

Prayers and Protection: The Tower at Torba Reconsidered

MARTIN F. LEŠÁK

The tower at Torba (fig. 1) is the most eastern fortified outpost of the well-known *castrum* Castelseprio. It is situated about forty kilometers north of Milan in the valley of the Olona river at the foot of the hill to where the main nucleus of the *castrum* extends (fig. 2). The origins of this military building date back to the 5th or 6th century at the very latest¹; however, the wall paintings decorating two floors of the structure were created soon after the Benedictine convent was founded nearby. This most likely occurred during the 8th century². Though the first reference to the

tower appeared as early as in the first half of the 20th century³, the wall paintings were only mentioned in 1967 by Santino Langé⁴, and did not awaken much scholarly interest in the following years⁵. This fact is especially striking in comparison to the bibliography regarding famous frescoes, which is preserved a few hundred meters from the tower in Santa Maria *foris portas*, one of the most studied monuments in Lombardy⁶. To this day, the only remaining monograph about the murals at Torba is Carlo Bertelli's piece (of fifty-nine pages) from 1988⁷ and therefore

¹ Most recently Brogiolo dated foundations of the tower to the 5th century: G. P. BROGIOLO, *La torre tardo-antica e il monastero alto-medievale di Torba*, in *Archeologia classica e post-classica tra Italia e Mediterraneo*, eds. S. Lusuardi Siena, C. Perassi, F. Sacchi and M. Sannazaro, Milano 2016, pp. 225-232. Cf. A. SCILLIA, *Analisi stratigrafica degli alzati*, in *Castelseprio e Torba. Sintesi delle ricerche e aggiornamenti*, ed. P. M. De Marchi, Mantova 2013, pp. 93-123, esp. 109; G. P. BROGIOLO, *Per una storia religiosa di Castelseprio: il complesso di Torba e la chiesa di S. Maria foris portas*, in *Castelseprio e Torba...*, 2013, pp. 213-222; M. ROSSI, *Castelseprio nell'alto Medioevo*, in *Storia dell'Arte a Varese e nel suo territorio*, ed. M. L. Gatti Perer, Varese 2011, pp. 8-49, esp. 40; and S. COLOMBO, *Conoscere Castelseprio, Torba e dintorni*, Varese 1999 (1 ed. 1995), p. 19. Renato Bazzoni places the construction of the tower into the context of the late Roman period, i. e. to the 5th century, when the number of attacks on borders of the empire increased. See R. BAZZONI, *Il Monastero di Torba e i suoi affreschi*, in *Conservazione e valorizzazione degli affreschi nella provincia di Varese*, ed. P. C. Marani, Varese 1997, pp. 17-22, esp. 17. For the 5th century dating, see also E. CHIZZONI - G. VASSALLI, *Il Monastero di Torba*, in «Tracce», VIII (1987/2), pp. 95-102, esp. 96; Y. PANIN, *Documenti inediti quattrocenteschi per Torba*, in «Arte Lombarda», 64 (1983/1), pp. 93-98, esp. 93; or L. ROTONDI SECCHI TARUGI, *Il baluardo difensivo di Castelseprio verso Torba*, in «Rassegna Gallaratese di Storia e d'Arte», XXXII, 119 (1973), pp. 81-88, esp. 88.

² The dedication of the abbey to St. Mary is documented by historical sources from 1049 and 1204. However, on the grounds of references to Torba in *Liber notitiae sanctorum Mediolani*, originating probably at the end of the 13th century, some historians inaccurately claimed that the convent was dedicated to St. Blaise. See for example G. GIULINI, *Memorie spettanti alla storia, al governo ed alla descrizione della città e campagna di Milano, ne' secoli bassi*, IV, Milano 1855 (1 ed. 1760), pp. 700, 722 and F. BOMBOGNINI, *Antiquario della Diocesi di Milano*, Milano 1856 (1 ed. 1790), p. 100. For the references, from which it would be possible to deduce that, at the time, there was a church of St. Mary with an altar dedicated to St. Calocerus and a monastery church of St. Blaise with two altars, first dedicated to St. Peter, second to St. Quiriacus; see G. ROTONDI, *Un passo di Galvano Flamma e il monastero di Torba*, in «Archivio Storico Lombardo», XLIX (1922), pp. 119-134, esp. 127, n. 2 and *Liber notitiae sanctorum Mediolani: manoscritto della Biblioteca capitolare di Milano*, eds. M. Magistretti and U. Monneret de Villard, Milano 1917. See also CHIZZONI - VASSALLI, 1987, p. 96 and S. LANGÉ, *Preliminari al complesso monumentale for-*

tificato della Torba (Castelseprio), in «Castellum», V (1967), pp. 33-48, esp. 36.

³ See G. P. BOGNETTI, *Aggiornamenti su Castelseprio III*, in «Sibrium», IV (1958-1959), pp. 19-79, esp. 21; E. ARSLAN, *L'architettura romanica milanese*, in *Storia di Milano*, III, 1954, pp. 395-521, esp. 413, n. 2; G. P. BOGNETTI, *S. Maria foris portas di Castelseprio e la storia religiosa dei Longobardi*, in *Santa Maria di Castelseprio*, eds. G. P. Bognetti, G. Chierici and A. De Capitani d'Arzago, Milano 1948, pp. 15-511, esp. 366, 396; ROTONDI, 1922, p. 127; and *Liber notitiae sanctorum...*, 1917.

⁴ See LANGÉ, 1967. Carlo Bertelli ascribed essential role in making the murals visible to Adriano Peroni. See C. BERTELLI, *Relazione preliminare sulle recenti scoperte pittoriche a Torba*, in *Longobardi e Lombardia: aspetti di civiltà longobarda. Atti del 6° congresso internazionale di studi sull'alto medioevo* (Milano, 21-25 ottobre 1978), Spoleto 1980, I, pp. 205-218, esp. 205 or S. LOMARTIRE, *Torba, Monastero di Santa Maria, Torre*, in *Pittura tra Ticino e Olona, Varese e la Lombardia nord-occidentale*, ed. M. Gregori, Milano 1992, pp. 215-216. For the mentioned Peroni's study, see A. PERONI, *O svjazi fresok cerkvi Santa Marija v Kastel'seprio i baziliki San Sal'vatore v Brešii* (in Russian), in *Vizantija južnye Slavjane i drevnjaja Rus, Zapadnaja Evropa*, ed. V. N. Graščenkov, Moskva 1973, pp. 375-387, esp. 385-386.

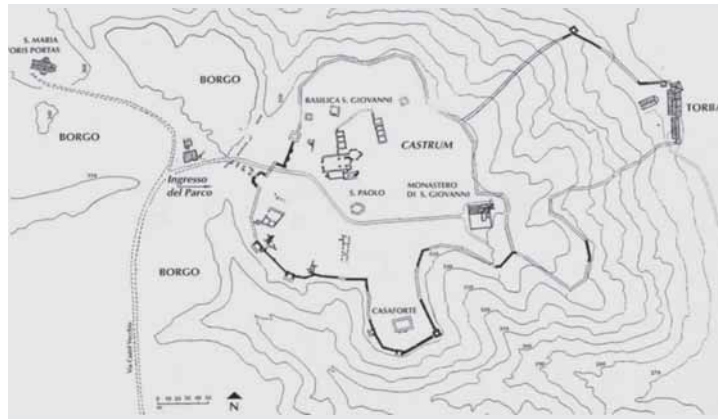
⁵ See for example P. G. SIRONI, *Le difese di Castelseprio nel XIII secolo*, in «Rassegna Gallaratese di Storia e d'Arte», XXXII, 119 (1973), pp. 67-73, esp. 68; ROTONDI SECCHI TARUGI, 1973; A. PERONI, *Spunti per un aggiornamento delle discussioni sugli affreschi di S. Maria di Castelseprio*, in «Rassegna Gallaratese di Storia e d'Arte», XXXII, 119 (1973), pp. 19-27, esp. 27; S. MAZZA, *Il complesso fortificato di Torba*, in «Sibrium», XIV (1978-1979), pp. 187-215, esp. 213; R. BAZZONI, *Il nucleo altomedievale di Torba*, in «Sibrium», XIV (1978-1979), pp. 217-218; R. M. KLOOS, *Die Inschriften im 1. Stock des Turmbaues von Torba*, in *Longobardi e Lombardia...*, 1980, pp. 219-224; or BERTELLI, 1980.

⁶ See for example BOGNETTI, 1948; K. WEITZMANN, *The Fresco Cycle of S. Maria di Castelseprio*, Princeton 1951; E. KITZINGER, *Byzantine art in the period between Justinian and Iconoclasm*, in *Berichte zum XI. Internationalen Byzantinisten-Kongress*, IV, 1, München 1958, pp. 1-50; P. D. LEVETO, *Castel Seprio: Architecture and Painting*, Dissertation thesis, Indiana University, 1985; or J. MITCHELL - B. LEAL, *Wall paintings in S. Maria foris portas (Castelseprio) and the tower at Torba. Reflections and reappraisal*, in *Castelseprio e Torba...*, 2013, pp. 311-345.

⁷ See C. BERTELLI, *Gli affreschi nella torre di Torba*, Milano 1988.



1. The tower at Torba (Castelseprio), exterior.

2. The *castrum* Castelseprio, general plan.

his ideas and interpretations have primarily shaped our understanding of the wall paintings from then on⁸. In fact, the second, and so far, the last in-depth study concentrating specifically on the tower's decoration, is an article written by John Mitchell and Bea Leal from 2013. Mitchell and Leal published their study in the monumental volume *Castelseprio e Torba: sintesi delle ricerche e aggiornamenti*, edited by Paola Marina De Marchi⁹ – largely following Bertelli's suggestions. The opinions of authors diverge on the function of the upper floor chapel. While Bertelli suggested it was used as a main liturgical space of the convent before a proper church had been constructed¹⁰, authors of the most recent article challenged his view. Mitchell and Leal believed that it was decorated and redesigned «expressly for funerary use [...] as a chapel for memorial masses, remembering and praying for the salvation of deceased sisters and benefactors»¹¹.

The scarce historiography of the tower provides answers to art-historical questions; however, some of them are based on imprecise arguments and observations, and therefore require our vigilance and a reconsidering. Firstly, after focusing on the little scholarly attention the tower at Torba has attracted in the past, the present article will attempt to introduce an in-depth reconsideration. We will discuss the relation between the decoration of the two floors, a proclaimed stylistic isolation of the murals and consequently, we will touch on the topic of their dating. Finally, reflecting on the iconography of the upper room's visual

scheme, we will propose a new layer of understanding of the wall paintings' *raison d'être* and their function. In other words, in the last section of the article, we will be interpreting the choice to reuse the military structure in a new sacral context.

The Reborn Tower at Torba

The murals of the tower at Torba are one of the most coherently preserved decorations from the 8th and 9th centuries created in the West. Here, we specifically address the iconography of the upper chamber's visual scheme, not the condition of its preservation. To understand the lack of attention given to the study of this object¹², we should not forget Renato Bazzoni's claim from 1987, celebrating not a survival but a «rebirth»¹³ of the tower at Torba, referring to its history full of struggle and affliction.

The first centuries of the tower's existence are shrouded in mystery. We can only assume that during the turbulent period after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the tower retained its original defensive function¹⁴. Based on the architectural layers of the structure itself¹⁵, the wall paintings preserved within its walls and the historical development of the region, we can presume, it was during the 8th century the tower's primarily military character transformed into a religious one also, becoming a part of a Benedictine convent¹⁶.

⁸ See LOMARTIRE, 1992; S. LOMARTIRE, *La pittura medievale in Lombardia*, in *La pittura in Italia, L'Altomedioevo*, ed. C. Bertelli, Milano 1994, pp. 47-89; F. DE RUBEIS, *Le iscrizioni della Torre del monastero di Santa Maria di Torba: un problema paleografico*, in *Castel Seprio e Vico Seprio. Aggiornamenti*, atti del convegno (Castelseprio - Torba, 22 settembre 2001), ed. C. Benati, Castelseprio 2002, pp. 83-100; M. ROSSI, *La tradizione dell'antico nella pittura alto-medievale del territorio del Seprio*, in *Medioevo: il tempo degli antichi*, ed. A. C. Quintavalle, Milano 2006, pp. 257-266; M. ROSSI, *Il problema Castelseprio*, in *L'VIII secolo, un secolo inquieto*, atti del convegno internazionale di studi (Cividale del Friuli, 4-7 dicembre 2010), ed. V. Pace, Cividale del Friuli 2010, pp. 131-137; ROSSI, 2011.

⁹ See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013.

¹⁰ See BERTELLI, 1988, p. 47.

¹¹ See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 344.

¹² For example, the tower was not mentioned at the international conference

L'VIII secolo..., 2010.

¹³ Renato Bazzoni writes about «rinascita», see R. BAZZONI, *Torba non più dimenticata*, in «Sibrium», XIX (1987-1988), pp. 153-164, esp. 154.

¹⁴ See P. M. DE MARCHI, *Castelseprio e il suo territorio in età longobarda e carolingia*, in *Castelseprio e Torba...*, 2013, pp. 15-44, esp. 15, and BAZZONI, 1997, p. 17. It has been suggested that the tower's position was supposed to reduce a probability of a successful attack from the valley and guarantee a water supply for the whole *castrum*. See BOGNETTI, 1958-1959, p. 21; SIRONI, 1973, p. 69; and ROTONDI SECCHI TARUGI, 1973, pp. 87-88. Cf. LANGÉ, 1967, pp. 36, 39.

¹⁵ See SCILLIA, 2013, p. 109. Cf. BROGIOLO, 2016, p. 228.

¹⁶ Renato Bazzoni suggested this change was feasible only in the Longobard period during which the military centers turned into places of trade and encounters. See BAZZONI, 1997, p. 17. Yet, it seems to also be possible that the nunnery was founded only after the fall of *Regnum Langobardorum* in 774. On the fall of *Regnum Langobardorum* and the Lombard king's politics at the

The first historical source referring to St. Mary's monastery at Torba dates to the 22nd of December 1049¹⁷. Neither this document nor more recent sources¹⁸ reveal much of the convent's life, let alone of an important decorative campaign. Nevertheless, life at Torba must have undergone a change after the famous destruction of Castelseprio in 1287. The *castrum* was demolished under the command of Milanese Archbishop Ottone Visconti and only sacred places within the complex were spared of the terror¹⁹. That is most likely the reason why the tower at Torba withstood the tragic fall of Castelseprio²⁰. The Benedictine nunnery retained some of its possessions even after this event, yet the life without the *castrum* was complicated²¹. Economic troubles²², together with the convent's isolated and dangerous position within a now depopulated area, led to its second and final²³ abandonment in 1481²⁴. The departure of the nuns truly meant "death" for the tower and the murals within it. Thanks to several documents²⁵, it is possible to deduce that the former abbey was rented to farmers, as soon as it had been abandoned by the nuns²⁶. It was used in the everyday life of its new residents until the second half of the 20th century.

It is no surprise that scholars found the former abbey in a miserable condition. In 1967, Santino Langé confirms the poor condition of the abbey by saying: «attualmente si presenta infatti come un cascinale piuttosto in cattivo stato, quasi completamente ricoperto di edera, con intonaci fatiscenti e finestre casualmente



3. The tower at Torba, second floor, east wall, before 1977.

ricavate, prive di sottolineature architettoniche»²⁷. Langé knew the restoration of the murals hidden under the layers of whitewash was necessary (fig. 3). He also knew the process could not be initiated until after the farmers left (at some point before 1970), and after the property has been purchased by Giulia Maria Mozzoni Crespi in 1976²⁸. The new owner, one of the founders of FAI (Fondo Ambiente Italiano), officially donated the Torba Abbey to

beginning of the 70's, see for example T. INDELLI, *Langobardia, I Longobardi in Italia*, Padova 2013, pp. 46-50; J. T. HALLENBECK, *Pavia and Rome: The Lombard Monarchy and the Papacy in the Eight Century*, Philadelphia 1982, pp. 137-174; D. S. SEFTON, *Pope Hadrian I and the Fall of the Kingdom of the Lombards*, in «The Catholic Historical Review», LXV (1979/2), pp. 206-220; P. PARTNER, *The Lands of St. Peter*, London 1972, pp. 29-33.

¹⁷ This document records a donation of two estates, the second of which is located near Torba, by the Archbishop of Milan, Guido da Velate, to the nuns of S. Maria del Monte in Varese: «secundo campo iacet ad l. ubi dic. Ciscalina: da munte S. Marie de monesterio qui dic. Turba, da alia parte aliquantum in via, et est tab. XXX». See *Regesto di S. Maria di Monte Velate, sino all'anno 1200*, ed. C. Manaresi, Roma 1937, p. 23, item 32. For this and other historical sources regarding Torba, see also PANIN, 1983, p. 94; E. T. VILLA, *Le monache di Torba e i Castiglioni di Casciago*, in «Archivio Storico Lombardo», CIII (1979), pp. 303-330, esp. 304; G. D. OLTRONA VISCONTI, *Il monastero di Torba (note per una cronologia)*, in «Rassegna Gallaratese di Storia e d'Arte», XIX, 75 (1960), pp. 175-177; and ROTONDI, 1922, esp. 126.

¹⁸ We refer to a document from 1124, which records a donation of the land «a meridie Sancte Marie de Turba», published in *Le pergamene della Basilica di S. Vittore di Varese (899-1202)*, ed. L. Zagni, Milano 1992, pp. 77-78, item 48. See also *Regesto di Santa Maria...*, 1937, p. 264, item 385 for a document from 1198 which reads: «a mane heredum Laurencii Calbi, a meridie abatisse de Turba, a sero S. Marie de Monte».

¹⁹ The destruction was ordered after thirty years of quarrel between Sepriese nobility and the Milanese archbishop. See BAZZONI, 1997, p. 18; M. O. H. CARVER, *S. Maria Foris Portas at Castel Seprio: A Famous Church in a New Context*, in «World Archaeology», XVIII (1987/3), pp. 312-329, esp. 312; LEVETO, 1985, p. 4; or BOGNETTI, 1948, pp. 357-362. The order of the archbishop was clear: «Castrum Seprium destruatur, et destructum perpetuo teneatur, et nullus audeat vel praesumat in ipso Monte habitare». See GIULINI, 1855, p. 698 or BOGNETTI, 1948, p. 496.

²⁰ Renato Bazzoni argues that the tower would probably survive even if it was not protected by the presence of nuns, since a demolition of a structure so architecturally advanced would be an enormously difficult task. The tower at

Torba was, as argues Bazzoni, more resistant than walls surrounding the whole complex. See BAZZONI, 1987-1988, pp. 153-154.

²¹ On the convent and life of the nuns, see especially VILLA, 1979 and PANIN, 1983.

²² With a lease contract signed in 1357, nuns rented all their estates to Guarnerio and Obizzo Castiglione. This is the first sign of economic problems, which probably only deepened during the following years. See VILLA, 1979, pp. 308 and 319-321; OLTRONA VISCONTI, 1960, p. 176; and ROTONDI, 1922, p. 128.

²³ The nuns of the abbey left the convent for the first time in 1426. They joined nuns from the convent of S. Antonino di Luvinata, which also belonged to the Benedictine order. Giuseppe Rotondi mentions four documents relating to the decision of nuns, in which we find also a reference to an ongoing local war: «bellozum turbines». See ROTONDI, 1922, p. 129. See also VILLA, 1979, p. 308 or OLTRONA VISCONTI, 1960, p. 176. The fusion between the two convents lasted for approximately thirty years. At some point during the period between 1457 and 1460, the nuns returned to their home at Torba, renovated some of its parts only to abandon it again, the last time being in 1481. See ROTONDI, 1922, p. 130 and PANIN, 1983, pp. 95-97.

²⁴ In 1481, Ubertetto Pusterla, the uncle of the then abbess, Margherita Pusterla, donated to the nuns a house in Tradate (close to the church of S. Sepolcro), into which they moved. S. Sepolcro Abbey in Tradate became their new seat. See VILLA, 1979, p. 309 and ROTONDI, 1922, pp. 131-132.

²⁵ Yula Panin argues that document from 1436, which records an anxious effort of the nuns to ensure the right to draw water from an irrigation ditch, so their lawns could be watered, suggests a presence of a tenant farmer. See PANIN, 1983, p. 94. Ettore Tito Villa believes that the income from their estates enabled them to live independently even within the different convent. See VILLA, 1979, p. 308.

²⁶ See BAZZONI, 1997, p. 18; ROTONDI, 1922, pp. 133-134; and PANIN, 1983, p. 94. In fact, the complex remained in the possession of the Sisters until 1799, when their new convent at Tradate was suppressed in accordance to the policy of Napoleon. See also T. TIBILETTI, *Testimonianze letterarie e indagini archeologiche a Castelseprio. Interpretazioni, problemi, spunti di riflessione*, in *Castelseprio e Torba...*, 2013, pp. 45-86, esp. 81 and OLTRONA VISCONTI, 1960, p. 177.

²⁷ See LANGÉ, 1967, p. 34.

²⁸ See BAZZONI, 1997, p. 18.



4. The tower at Torba, second floor, east wall, detail of an angel.

the above-mentioned organization in 1977²⁹. Consequently, the restoration works³⁰ led by Renato Bazzoni (FAI) and Pinin Brambilla Barcilon started³¹. Thanks to these careful interventions the tower rose from the ashes, or rather, returning to the words of Bazzoni, it was truly «reborn».

The tower was under private ownership up until 1976, making it almost inaccessible and in a poor state of preservation. This fact is the major cause for its relatively scarce historiography. Another valid reason for this, as Langé pointed out in 1973, might also be the traditional perception of the complex as a separate convent rather than an integral part of the *castrum*³². The *castrum* itself attracted scholarly attention thanks to the discovery of the Santa Maria *foris portas*' frescoes in 1944³³. The latter wall paintings with their Hellenistic character aroused a great and widespread interest³⁴, understandable in the context of the forties of the 20th century. During this time scholars such as Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Kitzinger and Kurt Weitzmann intensely dealt with the question of medieval renaissances³⁵. It seems the Hellenistic forms and high-quality frescoes in Santa Maria *foris portas*, grasped the attention of scholars away from the highly stylized and worse preserved paintings from the very beginning. However, it must be emphasized that

the first discovery in the Santa Maria *foris portas* in 1944 and the increased interest in the area linked to it, eventually led to the uncovering of the painted walls at Torba.

Two Chambers and Layers of Painted Plaster

We have already pointed out the rare integrity of the preserved visual scheme of the chapel in the second floor of the tower. In the following paragraphs, we will focus on its iconography and its relation to the layers of the remaining painted plaster in the chamber below.

The focal point of the upper cycle, which unfolds on the walls of a small, nearly square room, is the enthroned beardless Christ with a cruciform nimbus represented between two secured windows of the east wall (fig. 5). He is flanked by two angels. The one better preserved on Christ's left side, holds an orb in his left hand, painted by using a pair of compasses (fig. 4). A group of four people is represented on the right side of the wall, beyond the window. The closest to the main group is John the Baptist holding a lamb, or rather a medallion with a lamb. The following saint may be interpreted as St. Peter, based on his white hair and beard. It is difficult to specify whom the other two figures represent, though; it is possible they are apostles³⁶. There are no visible fragments of saints to be found on the left side of the wall. Nevertheless, following the well-known iconography of *Deësis*, we can presume the iconic presence of Virgin Mary³⁷, though different possibilities cannot be excluded³⁸. The probable position of her depiction, as John Mitchell and Bea Leal observed, could be accentuated by as well as deduced from a large cross on a dado painted as a *velum* in the lower part of the wall³⁹.

The opposite west wall is divided by a single axial window (fig. 6). Eight figures – all of them most likely male saints – are depicted above a dado painted as a marble on the left side of the

²⁹ See M. MAGNIFICO, *Presentazione*, in *Castelseprio e Torba...*, 2013, p. 12.

³⁰ Thanks to the historical development and late rediscovery of the tower, the murals avoided in some cases inconsiderate interventions of the later centuries. In fact, only two interventions have been carried out. The first started almost immediately after the monument had been acquired by the FAI. To be more specific, the restorer received the official authorization for proceeding to the works from Soprintendenza on the 25th of August 1977. The second restoration campaign started only thirty years later in 2007. It was motivated by a continual degradation caused primarily by an inadequate temperature and humidity. The independent restorer Pinin Brambilla Barcilon led both restoration campaigns. Sadly though, a documentation has been preserved only to the later and much more delicate intervention, i. e. to those from 2007. We can explain this lack of earlier documents by laconic commentary of Barcilon, who stated that there is any detailed documentation since it was not required by the commission at the end of the 70's. I would like to thank Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la Città Metropolitana di Milano as well as FAI for their cooperation. For the documents concerning the restoration as well as the tower's history from 1960's, see Milano, Archivio Monumenti della Soprintendenza, folders o/2 4580 and o/2 4580 II. For the early photos of the tower and the murals see Milano, Archivio Fotografico della Soprintendenza, entry «(VA) Torba». See also *Il notiziario del FAI*, from 1980 on.

³¹ See TIBILETTI, 2013, p. 85; BAZZONI, 1987-1988, p. 154; and BERTELLI 1980, p. 205.

³² S. LANGÉ, *L'inserimento del monastero fortificato di Torba nel dibattito di Castelseprio*, in «Rassegna Gallaratese di Storia e d'Arte», XXXII, 119 (1973),

pp. 75-79, esp. 75.

³³ See BOGNETTI, 1948.

³⁴ See above note 6.

³⁵ See K. WEITZMANN, *The Joshua Roll: a Work of the Macedonian Renaissance*, Princeton 1948. E. KITZINGER, *Mosaic Pavements in the Greek East, and the Question of a «Renaissance» under Justinian*, in *Actes du VI^e Congrès International d'Études Byzantines*, Paris, 27th July - 2nd August 1948, II, Paris 1951, pp. 209-223; and E. PANOFSKY, *Renaissance and Renaissances*, in «The Kenyon Review», VI (1944/2), pp. 201-236.

³⁶ At first, Bertelli imagined that nine apostles (three on the east wall and six on the south one) are depicted on Christ's left side. Three more, according to the author, were represented on the east wall, following the possible representation of Mary. In 1988, Carlo Bertelli divided the group of apostles as follows: eight on the east wall; one on the south wall; and three on the north wall. See BERTELLI, 1980, pp. 210-211. Cf. BERTELLI, 1988, p. 26.

³⁷ See BERTELLI, 1980, p. 210 and BERTELLI, 1988, p. 26. For the iconic presence, see H. BELTING, *Iconic Presence. Images in Religious Traditions*, in «Material Religion» (published online), XII (2016/2), 235-237.

³⁸ We must recall the 7th century text from Constantinople describing a miracle of St. Artemios. This miracle describes a chancel screen on which has been depicted Christ between John the Baptist and the church patron St. Artemios in large icons. See H. BELTING, *Likeness and Presence, A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Chicago 1994 (I ed. 1990), p. 233, 502.

³⁹ See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 337.



5. The tower at Torba, second floor, east wall.



6. The tower at Torba, second floor, west wall.



7. The tower at Torba, second floor, south wall, detail with *Hodigitria*.

central opening. Another eight saints are represented to the right, north of the window. Thanks to the inscription (SCA EVFEMIA, St. Euphemia) and the physiognomy of preserved faces, we can assume that they are all female. A praying nun in a dark habit is painted below each of these eight saints⁴⁰. The nuns' position in the lower part of the wall can be explained. Firstly, they were not an integral part of the heavenly realm and secondly, there was a need to divide the minimalistic, square, originally only military chamber into functional sections⁴¹. It truly seems, the actual nuns entering the chamber were conducted by the scheme itself. Put differently, the image seems to lead their movement towards their designated places within the chapel. Due to the absence of attributes or *tituli*, apart from St. Euphemia, a precise identification of the figures depicted on this wall is impossible.

The same could be said about fragments of six figures in the left part of the south wall⁴². In fact, the only clearly recognizable person on this wall is the Mother of God holding the child Christ – *Hodigitria* (fig. 7, tav. 2) – represented on the right side of the current entrance⁴³. A smaller figure, a woman dressed in lay-clothes with a square halo (this motif could suggest that she was still alive when the decoration was being created) offers a candle to the Virgin⁴⁴. Carlo Bertelli identified her as an unknown noblewoman, «comitissa Seprii», one of the benefactors of the murals⁴⁵. There are four more saints standing on the right side of the offering scene and one martyr depicted on the left, crowning a cleric dressed as a bishop⁴⁶. Due to his lower position outside of the frame, the absence of a nimbus, and the coronation act itself, the latter has been identified as another donor, or «at least a ranking ecclesiastic with a particular interest in the community at Torba»⁴⁷.

⁴⁰ Saverio Lomartire believes that we may be facing the representation of all nuns who lived in the convent at the time the walls were painted. Consequently, this image has been defined as a «collective portrait». See LOMARTIRE, 1992, p. 215 and BERTELLI, 1980, p. 213. In addition, John Mitchell with Bea Leal suggested «the saints above may represent the name patrons of the nuns below». See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 342. Since we do not have any information about the sisters' life from the period of murals' creation, such hypotheses need to be treated with caution.

⁴¹ The alternation of *velum* and marble imitations also belongs to this necessity. See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, pp. 337-339. These authors claim that the dado is used «to articulate and introduce hierarchical structure». See also BERTELLI, 1988, p. 26.

⁴² The most eastern figure on the south wall has been generally interpreted as an apostle. See for example ROSSI, 2011, p. 40 and BERTELLI, 1988, p. 26. The other five figures were read by Bertelli in 1980 as apostles also. See BERTELLI, 1980, pp. 210-211. However, in 1988, he claimed they are martyrs. Cf. BERTELLI, 1988, p. 26.

⁴³ It was especially Carlo Bertelli and Jean-Claude Genoud who dealt with the question of the chamber's entrance. They described three stages of the upper floor existence: First, the room was accessible through an inner stairway; it had only windows, no doors; the walls were bare. Second, the door on the south wall was created; the walls have been whitewashed (the simple red band was painted in the lower part of the walls). Third, the southern entrance was walled up; the door in the north wall emerged; the walls were decorated with the mural cycle. See J.-C. GENOUD - C. BERTELLI, *Torba*, in «Etudes de lettres, Revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne», CCXIII (1987/2-3), pp.

67-83, esp. 70 and BERTELLI, 1988, pp. 12-13, 17. Cf. BERTELLI, 1980, pp. 208-209. Ideas of Genoud and Bertelli were not reflected in the more recent studies. See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 340.

⁴⁴ See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 341; BERTELLI, 1988, pp. 28 and 47. Regarding this figure, Marco Rossi stated: «potrebbe forse trattarsi della contemporanea badessa, o della fondatrice del monastero, o di una nobile protettrice della comunità». See ROSSI, 2011, p. 44. The belief that a square nimbus was the marker of a living person is based on the 9th century description of the portrait of Gregory I in SS. Andrea e Gregorio at Rome. It must be noted, however, that this bizarre piece of iconography does not always have to identify someone who is alive, as reminded George Bishop Tatum. See G. B. TATUM, *The Paliotto of Sant'Ambrogio at Milan*, in «The Art Bulletin», XXVI (1944/1), pp. 25-45, esp. 28. See also J. OSBORNE, *The Portrait of Pope Leo IV in San Clemente, Rome: a Re-Examination of the So-Called 'Square' Nimbus, in Medieval Art*, in «Papers of the British School at Rome», XLVII (1979), pp. 58-65, esp. 64. See also S. FISHER, *The Square Halo and Other Mysteries of Western Art*, New York 1995.

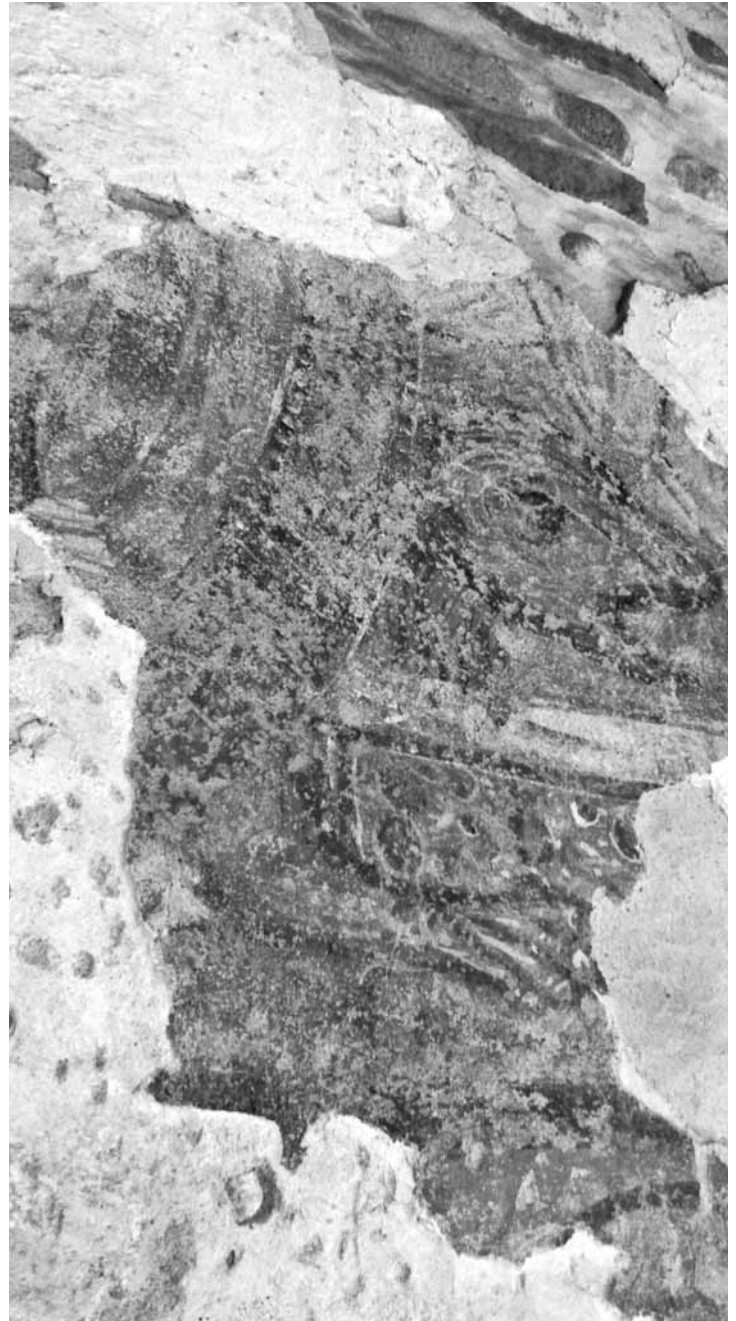
⁴⁵ See C. BERTELLI, *Pittura di età carolingia nell'Italia settentrionale e a Castelseprio*, in «Sibrium», XIX (1987-1988), pp. 81-86, esp. 86 and BERTELLI, 1988, pp. 28, 47.

⁴⁶ The cleric wears a long tunic, chasuble, and an embroidered stole. Carlo Bertelli suggested, on the bases of comparison of this coronation with that of Angilbert II depicted on the famous Golden Altar of S. Ambrogio in Milano, that the martyr who crowns the bishop was in fact the saint to which the chapel was dedicated. See BERTELLI, 1988, p. 28 and ROSSI, 2011, p. 44.

⁴⁷ See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 341. See also ROSSI, 2011, pp. 40-44 and BERTELLI, 1988, pp. 28, 47.

Only few fragments of the decorative scheme are preserved on the north wall of the room. The lower parts of two figures are recognizable between two openings, opposite today's door. The one, next to the right opening, seems to depict a different ecclesiastic authority, judging from a richly ornamented stole. The other was identified by Bertelli as a saint or a martyr. Mitchell and Leal, however, believed that it represents a material benefactor⁴⁸. Furthermore, there used to be a panel between these two figures with an inscription, but unfortunately, today it is undecipherable⁴⁹. An essential piece of the cycle survived at the western end of the same wall, namely a lion with a jeweled book in its paws, supporting the lower right part of the mandorla (fig. 8, tav. 1). Considering the popularity of the visual scheme known as *Maiestas Domini*⁵⁰ around 800, we follow a hypothesis already presented by Bertelli, who stated that the mandorla «doveva contenere un'immagine del Redentore in trono»⁵¹.

The upper room's iconography is rich in art-historical significance; therefore, two more observations must be made regarding it. Firstly, saints, martyrs, and ornamental motifs are painted on the jambs of openings. Secondly, remains of the red decorative band, which had been painted around the whole room before the creation of the above-described cycle are clearly visible in the lower part of the walls. In fact, Vincenzo Gheroldi recognized, on the grounds of stratigraphic evidence, geomorphological analysis and the recognition of different working techniques, three layers of painted or whitewashed plaster in this room⁵². The first and second of these layers are related to the red band. The murals are painted on the third one, which is superimposed on the other two and separated into *pontatas*. Here we must stress that, subtle changes and substitutions were made on this third painted plaster, traceable on the south and west walls (fig. 9). As Gheroldi observed, they are «rifacimenti in corso d'opera anziché sostituzioni di altra fase»⁵³. In other words, as Bertelli already presupposed⁵⁴ and Gheroldi supported via his research, the whole mural cycle of the upper chamber originated from a single decorative campaign.



8. The tower at Torba, second floor, north wall, detail.

⁴⁸ Cf. BERTELLI, 1988, p. 33 and MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 340.

⁴⁹ This panel, according to Mitchell and Leal, «marked the dedication of the chamber as a sacred space». See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 340.

⁵⁰ For this iconography, see Y. CHRISTE, *Une 'Maiestas Domini' de type Lombard*, in «Arte Lombarda», 102-103 (1992/3-4), pp. 5-13; Y. CHRISTE, *L'Apocalypse de Jean: sens et développements de ses visions synthétiques*, Paris 1996, pp. 123-131; B. KÜHNEL, *The End of Time in the Order of Things*, Regensburg 2003; A.-O. POILPRÉ, *Maiestas Domini. Une image de l'Église en Occident*, Paris 2005; or V. CANTONE VALENTINA, *Ars monastica. Iconografia teofanica e tradizione mistica nel Mediterraneo altomedievale (V-XI secolo)*, Padova 2008. See also LOMARTIRE, 1992, p. 215. The last-mentioned uses the term also for the enthroned Christ on the east wall. This is understandable, since this denomination means in general, as Peter K. Klein states, «the enthroned Christ in majesty». I have chosen to apply this term only to the north wall image both to avoid confusion and to follow contemporary art-historical jargon. P. K. KLEIN, *Introduction: The Apocalypse in Medieval Art*, in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, eds. R. K. Emmerson and B. McGinn, Ithaca-London 1992, pp. 159-199, esp. 163. Cf. É. PALAZZO, *L'invention chrétienne*

des cinq sens dans la liturgie et l'art au Moyen Âge, Paris 2014.

⁵¹ See BERTELLI, 1988, p. 29. Illuminations of the famous *Trier Apocalypse* allow us to speculate that a depiction of the Lamb of God, or even the triumphant horned lamb of Revelation, was painted inside of this mandorla. On the manuscript, see for example J. SNYDER, *The Reconstruction of an Early Christian Cycle of Illustrations for the Book of Revelation - the Trier Apocalypse*, in «Vigiliae Christianae», XVIII (1964), pp. 146-162 or P. L. KLEIN, *L'Apocalypse de Trèves*, in *Le Jugement dernier entre Orient et Occident*, ed. V. Pace, Milano 2006, pp. 37-39.

⁵² See V. GHEROLDI, *I rivestimenti aniconici e i dipinti murali della Torre del Monastero femminile benedettino di Torba*, in *Castelseprio e Torba...*, 2013, pp. 293-310, esp. 300-303. Cf. BERTELLI, 1988, pp. 12-13, 17.

⁵³ The hand of the donor who is depicted next to the Madonna on the south wall was at first higher, also the color of her dress was different. On the west wall, the head of the second sister in the row of portrayed women (from the left) was originally higher. See GHEROLDI, 2013, p. 308.

⁵⁴ See BERTELLI, 1980, pp. 211-213. See also BERTELLI, 1988, pp. 22, 29.



9. The tower at Torba, second floor, west wall, detail.

Multiple layers of painted plaster are also preserved in the lower room. The oldest one includes a dado painted in imitation of polychrome *opus sectile* in the lower section of the east wall. It is identical to the same motif on the west wall of the

upper chamber⁵⁵. Secondly, there are remaining fragments of a large narrative composition above the painted dado⁵⁶. Mitchell and Leal suggested an alluring, yet untenable hypothesis considering the murals' state of preservation. According to the scholars, fragments «might be consonant with a representation of the Maries speaking with the Angel at the tomb of the risen Christ»⁵⁷. Thirdly, a border defining the space of the east recess is recognizable on its reveals. This delimitation would suggest that when this room received its first decoration, the walls of the recesses were left bare, with no embellishments. Remains of an unspecified, painted plaster are also preserved on the south wall.

Several figures are displayed in the alcoves of the southeastern corner. We can still recognize three saints and three praying women – most likely nuns. One is called Aliberga, as a palimpsest *titulus* next to her reveals⁵⁸. Furthermore, an ochre cross (or Christogram⁵⁹) is depicted on a white background with a long inscription around it⁶⁰. These murals were painted on a subsequent layer of plaster several years after the first layer of the lower room had been finished⁶¹. Carlo Bertelli believed they originated in the same period as the cycle of the upper room⁶². John Mitchell with Bea Leal suggested the first floor, including all its decorative phases, was completed even before the work on the murals above began⁶³. However, Gheroldi disproved both latter hypotheses by technological research. The scholar demonstrated, it is the first layer of plaster of the lower chamber which corresponds to the third layer above; the layer on which the murals were created⁶⁴. The typology of the imitated *opus sectile* visible on the walls of both the lower and upper chamber strongly supports his conclusion. Consequently, we can imagine an impressive decorative campaign resulting in murals covering four walls of both chambers; most likely related both in its iconography as well as its functional use⁶⁵.

⁵⁵ See GHEROLDI, 2013, p. 295, fig. 4a.

⁵⁶ We refer to a fragment of an inclined head and the lower part of a standing figure, both turning left; and almost unidentifiable painted elements in the upper left section of the central field – it has been suggested that these used to form a part of an architectural structure. See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, pp. 328-329.

⁵⁷ See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 329.

⁵⁸ For reading this palimpsest inscription, see BERTELLI, 1980, p. 214; KLOOS, 1980, p. 219; BERTELLI, 1988, pp. 40-41; ROSSI, 2011, p. 46; or LOMARTIRE, 1992, p. 216.

⁵⁹ Rudolph M. Kloos suggested the upper part of the image was comprised of the “P” shape. See KLOOS, 1980, p. 220.

⁶⁰ The inscription in ochre letters spread on the white background around the cross comprises of the Greek redemptive letters Alpha (Α) and Omega (Ω) hanged on three chains from both limbs of the cross; letters which can be read as *Hec lex dei vera* around the chains; and a long *titulus* located on both sides of the cross under the letters Alpha and Omega. The reading of this text is not an easy task. The major role in its interpretation played the word ALEXANDRIA. In 1980, Kloos suggested that it is a reference to the Egyptian city from which a relic of an unknown saint had been taken to Torba (KLOOS, 1980, pp. 223-224). Yet, Bertelli proposed in the same publication that the person transferred

from Alexandria to Torba could have been alive. In other words, the mention of the city was, in his opinion, only an important piece of information regarding the place of a deceased's origin (BERTELLI, 1980, pp. 214-215). Then, in 1992, Saverio Lomartire asserted that the text refers to an Abbess Alessandra. It thus became this abbess, and not relics from Alexandria, for whom the «eternal rest [in the bosom of] Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob» in the inscription is asked (LOMARTIRE, 1992, p. 216). This reading together with the cross's typology and the resemblance of the recesses with *arcosoliums* provided Mitchell and Leal arguments to state that the lower chamber was used in a funerary and memorial sense. See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 326.

⁶¹ See GHEROLDI, 2013, pp. 293-299.

⁶² See BERTELLI, 1988, p. 40.

⁶³ See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, pp. 336 and 344.

⁶⁴ See GHEROLDI, 2013, p. 294.

⁶⁵ Remains of a painted plaster are also visible on the south wall of the lower room. Unfortunately, we cannot determine neither the fragments' iconography, nor whether they belong to the first, second, or even later decorative phase of this chamber. See GHEROLDI, 2013, p. 299. Nevertheless, its existence is rather in accordance with the statement, that all walls of the lower room were originally decorated with an elaborate scheme, than it is in contradiction to this hypothesis. See also MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 329 and BROGIOLO, 2016, p. 227.

The Date and the Stylistic Isolation

Regarding the question of dating, we first need to focus on the so far omitted construction history of the tower. We have already established that its origins extend to the 5th or 6th century at the very latest⁶⁶. Its upper floors, however, do not seem to belong to the initial phase of construction. Angela Scillia dated both levels in which the murals are preserved before the 8th century, yet, Gian Pietro Brogiolo attributed the upper chamber to a later period. The latest ¹⁴C (Carbon-14) analyses of the mortar are taken from the external masonry in the area around the entrance into the chapel. These analyses led the scholar to suggest a generic dating of this upper elevation between the 9th and 10th centuries⁶⁷. This result, which would give us a *terminus post quem* for the murals, should be however, as the author itself emphasizes, taken with caution, considering difficulties brought by analyses of a mortar. In addition, the question of entering the room, as Bertelli and Jean-Claude Genoud pointed out, seems to be a problematic one, due to structural changes. These changes, especially regarding the openings, occurred after the wall paintings were already finished⁶⁸. Consequently, it is still necessary to search for different methods of examination to bring us closer to a correct solution.

Paleography and epigraphy played a significant role in dating the murals⁶⁹. The reasonably certain *terminus ante quem* was provided by the «Margarite» *graffito*, in the form of a minuscule engraving into the surface of the painted plaster beneath Christ's representation on the east wall (fig. 10)⁷⁰. Carlo Bertelli stressed that writing on a piece of papyrus differs greatly from an engraving into a wall, nonetheless, he compared the two. According to him, the characteristic form of the letter «r» is comparable to the late 8th century North Italian writings⁷¹. Furthermore, the letters «g» and «a», in his opinion, represent the Carolingian type⁷². These forms, as the author claimed in 1988, would not appear after the second decade of the 9th century⁷³.

Painted inscriptions preserved in majuscule located in both chambers helped scholars determine the date. Flavia De Rubeis,



10. The tower at Torba, second floor, east wall, «Margarite» *graffito*.

for example, suggested the murals originated towards the end of the 8th century, because the painted inscriptions correspond to the *tituli* documented in the Longobard mural cycles of Brescia (San Salvatore) and Cividale (Longobard Temple)⁷⁴. Scholars have reached similar conclusions on dating, thanks to analyses of both painted and engraved inscriptions on the tower's inner walls. The dates oscillate between fifty years around the year 800⁷⁵. A question that arises is whether the art historical concept of style supports those conclusions⁷⁶.

Before attempting to resolve it, however, we must address the technique of the murals and the condition of their preservation, inherently linked to it. The wall paintings were not rendered in *buon fresco* but *fresco-secco* technique. The first draft of the scheme was sketched into a still wet plaster (separated into *pontatas*), whereas most of the details (facial features, folds of draperies, etc.) were applied on the already dried surface⁷⁷. The murals' resistance to harmful aspects of time, was in result, weakened from the very beginning. Thus, after the mentioned restorative works at the end of the seventies; including the removal of layers of whitewash covering the paintings, an implementation of the stylistic analysis was, and still is, problematic.

⁶⁶ Cf. BROGIOLO, 2016, pp. 227-228 and SCILLIA, 2013, p. 109.

⁶⁷ See BROGIOLO, 2016, pp. 227-228; BROGIOLO, 2013, pp. 216-219; and SCILLIA, 2013.

⁶⁸ See above note 43.

⁶⁹ For paleographic and epigraphic analyses of Torba's inscriptions, see BERTELLI, 1980, pp. 215-216; KLOOS, 1980; and DE RUBEIS, 2002.

⁷⁰ Today, we can read only a part of original four engraved inscriptions, because a segment of the plaster carrying them has been lost. Bertelli characterized these inscriptions as «graffiti commemorative». See C. BERTELLI, *Ultimi studi sulle pitture di Castelseprio e Torba*, in *Castel Seprio e Vico Seprio*, 2002, pp. 1-8, esp. 3 and BERTELLI, 1988, p. 20. Fortunately, thanks to a transcription provided by the scholar in 1980, we can partly reconstruct their original form. See BERTELLI, 1980, p. 215. See also LEVETO, 1985, pp. 17-18, n. 36.

⁷¹ Bertelli compared the inscription with Ms. Phillips 1885 from the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. See BERTELLI, 1980, pp. 215-216. For the manuscript, see H. DEGERING, *Die Schrift, Atlas der Schriftformen des Abendlandes vom Altertum bis zum Ausgang des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1929, p. 25 and fig. 42.

⁷² In the words of Bertelli himself, «Altri elementi significativi sono poi le

forme della g e della a, di tipo carolingio nonostante la parvenza più arcaica dell'insieme dell'iscrizione». See BERTELLI, 1980, p. 216. On the Carolingian minuscule and its ample bibliography, see L. E. BOYLE, *Medieval Latin Palaeography, A Bibliographical Introduction*, Toronto-Buffalo-London 1984, pp. 140-170.

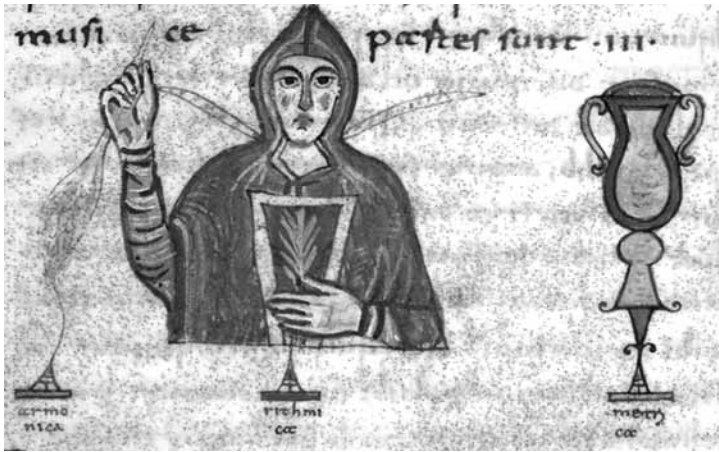
⁷³ See BERTELLI, 1988, p. 40. Cf. DE RUBEIS, 2002, pp. 98-99.

⁷⁴ De Rubeis pointed out the similar morphology of the letters and the vertically developed script system. See DE RUBEIS, 2002, pp. 84-88 and 98-99.

⁷⁵ See for example LANGÉ, 1967, pp. 44 and 48; LANGÉ, 1973, p. 77; BERTELLI, 1980, pp. 215-216; BERTELLI, 1988, p. 40; DE RUBEIS, 2002, pp. 98-99; MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, pp. 336 and 344.

⁷⁶ See for example J. ELSNER, *Style*, in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. R. S. Nelson and R. Shiff, Chicago-London 2003 (I ed. 1996), pp. 98-109; A. PINOTTI, *Formalism and the history of style*, in *Art History and Visual studies in Europe*, eds. M. Rampley et al., Leiden 2012, pp. 75-90; H. WÖLFFLIN, *Principles of art history. The problem of the development of style in early modern art*, eds. J. Blower (transl.), E. A. Levy and T. Weddigen, Los Angeles 2015 (I ed. 1915).

⁷⁷ See BERTELLI, 1980, pp. 211-213.



11. Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine, ms. 660, f. 133r.



12. The tower at Torba, second floor, west wall, two lost heads of nuns.



13. The tower at Torba, second floor, west wall, face of a saint.

Furthermore, the fact that preserved medieval objects form only a minute fragment of the originally much richer visual culture, led Bertelli to claim the wall paintings do not have any stylistic equivalent in a monumental decoration from the 8th and 9th centuries – neither in North Italy nor in its other parts⁷⁸. Comparisons with surviving murals cannot disprove the formal isolation of Torba (Tempietto Longobardo at Cividale, San Salvatore in Brescia, San Vincenzo al Volturno in Benevento, main church of the monastery of St. John in Müstair, Sant’Ambrogio alla Rienna at Montecorvino Rovella, Chapel of Theodotus in Santa Maria Antiqua, etc.). In fact, there has only been one attempt to link the murals to another wall painting. Based on the stylistic comparison with a saint preserved in Santa Maria presso San Satiro in Milano, Giovanni Valagussa cautiously suggested

dating the upper room scheme to the 10th century⁷⁹. Because of the thicker contours of the Milanese saint’s face, his overall starker and more rigid character, and the fact Valagussa neglected the already discussed analyses of inscriptions, it would be rather difficult to support his position.

Having in mind the problematic state of preservation and the differences between two media, we might draw our attention to manuscripts also. Illuminations of the codex of Bishop Eginone (769-799), written in Verona at the end of the 8th century, and the manuscript CLXV of the Chapter Library (Biblioteca Capitolare) in Vercelli, dated to the beginning of the 9th century have already been linked with the wall paintings by Bertelli. The art historian emphasized the analogies between the two being very generic and confirming the North Italian origin of the artist⁸⁰.

⁷⁸ See BERTELLI, 1980, pp. 216-217 and BERTELLI, 1988, pp. 40-41.

⁷⁹ See G. VALAGUSSA, *Dagli inizi della pittura al Duecento*, in *Pittura a Milano dall’Alto Medioevo al Tardogotico*, ed. M. Gregori, Milano 1997, pp. 31-42, esp. 33-34.

⁸⁰ See BERTELLI, 1988, p. 41. For the Codex of Bishop Eginone, also called

the *Codice di Eginone*, with four illuminations, each depicting one of the Church fathers, see Ch. MATTKE, *Mémoire et devoirs d’un évêque, l’iconographie du ‘codex’ d’Éginone*, in *Utilis est lapis in structura*, ed. L. Pressouyre, Paris 2000, pp. 215-230 and L. CASTELFRANCHI VEGAS, *L’arte medioevale in Italia e nell’Occidente europeo*, Milano 1993, p. 23. On the manuscript CLXV of the Chapter

The illumination of a musician from the codex of *Institutiones* of Cassiodorus (Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine, ms. 660) still provides us with more than a «generic» affinity (fig. 11)⁸¹. Its comparison with one of the nuns' faces in the chapel, preserved unfortunately only in the early photographs (fig. 12), is especially striking. The physiognomy of both – the elongated shape of their noses and faces in general, their almond shaped eyes created by the thick contours, as well as their emphasized cheeks – reveals a significant resemblance. The same features are visible also on other surviving faces at Torba (fig. 13, tav. 3). In 2000, Carlo Bertelli suggested that Mazarine 660 is the copy of a 6th century manuscript made at the order of Anselm (723-803; Duke of Friuli, then Abbot of Nonantola Abbey). This occurred sometime after he had returned to Nonantola from his exile at Monte Cassino, i. e. no later than in the eighties of the 8th century⁸². Following his hypothesis, we may believe, the paleographical and epigraphical investigations of Bertelli, De Rubeis and Rudolf M. Kloos are supported by formal aspects.

The question of dating Mazarine 660 is, however, much more delicate⁸³. Bernhard Bischoff, the main authority on western medieval manuscripts, stated: «nulla si conosce della sua storia»⁸⁴, and thus, similarly to the murals' case, we must rely only on the style of images and words when questioning its origin. Most recently, Giulia Orofino stated its style is in comparison to other Nonantola Abbey's manuscripts attributed to the first half of the 9th century «altrimenti maturo, spiegabile con una cronologia più avanzata, verso la fine del secolo»⁸⁵. If we consider the two generations involved and several hands which may have been responsible for the manuscript's rendering⁸⁶, Orofino's reasoning seems insufficient, yet it is a more detailed explanation than the one Bertelli had used to buttress his supposition in 2000⁸⁷. Which claim should be then supported?

We suggest Bertelli's hypothesis in question of dating the Mazarine 660. This would be the logical conclusion, considering the Mazarine 660's visual link to the murals, the analyses of the inscription in the tower mentioned above and the iconographic similarities between the enthroned Christ at Torba and



14. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Nouv.Acq.Lat. 1203, Godescalc Evangelistary (781-783), f. 3a, *Enthroned Christ*.

that of Godescalc manuscript from the eighties of the 8th century (fig. 14). We use the interconnection between the murals and the manuscript, firstly, to date the manuscript closer to the

Library in Vercelli, which is illuminated with drawings depicting the history of councils, see Ch. WALTER, *Les dessins carolingiens dans un manuscrit de Vercelli*, in «Cahiers archéologiques», XVIII (1968), pp. 99-107 and J. HUBERT - J. PORCHER - W. F. VOLBACH, *L'Europa delle invasioni barbariche*, Milano 1980, pp. 142-147. In 1980, Bertelli suggested a comparison with miniatures from the Ivrea's manuscripts. Cf. BERTELLI, 1980, p. 217. The Sacramentary of Warmund d'Ivrea, which Bertelli most likely meant, is today dated between 966-1002. See E. A. GATTI, *In a Space Between: Warmund of Ivrea and the Problem of (Italian) Ottonian Art*, in «Peregrination», III (2010/1), pp. 8-48.

⁸¹ For the musician, see especially B. BISCHOFF, *Manoscritti nonantolani dispersi dell'epoca carolingia*, in «La bibliofilia», LXXXV (1983), pp. 99-124, esp. 118.

⁸² See C. BERTELLI, *Aspetti dell'arte promossa dai Longobardi in Italia nell'VIII secolo*, in *Il futuro dei Longobardi. L'Italia e la costruzione dell'Europa di Carlo Magno. Saggi*, eds. C. Bertelli and G. P. Brogiolo, Milano 2000, pp. 189-195, esp. 189. On Anselm's exile, see G. BRAGA, *Testimonianze di vita monastica italiana fra nord e sud nell'VIII secolo*, in *Il monachesimo italiano dall'età longobarda all'età ottoniana (secc. VIII-X)*, ed. G. Spinelli, Cesena 2006, pp. 509-534, esp. 514.

⁸³ *Mazarine 660* is comprised of two parts. One of these belongs to the 15th century. Logically, it is the second one which we are interested in. According

to Bernhard Bischoff, the paleographical analysis reveals two generations of scribes and several different hands. One of the hands writes in the manner known at Nonantola; two or three others are comparable to the script of the Sessoriano 95, dated probably to the first half of the 9th century. See BISCHOFF, 1983, pp. 108, 118; G. CAVALLO, *Libri e cultura nelle due Italie longobarde*, in *Il futuro dei Longobardi... Saggi*, 2000, pp. 85-103, esp. 89; and C. ALBARELLO, *Cassiodoro, Institutiones*, in *Il futuro dei Longobardi. L'Italia e la costruzione dell'Europa di Carlo Magno*, exhibition catalogue, eds. C. Bertelli and G. P. Brogiolo, Milano 2000, pp. 158-159. For the early 10th century dating, see A. MOLINIER, *Catalogue des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Mazarine*, Paris 1885, pp. 301-302. For doubts about its North Italian origin, see M. PALMA, *Alle origini del «tipo di Nonantola»: nuove testimonianze meridionali*, in «Scrittura e civiltà», VII (1983), pp. 141-149, esp. 147. Cf. G. OROFINO, *Da Montecassino a Nonantola, la tradizione illustrativa delle Institutiones di Cassiodoro*, in *Il monachesimo italiano...*, 2006, pp. 553-607, esp. 560.

⁸⁴ See BISCHOFF, 1983, p. 118.

⁸⁵ See OROFINO, 2006, p. 561.

⁸⁶ See BISCHOFF, 1983, p. 118.

⁸⁷ See BERTELLI, 2000, p. 189.

year 800 – rather than to the second half of the 9th century. Secondly, we consider the opposite view to linger on the dating of the murals, once decorating both upper levels of the tower around 800. Subsequent layers of painted plaster documented in the southeastern corner of the lower chamber are probably only several years younger considering the similarities in the physiognomy of faces, technique and scripts⁸⁸.

The Intercession and Power of Saints at Torba

We have seen the wall paintings of the upper chamber raise intriguing questions regarding the iconography and function of the room, hence, the tower itself. Beside the row of apostles, saints, martyrs, and nuns, there are three iconographic points which come into our focus. It begins with the depiction of *Maiestas Domini* on the north wall, the votive image on the south wall, and the enthroned Christ surrounded by angels, John the Baptist, and (most likely) Mary on the east wall. According to John Mitchell and Bea Leal, the latter mentioned group, for which the Greek term *Deësis* (δέησις) has been frequently used⁸⁹, was depicted «in generic reference to the Last Judgement»⁹⁰. We will start our interpretation of the visual scheme by reflecting on this statement.

Starting from the end of the 19th century, most scholars (Nikodim P. Kondakov, Jean Fournée, or Louis Bréhier) explained the rather narrowly specified iconographic motif *Deësis* as a derivation of the eschatological vision⁹¹. They believed this imagery bears an eschatological connotation; an understanding which Mitchell and Leal follow in their statements. This tradi-

tional interpretation radically changed thanks to studies of Thomas von Bogyay and Christopher Walter in the second part of the sixties⁹². In 1968, Walter stated, «the advocacy of the Virgin and the Prodrome at the Last Judgment is simply a development of an already existing faith in their intercessory power [...]. This faith in their intercessory powers in its turn was a development of an already existing belief that they were exceptionally powerful in the heavenly court»⁹³. According to Walter and Bogyay, *Deësis* had been added to the Last Judgment theme later during the 11th century. Only then did it acquire new significance⁹⁴. Following their hypotheses, and the suggested dating of the wall paintings at Torba, it would be difficult to support Mitchell and Leal's proclamation. Bearing in mind ideas of Walter and Bogyay, we would likely adopt the interpretation of John and Mary as the logical part of heavenly court's vision, in which they figure as the witnesses of Christ's divinity.

However, before reaching such a conclusion, it is necessary to pursue one more lead in our examination of *Deësis*. Namely, it is the funerary chapel dedicated to San Zenone at Santa Prassede, most likely ordered by Pope Paschal I (817-824) for his mother Theodora⁹⁵. The iconography of this space is without a doubt specific to Rome's context. It includes an «Empty Chair», Transfiguration, *Anastasis*, and most essentially the depiction of the Prodrome and Mary surrounding God – the light invading the chapel through the east window⁹⁶. All these iconographic elements, as Ivan Foletti and Valentine Giesser recently pointed out, appear in later representations of the Last Judgment. Consequently, art historians interpreted San Zenone's decorative scheme also as a version of the Last Judgment iconography⁹⁷. In their view, John the Baptist and Mary, do not figure

⁸⁸ See J. HANSELMANN, *I frammenti di affreschi di Torba: ricomposizione e interpretazione*, in «Sibrium», XIX (1987-1988), pp. 165-172, esp. 167 and DE RUBEIS, 2002, pp. 84-85.

⁸⁹ On the usage of this term and the introduction into this iconography, see for example Ch. WALTER, *Two Notes on the Deësis*, in «Revue des études byzantines», XXVI (1968), pp. 311-336 and A. CUTLER, *Under the Sign of the Deësis: On the Question of Representativeness in Medieval Art and Literature*, in *Studies on Art and Archeology in Honor of Ernst Kitzinger on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, «Dumbarton Oaks Papers», XLI (1987), pp. 145-154. For using the word in the murals' historiography, see BERTELLI, 1988, pp. 26, 29, 34, 42 and BERTELLI, 1980, pp. 210-211.

⁹⁰ See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 342.

⁹¹ See N. P. KONDAKOV, *Geschichte der Denkmäler des byzantinischen Emails*, Frankfurt am Main 1892, p. 274. J. FOURNÉE, *Le jugement dernier. Essai d'exégèse d'une oeuvre d'art: le vitrail de la Cathédrale de Coutances*, Paris 1964, p. 104; L. BRÉHIER, *L'art chrétien*, Paris 1928, p. 147. For a summary of interpretations and ideas concerning the Deësis, see for example T. BOGYAY, *Deësis und Eschatologie*, in «Byzantinische Forschungen», II (1967), pp. 59-72, esp. 61-64.

⁹² See BOGYAY, 1967 and WALTER, 1968. In fact, it was already Aleksandr I. Kirpičnikov who in 1893 claimed that, originally, there was no eschatological connotation linked to the image. See A. I. KIRPIČNIKOV, *Deisus na Vostoke i na Zapade i ego literaturnye paralleli* (in Russian), in «Žurnal Ministerstva narodnogo prosvěščenija», CCXC (1893), pp. 1-26, esp. 7-8. Thomas von Bogyay remarked that even though the western authors cited Kirpičnikov's study frequently, they read it rarely. See BOGYAY, 1967, p. 63.

⁹³ See WALTER, 1968, p. 336. See also E. KANTOROWICZ, *Ivories and Litanies*,

in «Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes», V (1942), pp. 56-81, esp. 71.

⁹⁴ See WALTER, 1968, p. 335; Ch. WALTER, *The Origins of the Iconostasis*, «Eastern Churches Review», III (1971/3), pp. 251-267, esp. 265; and BOGYAY, 1967, pp. 62, 71-72.

⁹⁵ From the ample bibliography about the San Zenone chapel in Santa Prassede, see for example U. NILGEN, *Die grosse Reliquieninschrift von Santa Prassede: eine Quellenkritische Untersuchung zur Zeno-Kapelle*, in «Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte», LVIX (1974), pp. 7-29; B. BRENK, *Zur Bildprogramm der Zenokapelle in Rom*, in «Archivo español de arqueología», XLV-XLVII (1972-1974), pp. 213-222; G. V. MACKIE, *The San Zeno chapel, a prayer for Salvation*, «Papers of the British School at Rome», LVII (1989), pp. 172-199; R. WISSKIRCHEN, *Die Mosaiken der Kirche Santa Prassede, in Rom*, Mainz am Rhein 1992; C. J. GOODSON, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I. Papal Power, Urban Renovation, Church Rebuilding and Relic Translation, 817-824*, Cambridge 2010; A. PIROCHTOVÁ, *Kaple San Zenone v bazilice Santa Prassede v Římě*, Dissertation thesis, Masaryk University, Brno 2012; and I. FOLETTI - V. GIESSER, *Il IX secolo: da Pasquale I (817-824) a Stefano V (885-891)*, in *La committenza pontificia dei papi a Roma nel Medioevo*, ed. M. D'Onofrio, Roma 2016, pp. 219-237.

⁹⁶ See FOLETTI - GIESSER, 2016, pp. 228-230. Cf. V. IVANOVICI, *Windows and Church Space in Early Medieval Byzantium and West*, in «Opuscula historiae artium», LXII (2013), pp. 38-47, esp. 45.

⁹⁷ They based their interpretation also on the reading of night vigil – *Pannyichis* – which has been sung in the period between an individual's death and his or her funeral. FOLETTI - GIESSER, 2016, pp. 228-230.

as mere passive witnesses of Christ's divinity, quite the contrary. In this funerary chapel, they are actively pleading with God – the Judge – for the souls of the deceased⁹⁸. Their carefully laid hypothesis challenged Walter's and Bogyay's argument on several levels, considering the Last Judgment's non-existing relation to *Deësis* before the 11th century. Furthermore, this idea made the statement made by Mitchell and Leal relevant once again. According to them, the *Deësis* in the tower bears a generic reference to the Last Judgment. Yet several iconographic elements («Empty Chair», Transfiguration, *Anastasis*) which form a Last Judgment representation at the San Zenone chapel are missing at Torba. This seems to demonstrate, paradoxically, that John and Mary on the tower's walls should not be perceived exclusively in this Last Judgment – eschatological – context. We believe that these figures should be understood in Walter's perspective, as a logical part of the heavenly court's vision which is timeless in its essence, and thus cannot be linked to the end of time only.

This assumption is strengthened by our understanding of *Maiestas Domini* on the north wall of the upper chamber. One of the most frequent and versatile iconographic motifs in Christian art is based on the description of the Great Vision of the Enthroned in Revelation (Apoc. 4). Its origin thus lies in a series of visions of the End times – eschatology. Due to the background, modern authors link it to a triumphal theophany removed to the end of time. They even interpret it, similarly to *Deësis*' case, as the Last Judgment's reduction⁹⁹. However, as Yves Christe convincingly asserts in accordance with ideas of Peter K. Klein, from Tyconius's ecclesiological reading of John's Apocalypse, the significance of the *Maiestas Domini* in early middle ages is «present ecclesiological, rather than the future eschatological»¹⁰⁰. It denotes His glory in the already existing, present, celestial Church-Kingdom more than representing the end of time, the Last Judgment, or the second coming of Christ. This ecclesiological approach is essential for shaping the nature

of major Latin commentaries on the Apocalypse from the 4th to the 12th century. Throughout Tyconius' exegesis, Eric Thunø claimed: «John's vision of the end of time was transported from the edge of history back into the present to describe the current Church existing simultaneously on earth and in heaven»¹⁰¹. Subsequently, early medieval representations based on the Apocalypse can be understood as visions of the celestial and terrestrial Church now.

The presented understanding of *Deësis* and *Maiestas Domini* suggests that a direct reference to the Last Judgment or eschatology in the chamber's decorative scheme is unlikely. If we follow the idea that the iconographical themes bearing eschatological connotations have been connected to the funerary function, as in the case of the San Zenone chapel in Rome, should we not reconsider the hypothesis of Mitchell and Leal? They claimed that the tower was restored «expressly for funerary use»¹⁰². This question is indeed essential. After all, it was the representations of the southeastern corner of the lower room, described above, which led scholars to presuppose the originally intended funerary character of the whole tower¹⁰³. However, these depictions were only later additions to the scheme. In other words, they should not be used to determine the upper chamber's *raison d'être*.

Our answer to the question starts with the image of an offering to Mary with Child represented on the south wall. This scene rises from the tradition of the belief in the intercessory powers of the Virgin¹⁰⁴ (or saints in general) and of votive images. Hans Belting explained that votive images, appearing for example in St. Demetrius's church in Salonika, were «meant to present private individuals or public figures as the saint's client»¹⁰⁵. By funding of an image which in words of Georges Didi-Huberman «can offer itself equally in *propitiation*, in a time of expectation and unfulfilled desire»¹⁰⁶, the private «client», besides deepening his or her personal relationship with a saint¹⁰⁷,

⁹⁸ The intercession of Mary and John has been, of course, desired in this funerary context since it may help during the general Last Judgment at the end of the time and during the particular judgment of an individual upon death. Furthermore, it also may help to a soul which has been in the interim, i. e. a place between these two judgments. See for example *Bede Venerabilis, The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, transl. J. Stevens John, London - New York 1939 (I ed. 1910) and H. FOXHALL FORBES, *Diuiduntur in Quattuor: The Interim and Judgement in Anglo-Saxon England*, in «The Journal of Theological Studies», LXI (2010/2), pp. 659-684.

⁹⁹ See Y. CHRISTE, *Jugements derniers*, Saint-Léger-Vauban 1999, p. 150 and Y. CHRISTE, *The Apocalypse in the Monumental Art of the Eleventh Through Thirteenth Centuries*, in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, 1992, pp. 234-258, esp. 236.

¹⁰⁰ For this topic, see CHRISTE, 1992, p. 255; KLEIN, 1992; CHRISTE, 1996, pp. 7-17; or E. THUNØ, *The apse mosaic in early medieval Rome, time, network, and repetition*, New York 2015, pp. 74-81. On Tyconius's commentary, see for example S. B. STEINHAUSER, *The Apocalypse Commentary of Tyconius, A History of Its Reception and Influence*, Frankfurt am Main 1987.

¹⁰¹ See THUNØ, 2015, pp. 74-75; CHRISTE, 1996, pp. 19-51; and CHRISTE, 1992, p. 235.

¹⁰² See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 344.

¹⁰³ Here we refer, first, to Saverio Lomartire's reading of the inscription around

the cross. See LOMARTIRE, 1992, p. 216. It must be pointed out that Rudolph M. Kloos suggested a different interpretation of this text. Cf. KLOOS, 1980, pp. 223-224. Second, to the typology of the same cross. See MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, pp. 334-335. Third, to the resemblance of the recesses themselves with *arcosoliums*. See BERTELLI, 1988, p. 45. And fourth, to the technique used for creating the faces within the recesses which was labeled as «typical funereal». MITCHELL - LEAL, 2013, p. 336.

¹⁰⁴ An offering to Mary was perceived, at least within some groups, as a desirable act, since Mary's intercession could bring a spiritual as well as terrestrial advantages to the supplicants, already in the 4th century. Theologians opposed this practice at first. It changed after the council of Ephesus in 431 which recognized Mary as the Mother of God (Theotokos). This decision led to general veneration of the Virgin as well as to the birth of new texts emphasizing her role as an intercessor with God. See BELTING, 1994, pp. 32-36; C. OAKES, *Ora Pro Nobis, The Virgin as Intercessor in Medieval Art and Devotion*, London 2008, pp. 7-23; and N. TURCHI, *Il gesto d'intercessione nell'arte religiosa bizantina*, in «Colloqui del Sodalizio», I (1951), pp. 46-50.

¹⁰⁵ See BELTING, 1994, p. 82.

¹⁰⁶ See G. DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Ex-Voto: Image, Organ, Time*, in «L'Esprit Créateur», XLVII (2007/3), pp. 7-16, esp. 9.

¹⁰⁷ See P. BROWN, *The Cult of the Saints*, Chicago 1981, pp. 56-58.

asked or thanked for advantages of the actual saint's intercession. Thereby, this scheme is from the visual point of view, an imagery of the active intercessory role of a saint, and from the view of its own existence, an entreaty or an acknowledgement of a private individual.

It is from this intercessory-votive perspective that we should perceive the whole decoration of the upper room at Torba. The murals with its accentuation of apostles, martyrs, John the Baptist, and Mary, as well as its strikingly high number of depicted contemporary individuals, should be interpreted as a votive scene which has expanded on the four walls of the room, i. e. a votive chapel. People who would climb the stairs into this cramped space would be surrounded by a representation of powerful advocates, or rather the Court of Heaven. This court is outside of the category of time and therefore we can interpret it, for example, in its eschatological sense, as a future reality somewhere at the end of time. It can also represent a paradisiac place of joy in the vision of the *interim* described by Bede¹⁰⁸; and in the ecclesiological terms of Tyconius' reading of John's Apocalypse, as the «now» existing celestial kingdom¹⁰⁹. It is more than clear that the nuns, and sometimes perhaps also the donors, while seeing this timeless celestial vision would plead with the saints for diverse types of intercession. They could have plead for both well-being of the living and for souls of the deceased, having in mind either Last Judgement or the place between the particular judgment and the last one – *interim*. In this sense, we just cannot rule out the possibility of the funerary use of this votive chapel suggested by Mitchell and Leal. Yet, we would like to put emphasis on one specific plea concerning life (the present terrestrial existence) rather than death, which will hopefully shed light on the choice of people responsible for the visual scheme to use until then only military tower in a new sacral context.

The following hypothesis regarding the donors' decision will be anchored on one hand in the already presented reading of the murals, and, on the other, in the tower's materiality and historicity.

It has already been stressed that during the turbulent period, after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the tower retained its original defensive function¹¹⁰. This most likely changed during the 8th century, when the convent was established in the tower's vicinity¹¹¹. While trying to understand this transformation, Renato Bazzoni stated that «Torba aveva visto sostituire al fragore delle armi, il sussurrare delle preghiere»¹¹². These words suggest that the protective function of the tower had lost its im-

portance at some time during that century – arms were, after all, replaced and substituted by prayers.

The political situation after the fall of the Lombard empire in 774, and the suppressing of Rotgaudo's riot in Friuli in 776, likely calmed the north Italian area. In 787, as Tommaso Indelli wrote, that stability had spread to the whole Peninsula¹¹³ and was reinforced by Charlemagne's coronation as Holy Roman Emperor in 800. Despite the historical background, it is difficult to imagine that the *castrum's* fortification was perceived by its inhabitants as unnecessary from the military point of view at the time of the murals' creation. Furthermore, it was not only military powers threatening the people living within the walls. Aerial, intangible forces linked to the notion of the biblical wilderness – a place associated with death, chaos, disobedience, temptation and testing by demons – (what will be later called *selva oscura* by Dante) were as real as a potential military or, more broadly, corporeal threat and perilous to people living in the *castrum*¹¹⁴. In this regard, we should recall, for example, that it was early medieval hermits who were entering in the wilderness to fight against these powers¹¹⁵ and the sound of bells was believed to have capacity to disperse demons, as Bishop Gerard of Arras-Cambrai described in his text around 1025¹¹⁶.

If we then return to our intercessory reading of the wall-paintings and to the interpretation of the second-floor chamber as a votive chapel (one of the benefactors of which might have been a high-ranking noblewoman living in the *castrum*), we might see the choice to embellish the tower in a new perspective. We believe this decision, risen from the high intellectual circles – based on the painted inscriptions and comparison of the murals with Mazarine 660 – should not be perceived as a «substitution» of a military function for a religious one, but rather as an upgrade of its protective purpose through the addition of a new religious aspect. We would like to suggest that a person (people) who donated funds to create murals within the tower, might have done so not only for his or her personal betterment (whether this would relate to now, then, or even afterwards), but mainly for the betterment of the safety of all citizens of Castelseprio. Therefore, during the prayers, nuns, and perhaps also donors, while viewing the heavenly court, pleaded with saints especially for the «well-being», and the endurance of both *castrum's* walls and the people living in it. The prayers activated the power of represented saints to fight, protect, and by divine help fortify Castelseprio against both intangible and tangible military threats, thus making the saints truly present.

¹⁰⁸ See above note 98.

¹⁰⁹ See above note 100.

¹¹⁰ See DE MARCHI, 2013, p. 15 and BAZZONI, 1997, p. 17.

¹¹¹ See BAZZONI, 1997, p. 17.

¹¹² See BAZZONI, 1987-1988, p. 153.

¹¹³ See INDELLI, 2013, pp. 46-60, esp. 58.

¹¹⁴ See for example V. DELLA DORA, *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium*, Cambridge 2016, esp. 118-144; and J. HOWE, *Creating Symbolic Landscapes, Medieval Development of Sacred Space*, in *Inventing Medieval Land-*

scapes, Senses of Place in Western Europe, eds. J. Howe and M. Wolfe, Gainesville 2002, pp. 208-223.

¹¹⁵ See DELLA DORA, 2016, esp. 133-137 and HOWE, 2002, esp. 212-214.

¹¹⁶ See J. H. ARNOLD - C. GOODSON, *Resounding Community: The History and Meaning of Medieval Church Bells*, in «Viator», XLIII (2012/1), pp. 99-130, esp. 120-121. See also E. LOON-VAN DE MOOSDIJK, *Pilgrim Badges and Bells*, in *Art and Symbolism in Medieval Europe*, eds. F. Verhaeghe and G. de Boe, Zellik 1997, pp. 149-154.

With regard to the protection against military danger by a represented saint, we recall the siege of Constantinople by the Avars in 626. During this time, the icons of the Virgin were placed above the gates and carried in solemn processions around the walls¹¹⁷. Considering aerial (demonic) threats, as understood by Herbert L. Kessler, in the Anagni's oratory of Saint Thomas Becket, representations on the jambs of windows dated to the 12th century refer to this spiritual struggle between good and evil, and as such possess an apotropaic function¹¹⁸. To support our reading of Torba's murals, wall-paintings preserved in the «rotunda» tower of Ansperto in Milano dated to around 1300, must also be mentioned¹¹⁹. This tower in the garden of the Archaeological Museum (the ex-Monastero Maggiore, or Monastero di San Maurizio) is of Roman origin, and it constituted a part of Milano's early medieval fortification. According to some, it had been restored by Archbishop Ansperto (861-881) during the 9th century¹²⁰. The chronological gap separating these wall-paintings and those surviving at Torba is considerable, however, similarities between the two are clear. Firstly, the historical context of both is similar. Both are located on the inner walls of reused military towers near the female Benedictine convents¹²¹. Secondly, there is an iconographic analogy between the two, which allows us to presuppose that the murals from around 1300 follow an older iconography (maybe from Ansperto's time). The paintings represent, similarly to those at Torba, a procession of saints in the upper register, praying nuns in the lower one, as well as Mary and John the Baptist, in this case, surrounding the crucified Christ (fig. 15). These arguments encourage us to suggest a link between the two monuments and interpret the murals preserved in the tower of Ansperto in an equivalent way as those at Torba. This, consequently, would further our understanding because the latter cannot be considered as an isolated case.

On the grounds of the protective role of saintly images in the early middle ages, historical and iconographical analogies between the «rotunda» tower of Ansperto and the tower at Torba, and most importantly, on the grounds of the historical circum-



15. The interior of Ansperto tower, around 1300.

stances of the latter and the presented interpretation of its upper floor visual scheme, we will conclude with the following statements: The wall paintings of the tower at Torba, while reflecting a deep belief in the intercessory power of saints, Mary, and John the Baptist, were created around 800 to enhance the protection of Castelseprio. It was not the tower which protected the saints, but the prayers of the nuns, through the saints' intercession with God to protect the tower, the whole *castrum*, and the people living in it. This protection was sought against a potential corporeal danger (which includes a military threads), but also against demons, a spiritual danger spreading around the *castrum* in the wilderness that surrounded it, threatening its inhabitants on day to day basis.

¹¹⁷ Traditional scholarship has maintained that icons of the Virgin were carried in procession during this siege of Constantinople in 626. See BELTING, 1994, pp. 36-37, 62. For the text of George the Pisidian from 626, in which the author praises the patriarch who «demanded to speak, hastened to the city wall, and steadfastly held up to the [Avars] the awe-inspiring image of the unpainted painting», see BELTING, 1994, pp. 497-498. See also A. CLEMENA, *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon*, Farnham 2010, p. 68. Cf. B. V. PENTCHEVA, *Icons and Power, the Mother of God in Byzantium*, University Park (PA) 2006.

¹¹⁸ H. L. KESSLER presented these ideas at the international conference *Liminality and the Medieval Art*, which took place in Brno at the Masaryk University between the 11th and the 12th December 2017. The paper was called *At Hell's Upper Edge*.

¹¹⁹ On the murals, see for example F. BISOGNI, *Gli affreschi della «Torre di Ansperto» a Milano*, in «Arte Cristiana», LXXIV (1986), pp. 3-14; G. B. SANNAZZARO, *Gli affreschi nella torre poligonale: proposta di studio per il riquadro con i Tre santi in carcere*, in *Le torri romane del Monastero Maggiore*, ed. D. Caporusso, Milano 2017, pp. 59-62; and P. M. DE MARCHI, *Il monastero dei Santi Maria, Maurizio e Sigismondo, detto il Maggiore. Il Medioevo*, in *Le torri romane...*, 2017, pp. 15-30.

¹²⁰ For different hypotheses concerning Ansperto tower's origin, see I. ROSSI,

La chiesa di San Maurizio in Milano, Milano 1914, pp. 152-180 and DE MARCHI, 2017.

¹²¹ See BISOGNI, 1986, p. 3.

This article grew out of my master's thesis (2016). First and foremost, I would like to thank Ivan Foletti and Marco Rossi for reading various drafts, providing feedback that greatly improved my arguments. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Elisabetta Scirocco for providing me the access to libraries in Rome.

Referenze fotografiche

1, 4-6, 8, 10, 13, tavv. 1, 3: photo by the author; 2: after DE MARCHI, 2013, p. 52; 3: after M. LEŠÁK, *The Frescoes of the Tower at Torba: The Intercession and Power of Saints*, Masarykova Univerzita, 2016, fig. 95; 7, 9, tav. 2: after BERTELLI, 1988, pp. 53, 57; 11: © Bibliothèque Mazarine, Paris; 12: after *Il Notiziario del FAI*; 14: after LAUDAGE - HAGENEIER - LEIVERKUS, 2006, p. 160; 15: after BISOGNI, 1986, p. 4.