure 7. Door panel: Ascension of Mary. S. Sabina, Rome. German
Archaeological Institute, Rome. Bartl: Neg. D-DAI-Rom-61.2579.

Princeton's Index of Early Christian Art lists the panel with the *Madonna advocata* as the sole "unidentified" panel on these doors. The lack of identification for this panel is because it is highly unlikely there would be two panels on these doors depicting the same ascension scene—and the adjacent panel contains a very well-established early iconography of Jesus' ascension.[51] This panel, Figure 8, depicts Jesus ascending into the clouds in much the same way that he is depicted ascending on a finely carved ivory plaque dated around the year 400, seen in Figure 9. This ivory, which David R. Cartlidge and J. Keith Elliott call "one of the most famous in Christian art history," is without controversy identified as the ascension of Jesus because its lower register contains a scene of his resurrection— a scene that depicts him seated with three women approaching, a scene invariably identified as the women at the resurrection.[52] Various art historians have noted that the iconography on the second door panel is very similar to that of the upper register of the ivory and that this scene is more consistent with the gospel account of Jesus' ascension because only men are witnesses.[53] Both the panel and the ivory depict Jesus at the top of a cloud-like mountain literally being given a hand up into the clouds, either by an angel (on the door) or by a hand coming out of the clouds (on the ivory). A few men (two on the ivory and four on the door) are carved on the side of the mountain in various states of grief and awe. These artists may have been familiar with the theme of apotheosis found in imperial art in Rome, such as the depiction of Caesar ascending on the Belvedere altar.[54]

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by Peter and Paul), and fig. 10 (Maria standing alone). Some would identify another plate with an orante woman titled "Mara" as Mary, but this is not certain; Caroline H. Ebertshäuser, Herbert Haag, Joe H. Kirchberger, and Dorothee Sölle, *Mary: Art, Culture, and Religion through the Ages*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 63.

51. Kantorowicz, "King's Advent," 223.

52. Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art & the Christian Apocrypha*, 132–33, fig. 4.36; Herbert Kessler, "The Christian Realm: Narrative Representations," in *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, Catalogue of the Exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 19, 1977, through February 12, 1978, ed. Kurt Weitzmann (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art in association with Princeton University Press, 1979), 449–56, 454–55, fig. 67; Dewald, "Iconography of the Ascension," 279–81.

53. Dewald, "Iconography of the Ascension," 279–86, figs. 1, 2, 5; Herrmann and van den Hoek, "Two Men in White," 300–305.

54. Dewald, "Iconography of the Ascension," 281–82; Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), 222, fig. 177; Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 319–22, figs. 149–51. Watson in *Gospel Writing*, 562–63, argues that it is improbable that Christ would be depicted on this door panel "dragged awkwardly into heaven," but he does not address the ivory.

Figure 8. Door panel: Ascension of Jesus. S. Sabina, Rome. German
Archaeological Institute, Rome. Bartl: Neg. D-DAI-Rom-61.2573.

Figure 9. Ivory of the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ. Bayerisches
Nationalmuseum, Munich. Inv. no. MA 157, photo no. D27841.
© Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, München.

Ernst H. Kantorowicz influentially argued that the door panel with Mary orante was therefore not a scene of Jesus' ascension, and he proposed that it instead depicted Jesus descending to earth. He thought it was probably a scene of the second coming.[55] My analysis supports Kantorowicz's conclusion, that is, the scene with Mary depicted a descent of Jesus. It depicted a descent of Jesus—but not the second coming. This scene foreshadowed and foretold the second coming. It depicted Jesus descending for his dying mother.

Today the two carved wood panels are paired side-by-side near the top of the church doors, and that may have been their original placement.[56] On these two panels, the two ascension iconographies are separate and distinct. The panel with angels giving Jesus a hand up into the clouds depicted his ascension. The panel with Mary orante depicted hers.

FACTORS THAT LED TO THE LATER MISIDENTIFICATION OF THE ICONOGRAPHY

Several factors contributed to the early iconography of Mary's ascension—despite the prominence of both Mary and Paul in it—becoming confused in the Christian consciousness with the ascension of Jesus. Perhaps the most important is that the Dormition narrative failed to make it into the canon and was anathematized, for example, in the Gelasian decree.[57] Another significant factor, perhaps not unrelated, is that in some scribal circles the crucial scene of Mary raising her arms to pray while surrounded by twelve apostles generally fell out of favor, although a handful of rare texts, such the *Gospel (Questions) of Bartholomew* and Maximus the Confessor's *Life of the Virgin*, retain other scenes of Mary raising her arms to pray.[58] For example, the *Life of the Virgin*, which likely reflected Syriac traditions, depicted Mary praying arms-raised, both in a scene by herself on the Mount of Olives and also in a scene at her home where she blessed a large crowd of people that included the apostles as well as others "worthy of the honor of apostleship."[59] Like the scenes in the Six Books narrative,

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55. Kantorowicz, "King's Advent," 223–31.

56. For a photo of the doors, see fig. 88 in Kessler, "Bright Gardens of Paradise," 121.

57. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 38–39.

58. *Gospel (Questions) of Bartholomew* II.1–14 (Schneemelcher, trans., "Questions of Bartholomew," 540–53, 543–44) depicts Mary praying arms-raised with four named apostles.

59. Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 104 and 106–7 (Stephen Shoemaker, trans., *The Life of the Virgin* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012], 131,

these scenes evoked the luminous memory of Jesus' ascension in Acts 1 and Luke 24.50–51, where Jesus likewise raised his hands, blessed the disciples, and then was carried up to heaven. Yet the scene found in the two oldest Dormition manuscripts—where Mary raised her arms while surrounded by the twelve—perhaps became a focus of editorial concern, because a variety of later permutations exist. For example, although the editor of the Six Books homily attributed to John the Theologian retained the scene intact, later copyists sometimes omitted that Mary raised her arms to pray.[60] The Dormition homilies attributed to Theoteknos of Livias, Modestus of Jerusalem, Andrew of Crete, Germanus of Constantinople, John of Old Lavra, and John of Damascus all likewise omit that Mary raised her arms.[61] By contrast, the homily attributed to John of Thessalonica retained that Mary raised her arms—but said that she left the apostles and went outside to pray all alone.[62] A homily attributed to Theodosius of Alexandria alternatively said that Mary asked the men to leave her—and then she raised her arms and prayed.[63] The Palm text, found only in manuscripts penned after the oldest Six Books manuscripts, both said that Mary left the men to pray *and* also omitted that she raised her arms.[64] The two other Six Books Dormition manuscripts that have been published, one medieval Syriac and the other medieval Ethiopic, depicted Mary raising her arms to pray in an earlier scene, but not after the apostles

132–33); for the likelihood that Maximus was Syrian, see 9–11; for a seventh-century dating of this text, see 15. Another scene of Mary raising her arms to pray before a crowd that included people in addition to the apostles is attributed to Theodosius of Alexandria, *Discourse on the Falling Asleep of Mary* 5.32 (Forbes Robinson, trans., *Coptic Apocryphal Gospels*, Texts and Studies, Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature 4, Coptic Apocryphal Gospels 2 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896], 90–127, 107–13, esp. 111).

60. Coxe, "Book of John Concerning the Falling Asleep of Mary," ANF 8:589. Compare to another manuscript of the same homily where Mary prays *without* raising her arms in Stephen J. Shoemaker, trans., "The Earliest Greek Dormition Narrative: Narrative by St. John the Theologian and Evangelist, concerning the Dormition of the All-Holy Theotokos and How the Undefiled Mother of Our Lord was Translated," in *Ancient Traditions*, 351–69, 362–63, 364.

61. Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 71–257.

62. John of Thessalonica, *On the Dormition* 12 (Brian E. Daley, trans., "The Dormition of Our Lady, The Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary by John, Archbishop of Thessalonica," in *On the Dormition of Mary*, 48–70, 62).

63. Theodosius, *Discourse on the Falling Asleep of Mary* 3.9 (Robinson, "Falling Asleep of Mary," 101).

64. Ethiopic *Liber Requiei* 66 (Shoemaker, Ethiopic *Liber Requiei*, 324).

arrived—after the apostles arrived, the medieval Syriac depicted Mary in bed and the Ethiopic depicted her bowing down to pray.[65]

This type of scribal liberty is well documented across Dormition text traditions. Shoemaker, for example, has shown how some Dormition editors silenced the women who had the important role of announcing Mary's death to Jesus after he had descended. These editors replaced the female announcers with men. In the original version, the male apostles left Mary's room, went outside, and fell asleep. In this version, Mary died, the women told Jesus that she had died—and then the men woke up. In the later version, however, Mary died, the women were silent, and instead the *men* told Jesus that his mother had died—and then the men woke up![66]

Just as later scribal license disrupted the scene, later artistic license did as well. Dewald's 1915 "Iconography of the Ascension" provides a detailed progression of ascension iconography and is free online at the HathiTrust Digital Library.[67] Dewald's illustrations show how, towards the end of the first millennium, some artists began to change small elements of the iconography so that it fit better with an understanding that it was a scene of Jesus' ascension. Some artists added elements from the ascension of Jesus as seen on the ivory plaque and the left-hand S. Sabina door panel, such as showing Jesus in a climbing posture, or adding a heavenly helping hand, or positioning the angels so they could push or pull Jesus up into heaven.[68] Finally, some artists began to show only Jesus's legs below the clouds, giving the clear impression that he was disappearing, not descending.[69] At about the same time, alternative art of the "Assumption of Mary" also began to appear, which depicted Mary soaring up towards the clouds or floating in a mandorla above the people below.[70]

65. Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, trans., "The History of the Blessed Virgin Mary," in *The History of the Blessed Virgin Mary and The History of the Likeness of Christ which the Jews of Tiberias Made to Mock at*, vol. 1 (English), Semitic Text and Translation Series 5 (London: Luzac, 1899), 102, 103–10; Ethiopic Six Books 27 and 33 (Shoemaker, "The Ethiopic Six Books," in *Ancient Traditions*, 375–96, 378, 383).

66. Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Gender at the Virgin's Funeral: Men and Women as Witnesses to the Dormition," *SP* 34 (2001): 552–58.

67. Dewald, "Iconography of the Ascension," 277–319. http://babel.hathitrust.org /cgi/pt?id=njp.32101073016501;view=1up;seq=5

68. Dewald, *Iconography of the Ascension*, 294–308, figs. 8–13, 17–20.

69. Dewald, *Iconography of the Ascension*, 315–18, fig. 25.

70. José María Salvador González, "La iconografía de la Asunción de la Virgen María en la pintura del quattrocento italiano a la luz de sus fuentes patrísticas y teológicas" (Ph.d. dissertation, Institut d'Estudis Medievals, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2011), 189–220; see also the ivory book cover from St. Gall's monastery and illuminations from Augsberg and Munich in Gertrud Schiller, *Ikonographie der christ-lichen Kunst*, vol. 4.2, *Maria* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1980), 350–51, figs. 594, 595, 597.

What seems to have sealed the loss of any memory of this iconography as a scene about the ascension of Mary, however, was the popularization of an alternative iconography called the "Dormition" to represent the iconic scene of Mary's death. This scene showed Mary still flanked by the twelve male apostles—still the eleven plus Paul—but instead of standing with her arms raised she was depicted lying on her deathbed.[71] Mary on her deathbed, flanked by six men at her head and six at her feet, is first seen on mid-tenth-century ivories.[72]

Curiously, both a deteriorated Palestinian pottery token of the Dormition dated sixth century and the oldest surviving Dormition painting show Mary on her deathbed with only *three* people at her head, not six. On the pottery token the gender of the three individuals standing next to Mary's head is uncertain and the part of the token that depicted the foot of her bed is effaced.[73] The oldest Dormition painting, however, painted prior to 913/14 on the wall of the church at the Deir al-Surian monastery in Egypt while Syrian monks resided there, clearly shows Mary flanked by three women at her head and another three women at her feet, as seen in Figure 10.[74] It seems highly likely that since the artist of the pottery token of the Dormition depicted three—not six—people at Mary's head, these three were intended to represent the same three women depicted at Mary's

71. Maria Evangelatou, "The Symbolism of the Censer in Byzantine Representations of the Dormition of the Virgin," in *Images of the Mother of God. Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 117–31, figs. 10.1, 10.3–10.5, 10.9; Miner, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, pl. 26, fig. 142, pl. 28, fig. 141, pl. 29, fig. 140.

72. Anthony Cutler, "The Mother of God in Ivory," in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art: Benaki Museum, 20 October 2000–20 January 2001*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Milan: Skira, 2000), 167–75, 170.

73. Rahmani suggests that the three faces are bearded, but this is not self-evident on the tiny deteriorated token; an alternative explanation, supported both by the photo of the token and by Rahmani's sketch of it, is that the artist depicted these three faces with women's head coverings; L. Y. Rahmani, "Eulogia Tokens from Byzantine Bet She'an," *Atiqot* 22 (1993): 109–19, 113–15, fig. 10; for dating discussion, see Stephen J. Shoemaker, "The (Re?)Discovery of the Kathisma Church and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Ancient Palestine," *Maria: A Journal of Marian Studies* 2 (2001): 21–72, 45–48.

74. Karel Innemée and Youhanna Nessim Youssef, "Virgins with Censers: A 10th Century Painting of the Dormition in Deir al-Surian," *Bulletin de la Société d'archéologie copte* 46 (2007): 69–85, plate 12. For a color photo online, see Karel Innemée, "Deir al-Surian, a Treasure Chest in the Desert," *Past Horizons: Adventures in Archeology:* http://www.pasthorizonspr.com/index.php/archives/06/2013/deir-al -surian-a-treasure-chest-in-the-desert (accessed Dec. 16, 2013).

head in the Deir al-Surian painting.[75] In the wall painting, the twelve male apostles are depicted behind the women, with several resting their chins on their hands as if about to fall asleep.[76]

Some later Dormition art depicts two or three small women either following at the tail end of the two lines of male apostles flanking Mary's deathbed or peeking out of windows and watching the men.[77] The Deir al-Surian painting, however, explicitly mirrors Mary's deathbed scene in accordance with the earliest Dormition narrative where she died surrounded only by women, per Shoemaker as cited above. This painting features women only, not men, around Mary's deathbed. It is dated by architectural developments in the Deir al-Surian church between the eighth century and 913/914.[78] Both the token and the fresco thus are dated earlier than any Dormition art that depicts men flanking Mary's deathbed. The deathbed scene with men, however, soon became popular in both East and West. In the West perhaps the most prominent placement is directly above the altar in the lower register of the thirteenth-century apse mosaic of the S. Maria Maggiore basilica in Rome.[79]

75. A miniature in the Benedictional of St. Æthelwold, usually dated to the second half of the tenth century, illustrates Mary on her deathbed with three women oriented to her head, again with the men standing outside (below) the scene; this is the only other Dormition scene I know that retains the women alone at Mary's deathbed; Andrew Prescott, *The Benedictional of St. Æthelwold: A Masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon Art* (London: The British Library, 2002), folios 102v–103.

76. Two additional elements of this painting merit highlighting. First, as in the earliest Palm tradition, here a great angel with beautiful wings stands in for Jesus, depicted in the center beside Mary where Jesus stands in later Dormition iconography. Second, as in the Six Books tradition, censers are present; the six women swing censers around Mary, a ritual that in the later iconography Peter or another heresiarch is often is depicted performing; Evangelatou, "Symbolism of the Censer," 117–31, figs. 10.2, 10.4–10.6, 10.9. According to the texts of the fifth-century and the Ethiopic Six Books manuscripts, three virgins lived with Mary and brought censers to her (Lewis, "Transitus Mariae," 25; Ethiopic Six Books 27). The presence of both the Great Angel and the women with censers in the Deir al-Surian painting suggests that its painter may have been working from an early Dormition narrative tradition that retained both motifs.

77. Cutler, "Mother of God in Ivory," 170, 173, fig. 112; Evangelatou, "Symbolism of the Censer," figs. 10.5, 10.9.

78. Innemée and Youssef, "Virgins and Censers," 69–70.

79. Josef Pustka, *Santa Maria Maggiore* (Rome: Edizione d'Europa, 1992), 26, 82–83.

Figure 10. Dormition wall painting. Six women flank Mary. Deir al-Surian, Egypt. Karel Innemée.

CUBICULUM OF THE VELATA IN
THE PRISCILLA CATACOMB

Worthy of further research is the possibility that iconography of the ascension of Mary appeared in Rome even earlier than the early fifth-century S. Sabina door panel. Jesus' return to his mother when she died foretold the parousia of the second coming, and a visual text about Mary's death and ascension would have been consistent with the funereal environment of the Christian catacombs in Rome. Some catacomb fresco compositions in fact contain what appears to be an early version of the core vertical composition. The best known of these is a pre-Constantinian fresco on the back wall of the early fourth-century Cubiculum of the Velata in the Priscilla catacomb that was painted just over a century before the S. Sabina door panel was carved.[80] This fresco, surrounded by scenes from Jewish Scripture, is one of several catacomb frescos that depicted an arms-raised woman beneath a man inside a circle, a man depicted variously as a shepherd or as Jesus.[81]

The shepherd of the Cubiculum of the Velata was painted inside a circle that begins on the wall cove of a ceiling roundel.[82] This architectural placement is comparable to that of the earliest recognized wall painting with ascension iconography, in monastery chapel 17 in Bawit, which depicts Jesus inside a circle that begins on the ceiling cove of a wall niche.[83] When viewed from the floor below, both frescos have similar perspective; they are compared in Figures 11 and 12.

80. The date of this cubiculum is probably best established by a plaque dated 308–9 embedded in the wall on the opposite side of the corridor. This restored fresco has recently been in the news with an associated color image: Francis X. Rocca, "Abroad at Home Thanks to Google," online *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 3, 2013: http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304337404579213931028187234 [accessed Dec 18, 2013].

81. See others in Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, 179, cat. 8; Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms*, vol. 2 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herdersche, 1903), plates 72 and 165. An ornamental bronze fitting with several biblical scenes found in Novalje, Croatia is the oldest artifact where an orante woman explicitly identified as Mary is paired with a shepherd; the shepherd was labeled PASTOR and the orante MARIA; Himmelmann dates it as early as the time of Constantine; Nikolaus Himmelmann, *Über Hirten-Genre in der antiken Kunst* (Opladen: Westdeutscher, 1980), 161, plate 76.

82. The shepherd with these sheep high on the wall might have invoked in the viewer the memory of the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15 and the sorting of the sheep from the goats in Matthew 25, which in this funereal environment might have symbolized the salvation of the soul.

83. Walter Dennison and Charles R. Morey, *Studies in East Christian and Roman Art*, University of Michigan Studies, Humanistic Series 12 (New York: MacMillan, 1918), 68–75, fig. 29; for the color illustration, see Clédat, *Monastère*, plate 40.

Figure 11. Coptic monastery niche, chapel 17, Bawit, Egypt. Jean Clédat, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouît* (1904), pl. 15.

Portraits of Jesus as well as of the apostles are exceedingly rare in the pre-Constantian art of the imperial city of Rome, and in the Cubiculum of the Velata the beautiful orante is not flanked by two men as seen on the S. Sabina door panel.[84] She is instead flanked by two vignettes, each featuring a woman. These share the space of a red-outlined lunette and, as Nicola Denzey and others have suggested, they may be portraits

84. For recent perspectives on a more non-religious approach to identifying early catacomb art, see James A. Francis, "Biblical not Scriptural: Perspectives on Early Christian Art from Contemporary Classical Scholarship," *SP* 44 (2010): 3–6; Paul Corbey Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Jaś Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, revised edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Figure 12. Cubiculum of the Velata, Priscilla catacomb, Rome. J. M. Gilbreath.

that commemorated the life of a single woman, most likely the patron who commissioned this art for her family tomb.[85] If so, the most recent interpretations of these portraits indicate that the deceased woman wanted to be remembered for both her motherhood and her literacy, female ideals that paralleled the complex depiction of Mary in Dormition traditions.

The biographical portrait to the right of the orante depicted the deceased woman holding a naked infant. This composition so closely resembles some catacomb portraits of Mary at Epiphany that it is still sometimes

85. Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Boston: Beacon, 2007), 75–76, 78; Geri Parlby, "The Origins of Marian Art in the Catacombs and the Problems of Identification," in *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), 41–56, 48–49; Vincenzo Fiocchi Nicolai, Fabrizio Bisconti, and Danilo Mazzoleni, *The Christian Catacombs of Rome: History, Decoration, Inscriptions*, trans. Cristina Carlo Stella and Lori-Ann Touchette (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2009), 106, 135–36.

identified as Mary.[86] On the left, the woman, forever caught in the act of reading, is portrayed holding what is usually today described as an open scroll.[87] Janet Huskinson has noted that when a Roman woman chose to depict herself after death holding a scroll or book, she was emphasizing her own literacy.[88] The left-hand vignette also depicts a large man, historically identified as a bishop, pointing at the woman's scroll as if he had given it to her.[89] This male approbation of the woman's literacy resonates with Jerome's letter from 403 C.E. to Laeta in Rome on the education of her daughter Paula. Jerome instructed Laeta to teach Paula her letters from the earliest age so that she would learn to read and write. Though Jerome wrote his letter a century after this fresco was painted, quite possibly he was transmitting an earlier educational tradition of literacy for Christian girls that invoked Mary, for he told Laeta, "Let her take her pattern by Mary."[90]

The parallelism in the left- and right-hand portraits in this early Christian cubiculum suggests that the deceased woman intended to invoke for herself the pattern of Mary, both as a mother and as a literate woman.

86. An early fourth-century catacomb portrait of Mary flanked by two magi in the Catacomb of Marcellinus and Peter provides a near mirror-image of this mother seated in a round-backed chair wearing a white dalmatic; see Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, 181, fig. 10A. For the continued identification of this mother with child as Mary, see John Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 21, fig. 5.

87. Various art historians have proposed that the woman holds an unfurled scroll; for an excellent recap, see Denzey, *Bone Gatherers*, 77–85. See also Fabrizio Mancinelli, *Catacombs and Basilicas: The Early Christians in Rome* (Florence: Scala, 1981), 29; Mancinelli curiously refers to the Velata as a male and to the left-hand scene as the man's wedding, despite that the groom rather improbably stands behind the bride.

88. Janet Huskinson, "Gender and Identity in Scenes of Intellectual Life on Late Roman Sarcophagi," in *Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity*, ed. Richard Miles (London: Routledge, 1999), 208–9.

89. The seventeenth-century catacomb explorer Antonio Bosio was the first to call this man a bishop, though he said that the bishop had given the woman a veil, not a scroll; Antonio Bosio, *Roma sotterranea opera postuma di Antonio Bosio Romano . . . Publicata dal commendatore Fr. Carlo Aldobrandiono*, reprint (New York: AstroLogos Books, 2008), book 3, 549; for a recap of the tradition of this man interpreted as a bishop, see Denzey, *Bone Gatherers*, 77–85.

90. Jerome, *Letter* 107.7 (F. A. Wright, trans., *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, reprint [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954], 339–71, 355); Bell interprets Jerome's instruction in this way in Susan Groag Bell, "Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, eds. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowalski (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 149–87, 158–59. Ambrose in *On Virgins* 2.7 and 2.10 depicted Mary as a similar exemplar, saying she was "devoted to reading" and "in the presence of so many books" (Boniface Ramsey O. P., *Ambrose* [London: Routledge, 1997], 93, 94).

Certainly an early understanding of Mary as both a mother and a symbol of female literacy comports with the way the oldest Palm narrative said Jesus gave his mother Mary a book.[91] It also comports with the text of the very oldest (fifth-century) Six Books manuscript, which said Mary gave writings to other women.[92] Just like later editors of the Palm narrative redacted the book that Jesus gave Mary, however, so also later Six Books editors redacted the writings that Mary gave women.[93]

Finally, whether painted to depict the deceased woman or to depict Mary in the narrative about her death, or both, the image of a woman with her arms raised in prayer as the central focus of the main wall of the Cubiculum of the Velata had the effect of exhorting even the casual viewer peering in from the torch lit corridor to follow her example. Most important in this funereal setting, if the core vertical composition in any way symbolized Mary's ascension to heaven, it reminded mourners of Jesus' promise that the dead would be raised—that the deceased woman herself would live again.

CONCLUSION

The oldest artifacts of the early Christian iconography previously known as the Ascension of Christ depicted a scene of the ascension of Mary. The Six Books text of the two oldest Dormition manuscripts almost perfectly described this scene. The Six Books text explains why Mary was the center of the composition—the scene was about her ascension. It explains why Mary was depicted orante—she raised her arms to pray. It explains why Jesus was seen in a sphere in the sky—he was descending to her in his chariot of light. It explains why she was depicted surrounded by eleven apostles plus Paul—the event occurred years after the ascension of her son.

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91. According to the Palm narrative, Mary wrapped the book that Jesus gave her in fine cloth, and later showed it to John and asked him to carry it in front of her coffin; see Ethiopic *Liber Requiei* 36, 44–45. John has traditionally been depicted as a beardless youth, and in a curious synchronicity with the text, this vignette depicts a beardless youth—perhaps the deceased woman's servant or perhaps her son—standing behind her holding a long white cloth, as if waiting to wrap her scroll.

92. Lewis, "Transitus Mariae," 34.

93. The editor of the late sixth-century manuscript excised almost the entire scene; Wright, "Departure," 141. The editor of the Six Books homily attributed to John the Theologian also excised it. The scribe or translator behind the medieval Ethiopic Six Books substituted "a sweet and beautiful fragrance" for the writings that Mary gave women; see Ethiopic Six Books 35 (Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 385). The medieval Syriac alone retained the scene, saying that Mary gave the women "small books"; Budge, *History of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 136.

Scribal and artistic innovations still color the modern viewer's interpretation of the oldest ascension artifacts. These innovations help explain why this iconography was identified as the ascension of Jesus despite the incongruent presence of Mary and Paul in it. The editorial license permitted within the literary traditions that did not make it into the canon helps explain why art historians have found it difficult to discover the narrative and liturgical traditions that stimulated these artistic renderings of the final events of Mary's life.[94] Furthermore, the translation of *analēpsis* as "ascension" when it refers to Jesus, but as "assumption" when it refers to Mary, appears to be an example of imputing later theology about Mary onto earlier literature and iconography, and has added to the confusion.

Mary may have played a more significant role for some early Christians than previously recognized. The side-by-side carved panels on the S. Sabina doors, for example, affirm that some Christians around the year 430 apparently believed that the ascension of Mary was as important to commemorate as that of her son. In addition, Mary's early cult may have been more positive for women than currently credited. The Palm narrative's depiction of Jesus giving Mary a book, for example, may have been understood as Jesus both acknowledging and authorizing Mary's literacy. The Six Books scene where Mary gave women writings may similarly have been interpreted as authorizing female literacy. Some early Christian women—perhaps the woman portrayed in the Cubiculum of the Velata—may have employed Mary as an ideal to justify their own literacy. As indicated, however, by the later elimination of scenes that depicted Mary with books as well as by the substitution of men for the women around Mary, some later church authorities may have become uncomfortable with Mary as this type of female exemplar. Fortunately, literary artifacts retained in a handful of manuscripts, as well as archeological discoveries like the Deir al-Surian painting, permit the recovery of some of these early Christian memories.

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94. My thanks to the first anonymous reviewer for suggesting this description for the complex process of recovering traditions that may lay behind art.