

PAINTING IN ROME IN THE TIME OF PASCHAL I: S. PRASSEDE ALL'ESQUILINO AND S. CECILIA IN TRASTEVERE¹**Giulia Bordi**

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Resum

Il complesso basilicale di S. Prassede, realizzato da Pasquale I (817-824) all'inizio del suo pontificato, conserva uno dei cicli affrescati più importante della città di Roma altomedievale, e che insieme all'architettura e ai mosaici di questa stessa basilica, concorrono a creare un monumento privilegiato per lo studio della produzione artistica di inizio IX secolo. In questa sede proponiamo un primo approccio allo studio di questi affreschi finora poco indagati e una revisione di quanto detto fino ad oggi su un altro complesso legato alla figura di Pasquale I, S. Cecilia in Trastevere, e più precisamente sulla decorazione del suo battistero. Questa ricerca fa parte di un progetto più ambizioso in cui si punta ad approfondire la Roma di Pasquale I in occasione del 12° centenario dell'insediamento del pontefice.

Paraules clau: Santa Prassede, Santa Cecilia, Pasquale I, Mosaico, Affreschi, Roma, Pontefice, Martiri

Abstract

The basilical complex of S. Prassede, commissioned by Paschal I (817-824) at the beginning of his papacy, houses one of the most important frescoes cycles of early medieval Rome, which, together with the architecture and mosaics of this same basilica, turn it into a privileged monument for the study of the artistic production of the early ninth century. This paper proposes a first approach to these so far barely explored frescoes, and a state-of-the-art review of another complex linked to Paschal I, S. Cecilia in Trastevere, and more specifically of the decoration of its baptistery. This research is part of a more ambitious project aimed at deepening our understanding of Rome in times of Paschal I on the occasion of the 1200th anniversary of his elevation as pope.

Paraules clau: Santa Prassede, Santa Cecilia, Paschal I, Mosaic, Affreschi, Rome, Pontiff, Martyrs

¹ Although the considerations from which this article is born are the shared fruit of the three authors, each of us is directly responsible for a section. C. Mancho addressed the topic, *The frescoes of Santa Prassede, status quæstionis and remaining problems*; V. Valentini produced the graphic reconstruction of the west transept of Santa Prassede; and G. Bordi authored the section entitled *Paschal I and the baptistery of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere*.

The most complete decorative ensemble of the ninth century preserved in Rome is undoubtedly that of Santa Prassede. According to the information provided by the *Liber Pontificalis*, the Basilica of Paschal I (817-824) was built anew between 817 and 819 to replace an old *titulus* of which, despite the efforts, no trace has been found.² Leaving aside the moveable elements and focusing our attention on wall decorations, the building still displays the mosaics of the apse, the apsidal arch, the triumphal arch, and the intrados of the north window of the façade, as well as the entire chapel of San Zenone,³ a significant part—approximately a fifth—of the frescos of the west transept, part of the decoration of the west side nave, and parts of the pavement, re-used in the presbyterial area (FINOCCHIO 2010).⁴

We can therefore argue that Santa Prassede is a sort of litmus paper of Roman pictorial reality at the beginning of the ninth century. No other complex, in fact, provides us with such solid points to understand the latitude of a pontifical artistic commission. Not only is a significant part of the decorative interventions still extant—mostly mosaics—but the promoter of the works and their chronology are also known.

But what could these data—because this is data—contribute to a nineteenth-century conception of art history? Nothing, and consequently the whole ensemble was neglected, so that the outstanding frescoes have remained practically unexplored until today. Art historians have focused on mosaics, the artistic masterpiece, the ‘work of art’ that can withstand the comparison with ‘other works of art’.⁵ What interest could the frescos of Santa Prassede—considered as archaeological evidence, a two-dimensional ruin—hold for the outline of ‘the Taste’ of an era? Unfortunately, this approach has not only affected Santa Prassede, but its case draws attention to

² These efforts were mainly due to B. M. APOLLONJ-GHETTI (1961) and A. MUÑOZ (1918). The problem with the position of the ancient *titulus* is due to the hypothesis that it was either a basilica—a possibility arising from the reports of a restoration carried out under Hadrian I—or an underground structure with respect to the Paschalian basilica, in a similar relationship as the one established between the *titulus equitii* and the church of Santi Martino e Silvestro ai Monti, about two hundred metres from Santa Prassede as the crow flies. As we have suggested elsewhere (see MANCHO 2016) both the topography of the Esquiline at the site of Santa Prassede, and the archaeological evidence found by Apollonj-Ghetti and Muñoz, lead us to think of a *titulus* inside an *insula*, probably underground, in a situation similar to that of the chapel still visible today in the *insula* under Santa Maria in Aracoeli. Logically, such a structure would have been demolished by the construction of the current basilica. Of that *titulus*, therefore, only the name of the road that led there would be extant in the current Via di Santa Prassede.

³ The literature on the mosaics of the presbytery and the chapel of San Zenone is rather abundant; since they are not the subject of this article, on this point we refer to the entry “Santa Prassede” by S. PENNESI (2006). As regards the orientation of the building, Santa Prassede has the apse to the north, and consequently the arm of the transept in question here is on the west side.

⁴ It is unclear what can lie hidden beneath the various later decorations, particularly in the transept and central nave.

⁵ It is perhaps significant that the first reference to these mosaics can already be found in G. Vasari’s *Vite* (1986 [1550]: 132): “Lauorarono ancora le chiese nuoue di Roma di musaico alla Greca, com’a Santa Prassedia la Tribuna.” They also drew the attention of authors such as F. GREGOROVIVS 1973[1903]: I, 543-545 who, among other things, already mentioned some of the key points for the analysis of these mosaics, starting with the model of Santi Cosma e Damiano (although the definitive edition of the first volume was published in 1903, the following passage shows no significant changes compared to the first version published in 1870: 55-57).

how wrong it is, given that mosaic and painting surely have much more to say together than what they can reveal separately.

This paper has two main objectives: on the one hand, addressing the aspects that will allow us to further our knowledge of the less explored part of this dataset, that is, the frescoes; on the other, to use Santa Prassede as a case study around which to outline a profile of Roman painting between the late eighth century and the first half of the ninth, starting from the re-examination of the wall paintings preserved in the baptistery of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere.

The frescoes of Santa Prassede, *status questionis* and remaining problems

To the best of our knowledge, the first reference to the frescoes in the transept of Santa Prassede was made by CANCELLIERI (1806: 136):

In this bell tower, on the interior walls on the second floor level, there are some ancient paintings that depict the events of the story of Saint Agnes. It is a disgrace, that they find themselves largely damaged: nonetheless there are still many complete figures, and various letters at the end of the cornices describe some facts of her life.⁶

The author, who was actually studying the bell tower, took his cue from the information contained in the *Liber Pontificalis* and identified the space as an oratory of Saint Agnes;⁷ as a consequence, he associated this martyr with the fragmented scenes of the frescoes, in spite of the fact that the “various letters (...) describing some facts” made no actual reference to the saint.

Fifty years later, the existence of this space and its frescoes was brought to the attention of the Commission of Sacred Archaeology. The minutes of the fifth session of 1858 read,

Then Monsignor [Domenico] Bartolini said that with great pleasure he had finally found in the bell tower of the Church of Santa Prassede the Oratory of San Pasquale in honour of Saint Agnes Virgin and Martyr and that he had seen the paintings there. However, since said paintings had been darkened due by time and filth and they were in a rather elevated place he was unable to see them properly. He therefore asked the commission to build a small gangway and to send its painter Silvestro Bossi with an injunction to clean them, and then begged the Church branch [of the Commission] to access the place to examine them. The secretary was (...) of the execution of the claim submitted by Monsignor [Domenico] Bartolini.⁸

⁶ “In questo *Campanile*, sopra i Muri dell’Interno, vi sono al secondo Piano, alcune *Pitture antichissime*, rappresentanti i *Fatti dell’Istoria di S. Agnese*. È una disgrazia, ch’esse trovinsi in gran parte scancellate: nulladimeno vi sono ancora molte *Figure intiere*, e nel fine delle *Cornici* vi sono varie Lettere, che spigano alcuni fatti della sua vita.”

⁷ “Hic benignissimus præsul fecit in iamdicto monasterium oratorium beatæ Agnetis Christi martyris, mire pulcritudinis exornatum.”, LP. II: 55, benché lui citi il testo *princeps* (Anastasius 1602: 220).

⁸ “Quindi monsignor [Domenico] Bartolini avvertiva, che con sommo piacere avea alla fine trovato nel Campanile della Chiesa di Santa Prassede l’Oratorio di San Pasquale in onore di Santa Agnese Vergine e Martire e che ivi avea vedute delle pitture: ma siccome affermava che le medesime erano per gli anni e per la sozzura oscurate e in un luogo piuttosto elevato non avea potuto bene considerarle. Dimandava perciò che la commissione fattovi

The fact that more than fifty years had passed since the first discovery is not surprising given the general lack of interest that the mural painting of this period aroused at the time.⁹ However, this document is still important, for it bears witness to the moment when these frescoes entered the official circuit, and also confirms, if not the first restoration project, the first instance of concern for their state of preservation.

The first analysis of the structure and frescos, proposed by Alexander Nesbitt, was conducted only a few years later (1866:185-186, Plate XII, 3, p. 198). First of all, the author identified part of the transept in the bell tower. The attention he paid to decoration, both on an iconographic and on a formal level, led him to an initial attempt to identify the scenes, albeit fairly unsuccessfully. Suffice it to recall that among the scenes he identified, for example, the Wedding at Cana, concluding that “the subjects seem to be either biblical or legendary.” It is nevertheless noteworthy that Nesbitt never gave in to the temptation of connecting the paintings to the oratory of Saint Agnes, which evinces a critical reflection on the monument. Through the stylistic analysis of the frescoes, he then went on to suggest their contemporaneity with the building, dating them to 817; and, more importantly, he linked their creation to that of the mosaics:

The soffits of the windows show traces of garlands of fruit and flowers, much resembling those in mosaic in the soffits of the triumphal arch and of the apse of this church. These paintings would seem to belong to the period of the building of the church a. d. 817; the style is stiff and dry, and very closely resembles that of the mosaics in the same church.

These conclusions are by no means trivial. In the previous documents, the mosaics were never mentioned and if any connection with Paschal I was at all established, it was due to the misidentification with the oratory of Saint Agnes. In contrast, Nesbitt instinctively started from the comparison with the mosaics and therefore recognized the concealed transept of the church of Paschal I in the structure, a conclusion that was far from evident at the time.

Shortly afterwards, Leo Nardoni (1870: 6-7), unaware of the previous works by Cancellieri and Nesbitt, presented his discovery of an Oratory of Santa Agnese—at that point ‘discovered’ for the third time—with great enthusiasm.¹⁰ His account of the frescoes depicting the “events of the

erigere un piccolo ponte rispedito il suo pittore Silvestro Bossi con l’ingiunzione di nettarle, e quindi pregava che la sezione-Chiese vi accedesse per esaminarle. Il segretario fu incom(...) dell’esecuzione della dimanda fatta da monsignor [Domenico] Bartolini.” Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology (hereinafter, PCAS), Archivio Storico Documenti, Verbali delle Sedute, C. di A.S. Processi Verbali vol. I, year 7, p. 304, Reg. ASD/9.

⁹ Regarding the restoration of these decorations, the only documented instances so far are this report and the intervention led by L. Mortari (1969) in the late 1960s. In the account of the latter, however, it is clear that another intervention was also carried out in the twentieth century.

¹⁰ The announcement of his ‘discovery’, which he sent to the PCAS, seems almost comical in this sense: “Third, a letter dated 9 December 1868 was read, accompanied by a sheet of paper about an ancient oratory of Santa Agnese in Monasterio. It was sent by Mr. Leone Nardoni, who asked the Secretary to communicate this discovery, or monument, existing in the Church of Santa Prassede to the Commission so that they would look after and take an interest in it. Included in the acts.” (2nd Session, held on Thursday, 5 March 1869 at 10:30 a. m.). PCAS, vol. II, year 18, p. 37, Reg. ASD/10.

legend of Saint Agnes” would not deserve any attention were it not for an interesting detail in the text. Specifically, it is a statement of the author that went unnoticed: “Al di sopra degli afreschi si veggono alcuni residui di figure in mosaico, e delle finestre con entro ancora qualche avanzo degli speculari” (Above the frescoes there are some traces of mosaic figures, and windows with some remnants of glass tiles). It must be noted that the most attentive author up to that moment, A. Nesbitt, had said nothing about this, although at the same time it should also be pointed out that Nardoni’s text was much more concise. At any rate, it seems difficult to confuse frescoes and mosaics, and the author clearly describes the presence of “figure in mosaico” above the frescoes. Moreover, he identified the windows and “qualche avanzo degli speculari” that are still extant, which proves the accuracy of such identification. Unfortunately, later interventions have lowered the ceiling level to the upper limit of the windows; in consequence, nowadays it is not possible to verify whether there could be some mosaic decorations above the frescoes.

The greatest advances in the comprehension of these paintings were brought about by the text of M. Armellini (1887:558-560), the first one to carry out a direct and in-depth analysis of them. The author mostly based his work rather on the interpretation of inscriptions than on the images. This is apparent in the fact that he linked the texts to the panels above them as if they were captions,

... arranged in three registers, one above the other, and **under each painting** there is a red band, where statements concerning the depicted subjects are written in white letters.¹¹

This was actually incorrect because the texts relate to the images below them. In spite of this, Armellini must be credited with having transcribed the inscriptions for the first time, thus guaranteeing their preservation.

Paradoxically, Josef Wilpert, whose watercoloured plates of the frescoes of Santa Prassede remain one of the cornerstones for their understanding, wrote very little about the matter. This author devoted an article to them, published in 1908 (WILPERT 1908: 179-180), in which he merely made a series of clarifications and corrections to the reading of the inscriptions proposed by Armellini. Subsequently, in the *Die Römische Mosaiken und Malereien*, where the above mentioned plates appeared, Wilpert mentions the frescoes only as regards their stylistic comparison with those of Saints Cyricus and Julitta in Santa Maria Antiqua (WILPERT 1916: II, 651). According to this text, therefore, one is led to think that, in the economy of his monumental undertaking, Wilpert paid little attention to the paintings of Santa Prassede either for a lack of interest or, more probably, because he lacked the necessary time to further deepen his knowledge. However, the three beautiful plates, whose originals are now kept at the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology (Ibid.: IV, 202-204), are the result of an extremely complex and expensive process of production, and bear witness to how important the documentation of these frescoes was for Wilpert (Fig.

¹¹ “(...) disposti a tre ordini, gli uni sopra gli altri, e **sotto ciascun quadro** corre una fascia rossa, ove con lettere bianche sono scritte le cose dichiarative dei soggetti in essi espressi.” This highly successful work had at least three editions. As far as the frescoes of Santa Prassede are concerned, the later editions (1891 and 1942) did not add anything to what was already mentioned in the first one. Emphasis by the author.

7-9).¹² There is no doubt that whereas we are indebted to Armellini for the preservation of the inscriptions accompanying the frescoes, we owe to Wilpert the clearest image of the latter, produced between 1905 and 1910.

Surprisingly, from this moment onwards—that is, from the moment the frescoes could have been more widely known and, above all, more thoroughly studied—and until the 1990s, silence fell over them like a heavy blanket. Of course, several authors mentioned their existence. Pietro Toesca, the father of Italian art history, after devoting about seven pages to the mosaics of Paschal I referred to our frescoes identifying them as “the paintings in the sacristy of Santa Prassede,” and closed the matter with the following comment, “these are only humble works, not entirely homogeneous and of uncertain dating” (TOESCA 1907: 402–3). This trenchant judgment also applied to a large part of Roman painting of the ninth and tenth centuries, mentioned in the same paragraph.

It is indeed astonishing that the solid foundations laid by the work of A. Nesbitt, M. Armellini, and J. Wilpert did not stimulate, even at the time of their appearance, the interest to further study these paintings. The impressive work of G. Matthiæ (MATTHIÆ 1987[1965]: 173-195) confirms that in the 1960s they were still considered little more than ‘extras’ on the scene of Roman medieval art:

Mosaic production not only took over the most important commissions but also relegated mural painting—always linked to more modest promoters and purposes—to a lower rank, depriving it of the possibility of rapid adaptation to the new achievements and stylistic rigorism that was the immediate reflection of the great events of the time. Fresco painting, at least according to the extant works, dragged out a struggling existence and showed the ways established by mosaic production with considerable delay (Ibid.: 173).¹³

It is always difficult, if not impossible, to escape the historiographical tendencies that mark our journey as historians; moreover, we cannot fail to admit that in the History of Art the necessary balance between history and art has frequently been ignored, to the detriment of works such as the frescoes of Santa Prassede, considered to be of “lower rank.” It is in fact unthinkable to imagine a historian giving up on studying a document because it is written with low quality ink or has a faulty syntax. Here we see how the weight of a certain concept of art led Matthiæ to forget about ‘history’. According to this paradigm, Matthiæ’s analysis of the frescoes of Santa Prassede remained confined to a purely qualitative comparison with the mosaics of the same basilica, marking the frescoes as a production of much lower quality made by “less skilled painters.”

¹² We will not dwell here on Josef Wilpert’s fascinating process for the production of watercoloured photographs, for which we refer to G. Bordi’s recent studies (BORDI 2009a; BORDI 2009b: 458).

¹³ “Alla pittura murale, sempre legata a committenti o ad intenti più modesti, la produzione musiva non solo sottrasse le ordinazioni più importanti ma, avendola relegata in un rango minore, le tolse anche la possibilità di un rapido adeguamento alle nuove conquiste e a quel rigorismo stilistico che era il riflesso immediato dei grandi avvenimenti del tempo. La pittura in affresco, almeno stando alle opere che ci sono conservate, trascinò una esistenza stentata e risenti con notevole ritardo dei modi invalsi in quella musiva.”

Their intrinsic value is totally denied and, alongside the mosaics, they can only be explained by some kind of incapacity, either executive, related to their promoters, or economic. Within this framework there is no room for other interpretations related to choice, function, or adaptation to space requirements. Consequently,

... while mosaic artists had the mission of providing the act [the translation of the relics by Paschal I] with the appearance of a theophany, the fresco painters were responsible for the humblest aspect of the historical episodes related to the martyrdom of the blessed, and they repeated the scenes of the saints appearing before the court and their torment with remarkable monotony and little variation. This narration aimed to be historical and edifying, but only succeeded in being sad and boring, almost the medieval foretaste of the dreadful anthology that the Counter-Reformation would place in the perimeter of Santo Stefano rotondo (Ibid.: 174).¹⁴

Although still stuck in stylistic issues, the genius of G. Matthiæ lies in the fact that he was able to grasp the specificity of the cycle of Santa Prassede, even if in a negative way. The group of frescoes in the transept of Santa Prassede is indeed repetitive—hence boring—and probably shares the purpose of the Counter-Reformist programmes that sought in early Christianity, and more precisely in Palaeo-Christian iconography, the foundations of Catholicism that emerged from the Council of Trent.¹⁵

In C. Bertelli's important study (1983), Rome remains trapped in a perfect storm, in which the city assumes the role of spectator of a scene with two major protagonists: Carolingian *renovatio* and Byzantine art. It is interesting that the author included Ravenna in this two-way dialogue, which shifted attention towards a context that is always Byzantine, but clearly Italic and long-standing. The search for mosaic workshops in this context and the news of the restoration carried out by Leo III in Sant' Apollinare in Classe (Ibid.: 79) could have allowed the author to escape that binomial. Instead, his analysis of the Roman situation in the ninth century remained embedded between 'Carolingian Rome' and Byzantine contributions. Thus, from a formal point of view, C. Bertelli claimed that, "The mosaics are also oriental, but they cannot be reconciled with what we identify as Byzantine before and immediately after the iconoclastic silence" (Ibid.: 81); moreover, from the iconographic point of view the 'framework' is Roman:

In order to escape the seduction of mosaics, where gold and enamel convey the sensual fascination of lost riches, it is interesting to compare them with the frescoes in the transept of Santa Prassede, produced by the same masters and once designed to be seen simultaneously. In the frescoes it is easier to grasp the brutality of a discourse simplified to the extreme, utterly immoderate when

¹⁴ "(...) mentre i musivari ebbero il compito di dare al fatto [la traslazione delle reliquie da parte di Pasquale I] un aspetto di teofania, ai frescanti spettò quello più umile degli episodi storici relativi ai martirii di quei beati e con notevole monotonia essi ripeterono, con scarse varianti i momenti del santo dinanzi al giudice e del suo supplizio. È una narrazione che vuol essere storica ed edificante e riesce soltanto triste e noiosa, quasi l'anticipazione medioevale dell'antologia terrificante che la Controriforma collocherà nel perimetro di S. Stefano rotondo."

¹⁵ It is not by coincidence that, despite the transformations it has undergone, Santa Prassede is still extant, and it is no coincidence either that the titular cardinal responsible for this preservation—transformations notwithstanding—was Saint Carlo Borromeo.

it comes to action, and where the late ancient language is completely burned down and has left only the trace of a memory, supported by figurative understanding (Ibid.).¹⁶

As a matter of fact, even if the discourse is more articulated here, it is not that far away from that of Matthiæ.

It was only at the end of the nineties that interest in Santa Prassede was reactivated both with regard to architecture, with the book by M. Caperna (1999), and with regard to the frescoes. In the case of the latter, it is necessary to consider, basically, the degree dissertation of S. Pennesi (1998). Unfortunately, this researcher has not had the opportunity to publish the results of her study, which we believe to be one of the most comprehensive works on the subject to date. Therefore, even if it is not frequent to have to refer to a degree dissertation, in practice this is the only monographic study devoted to this pictorial ensemble. Pennesi mainly resolves the relationship between inscriptions and decoration, and consequently the identification of the represented subjects. From this point of view, it is a flawless job. The author raises the question of the relationship between mosaics and frescoes and their inclusion in the pictorial context of the Rome of that time, both on a formal and on an iconographic level.¹⁷

However, in light of current knowledge, Pennesi's research understandably presents two main problems. The first one is the fact that it was conducted in parallel to the elaboration of the text of M. Caperna (1999) on the architecture of the building, which, therefore, she could not take into consideration, and which led her to exclusively rely on the work of R. Krautheimer and S. Corbett (1971). The second issue is conceptual: the 'foundations' of Pennesi's analysis are partially outdated. In order to outline the Paschalian intervention, the author adopts the *Profilo* of ninth-century Rome published by R. Krautheimer (1981). As we have had occasion to underline elsewhere (MANCHO 2011), this text, although still basic, now shows a series of cracks in the discourse, especially with regard to the issue of the 'Carolingian Rome'.

The *status quaestionis* we have just outlined, allows us to get an idea of what has been achieved concerning the paintings of Santa Prassede and what remains to be explored at the beginning of 2017.¹⁸ Above all, it is clear that the study of these frescoes is a complex problem to be tackled at two different levels. The first one must place the monument that the frescoes were meant to

¹⁶ "È interessante, per sottrarsi alla seduzione del mosaico, dove l'oro e lo smalto trasmettono un sensuoso fascino di ricchezze perdute, confrontare i mosaici con gli affreschi nel transetto, di Santa Prassede, dovuti agli stessi maestri e che un tempo dovevano essere visti simultaneamente. Negli affreschi cogliamo meglio la brutalità d'un discorso semplificato all'estremo, tutto immedesimato nell'azione e dove il linguaggio tardo antico è completamente bruciato ed ha lasciato soltanto tracce mnemoniche, appoggi alla comprensione figurativa."

¹⁷ An article published the following year (ZACCAGNINI 1999) had no interest other than to act as a contrast to the corrections made by J. Wilpert (1908) to M. Armellini's proposal. However, the author had clearly not read Wilpert's text and therefore carries out the same analysis of Armellini's work but ninety years later.

¹⁸ Paradoxically, more or less recent works dealing with the decoration of Santa Prassede either contribute nothing (see GOODSON 2010:235-241, which is based in ZACCAGNINI 1999) or continue to dismember the ensemble by focusing on a single piece of the puzzle (THUNØ 2014).

decorate at the very centre. No study has ever addressed the decoration of Santa Prassede as part of a single large project. It is necessary to underline that this is the only preserved Paschalian complex that allows such an exercise. We are now far from the time when architecture, alone and under certain conditions, was sufficient to explain or justify the ‘Carolingian *renovatio*’, mosaics, and the Byzantine contrast in plastic arts, as well as to ignore paintings because they were not perfectly in tune with mosaics. The project of Santa Prassede was conceived as a whole, and was led by the pontiff, in the same way that, *mutatis mutandis*, the MAXXI of Rome in its entirety is a project by Zaha-Hadid and nobody would ever think of speaking of a ‘Roman workshop’ to refer to the bricklayers who laid the resin floors of the museum.

For this reason, the second level of analysis must put the city at the centre. The creation of a basilica like Santa Prassede, with all its distinctive features, was only possible in Rome at the end of the second decade of the ninth century; neither sooner nor later. There is no doubt that in conceiving Santa Prassede, Paschal I had in mind the city, a city of Rome that could either serve his projects or not (MANCHO 2016). However, this too general reading does not satisfy us any more. The question to which we must find precise answers also concerns the wall decorations of the building.¹⁹

These are partially preserved in a part of the ancient west transept that was transformed into a bell tower in the second half of the thirteenth century (Fig. 1-2).²⁰ The transformation involved the construction of a vertical wall that still today separates the transept from the presbytery. The passage between the lateral nave and the transept, framed by a column with a beautiful architrave, was walled up. Thus, the tower was built inside the pre-existing structures with the addition of a floor above the top of the transept for the placement of the bells; a space that is still extant. Today, this bell tower has a first level in which the walls have been completely scraped down and where, therefore, no traces of plaster remain. A wrought-iron spiral staircase in the north-west corner of the transept leads to a first floor, where the surviving frescoes coexist with the organ (Fig. 3). This floor is located at the level of the side *coretto* and above the windows of the transept a ceiling marks the second floor, only accessible from the outside (Fig. 11).

Today, the opening cut into the north and south walls of the transept to support the eastern closing wall disrupts the flow of the frescoes towards the presbytery. However, some frescoes, which, we suppose, would reach the level of this decoration, could still survive underneath the modern fake marble *crustae* that close the mosaic decoration of the apsidal arch.²¹

¹⁹ There is no doubt that Goodson’s book (2010) did not answer the question even though it provided an important amount of materials that simplify the search in this direction.

²⁰ From the calculations made by V. Valentini for the hypothetical reconstruction, the total surface area that could have been painted in Paschal I’s project was 303m²; the extant frescoes only occupy 52.73m², that is, 17.4% of the total west transept.

²¹ Also on a purely physical level, during our last visit to Sta. Prassede, on the occasion of the seminar “Grata più delle Stelle” (Roma-La Sapienza and Roma Tre), we had the opportunity to corroborate the conservation problems of the frescoes between the second and third register of the south-west corner. The first visual analyses suggested the need for a precautionary intervention that we hope will be carried out shortly.

The analysis of the frescoes, one of the 'pieces' of the decoration of Santa Prassede, is fundamental to understand the complex, and to do so it is necessary to start from the 'material' reality of what is still extant: a sixth of the decoration of the west arm of the transept. Already in the watercoloured photograph published by Wilpert in 1916 (Fig. 7-9) it was possible to see that only five registers of the ornamentation that once covered the walls of the west transept had partially survived.

The fall of the plaster to the left of the first scene of the first register provides us with precious information because it highlights the flat arch above the architrave resting on the column that frames the passage between the west side nave and the transept. This important detail allows us to affirm that there were no other scenes before this one, and that therefore the narration started here.

The scenes preserved today are twenty-one, most of which have been identified (PENNESI 1998: 74-103) (Fig. 10).

There is no doubt that, despite the fall of part of the pictorial surface, the frescoes in Register 1 depict a cycle dedicated to Saints Praxedes and Pudentiana (Fig. 10 1, a). In Register 2, there are ten extant scenes, and the episodes narrated refer to Saints Basilissa (Fig. 10 2, a), Julian and Celsus (Fig. 10 2, b), Marcionilla, Anthony (Fig. 10 2, c) and the neophyte Anastasius, all of them martyrs of Antinopolis who died during the persecutions of Diocletian and Maximian. In Register 3, there are also ten surviving scenes depicting Claudius and his sons Jason and Maurus plus seventy soldiers (Fig. 10 3, a; 4-5), Chrysantus and Daria (Fig. 10 3, b; 6) martyred under the persecutions of Numerian (283-4). The identification of the scenes listed above is the result of the correspondence between painted inscriptions and the iconographic interpretation of the paintings themselves, but it should be noted that the painted surface visible *in situ* and Wilpert's plates attest to the existence of a greater number of scenes.

In the first register there are vestiges of at least four other scenes, in none of which there is any trace of inscriptions left (Fig. 10 1, a, 3,7-9), but by applying the scheme of Registers 2 and 3, this number could increase to at least nine. In Register 4, so far unanalysed, by combining the data of Wilpert's photographs, the extant fragments, and the space available between the four windows, we could count, at least, seven other scenes and the same would also work for the fifth register, where some traces left can likely be identified as an inscription (Fig. 13). Thus, in the area that is now visible, the total number of scenes would amount to about forty-three. Almost half of these can be identified on the basis of preserved inscriptions. Assuming a similar structure in the eastern transept, the total would reach eighty-six scenes without considering the fact that we do not know the number of scenes that were depicted between the preserved area and the apsidal mosaic.

The analysis of the available data allows us to go even further. In the reconstruction that we have developed with Valeria Valentini we can see, in the upper part, that the maximum height inside the transept allows us to hypothesize the existence of a sixth register with the same height as the

others and, therefore, capable of containing at least ten other martyrdom scenes, if the previous scheme were to apply. There is a space of about one metre left at the end of the wall where we can assume the presence of a decorative band.²² The problem remains in the decoration of the almost five metres existing between the base of the first narrative register and the floor of the basilica. One might suppose that it was a painted drapery, but there are no known cases of draperies of about five metres high. However, there are several early medieval Roman complexes where the register consisting of hagiographic stories is closed in its lower part by a series of saints under which a draped design is depicted.²³ The space available in the case of Santa Prassede would therefore allow us to imagine a seventh register that could accommodate such a series and under which there would still be a space of 2.40 metres high that could accommodate a painted drapery. As we will show below, perhaps it is not by chance that these are also the dimensions of the draped design in the baptistery of Santa Cecilia.

The argument supporting the presence of such a pattern in the decoration of the transept is that the first register with martyrs' scenes features the beginning of the story of Praxedes and Pudentiana (Fig. 10 1, a). Since the basilica is dedicated to Praxedes it would seem strange to find a register dedicated to other martyrs under her legend. Their position would then become preferential, relegating the titular saint to a secondary role. That is why we rejected the idea of other registers below the first one. However, a parade of martyrs would instead serve not only to include many more saints than those depicted in the scenes above, but also to provide an excellent and logical connection with the triumphant martyrs of the arch, which is in fact a triumphal arch.²⁴ According to this hypothesis, the number of scenes would amount to about 106 for the whole transept, to which the hieratic figures of the parade of martyrs should also be added.

In short, therefore, the pictorial decoration in the transept of Santa Prassede was probably organized starting from a first level depicting drapery, a second level with a set of martyrs, and six vertically stacked registers featuring scenes of martyrdom. A decorative band in the upper part would have served to unify mosaic and pictorial decorations, while acting as a link between the two sides of the transept (Fig. 12).

In addition to the reconstructive hypothesis, the historiographic logic at the basis of the present work on the Basilica of Santa Prassede turned the famous inscription with the list of martyrs translated from the catacombs (Fig. 14) into an essential reference for the identification of the martyrdom cycles. However, only Maurus, Jason, Chrysantus, Daria, Praxedes, and Pudentiana

²² Evidently, another possibility is that the decorative band stretched out from the window to the top of the wall.

²³ This tripartite pattern can be seen in other Roman wall paintings: in the paintings of the time of Paul I in the left side nave of Santa Maria Antiqua; at Sant'Adriano al Foro, in the paintings—today removed and preserved in the Crypta Balbi National Museum—produced during the papacy of Hadrian I; and on the left wall of the church of Santa Passera alla Magliana (BORDI 2008:147-152). This last example is particularly interesting given that the decoration, with scenes of the life of Saint Praxedes, has been attributed to the time of Paschal I (FALLA 2011).

²⁴ It should be noted that this was the first time in which the main arch leading into the transept from the central nave was thus called (LP. II: 54): “Simili modo et **arcum triumphalem** eisdem metallis mirum in modum perficiens compsit.”

are mentioned in it, that is, only six of the thirteen saints martyred in the identified scenes. The percentage is rather low, and even in the event that it was possible to identify all the scenes and their respective martyrs, there would still be an important group of martyrs who were not mentioned in the inscription but did feature in the frescoes. How can this asymmetry be explained?

On the one hand, it must be acknowledged that the inscription does not contain the names of the 2,300 corpses of martyrs that were supposedly moved from the catacombs; on the other, neither could the frescoes reproduce such a set, despite the extent of the pictorial surface that we have hypothesized above. Therefore, the cycles of the transept probably respond to an internal logic that should be clarified. In fact, it is already remarkable that all the preserved scenes belong only to five hagiographic legends, namely, to the cycles of the saints Praxedes, Basilissa, Julian and Celsus, Claudius and Hilaria, and Chrysantus and Daria. The question should then be: why this selection?

It should also be considered whether the selection of martyrs depicted there is related to the mosaic complex of the apse and, above all, to the triumphal arch, or, as Pennesi argues, it is instead linked to the use of the transept and its decoration. Understanding which scenes were seen depending on the position of the faithful and the pilgrims in the transept and side naves would probably further our knowledge of this decorative complex. Given the repetitive general scheme of a substantial part of the extant scenes, some morphological deformations of the figures suggest that for some or all of them there were privileged points of view from which to enjoy the images; for instance, upon entering and leaving the ring-shaped crypt. A better comprehension of the presbyteral arrangement, on which A. Ballardini and M. Caperna are now working, will certainly provide us with new data in this sense.

The reconstruction of the west transept proposed here shows that the result had to be really impressive (Fig. 12). Let us picture what visiting the Basilica of Santa Prassede meant for the pilgrims who came to Rome in search of the relics of the martyrs—2,300 corpses gathered at the behest of Paschal I. After passing through the side nave, seeing the Celestial Jerusalem of the mosaics of the triumphal arch and the martyrs with palm branches and white robes in an attitude of expectation similar to their own procession, pilgrims entered the transept where the eyes of about sixty more martyrs stared at them. Above them, six levels of repetitive scenes, difficult to identify but with a complete list of the turments inflicted on the martyrs, prepared the descent into the crypt (where the proximity to the martyrs was probably paroxysmal) to then emerge on the other side and find the same impressive image. Perhaps the feeling of dizziness felt by the faithful was not too different from the one described by Patriarch Photius in his homily for the Theotokos of the Pharos (ca 880) in Constantinople:

It is as if one had entered heaven itself with no one barring the way from any side, and was illuminated by the beauty in all forms shining all around like so many stars, so is one utterly amazed. Thenceforth it seems that everything is in ecstatic motion, and the church itself is circling round (MANGO 1971: 185).

Besides these considerations, the painted inscriptions that accompanied the frescoes are always an interesting subject for reflection, demonstrating how many levels of interpretation such a decorative intervention can contain. These ad hoc texts that are so important to us today, were read only once: while they were being painted.

Since this is the most important complex of martyrs' cycles in early medieval Rome, it is necessary to investigate, as Pennesi very timidly started to do (1998:104-114), the evolution of this type of painting from the chapel of Theodotus in Santa Maria Antiqua (741-752) to Santa Prassede and throughout the ninth century.²⁵

Paschal I and the baptistery of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere

The image of the pictorial decoration of Roman churches between the last quarter of the eighth century and the first half of the ninth century is still quite blurred.²⁶ The study of the paintings of the transept of Santa Prassede, started by C. Mancho in recent years, appears as an important opportunity to tackle the state of the art of the study of painting in Rome between the eighth and ninth centuries. It also represents an attempt at reinterpreting a series of decorative contexts which, due both to their precarious state of conservation and to the almost total loss of links with a specific commission or chronology, have remained hovering between these two centuries, often anchored to the generic dating "end of the eight century - first decades of the ninth century." I refer here, according to a preliminary census, to the paintings on the southern wall of the church of Santa Passera alla Magliana (MANACORDA 1994: 37-39; FALLA-CASTELFRANCI 2011) (Fig. 16), to those of the medieval oratory under the basilica of Santi Giovanni e Paolo al Celio (Fig. 17),²⁷ to the decoration of the north and south walls of the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs in the Roman Forum (Fig. 18),²⁸ to some iconic panels preserved in the atrium of Santa Maria Antiqua (OSBORNE 1987:191-194) (Fig. 19), and to the first layer of paintings of the so-called Chapel H9 in San Lorenzo fuori le mura (BORDI 2007: 213-217) (Fig. 20). To these I also propose to add 'new acquisitions', taking into account some pictorial contexts whose dating should be reconsidered.

The first context from which to launch the research process initiated on the occasion of the anniversary of the pontificate of Paschal I (817-824) is the pictorial decoration preserved in the baptistery of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere; a monumental complex where, as is well known, Paschalian patronage was acclaimed (Fig. 21). Rediscovered during the excavation campaign conducted by Parmegiani and Pronti between 1987 and 1999, according to these scholars the

²⁵ This topic was discussed by Jessop (1999) for the seventh and eighth centuries. The most recent publications on complexes such as Santa Maria in via Lata (BORDI 2015), Santa Maria Antiqua (ANDALORO, BORDI, MORGANTI 2016) and the catacombs of Calepodio (MINASE 2009), among others, should allow us to deepen our knowledge way beyond what was possible only a few years ago.

²⁶ The reference framework for this period is still the one outlined by Maria Andaloro in the update to Matthiae's volume (1965): ANDALORO 1987: 263-295, esp. 282-286.

²⁷ GERMANO DI SAN STANISLAO 1894: 417-440; CURZI 1999: 607-616; RANUCCI 2015: 313-327.

²⁸ ROMANELLI-NORDHAGEN 1964: 63; GULOWSEN 1994: 117; BORDI 2016: 286.

baptistry was established in the first half of the fifth century within a pre-existing complex in whose structures was identified a *domus* dating to the second century BC. In the first half of the second century AD, said *domus* was subsumed into an *insula* whose inner courtyard redefined the perimeter of the existing atrium (PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2007a: 11-25) (Fig. 22). The baptistry occupied the large hall to the north of the *insula*'s courtyard and was to be annexed to the *titulus Sanctae Caeciliae* of which no archaeological evidence has been found (PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2007b: 41-55).

As early as in the fourth century, a circular basin was installed in the middle of the spacious area and a sort of trifore mullioned window was opened on the eastern side. In the same phase, in two other areas of the *insula* located to the east of the hall, a *balneum* was built (PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2007a: 25-33) which, in the following century, would be regarded as the site of the martyrdom of Saint Cecilia (PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2007b: 44). The baptismal font used the pre-existing basin, maintaining the same internal diameter while punctuating the outer hexagonal perimeter by means of concave sides alternating with short straight sections (Ibid.: 45-46). According to the reconstruction proposed by Parmegiani and Pronti, at the beginning of the fifth century the baptismal chamber had the following appearance: in the centre there was a basin lined up with marble slabs both on the inside and on the outside and surmounted by a *tegurio* supported by columns with capitals. On the northern wall there was a large window, on the western one a door; the southern wall was closed, while the eastern wall communicated with the adjacent space through three arches supported by two columns with capitals; the pavement of the chamber was made of marble slabs (Ibid.: 44-50, fig. 68). Again according to the two aforementioned archaeologists, already in the fifth century, the north, west, and east walls of the chamber were embellished with pictorial decorations, today only extant up to a maximum height of about 2.30 m (Ibid.: 47) (Fig. 23). On the northern wall, where the most consistent fragments remain, the decoration is articulated in three registers: the first one is characterized by painted draperies (about 1.40 m high) (Fig. 24), the second register features a high band with a long festoon with leaves and buds (about 38 cm high), and the last register depicts panels (about 172 cm wide) of which only the lower frame and the beginning of the lateral sides are extant. The latter were certainly meant to accommodate narrative scenes (Fig. 24).²⁹

The drapery runs along the entire wall and is decorated with a pattern of three *rotae*—one larger circle flanked by two smaller ones—interspersed with spade-like motifs surrounded up and down by a red, yellow, and red three-striped band. This drapery has a peculiarity that is worth mentioning, for unlike typical draperies, marked by folds in correspondence with the attachment of the fake fabric to the wall through eyelets, it rather seems conceived as a long and heavy unfurled cloth hung in such a way as to remain stretched. Using the terminology of the *Liber Pontificalis*, it could be the representation of a kind of hanging that resembles more a *cortina*³⁰

²⁹ I thank Neda Parmegiani and Alberto Pronti for having 'opened the doors' of the archaeological area of the baptistry of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere for me with great goodwill and generosity.

³⁰ The *cortina* was a heavy silk curtain used in basilicas in large spaces such as the main entrances or triumphal arches: PETRIAGGI 1984: 44; OSBORNE 1992: 315-316.

than a *vela*.³¹ According to Parmegiani and Pronti, the uniqueness of this drapery, for which they claim to have found no equal, is an indication of its antiquity, which according to these two authors can be traced back to the fifth century (PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2007b: 47).

However, several elements suggest the need to move forward the dating of this decoration and to propose a new interpretation of the decorative phases of the baptistery. First of all, the use of painted draperies to decorate the base of a worship building is not documented in Rome before the sixth and seventh centuries; until this date, the space on the walls between the floor and the decorative programmes featured marble *crustae* or painted imitations of these.³² The earliest cases of painted draperies that I know of are those preserved on the southern wall of the lower church of San Crisogono (sixth century)³³ and on the last section of the wall of the eastern nave in Santa Maria Antiqua (mid seventh century).³⁴ Secondly, the baptisteries erected in Rome between the fifth and sixth centuries seem to favour marble *crustae* rather than painted plaster for decoration. Consider, for example, the nearby baptistery of San Crisogono, which dates back to the fifth century. On the west wall, underneath more recent plaster layers, there are still clear traces of the vaulting pipes used as preparation for the original decoration with *incrustationes*.³⁵ That is also the case of San Clemente, which dates back to the thirties of the sixth century and preserves, along the perimeter of the baptismal chamber, the mortar with the imprint of the slabs and some fragments of *crustae* still in place (GUIDOBALDI 1997:459-491, esp. 483-488). It is very likely that the original decoration of the walls of the baptistery of Santa Cecilia was also made of marble *crustae*, which would later have been removed and replaced with a painted plaster decoration. When was the latter introduced?

The comparison with two little-known Roman painted draperies can, in my opinion, help to narrow down the dating of this decoration. These are the *vela* still visible in the medieval oratory within the complex of Roman houses under the basilica of Santi Giovanni e Paolo (Fig. 25) and in the so-called Chapel H9 of San Lorenzo fuori le mura (Fig. 26). The first example is preserved in large fragments on the base of the eastern wall of the oratory (RANUCCI 2015: 318, 320 and Figs. 9-13, Table XVII. a1). This painted drapery features characteristics similar to that of Santa Cecilia, even if the decoration of the cloth is more articulated and presents the alternation of “crossed swords and orbs,” *rotae*, and spade-like motifs. Attributed in the past to the second half

³¹ The *vela* were delicate silk curtains that usually hung between the columns of the main nave or the minor ones: PETRIAGGI 1984: 44; OSBORNE 1992: 315-316.

³² OSBORNE 1992: 311. This essay, devoted to the different types of fabrics and their imitation in painting in early medieval Rome is still an essential reference.

³³ These are the painted draperies on the first register of wall decoration for whose dating Anna Melograni (1990:144-145,158, Figs. 4 and 6) proposed the middle of the sixth century. However, this dating could also be moved forward to the second half of the sixth century or even to the early seventh century.

³⁴ NORDHAGEN 1962: 63; NORDHAGEN 1978:133, Plate LVIIa.

³⁵ The baptistery of San Crisogono, whose foundation is almost contemporary to that of Santa Cecilia, also shared with the latter the water channel network, as evidenced by the inscription on the supply conduit found during excavations: + pet(---) s(an)c(t)oru(m) Chrys(o)g(oni) et Cec(iliae). See PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2007b: 46.

of the eighth century (OSBORNE 1992: 341), or considered part of the decoration added to this wall in the twelfth century (CURZI 1999: 613), it was recently dated by Cristina Ranucci to the end of the eighth century and connected to the rest of the late medieval decoration of this space (RANUCCI 2015: 315, Tables XVII. a1-2).

The *vela* of Chapel H9 are now visible on the north wall through the gaps of the eleventh-century layer painted on top of it, and also in the lower register of the east wall, below the standing figure of Saint Agatha. The second example features a floral pattern with petals and pistils in the centre, but it does not depict the folds of the drapery either. Although the first decoration of this chapel was dated in the past to around the year 700 (KRAUTHEIMER 1952: 21), I have proposed elsewhere to move this dating forward to the end of the eighth century or first half of the ninth century (BORDI 2007: 215-217). Further confirmation of a later production of the paintings of Santa Cecilia comes from the observation of the ornamental band placed between the *vela* and the decoration in panels that adorned the upper part of the wall. The festoon does not display the compositional freedom and naturalism that characterizes the garlands of flowers and fruits of the decorations—especially mosaics—produced in the fifth and sixth centuries, such as the mosaics of the soffit of Santa Maria Maggiore (432-440)³⁶ or that of San Lorenzo fuori le mura (578-590) (TADDEI 2002: 1763-1788). Instead, it is very close to the garland bands preserved in the soffits of two windows of the southern transept of the basilica of Santa Prassede (Fig. 15), but also to the festooned decoration with lilies and leaves that can be seen on the intrados of the central arch of the trifore mullioned window of the same Santa Cecilia in Trastevere (Fig. 27) that Parmegiani and Pronti attributed to the Paschalian phase (2002: 1763-1788).³⁷ Looking into the soffits of the trifore window I believe that the decoration of the first arch, which Parmegiani and Pronti dated to the fifth century (PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2004:91-92; PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2007b: 47, Fig. 63), should also be connected to the pictorial campaign of Paschal I's time (Fig. 28). Even the tangent semi-circles with beaded edges that characterize the second soffit can also be found in the rich decorative repertoire of the pictorial and mosaic decoration of leftover spaces, intrados of windows, and cornices of the Basilica of Santa Prassede.

As for the *vela*, a second example preserved on the southern wall of the baptismal chamber was attributed to the papacy of Paschal I, forming a sort of palimpsest with the one discussed above (PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2007c: 59). The two overlapping draperies are placed on a new brick wall into which three narrow slit windows were cut (Ibid.: Figs. 70-76) (Fig. 29). This wall was built to close a room adjoining the baptismal chamber, and according to the hypothesis of Parmegiani and Pronti, in order to create a relic chamber.³⁸ Two fragments of the second drapery survive on the west side of the wall. Higher than the previous one, this drapery is characterized by narrow drapes crossed by long folds marked with dark blue lines (Fig. 30). Its height does not seem to

³⁶ See, finally, MENNA 2006: 343-346, Figs. 35-36, 46.

³⁷ These two archaeologists in fact affirm that this festoon imitates the ornamental strip placed at the top of the painted drapery of the northern wall of the baptismal chamber. PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2007c: 58-59, Fig. 73.

³⁸ This was is labelled as 79 bis, PARMEGIANI-PRONTI 2007c: 57-58.

match the morphology of the wall, given that, by mentally integrating the part that has now collapsed, it probably reached the height of the three slit windows. In contrast, the earlier drapery is much lower and seems to be designed with respect to the height of the opening of said three windows.

The most recent drapery, considered by Parmegiani and Pronti as a result of the ninth-century interventions in the baptistery (PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2004:119; PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2007c: 59-60), shows some peculiar characteristics such as the presence in the upper section of two confronted animal figures outlined in ochre in a rather cursive fashion, and an ornamental but hardly readable motif delineated in red in the central section that suggest a comparison with the examples of painted draperies documented in Rome between the tenth and eleventh centuries. Among these, Santa Cecilia seems to share some similarities with the fake draperies preserved in the northern apsidiole of the church of Santi Quirico e Giulitta, and belonging to the second layer of decoration (second half of the tenth century)(Fig. 31),³⁹ and with those produced during the mid-eleventh-century phase of Chapel H9 in San Lorenzo fuori le mura (BORDI 2007:217-222) (Fig. 32). Should these comparisons prove convincing, this would imply that the baptistery underwent another decorative intervention at the turn of the eleventh century, before the building was raised another 2.15 m between the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries (PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2007c: 60-63).

As for the decorative campaign of the first phase, were we to accept to move it forward to the years of the pontificate of Paschal I, this intervention could find a valid justification in the setting up of the relic chamber on the southern side of the baptismal area (Ibid.: 57-58, Fig. 76), where the erection of a new wall had to necessarily involve the updating of the decoration of the entire space. Turning then the attention to the patronage of Paschal I in the city of Rome, this new decorative phase of the baptistery would imply a pictorial intervention at the initiative of the pontiff, which would add to the well-known mosaic endeavours in his three basilicas: Santa Prassede, Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, and Santa Maria in Domnica. Such a decorative campaign would be concurrent and complementary to the one carried out in Santa Prassede. In fact, by operating a virtual osmosis between the two contexts, the base of the wall in the baptistery of Santa Cecilia could help reconstruct what is now lost in the west transept of the basilica of the Esquiline. We could then imagine that in Santa Prassede the faithful, after having crossed the semi-circular crypt, went up the flight of stairs and find themselves in front of an elegant painted curtain, closed at the top by a luxuriant classical frieze with leaves, flowers, and fruits, which was in turn surmounted by a parade of the same martyrs whose relics they had just worshipped. Above the parade, along the high walls of the transept, their gaze would then get lost in retracing the savageness of their martyrdoms register after register.⁴⁰

³⁹ See, finally, BORDI 2006: 315-317.

⁴⁰ See the reconstruction of the transept of Santa Prassede above.

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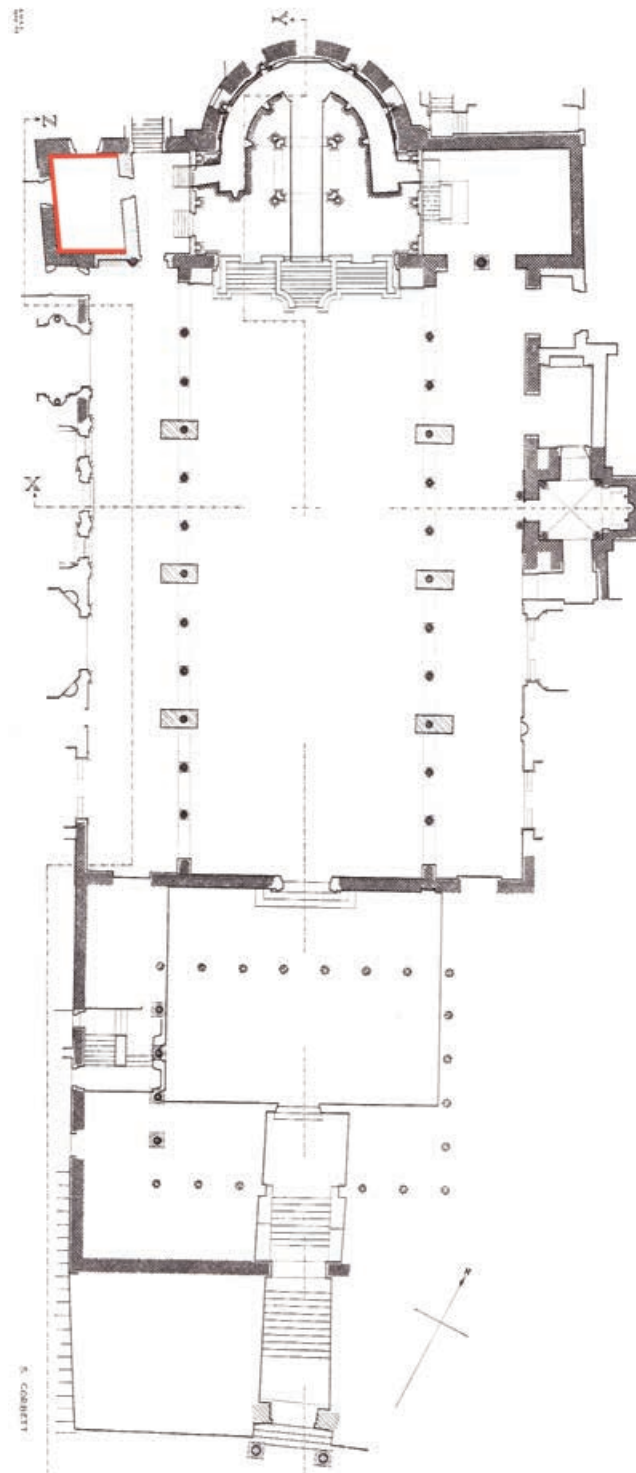


Fig. 1 Floor plan of Santa Prassede according to S. Corbett (1971), and reproduced by R. Wisskirchen (1990, Plate 1). The walls with extant frescoes are marked in red. (ArxiuCMancho).

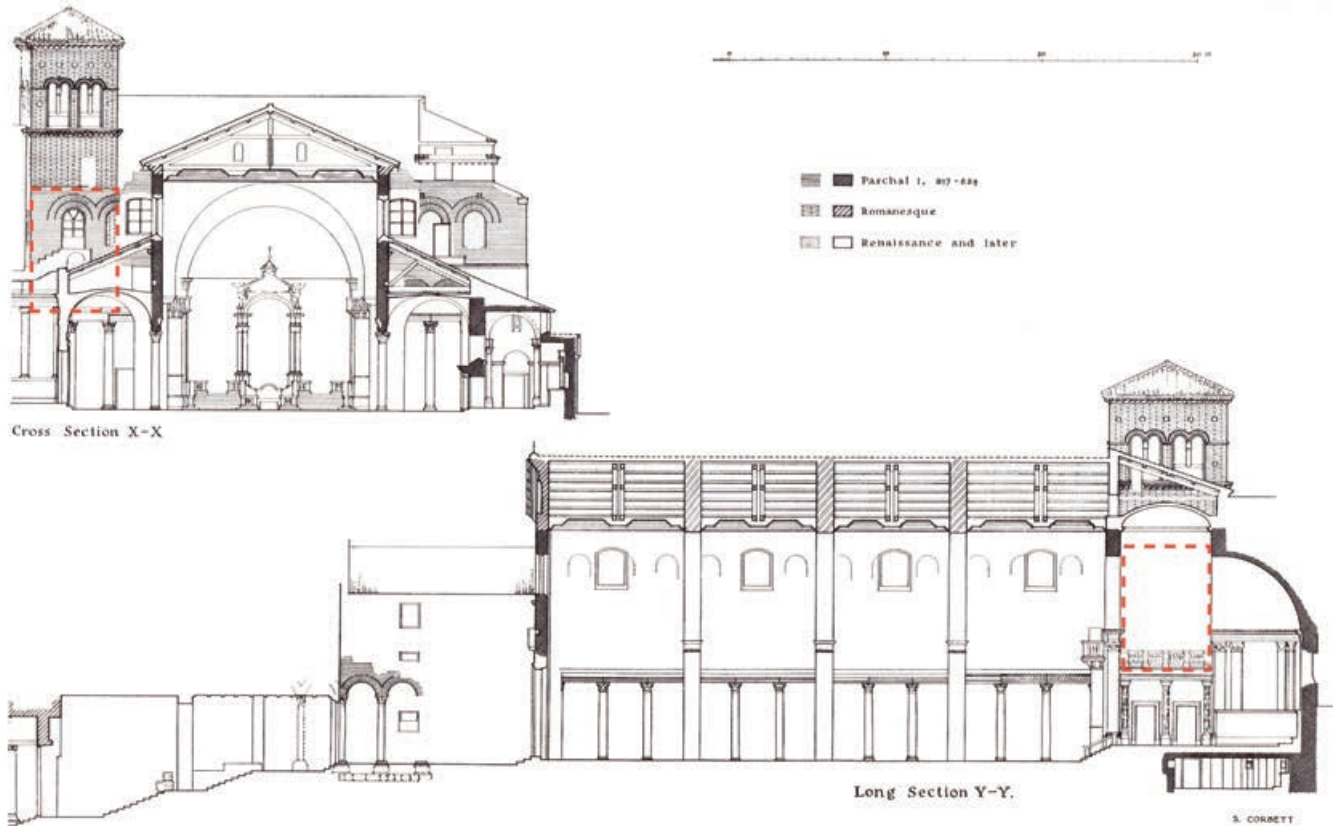


Fig. 2 Longitudinal (y-y') and transverse (x-x') sections according to S. Corbett (1971), and reproduced by R. Wisskirchen (1990, Plate 2). Red dashed lines indicate the situation of the frescoes inside the bell tower, formerly the transept (ArxiuCMancho).



Fig. 3a, 3b North wall of the inside of the bell tower, formerly the transept, of Santa Prassede with the preserved paintings as they were in 2005 (ArxiuCMancho).



Fig. 4 Detail of the south wall, Register 3 a, Scenes 2-3, death of the children of Claudius and Hilaria, Jason and Maurus, and seventy soldiers, 2005. (ArxiuCMancho).



Fig. 5 Detail of the previous scene in November 2016 showing the detachment of the plaster from the wall (ArxiuCMancho).



Fig. 6 Detail of Register 3b, Scene 1, Chrysanthus prays from the Tullianum prison, 2005 (ArxiuCMancho).



Fig. 7 Frescos in the south wall of the transept, according to watercoloured photographs by J. Wilpert (1916: IV, 202)



Fig. 8 Frescos in the west wall of the transept, according to watercoloured photographs by J. Wilpert (1916: IV, 204)



Fig. 9 Frescos in the north wall of the transept, according to watercoloured photographs by J. Wilpert (1916: IV, 203)

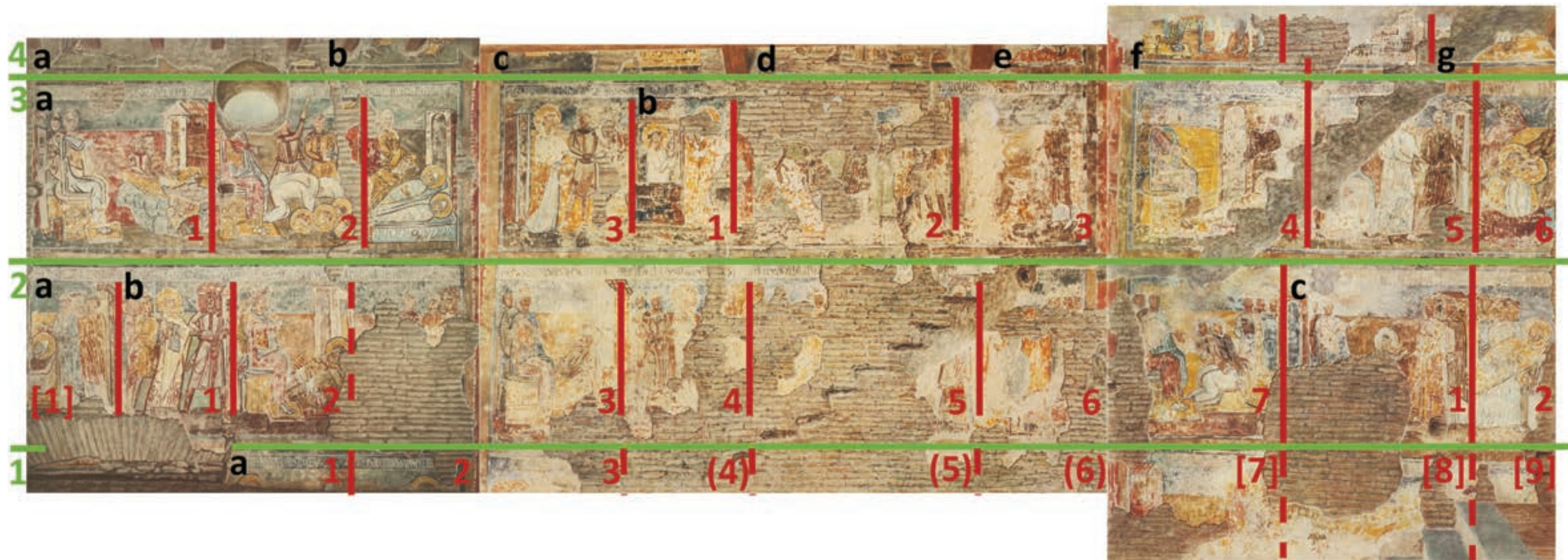


Fig. 10 Identification of scenes according to Pennesi (1998). The organization in Registers/Cycles/Scenes is ours, as well as the hypothesis of the scenes depicted in Registers 1 and 4. Text in brackets indicates identifications not based on painted inscriptions; numbers in round brackets indicate possible scenes; numbers in square brackets indicate a hypothetical scene number.:

Register 4: Cycles/Scenes **a-f** unidentified

Register 3: **a** Cycle of martyrs Claudius and Hilaria: 1 Claudius condemned by Numerian; 2 Deaths of their sons Jason and Maurus plus seventy soldiers; 3 Hilaria buries their sons; 4 Hilaria is arrested. **b** Cycle of the martyrs Chrysanthus and Daria: 1 Chrysanthus prays from the Tullianum prison; 2 (Daria in the postribule saved by the lion); 3 (Daria and the lion saved by fire); 4 Chrysanthus's torment "in a pile of stones"; 5 Chrysanthus and Daria led to martyrdom; 6 Death of Saints Chrysanthus and Daria.

Register 2: **a** Cycle of Saint Basilissa: [1] The burial of Basilissa. **b** Cycle of Saints Julian and Celsus: 1 Julian is arrested; 2 Julian's companions are burned; 3 Julian is flogged; 4 Julian and Celsus meet; 5 Conversion of Celsus; 6 Celsus throwing his books and toga away; 7 Julian and Celsus in barrels of pitch, bitumen, and sulphur. **c** Cycle of Marcionilla and Anthony and the neophyte Anastasius, martyrs of Antinopolis: 1 Celsus advises Marcionilla; 2 Baptism of Marcionilla.

Register 1: **a** Cycle dedicated to the saints Praxedes and Pudentiana: 1 Pudens indoctrinated by Saint Paul; 2 Pudens educates his daughters Pudentiana and Praxedes; 3 unidentified; (4 to 6) lost.; 7 a 9 unidentified.

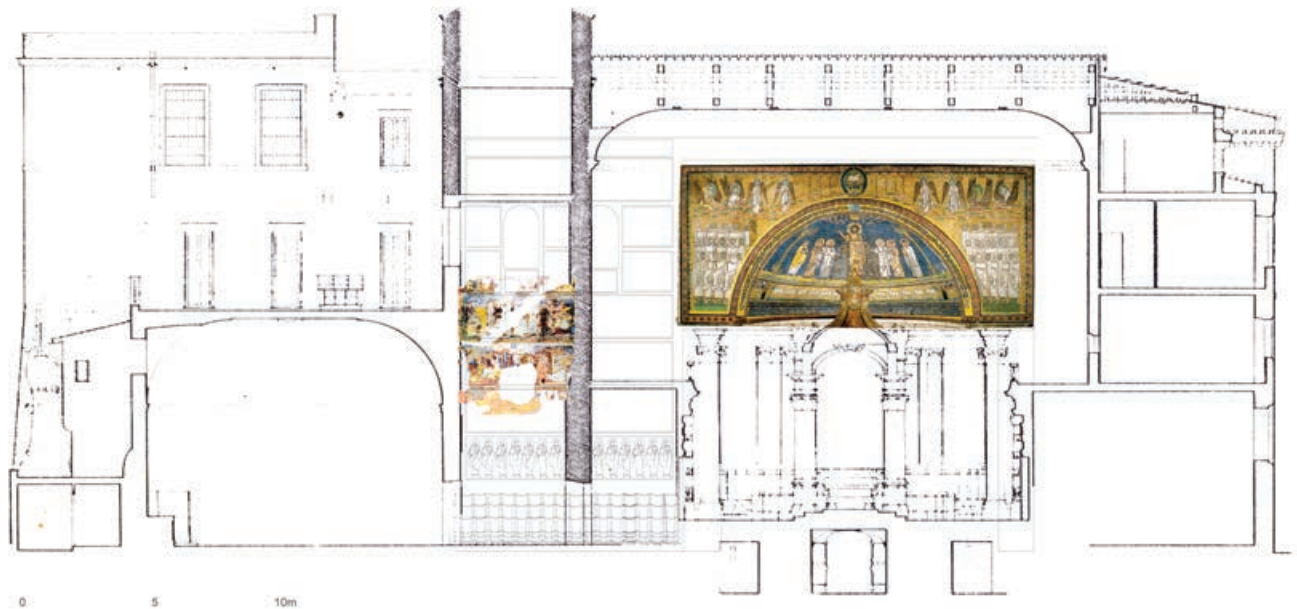


Fig. 11 Reconstructive hypothesis of V. Valentini of the transverse section of the presbytery (source: Dahdah, Kaban, *Lettura delle tecnologie storiche della basilica di S. Prassede in Roma e problemi statici di conservazione*, Faculty of Architecture, Sapienza - University of Rome, lecturer Prof. A. Giuffr , co-lecturer Prof. V. Ceradini, 1990-1991: Table 6).



Fig. 12 Reconstructive hypothesis with the west arm of the transept split into two, the position of the extant frescoes, and the relationship between frescoes and mosaics of the apsidal arch. The dimensions of the west arm of the transept are: 15.06 m high x 8.68 / 6.04 / 8.14 m wide. The total surface—excluding openings—is 303 m², only 52.73 m² of which still feature frescoes. According to the hypothesis, the decoration was organized in six vertically stacked registers depicting martyrdom scenes with a parade of martyrs at the base, under which the lower register is decorated with painted draperies (V. Valentini).

Fig. 13 Detail of the frescoes preserved in Register 5 to the right of the north wall window (ArxiuCMancho).



Fig. 14 Inscription commemorating the transfer of the 2,300 corpses of martyrs and the consecration of the basilica (ArxiuCMancho).



Fig. 15 Detail of the intrados of the southern window of the bell tower, formerly the transept, 2005 (ArxiuCMancho).



Fig. 16 S. Passera alla Magliana, south wall, scenes from the life of Saint Praxedes (?) and Fathers of the Church (Atlante 2006).



Fig. 17 Medieval oratory under the basilica of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, Christological scenes, detail of the Anastasis (G. Bordi).



Fig. 18 Oratory of the Forty Martyrs in the Roman Forum, south wall (G. Alfano).



Fig. 19 Santa Maria Antiqua, atrium, niche with saints Agnes and Catherine (G. Alfano).



Fig. 20 San Lorenzo fuori le mura, Chapel H9, east wall, Saint Eugenia (G. Bordi).

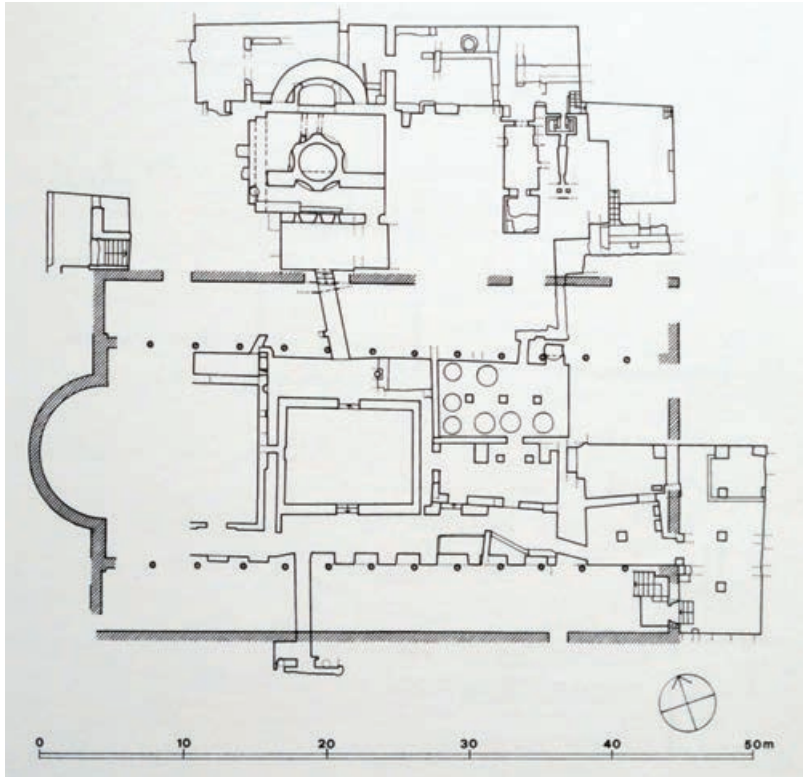


Fig. 21 Floor plan of the archaeological area of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere (PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2007a).



Fig. 22 Reconstructive hypothesis of the complex of the Baptistry of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere (PARMEGIANI, PRONTI 2007b).



Fig. 23 Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, Baptistry, north wall, painted drapery (ArxiuCMancho).

Fig. 24 Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, Baptistry, north wall, painted drapery, detail (G. Bordi).



Fig. 25 Medieval oratory under the basilica of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, east wall, painted drapery (G. Bordi).

Fig. 26 San Lorenzo fuori le mura, Chapel H9, east wall, painted drapery (G. Bordi).



Fig. 27 Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, Baptistery, central soffit of the trifore mullioned window (G. Bordi).



Fig. 28 Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, Baptistery, north soffit of the trifore mullioned window (ArxiuCMancho).

Fig. 29 Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, Baptistery, south wall
(ArxiuCMancho)



Fig. 31 Santi Quirico e Giulitta, Lower Church, north apsidiole, painted drapery (G. Bordi).



Fig. 30 Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, Baptistery, south wall, painted drapery (G. Bordi).



Fig. 32 San Lorenzo fuori le mura, Chapel H9, north wall, painted drapery (R. Sigismondi).