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## **Saving Church, City, and Soul: Sanctuary Mosaics at S. Prassede, S. Cecilia in Trastevere and S. Maria in Domnica in Rome**

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Saving Church, City, and Soul: Sanctuary Mosaics at S. Prassede, S. Cecilia in  
Trastevere and S. Maria in Domnica in Rome

ARHS 449: Junior/Senior Seminar in Art History

Dr. Kirstin Noreen

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During the Carolingian age, the Lombards, Byzantines, and Franks challenged Rome's religious and political autonomy. In an effort to reclaim the city, which was in grave turmoil and disrepair, Pope Paschal I (817-824) embarked on a mission that left a lasting legacy for the city of Rome, the papacy, and the man himself: to revive the landscape on which so many pious Christians were martyred in the name of God. Paschal transformed the Roman churches of S. Prassede, S. Cecilia in Trastevere, and S. Maria in Domnica. The extensive mosaics he commissioned at each site visually record his pious actions for eternity, ensuring his own salvation and emphasizing papal authority and Roman prominence within the complicated European political landscape of the Carolingian period.

The dilapidated and vincible state of Rome motivated Paschal to commission grand urban church reconstructions for the protection of corporeal relics. He was responsible for the translation of thousands of corporeal relics from vulnerable, rural catacombs to the interior of the city walls. Herbert Kessler affirms the pope acted out of a concern for the relics' safety: "Pope Paschal's mission in building the church was to provide a suitable resting place within the city for relics rescued from the now-abandoned catacombs outside the walls."<sup>1</sup> The catacombs had served as sites of saint veneration since antiquity; however, during the Middle Ages, they were in a state of decline and proved especially defenseless when Lombard raiders successfully purloined the bones of martyrs.<sup>2</sup> Theft was especially problematic given what, as John McCulloh explains, was

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert L. Kessler and Johanna Zacharias, *Rome 1300: On the Path of the Pilgrim* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 109.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 110.

the growing importance of hagiology and the veneration of authentic relics.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Paschal's movement of the relics to churches within the city walls provided them with the security the catacombs lacked, enabling for the continuance of Christian religious practices.

Paschal also sought to regain authority during the Carolingian period when Rome and the papacy were in precarious positions of power. In addition to the continued threat of Lombard attacks, the encroaching Byzantines to the east threatened Roman religious beliefs and practices. Byzantium deterred the veneration of relics and promoted the destruction of sacred images precious to Christians in Rome.<sup>4</sup> An alliance with the Franks, who were far less destructive than the Lombards or the Byzantines, was the best option available to Rome at the time. The Franks shared the desire for relics and expressed a willingness to respect papal wishes adequately.<sup>5</sup> However, Paschal's authority remained compromised. The Frankish Emperor, Louis the Pious, threatened the papacy when he sponsored an investigation into Paschal's alleged participation in the murders of Lateran officials. The Franks also rejected the papacy's pleas to return Roman land they had claimed as their own. Internal issues further complicated matters

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<sup>3</sup> John M. McCulloh, "From Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Continuity and Change in Papal Relic Policy from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> Century," in *Pietas: Festschrift für Bernhard Kötting*, ed. Ernst Dassmann and K. Suso Frank (Münster: Aschendorff, 1980), 313-319.

<sup>4</sup> During Byzantine Iconoclasm, which lasted from about 713-787 and again from 814-814, Byzantine Emperors placed a ban on religious icons. This was a period of devastating destruction of sacred images due to the Byzantine rulers' concern of idolatry, or treating images as if they are the physical embodiments of the figures themselves. Rome's reverence for sacred images made them important targets of iconoclastic aims.

<sup>5</sup> McCulloh, "From Antiquity to the Middle Ages," 313-319.



for Paschal. A group of aristocratic Romans initiated civic uprisings prior to his papacy that he was unable to subdue.<sup>6</sup>

In this politically tumultuous environment, Paschal recognized his basilica projects as opportunities to assert endangered Roman and papal authority. First, it is important to note that Rome was of special interest at this time largely due to the popularity of the city's saints and the increased demand for corporeal relics beyond its borders. In addition, it was only shortly before Paschal was pope that the papacy lifted the ban on the translations of relics, if only for special circumstances.<sup>7</sup> Paschal capitalized on these circumstances by collecting Rome's celebrated corporeal relics and presenting them in a new setting expressive of the significance of the city and its bishop. Caroline Goodson has recently shown that the pope's systematic relocation of bodies of saints to churches within Rome effectively centralized the power of both the pope and Rome: "Through the introduction of corporeal remains, Paschal imported the sacred sites of the catacombs into his titular churches, transforming the scattered melodies of sanctoral veneration and architecture in late eighth and early ninth-century Rome into a controlled symphony of Roman primacy and papal self-authorization."<sup>8</sup> By assembling corporeal relics previously disbursed in shrines across the countryside within strategic churches in the sacred city, Paschal both literally and symbolically underscored the importance of the Rome and the supremacy of the pope.

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<sup>6</sup> Caroline J. Goodson, "The Relic Translations of Paschal I: Transforming City and Cult," in *Roman Bodies*, ed. Andrew Hopkins and Maria Wyke, (London: British School at Rome, 2005), 135.

<sup>7</sup> McCulloh, "From Antiquity to the Middle Ages," 313-320.

<sup>8</sup> Goodson, "The Relic Translations of Paschal I," 123.

Paschal reconstructed the deteriorating ancient church of S. Prassede to commemorate the translation of the saint's relics and to link his image to her sacred identity into perpetuity. The *Liber Pontificalis* records his act of moving the vulnerable relics from the decrepit catacombs and their translation to the newly refurbished ancient church: "The holy and distinguished pontiff sought out, found and collected many bodies of saints lying in destroyed cemeteries, with dutiful concern that they should not remain neglected; with great affection and veneration he removed and buried them in the church of Christ's said martyr St. Praxedes, which he had wonderfully removed and constructed."<sup>9</sup> The choice of wording suggests that the pope searched for the relics himself and carried them to the secure church with his own hands, an action that memorialized him as the selfless, dedicated protector of a multitude of Roman saints.<sup>10</sup>

Sanctified for her pious actions, Prassede was a compelling figure for Paschal. She was the daughter of the Roman Senator Pudens and the sister of Pudenziana, who was also martyred for her own unrelenting faith, and the disciple Timothy. Prassede devoted her family's land to the Christian poor, converted pagans to Christianity, and ensured persecuted Christians received proper burials. Goodson argues that Paschal was well aware of these details and chose to refurbish the church to associate his own life with Prassede's faithfulness: "The details of Prassede's *Vita* were surely known to Paschal, and I suggest that his choice to restore the church reflects a desire to associate

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<sup>9</sup> Davis, Raymond, trans., *The Lives of Ninth-Century Popes (Liber Pontificalis)* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1995), 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> The *Liber Pontificalis* essentially provides a chronological list of every pope and their papal deeds going all the way back to Peter. Due to the fact that the text is highly constructed in nature to suit the goals of the Church, its reliability as a primary source has been brought into question. On the *Liber Pontificalis*, see Thomas F. X. Noble, "A New Look at the *Liber Pontificalis*," *Archivum historiae pontificate* 23 (1985): 347-358.

himself with her pious devotion.”<sup>11</sup> In addition to Prassede, Paschal reportedly transferred relics of some 2,300 saints to the church from deteriorating catacombs. The church would become a visible reminder of Paschal’s actions of unwavering piety.

The mosaic decoration at the sanctuary end of Santa Prassede celebrates Prassede’s sanctity, Paschal’s protection of her bodily remains and Rome’s religious prominence. Serving as the focal point of the church, the apse mosaic represents the Second Coming (fig. 1). The background, absent of light or shadow, is a flat yet infinitely deep blue embodying the moment of Apocalypse.<sup>12</sup> Dominating the apse, Christ appears in hierarchical scale in the center of the mosaic. While his left hand grasps the sealed *logos* scroll, concerning the secrets of the Last Judgment, his right hand raises as if to greet visitors to the church.<sup>13</sup> Slightly elevated above the ground line, he hovers on an accumulation of small red, green, and blue-hued clouds above the River Jordan, titled “IORDANES.” Above Christ appears a smaller grouping of light blue clouds representing Heaven, through which the hand of God extends with a wreath to crown his son.

Six other figures accompany Christ in the Second Coming scene of the apsidal vault mosaic. To the right stand Peter, who presents Prassede’s sister, Pudenziana, to Christ, and a third figure whose identity is debated.<sup>14</sup> To the left stand Paschal and Paul,

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<sup>11</sup> Goodson, “The Relic Translations of Paschal I,” 126. *Vitae*, or Lives, are books describing the religious lives of saints. As hagiology increased in popularity, so did interest in these literary sources.

<sup>12</sup> Michael G. Sundell, *Mosaics in the Eternal City* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007), 20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>14</sup> This unknown figure has been identified as the disciple Timothy or as Saint Zeno, to whom a chapel at S. Prassede was dedicated. On the disciple Timothy, see Caroline Goodson, “*The Rome of Pope Paschal I: Papal Power, Urban Renovation, Church*

who presents Prassede. Although to a lesser extent than Christ, Prassede and Pudenziana also hover over the ground line while the others are firmly connected to the earth. While this might be a signifier of their saintly status, Michael Sundell suggests that the sister saints hover in anticipation of their forthcoming rebirth: “Prassede and Pudenziana levitate slightly in the excitement of their resurrection.”<sup>15</sup> In the register below, twelve sheep process from the gates of Bethlehem and Jerusalem towards a central Lamb of the Resurrection figure. The sheep seek to drink from the four rivers of Paradise for their own salvation. The pope is also immortalized in the mosaic.<sup>16</sup>

Paschal's appearance in the apse mosaic commemorates his construction of the church and reveals his personal wish for salvation. A nimbus, a halo distinguished by its square form, identifies him as the only living figure among the group, and his *pallium* denotes his role as pope (fig. 2). Paschal humbly offers a model of the church of S. Prassede to the heavenly figures, revealing his hope to be recognized for negotiating the protection and continued veneration of saints. Conveying Paschal's pivotal role in the building of the structure, the imagery would certainly make an impression on church visitors and encourage them to recognize the pope's pious actions on behalf of such a large number of saints into perpetuity. Furthermore, a palm frond growing to his right and a phoenix perched upon it provide appropriate apocalyptic imagery of perpetual triumph and regeneration, and the close proximity of these symbolic images to the titular pope emphasizes his own desire for triumph over death.

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*Rebuilding and Relic Translation* (Cambridge: University Press, 2010), 150. On Timothy, see Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 126.

<sup>15</sup> Sundell, *Mosaics in the Eternal City*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Goodson, “*The Rome of Pope Paschal I*,” 152.

An apse mosaic inscription at S. Prassede textually articulates the same message conveyed through the mosaic imagery. The inscription explains that Paschal's offering of the church of S. Prassede was performed in the hopes that he might achieve salvation: "The hall shines, decorated with precious minerals, in honour of the saintly Praxedis who pleases in Heaven, through the zeal of Pontiff Paschal, servant of the Apostolic See, who collected the bodies of many saints and buried them under these walls, in order that he may be more eligible to approach the gates of Heaven."<sup>17</sup> The inscription ensures his deeds are recorded into perpetuity and that, upon the Second Coming, he might be reborn. This can also be seen as a general petition on behalf of the papacy, to be recognized and rewarded for its role on earth.

In keeping with the apse mosaic's apocalyptic theme, the apsidal arch mosaic links to the divine realm through a depiction of the apocalyptic vision of the *Agnus Dei* (fig. 3). The Lamb of the Resurrection, representing Christ, appears in line with the apse image of Christ. Seven flaming candlesticks flank the enthroned Lamb of God and serve as symbols of the seven churches of early Christendom. To the right side of the Lamb appear two angels and winged beasts representative of the evangelists Saint John and Saint Luke, an eagle and ox. To the left side of the Lamb appear two more angels and winged beasts representative of the evangelists Saint Mark and Saint Matthew, a lion and man. The figures hover over clouds, like those in the apse mosaic, denoting their heavenly existence. The background of luminous gold mosaic tiles further implies the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

divine setting. This imagery links that of the apse mosaic with the triumphal arch mosaic.<sup>18</sup>

The meaning of the triumphal arch mosaic program closely links to the apse's apocalyptic imagery (fig. 4). A jeweled wall, representative of the Heavenly Jerusalem, encloses a central group (fig. 5). Christ, although smaller than in the apse, appears again, directly in the center of the mosaic, hovering above the ground line. Two angels, the Virgin Mary, Prassede, and the twelve Apostles flank him. Two additional unidentified figures and another angel appear above the apostles at either end. Two more angels stand by entrances on each end of the wall. They gesture to welcome Peter and Paul, who lead groups of figures towards the walled city's entrances (fig. 6). These figures represent the 2,300 martyrs buried at S. Prassede. Behind a row in the foreground, heads appear stacked one on top of another to express the multitude of saints, attesting to Paschal's remarkable undertaking in the relocation of each one of them to S. Prassede.

Marchita Mauck argues that the triumphal arch mosaic visually connects the Heavenly church depicted in the apsidal mosaics with Paschal's terrestrial church of S. Prassede. She likens the jeweled walls of the Heavenly Jerusalem to those of the city of Rome. Consequently, while in keeping with the apocalyptic imagery in the apse, Mauck explains that the mosaic ventures a step further with the depiction of a contemporary event – the dedication of the church in 817 – with imagery inspired by liturgical texts. The *In paradisum* and *adventus* texts, she explains, relate to the burial procession of a body either to or from a cemetery.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the texts would be especially appropriate in

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<sup>18</sup> Sundell, *Mosaics in the Eternal City*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Marchita B. Mauck, "The Mosaic of the Triumphal Arch of S. Prassede: A Liturgical Interpretation," *Speculum* 62, no. 4 (1987): 820.

honoring the transfer of relics from crypts beyond the walls of Rome to S. Prassede. In this light, Mauck explains that the 2,300 standing saints can be seen as moving towards the gates of Rome, just as they did on the day of the church's dedication when *In paradisum* and *adventus* would have played an important role: "Both of these [texts] would have been part of the dedication of S. Prassede in 817, an event that was accompanied by the deposition of large relics."<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the unique relationship between this text and image is especially relevant to church visitors. Possibly there to honor the death of a friend, they are ultimately inspired to consider their own death and salvation. Equating Rome with the Heavenly Jerusalem, Paschal's status is elevated to intercessor, the most important living connection to the divine.

A ninth-century inscription immured in a pier of a diaphragm arch at S. Prassede helps to explain as well as validate the images of the mosaic program. The words record the translation of relics, underscoring Paschal's crucial role:

In the name of the Lord our Savior Jesus Christ, in the times of holiest and thrice blessed and apostolic lord Pontiff Paschal, bodies of saints worthy of veneration were brought into this hold and venerable basilica of the Virgin of Christ, Praxedis. The above mentioned Pontiff, bearing those resting neglected out of cemeteries or crypts, with his own hands he placed [them] under this sacred altar, with the greatest care, in the month of June, the twentieth day, in the tenth indiction [817]...<sup>21</sup>

This inscription ensures, once again, that God's humble servant, Paschal, will be eternally praised for his acts of devotion. He will be remembered for rescuing the bodies of the saints now resting safely at S. Prassede, for he carried them from the dilapidated catacombs of Rome to a secure and newly refurbished sacred space of his own design with his very own hands. In addition, eighty-six of the saints buried there are listed by

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 814.

<sup>21</sup> Goodson, "The Relic Translations of Paschal I," 126.

name and the remaining 2,165 are grouped by types, including popes, priests, and martyrs.

The inscription also further reinforces Mauck's theory connecting the mosaic program to liturgical practices. Goodson explains that the division of the inscription's list of saints into categories of types is reflective of the hierarchically organized Litany of Saints. This parallel to the sacred responsorial prayer serves to highlight the role of the saints within the setting of S. Prassede – as intercessory agents between the earthly and terrestrial realms.<sup>22</sup> This would be especially powerful for religious individuals visiting the church because it implies that they could potentially connect with the divine through the veneration of these saints: "Paschal's inscription stresses the role that these saints and their presence in the church are targeted to play: they are intercessory agents, the means by which the faithful can communicate with and receive spiritual rewards from the divine, through the vehicle of Pope Paschal."<sup>23</sup> While these powerful religious implications were certainly important for Paschal to convey to the Christian community, he also sought to stress his vital role in creating the potential for a connection to the divine. Through Paschal, one could seek salvation, a rebirth upon the Second Coming.

Paschal also reconstructed the church of S. Cecilia in Trastevere to honor the remains of and associate himself with the popular Roman Saint Cecilia eternally. The *Liber Pontificalis* reports that one day when the pope came to the saint's church to pray, he saw it was in extreme disrepair and set out to construct a new church in its place. The story continues that S. Cecilia visited Paschal in a dream to thank him for his work in her

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 231.



name and to implore him to locate her lost relics and bury them within the new church, and this he did, again, with his very own hands.<sup>24</sup>

The selfless Cecilia, as inspiring as Prassede was to Paschal, was also martyred for her faith. A virgin, she converted her husband, Valerianus, and his brother, Tiburtius, to Christianity. When the two men were martyred for their faith, she gave them a proper burial at the risk of losing her own life. As punishment, the Romans tortured Cecilia for three brutal days before she passed. At some point during those three days, she dedicated her home in Trastevere as a church with the help of Pope Urban.

In line with the format of the apse mosaic at S. Prassede, the apsidal arch mosaic at S. Cecilia depicts the Second Coming (fig. 7). The rich blue background signifies the divine space. A monumental Christ figure dominates the center of the scene. Again, he appears enveloped by small clouds of red and blue, denoting his place in Heaven. Above his head floats another cluster of clouds, representing the heavens. The hand of God, holding a gold wreath with which to crown Christ, pierces through these clouds. Directly above the figure of Christ also appears the symbol for his name, the Chi Rho. Christ motions the familiar welcoming gesture with his right hand and holds the scroll with the secrets of the Last Judgment in his left. He is flanked by the patrons of Rome, the apostles Paul and Peter. To the right of Peter stand Saint Agatha and Valerian, and to the left of Paul stand Saint Cecilia and the titular pope, Paschal I.<sup>25</sup> In the register below the figures, sheep representing the twelve Apostles appear in procession from Jerusalem and Bethlehem toward the four rivers of Paradise. The rivers flow from a hillock upon which

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<sup>24</sup> Davis, *The Lives of Ninth-Century Popes (Liber Pontificalis)*, 15-16.

<sup>25</sup> The monastery of S. Cecilia in Trastevere was dedicated to Saint Agatha.

Christ appears as the Lamb of the Resurrection. Just as at S. Prassede, Paschal also sought the salvation that his dedication of the church might provide.

Much like the apse mosaic of Santa Prassede, the apse mosaic of S. Cecilia in Trastevere commemorates Paschal's connection to Saint Cecilia. He stands adorned by his nimbus and *pallium* and presents the model of the church of S. Cecilia (fig. 8). A palm frond and phoenix signify the potential for Paschal's own triumph and regeneration through the dedication of the church but also, more generally, to the triumph of the struggling papacy. This image contributes to the general theme of the apocalyptic imagery and the hope for renewal through Christ and through the papacy.

The apse mosaic inscription also perpetually records Paschal's translation of relics to S. Cecilia in Trastevere. He intentionally integrated these constant reminders of his pious devotion to Christ in S. Cecilia, just as he did at S. Prassede. The words of the inscription eternally record his role in reconstructing the church:

This spacious house glitters built of varied minerals; this hall, once in time past has been ruined, the generous prelate Paschal built to a better condition, forming it on a famous foundation; these golden mysteries resound with jewelled precincts; serene in the love of God. He joined the bodies of Saint Cecilia and her companions; youth glows red in its bloom. Limbs that rested before in the crypts, Rome is joyous, triumphant always, adorned forever.<sup>26</sup>

The inscription substantiates the relics' presence and Paschal's role in translating them to the reconstructed church he presents in the mosaic. The words clearly emphasize his good work performed in hopes of salvation, and the mention of Rome's perpetual triumph underscore his efforts to heighten his political status at a time when the papacy's

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<sup>26</sup> Goodson, "*The Rome of Pope Paschal I*," 152.

authority was challenged. During worship, visitors would recognize Paschal as the intermediary between this world and the next, able to relay their prayers to Christ.<sup>27</sup>

The format of the mosaic programs of S. Prassede and S. Cecilia is based on an early Christian prototype at SS. Cosma e Damiano to link Paschal's pontificate to the period of Christianity under the Roman Emperor Constantine (fig. 9).<sup>28</sup> The early model depicts a central, monumental Christ figure floating on a group of colorful clouds also flanked by figures, including the titular saints, on a similar deep blue, heavenly background. The familiar heavenly realm appears in the form of clouds above Christ's head as do the symbols of triumph, the palm frond and phoenix, to the side. Below, the procession of sheep appears in a frieze.

Richard Krautheimer's Carolingian Revival theory purposes this choice was part a larger trend to revive early Christian artistic programs. He explains that the Frankish king Charlemagne, father of Louis the Pious, based his empire on that of Constantine. He also sought to mirror Constantine's relationship with Pope Sylvester.<sup>29</sup> Louis the Pious continued this approach in his relationship with Pope Paschal. Krautheimer explains that the renaissance honored this relationship in an effort to emulate heroic Christian figures and to demonstrate an utmost respect of early Christianity: "As visualized in Rome, at the papal court, the parallelism is a characteristic example of medieval typology intended to illustrate the papal and the imperial policy. Beyond that it illuminates the conception

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<sup>27</sup> Goodson, "The Relic Translations of Paschal I, 127.

<sup>28</sup> Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 126.

<sup>29</sup> The Carolingian renaissance refers to more than the mosaic decorations discussed here. Entire church plans were modeled after early Christian churches as well, including S. Prassede: Richard Krautheimer, "The Carolingian Revival of Early Christian Architecture," *The Art Bulletin* 24, no.1 (1942): 36.

that the Carolingian period had of Roman antiquity: it seems as though Antiquity were epitomized in the Christian Rome of Constantine and Sylvester.”<sup>30</sup>

Based on the historical implications of the imagery, Paschal’s choice to model his own artistic commission on SS. Cosma e Damiano was advantageous for many reasons. First, the choice expresses the pope’s political concerns regarding the Franks, and his desire to maintain a beneficial relationship with the Frankish emperor, Louis the Pious. Further, the reference firmly links the Carolingian papacy to the roots of the Christian church in Rome. The two-fold approach both stabilizes Paschal’s relationship with the Franks while simultaneously achieving a chief purpose of the mosaic commissions under consideration: to assert his legitimacy and prominence in the greater picture of Carolingian Europe.

Through his artistic patronage of S. Maria in Dominica, Paschal sought to establish a connection to the Virgin for beneficial religious and political purposes. However, unlike S. Prassede and S. Cecilia in Trastevere, relics did not motivate the reconstruction of this church, as the Virgin was assumed entirely into the heavens.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, Paschal envisioned the potential to memorialize his piety and elevate the position of Rome and the papacy due to a unique characteristic of the Virgin. She is a physical embodiment of the human nature of Christ and the earthly connection to him.

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<sup>30</sup> Krautheimer, “The Carolingian Revival of Early Christian Architecture,” 37.

<sup>31</sup> Even after the mid-ninth-century flood of relics into churches, S. Maria in Dominica, notably, did not house any relics. This was the case until the mid-eighteenth century, when an antiquarian claimed a canister, containing relics of Peter and Paul dating from Paschal’s pontificate, rested under the high altar. Particularly since this relic is “missing” and the *Liber Pontificalis* makes no mention of it, Goodson explains that this claim reveals the eighteenth-century opinion of Paschal; Goodson, “*The Rome of Pope Paschal I*,” 223-224.

Due to this distinction, the format of S. Maria in Domnica's apsidal arch mosaic represents a deliberate departure from the imagery at S. Prassede and S. Cecilia, where the saints and Paschal flank a central image of Christ (fig. 10). Dominating the S. Maria apse mosaic, a monumental figure of the Virgin Mary sits frontally on a jeweled throne in the center of the scene. She gazes upon the space of the church with a soft, welcoming smile as she gently holds her son, the Christ child, in her lap. Christ raises one hand to bless the congregation of the church. Kneeling in adoration before the Virgin, a third central figure twists his torso to face the nave in acknowledgement of church visitors below. He appears in the traditional nimbus and *pallium* denoting his status as the living pope, Paschal. Represented on a significantly smaller scale to suggest his humility and dedication to the Virgin, the pope holds Mary's right foot in a gesture of adoration and a scroll, the Word of God. The group is flanked by angels to highlight their mortality, a key characteristic that helps to guide their organization in the mosaic.

While a field of flowers firmly grounds the enthroned Virgin and the Christ child, the image on the apex of the apsidal arch directly above represents Christ in Heaven. He appears in a mandorla, flanked by the procession of the twelve Apostles. Monumental figures of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist gesturing towards the divine image of Christ fill the spandrels. Commencing from a view from the floor of S. Prassede, the viewer's eye moves through the apsidal vault mosaic to the ultimate image of Christ risen in the apsidal arch mosaic. The visual journey establishes the basic spiritual chain of command that Paschal will claim.

An intended hierarchical reading of the mosaic imagery suggests Paschal's vital function as the intercessor between the terrestrial church and the divine realm. The

placement of Paschal's feet provides a visual clue, as they appear to extend into the space of the church, completing the link between the divine envisioned above and the terrestrial below. Erik Thunø explains that this positioning of Paschal between the holy image of the Virgin and the congregation below underscores his role as intercessor: "As the patron of the mosaic, itself a medium of sacred mediation, placed between the faithful and the Virgin, his feet resting on the frame, the ninth-century pope thus poses himself as a channel for spiritual mediation, transmitted through the Virgin and the mosaic, but conditional upon his own person."<sup>32</sup> Just as Christ was born of flesh to act as intercessor between this world and heaven, the anagogical mosaic takes on a sacred function to materialize the divine.<sup>33</sup> Paschal becomes the sole living link to Christ.

The mosaic inscription below perpetually records Paschal's dedication of the church to the Virgin Mary, much in the spirit of Paschal's other churches. Poetically, the words address the Virgin and proclaim that Paschal has renovated the ancient church in her honor: "This house, once reduced to ruins, now gleams perennially decorated with various minerals, and its glory resplends as Phoebus in the sky, having fled the dark shadows on the gloomy night. O Virgin Mary, to you Paschal the virtuous happy bishop has founded this regal hall, to remain through the centuries."<sup>34</sup> While, on the one hand, Paschal's sponsorship was clearly in reverence for the Virgin, the inscription reveals ulterior motives in its final words. Extending beyond Paschal's religious intentions,

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<sup>32</sup> Erik Thunø, *Image and Relic: Mediating the Sacred in Early Medieval Rome* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2002), 176.

<sup>33</sup> Erik Thunø, "Materializing the Invisible in Early Medieval Art: The Mosaic of Santa Maria in Domnica in Rome," in *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Giselle de Nie, Karl F. Morrison and Marco Mostert (Turnhout, Brepols Publishers, 2005), 273-275.

<sup>34</sup> Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 231.

Goodson explains the text indicates the pope's objective to create a legacy for Rome.<sup>35</sup> This suggestion brings to mind the imagery of Rome as the Heavenly Jerusalem at S. Prassede. Although similar imagery does not appear in the apse mosaics at S. Maria, the pairing of imagery and text reveal the same basic intention – to present Rome as the center of Christianity, largely due to the efforts of Paschal.

Even in its highly restricted setting within the Lateran Palace, an enamelled cross reliquary Paschal commissioned for the Sancta Sanctorum reinforces Paschal's special interest in the Virgin's role as intercessor (Fig. 11). A series of seven scenes of the Infancy cycle of the Virgin decorate the front of the cross in a revived cloissoné enamel technique. "The enamel cross emphasizes the Virgin's role as the vehicle of the Incarnation as shown by her key presence in the specially attenuated Nativity scene."<sup>36</sup> Further, an inscription on the side tells that the cross was given from the Virgin to Paschal. Consequently, just as with S. Maria, the artistic commission is meant to create and, at the same time, justify and advertise Paschal's relationship to Mary.

Some might argue that Paschal's mosaic programs provide evidence for a power-hungry pope most interested in self-preservation. While this might be a potential argument, visual clues point to a pope who was interested in elevating the papacy for the sake of the stability of future generations, not just himself. For example, none of the images of Paschal in the mosaic are realistic portrayals of the pontiff, emphasizing features unique to Paschal and Paschal only. They are merely schematic representations of the figure of the pope whose role, not individual identity, is only recognizable because of the inclusion of the square halo, nimbus, *pallium*, and church model. These images

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Thunø, "Materializing the Invisible in Early Medieval Art," 271.

could easily represent another papal figure, which allows the mosaic to extend the pleas for salvation not only to Paschal, but also to all popes. As discussed, Paschal's intention was to rectify the poor state of affairs for Rome and the papacy. Goodson supports this view and claims that these programs are not based on Paschal, the man, but are, rather, reactions to the political events of the time: "I argue that this movement within the papacy grew out of events of the previous decades, both in the empire and in the papal state, and more specifically very contemporary politics."<sup>37</sup>

During the Carolingian period, Rome was in dire straights. The ancient infrastructure was falling apart and internal power struggles and invasions of foreigners predicted a grim future. In addition to these factors, sacred relics buried in rural crypts outside the city's walls were being pillaged and destroyed. The papacy faced an uncertain fate, so Paschal resolved to help rebuild the decaying city and reclaim its prominence and splendor, all in the name of the determined papacy. At S. Prassede, Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, and Santa Maria in Domnica, Paschal envisioned ideal opportunities to elevate the image of the pope on the platform of the importance of Rome and its sanctity. The mosaics commissioned by Paschal at each location establish Rome as the Holy Jerusalem and perpetually affirm the pope's role as the intermediary between humankind and the divine. The churches become satellites of St. Peter's, spreading the message of Christianity to those who visit and allowing the papacy to gain a strong foothold in Rome once again. Standing today, the churches remain as visual reminders of Paschal's pivotal role in surviving the trials of the Carolingian period.

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<sup>37</sup> Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 6.



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## Figures



Fig. 1. Detail of apse mosaic, 817-824. Mosaic, apsidal vault, S. Prassede, Rome, Italy. Reproduced from Fotopedia, <http://www.fotopedia.com> (accessed November 16, 2010)





Fig. 2. Detail of Paschal I on apse mosaic, 817-824. Mosaic, apse, S. Prassede, Rome, Italy. Reproduced from Wikipedia, <http://www.wikipedia.org> (accessed November 17, 2010).



Fig. 3. Apse mosaics, 817-824. Mosaic, apse, S. Prassede, Rome, Italy. Reproduced from Willy of Won't He?, <http://willyorwonthe.blogspot.com> (accessed November 16, 2010).



Fig. 4 Mosaics of triumphal arch, apsidal arch, and apse, 817-824. Mosaic, apse, S. Prassede, Rome, Italy. Reproduced from Marchita Mauck, "The Mosaic of the Triumphal Arch of S. Prassede: A Liturgical Interpretation," *Speculum* 62, no. 4 (1987): 815.



Fig. 5. Detail of triumphal arch mosaic (center), 817-824. Mosaic, apse, S. Prassede, Rome, Italy. Reproduced from Marchita Mauck, "The Mosaic of the Triumphal Arch of S. Prassede: A Liturgical Interpretation," *Speculum* 62, no. 4 (1987): 815.



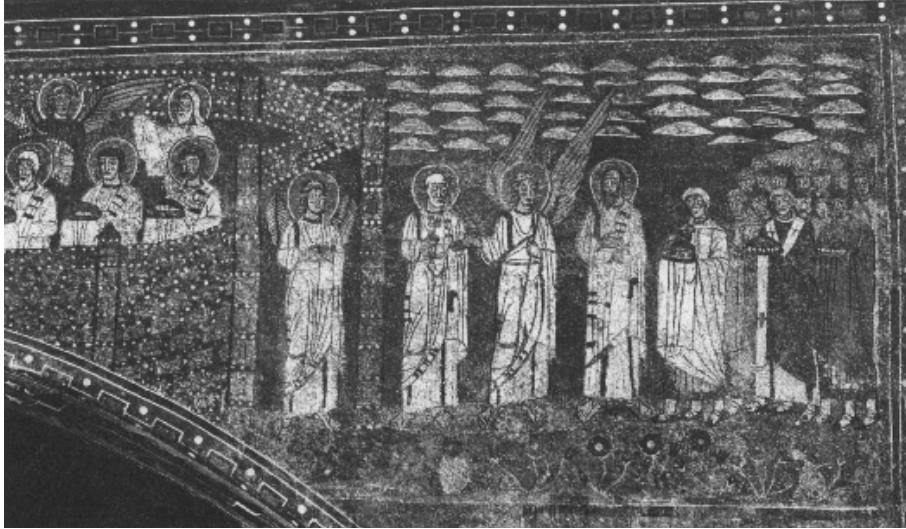


Fig. 6. Detail of triumphal arch mosaic (right side), 817-824. Mosaic, apse, S. Prassede, Rome, Italy. Reproduced from Marchita Mauck, "The Mosaic of the Triumphal Arch of S. Prassede: A Liturgical Interpretation," *Speculum* 62, no. 4 (1987): 815.



Fig. 7. Christ with Six Saints, 817-824. Mosaic, apsidal vault, S. Cecilia in Trastevere, Rome, Italy. Reproduced from ArtStor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed November 16, 2010).





Fig. 8. Christ with Six Saints, 817-824. Mosaic, apsidal vault, S. Cecilia in Trastevere, Rome, Italy. Reproduced from ArtStor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed November 16, 2010).



Fig. 9. Mosaic, apse, SS. Cosmo e Damiano, Rome, Italy. Reproduced from Wikipedia, <http://www.wikipedia.org> (accessed November 17, 2010).



Fig. 10. Enthroned Virgin and Christ Child, 817-824. Mosaic, apsidal vault, S. Maria in Domnica, Rome, Italy. Reproduced from Paradoxplace, <http://www.paradoxplace.com> (accessed November 16, 2010).





Fig. 11. Enamelled cross, 817-824. Gold and cloisonné enamel reliquary, Vatican Museum, Vatican City, Italy. Reproduced from Erik Thunø, *Image and Relic: Mediating the Sacred in Early Medieval Rome* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2002), Pl. 1.