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Transforming Sacred Spaces

New Approaches to Byzantine Ecclesiastical Architecture from the Transitional Period

Edited by Sabine Feist
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I. Texts

A question about the proper relationship between architecture and images stood at the origin of the “second Iconoclasm,” the renewed effort by the Byzantine emperors of the early ninth century to regulate the production and use of portraits of holy persons. The question appears already in a text conventionally attributed to the “Scriptor Incertus”, an anonymous ninth-century historian, who provides a detailed (and hostile) narrative of the reign of Leo V (813–820). Leo presented a compilation of patristic denunciations of image-worship to Nikephoros, Patriarch of Constantinople (806–815), who replied that the passages referred, not to Christian veneration, but to idolatry. Leo’s advisers responded by producing a new dossier, which the emperor brought to the patriarch in December of 814. Argued Leo: “the people are scandalized by the images, saying that we are wrong to venerate them and that because of this the foreign nations are our masters. Condescend just a little, make a compromise with the people, and let us remove those [images] that are down low (τὰ χαμηλὰ περιέλωμεν).” Nikephoros stood firm, even after a group of “apostate bishops” presented him with an identical request early in 815: “Work with us a little, and let us remove all those [images] that are down low (Μικρὸν σύνελθε ἡμῖν, ἵνα περιέλωμεν πάντα τὰ χαμηλά).” The patriarch’s intransigence led to his forced abdication, and Leo convened a council in Hagia Sophia to discuss the image question.

Insofar as the *horos* (definition) of the council of 815 can be reconstructed, it did not explicitly invoke the concept of “images down low.” However, it did express a general preoccupation with the contexts in which viewers encounter images: “the main

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1 The “Scriptor Incertus” is so designated, not for his indecisiveness, but for his anonymity. Some view the text as a fragment of the history authored by Sergios Confessor, father of the Constantinopolitan Patriarch Photios: see most recently Treadgold 2013, 90–100. Others see it as a pamphlet directed against Leo V: see e.g. Brubaker – Haldon 2001, 179–180.
2 The two compilations were probably the florilegia of 754 and 815, respectively. See Anastos 1954, 157–158.
3 Iadevaia 1987, 62. On the translation of the concluding phrase note Martin 1930, 165 fn. 3. For a summary and analysis of the account, see Brubaker – Haldon 2011, 368–370.
4 Iadevaia 1987, 67. Two later hagiographic texts attribute a similar proposal to Emperor Leo III (717–741). The tenth-century version of the Life of Stephen the Younger by Symeon Metaphrastes has Leo propose that images should be placed higher up, so that no one may touch them with their mouths or otherwise treat them in undignified fashion: Iadevaia 1984, 74. The Slavonic life of Saint Stefan of Surozh, “a complex multilayer composition” containing numerous temporal strata, recalls that Leo “ordered the icons to be hung high up, so that he who is pure [in heart] would have to climb up to kiss them.” Ivanov 2006, 142; on the “multilayer” nature of the text at 109.
argument in respect of the ‘ordinary’ observer was focused on the unsuitability of holy images placed in situations which would earn them, implicitly or explicitly, the devotion and adorations which should properly be reserved to God alone.” The council also displayed an increased concern with the legitimacy of images of saints, in addition to the images of Christ that had dominated the eighth-century controversy. For example, the council’s florilegium includes a passage attributed to Basil, the fifth-century bishop of Seleukeia, asserting that saints are to be commemorated in words, not “the evil art of these figures.” The theological focus on images of saints is commensurate with the architectural focus on “images down low.” As we shall see, images of saints occupied the lowest registers of the decorative programs of many early medieval church interiors.

One ninth-century document provides an explicit and thorough justification of the removal of “images down low”: a Latin letter written in the names of the Byzantine emperors Michael II (820–829) and Theophilos (822–842) and addressed to the Frankish emperor Louis (“the Pious,” 814–840). The letter bears the date of 10 April 824, and is primarily concerned with the revolt of Thomas the Slav, which the emperors had subdued in the previous year. Only at the end does the discussion turn to images. The emperors complain of the evil things (malarum rerum) that clergy and laymen had introduced as innovations: placing images where crosses alone belong; placing lights and burning incense in front of images; singing hymns to them, adoring them, and asking them for help; wrapping images in cloths, engaging them as godparents; scraping paint from images and mixing it with the eucharistic bread and wine. “For this reason, the orthodox Emperors and most learned bishops decreed that a local council be convened (statuerunt… locale adunare concilium) so as to examine these matters… By common decision they forbade such practices [as those listed above] in any place whatever, and caused images to be removed from the lower positions (imagines de humilioribus locis auferri fecerunt), and permitted those which had been placed in higher positions to remain in their places (et eas, quae in sublimioribus locis positae erant … in suis locis consistere permiserunt), so that the pictures themselves might be considered like writings (ut ipsa pictura pro scriptura haberetur) but not be adored by the simple and the weak (ne ab indoctioribus et infirmioribus adorarentur), and they forbade that lamps be lit or incense offered before them.”

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6 Brubaker – Haldon 2011, 374. This was part of a broader shift between the eighth- and ninth-century debates about images, which can be characterized as a move from Trinitarian to formalist discourses (Barber 1995), and from ontology to epistemology (Elsner 2012).
7 Alexander, 1953, 43–44 with 61.
8 For the historical context, see Noble 2009, 255. Sode 2005 considers the letter to be a later elaboration of uncertain intent (“zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt, der hier noch nicht bestimmt werden kann, und aus Gründen, die noch nicht festgestellt werden können”) upon an authentic kernel; I am not convinced. On the revolt of Thomas, see Brubaker – Haldon 2011, 386–387.
9 Sode 2005, 148–149 argues that many of these things, including the consumption of paint from icons and the use of icons as godparents, are not based in Christian practice, but respond to polemic references to Michael II’s Athinganoi (“zigeunerisch”) origins. However, Baranov 2010 compiles positive references to these very practices from iconophile sources, especially the letters of Theodore the Studite.
The “local council” was probably not the council of 815, but a smaller gathering held in 821, which focused, to judge from the letter, on pastoral matters. Such were the concerns that prompted the removal of images down low, whose very presence was understood to encourage excessive adoration by “the simple and the weak.” A pastoral role is also assigned to “images up high,” which can function like texts: presumably depictions of stories from the Bible and saints’ lives. Notably, the letter’s authors do not elaborate on the distinction, instead assuming a shared understanding of the significance of the architectural positions of images. Perhaps the distinction between images that function like writings and those that encourage excessive adoration registers Byzantine awareness of the Gregorian distinction between idolatry and the pedagogical use of images. Or perhaps it derived from widespread assumptions about the relationship between images and “the people.”

There is little archaeological evidence for the removal or destruction of images during the second Iconoclasm. However, the impact of imperial opposition to “images down low” can be traced in the writings of the ninth-century iconophiles, especially Theodore the Studite (759–826) and the Patriarch Nikephoros. In the preface to his second Refutation, Theodore remarks that the iconoclasts “assign the icon a place higher up in the church, fearing that if it is located in a lower place, where it could provide an opportunity for veneration, it may cause them to fall into idolatry.” Theodore counters that the Old Testament kings removed idols both high up and those low down. If the images in churches were idols, then all should be removed. In fact, the iconoclasts have tacitly admitted that it is possible to depict Christ, but maintain that veneration of such a depiction constitutes worship of creation in place of the Creator, a position that Theodore seeks to refute in the following discourse.

Nikephoros addresses the relationship between architecture and images in his refutation of the iconoclasts’ distinction between innately sacred locations within the church (especially the altar) and the images that happen to appear there. Such a distinction is assumed both by Leo’s proposed compromise and by the letter of Michael and Theophilos: while the church building is necessary to Christian worship, its decoration is incidental and can be removed if it provokes unseemly behavior. For Nikephoros it is not possible to distinguish between architecture as essence and image as accident. Image, architecture, and worship jointly constitute a coherent system that cannot be selectively dismembered: “These places [sc. the solea, the columns, the doors,
and the altar of a church] are places of proskynesis, and they have been imprinted with these [images] for the sake of proskynesis.”

Nikephoros’s text reduces the architectural problematic of the “second Iconoclasm” to two basic positions. According to the first, which is assumed by the imperial effort to remove “images down low,” the church is an ad hoc assemblage of elements that can be rearranged and altered in response to practical exigencies. According to the second, which gradually emerges in the controversial literature of the ninth century, the physical structure of the church forms a holistic system in which every element is essential. The removal of any element is therefore fatal. This second position is also reflected in a contemporary conception of the sacredness of a church building as a positive condition that is susceptible to negation. Thus, Theodore the Studite argues in multiple letters that a church that is occupied by heretics is abandoned by its guardian angel and becomes a normal house.

The opposition between these two positions may illuminate the development of the ninth-century debate, but it leaves multiple art-historical and archaeological questions unanswered. Did the polemical concept of “images down low” evoke archaeological realia? If so, what functions did those images serve, and what aesthetic principles governed their architectural position? Finally, why were the emperors represented as opposing them?

In the following, the friezes of standing saints that were painted near eye-level in Roman churches of the eighth and ninth centuries will emerge as strong archaeological correlates for “images down low.” These friezes could serve as models for imitation by individuals and by Christian communities, a function that complemented the spatial fragmentation of the church interior. Early medieval churches offered a series of discrete, discontinuous encounters with altars, images, and other sites of reflection and contemplation. In the ninth century, a different, holistic ideal of the church interior emerged. By surrounding the viewer with figures of saints, later church interiors both foregrounded the images’ function as mediators between people and saints and increased the conceptual distance between viewer and image. Aesthetic and functional analysis of these archaeological developments provides a broader context for the ninth-century texts on “images down low.”

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18 This position is anticipated already in the eighth century by the establishment of “the image” as an integral part of a theological system, as in the works of John of Damascus, but without the explicit reference to the physical structure of the church. See Elsner 1988.

II. Realia

Did the “images down low” of the ninth-century texts evoke a physical correlate in contemporary church interiors? In a foundational account of “Byzantine Art in the Period Between Justinian and Iconoclasm,” Ernst Kitzinger described the ninth-century proposal to remove “images only from low positions” as a “logical counterpart” to a “tendency” in the art of the sixth and seventh centuries, namely: “in churches, paintings and mosaics with figure subjects were apt to be placed lower than they had been heretofore and in some instances were allowed to invade the zone beneath the principal cornice, traditionally the dividing line between imagery and panelling or dado.”

Kitzinger cited two examples of this phenomenon, both dating from the early seventh century: the pier mosaics of Hagios Demetrios in Thessaloniki, and a fresco depicting Anna holding the infant Mary in the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in the Roman Forum.

By describing the ninth-century texts as a “logical counterpart,” not a response, to the seventh-century monuments, Kitzinger acknowledged the two-century gulf that separates the texts from the realia. There are two ways to bridge this gulf. The first is to treat the period between ca. 650 and 850 as a hiatus in the archaeologically-based history of architecture and images, during which arguments about pictures arrested those internal dynamics that drove their relationship to built environments. The second is to seek later archaeological developments that could help to understand the ninth-century concern with the category of “images down low.” In fact, the archaeological record does reveal a relevant shift in the relationship between architecture and images. Within the eighth- and ninth-century ecclesiastical interiors of the city of Rome, friezes of life-sized standing saints were painted across unbroken expanses of wall and positioned close to the eye-level of those who stood on the church floor.

The best-preserved example of this phenomenon is a four-register ensemble of paintings in the left aisle of Santa Maria Antiqua (figs. 1-2), which most scholars have dated to the pontificate of Paul I (757–767). The paintings of the lowest zone, before which an altar stood to the right of center, depict hanging curtains (a *velum*). The composition of the second register is anchored by the enthroned figure of Christ, who is positioned directly above the altar. On either side stand twenty male saints, eleven to the viewer’s left and nine to the right, all accompanied by Greek *tituli*. The two uppermost registers are divided into horizontal segments of unequal length, which contain scenes from the Book of Genesis and are accompanied by *tituli* in Latin.

20 Kitzinger 1958, 41 and fn. 152.
21 For the pier mosaics in Hagios Demetrios, see Bauer 2013, 198–209. For the date of the fresco of Anna and Mary, see Nordhagen 1968, 89.
22 Thus Demus 1955, 50–51.
23 In discussion of the architectural features of Roman churches, many of which are not oriented, I give positions from the point of view of someone facing the main apse.
24 Paul’s involvement in the decoration of the church is attested by an inscription in the presbytery. Fundamentally, Wilpert 1916, 701–713. For a review of later opinions, with additional reasons for preferring an eighth-century date, see Santerre 1983, II. 193 fn. 23. More recently, a dating to the pontificate of Paul I has been adopted by Lucey 2004, 85; and Lucey 2007, 148–150.
25 Lucey 2004, 83–85 considers the altar to be contemporary with the frescoes; but Bauer 1999, 411–412 (and Bauer 2002, 83) dates the introduction of the altar after the execution of the frescoes.
Most scholarly discussion of the frieze of standing saints has focused on the presence of both “Greek” or “eastern” saints and “Latin” or “local” saints. Indeed, the first eight figures to the right represent bishops from points east of Rome: John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzos, Basil of Caesarea, Peter of Alexandria, Cyril of Alexandria, Epiphanius of Salamis, Athanasios of Alexandria, and Nicholas of Myra. The rightmost figure, however, is Erasmus, a bishop of Formia in Campania who was martyred under Diocletian, and whose passio was depicted in a contemporary cycle of paintings in Santa Maria in Via Lata. The selection of figures to the left is more eclectic. Moving outwards from Christ, the first four saints are bishops of Rome (Clement, Sylvester, Leo the Great, and Alexander), followed by two Italian bishops (Valentine and Abundius). At this point, however, two Palestinian abbots (Euthymios and Sabbas) intervene. Sabbas was the patron of an important early medieval monastery in Rome, but Euthymios has no obvious connection to Italy. The final three figures include the soldiers and martyrs Sergios and Bakchos, who incongruously bracket Pope Gregory the Great. The general impression is less of a coherent geographic distribution than of a broad diversity of origins and occupations, a diversity carried through into the variety of garments, attributes, and facial types exhibited by the individual figures.

By any standard, the images of saints in the left aisle of Santa Maria Antiqua are “down low.” The height of the velum zone is 114 centimeters and the height of the second register, containing the frieze of saints, is 152 centimeters. Funerary archaeologists report that the mean stature of a medieval Italian man was around 166 centimeters. Thus the saints are slightly under life size, and a man who stood close to the frieze would find his eye positioned at the level of their knees. Although elevated, the saints are approachable. They are distinguished in position from the pier mosaics of Hagios Demetrios, which are substantially higher up, and in kind from the panel of Anna holding Mary in Santa Maria Antiqua, which is set at a similar distance from the ground, but presents a discrete framed composition in which the figures are considerably under life size.

The frieze in Santa Maria Antiqua is only the best-preserved example of a characteristic phenomenon in eighth-century Rome. Compare, for example, the apse end of the right aisle of the lower church of San Clemente, where Wilpert documented the remains, now entirely vanished, of two standing saints above a low velum. Proposed

26 Already in 1911, Wladimir de Grüneisen described the frieze as “le Christ trônant au milieu de saints latins à sa droite et grecs à sa gauche”: Grüneisen 1911, 108. Santerre 1983, 1,158–159, saw here “une grande frise de saints ‘grecs’ et latins,” which, he proposed, was painted “peut-être pour célébrer l’union des Églises grecque et latine dans la défense des images.” Lucey 2007, 149–150 has interpreted the Greek tituli that accompany the frieze of saints as evidence for use of this aisle by “Greek-speaking clerics” as “an area for private and/or monastic devotions.”
27 For that cycle, see Jessop 1999, 259–266.
28 On these images, see Tomeković 1993, 134–136.
29 Grüneisen 1911, 106, 108.
30 Gianneccchini – Moggi-Cecchi 2008, 291, fig. 2.
31 The pier mosaics of Hagios Demetrios begin more than halfway up the piers, that is, at least two and a half meters above ground level; see e.g. Soteriou – Soteriou 1952, 114 Eik. 43. Grüneisen 1911, 157, measures the height of the Anna panel at 112 cm, and places it at 95 cm above ground level.
dates have ranged across the eighth century. Or compare the frieze of standing saints that was painted above a dado and beneath the eighth-century narrative of the life of Saint Erasmus in “Hall IV” of the church of Santa Maria in Via Lata. The combination of standing saints below with narrative scenes above is shared with the left aisle of Santa Maria Antiqua, where the frieze of saints stands below a cycle of scenes from Genesis. The arrangement was maintained in later centuries; note, for example, the ninth-century paintings of Santa Maria Egiziaca, where scenes from the gospels stood above friezes of standing saints.

The placement of saints below stories parallels the distinction drawn in the letter of Michael II and Theophilos, for whom images down low are adored (and thus represent discrete figures), while images up high work like writings (they tell stories). The Roman interiors of the eighth and ninth centuries are closer both in time and in kind to the decorative schemes described in the letter than the individual panels that encroached upon the dado zones of seventh-century churches.

Although the friezes of saints near the viewer’s eye-level represent an innovation in the Roman ecclesiastical decoration of the eighth century, it is possible to construct a genealogy for their emergence. It might seem natural to begin this genealogy with the rows of saints depicted in the sixth-century mosaics above the nave colonnade at Sant’Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna. Here, at south, a procession of male martyrs approaches an enthroned Christ surrounded by angels while, at north, a procession of female martyrs and Magi approaches an enthroned Mother and Child, likewise flanked by angels. However, the directionality of these mosaics presents a radical difference from the frieze of Santa Maria Antiqua. Whereas the rows of martyrs in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo lead the viewer towards the culminating groups at the apse end of the church, the frescoes of the left aisle of Santa Maria Antiqua hold the viewer in front of the figure of Christ and the altar beneath.

A closer comparison is provided by the symmetrical groups of standing figures (henceforth “arrays”), anchored by a central figure and located near an altar, depicted in the sixth-century mosaics of the apse of Santi Cosma e Damiano (fig. 3) and the arch of San Lorenzo fuori le mura. Despite the stylistic gulf between these two mosaic compositions, they share an identical figural syntax. The seven-figure arrays establish a hierarchy of sanctity, in which apostolic mediators (Peter and Paul) introduce the titular saints (Santi Cosma e Damiano) or the titular saint and a suitable companion (the early martyr Lawrence and the protomartyr Stephen) to the central figure of Christ. The arrays are completed at their extremities by a living epithalamic donor at left (Felix IV (526–530) in Santi Cosma e Damiano, Pelagius (556–561) in San Lorenzo fuori le mura) and a lesser saint at right (Theodore and Hippolytus, respectively). These Roman mosaics, like the pier mosaics of Hagios Demetrios in which the saint is accompanied

33 Jessop 1999, 261. For the architectural setting, see CBCR 3, 78–79.
34 Lafontaine 1959, 46–48; Adam 1994, 28–29 with Fig. 26.
35 Recently Yasin 2009, 202–204.
36 On these compositions, see now Thunø 2015.
37 For the stylistic difference, see Kitzinger 1934, 5–7.
by civic and ecclesiastical dignitaries, emphasize the interactions among the standing figures, and depict the privileged access to holy figures that living community members were understood to enjoy. As compositions, they require nothing of their viewers, who can only assent to an established state of affairs.

This type of array was often replicated in later centuries. The ninth-century apse mosaic of Santa Prassede follows the sixth-century prototypes with perfect understanding. Peter and Paul introduce Praxedes and her sister, Pudentiana, to the central figure of Christ. At the extremities, the episcopal donor (Paschal [817–824]) stands at left, and a lesser saint (without titulus) at right. However, the array could also be adapted to different situations. In the seventh-century fresco behind the altar and beneath the depiction of the crucifixion in the Theodotos Chapel in Santa Maria Antiqua, the Virgin and Child together assume the central position. They are bracketed as usual by Peter and Paul, who introduce an appropriate pair of saints (Julitta and Quiricus). At left appears the living bishop, Zachary (741–752), whose counterpart at right is not a “lesser saint,” but the chapel’s patron, Theodotos, a high-ranking lay official in the episcopal administration. This painting uses a position that carried limited significance in earlier arrays to depict a non-episcopal donor without displacing the bishop.

Something different in kind appears in the mosaics of the Cappella di San Venanzio in the Lateran Baptistery, which was built in the mid-seventh century to house the remains of various Istrian and Dalmatian saints and martyrs. *Mutatis mutandis*, the apse composition is a standard array, here expanded to include nine figures. The central position is assumed by the Virgin, who gestures up to a figure of Christ, set in a distinct zone and depicted at bust-length. As usual, the central figure is bracketed by Peter and Paul, who are bracketed in turn by the two saints John to whom the Lateran complex was dedicated, and at one remove further by the saints Domnius and Venantius, whose remains were housed in the chapel. The outermost figures represent the episcopal donors, John IV (640–642) and Theodore I (642–649). However, the row of standing figures continues onto the walls at either side of the semidome. Here eight saints are depicted in two groups of four. They face into the main space of the chapel, and do not interact with the figures in the apse (rows of this type are henceforth called “friezes”). Instead, their interaction with an implied viewer gains a new primacy.

It is significant that the first preserved frieze of this type appears in an enclosed chapel without side aisles, not in one of the great basilicas.

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39 See e.g. Wisskirchen 1992.
40 Belting 1987, who discusses this painting as “das offizielle Dedikationsbild.”
41 Mackie 1996.
42 The spatial distinction is reinforced by a stylistic distinction between the “aufgelöste Art” of the figures on the wall and the “plastisch geschlosseneres Stil” of the figures in the apse: Kitzinger 1934, 14.
43 A partial, roughly contemporary comparison is supplied by the two pairs of church fathers that were painted on either side of the apse of the presbyterium (also an enclosed space) of Santa Maria Antiqua in the mid-seventh century. The position in attitude in relationship to the apse is comparable, while the arrangement in pairs and location much closer to the ground are distinct. Wilpert 1916, Taf. 142; for the date, see Kitzinger 1934, 8; Nordhagen 1962, 58–61; thorough description in Nordhagen 1978, 97–100.
The friezes in the chapel to the right of the presbyterium of Santa Maria Antiqua, the so-called “Chapel of the Physicians,” engage their viewers still more explicitly (fig. 4).

Usually associated with a decorative campaign carried out during the papacy of John VII (705–707), the standing medical saints do not frame a central figure of Christ, and are positioned much lower on the wall than their counterparts in the Cappella di San Venanzio. However, the friezes of the Chapel of the Physicians remain significantly above head-height and over life-size. Therefore, the mid-eighth-century paintings of the left aisle of Santa Maria Antiqua (figs. 1–2) represent a further stage in the development, in which the frieze of saints, none of whom interacts with the central figure of Christ, comes still closer to the ground, and shrinks to slightly under life-size.

The nature of the difference between the two spaces is illuminated by two representations from the early twentieth century. In a watercolor of the Chapel of the Physicians, the ankles of the saints are roughly level with the top of the door that pierces the chapel's northern wall (fig. 4). The door serves as an architectural proxy for a visitor to the building, and thus situates the saints just out of reach. In a photograph of the left aisle, by contrast, the saints of the overlap with a man who stands under the arcade, surrounding him roughly at arm’s height, within easy reach (fig. 2).

Thus the architectural and compositional development from the array of the sixth century to the frieze of the eighth century is accompanied by a new mode of address to the viewer. The array in the apse of Santi Cosma e Damiano (fig. 3) is internally coherent, depicting relationships that persist with or without the presence of a viewer. The frieze of the left aisle of Santa Maria Antiqua, on the other hand, does not present a coherent set of internal relationships. Even the notional centrality of Christ is undermined by the uneven distribution of saints to either side. Instead, the frieze is externally coherent, completed only by the introduction of a viewer.

The Roman friezes of the eighth and ninth centuries can help to interpret the ninth-century texts on “images down low,” but not by serving as proxies for putative lost monuments of the capital, where those texts were composed.

The evidence for figural mural decoration of Constantinopolitan churches before the second half of the ninth century is limited. The naos and sanctuary of Hagia Sophia contained no mural figural decoration before the second half of the ninth century. The evidence for figural mural decoration of Constantinopolitan churches before the second half of the ninth century is limited. The naos and sanctuary of Hagia Sophia contained no mural figural decoration before the second half of the ninth century. Extant figural mosaics from late antique Constantinople are scarce and extremely fragmentary.

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44 See especially Knipp 2002.
45 The six saints on the north wall occupy a register that stands two and a half meters above ground level, and measures 188 centimeters in height: Grüneisen 1911, 163–165.
46 I borrow the concepts of internal and external coherence from Riegl 1999.
47 For an overview of the historiographic problems adumbrated here, see Brubaker 2004a.
48 Mango 1962, 93–94; Mango – Hawkins 1965, 147–148. This leaves aside the figural mosaics in the subsidiary rooms on the upper level of the southwest corner, on which see Cormack – Hawkins 1977. The literary evidence is insufficient to determine if the mural decoration of the Justinianic Church of the Holy Apostles was also aniconic: James 2012, 204.
49 A mosaic depiction of the presentation of Christ in the Temple was installed, perhaps in the sixth century, over an immured window to the south of the apse of the north church at Kalenderhane: Striker – Hawkins 1997, 121–124. A mosaic depiction of a youthful figure that originally formed part of a larger mural composition, possibly dating to the late seventh or early eighth century, was kept as an icon in the church of Hagios Nikolaos near Gül Camii in the early twentieth century: Židkov 1929/1930; Nordhagen 1965, 159–160.
Textual accounts of the destruction of images in Constantinopolitan churches by eighth-century emperors are revealing, even when weighed against their overtly polemical contexts. For example, the Life of St. Stephen the Younger by Stephen the Deacon describes the removal of a Christological cycle from the walls of the church of the Virgin at Blachernae under Constantine V. This is precisely the type of image that Michael and Theophilos claimed to preserve. There are also references to images in texts with no immediate relation to the image controversy. For example, an account of the church of the Virgin of the Spring, preserved in a twelfth-century manuscript, describes mosaics of the emperors Eirene (780–802) and Constantine VI (780–797), who were represented on both sides of the church presenting gifts.

The Constantinopolitan approach to church decoration was not aniconic, although the Justinianic Hagia Sophia suggests that the ecclesiastical interiors of Constantinople may have been less saturated with images than those of early medieval Rome. Nevertheless, the evidence is suggestive of a broadly shared sense of architectural decorum. The eighth-century mosaics of the church of the Virgin of the Spring recall the sixth-century mosaics of the imperial couple at San Vitale in Ravenna and the seventh-century mosaic of emperors and clerics at Sant’Apollinare in Classe. The Christological cycle in the Blachernae may be a polemical invention, but it does give us a Constantinopolitan author evoking a narrative cycle “up high” like those invoked in the ninth-century texts. In short, the Roman friezes of the eighth- and ninth-centuries provide a glimpse of the architectural realia that the ninth-century texts might have evoked in contemporary readers, both those in the east and those in the west.

III. Functions

According to the letter of Michael II and Theophilos, “the orthodox Emperors ... caused images to be removed from the lower positions, and permitted those which had

51 Similarly, a ninth-century miracle story about the church of the Virgin at Chalkoprateia describes fifth-century mosaics depicting the birth of the Virgin and of Christ, and sixth-century mosaics depicting the adoration of the Magi and the annunciation. The latter, located in the apse, was supposedly destroyed by order of Constantine V: Lackner 1985, 851–852; and note the discussion by Mango 1993/1994.
52 Talbot – Johnson 2012, 222–223. See also the sixth-century dedicatory epigram of the church of Hagios Poleyuktos, which describes a depiction of the baptism of Constantine on the facade: AP I.10.70–76, with Speck 1991 and Fowden 1994. Both texts describe the sort of imperial iconography that remained uncontroversial throughout the eighth and ninth centuries. The legitimacy of imperial portraiture is granted by both “iconophiles” and “iconoclasts,” even if the latter accused the emperors of “Christomachy” for having removed the image of Christ and retained their own. See especially Grabar 1984, 215–227. For portraits of Leo III and Constantine V preserved in a twelfth-century copy of the Ekloga, see Cotsonis 2002, Fig. 9.
53 Pentcheva 2006, 48 notes that the Marian cult of early medieval Constantinople was based on relics, in direct contrast to that of Rome, which was based on images.
54 Thus already Grabar 1984, 240–243. Far from viewing the churches of Rome as reflections of lost monuments of Constantinople, we should entertain the notion that the decoration of Italian churches could provide models for Constantinopolitan interiors. Thus Brubaker 2004a, 43–44, on similarities between the decoration of Santa Maria Antiqua and the Paris Gregory: “it is equally possible (and less speculative) to argue that knowledge of the Roman formula traveled east.”
been placed in higher positions to remain in their places, so that the pictures themselves might be considered like writings, but not be adored by the unlearned and the weak.”

The functional distinction invoked here is immediately familiar to the art historian raised on the distinction between “cultic” and “scenic” images, imago and historia. Accordingly, scholars have largely agreed with the letter that early medieval images were treated as proxies for the figures depicted. For Kitzinger, “the saint’s image takes on an unprecedented actuality and reality, it begins on a broad scale to speak and act for the saint himself and to be approached, venerated and used more and more as though it were animate.” This social development led to a “realism of a peculiarly medieval kind,” in which the artist was primarily tasked with “creating a receptacle, a house or shell for the divine substance, a vehicle for the supernatural.” Agreement regarding the primacy of the mediating function of saints’ images transcends substantial scholarly differences regarding the date of its emergence and the relative accessibility of holy person to earthly viewer.

A second, and well-attested, function for early medieval saints’ images has received less attention in art-historical literature: their use as models for imitations by Christians who wished to attain sanctity themselves. Iconoclasts and iconophiles agreed that one should imitate the lives of the saints, differing only on the utility of paintings. Friezes of standing saints were uniquely suited to this function, as they provided viewers with a range of models for virtuous conduct. By providing an image of a heavenly community as a collection of diverse individuals united by a common goal, they could be invoked as models for earthly communities as well. This may be illustrated by two corpora: the late antique and early medieval wall paintings of Dayr Apa Jeremiah, and the epigrams of Theodore the Studite. Despite the differences in geography and medium, both exemplify the utility of a series of saints as a model for imitation by a Christian community.

The monastery of Apa Jeremiah stood on the west bank of the Nile, roughly twenty kilometers south of Cairo, and on the edge of Saqqara, the necropolis of ancient Memphis. It was excavated in two campaigns, by the Egyptologist James Quibell between 1906 and 1910 and the German Archaeological Institute in the 1970s and 1980s, and is now one of the most archaeologically visible monastic complexes of the early Middle Ages. Its foundation is dated by literary sources to the fifth century, but most of the monumental remains date to the late seventh and eighth centuries, and the majority of dated tombstones of community members dates to the second half of the eighth century.

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55 Werminghoff 1908, 478–479.
56 For paradigmatic definitions of the “szenischen ‘Histiorienbildes’” and the “kultischen ‘Repräsentationsbildes,’” see Panofsky 1927, 264–268. For imago and historia in later medieval Europe, see e.g. Belting 1981, 69–103.
57 Kitzinger 1958, 45.
58 Kitzinger 1958, 46. Compare the account of “magical realism” in Demus 1955, 43–44.
59 For a later date, see most recently Brubaker 2012, 9–21. For earlier dates, see Nordhagen 1987; Nordhagen 2010. Differences regarding degree of accessibility are often distilled in a metaphor of mediation, e.g.: “window” (Brubaker 1998, 1216), “relay” (Nordhagen 2010, 103), “signpost” (Barber 2002, 137), “conduit” (Marsengill 2013, 1), “telecommunication apparatus” (Mathews 1988, 13).
60 Anastos 1954, with Cholij 2002, 87 fn. 32.
61 Grossmann 1991, with references to earlier literature.
Many of the individual chambers excavated by Quibell were covered with paintings from the floor to the preserved height of the structure and on all four walls. His expedition removed many paintings from the site, some of which are now kept in the Coptic Museum in Cairo. In the present context two spaces excavated by Quibell are of immediate relevance: “Cell A” and “Chamber 706.”

Cell A is a quadrangular room to the northeast of the main church (fig. 5). The visitor who entered the cell through its southern door was confronted by a fresco depicting four standing saints on the opposite, northern wall, positioned close to the ground and under life size (fig. 6). A small figure bends to touch the feet of the two saints at right. No inscription accompanies the leftmost figure, but his nudity (under ample hair and beard) and the date palm once visible to his left urge an identification with the anchorite Saint Onophrios. The remaining figures are labeled, from left to right, as Makare, Apollo, and Phib (or Pamun), all monastic saints of Late Antiquity.

As Elizabeth Bolman has argued, if a monastic cell is understood as a space for the practice of spiritual discipline, then the saints’ images served as exemplars, reminders of earlier monastics who performed their spiritual work in especially worthy fashion. Apa Apollo, in particular, was known for his successful imitation of the miracles of Christ. The painting in Cell A at Dayr Apa Jeremias “maps out [a] mimetic hierarchy in visual form: the viewer and the monk in proskynēsis strive to imitate Apa Apollo, who himself has successfully imitated Christ.”

Nor is Apollo the only model for imitation. The leftmost figure of the anchorite, although he displays the same gesture of prayer as Apollo, is distinguished by his long hair, his beard, and his nudity. The two remaining figures hold books instead of praying. They are fully clothed, but physically distinct from Apollo: Makare has a long face and a forked beard, while the face of the rightmost figure is squat and his beard is shaped like a spade. While the painting enjoins the viewer to imitate past monks who have successfully imitated Christ, it acknowledges a variety of legitimate paths to that end, including both the solitary life and the leadership of a community, both prayer and study.
Room 706 is a windowless quadrangular chamber that stood off of a passageway linking the main church and the refectory to its north. One wall (we do not know which) supported a painting of eleven male figures, depicted at bust length and well under life size (fig. 7). The inscriptions name “Maxentius Mena, the lame,” “Brother Mena the stonemason,” “Horus the watchman,” “Brother David, the Ethiopian” and seven further “watchmen.” An additional three inscriptions from the west wall of the same room were painted over additional paintings that are neither preserved nor documented, but depicted “my brother Abraham,” “Apa Jeremias,” and “my brother Zacharias, the son of Apa Naf ... the potter.”

The paintings in Room 706 do not depict saints, but members of the community, who were presumably alive or recently deceased at the time of painting. Some are identified by name only, some by their family relations and the occupation of their parents (“son of the potter”) or by a regional identity (“the Ethiopian”), but most are identified by occupation (watchmen plus one mason) or by their inability to perform certain kinds of labor (“the lame”). These figures are depicted more simply than the saints of Cell A, but also form a row of standing figures, under life size. Furthermore, in both cases the painter differentiates between individuals through physical traits. Some faces in Room 706 are bearded, others not; some heads are boxy, others long; some carry full heads of hair, while others are balding.

The painters of both spaces recognized the ability of the frieze of standing figures to express diversity within unity, or membership in a community: the community of saints, on the one hand, and a monastic community, on the other. The two paintings are separated by the distinction between bust-length and full-length depictions, and by the differing quality of the execution. Nor are the two communities identical. The one resides in heaven, the other on earth; the one has attained that for which the other strives. Nevertheless, the hope that they might eventually converge is maintained through varieties of mimesis: through the spiritual practices of the monk who imitates the saintly model, through the painter’s imitation of the figures of the saints within the monastery’s chambers, and through the representation of the earthly community in a manner comparable to the heavenly.

An analogous use of a common formal device to represent saintly and monastic communities appears in the poems of Theodore the Studite, a prolific author of iambic verses that were anthologized shortly after his death. Paul Speck’s edition includes a series of 24 poems on individual saints, which he collectively designated the “Heiligenzyklus.” Each contains four lines and addresses the saint in the second...
person, with the exception of the epigram on John the Baptist, who speaks in the first person. The poems consist primarily of praise of the saints. So, for example, on the Apostle Paul: “Greetings, great vessel of divine knowledge, from whom all draw the greatest blessings. For, having pulled the whole world out of error, you reached the summit, attaining the third heaven.”

Theodore also composed a second “cycle” of 27 poems, which Speck designated collectively as the “Mönchsgedichte.” These exhibit neither the formal unity nor the topical consistency of the “Heiligenzyklus.” They vary in length between nine and fourteen lines, and address not only individual occupations or offices within a monastic community (abbot, oikonomos, etc.), but also categories to which all monks should belong (“those who renounce,” “the obedient”), people outside of the monastic community (laymen, travelers), architectural elements of the monastery complex (the dormitory, the guesthouse), and the monastery itself.

Of the fifteen poems that address members of the community, all are composed in the second person, and all contain descriptions of their duties and praises of their merits. Furthermore, five compare the addressees to Old Testament figures (the second in command is compared to Joshua, and the cook to Jacob) or to saints (the cobbler is compared to the Apostle Paul, the oikonomos and cellarer to Stephen the Protomartyr). Thus on the cobbler: “How noble is the art of the shoemakers, for it belongs to the great Apostle Paul. Imitating the sweat of his labors, tackle with ardor and fitting care your daily tasks, like workers of Christ. Cut the skins and hides as required to renew the old things, and only then to fashion the new. Neither throw away things that should be kept, nor be careless in cutting. For by doing all these things in worthy fashion, you will complete the martyrs’ course.”

In his catechetical literature, as in his poems, Theodore often presented the community of saints as a model for imitation by a monastic community. The comparison of the thrifty cobbler with the victorious martyr is one of many passages in which Theodore “compared the spiritual struggle of the monk to martyrdom.” For Theodore, as for the Egyptian painters, a qualitative and chronological gulf separates the saints of the past from contemporary monks. However, imitation of the saints requires nothing more than hard work. The shoemaker progresses towards sainthood by imitating the sweat of Paul’s labors.

Taken together, the two cycles of Theodore’s poems provide a literary analogue to the rows of standing figures from Dayr Apa Jeremias. The literary form of the cycle of


80 See the references collected by Speck 1968, 212, and especially Cholij 2002, 35–37, 86–87.

81 Cholij 2002, 93.

82 For Theodore, “not only was [sanctification] open to all, but it was the duty of every Christian.” Cholij 2002, 238 and passim.
iambic verses works like the visual form of the frieze to unite a series of discrete units within a higher-order category while preserving individual differences. The comparison to the paintings at Dayr Apa Jeremias would be rendered more concrete if, as Speck argued, both the “Heiligenzyklus” and the “Mönchsgedichte” preserve the texts of epigraphic cycles that were displayed within the Stoudios Monastery, the former accompanying the saints’ images.83

Both the paintings of Dayr Apa Jeremiah and the friezes of eighth-century Rome exemplify how paintings could serve as models for imitation by diverse individuals within various kinds of Christian community.84 The frieze of standing saints was especially well suited to this end. Its serial form portrayed the figures as equivalent while simultaneously allowing for comparison of their divergent facial types and costumes. Moreover, its open mode of address, in contrast to the closed arrays of the apses, helped to render the various figures as potential models, not distant occupants of a separate realm.

IV. Aesthetics

The use of saints’ images as models for virtuous conduct may also account for their position within the church: perhaps physical proximity emphasized the attainability of the goal. However, the position of the friezes must also be considered within an architectural context, as an element not only of an ethical system, but also of an aesthetic one.

The frieze of saints in the left aisle of Santa Maria Antiqua might seem to anticipate the “choir of saints,” the lowermost of the three components of Otto Demus’s “classical system” of Middle Byzantine church decoration.85 The choir includes those full-length portraits that “find their proper places on vertical walls, in barrel vaults and on the vertical parts of arches… In a higher degree than of any other parts of the decoration it can be said of the Saints, the single figures, that they share the space of the church with the beholder.”86 This description could be applied to any of the early medieval friezes discussed in Section II above.87 However, a closer consideration of the architectural contexts of the early medieval friezes reveals little that points forward to Middle Byzantine decoration. The early medieval churches of Rome and the Middle Byzantine

83 Speck’s extended arguments for seeing the cycle of epigrams on saints as the textual component of a monumental set of wall paintings in the Stoudios Basilica, are both compelling and unprovable: Speck 1964; Speck 1968, 211–213. His suggestion that the poems on the monastic life were displayed within relevant areas of the monastery was made in passing: Speck 1968, 114.
84 The promotion of saints’ images as models for imitation that emphasized individual distinctiveness will have worked in counterpoint with an understanding, widespread in Studite circles, of Biblical narrative as providing models for imitation that converged on “a single liturgical type”; on which see Krueger 2014, especially at 16–17.
85 Demus 1955, 26–29. For important revisions to Demus’s account, see James 1994.
87 It is not without reason that Speck (1964, 341) imagined the monumental images that he saw behind Theodore’s “Heiligenzyklus” as a “Vorform” of the fully developed “οὐρανὸς ἐπίπτωσ” (“heaven on earth”) of the Middle Byzantine cross-in-square.
cross-in-square result from two radically distinct conceptions of the architectural space of the church: the former fragmented, the latter holistic.  

The late antique church basilica, as Alois Riegl argued, should be understood as two conjoined elements: a vaulted sanctuary and a columned hall. Moreover, the central aisle of this hall was merely a roofed court, “the ground of the relief, architectonically appraised a vacuum, a formless, empty space, only provisionally roofed.” The aisles were linked to each other by their decoration and by normative lines of sight. “The view out of the side-aisle across the roofed court to the facade of the other side-aisle, with its colonnade and paintings on the wall above, determined the artistic effect of the hall in the early Christian basilica.” Riegl’s argument can be illustrated by two photographs of the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. In the first, taken from the center of the nave, the mosaic above the colonnade is substantially obscured by the entablature (fig. 8). Only in the second, taken from the opposite aisle, does the mosaic become fully visible (fig. 9). The colonnade is a facade that is meant to be viewed from the opposite aisle, not a wall that encloses the nave.

Ultimately, then, the late antique basilica consisted of two aisles and a sanctuary arranged about an empty space. When late antique basilicas were carved up into an increasing number of alternative foci (altars, chapels, oratories, and crypts) in the early Middle Ages, the resulting fragmentation was a natural development from the original aesthetic conception. As Franz Alto Bauer has shown, the fragmentation of the basilica was a liturgical and architectural phenomenon that produced two divergent tendencies. On the one hand, the clerical space of the sanctuary became progressively distinct from the lay space of the aisles. This increasing distance was established in part through such architectural devices as columns, screens, and podiums. On the other hand, the faithful were granted access to the relics and images of the saints in smaller and more intimate spaces within the side aisles. This increasing proximity was enabled in part through construction of chapels and subsidiary altars. An “increasing drive towards spatial enclosure” facilitated the establishment of distance between congregation and clergy and of proximity between the congregation and the saints’ memorials.

The aesthetic character of these developments is robustly expressed in older spaces that were converted to ecclesiastical use in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Here we see what was deemed necessary to transform a given space into a site of worship. The Antonine buildings occupied by Santa Maria Antiqua, for example, render concrete Riegl’s conceptual analysis of the church basilica. A peristyle court was converted to a nave, with the covered porticoes serving as the aisles, while a vaulted tablinum was

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88 Fundamentally on the cross-in-square, see Ousterhout 2008, 7–38.
89 Riegl 1903, 202–203.
90 Riegl 1903, 208, 210 (“bloß gleichsam Reliefgrund, architecktonisch gefaßt ein Nichts, ein formloser, leerer Raum, und nur provisorisch überdeckt”).
91 Riegl 1903, 208 (“der gerade Draufblick von einem Seitenschiff aus quer über den überdeckten Hof hin nach der Front des andern Seitenschiffes mit ihren Säulenreihen und Malereien an der Wänder darüber war es, der die künstlerische Wirkung des Langhauses in der altchristlichen Basilika bedingte”).
92 So too (and surely with Riegl in mind) Demus 1955, 45.
93 Bauer 1999; Bauer 2002.
converted to a central sanctuary flanked by two side chapels. The decorative and cultic foci clustered in the porticoes, while the open space at the center of the peristyle remained empty, at least until its northwestern corner was walled off and converted into an additional "chapel."

The sixth-century renovation of San Martino ai Monti clearly illustrates the distinction between the aesthetic principles that inform the early medieval churches and those of the cross-in-square. The pre-existing Roman structure presented a nine-bay space of vaults and piers: nearly a ready-made cross-in-square. It was rendered suitable for worship by surrounding the piers with "padding masonry," and covering the resulting walls with painted figures. Whereas the cross-in-square is a unitary space, sculpted by vaults and punctuated by columns, the early medieval church is a series of spaces, defined by flat walls and columnar screens.

The emergence of the frieze of saints in the early medieval interiors of Rome complements the emergence of the flat wall as a medium of spatial division. Whereas the late antique basilicas position their viewers within one aisle, directing their gaze across the nave to the facade of the opposite aisle, the left aisle of Santa Maria Antiqua turns the visitor’s attention inwards, to the interior spaces of the side aisles (figs. 1–2). If previously the two aisles were linked by normative lines of sight, now they have become autonomous compartments. Such spaces were intimate yet transitory, conceived more for momentary encounters than for the monumental depiction of eternal states of affairs. This transience is reflected by the striking frequency with which the side aisles and chapels of Roman churches were painted over with new figural programs. It was also fully compatible with the externally coherent nature of the frieze composition. These were images that existed, not for themselves, but for viewers.

It is tempting to draw a direct line from the intimate encounter between viewer and image staged within these side aisles to the literary descriptions of the decoration of palatial interiors in Constantinople during the reign of Emperor Michael III (842–867). The epigram on the reception hall known as the Chrysotriklinos declares: "All around the building, like guards, [stand] angels, apostles, martyrs, priests." A homily by Patriarch Photios (858–867) on the palatine church of the Virgin of the Pharos describes "a choir of apostles and martyrs, yea, of prophets, too, and patriarchs [that] fill and beautify the whole church with their images."

Unfortunately, we know hardly anything the architecture of these buildings, or about the spatial disposition of the images within. Both were, like Santa Maria Antiqua and Santa Maria in Via Lata, older structures adopted to new ends in part through the addition of images. The Chrysotriklinos was originally built in the sixth century, and the Pharos in the eighth at the latest. Perhaps their new decorations

95 For the architectural history, see especially Tea 1937; CBCR 2, 249–268.
96 Bauer 2002, 83.
98 As Riegl 1999, 338, wrote about a 1639 group portrait by Franz Hals: "the figures … exist essentially only for the sake of the viewer."
99 AP I, 106; translation after Mango 1972, 184.
100 Mango 1958, 188.
staged a series of local encounters between viewer and image in the manner of the Roman churches. However, their descriptions announce an aspiration for that “direct relationship between architectural form and decoration”\textsuperscript{103} that would characterize the mature cross-in-square. The language of holism (“all around the building,” “the whole church”), echoes the emerging theological conception of the church building as a system in which every element is essential, discussed in Section I above.

The holistic ideal culminated in an entirely different relationship between viewers and images than the earlier, fragmented aesthetic. In the early medieval churches the encounter between viewer and image could be episodic and familiar, a moment of regard set within a series of discrete experiences. In the eleventh-century churches that formed the basis for Demus’s account, however, it was no longer a question of individuals, but of wholes: “the guiding thought … is realized only in the sum of all the single figures.”\textsuperscript{104} This totality produces “an intimate relationship between the world of the beholder and the world of the image.”\textsuperscript{105} The fact that “the stress is not laid on the single picture in isolation” betrays “the sociological interest in relations rather than a preoccupation with problems of ethics.”\textsuperscript{106}

In the fragmented early medieval interiors, the saints’ images were instrumentally accessible. A person could seek an image that suited his or her needs, just as a community could choose to paint over old images with new ones better suited to changed circumstances. At root, this is the same attitude that the ninth-century texts about “images down low” attribute to the iconoclast emperors: those images that help can stay, those that cause trouble should go.

In contrast, the later, holistic interiors aspired to present a complete picture of another world. The result could tend towards paradox, a kind of alienation through immersion. On the one hand, the saints are irresistibly present: they can be kissed and honored like beloved familiars.\textsuperscript{107} On the other hand, they are undeniably absent, part of another world, complete in itself, which is emphatically not our own.\textsuperscript{108} One senses affectively that the saints are present, while recognizing intellectually that they are not. This experience is produced by the unified aesthetic of the interior, where architecture works in concert with figural design to establish an intimate relationship between viewer and image, while simultaneously preserving the image’s status as image, “without any admixture of earthly realism.”\textsuperscript{109} “The holistic interiors foreground the mediating function, only to withdraw it. An eternal dialectic of presence and absence replaces the experience of a slight remove that can be closed through hard work.

\textsuperscript{103} Ousterhout 1996, 28.
\textsuperscript{104} Demus 1955, 30.
\textsuperscript{105} Demus 1955, 4; emphasis added. This aspect of Demus’s argument is best understood in dialogue with Riegl’s concept of exterior unity (or external coherence): Nelson 2000, 158.
\textsuperscript{106} Demus 1955, 5. This line of thought may be expanded through the discussion of the “positional meaning” of images after Iconoclasm in Elsner 1988.
\textsuperscript{107} Mathews 1988, 12–14 (especially at 14: “one was supposed to fall in love with these saints”); cf. Mathews 1990.
\textsuperscript{108} Barber 1998, especially at 14: “the church is not Heaven, only a spectacle of Heaven.”
\textsuperscript{109} Demus 1955, 33–34.
V. Politics

In the eighth and ninth centuries, “images down low” did not always do what the letter of Michael and Theophilos claims they did, namely, serve as proxies for the holy figures depicted. They were equally, perhaps primarily, salutary exempla and objects of imitation. However, as a new theological and aesthetic conception of the church building emerged in the ninth century, images down low became the objects of pious desire described by the letter, but framed so as to defer consummation. The ninth-century texts both reflected an archaeological state of affairs and participated in a conceptual shift with consequences for the normative relations between architecture, images, and viewers.

One might explain that state of affairs, the growing intimacy between images and viewers of the early medieval interiors, by invoking a variety of narratives (an age of anxiety, pagan survivals, a popular tendency towards idolatry), but it might not require much explanation. Perhaps images and viewers simply tend towards each other when left to their own devices. In the words of the Tuscan proverb, “with saints in the church, and with gluttons in the tavern”: what else would we expect to find there?\

More puzzling is the intervention represented by the ninth-century texts. Here an apparent contradiction between the Scriptor Incertus and the letter of Michael and Theophilos is of help. Both texts invoke concepts of “the people” (ο λαος, laici). However, in the Scriptor Incertus, Leo states that the people are opposed to (“scandalized by”) the images, while the letter of Michael and Theophilos claims that popular affection for images has led to abuses that they, as orthodox emperors, need to control.

The contradiction can be resolved so long as we do not expect the documents to provide an accurate picture of popular practice. The “Scriptor Incertus” is meant to discredit Leo, and the letter of Michael and Theophilos is meant to present the emperors of the east to their colleagues in the west as being in control, both of the revolt of Thomas, and of the dispute about images. Both texts assume an ideal distance between emperors and “the people.” In the Scriptor Incertus, Leo breaches this distance by bowing to popular pressure, just as he urges Nikephoros to “make a compromise with the people.” In contrast, Michael and Theophilos communicate their maintenance of distance to the Frankish court. The distance between images and viewers became an issue together with the distance between emperors and people.

Let us then return once more to the frieze of Santa Maria Antiqua (figs. 1–2), and the comparison to the earlier standing arrays (e.g. fig. 3). In the frieze the earlier mediated relationship between Christ and the saints has been annulled through the removal of the intercessory figures of Peter and Paul, and the entire group has been brought into closer proximity to the viewer, as models for imitation. The distance between viewer and saint has contracted, and to overcome it is no longer a question of intercession (a higher-ranking figure who intervenes to carry along a message), but of the hard work of imitation (“imitating the sweat of his labors,” in Theodore’s words). So too for the poems of Theodore, in which the distance between the community of saints and

110 “… ne la chiesa / coi santi, e in taverna coi ghiottoni.” Inferno XXII, 14–15.
111 Iadevaia 1987, 62; Werminghoff 1908, 478.
the Christian community is collapsed. The early medieval friezes modeled a type of community in which bonds were formed through aspirational mimesis, in contrast to those communities in which hierarchy is maintained through arbitrary distance.

In this sense, even as the “defenders of images” triumphed in 843, so too did the emperors. The imperial effort to re-establish distance through removal of “images down low” failed, but its rejection in theological discourse was bound up with a rejection of the fragmented conception of church interiors that had permitted local, immediate encounters between people and images. In place of the intimate encounters between layperson and role model that were possible in the earlier monuments arose a totality within which the visitor can only be a temporary interloper.112

To be sure, people in later Byzantine centuries discovered ample strategies for making “heaven on earth” answer more directly to earthly needs, ranging from the display of portable icons, through directed attention to specific images on appropriate occasions, and up to the use of church interiors for feasting and sleeping.113 At the same time, efforts to define and regulate proper relations between viewers and images did not end with the “era of Iconoclasm.” Arguments that began in the eighth and (especially) ninth centuries continued to develop in the eleventh and beyond.114 The field is vast, and this is not the place to survey it. But it would not be appropriate to end this account with exile from heaven. For by producing a monumental and pervasive fiction of distance, the holistic conception ultimately opened a new space for the day-to-day exercise of proximity. The more fully developed systems (theological, aesthetic, architectural) that shaped the Middle Byzantine church interior served as so many alibis, allowing images and people to settle once more into the background, pursuing their entelechies until some new force intervened.

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112 “The fact that the frontal figures surround the room on all sides makes the empty space in the middle seem their real domain.” Demus 1955, 44; emphasis added.


114 Barber 2007.
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Fig. 1: Decoration of the left aisle of Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome
(after the watercolor reproduced by Grüneisen 1911, Pl. IC. XXI-A)

Fig. 2: View from the peristyle court to the left aisle and presbyterium of Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome
(after the photograph reproduced by Grüneisen 1911, 108 fig. 82)
Fig. 3: Apse mosaic of Santi Cosma e Damiano, Rome (after the watercolor reproduced by Wilpert 1916, Taf. 102)

Fig. 4: Decoration of the Chapel of the Physicians, Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome (after the watercolor reproduced by Wilpert 1916, Taf. 145, 1)
Fig. 5: View of the eastern wall of Cell B (portions of Cell A visible behind), Dayr Apa Jeremiah (after the photograph reproduced by Quibell 1908, Pl. XLV)

Fig. 6: Decoration of the northern wall of Cell A, Dayr Apa Jeremiah (after the photograph reproduced by Quibell 1908, Pl. XLIV)
Fig. 7: Decoration of Room 706, Dayr Apa Jeremiah
(after the photograph reproduced by Quibell 1909, Pl. XI, 3)
Fig. 8: View from the nave to the left colonnade of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome (photograph by the author)

Fig. 9: View from the right aisle to the left colonnade of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome (photograph by the author)