

MITTEILUNGEN  
DES KUNSTHISTORISCHEN  
INSTITUTES  
IN FLORENZ



LXIII. BAND — 2021  
HEFT 2



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HEFT 2

# MITTEILUNGEN DES KUNSTHISTORISCHEN INSTITUTES IN FLORENZ

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1 Rome,  
Apostolic Palace,  
Sistine Chapel

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# THE SISTINE CHAPEL'S STARRY SKY RECONSIDERED

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Florian Métral

## Introduction: A Misunderstanding

In his *Vite*, Giorgio Vasari claimed that the Sistine ceiling painted by Michelangelo from 1508 to 1512 (Fig. 1) is “la lucerna, che ha fatto tanto giovamento e lume all’arte della pittura, che ha bastato a illuminare il mondo, per tante centinaia d’anni in tenebre stato”.<sup>1</sup> It goes without saying that Western art history rarely questioned the status of absolute masterpiece of this work, which has received since the end of the nineteenth century an incredible – if not excessive – amount of attention.<sup>2</sup> This study in the first place addresses the

scholarship on Renaissance art, but it also aims to make a broader contribution to the history of art by questioning how the conscious or unconscious glorification of an artist and the need to identify ‘moments of rupture’ – that is, Michelangelo’s Sistine ceiling – has led scholars to neglect or simply deny visual evidence.

The case in question does not concern a secondary artifact but one of the most monumental frescoes ever realized in Western art: the starry sky of the original Sistine ceiling painted in circa 1481 by the Umbrian artist Piermatteo d’Amelia.<sup>3</sup> Commissioned by Pope

<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, a cura di Rosanna Bettarini/Paola Barocchi, Florence 1966–1997, VI, p. 39 (ed. 1568). Cfr. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, ed. by Julia Conaway Bondanella/Peter Bondanella, Oxford 1991, p. 443: “[...] the beacon of our art, and it has brought such benefit and enlightenment to the art of painting that it was sufficient to illuminate a world which for so many hundreds of years had remained in the state of darkness”.

<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the Sistine ceiling – and the entire Sistine Chapel – appears as “monstrously ambiguous”, to follow James Elkins’ argument: so much has been written about it that its apparent primary meaning disappeared behind the inconsistency of contemporary historical interpreta-

tion (James Elkins, “On Monstrously Ambiguous Paintings”, in: *History and Theory*, XXXII [1993], pp. 227–247). On the other hand, as pointed out more recently by Giovanni Careri, the Sistine Chapel stands as a “theoretical object”, a “dialectical image”, and thus “permits us to recognize it ‘as one of our own concerns’” (Giovanni Careri, “Time of History and Time Out of History: The Sistine Chapel as ‘Theoretical Object’”, in: *Art History*, XXX [2007], pp. 326–348: 327f.; cfr. also *idem*, *La torpeur des Ancêtres: juifs et chrétiens dans la chapelle Sixtine*, Paris 2013, pp. 13–18).

<sup>3</sup> On Piermatteo d’Amelia, see *Piermatteo d’Amelia: pittura in Umbria meridionale fra ’300 e ’500*, exh. cat., ed. by Leonilde Dominici, Perugia 1997; *Piermatteo d’Amelia e il Rinascimento nell’Umbria meridionale*, exh. cat. Terni/Amelia



Sixtus IV, the ceiling was destroyed in the spring of 1508 at the request of his nephew, Pope Julius II, to give way to an entirely new design by Michelangelo, which would include prophets, sibyls, and stories from the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup>

The watercolor drawing today in the Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe of the Uffizi in Florence (Fig. 4) is the only testimony of the original appearance of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Although the artwork is well-known among Renaissance scholars, it has been merely discussed in terms of documentary evidence to highlight the novelty and the richness of Michelangelo's design. This point of view goes back to Ernst Steinmann's monumental study on Michelangelo published in the very beginning of the twentieth century. Steinmann, the first to seriously consider the drawing, claimed that it was simply a "rein dekorative Malerei", a purely decorative painting.<sup>5</sup> This statement was supported by the publication of a lithograph by Gustavo Tognetti in 1899, which has been considered an accurate depiction of what the Sistine Chapel looked like between 1482 and 1508 (Fig. 2).<sup>6</sup>

In fact, this assertion is founded on a misreading of Piermatteo d'Amelia's drawing which, inevitably, leads to a reductive understanding of the first decoration of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Through a meticulous analysis of the Uffizi drawing, this essay aims

to argue that the starry sky did more than assume a strictly decorative role. It represented an astronomical configuration of the heavens related to a significant event for the Church and, most of all, for Sixtus IV that occurs on 15 August: the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin, to whom the chapel was dedicated.

After contextualizing the Uffizi drawing within the iconography of starry skies in Renaissance art and considering astronomy within the Sistine court, this study then focuses on the stellar symbolism and its significance for the understanding of the starry sky and the Sistine Chapel as a whole. Finally, the re-examination of Piermatteo d'Amelia's fresco will lead us to reconsider some formal and iconographical aspects of Michelangelo's ceiling.

### A Chapel for the Virgin of the Assumption

The Sistine Chapel bears the imprint of its patron, the Franciscan theologian Francesco della Rovere, who became Pope Sixtus IV in August 1471.<sup>7</sup> Located in the Apostolic Palace, the so-called *capella di Sisto* is one of the major achievements of the *renovatio urbis Romae*: the political project of the renewal of the greatness of ancient Rome in order to legitimize papal power and authority.

Most scholars today presume that Sixtus IV planned the reconstruction of the former medieval

2009/10, ed. by Vittoria Garibaldi/Francesco Federico Mancini, Ciniello Balsamo 2009; Lucilla Vignoli, *Piermatteo d'Amelia: un maestro umbro tra Firenze e Roma*, Perugia 2015; Nathaniel Silver, *Close Up: Piermatteo d'Amelia's Annunciation*, exh. cat. Boston 2017, Carlisle, Mass., 2017.

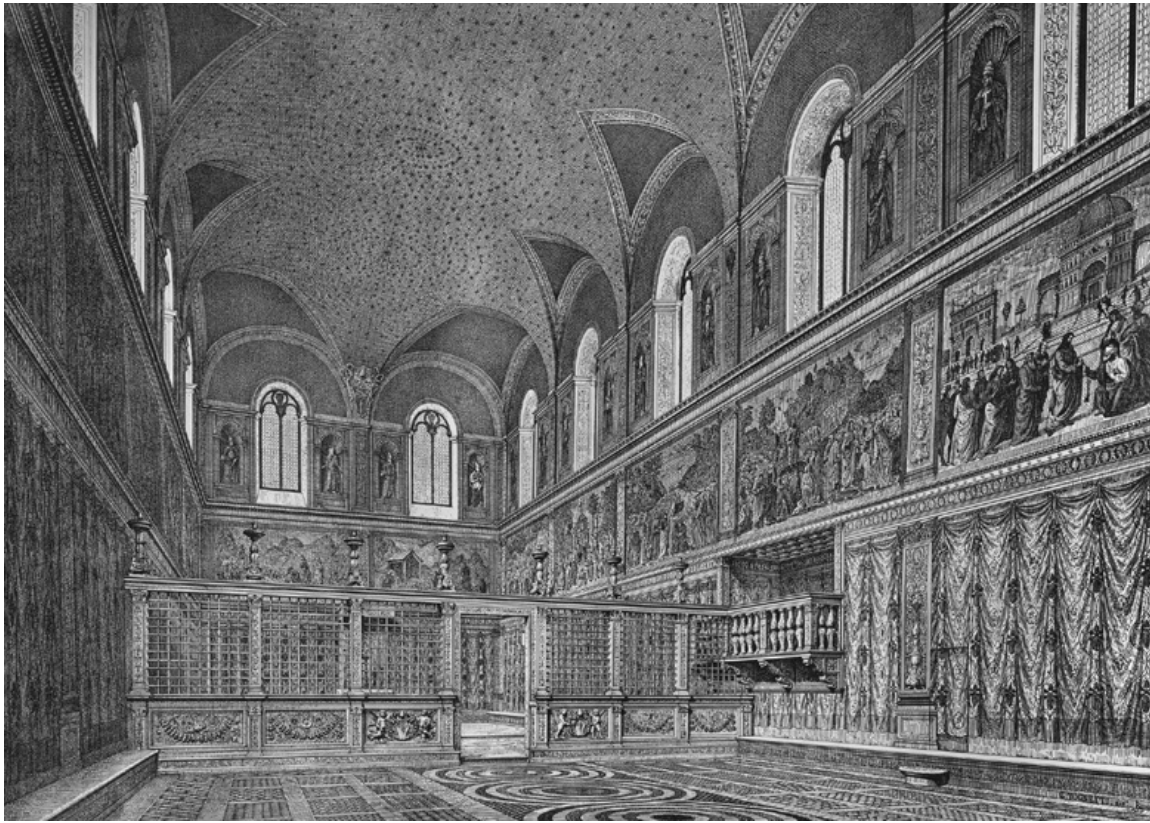
<sup>4</sup> On the Sistine Chapel under Sixtus IV, see especially Ernst Steinmann, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle*, Munich 1901–1905; Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo*, II: *The Sistine Ceiling*, Princeton 1945; Leopold D. Ettlinger, *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo: Religious Imagery and Papal Primacy*, Oxford 1965; John Shearman, "The Chapel of Sixtus IV", in: *The Sistine Chapel: The Art, the History, and the Restoration*, ed. by Massimo Giacometti, New York 1986, pp. 22–87; Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt, "Michelangelo's Early Projects for the Sistine Ceiling: Their Practical and Artistic Consequence", in: *Studies in the History of Art*, XXXIII (1992), pp. 56–87; Carol F. Lewine, *The Sistine Chapel Walls and the Roman Liturgy*, University Park, Pa., 1993; Starleen Kay Meyer, *The Papal Series in the Sistine Chapel: The Embodiment, Vesting and Framing of Papal Power*, PhD diss. University of Southern California, Los An-

geles, 1998; *The Fifteenth Century Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel*, ed. by Francesco Buranelli/Allen Duston, Vatican City 2003; Kim E. Butler, "The Immaculate Body in the Sistine Ceiling", in: *Art History*, XXXII (2009), pp. 250–289; Ulrich Pfisterer, *La Cappella Sistina*, Rome 2014, pp. 17–48.

<sup>5</sup> Steinmann (note 4), I, p. 192.

<sup>6</sup> This reconstruction of the Sistine Chapel has been reused invariably for more than a century, even in the most recent and ambitious synthesis of Italian Renaissance art by Stephen J. Campbell/Michael W. Cole, *A New History of Italian Renaissance Art*, London 2012, pp. 275f.

<sup>7</sup> On the artistic and architectural patronage of Sixtus IV, see especially Egmont Lee, *Sixtus IV and Men of Letters*, Rome 1978, pp. 123–150; Rona Goffen, "Friar Sixtus IV and the Sistine Chapel", in: *Renaissance Quarterly*, XXXIX (1986), pp. 218–262; Fabio Benzi, *Sisto IV Renovator Urbis: architettura a Roma 1471–1484*, Rome 1990; Jill E. Blondin, "Power Made Visible: Pope Sixtus IV as *Urbis Restaurator* in Quattrocento Rome", in: *The Catholic Historical Review*, XCI (2005), pp. 1–25.



2 Gustavo Tognetti, reconstruction of the Sistine Chapel before 1508, in: Ernst Steinmann, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle*, I, Munich 1901, pl. VII

chapel—which would be known as the Sistine Chapel—during or just after the celebration of the Jubilee in 1475.<sup>8</sup> Even if there is still debate as to whether the main architect was Giovanni de’ Dolci or Baccio Pontelli, it is now generally acknowledged that the building was renovated primarily between 1477 and the

spring of 1481.<sup>9</sup> As for the pictorial decoration, recent reconstructions of the chronology based on surviving documents reveal that it began not before early summer of 1481 and was concluded around the end of August 1482.<sup>10</sup> A team of Umbrian and Florentine artists led by Pietro Perugino – and including Pier-

<sup>8</sup> See Ettlinger (note 4), p. 14; Shearman (note 4), pp. 40–45; Pier Nicola Pagliara, “The Sistine Chapel: Its Medieval Precedents and Reconstruction”, in: *The Fifteenth Century Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel* (note 4), pp. 77–86; 81; Pfisterer (note 4), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> The date of 1477 emerges from Robert Flemmyng’s poem *Lucubratiunculæ Tiburtinae*, in which the chapel is described as already in construction. See John Monfasani, “A Description of the Sistine Chapel under Pope Sixtus IV”, in: *Artibus et Historiae*, IV (1983), 7, pp. 9–18; 14; Lewine

(note 4), p. 44; Arnold Nesselrath, “The Painters of Lorenzo the Magnificent in the Chapel of Pope Sixtus IV in Rome”, in: *The Fifteenth Century Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel* (note 4), pp. 39–75; 40.

<sup>10</sup> From Andreas of Trebizond’s preface – written between April and mid-May 1482 – to his father’s translation of the *Almagest* we learn that the decoration of the chapel was then complete for the most part; see Monfasani (note 9), pp. 11–18. For the chronology of the decorative campaign, see especially Nesselrath (note 9), pp. 39–50, and Pfisterer (note 4), pp. 27–35.

matteo d'Amelia – frescoed all of the chapel's walls in a year or so.<sup>11</sup>

Stories of Moses and of Christ were painted along the walls from the altar to the entrance of the chapel. They emphasized a typological conception of sacred history that included the figure of the pope as a new Moses and vicar of Christ.<sup>12</sup> In the upper register of the chapel walls, the cycle depicting the first popes stressed in a complementary way the legitimacy and authority of the Roman pontiff as the successor of Saint Peter, the first bishop of Rome.<sup>13</sup>

However, it appears that most of the pictorial decoration commissioned by Sixtus IV strengthens the connection between the image of the pope and the figure of the Virgin Mary, more precisely with the Virgin of the Assumption and the *Immaculata*, to whom the Sistine Chapel along with many other churches and chapels in Rome had been dedicated or rededicated by the Della Rovere pontiff.<sup>14</sup> As Rona Goffen stated, a dedication to the cult of the Immaculate Conception would have been controversial, but this is what the dedication to the Assumption of the Virgin implied for Sixtus. This devotion was not new, as Kim Butler also pointed out: a sermon dated 1448

by Francesco della Rovere (then a young priest and professor of theology) already contains the basis of what would become the liturgy of the *Immaculata* at the time of his pontificate.<sup>15</sup>

The *Assumption of the Virgin* painted by Perugino on the altar wall confirmed the primacy of Marian theology in the Sistine Chapel's decorative program. A drawing in the Albertina Museum (Fig. 3), now attributed to Pinturicchio's circle, records the original composition of the altarpiece, which was damaged by a fire in 1525 and eventually destroyed in the 1530s to make space for Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*.<sup>16</sup> In the upper part, Perugino depicted the Virgin in glory surrounded by cherubs and musical angels, whereas the lower part of the composition portrayed the twelve apostles. Most of them are gazing into the heavens, which are the final destination of the Virgin Mary. On his knees, hands clasped and face upturned, Sixtus IV takes part directly in the contemplation of the mystery of the Assumption. Behind him Saint Peter, with his left hand over the pope's head, designates Sixtus IV as his legitimate successor and as a witness of the plan of salvation. As noted by many scholars, the *Assumption* of Perugino emphasizes the status of

<sup>11</sup> The contract of October 1481 concerns the scenes from the Old and New Testament to be painted by Rosselli, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and Perugino. It does not mention the popes' portraits in the upper wall nor Piermatteo d'Amelia's starry sky, apparently because they had already been completed; see Meyer (note 4), p. 25, and Pfisterer (note 4), p. 27. The inscription by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger on the back of the Uffizi drawing mentioning Piermatteo as the author of the original Sistine ceiling – which will be discussed below – is the only known evidence of the Umbrian painter's involvement in the decoration of the Sistine Chapel.

<sup>12</sup> Ettlinger (note 4), pp. 94–103, 116f.; Shearman (note 4), pp. 40–45; Lewine (note 4), pp. 96f.; Jorge María Mejía, “Biblical Reading of the Frescoes on the Walls of the Sistine Chapel”, in: *The Fifteenth Century Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel* (note 4), pp. 9–37: 33; Pfisterer (note 4), pp. 35–41.

<sup>13</sup> Ettlinger (note 4), p. 22; Shearman (note 4), pp. 40–42; Meyer (note 4), pp. 131–189; Stefan Bauer, *The Censorship and Fortuna of Platina's Lives of the Popes in the Sixteenth Century*, Turnhout 2007, pp. 71f.

<sup>14</sup> On Sixtus IV's devotion to the Virgin and promotion of the Marian cult, see Lewine (note 4), p. 18; Goffen (note 7), pp. 228–231; Andrew C. Blume, “The Sistine Chapel, Dynastic Ambition, and the Cultural Patronage of Sixtus IV”, in: *Patronage and Dynasty: The Rise of the Della Rovere*

*in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by Ian F. Verstegen, Kirksville 2007, pp. 3–18; Jill Elizabeth Blondin, “Pope Sixtus IV at Assisi: The Promotion of Papal Power”, *ibidem*, pp. 19–36; Butler (note 4); Peter Howard, “Painters and the Visual Art of Preaching: The *Exemplum* of the Fifteenth-Century Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel”, in: *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, XIII (2010), pp. 33–77: 61–71.

<sup>15</sup> See Goffen (note 7), p. 230, and Butler (note 4), p. 251. On Sixtus IV's seminal role as promoter of the cult of the Immaculate Conception, see in addition to Butler also Nicholas Temple, *Renovatio Urbis: Architecture, Urbanism, and Ceremony in the Rome of Julius II*, London/New York 2011, pp. 167–184, and Camilla Cavicchi, “Osservazioni in margine sulla musica per l'immacolato concepimento della Vergine, al tempo di Sisto IV”, in: *L'Atelier du Centre de recherches historiques*, X (2012), <http://acrh.revues.org/4386> (accessed on 11 January 2019).

<sup>16</sup> On this drawing, see Pietro Scarpellini, *Perugino*, Milan 1984, pp. 77f.; Vittoria Garibaldi, *Perugino*, Milan 2004, pp. 67–70; Claudia La Malfa, in: *Pinturicchio*, exh. cat. Perugia/Spello 2008, ed. by Vittoria Garibaldi/Francesco Federico Mancini, Cinisello Balsamo 2008, pp. 374f., no. 16. For the reconstruction of the appearance of the Sistine Chapel's altar wall, see Ettlinger (note 4), pp. 23–26, and Nesselrath (note 9), pp. 45–47.



3 Circle of Pinturicchio,  
*Assumption of the Virgin*.  
Vienna, The Albertina  
Museum, inv. 4861



the Virgin Mary as *Porta Coeli* – Gate of Heaven – and at the same time the role of the pontiff in the guidance of the Church.<sup>17</sup> Mary was the first of all of humanity to be saved by the grace of her Son, and the mission of the pope is to reveal the primacy of this event within God’s plan of salvation.

Despite this overarching theme of the Sistine Chapel decoration, scholars never considered the possibility that the starry sky of Piermatteo d’Amelia could also have played a role in the Mariological and ecclesiological message of the Sistine Chapel decoration. Indeed, most of them judged it to be a purely

decorative element with no particular meaning, while others doubted – erroneously, as we shall see – that the ceiling was ever painted. According to Ulrich Pfisterer’s account in his recent monograph, it is likely that Piermatteo d’Amelia was in fact one of the first painters to work in the Sistine Chapel, and he probably completed the depiction of the starry sky in the summer of 1481.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, as an in-depth analysis of the Uffizi drawing reveals, the quattrocento ceiling was extensively based on astronomical knowledge related to Marian liturgy, especially the feast of the Assumption.

<sup>17</sup> See Ettlinger (note 4), pp. 104–119; Lewine (note 4), p. 44; Pfisterer (note 4), pp. 38–41.

<sup>18</sup> According to the new chronology of the quattrocento frescoes as proposed by Pfisterer (note 4), p. 27.



## The Uffizi Drawing I: Context

In his major study on Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, first published in 1945, Charles de Tolnay – following Steinmann – said of Piermatteo d'Amelia's fresco: "This ceiling decoration corresponds to early Christian art in which it was customary to decorate a vault with a starry sky."<sup>19</sup> This assertion is not wrong: even in the beginning of the sixteenth century, church ceilings were still covered with decorative stars arranged in a symmetrical composition, despite the new artistic fashion which tended to substitute them with depictions of biblical stories and figures.<sup>20</sup> But De Tolnay's reading is highly problematic, mainly because it conflicts with the evidence of the Uffizi drawing, the only surviving visual document of the original Sistine Chapel ceiling (Fig. 4).<sup>21</sup>

Considering that the author of the drawing could only be the artist in charge of the depiction of the starry sky, scholarship never really discussed it – probable, but still not documented – authorship by Piermatteo d'Amelia.<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, there is an ongoing debate about the correct meaning of the inscription by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger on the back of the sheet: "p[er] la capella di sisto di mann[i?]era di piermat[eo] damelia no[n] si fece così / La fatta michelagnolo poi a fi[g]ure come si vede i[n] op[er]a".<sup>23</sup>

According to some scholars, the words "non si fece così" by Sangallo emphasize the visual contrast between the starry sky of Piermatteo d'Amelia and the invention "a figure" carried out by Michelangelo.<sup>24</sup> Other scholars claim that they imply that the Umbrian painter simply never executed the starry sky.<sup>25</sup> This last opinion is generally based on Giorgio Vasari's account of the origins of Michelangelo's decoration project in the first edition of the *Vite* (1550): "Era già ritornato il Papa [Julius II] in Roma, et mosso dall'amore, che portava alla memoria del Zio, sendo la volta della cappella di Sisto non dipinta, ordinò che ella si dipignesse."<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, one may consider that Vasari either refers to the part of the vault possibly left "non dipinta" (unpainted) as we can see in the drawing (the lunettes and the spandrels) or, most likely, was at that time not well documented, since the second edition of the *Vite* (1568) does not include this statement. Furthermore, the comment about the ceiling not being painted could have something to do with the damage to the fresco caused by the massive crack in the vault that occurred in the spring of 1504.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, there is no reason to assume that Piermatteo d'Amelia never painted the starry sky, given the overall coherence of Sixtus IV's project. An epigram by Aurelio Brandolini, written in 1482 and dedicated

<sup>19</sup> De Tolnay (note 4), p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> The cupola of the Oratorio di Santa Maria in Solario in Brescia painted by Floriano Ferramola between 1513 and 1524 is an outstanding example; see Renata Stradiotti, "Il ciclo di affreschi del XVI secolo nell'aula superiore di Santa Maria in Solario", in: *San Salvatore – Santa Giulia a Brescia: il monastero nella storia*, ed. by *eadem*, Milan et al. 2001, pp. 268f. Also in the 1520s, Bernardino Luini and his workshop painted a starry sky in the Aula delle Monache in San Maurizio in Milan. I will come back – later in this article – to other examples from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that are particularly relevant to the understanding of the Sistine Chapel's starry sky.

<sup>21</sup> Ca. I480/81, pen and ink, watercolor, traces of black pencil, 392 × 175 mm. For earlier discussions of the sheet, see Steinmann (note 4), I, pp. 190–193; De Tolnay (note 4), p. 13; Ettliger (note 4), pp. 15–17; Roberto Salvini, *La Cappella Sistina in Vaticano*, Milan 1965, pp. 123–127; Shearman (note 4), pp. 40–45; Weil-Garris Brandt (note 4), pp. 60f.; Monica Castrichini, in: *Piermatteo d'Amelia* 1997 (note 3), pp. 199f., no. 19; Meyer (note 4), pp. 49–55; Monica Castrichini, in: *Piermatteo d'Amelia* 2009 (note 3),

pp. 134f., no. 18; Pfisterer (note 4), pp. 39f.; Carmen C. Bambach, *Michelangelo: Divine Draftsman and Designer*, exh. cat., New York 2017, p. 78, fig. 49, and p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> Ernst Steinmann (note 4), I, pp. 190f., first stressed that the attribution of the drawing to Piermatteo d'Amelia mainly relies on the inscription by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger.

<sup>23</sup> "For the chapel of Sisto in the manner of Piermatteo d'Amelia; but not realized like this. Michelangelo made it then with figures as one sees it in the work [today]" (Ulrich Pfisterer, *The Sistine Chapel: Paradise in Rome*, Los Angeles 2018, p. 35, note 24). I use here the transcription recently given by Pfisterer (note 4), p. 47, which I consider the most accurate. A very similar transcription was proposed in Weil-Garris Brandt (note 4), p. 82, note 17, and Meyer (note 4), p. 49. Steinmann (note 4), I, p. 191, had transcribed the word "mann[i?]era" as "mano". While De Tolnay and Ettliger agreed with him, more recently Castrichini 1997 (note 21) proposed a different transcription which, however, seems erroneous: "P[er] la capella di Sisto di maniera di Piermateo damelia non si fece così / La fatta Michelagnolo poi afine / comisi[o]ne di Papa". Antonio da Sangallo

to the pope, contains references to a “starry temple” raising to the sky that, as argued by Ulrich Pfisterer, likely allude to the fresco of Piermatteo d’Amelia in the Sistine Chapel.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the entry for 10 June 1508 in the diary of Paris de Grassis, master of ceremonies to Pope Julius II, also seems to accredit this idea, referring to the noise and dust caused by workers in the Chapel presumably in connection with the destruction of the starry sky and the preparatory work for the new fresco.<sup>29</sup> In my opinion, the phrase “non si fece così” by Sangallo must be understood as “non si fece esattamente così”, also because the Uffizi drawing, as I will point out later, on account of some peculiarities may not accurately reflect the starry sky painted by Piermatteo d’Amelia.

This leads us to the function and the dating of the Uffizi drawing, which also raise critical issues. Some scholars assume that it was made at the request of Pope Julius II as a *ricordo* of the starry sky, after the decision had been made in 1505 to commission an entirely new decoration for the Sistine ceiling from Michelangelo.<sup>30</sup> If Piermatteo d’Amelia is indeed the author of the drawing, he could have realized it in 1504/05 during his last documented stay in Rome.<sup>31</sup> If not, we can assume that the task could easily have been carried out by someone else belonging, for instance, to Bramante’s

circle. In general, however, *ricordi* drawings – such as the *Assumption* after Perugino mentioned earlier – serve as exempla to be copied and adapted in the workshop, which is not the case here.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, to my knowledge no other case of a *ricordo* drawing commissioned by Julius II is documented. Therefore, most of the scholars more reasonably assume that the Uffizi sheet is the drawing accompanying the (missing) contract signed in 1481 by Piermatteo d’Amelia for the decoration of the Sistine ceiling.<sup>33</sup> This would also explain the relative accuracy of the astronomical depictions in the starry sky.

Any attempt to interpret the original Sistine ceiling has also to deal with the state of conservation of the drawing. Due to the discoloration that generally affects watercolor drawings, the pigments have considerably faded. This applies especially to the blue pigment in the central zone of the sheet and in the Della Rovere coat of arms in the spandrels at the extremities, but also to the little yellow dots used for the depiction of the stars.<sup>34</sup> An in-depth visual analysis reveals that the author of the drawing first outlined (with a compass) the illusionistic architecture that defines the limits of the starry sky, anticipating, in a certain way, the *quadratura* depicted by Michelangelo three decades later.<sup>35</sup> The most visible golden stars and the white line in the center

probably annotated the drawing after 1520, when he became chief architect of Saint Peter’s and thus had access to a large number of artistic items preserved in the Vatican collections.

<sup>24</sup> Shearman (note 4), p. 43; Steffi Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes: The Flowering of the Renaissance, 1470–1510*, New York 1997, p. 98; Meyer (note 4), p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> Ettlinger (note 4), pp. 15f.; Maurizio De Luca, “Technique and Restoration Method”, in: *The Fifteenth Century Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel* (note 4), pp. 87–93; 88.

<sup>26</sup> Vasari 1966–1997 (note 1), VI, p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> The entry of 15 May 1504 in the diary of Paris de Grassis records that the chapel is “ruinous, and all shattered”. Johann Burckhard (1450–1506), one of the other masters of ceremonies of Julius II, described it as “split down the middle”. The chapel remained unusable for several months during the repairs commissioned by the pope. See Shearman (note 4), p. 32, from which the quotes are taken.

<sup>28</sup> “Hic, ubi sidereum consurgit ad aethera templum” (cit. in Pfisterer [note 4], pp. 132f.).

<sup>29</sup> See Eugène Müntz, “Une rivalité d’artistes au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle: Michel-Ange et Raphaël à la cour de Rome [2]”, in: *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, XXV (1882), pp. 385–400; 385f., note 1.

<sup>30</sup> For this argument, see Volker Herzner, *Die Sixtinische Decke: Warum Michelangelo malen durfte, was er wollte*, Hildesheim 2015, pp. 21–23, and Bambach (note 21), p. 83.

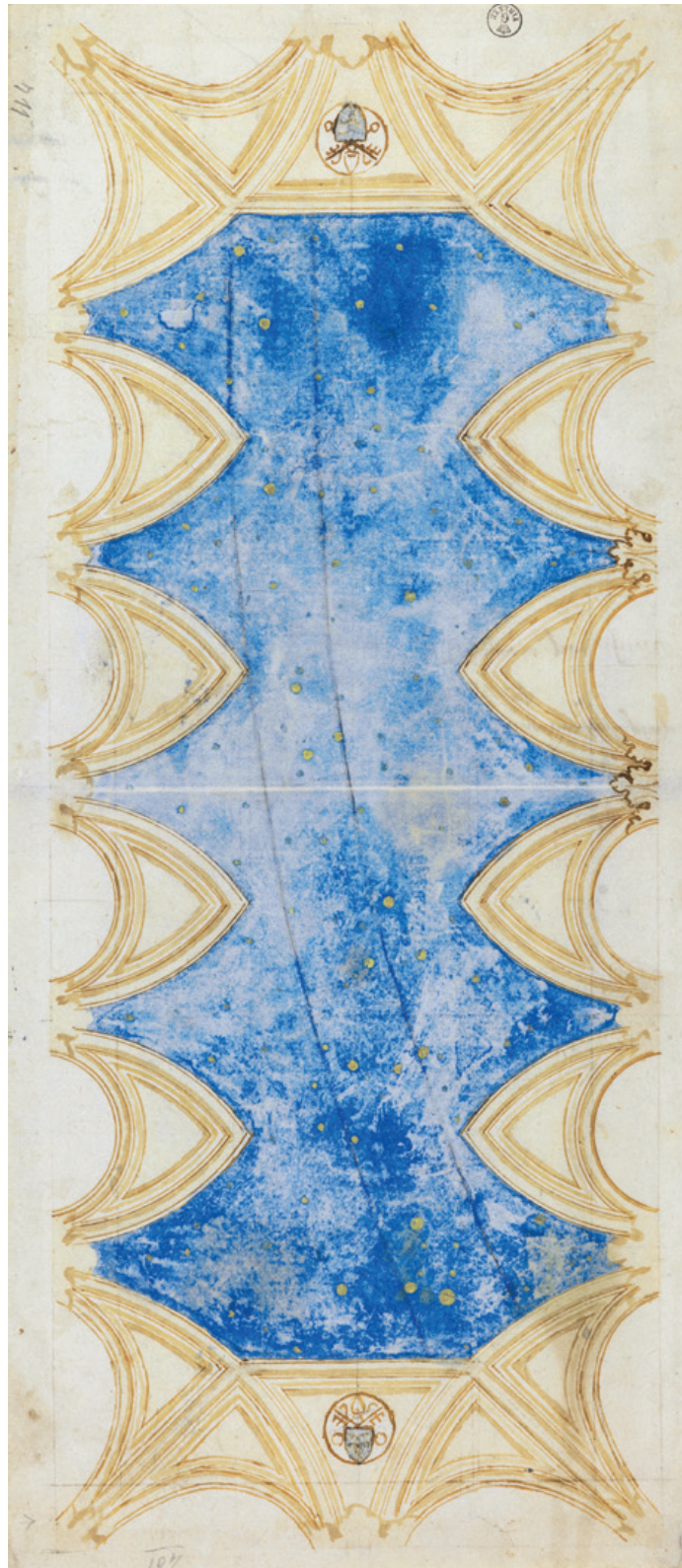
<sup>31</sup> Emilio Lucci, “Piermatteo d’Amelia a Roma: nuovi documenti (1504–1505)”, in: *Studi di storia dell’arte*, VIII (1997), pp. 293–295.

<sup>32</sup> On this practice, see Carmen C. Bambach, *Drawing and Painting in the Italian Renaissance Workshop: Theory and Practice, 1300–1600*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 81–126.

<sup>33</sup> See Shearman (note 4), p. 43, and Pfisterer (note 4), p. 39.

<sup>34</sup> I would like here to address a special thank to Marzia Faietti and the staff of the Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe of the Uffizi Gallery for their kind help in understanding the material execution of this drawing.

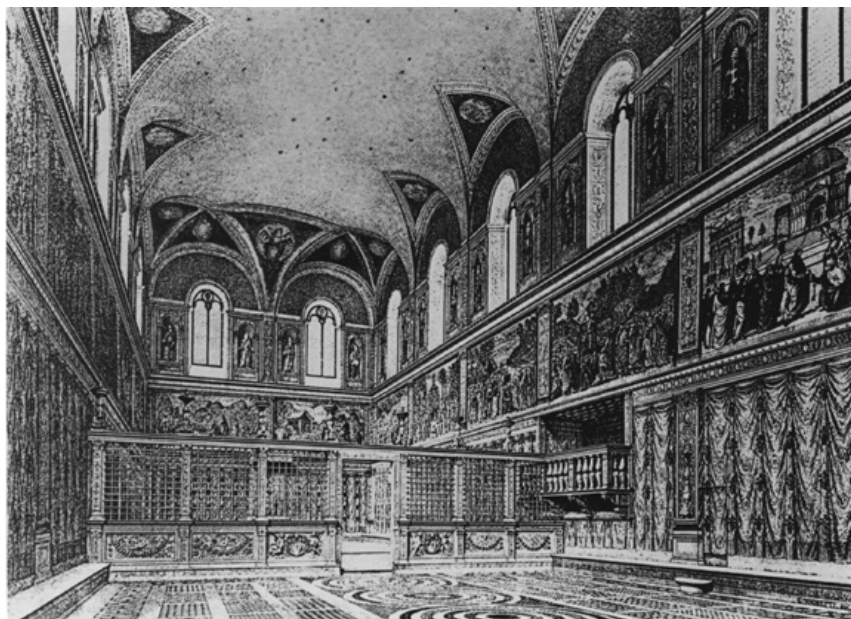
<sup>35</sup> Meyer (note 4), pp. 51–53; Weil-Garris Brandt (note 4), p. 61; Bambach (note 21), p. 83.



4 Piermatteo d'Amelia (attr.),  
design for the Sistine ceiling.  
Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi,  
Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle  
Stampe, inv. 711 A



5 Reconstruction of the Sistine Chapel before 1508 according to Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt



were the very last elements of the sheet to be executed, because of, as I will argue, their importance in the general meaning of Piermatteo d'Amelia's ceiling fresco.

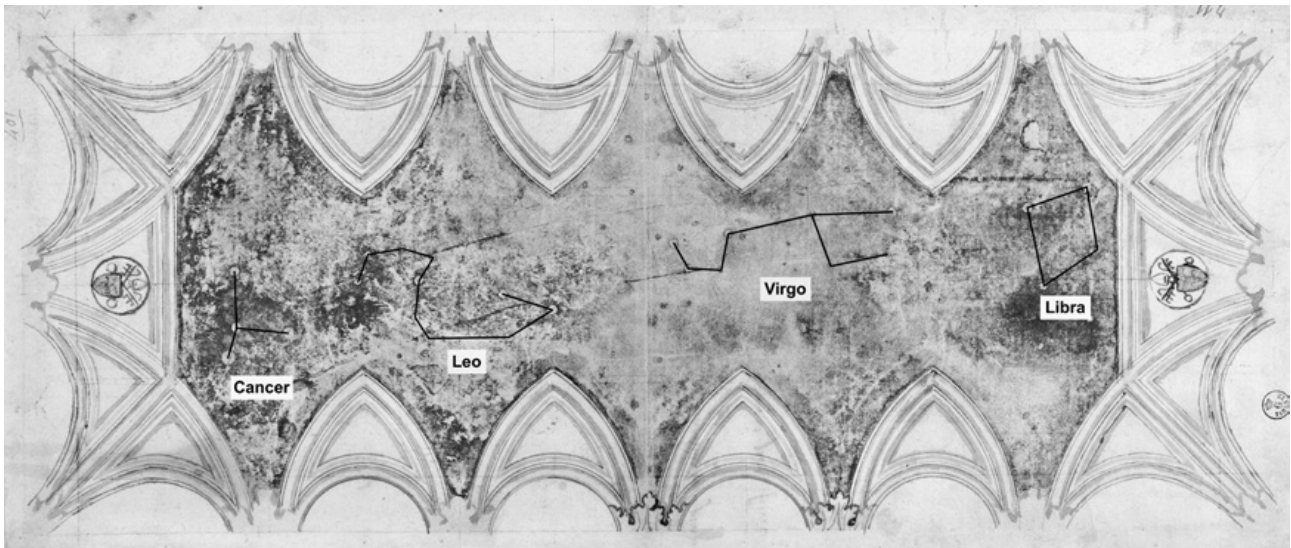
### The Uffizi Drawing II: Iconography

As I just pointed out, any analysis of the original Sistine ceiling has to deal with the question of the reliability of the Uffizi drawing. In other words, does the sheet faithfully reflect what Piermatteo d'Amelia had painted on the ceiling? If we primarily consider it the contract drawing, there are at least three reasons to presume that it offers a picture, if not definitive, very close to the final result. First, Sixtus IV wanted the chapel completed very quickly and before his death.<sup>36</sup> Second, there is no evidence of significant changes in the form and content of other parts of the decoration. Third, as I will now discuss, the drawing is sufficiently detailed and permits us to arrive at some conclusions about its iconography and meaning in the general context of the Sistine Chapel under the first Della Rovere pope.

Several factors have contributed to the dismissal or disregard of the Uffizi drawing by so many scholars. I will only mention two of them: firstly, it refers to a destroyed work of art by a lesser-known painter that has been replaced by a major work of an artist considered one of the greatest geniuses of the time; secondly, it appears as a 'technical' and non-figurative representation, suggesting that there is nothing more to be said. Yet even a brief examination of the Uffizi drawing reveals that something interesting is going on here. The vast blue area that takes up almost the entire space of the sheet is remarkable. However, even more significant is the depiction of the stars. They not only vary in size and luminosity but, above all, are apparently scattered throughout the surface in a casual and irregular way, thus effectively contradicting the purely ornamental function that Steinmann and De Tolnay attributed to the ceiling. In this regard, Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt's reconstruction of the Sistine Chapel (Fig. 5), also based on Tognetti's lithograph, is by far the most reliable one to date.<sup>37</sup> It aban-

<sup>36</sup> Pfisterer (note 4), p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> Published in Weil-Garris Brandt (note 4), p. 60.



6 Piermatteo d'Amelia (attr.), design for the Sistine ceiling (as Fig. 4) with superimposed diagrams identifying the constellations of Cancer, Leo, Virgo, and Libra

done the common idea of a stylized geometric night sky by seriously taking into account the irregular positioning of the stars seen in the Uffizi drawing. Even so, all three of them failed – as most scholars after them – to notice a very distinct feature of the sheet: a curved strip defined by black outlines that goes from one extremity of the drawing to the other. Building on a suggestion by Pfisterer, I argue here that it represents the zodiac, the imaginary band formed by the twelve prominent constellations through which the sun, the moon, and the planets travel over the year.<sup>38</sup>

The chromatic alteration and the relative accuracy of the drawing, coupled with the unusual preference for a naturalistic image of a starry sky, make the identification of the zodiacal constellations depicted here difficult. Yet thanks to a comparison with illustrated manuscripts known at the time and also with other

astrological ceilings painted during the same decades, it is possible to identify four patterns of stars, which correspond, as I will now propose, to the constellations of – from left to right on the sheet – Cancer, Leo, Virgo, and Libra (Fig. 6).

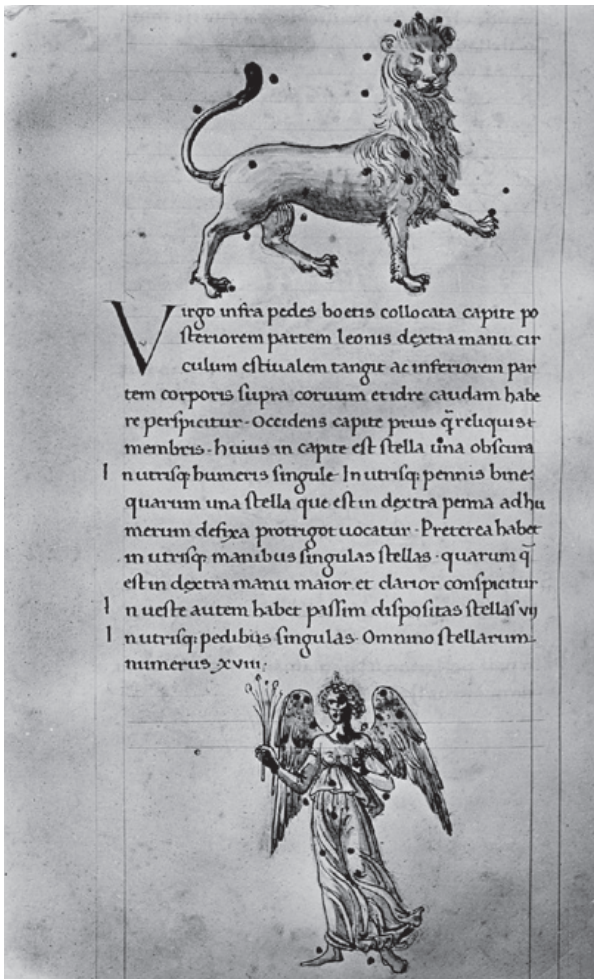
Located on the left side of the Uffizi drawing, the constellation of Leo, which is defined by its sickle-shaped star formation, is undeniably the most recognizable pattern. Its stars and their alignment were quite well established in the fifteenth century, as confirmed for instance by a manuscript of Hyginus's *De Astronomica*, dating from before 1480 and held in the Vatican Library (Fig. 7).<sup>39</sup> This identification is also corroborated by an outstanding early painted example: the dome of the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo in Florence, conceived by the Florentine astronomer Paolo Toscanelli and realized probably by Giuliano d'Arrigo

<sup>38</sup> Pfisterer (note 4), pp. 27, 38–40, has been, as far as I know, the only scholar to state that the Uffizi drawing depicts an ensemble of zodiac constellations, without, however, identifying them.

<sup>39</sup> The manuscript was produced in Florence circa 1470–1480 for

Federico da Montefeltro. See *Sternbilder des Mittelalters und der Renaissance: Der gemalte Himmel zwischen Wissenschaft und Phantasie*, ed. by Dieter Blume/Mechthild Haffner/Wolfgang Metzger, Berlin 2016, II, pp. 611–615, no. 83.



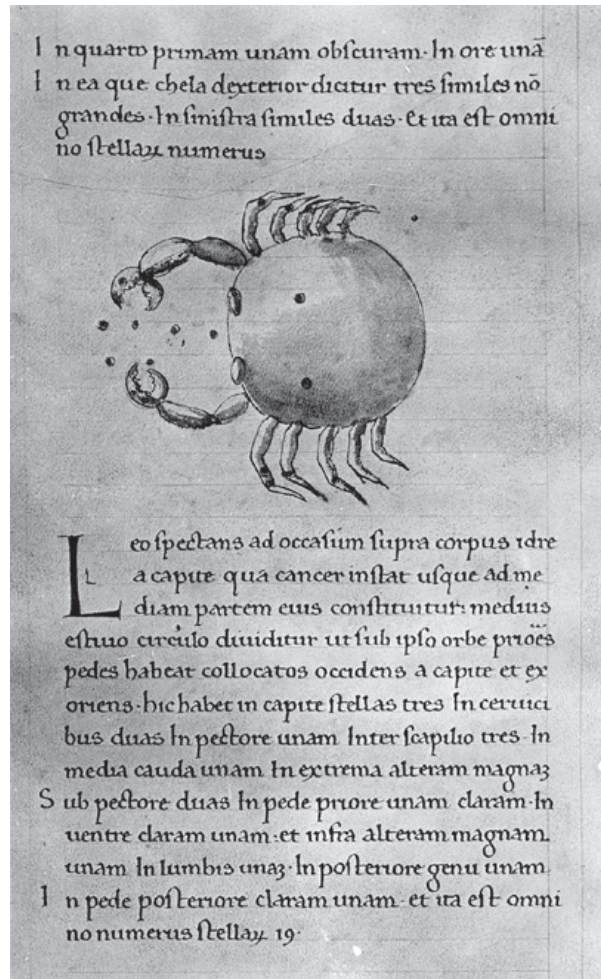


7 Hyginus, *De Astronomica*, constellations of Leo and Virgo. Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms. Urb. lat. 1358, fol. 132v

between 1434 and 1442, where the Leo constellation appears in the left part of the zodiac (Fig. 9).<sup>40</sup>

From the constellation of Leo, we may pass to the group of approximately eight stars, four of which are much larger than the others, located on the very left part of the drawing and identifiable as the con-

<sup>40</sup> For the reading of the Old Sacristy, see most recently Dieter Blume, "Astrologia come scienza politica: il cielo notturno della Sagrestia Vecchia di San Lorenzo", in: *L'art de la Renaissance entre science et magie*, conference proceedings Paris 2002, ed. by Philippe Morel, Paris/Rome 2006, pp. 149–164.



8 Hyginus, *De Astronomica*, constellation of Cancer. Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms. Urb. lat. 1358, fol. 132r

stellation of Cancer. Its representation varied considerably in medieval and Renaissance treatises on astronomy, as demonstrated by the comparison with the above-mentioned manuscript of Hyginus's *De Astronomica* (Fig. 8).<sup>41</sup> The configuration in the Uffizi drawing does not correspond very well to the

<sup>41</sup> The manuscript of Hyginus's *De Astronomica* held in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (Plut. 89 sup. 43) and produced in Florence for the Medici in 1482/83 is another example. See *Sternbilder des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* (note 39), II, pp. 619–625, no. 85, and Marion Dolan,





9 Giuliano d'Arrigo (attr.),  
astronomical ceiling.  
Florence, San Lorenzo,  
Old Sacristy

arrangement in the manuscript; a better comparison is again with the painting in the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo (Fig. 9), where the constellation of Cancer, located next to the sun, faces the one of Leo in the left part of the zodiac.

More problems arise when one attempts to identify the patterns of stars on the right side of the Uffizi drawing, which are much less distinct and accurate than those on the left side. Still, the Vatican Hyginus manuscript (Fig. 7), in conjunction with the so-called Cielo de Salamanca, a remarkable astronomical ceil-

ing painted by the Spanish artist Fernando Gallego in the library of the Escuelas Menores of Salamanca between 1483 and 1492 (Fig. 10), allow us to recognize the pattern of stars shown following the Leo constellation as the constellation of Virgo.<sup>42</sup> As in the fresco of the Escuelas Menores, this constellation, located in the central position of the zodiac, is decisive for the astronomical interpretation of the Sistine Chapel's starry sky, as I will argue later. The Cielo de Salamanca and the Hyginus manuscript are also helpful in identifying the last pattern of stars at the

*Astronomical Knowledge Transmission Through Illustrated Aratea Manuscripts*, Cham 2017, p. 401.

<sup>42</sup> On the Cielo de Salamanca, see especially Alejandro García Avilés, "Arte y astrología en Salamanca a finales del siglo XV", in: *Anuario del Departamento de Historia y Teoría del Arte*, VI (1994), pp. 39–60; José María

Martínez Frías, *El cielo de Salamanca: la bóveda de la antigua biblioteca universitaria*, Salamanca 2006; Lucía Lahoz, "La imagen de la Universidad de Salamanca en el Cuatrocientos", in: *Salamanca y su Universidad en el primer Renacimiento: siglo XV*, ed. by Luis E. Rodríguez-San Pedro Bezares/Juan Luis Polo Rodríguez, Salamanca 2011 (= *Miscelánea Alfonso IX*, 2010), pp. 267–318.



10 Fernando Gallego,  
astronomical ceiling.  
Salamanca,  
Escuelas Menores

very right extremity of the drawing as that of *Libra*, according to the standard succession of the zodiac's constellations in Western astronomy.<sup>43</sup>

Before discussing in detail the astronomical meaning of the original Sistine Chapel ceiling, it is essential to point out that the Uffizi drawing shows unusual peculiarities compared to other starry skies in medieval and Renaissance art.<sup>44</sup> The most noteworthy one is that the constellations lack the outline

of the figures that give them their name; consequently, for an unskilled observer it is roughly impossible to identify them. The preference for a naturalistic image of the starry vault – as opposed to a figurative or stylized one – is particularly astonishing since even on celestial globes – like the one by Johannes Schöner depicted by Hans Holbein in *The Ambassadors* (1533) – such outlines are never missing.<sup>45</sup> Although the court of Sixtus IV, as we shall see, was full of individuals

<sup>43</sup> H. Darrel Rutkin, *Sapientia Astrologica: Astrology, Magic and Natural Knowledge, ca. 1250–1800*, I, Cham 2019, pp. lxi–lxiii.

<sup>44</sup> For a general overview on celestial iconography in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, see especially Gioia Mori, *Arte e astrologia*, Florence 1987; *Astrologia: arte e cultura in età rinascimentale*, exh. cat., ed. by Daniele Bini, Modena 1996; Philippe Morel, *Mélima: magie, astres et démons dans l'art italien de la Renaissance*, Paris 2008; Mary Quinlan-McGrath, *Influences: Art, Optics, and Astrology in the Italian Renaissance*, Chicago/London 2013, pp. 1–24; Dieter

Blume, "Picturing the Stars: Astrological Imagery in the Latin West, 1100–1550", in: *A Companion to Astrology in the Renaissance*, ed. by Brendan Dooley, Leiden/Boston 2014, pp. 333–398; *Sternbilder des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* (note 39).

<sup>45</sup> On globes in the Renaissance, see Elly Dekker/Peter van der Krogt, *Globes from the Western World*, London 1993; Elly Dekker, "Globes in Renaissance Europe", in: *Cartography in the European Renaissance*, ed. by David Woodward, Chicago 2007, pp. 135–173.

endowed with the astronomical knowledge necessary to decipher the constellations even without these figures, this was certainly not the case for all intended viewers of the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

Another unusual feature of the Uffizi drawing is the point of view adopted for the arrangement of the zodiac's constellations. Comparing them to the constellations in the dome of the Old Sacristy, we can observe that those of Piermatteo d'Amelia are reversed: Cancer is pointing to the right and not to the left, Leo is pointing to the left and not to the right, and so on. In other words, the original Sistine ceiling was to show a 'globe-view' of the skies, which means that the constellations appeared not as seen from Earth – the conventional 'sky-view' – but from outside the sphere, in a fashion that cosmographers of the sixteenth century described as the 'God's-eye view'.<sup>46</sup> Maps and celestial globes produced during the Renaissance generally used this type of projection that, since Ptolemy's *Almagest*, was considered suitable for comprehensive pictures of the sky.<sup>47</sup> This, however, is not the case of the Uffizi drawing, which shows only a part of the zodiac and thus should be based on a 'globe-view' projection, as the frescoes of San Lorenzo and the Escuelas Menores (Figs. 9, 10). This observation opens two possibilities: either the adoption of the 'sky-view' was a deliberate choice on the part of Sixtus IV and his advisors to imitate the perspective of God on his creation or the drawing is in some way inaccurate be-

cause its author, relying on celestial maps or globes, did not take into consideration the change of view necessary for a vault decoration.

What does the arrangement of the signs of Cancer, Leo, Virgo, and Libra on the zodiac band signify? As Darrel Rutkin recently recalled, there are two main types of astronomical and astrological decorations.<sup>48</sup> Those of the first type, such as the wall paintings in the Palazzo della Ragione (1420–1440),<sup>49</sup> the Sala dei Mesi in the Palazzo Schifanoia (1476–1484),<sup>50</sup> the dome of the Chigi Chapel (1516),<sup>51</sup> or the ceiling of the Sala Bologna in the Vatican Palace (1575),<sup>52</sup> offer, with a more or less encyclopedic purpose, a sort of general *compendium* of astral knowledge. Those of the second type, such as the previously mentioned frescoes in Florence and Salamanca, but also the ceilings of the Sala di Galatea in the Villa Farnesina (ca. 1511)<sup>53</sup> and the Sala dello Zodiaco in the Palazzo Ducale of Mantua (ca. 1580),<sup>54</sup> commemorate a specific event linked with its location – a birth, a wedding, an election, or another significant political circumstance – by depicting the appearance of the sky at that time, which thus allows the erection of a horoscope.

Because the Uffizi drawing represents only a part of the zodiac, the starry sky of the Sistine Chapel must have belonged to this second type. But apart from the zodiacal constellations, there are other essential prerequisites for calculating a horoscope according to the Ptolemaic tradition set out in the

<sup>46</sup> On the 'globe-view' and the 'sky-view' in Western cartography, see in particular Elly Dekker, *Illustrating the Phaenomena: Celestial Cartography in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Oxford 2013, pp. 34–38. On the 'God's-eye view' and the theory of cosmography, see Frank Lestringant, *Mapping the Renaissance World: The Geographical Imagination in the Age of Discovery*, Berkeley 1994, and *idem*, "Ouverture", in: *Les méditations cosmographiques à la Renaissance*, ed. by *idem*, Paris 2009, pp. 7–18.

<sup>47</sup> See Nick Kanas, *Star Maps: History, Artistry, and Cartography*, New York 2007, pp. 10–13. The ceiling of the Sala del Mappamondo (1573–1575) in the Palazzo Farnese in Caprarola commissioned by the "Gran Cardinale" Alessandro is an example of this type of projection, as well as the globe supported by the *Farnese Atlas* (2nd century BC) acquired by the latter during the same decade.

<sup>48</sup> Rutkin (note 43), pp. 431–433.

<sup>49</sup> On this decoration, see in particular Graziella Federici Vescovini, "La teoria delle immagini di Pietro d'Abano e gli affreschi astrologici del Palazzo della Ragione di Padova", in: *Die Kunst und das Studium der Natur vom 14. zum 16. Jahrhundert*, conference proceedings Frankfurt am M. 1984, ed. by Wolfram Prinz/Andreas Beyer, Weinheim 1987, pp. 213–235.

<sup>50</sup> On this famous example, see most recently Morel (note 44), pp. 102–184, as well as the contributions in *Atlante di Schifanoia*, ed. by Ranieri Varese, Modena 1989, and *Il Palazzo Schifanoia a Ferrara*, ed. by Salvatore Settis/Walter Cupperi, Modena 2007.

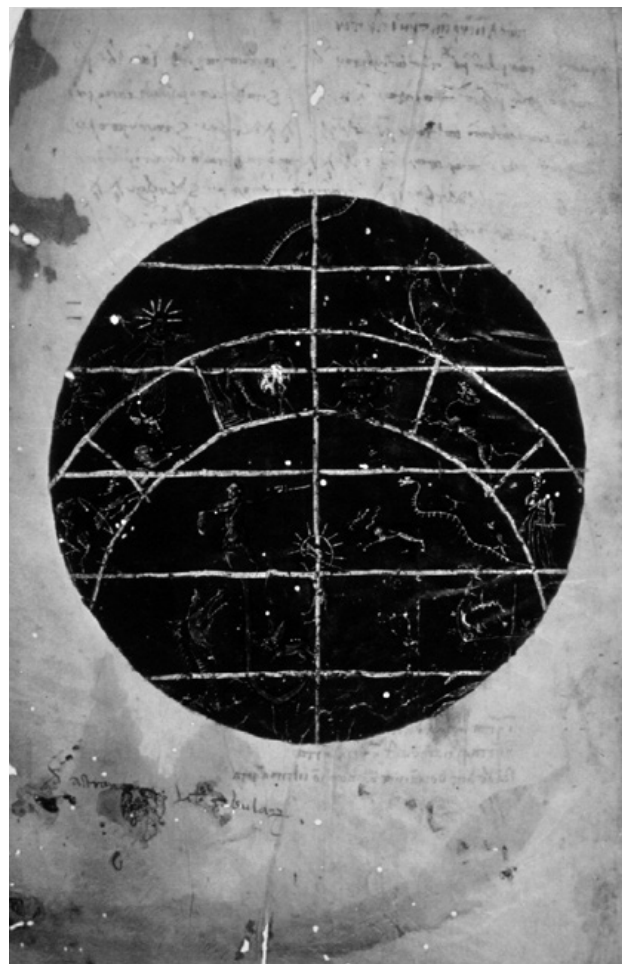
<sup>51</sup> See most recently Florian Métral, "Au commencement était la fin: retour sur la chapelle Chigi de Santa Maria del Popolo à Rome", in: *Studiolo*,



*Tetrabiblos*.<sup>55</sup> First, the position of the sun in the ecliptic line – which symbolizes its path over the year – and that of the moon and the planets. Second, the indication of the horizon line, which corresponds to the ascendant, and of the meridian, which corresponds to the mid-heaven or zenith. The Old Sacristy’s cupola reflects such a setting (Fig. 9). It is also what we find in a remarkable manuscript copy of Ptolemy’s *Handy Tables* from the ninth century held in the Vatican Library, which shows a depiction of a starry sky quite close to that of the Sistine Chapel (Fig. II).<sup>56</sup>

The main difficulty with the Uffizi drawing lies in the fact that, as far as we can observe, it does not represent the position of the sun, moon, and planets within the zodiac band and thus lacks one of the main prerequisites needed for charting a horoscope. I could not identify another image with such a lack of astronomical data. Yet one of the above-mentioned requirements is met: the vertical white line at the very center of the sheet represents, I suggest, either the horizon (ascendant) or the meridian (mid-heaven) for the location of the Sistine Chapel – that is to say Rome.

Because of its astronomical indeterminacy, the idea that the Sistine ceiling was a kind of painted horoscope must remain tentative. Other conclusions may be drawn, however, with greater confidence. The vertical line of the Uffizi drawing indicates that Virgo is about to ascend or is in mid-heaven. As in the astronomical ceilings of Florence and Salamanca, the



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11 Ptolemy, *Handy Tables*,  
constellations of the northern hemisphere.  
Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana,  
ms. Vat. gr. 1291, fol. 2v

XII (2015), pp. 154–183; *idem*, *Figurer la création du monde: mythes, discours et images cosmogoniques dans l'art de la Renaissance*, Arles 2019, pp. 107–109, 186f.

<sup>52</sup> See Emily Urban, “La volta celeste della Sala Bologna e la tradizione della cosmografia rinascimentale”, in: *La Sala Bologna nei Palazzi Vaticani: architettura, cartografia e potere nell'età di Gregorio XIII*, ed. by Francesco Ceccarelli/Nadja Aksamija, Venice 2011, pp. 57–64.

<sup>53</sup> Among the more recent literature, see especially Kristen Lippincott, “Two Astrological Ceilings Reconsidered: The *Sala di Galatea* in the Villa Farnesina and the *Sala del Mappamondo* at Caprarola”, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, LIII (1990), pp. 185–207; Mary Quinlan-McGrath, “The Villa Farnesina, Time-Telling Conventions and Renaissance Astrological Practice”, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, LVIII (1995), pp. 53–71.

<sup>54</sup> See Maria Grazia Fiorini Galassi, “Simbologia astrale nella stanza detta dello Zodiaco, nel Palazzo Ducale di Mantova”, in: *Civiltà mantovana*, n.s., III (1984), pp. 77–98, and Luisa Capodieci/Cristiana Ilari, “La Sala dello Zodiaco affrescata dal Falconetto a Mantova: ricerche d'archivio per una proposta di committenza”, in: *Venezia Cinquecento*, VI (1996), pp. 23–37.

<sup>55</sup> For a general overview on the practice of horoscope, see Rutkin (note 43), pp. lix–lxxxv.

<sup>56</sup> The *Handy Tables* are a revised and extended version of the astronomical tables in the *Almagest*. Ptolemy designed this set of tables for practical use, especially among astrologers. The manuscript copy of the Vatican Library (Vat. gr. 1291) was in Italy before 1465 (Blume [note 40], p. 162, note 8). For a description see Dekker (note 46), pp. 225–227.

section of the zodiac containing the constellations I have identified – Cancer, Leo, Virgo, and Libra – unquestionably points to a summer date, between mid-June and mid-October.<sup>57</sup> In my view, the location of the sun in the original Sistine ceiling was meant to coincide somehow with the vertical line of the ascendant or mid-heaven, thus referring to a date around mid-August, when the sun has left Leo and is about to go through Virgo. The most likely date is that of 15 August: the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary to whom the chapel is dedicated. We may see all of this as unsurprising in light of the astronomical investigations carried out at the court of Sixtus IV during his pontificate.

### Astronomy at the Sistine Court: George of Trebizond and Regiomontanus

Astronomy – including the practice of astrology – was of major interest at the papal court in the second half of the fifteenth century. During his papacy, the first Della Rovere pope strongly endorsed its teaching at the Roman university through the humanist Lorenzo Bonincontri, who was well-known at the time for his ongoing work on the edition of Manilius's *Astronomica*.<sup>58</sup> Sixtus IV was one of the most engaged Roman pontiffs in promoting and defending the study of celestial bodies, but not the first to be interested in the subject.

By the time of his death in 1455, Pope Nicholas V had accumulated an impressive collection of

manuscripts, with a particular strength in Greek texts.<sup>59</sup> Together with other books already held in the ancient papal libraries, this collection would form the core of the Biblioteca Vaticana inaugurated in 1475 by Pope Sixtus IV. Among that remarkable set of manuscripts, astronomical (and astrological) books were well represented, including some of the most influential treatises known in the late fifteenth century: Aratus's *Phenomena*, the *De Astronomica* attributed to Hyginus, Manilius's *Astronomica*, and, last but not least, Ptolemy's *Almagest* and *Tetrabiblos*.<sup>60</sup>

Supported by Nicholas V, in 1451 George of Trebizond completed a long-awaited new Latin translation of the *Almagest* accompanied by a lengthy commentary.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately for the Greek savant, his work was received with hostility within the humanist milieu, where some scholars criticized the translation as too loose and the commentary as inaccurate. Among them was the influential cardinal Bessarion, who had provided the humanist with the Greek manuscript of the *Almagest*.<sup>62</sup> In response, during a diplomatic visit to the court of the Habsburg emperor Frederick around 1460/61, Bessarion encouraged the Viennese astronomer and mathematician Georg Peurbach to undertake a new translation of the *Almagest* that would correct and ultimately replace George of Trebizond's work. At his untimely death in April 1461, Peurbach left his *Epytoma Almagesti Ptolomei* unfinished, but one of his close followers, the German Johannes Müller – better

<sup>57</sup> It is now generally accepted that the cupola of the Old Sacristy in San Lorenzo depicts the position of the luminaries and planets on 4 June 1442 at 10:30 a.m.; see Blume (note 40), p. 152. Scholars are still debating about the fresco of Salamanca, but there is a consensus that it shows the appearance of the sky in August 1475 corresponding to the foundation date of the library; see García Avilés (note 42), pp. 53f.

<sup>58</sup> Ornella Faracovi, "The Return to Ptolemy", in: *A Companion to Astrology in the Renaissance* (note 44), pp. 87–98: 96. The edition was published under the title *Laurentii Bonincontri Miniatisensis in Manilium commentum* in Rome in 1484. On Lorenzo Bonincontri, see Benedetto Soldati, *La poesia astrologica nel '400*, Florence 1906, pp. 105–198, and Cecil Grayson, s. v. Bonincontri, Lorenzo, in: *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, XII, Rome 1970, pp. 209–211.

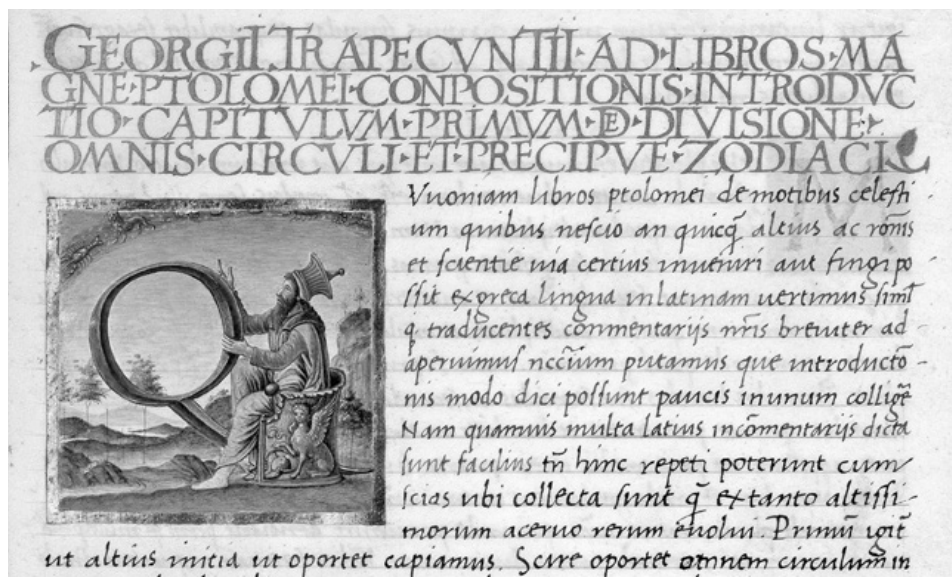
<sup>59</sup> See Leonard E. Boyle, "The Vatican Library", in: *Rome Reborn: The*

*Vatican Library and Renaissance Culture*, exh. cat. Washington 1993, ed. by Anthony Grafton, Washington/New Haven 1993, pp. xi–xxii: xi–xiv.

<sup>60</sup> See Noel M. Swerdlow, "The Recovery of the Exact Sciences of Antiquity: Mathematics, Astronomy, Geography", in: *Rome Reborn* (note 59), pp. 125–167: 139–156. The books possessed by Nicholas V and Sixtus IV are listed in Eugène Müntz/Paul Fabre, *La Bibliothèque du Vatican au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 1887, pp. 34–113, 135–268.

<sup>61</sup> John Monfasani, *George of Trebizond: A Biography and a Study of His Rhetoric and Logic*, Leiden 1976, pp. 71–81, 104–113.

<sup>62</sup> See Michael H. Shank, "Regiomontanus and Astronomical Controversy in the Background of Copernicus", in: *Before Copernicus: The Cultures and Contexts of Scientific Learning in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Rivka Feldhay/E. Jamil Ragep, Montreal/London/Chicago 2017, pp. 79–109: 87f.



12 George of Trebizond, *In Claudi Ptolomæi Almagestum, Commentarius lib. I–XIII*. Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms. Vat. lat. 2058, fol. 5r

known as Regiomontanus – continued the translation, in which he had participated since the beginning.<sup>63</sup> In 1462, Regiomontanus dedicated the new translation of the *Almagest* to Cardinal Bessarion. The *Epytoma Almagesti Ptolomei* was well received, and Johannes Müller became an authoritative figure on astronomy and mathematics in humanist circles for several decades, and long after his death.

However, despite the acclaim it garnered within Bessarion’s humanist circle, the *Epytoma* did not completely outshine George of Trebizond’s *Almagest*. In fact, the Greek humanist’s reputation in Europe had grown by the end of Nicholas V’s papacy and continued to do so through the pontificates of Pius II and Paul II.<sup>64</sup> In 1471 or 1472, George of Trebizond

returned to Rome (which he had left in 1452), invited by the newly elected pope Sixtus IV. As John Monfasani has argued, it is difficult to establish the precise contribution of the Greek scholar in the papal court, but it seems reasonable to suppose that the pope appealed to him for astronomical knowledge. We know from his son Andreas – who was one of Sixtus IV’s private secretaries – that George of Trebizond, probably soon after his arrival, planned to dedicate to the pope a new, richly decorated manuscript of his *Almagest* along with a commentary. His death in 1472 or 1473 interrupted this enterprise, which was eventually completed in 1482 by Andreas to ensure his father’s legacy.<sup>65</sup> Of particular interest to my interpretation is folio 5r of the commentary volume (Fig. 12). It fea-

<sup>63</sup> See Ernst Zinner, *Regiomontanus: His Life and Work*, Amsterdam 1990, in particular pp. 17–55, and Michael H. Shank, “The Classical Scientific Tradition in Fifteenth-Century Vienna”, in: *Tradition, Transmission, Transformation: Proceedings of Two Conferences on Pre-Modern Science Held at the University of Oklahoma*, ed. by F. Jamil Ragep/Sally P. Ragep/Steven John Livesey,

New York/Leiden 1996, pp. 115–136. On Regiomontanus see also the recent study by Michela Malpangotto, *Regiomontano e il rinnovamento del sapere matematico e astronomico nel Quattrocento*, Bari 2008.

<sup>64</sup> Monfasani (note 61), p. 232.

<sup>65</sup> *Idem* (note 9), pp. 11–14. The two manuscripts discussed here are the



AVGVSTVS.		SOLIS	LVNAE	Officiarius					
LEO		S	G	S	G				
1	c	Petri ad vincula	18	23	9	18	8	19	2
2	d	Stephani pape	18	20	10	0	9	6	15
3	e	Inuentio. S. Stephani	19	38	10	13	9	19	16
4	f	Non	20	36	10	26	10	2	15
5	g	Idus	21	33	11	9	10	11	15
6	A	Sixti pape	22	31	11	22	10	28	15
7	b	Africæ martyris	23	29	0	6	11	11	15
8	c	Cyriaci & iocorum eius	24	26	0	19	11	22	15
9	d	Vigilia	24	22	1	2	0	18	15
10	e	Laurentii martyris	26	22	1	14	0	20	15
11	f	Tyburti martyris	28	20	1	28	1	3	15
12	g	Clare virginis	28	18	2	12	1	18	15
13	A	Hippolyti martyris	29	16	2	24	2	0	15
14	b	Septembris Vigilia VIRGO	0	18	3	8	2	13	15
15	c	Assumptio Mariæ	1	12	3	21	2	20	16
16	d	Idus	2	10	4	8	3	9	16
17	e	Octaua. S. Laurentii	3	8	4	18	3	22	16
18	f	Agapiti martyris	4	6	5	1	4	16	16
19	g	Idus	5	4	6	18	5	16	15
20	A	Bernardi confessoris	6	3	7	28	6	16	15
21	b	Idus	7	1	8	10	7	18	16
22	c	Timothei & Symphoniani	8	0	9	23	8	16	17
23	d	Vigilia	8	0	10	16	9	16	18
24	e	Bartolemei apli	9	0	11	20	10	16	18
25	f	Idus	10	0	12	3	11	16	19
26	g	Idus	11	0	13	16	12	16	20
27	A	Ruffi martyris	12	0	14	29	13	16	20
28	b	Augustini episcopi	13	0	15	12	14	16	21
29	c	Decollatio S. Ioannis baptiste	14	0	16	8	15	16	22
30	d	Felicitis & Adaucti	15	0	17	12	16	17	22
31	e	Idus	16	0	18	22	17	17	23

13 Johannes Regiomontanus, *Kalendarium*, Nuremberg 1474. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, ms. 4 Inc.s.a. 1552, fol. 9r

*Almagestum*, lib. I–XIII: interpretatio latina Georgii Trapezuntii (Vat. lat. 2054) and the *In Claudii Ptolemaei Almagestum, Commentarius lib. I–XIII* (Vat. lat. 2058).

<sup>66</sup> About Andreas of Trebizond’s prefaces, see Michele Fuiano, “Astrologia e umanesimo in due prefazioni di Andrea di Trebisonda”, in: *Atti dell’Accademia di Scienze Morali e Politiche della Società Nazionale di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti di Napoli*, XVII (1967/68), pp. 385–412, and Monfasani (note 61), pp. 232–235.

tures an inhabited initial depicting Ptolemy staring at the zodiac band where we see some familiar constellations: Cancer, Leo, Virgo, and Libra. If the pointing finger of the Greek astronomer is meant to indicate the position of the sun in the ecliptic – approximately between Virgo and Libra –, it also refers to a summer date, which in this case is not the Assumption on 15 August as in the Uffizi drawing, but more probably the autumnal equinox that occurs around mid-September, as mentioned in the commentary by George of Trebizond.<sup>66</sup>

In many cases, the dedication of works in the Renaissance is aspirational and expresses intention on the part of their author rather than proof of reception. While it is difficult to measure the real impact of that manuscript, it is highly unlikely that Sixtus IV’s invitation to George of Trebizond had nothing to do with the pope’s interest in astronomy. At the time of the scholar’s death, plans for the decoration of the Sistine ceiling could only have been vague. Immediately after his election in 1471, Sixtus IV – like Paul II before him – was more concerned with a project of the highest significance for the Roman Church and Christianity: calendar reform.<sup>67</sup> The eleven extra minutes accumulating each year had led over the centuries to miscalculations of the dates of movable feasts such as Easter, which were determined on the basis of lunar phases and the date of the vernal equinox. At the end of the fifteenth century, the vernal equinox did not occur on March 21 as it should, but approximately nine or ten days earlier.

According to the testimony of Hartmann Schedel, the arrival of Regiomontanus in Rome in 1475, at the request of Sixtus IV, was a direct response to

<sup>67</sup> On the calendar reform between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries, see Karin Reich, “Problems of Calendar Reform from Regiomontanus to the Present”, in: Zinner (note 63), pp. 345–362; Christine Gack-Scheidig, *Jobannes de Muris “Epistola super reformatione antiqui kalendarii”*: Ein Beitrag zur Kalenderreform im 14. Jahrhundert, Hannover 1995; Charlotte Methuen, “Time Human or Time Divine? Theological Aspects in the Opposition to Gregorian Calendar Reform”, in: *Reformation and Renaissance*

George of Trebizond's death.<sup>68</sup> At the papal court, the German mathematician and astronomer played a part in solving the issue of calendar reform, even though he left his work incomplete due to his death (which occurred in murky circumstances) a few months later in 1476. Apart from his translation of the *Almagest*, Regiomontanus was well-known at this time for the first printed edition of Manilius' *Astronomica* (1473), for the *Ephemerides* – an almanac detailing the position of the sun, moon, and planets for each day of the years 1475 to 1506 –, and for the *Kalendarium* – a calendar containing especially the feast days of each month and the path of the sun through the signs over the year; these last two were published in Nuremberg in 1474.<sup>69</sup>

Notably, the *Kalendarium* (Fig. 13) and the *Ephemerides* (Fig. 14) give relevant indications of the major feast days that occur in August, such as the feast of Saint Sixtus on the 6th (which is also the anniversary date of Sixtus IV's election) and the feast of the Assumption on the 15th. More importantly for the meaning of the original Sistine ceiling, one can observe in the *Kalendarium*, a particular astronomical event calculated by Regiomontanus for the year 1474 on 14 August: the ecliptic date of the entrance of the sun into the sign of Virgo. While in the *Kalendarium* the view of the path of the sun over the year for the period 1475–1513 is indicated only in a general way, the *Ephemerides* includes detailed indications year by year. For the period relevant to the Sistine Chapel under Sixtus IV – 1475 to 1483 –, one can learn from the calculations of the German astronomer made in 1474 that the ecliptic date of the entrance of the sun into the sign of Virgo in 1475, 1478, 1479, 1482, and 1483 should fall not on the 14th but on 15 August – that is, on the feast of Assumption.<sup>70</sup>

14 Johannes Regiomontanus, *Ephemerides*, Nuremberg 1474. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, ms. Rar. 299 a, fol. 9v (plate of August 1475)

Review, III (2001), pp. 36–50; Tom Müller, “*Ut reiecto paschali errore veritatis insistamus?*”: Nikolaus von Kues und seine Konzilsschrift De reparatione kalendarii, Münster 2010; *La réforme du calendrier aux conciles de Constance et de Bâle*, ed. by Olivier De Solan, Paris 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Zinner (note 63), p. 151, and Malpangotto (note 63), pp. 22f.  
<sup>69</sup> On these works see Zinner (note 63), pp. 103–137; Malpangotto (note 63), pp. 22–75; Shank (note 62), pp. 79–109. On the use of the

*Kalendarium* and the *Ephemerides* for astronomical observations during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, see Rutkin (note 43), pp. lxx–lxxv. On Regiomontanus' calculations and work on the calendar reform, see Philipp E. Nothaft, *Scandalous Error: Calendar Reform and Calendrical Astronomy in Medieval Europe*, Oxford 2018, pp. 274–281.

<sup>70</sup> Johannes Regiomontanus, *Ephemerides*, Nuremberg 1474, fol. 9v (see our Fig. 14), 51v, 65v, 107v, 121v.

If, as argued earlier on the basis of the Uffizi drawing, the location of the sun in the original Sistine ceiling coincided with the line of the ascendant or the mid-heaven, I would suggest that the fresco of Piermatteo d'Amelia, despite the lack of a moon and planets in the drawing, depicted the setting of the sky on 15 August of the year 1475, which is the most widely accepted year for the foundation of the Sistine chapel.<sup>71</sup> It is quite possible that – for whatever reason – the sun, moon and planets were omitted only in the preserved design but were present in the final fresco version. That being said, there are two elements to keep in mind about the *Kalendarium* and the *Ephemerides*: first of all, the calculations were based on the Nuremberg meridian, not on Rome's longitude.<sup>72</sup> Second, the position of the luminaries and the planets were calculated at noon.<sup>73</sup> Even though none of his works are currently present in the Vatican Library, there is no reason to doubt that Regiomontanus did many astronomical observations, calculations, and tables for Sixtus IV adjusted to the sky of Rome in 1475–1476.<sup>74</sup>

As Ernst Zinner has shown, Regiomontanus owned celestial globes or was acquainted with their making, even if, in this case as well, there is no material evidence of his activity in the Vatican archives.<sup>75</sup> The celestial globe made by the German astronomer Nicolaus Germanus in 1477 along with a terrestrial one – both probably destroyed during the sack of Rome – is better documented.<sup>76</sup> The 1481 inventory

of the Vatican library and some letters from 1505 by Isabella d'Este describe these globes as placed on “two wooden legs, adorned with a cordovan bearing the coat of arms of Sixtus IV”.<sup>77</sup> Despite the lack of information about the design of Germanus' celestial globe, one may assume that it may have been a decisive source for the invention of the zodiac in the Sistine Chapel, also providing a reason for the adoption of a ‘globe-view’ of the heavens.

Other evidence for the astronomical interpretation of the starry sky can be gleaned from the chronology of the decoration itself. We know that the Sistine Chapel was completed during the summer of 1482, and the inauguration was initially scheduled for the feast of the Assumption.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, due to political troubles with the king of Naples in mid-August, the pope had to cancel the festivities. What is of interest here is that instead of rescheduling the inauguration soon after the end of the conflict, Sixtus IV preferred to postpone the consecration until the feast of the Assumption of 1483.<sup>79</sup> That decision stands as further evidence that there was something significant about the date of 15 August to the meaning of the chapel. It also points to a probable connection with Regiomontanus' *Ephemerides*: according to its astronomical chart of August 1483 (Fig. 15), as mentioned above, the first day of the entrance of the sun into Virgo in that year (as in 1482) still falls on the day of the feast of

<sup>71</sup> According to Darrel Rutkin (note 43), pp. lxxxiii–lxxxiv, the use of horoscope for *electiones* – i. e., to “choose a praiseworthy time for beginning a project” – was a common astrological practice.

<sup>72</sup> Zinner (note 63), p. 123.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 117.

<sup>74</sup> Johannes Tolhopf, another German astronomer who came to Rome around the fall of 1475, probably resumed the work of his colleague Regiomontanus; see Monfasani (note 61), p. 153. The same year, Tolhopf dedicated to Sixtus IV his *De motibus caelestium mobilium*, an unpublished treatise on planetary movement based on Ptolemy's *Almagest*, that is still preserved in the Vatican Library (Vat. lat. 3103). On Tolhopf, see especially Klaus Arnold, “Vates Herculeus: Beiträge zur Biographie des Humanisten Janus Tolophus”, in: *Poesis et pictura: Studien zum Verhältnis von Text und Bild in Hand-*

*schriften und alten Drucken. Festschrift für Dieter Wuttke zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. by Stephan Füssel/Joachim Knape, Baden-Baden 1989, pp. 131–155.

<sup>75</sup> Zinner (note 63), pp. 100, 164; Dekker (note 46), p. 140.

<sup>76</sup> For Germanus's globes, see José Ruyschaert, “Du globe terrestre attribué à Giulio Romano aux globes et au planisphère oubliés de Nicolaus Germanus”, in: *Bollettino dei Monumenti, Musei e Gallerie Pontificie*, VI (1986), pp. 93–104, and Józef Babicz, “The Celestial and Terrestrial Globes of the Vatican Library, Dating from 1477, and Their Maker Donnus Nicolaus Germanus (ca 1420–ca 1490)”, in: *Der Globusfreund*, XXXV/XXXVII (1987/1989), pp. 155–168.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 158.

<sup>78</sup> See Monfasani (note 9), p. 17.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem*.



the Assumption, as can be seen from the zero in the second column (marked at top by the symbols of sun and Virgo) of line 15.

Finally, if the appearance of the starry sky corresponds to 15 August (regardless of the year), the Uffizi drawing displayed, necessarily, a day sky – marked by the presence of the sun – painted as a night one. This kind of representation is not unconventional, as shown by the cupola of San Lorenzo’s Old Sacristy in Florence, which depicted the location of the luminaries and planets on 4 June 1442 at 10:30 a.m. in a nocturnal sky.<sup>80</sup>

Even if George of Trebizond and Regiomontanus were not directly involved, their astronomical and mathematical works undoubtedly nourished the conception of Piermatteo’s starry sky. My proposal of an astronomical interpretation of the Uffizi drawing should be taken as provisional, given all the issues highlighted previously. However, what is certain is that the original Sistine ceiling had a privileged meaning for the pope, which was closely tied not only to the astronomical knowledge but also to the Christian conception of stars as signs.

### Stars as Signs: Stellar Symbolism in Christian Thought

The relation and attitude of Christianity to the study of the heavenly bodies might appear ambivalent at first glance.<sup>81</sup> Despite the fact that the Bible contains some passages where stars are conceived as supernatural beings, the sacred scriptures on the whole condemn those who worship them and practice divination. While this activity – that is, astrology – was associated with idolatry, the study of the stars – that is, astronomy – was welcome for theological and liturgical purposes. The most salient example comes from

<sup>80</sup> See Blume (note 40), p. 152.

<sup>81</sup> For a general approach on Renaissance astrology, see Eugenio Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance: The Zodiac of Life*, London 1983; Steven Vanden Broecke, *The Limits of Influence: Pico, Louvain, and the Crisis of Renaissance Astrology*,

	☉	☽	♁	♂	♀	♃	♄	♅
Augustus	18	21	9	10	1	28	9	26
Petri ad uicula	18	21	9	10	1	28	9	26
e Stephani	18	21	9	10	1	28	9	26
Syxti pape	18	21	9	10	1	28	9	26
e Laurētii mar.	18	21	9	10	1	28	9	26
Hippolyti	18	21	9	10	1	28	9	26
Assumptio	18	21	9	10	1	28	9	26
e	18	21	9	10	1	28	9	26
Timothei	18	21	9	10	1	28	9	26
e Bartolemei	18	21	9	10	1	28	9	26
Augustini	18	21	9	10	1	28	9	26
Decolla. f. lo.	18	21	9	10	1	28	9	26
e	18	21	9	10	1	28	9	26

15 Johannes Regiomontanus, *Ephemerides*, Nuremberg 1474. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, ms. Rar. 299 a, fol. 121v (plate of August 1483)

the account of the fourth day of Creation in Genesis (I:14), which deals with the creation of the firmament by God: “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years.” Stars are like a calendar written in heaven. And for those learned in the science of *computus* – the method for the

Leiden/Boston 2003; Jean-Patrice Boudet, *Entre science et nigromance: astrologie, divination et magie dans l’Occident médiéval (XII<sup>e</sup>–XV<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Paris 2006, pp. 205–278; Quinlan-McGrath (note 44), pp. 1–24; Graziella Federici Vescovini, “The Theological Debate”, in: *A Companion to Astrology in the*

calculation of the liturgical events of the year (first of all the date of Easter) with the help of mathematics and astronomical observations – they are a celestial mirror of the liturgical year.<sup>82</sup> This is assuredly the primary function of the starry vault painted by Piermatteo d’Amelia: to represent the appearance of the night sky at the time of the feast of the Assumption on 15 August, one of the most important sacred events in the liturgical year.

As signs, stars also have various symbolic meanings in a biblical context. Stellar symbolism is particularly dominant in apocalyptic literature, where it foreshadows the end of time. For instance, stars are regarded as instruments of the revelation of the sacred truth, as can be read in the last vision of the prophet Daniel (12:3): “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” It is no wonder that stellar symbolism is so abundant in the Book of Revelation. Among its most striking and vivid images is their fall to earth (Rev. 6:13; 8:10), their identification with angels (Rev. 1:16–20; 12:4) and above all the Woman of the Apocalypse (Rev. 12:1): “A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.”

In the context of the Sistine Chapel under Sixtus IV, it is essential to note that since the early centuries of Christendom the Woman of Revelation, on account of her stellar symbolism, has been commonly

identified as the Virgin; and in the Middle Ages the Virgin acquired epithets such as *Regina Coeli* (Queen of Heaven) and *Maris Stella* (Star of the Sea). These were subsequently integrated into the liturgy of the feast of the Assumption.<sup>83</sup> Quattrocento and early cinquecento images of the Virgin are further evidence of this stellar symbolism connected to Marian theology. The *Madonna della Misericordia* of circa 1490 by Luca Signorelli and his workshop portrays the Queen of Heaven in front of a starry vault (Fig. 16).<sup>84</sup> The *Annunciation* of 1425/26 by Fra Angelico is a famous early example of an artwork creating a visual analogy between Mary’s mantle and the firmament vault (Fig. 17). Almost a century later, in 1513, Floriano Ferramola painted a *Virgin and Child* in the Oratorio di Santa Maria in Solario in Brescia with a star-adorned mantle in direct conjunction with a starry sky frescoed on the calotte of the apse (Fig. 18) but also on the cupola.<sup>85</sup>

Indeed, one of the main functions of stars in Marian imagery is to indicate the analogy between the Virgin’s mantle and the celestial vault. Already in the thirteenth century, the *De laudibus beatae Mariae Virginis* once attributed to Albert the Great emphasized such a theological view by noting that Mary’s robe is as vast as the sky itself and thus can be associated with the “firmamentum” and the sun.<sup>86</sup> The reference to the ‘Virgo in sole’ is particularly relevant to the original Sistine ceiling if we consider the Hours of Joanna I of Castile (ca. 1500) where an illumination shows Pope Sixtus IV praying on his knees and look-

Renaissance (note 44), pp. 99–140; William Eamon, “Astrology and Society”, *ibidem*, pp. 141–191; Robin B. Barnes, *Astrology and Reformation*, New York 2016, pp. 48–81; Rutkin (note 43).

<sup>82</sup> On the importance of *computus*, see Faith Wallis, *s. v.* *Computus*, in: *Medieval Science, Technology, and Medicine: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Thomas F. Glick/Steven J. Livesey/Faith Wallis, New York 2005, pp. 139–141.

<sup>83</sup> See *Who Is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*, ed. by Susan Haskins. Chicago/London 2008, pp. 16–20. In the context of the Sistine Chapel, Pfisterer (note 4), p. 40, also remembers the presentation of the Virgin Mary as Queen of Heaven in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*: “Indi rimaser li nel mio cospetto, / ‘Regina coeli’ cantando sì dolce, / Che mai da me non si parti ‘l diletto” (*Paradiso*, XXIII, 127–129).

<sup>84</sup> See Katherine T. Brown, *Mary of Mercy in Medieval and Renaissance Italian Art: Devotional Image and Civic Emblem*, London/New York 2017, pp. 96f.

<sup>85</sup> Although the stars on the Virgin’s mantle seem to be later additions, the *Assumption of the Virgin* of Bergognone, also painted in the 1510s, likewise stresses that analogy; see Harry B. Wehle, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: A Catalogue of Italian, Spanish, and Byzantine Paintings*, New York 1940, pp. 138f. On the decoration of the Oratorio di Santa Maria in Solario in Brescia, see note 20 above.

<sup>86</sup> Sylvie Barnay, “Une apparition pour protéger: le manteau de la Vierge au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle”, in: *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes*, VIII (2001), pp. 13–22: 16. For detailed discussions of the exegesis of the Virgin’s mantle, see Christa Belting-Ihm, “*Sub matris tutela?*”: *Untersuchungen zur Vor-*



16 Luca Signorelli and workshop,  
*Virgin of Mercy with Saints Sebastian  
 and Bernardino of Siena*.  
 Pienza, Museo Diocesano

ing up at a picture of the Virgin of the Sun (Fig. 19).<sup>87</sup> It is also worth noting that in the Middle Ages the Virgin Mary was long associated with the sign of Virgo. The root of this tradition can be traced back to Albumasar via Albert the Great's *Speculum Astronomiae* and Roger Bacon's *Opus Maius*.<sup>88</sup>

The stellar symbolism ascribed to the Queen of Heaven epitomizes the fact that the ceiling of Pier-

matteo d'Amelia not only possessed an astronomical meaning but, as a picture of the firmament, also formed an analogy with Mary's robe: a star-adorned mantle depicted as a night sky literally covers the Sistine Chapel and metaphorically protects, as in the many works depicting the Virgin of Mercy, the Church led by the pope.<sup>89</sup> By this view, the position of the constellation of Virgo in the center of the ceiling

*geschichte der Schutzmantelmadonna*, Heidelberg 1976; Jean Delumeau, *Rassurer et protéger: le sentiment de sécurité dans l'Occident d'autrefois*, Paris 1989, pp. 261–289; Dominique Donadieu-Rigaut, “Les ordres religieux et le manteau de Marie”, in: *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes*, VIII (2001), pp. 107–134; Brown (note 84), pp. 48–66.

<sup>87</sup> Bonnie J. Blackburn, “The Virgin in the Sun: Music and Image for a Prayer Attributed to Sixtus IV”, in: *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*,

CXXIV (1999), pp. 157–195: 180–187. As Blackburn recalls, the prayer, once attributed to Sixtus VI, has to be read in relation to the cult of the Immaculate.

<sup>88</sup> See Rutkin (note 43), pp. 152f.

<sup>89</sup> Even before Signorelli, the iconography of the Madonna of Mercy was widespread; the polyptych by Piero della Francesca (1460–1462, Sansepolcro, Pinacoteca Comunale) is a famous example. During the pon-



17 Fra Angelico,  
*Annunciation*.  
Madrid,  
Museo Nacional  
del Prado



18 Floriano Ferramola,  
*Virgin and Child  
with saints*. Brescia,  
Oratorio di Santa Maria  
in Solario



operates as another allusion to the presence and significance of the Virgin in the Sistine Chapel.

In the original Sistine ceiling, stars were both signs determining a precise event in sacred history – the feast of the Assumption on 15 August – and a symbolic representation of the Virgin. Aside from this Marian conception governing the starry sky of Piermatteo d’Amelia, there is an additional reading that can be suggested through the doctrine of Creation. In biblical and theological writings, stars also hold a significant place as signs of the omnipotence and wisdom of God the creator. “Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name”, states the Book of Isaiah (40:26) in a passage about the starry sky. There is indeed a deep-rooted tradition in Christian thought related to psalm texts which holds that one can come to know divine truths by considering visible created things. This theological conception is more specifically based on a much-discussed verse of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (I:20): “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.”<sup>90</sup>

This strand of thought was related to natural theology, a non-revealed theology aiming to read the Book of Scripture in the light of the Book of Nature.<sup>91</sup> For instance, the celebration of the visible created world provided the theological framework for the astronomical ceiling in Salamanca, which features the well-known third verse of Psalm 8: “When

tificate of Sixtus IV, the paintings by Domenico Ghirlandaio (ca. 1472, Florence, Ognissanti, Vespucci Chapel) and Bartolomeo Vivarini (1473, Venice, Santa Maria Formosa) witness the vitality of this Marian imagery throughout the Italian peninsula. On this argument see Brown (note 84).

<sup>90</sup> See James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, Oxford 1993; John G. Cook, “The Logic and Language of Romans I,20”, in: *Biblica*, LXXV (1994), pp. 494–517; Douglas A. Campbell, “Natural Theology in Paul? Reading Romans I.19–20”, in: *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, I (1999), pp. 231–252; Christopher Rowland, “Natural Theology and the



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19 Hours of Joanna I of Castile,  
fol. 237r: Pope Sixtus IV  
in prayer before an image  
of the Virgin in sole.  
London, British Library,  
Add. MS 35313

Christian Bible”, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, ed. by Russell Re Manning, Oxford 2013, pp. 23–38.

<sup>91</sup> The image of the Book of Nature was widely known during the Renaissance; see especially *The Book of Nature in Early Modern and Modern History*, ed. by Klaas van Berkel/Arjo Vanderjagt, Leuven 2006. On its use in the context of papal preaching in quattrocento Rome under the influence of Bonaventure, see John W. O’Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450–1521*, Durham 1979, pp. 96f.



I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established [...]”<sup>92</sup> Many medieval theologians spoke about the importance of the interrelation between the two Books, but one of these was a particularly eminent authority for Sixtus IV: the Franciscan theologian Bonaventure, who was canonized by the Della Rovere pope himself in April 1482.<sup>93</sup>

In his *Breviloquium* (1257), Bonaventure says that “the created world is a kind of book reflecting, representing, and describing its Maker, the Trinity”.<sup>94</sup> The *Collationes in Hexaemeron* (1273) offer a similar view: the Doctor Seraphicus insists on the anteriority of the Book of Nature but recalls its illegibility for humanity after original sin and thus the absolute necessity of the Scripture.<sup>95</sup> The meditation on the visible created world as divine “vestiges” (“vestigia”) is essential in Franciscan theology because it marks the first step towards the knowledge of God.<sup>96</sup> In the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (1259) the Franciscan theologian declares that “the supreme power, wisdom, and benevolence of the Creator shines forth in created things”.<sup>97</sup> Certain parts of the *Collationes in Hexaemeron* deal more specifically with stars as signs of divine truth. In his commentary upon the second day of Creation, Bonaventure links the formation of the “vault of heaven” to the “light of faith”. Later, regarding the fourth day of Creation, he emphasizes the fact that the firmament is an adornment of the visible world that decorates the church and the individual soul.<sup>98</sup>

Lastly, the naturalistic representation of the starry sky painted by Piermatteo d’Amelia suggests that

it was also meant to celebrate the greatness and the beauty of the world created by God.<sup>99</sup> By gazing up at this painted mirror of the firmament, the faithful can meditate on God and sacred history according to Bonaventure’s theological conceptions, which were shared and endorsed by Pope Sixtus IV. As a picture of the Virgin Mary and of the Creation, the original Sistine ceiling stressed the typological conception of the history of salvation that drove the entire decoration of the chapel, beginning with the stories of Moses and Christ. The starry sky aimed to remind all that the course of the history of salvation set by the Creator at the beginning of the world and testified by the Assumption of Mary and the cult of the *Immaculata* will find its fulfillment through the figure of the pope, considered as a new Moses, the representative of Christ upon earth and the leading authority of the Church.

#### Conclusion: Towards Michelangelo’s Ceiling

The astronomical reading of the original Sistine Chapel ceiling based on the Uffizi drawing, which appears to be a preliminary version awaiting fuller development, suggests two main considerations, which will serve as a conclusion for this study. The first – and clearly less disputable – point is that the ‘decorative’ understanding once proposed by Steinmann must be ruled out. The starry sky of Piermatteo d’Amelia was not purely ornamental, nor did Sixtus IV view it as a conventional decoration. Its status as a key element of the Mariological and ecclesiological program of the chapel must be rehabilitated.

<sup>92</sup> VIDEBO CELOS TUOS, OPERA DIGITORUM TUORUM, LUNAM ET STELLAS QUAE TU FUNDASTI (quoted in García Avilés [note 42], p. 40; see also our Fig. 10).

<sup>93</sup> See Lorenzo Di Fonzo, “Il processo di canonizzazione di San Bonaventura da Bagnoregio (1474–1482)”, in: *San Bonaventura, maestro di vita francescana e di sapienza cristiana*, ed. by Alfonso Pompei, Rome 1976, pp. 227–289; Goffen (note 7), pp. 226–228; Ronald C. Finucane, *Contested Canonizations: The Last Medieval Saints, 1482–1523*, Washington 2011,

pp. 33–70. On numerous occasions, Sixtus IV described himself as an avid reader of Bonaventure’s writings.

<sup>94</sup> “[...] creatura mundi est quasi quidam liber, in quo relucet, repraesentatur et legitur Trinitas fabricatrix” (Saint Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, trans. and ed. by Dominic V. Monti, Saint Bonaventure, NY, 2005, p. 96 [II, 12]). See also Costica Bradatan, “George Berkeley’s ‘Universal Language of Nature’”, in: *The Book of Nature* (note 91), pp. 69–82: 72.

<sup>95</sup> See Zachary Hayes, “Bonaventure’s Trinitarian Theology”, in: *A Com-*



In choosing, as I argued, to represent the astronomical configuration of the heavens in Rome on 15 August, the ceiling fresco came into close dialogue with Perugino's altarpiece of the Assumption. In this way, the pope – and the reasonably educated audience in the Sistine Chapel – could observe, by looking ahead and upward, the Virgin Mary as *Porta Coeli* on the altar wall becoming *Regina Coeli* on the vault and thus experience the Assumption as a path that leads to salvation and to God. The original Sistine ceiling reminded the entire assembly that there is no access to the divine without the Queen of Heaven, who is also the Mother of Salvation and the *Immaculata*. By introducing a correspondence between the starry vault and Mary's mantle, the Della Rovere pope also demonstrated his supreme power in temporal affairs, placed under the protection of the Virgin.

As an image of heaven, the starry sky of Piermatteo d'Amelia was at the same time an exaltation of the visible beauty of the world created by God. This reference to the *divina opera* appears to be further supported by the fact that stars were formed on the fourth day and, moreover, by the cult of the Immaculate Conception supported by Sixtus IV, which implies the predestination of the Queen of Heaven as part of the divine plan since before the beginning of time. With regard to the association between the Virgin and the Woman of the Apocalypse, Piermatteo d'Amelia's ceiling also emphasized the eschatological meaning of the starry sky. These veiled references to the beginning and the end of sacred history through the different manifestations of the Virgin could sug-

gest a typological reading of the Sistine Chapel ceiling as exemplified by the stories of Moses and Christ on the chapel walls.

This leads me to the second point, regarding the relation of Michelangelo's ceiling (Fig. 20) to Piermatteo d'Amelia's starry sky. Sixtus IV's decision to commission an astronomical ceiling for what was to be the center of papal authority demonstrates how important astronomy was under his pontificate. The decision of his nephew Julius II to replace it in 1506 should not be taken as a shift in attitude; he used a foundation horoscope for the rebuilding of Saint Peter's basilica the same year.<sup>100</sup> Even if the massive crack of 1504 cannot be taken as the primary motivation for the new Della Rovere pope to repaint the ceiling, the fact is that it eventually led him to that decision.<sup>101</sup>

One can undoubtedly agree with Antonio da Sangallo when he highlights the contrast between Piermatteo d'Amelia's and Michelangelo's projects on the back of the Uffizi drawing. Yet some formal and iconographical connections can be established between the two decorations from a theological point of view. Perhaps the most evident one is to be identified in the immaculism and ecclesiology that Kim Butler has argued are inherent to some of Michelangelo's ceiling images.<sup>102</sup> Located at the very center of the ceiling, where the path of the sun in the ecliptic indicated the date of the feast of the Assumption, the episode of the *Creation of Eve* is another way to remind viewers – as a symbolic palimpsest – of the Marian symbolism of the Sistine Chapel. Another point of continuity is to be

panion to *Bonaventure*, ed. by Jay M. Hammond/J. A. Wayne Hellmann/Jared Goff, Leiden/Boston 2014, pp. 189–245: 243–245.

<sup>96</sup> See Ilia Delio, "Theology, Spirituality, and Christ the Center: Bonaventura Synthesis", *ibidem*, pp. 361–402: 388–392.

<sup>97</sup> "Relucet autem Creatoris summa potentia et sapientia et benevolentia in rebus creatis" (Saint Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, trans. by Zachary Hayes, ed. by Philotheus Boehner, Saint Bonaventure, NY, 2002, p. 55 [I, IO]).

<sup>98</sup> Marianne Schlosser, "Bonaventure's Life and Works", in: *A Companion to Bonaventure* (note 95), pp. 9–59: 52f.

<sup>99</sup> As pointed out by Pfisterer (note 4), p. 31.

<sup>100</sup> See Mary Quinlan-McGrath, "The Foundation Horoscope(s) for St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, 1506: Choosing a Time, Changing the *Storia*", in: *Isis*, XCII (2001), pp. 716–741.

<sup>101</sup> See note 28 above.

<sup>102</sup> Butler (note 4), pp. 258–269.



—  
20 Michelangelo,  
decoration of the  
Sistine Chapel vault.  
Rome, Apostolic Palace

found in the emphasis of both ceilings on the importance of the doctrine of Creation in the history of salvation. While the starry vault of Piermatteo d'Amelia showed the beauty and magnificence of God's visible work, the frescoes of Michelangelo depicted the omnipotence and wisdom of God's first acts of creation – especially the formation of heavenly bodies where sun and moon are featuring prominently –, which remain unseen and only knowledgeable to humanity through the testimony of Moses – the supposed author of the Book of Genesis –, the prophets, and the sibyls. The real shift from the Sistine Chapel ceiling commissioned by Sixtus IV to the one painted under Julius II may be characterized, we might now say, as one from a non-

revealed to a revealed theology of God's Creation. The world might have been created *ex nihilo*, but this was not the case for Michelangelo's ceiling.

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In early summer of 1508, Michelangelo began his work in the Sistine Chapel soon after the complete destruction of the starry sky frescoed by Piermatteo d'Amelia in 1481 at the request of Pope Sixtus IV. Since the end of the nineteenth century, scholars assumed – erroneously – that the fifteenth-century ceiling was a conventional decorative picture of the heavens. This study offers new insights into the only surviving drawing of the decoration, which is today in the collections of the Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe of the Uffizi in Florence. It first aims to demonstrate that the starry sky of Piermatteo depicted a remarkable astronomical configuration of the heavens related to a significant event for the pope and the Church: the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin, which occurs on 15 August and to which the chapel was dedicated.

After contextualizing the Uffizi drawing within the iconography of starry skies in Renaissance art and considering astronomy within the Sistine court, this essay then focuses on the stellar symbolism and its significance. Stars are first understood as a calendar written in heaven, but they also have a symbolic meaning in regards to Marian theology and the doctrine of Creation. Finally, the analysis of Piermatteo d'Amelia's fresco will lead us to reconsider some formal and iconographical aspects of Michelangelo's ceiling.

*Musei Vaticani, Rome: Figs. 1, 20. – Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome: Fig. 2. – The Albertina Museum, Vienna: Fig. 3. – Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence: Fig. 4. – From Weil-Garris Brandt (note 4): Fig. 5. – Author: Fig. 6. – Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome: Figs. 7, 8, 11, 12. – Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Rome: Figs. 9, 16, 18. – Universidad de Salamanca: Fig. 10. – Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich: Figs. 13–15. – Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid: Fig. 17. – British Library, London: Fig. 19.*



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(S. 290, Abb. 8 | p. 290, fig. 8)

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