In Search of a Divine Face

Physiognomy and the Representation of Sanctity in Christian Art

Chiara Croci

Abstract

The article aspires to show how physiognomy was used in late antique art in order to give substance to the theophanic dimension of a person, especially of a saint. Drawing on monumental art, sculpture, daily life objects and catacomb paintings or mosaics, it is possible to discern that the physiognomic features were used as iconographical attributes, which were adjusted depending on the context and of the degree of holiness of the person depicted (saints, deceased, patrons). Therefore, the article allows to follow the transition from portrait to 'icon' characterizing the late antique period.

Contents

Portraits and physiognomical manipulation

[1] In keeping with the topic of the volume, dedicated to the iconic dimension of bodies, this article discusses the ways in which physiognomy was employed in late antique portraits. Drawing on a selection of famous cases, I analyse how physiognomy translated status and character, and, with them, the revelatory dimension of holy and ecclesiastical figures.

[2] The manipulation of one's physiognomy in his or her portrait was legitimated already in Aristotle's thinking, with the Greek philosopher praising the artisan who was able to rework the model's outlook in order to better reproduce its virtues.[1] In Antiquity, the portrait developed between a double quest, that for a mimetic reproduction of the model's physiognomic features, and that for elements that indicated its status.[2] Studies of Graeco-Roman portraiture thus have focused on the dichotomy between 'physiognomic' and 'typological' images, although the two can only be separated at a conceptual level.[3] When portraits

---

[1] Aristotle, *Poetics* 1454B (trans. with intr. by Malcom Heath, London 1996).

[2] The term "portrait" here means the representation of an individual outside of a narrative scene.

rather than theories are discussed, the two are often found to overlap (Fig. 1).[4] It is precisely the tension between the physiognomic/ individual and the typological/ idealised features that catalysed, in the second half of the twentieth century, some of the main theses regarding the representation of individual character. In the context of his research on the semiotics of authority in the Middle Ages, Ernst Kantorowicz postulated the existence of two bodies of the king, the mortal and the mystical/ political.[5] Paul Zanker stressed the use of "Zeitgesicht" in Roman imperial portraits; faces that became *en vogue* thanks to certain typological features, and which came to influence also private commissions of the time.[6] The same scholar showed that, when it came to representing intellectuals, certain physiognomical elements such as the beard, the upward gaze, and baldness were chosen and adapted in order to transmit their aspirations, ideals, and privileged relation with the divine.[7]

1 Marble portrait of a man, h. 23 cm, Roman, first half of the 3rd century CE. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no. 07.286.112 (photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

---

[3] Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, "Il ritratto nell'antichità", in: *Enciclopedia dell'arte antica*, VI, Rome 1965, 695-738.

[4] Tonio Hölscher, *Ideal und Wirklichkeit in den Bildnissen Alexanders des Großen*, Heidelberg 1971; Eugenio La Rocca, "Il ritratto e la somiglianza", in: *Ritratti. Le tante facce del potere*, eds. Eugenio La Rocca and Claudio Parisi Presicce, Rome 2011, 21-29.

[5] Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Princeton NJ 1957.

[6] Paul Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*, Munich 1987.

[7] Paul Zanker, *Die Maske des Sokrates: das Bild des Intellektuellen in der antiken Kunst*, Munich 1995. In evaluating sculpture, great weight was placed on the re-carving of pre-existent objects. See Marina Prusac, *From Face to Face. Recarving of Roman Portraits and the Late-Antique Portrait Arts*, 2nd ed., Leiden/Boston 2016.

[3] The dichotomy between the physiognomic and the idealised dimension of a portrait, and the importance ascribed to physiognomy on account of its capacity to indicate the person's interiority were further stimulated in the Christian milieu. The desire to represent the individual's spiritual life—that is, his or her vicinity to the divine—and even the degree of holiness often took precedence over that of producing a realistic image of the person.

[4] Synthesising the phenomenon is a famous passage by Paulinus of Nola (354–431), a Roman nobleman who adopted an ascetic life and eventually became bishop of the community at Nola. Faced with his friend Severus' desire for a portrait, he restated the embarrassment felt and expressed a century before by the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus (203–270) in face of his embodied state.[8] Paulinus underlined the impossibility of rendering both the carnal and the spiritual man (*homo spiritualis*) in a portrait.[9] This incapacity to account for the

---

[8] Paulinus Nolanus, *Epistolae* 30.2 and 30.6 (ed. and trans. by Giovanni Santaniello, Paolino di Nola, *Le lettere*, Naples 1992, 182-187, 192-195).

(*Ep.* 30.2): *Quid enim tibi de illa petitione respondeam, qua imagines nostras pingi tibi mittique iussisti? Obsecro itaque te per uiscera caritatis, quae amoris ueri solatia de inanibus formis petis? Qualem cupis ut mittamus imaginem tibi? Terreni hominis an caelestis? Scio quia tu illam incorruptibilem speciem concupiscis, quam in te rex caelestis adamauit. Neque enim alia potest tibi a nobis necessaria esse quam illa forma, ad quam ipse formatus es, qua proximum iuxta te diligas nulloque te nobis excellere uelis, ne quid inter nos inaequale uideatur. Sed pauper ego et dolens, quia adhuc terrenae imaginis squalore concretus sum et plus de primo quam de secundo Adam carneis sensibus et terrenis actibus refero, quomodo tibi audebo me pingere, cum caelestis imaginem infitiari prober corruptione terrena? Vtrimque me concludit pudor: erubesco pingere quod sum, non audeo pingere quod non sum; odi quod sum et non sum quod amo. Sed quid mihi misero proderit odisse iniquitatem et amare uirtutem, cum id potius agam quod odi nec elaborem piger id potius agere quod amo? Ipse discors mei intestino bello distrahor, dum spiritus aduersus carnem et caro aduersus spiritum dimicat, et lex corporis lege peccati legem mentis inpugnat;*

(*Ep.* 30.6): *Gratias autem domino, quod perenni magis et uiuente pictura imagines nostras non in tabulis putribilibus neque ceris liquentibus, sed in tabulis carnalibus cordis tui pinxit, ubi nos inpressos et animae tuae conformatos fidei et gratiae unitate custodiens, non solum istic sed etiam in aeterno saeculo indiuidua semperque praesenti contemplatione conspicies. Hic etiam, si tantus amor est uisibilia quoque captare solatia, poteris per magistras animi tui lineas uel inperitis aut ignorantibus nos dictare pictoribus, memoriam illis tuam, in qua nos habes pictos, uelut imitanda de conspicuis adsidentium uultibus ora proponens. Sed si forte ad intellectum uerbi tui inscitior manus artificis errauerit, dissimiles pinget aliis, tibi tamen nos semper animo consideranti et conplectenti, quoslibet uultus sub nostro nomine inperitia sua pinxerit, tamen tua conscientia nos erimus.*

[9] From the rich bibliography on this, see e.g. Nicolas Bock, "Making a Silent Painting Speak: Paulinus of Nola, Poetic Competition and Early Christian Portraiture", in: *The Face of the Dead and the Early Christian World*, ed. Ivan Foletti, Rome 2013, 11-28; Tomas Lehmann, "Martinus und Paulinus in Primuliacum (Gallien): Zu den frühesten nachweisbaren Mönchsbildnissen (um 400) in einem Kirchenkomplex", in: *Vom Kloster zum Klosterverband. Das Werkzeug der Schriftlichkeit*, eds. Hagen Keller and Franz

model's spiritual state essentially annuls the logic of the portrait. The point Paulinus makes can be linked to the diffusion, from the dawn of the Christian era, of a new type of image; an image able to account for the model's sanctity, produced for mnemonic and venerational purposes.[10] In this type of devotional image, physiognomic accuracy was not meant to reproduce mimetically the features of the model, but to render the holy individual present to the devotee, who sought contact with him or her through the image. As argued by Katherine Marsengill in her recent study, the margin between portrait and icon was blurred, with the birth of the latter being related to the gradual abandonment of the physiognomical portrait.[11] In Late Antiquity, the portrait thus goes through a transition, whose interaction with cult images has been studied in detail in the now classic studies by Hans Belting and Maria Andaloro.[12]

Representing saints: ascribing physiognomy

[5] As the more educated part of Roman society converted to Christianity, the elements that in ancient portraits stood for erudition, spiritual concerns, and self-control—those features that represented the mark of the philosophical life, like thinness, baldness or the beard—came to be used to indicate sanctity; that is the

---

Neiske, Munich 1997, 56-67; Chiara Croci, *Una 'questione campana'. La prima arte monumentale cristiana tra Napoli, Nola e Capua (secc. IV–VI),* Rome 2017, 170-173. On the previous case of Plotinus, see Thomas Pekáry, "Plotin und die Ablehnung des Bildnisses in der Antike", in: *Boreas* 17 (1994), 177-186. More broadly, on Plotinus' attitude toward art, see the classic study by André Grabar, *Plotinus and the Origins of Medieval Aesthetics*, new translation and introduction by Adrien Palladino, Rome 2018 (orig. "Plotin et les origines de l'esthétique médiévale", in: *Cahiers archéologiques* 1 [1945], 15-34).

[10] On cult images in Late Antiquity, see Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm", in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954), 83-150; Leslie Brubaker, "Icons before Iconoclasm?", in: *Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo* 45 (1997/1998), 2, 1215-1254; Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness. On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm*, Princeton, NJ 2002; Gilbert Dagron, *Décrire et peindre. Essai sur le portrait iconique,* Paris 2007, esp. 15-30.

[11] Katherine Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons: Between Reality and Spirituality in Byzantine Art,* Turnhout 2013; ead., "Panel Painting and Early Christian Icons", in: *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, eds. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison, New York 2018, 191-206. Marsengill ascribes to icons the change in the perception of holy individuals, cf. Katherine Marsengill, "The Influence of Icons on the Perception of Living Holy Persons", in: *Perceptions of the Body and Sacred Space in Late Antiquity and Byzantium*, ed. Jelena Bogdanović, Abingdon 2018, 87-103. For a contrasting view, see Thomas F. Mathews, *The Dawn of Christian Art in Panel Paintings and Icons*, Los Angeles 2016, who identifies the origin of Christian icons in panels showing pagan gods.

[12] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Chicago 1994 (orig. *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Munich 1990); Maria Andaloro, "Dal ritratto all'icona", in: *Arte e iconografia a Roma: da Costantino a Cola di Rienzo*, eds. Maria Andaloro and Serena Romano, Milan 2000, 31-67.

theophanic dimension of saints and ecclesiastic figures.[13] The process through which physiognomy was used to construct an image of a holy Christian individual can be traced by analysing how the apostles Peter and Paul received their typical portraits in the course of the fourth century. Since, in all likelihood, these were no mimetic representations of the two apostles, an artificial physiognomy was invented.[14] Personal features thus make way to an attributive physiognomy as Christian try to recover the faces of the apostles.[15]

[6] Paul is described in a second-century text as a man whose face is simultaneously human and angelic, characterised by a tension between the fascination he stimulated and his unattractive visage:

a man small of stature, bald-headed, bandy-legged, healthy, a brow meeting in the middle, a somewhat longish nose, a gracious presence; for some times he appeared as a man, but at other times he had the face of an angel.[16]

In order to put a face on this grave, inspired, and angelic character, artists of the fourth century adopted the image of the philosopher: a middle-aged man with pointed beard, dark hair, and advanced baldness.[17] Peter's portrait, which had to capture the diverse model of sanctity that the apostle embodied, was imagined as opposite to that of Paul. In the same period in which the face of Paul was gaining its features, that of Peter was also being established as that of a man with decisive and prominent features, rich hair, oval head and short beard. Peter

---

[13] See the contribution by Vladimir Ivanovici and Sissel Undheim in this special issue, with bibl.; see also Henry Maguire, *The Icons of Their Bodies. Saints and Their Images in Byzantium*, Princeton 1996.

[14] Eusebius of Caesarea (265–340), *Historia Ecclesiastica* 8.18.4 (ed. and trans. Arthur C. McGiffert, New York 1890, 646) testifies to the existence *ab antiquo* of panel portraits of Peter and Paul, but their circulation is attested only in later periods; cf. Stella Patitucci, "Aspetti dell'iconografia di San Paolo in età paleocristiana", in: *Paolo di Tarso. Archeologia, storia, ricezione*, 3 vols., ed. Luigi Padovese, Cantalupa 2009, vol. 1, 31-62: 33-34.

[15] On this issue, see Beat Brenk, "Homo coelestis oder von der physischen Anonymität der Heiligen in der Spätantike", in: *Bildnisse. Die europäische Tradition der Portraitkunst*, ed. Wilhelm Schlink, Freiburg im Breisgau 1997, 3-60, who discusses the development of a kind of "physical anonymity" in the images of holy figures.

[16] From the second-century apocryphal *Life of Paul and Thecla* (ed. and trans. by Jan N. Bremmer, *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Kampen 1996, 38).

[17] On the relationship between this description and the emerging iconography of Paul, see Callie Callion, "The Unibrow that Never Was: Paul's Appearance in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*", in *Dressing Judeans and Christians in Antiquity*, ed. Kristi Upson-Saia et al., Farnham 2014, 99-116. On the iconography of Paul in general, see Fabrizio Bisconti, "La sapienza, la concordia, il martirio: la figura di Paolo nell'immaginario iconografico della tarda antichità", in: *San Paolo in Vaticano. La figura e la parola dell'apostolo delle genti nelle raccolte pontificie*, ed. Umberto Utro, Todi 2009, 163-176; Stella Patitucci Uggeri, *San Paolo nell'arte paleocristiana*, Città del Vaticano 2010; Umberto Utro, "Alle origini dell'iconografia paolina", in: *Paulo apostolo martyri. L'apostolo San Paolo nella storia, nell'arte e nell'archeologia*, eds. Ottavio Bucarelli and Martin M. Morales, Rome 2011, 27-44, esp. 27-29.

emerged as a strong and mature fisherman able to balance, and complement, the erudite Paul (Figs. 2, 3).

2 Bowl base with Saints Peter and Paul flanking a column with the Christogram, gold glass, dm. 10 cm, late 4th century CE. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no. 16.174.3 (photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)
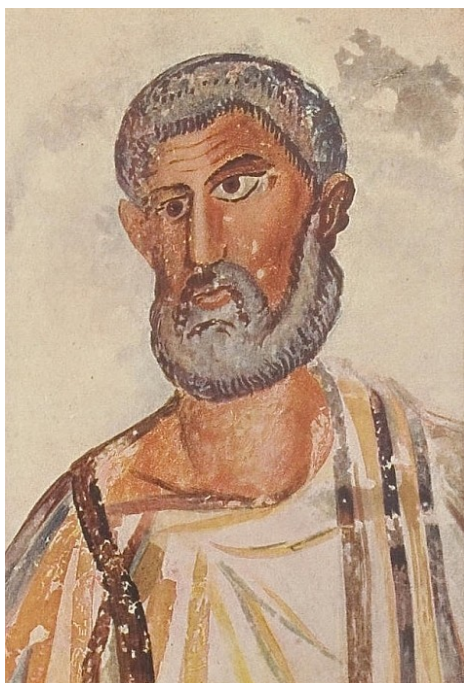
3 Saint Peter, detail of the vault of the Cubicolo dei Santi, Rome, Catacomb of Domitilla, late 4th century CE, watercolor by Joseph Wilpert (repr. from: Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms*, Freiburg i. Br. 1903, pl. 255)

[7] In imagining the appearance of the two apostles, the semantic possibilities offered by the physiognomic tradition were exploited in order to create two types of individuals able to translate a notion of embodied authority, if in diverse manners. Together, the two testified to the unity of a universal Church, reunited around the proselytising philosopher and the elect fisherman. Through the former God spoke the language of the elite, while in the latter the power of God was revealed as accessible to all. The role physiognomy played in the definition of a notion of incarnated sanctity, embodied by the two apostles, is confirmed, paradoxically, by the use of the opposing concept. However, on a number of gold glass pieces from the same period, physiognomic differences between the two are completely cancelled. Represented from the side and facing each other, Peter and Paul are shown with identical features, with their identities attested only by inscriptions (Fig. 4).[18]

4 Bottom of a drinking vessel or bowl with busts of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, gold glass, dm. 10,5 cm, Roman, 4th century CE. British Museum, London, inv. no. 1863,0727.4 (© The Trustees of the British Museum)

In this case, the identity implications of physiognomy are used to advertise the notion of *concordia apostolorum*, using a strategy attested in the depiction of tetrarchic rulers, whose unity and common source of power were indicated through the use of identical faces.[19]

---

[18] Charles Rufus Morey, *The Gold-Glass Collection of the Vatican Library, with Additional Catalogues of other Gold-Glass Collections*, Città del Vaticano 1959, cat. nr. 65-66. Chiara Croci, "Portraiture on Early Christian Gold-Glass: Some Observations", in: *The Face of the Dead and the Early Christian World*, ed. Ivan Foletti, Rome 2013, 37-48, esp. 42-43. On these objects, see e.g. Susan Walker, ed., *Saints and Salvation. The Wilshere Collection of Gold-Glass, Sarcophagi and Inscriptions from Rome and Southern Italy*, Oxford 2017, 73-132.

[19] Brenk, "Homo coelestis", 106-109. On the tetrarchs, see Marianne Bergmann, *Studien zum römischen Porträt des 3. Jahrhunderts nach Christus*, Bonn 1977, 138-78; id., "Bildnisse der Tetrarchenzeit", in: *Konstantin der Grosse*, (exh. cat. Rheinisches Landesmuseum Trier/ Bischöfliches Dom- und Diözesanmuseum Trier/ Stadtmuseum Simeonstift Trier), eds. Alexander Demandt and Joseph Engemann, Mainz 2007, 58-71.

Recognizability and substantiation of the saint

[8] Peter and Paul with their specific features stand out from a mass of early Christian saints characterised by physiognomic anonymity. An exception in this sense is represented also by the Roman martyr Agnes. The recognizability of her portrait, which spreads in the course of the fourth century, probably linked to the effigy on her tomb, allows us to distinguish physiognomy's use to render the saint present and stress her theophanic dimension. In a context populated by generic figures such as those on gold glass, the portrait of Agnes is broadly diffused and characterised by a great degree of iconographic coherence. Even though we cannot speak of a mimetic representation, and her identification is ascertained by inscriptions, the saint is consistently depicted as a plump young woman in orant position, with earrings, a bowl haircut and a type of chignon; all features that we later find on the mosaic 'icon' which adorns the apse of the sanctuary raised next to her tomb in the second quarter of the seventh century.[20] Although she was martyred during the reign of Diocletian (284–305), thus more recently than the apostles, there is no certainty that portraits of her made while alive ever circulated. Thus, the first attempt to give her a face, or at least an official image, could be associated with the organisation of her tomb during the episcopate of Liberius (352–366). Then, an engraved marble *pluteum* dominated by the saint's figure bore the features that would become hers (Fig. 5).[21]

5 Marble slab with Saint Agnes, ca. 352–366 AD, Basilica di Sant'Agnese fuori le mura, Rome (photo © Chiara Croci)

The selected physiognomy underlines the youth and dedication of the girl, serene and smiling. It was certainly not by chance that her figure appears similar to that of the Virgin, as depicted on gold glass pieces of the same period. In between a funerary portrait and an icon, the image with a plausible physiognomy that was

---

[20] Croci, "Portraiture on Early Christian Gold-Glass", 45-47.

[21] The slab was discovered in the eighteenth century in the pavement of the present church, and recognised as one of the marbles that decorated the tomb in the period of Liberius (*Liber Pontificalis*, ed. Louis Duchesne, Paris 1886, I, 85: "Hic Liberius ornavit de platomis marmoreis sepulchrum sanctae Agnae martyris"); cf. Amato Pietro Frutaz, *Il complesso monumentale di Sant'Agnese*, 2nd ed., Rome 2001, 46.

marked on the *pluteum* seems to have gained the status of an 'official' portrait of the saint, worthy of being reproduced.

[9] It is in a specific context, such as the one of the saint's tomb, that his or her image is often attested as having a particular, individualised physiognomy. That is the case with the chapel of St. Victor in Milan (490–512), part of the Basilica Ambrosiana. There, the martyr Victor is depicted at the centre of a wreath, on the apex of the dome (Fig. 6). Identified by the name "Victor", written on a book he holds in his left hand, the figure is characterised by a marked individualisation that distinguishes him from Sts. Nabor, Felix, Gervasius and Protasius, who are depicted in conventional fashion on the walls below (Fig. 7).[22]

6 Saint Victor, mosaic in the dome, 490–512, chapel of San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro, basilica of Sant'Ambrogio, Milan (photo © Domenico Ventura/ Ivan Foletti)

7 Saints Nabor, Felix, Gervasius and Protasius, mosaics on the southern wall, 490-512, chapel of San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro, basilica of Sant'Ambrogio, Milan (photo © Domenico Ventura/ Ivan Foletti)

---

[22] For the dating see also Ivan Foletti, "Physiognomic Representations as a Rhetorical Instrument: 'portraits' in San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro, the Galla Placidia 'mausoleum' and San Paolo fuori le Mura", in: *The Face of the Dead and the Early Christian World*, ed. id., Rome 2013, 61-83, 66-69; id., *Oggetti, reliquie, migranti. La basilica ambrosiana e il culto dei suoi santi,* Rome 2018, 81-87.

Victor is rendered in the manner of a philosopher, as a mature individual with grey hair and beard, prominent nose, plump mouth and protruding ears. As proposed by Ivan Foletti, the choice of a highly individualised physiognomy was meant to manifest the saint's presence in situ in the eyes of who entered the chapel. Without engaging in the complex matter of the various stylistic modes identifiable in the mosaics of the chapel, discussed by Foletti in his study, it is, nevertheless, necessary to stress that the saint stands out through the almost 'impressionistic', 'colouristic' depiction. This element differentiates him from other figures depicted in the chapel, including St. Ambrose's portrait, which can be defined as mimetic on account of its individualised features. The difference can be explained by the use of diverse kinds of models: In the case of Victor, a mimetic portrait on panel—a type of image that sources attest in tombs of venerated individuals—seems a likely model.[23]

8 Portrait of a man, encaustic on limewood, 39.4 x 19.3 cm, from Fayoum (Egypt), ca. 130–150 CE. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no. 09.181.2 (photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

[10] Representation of individuals in mimetic fashion finds its strongest expression in funerary contexts, as attested by the famous portraits from Fayoum (Fig. 8). In catacomb tombs too, carved spaces attest to the practice of inserting panels and/ or canvases with the defunct person's portrait.[24] In the latter

---

[23] Foletti, "Physiognomic Representations as a Rhetorical Instrument", 68-69.

[24] On portraits from Fayoum, see *Repertorio d'arte dell'Egitto greco-romano*. B. *Pittura*, vols. 1-4: *Ritratti di mummie,* ed. by Klaus Parlasca, Rome 1977-1980, and by Klaus Parlasca and Hans Fenz, Rome 2003. On the niches used for setting portraits above tombs, see Claudia Corneli, "Il 'ritratto antico': dalle *imagines maiorum* ai 'volti' delle catacombe di Roma", in: *La ricerca giovane in cammino per l'arte*, eds. Chiara Bordino

instance, the images were potentially made while the person was alive, which assured the transmission of his (or her) 'true image', preserving his memory and providing, in the case of saints, a focus for his cult. The physiognomic individualisation of a holy figure such as Victor thus appears linked to the developments of the funerary portrait, while potentially also reflecting the desire to render visible the saint's presence. His remains, buried beneath the chapel, assured his physical presence, in a context where the theophanic dimension of the martyr, and the possibility for the viewer to interact with him, were provided by the depiction of the effigy in the apex of the golden dome.

Popes and bishops: which physiognomy for the *homo spiritualis*?

[11] If in funerary context the choice of an individualised physiognomy can be traced back to earlier traditions, for other contexts one needs to explore the potential meaning of the choice. The series of pontifical portraits depicted in the nave of San Paolo fuori le mura in the time of Leo the Great (440–461) present us with such an instance.[25] There, one had to represent individuals for whom no previous models existed, with the exception of Peter and, possible, the most recent two bishops, the patron Leo and Sixtus III (432–440). Adopting the common motif of the *imago clipeata*, widespread in imperial context, these images are not 'intentional' portraits, but show nevertheless their subjects with cleverly individualised features. The forty-two bishops, identifiable through inscriptions that mention their names and number in the episcopal succession, are set on the underlying model of the philosopher. Based on this type of portrait of mature man with incipient baldness, each bishop received certain individualising features. Freed from the need to render the individuals recognisable, physiognomy was here employed as an iconographic tool, used to bring to life a number of different, yet complementary individuals. The resulting figures embodied both the prestige of the episcopal office and appeared as suitable intermediaries between the earthly and the heavenly Church.

---

and Rosalba Dinoia, Rome 2012, 165-173; Claudia Corneli, "Studies on the Painting of Rome's Christian Catacombs. On the Trail of a Portrait Included in the Wall of the Arcosolium", in: *The Face of the Dead and the Early Christian World*, ed. Ivan Foletti, Rome 2013, 29-41. On portraits in Roman catacombs in general, see Rosa Maria Bonacasa Carra, "Echi di ritratti di mummie nella pittura funeraria paleocristiana", in: *L'Egitto in Italia. Dall'Antichità al Medioevo*, ed. Nicolas Bonacasa, Rome 1998, 681-692; Fabrizio Bisconti, "I volti degli aristocratici nella tarda Antichità. Fisionomie e ritratti nelle catacombe romane e napoletane", in: *Aristocrazie e società. Fra transizione romano-germanica e alto medioevo*, eds. Carlo Ebanista and Marcello Rotili, San Vitaliano 2015, 27-46.

[25] Cf. e.g. Giulia Bordi, "I mosaici e i dipinti murali e perduti di San Paolo fuori le mura. La serie dei ritratti papali", in: *L'orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini*, ed. Maria Andaloro, Milano 2006, 379-395; Andaloro, "Dal ritratto all'icona", 41-45; Kristina Friedrichs, *Episcopus plebi Dei. Die Repräsentation der frühchristlichen Päpste,* Berlin 2015, 213-225.

[12] At the intersection between the funerary and the ecclesiastical milieux emerges a new manner of displaying individual physiognomies, through a synthesis able to flesh out that ideal *homo spiritualis* indicated by Paolinus of Nola; a figure permeated by the divine.[26] This process is discernible in the so-called Cripta dei Vescovi in the catacomb of San Gennaro in Naples. There, a number of arcosolia decorated with mosaics bear the portraits of bishops and other high ecclesiastical figures (Figs. 9, 10).[27] The creation of this space is closely related to the translation of the remains of the martyr Gennaro to the catacomb. As indicated by written sources, this was the work of bishop John I (413–432), whom we find buried *ad sanctos*, in the immediate vicinity of the martyr. His identification is confirmed by the inscription (of his titular saint's name) SCS IOHANNES on the arch of the arcosolium (Fig. 9).[28] The second arcosolium to be excavated was most likely the one in the wall to John's right, in which is generally recognised the image of the North African bishop Quodvultdeus (Fig. 10). Exiled by the church in Carthage, he found refuge in Naples, where he died in 454.[29]

---

[26] Andaloro, "Dal ritratto all'icona", 47; Stefano d'Ovidio, "Devotion and Memory: Episcopal Portraits in the Catacombs of San Gennaro in Naples", in: *The Face of the Dead and the Early Christian World*, ed. Ivan Foletti, Rome 2013, 85-106, esp. 98.

[27] On these mosaics, see D'Ovidio, "Devotion and Memory"; Croci, *Una 'questione campana'*, 124-134. On the evolution of the complex, see Dieter Korol, Pamela Bonnekoh and Marcel Wegener-Rieckesmann, eds., *La catacomba di S. Gennaro a Napoli: lo sviluppo del culto di S. Gennaro, delle aree centrali come anche dei complessi ecclesiastici nella tarda Antichità e nell'alto Medioevo* (forthcoming).

[28] On the translatio, see *Gesta episcoporum Neapolitanorum* I, 14 (*Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores rerum Longobardicarum et Italicarum saec. VI-IX*, ed. Georg Waitz, Hannover 1878, p. 406). To identify the individual as John, was the one who discovered the tomb, Umberto M. Fasola, *Le catacombe di San Gennaro a Capodimonte*, Rome 1975, 138, 146, 150. On the inscription, found in the 1990s, see Nicola Ciavolino, "Dieci anni di archeologia cristiana in Campania dal 1983 al 1993", in: *1983–1993: Dieci anni di archeologia cristiana in Italia. Atti del VII convegno nazionale di archeologia cristiana*, Cassino 2003, 615-669, esp. 651-653; Fabrizio Bisconti, "Napoli. Catacombe di San Gennaro. Cripta dei Vescovi. Restauri ultimi", in: *Rivista di archeologia cristiana* 41 (2015), 7-34, 18-19, fig. 10.

[29] Fasola, *Le catacombe di San Gennaro a Capodimonte*, cap. VI.

9 Mosaic portrait of bishop John of Naples, ca. 432, in the so-called Cripta dei Vescovi, catacomb of San Gennaro, Naples (photo © Chiara Croci/ Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana)


10 Mosaic portrait of bishop Quodvultdeus of Carthage, ca. 454, in the so-called Cripta dei Vescovi, catacomb of San Gennaro, Naples (photo © Chiara Croci/ Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana)

These two tombs represented the model for a long series of subsequent episcopal burials, which employed the same decorative scheme and were even set in uncomfortable positions in order to rest in the crypta. By the sixth century, the space became also a kind of episcopal necropolis, with paintings showing the fourteen predecessors of John being represented in a newly created antechamber.[30]

---

[30] On the two other tombs with mosaic portraits, see Dieter Korol, Pamela Bonnekoh, and Marcel Wegener-Rieckesmann, "Klerikale Repräsentation und Stifterwesen vom 5. bis 10. Jahrhundert in den Kernbereichen der Neapeler Katakombe S. Gennaro", in: *Acta XVI Congressus Internationalis Archaeologiae Christianae, Romae, 22.-28.9.2013*, Città del Vaticano 2016, 2091-2108. On the antechamber and its decoration, see Gennaro Aspreno Galante, "I frammenti del catalogo figurato dei primi vescovi di Napoli scoperti nelle catacombe di San Gennaro", in: *Atti della Reale Accademia di Archeologia, Lettere e Belle Arti* 13 (1887-1889), 201-229; Giovanni Liccardo, "Il catalogo figurato dei vescovi nelle

[13] The good state of conservation and the possibility of ascertaining their initial context render the two mosaic portraits relevant for our analysis of how physiognomy was used in late antique portraiture. Unlike the Milanese image of St. Victor, depicted in the apex of the dome, the two portraits in Naples follow closely the fashions of funerary images, with them being placed on arcosolia, inside clipea, and surrounded by vines or acanthus. The presence of the clipeum and of the vegetation betrays an honorary function, with the portraits being meant to communicate the holiness of the subjects and, at the same time, favour the development of a devotional practice towards them.[31] John's portrait is obviously shaped by the philosopher typology, contemplative and melancholic, with a pensive frown, slight bend of the head, and closed lips. To these rather standard features, the white hair and beard, baldness, and under-eye wrinkles add the distinction of age and biographic connotations that align with his episcopal status.[32] This type of portrait found its most convincing expression in the image of St. Ambrose, depicted in the Milanese chapel of St. Victor (Fig. 11).
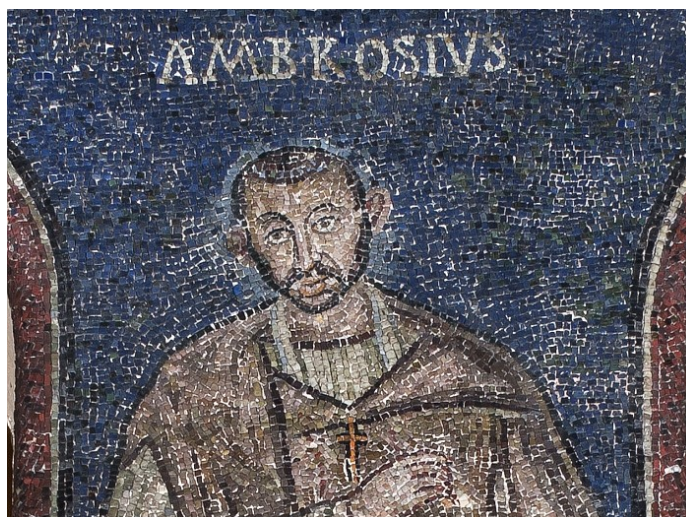
11 Saint Ambrose, mosaic on the southern wall, 490–512, chapel of San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro, basilica of Sant'Ambrogio, Milan (photo © Domenico Ventura/ Ivan Foletti)

[14] The bishop of Milan is represented using a combination of features borrowed from diverse typologies found in imperial and philosopher portraits, and used to create a convincing image of a mature orator, ascetic and contemplative. The protruding ears, fleshy mouth, and prominent nose help sketch a very specific figure, whose character is betrayed by the frowning forehead, reclined head, and a mouth that gives the impression of speech.[33] As with John's funerary portrait in Naples (Fig. 9), the balance between the physiognomic and the typological allows

catacombe di San Gennaro. Note intorno all'apostolicità della chiesa di Napoli", in: *Campania sacra* 22 (1991), 5-14.

[31] See D'Ovidio, "Devotion and Memory", 99-100.

[32] Bisconti, "I volti degli aristocratici nella tarda Antichità", 44.

[33] Foletti, "Physiognomic Representations as a Rhetorical Instrument", 64-66, 71-73.

the artisan to indicate the otherworldly concerns of the one who had promoted the cult of the saints venerated in the chapel, that is of a bishop whose own sanctity was supposed to be translated by his image,[34] in a context in which his holy life on earth, and his existence in heaven were certified by the light refracted by the mosaic tesserae.

Towards a physiognomy of holiness

[15] It is in the Neapolitan arcosolium to the right of John's that we see the seeds of a new paradigm of representation. The figure commonly identified as Quodvultdeus (Fig. 10) stands out due to its frontality and wide eyes, which recommend the image as one for venerational purposes. The face is that of an old man, emaciated and of dark skin, which contrasts with the blue eyes and fleshy red mouth. Together, the features create a feeling of individualisation greater than in the case of his neighbour (Fig. 9). The exceptionality of the portrait emerges from the tension between the seemingly contrasting features— an accentuated frontality combined with a thin body and plump mouth, where the eyes pierce towards the onlooker through their contrast with the dark skin. Concurrently, his pervasive gaze, slightly upward, creates a sense of detachment.[35] As the manner in which the person is represented stresses his presence in the catacomb, his turning towards heaven simultaneously communicates the holiness of his life, and reminds the onlooker of his present heavenly abode.

[16] It is precisely the capacity to reunite physiognomic plausibility and the depth of the bishop's spiritual life that allows the artisan to morph into one the portraits of the carnal and of the spiritual men theorised by Paolinus of Nola.[36] As in a photograph, the mosaicist created a highly individualised physiognomy that was caught in a moment's expression; a mimetic portrait which manages to translate the psychological and intellectual concerns of the *homo spiritualis.* The distinct physiognomy both merges and contrasts with the calm and serenity of the holy figure, whose distinctive luminosity is expressed through the contrast between the dark skin and the wide eyes.[37] The high level of individualisation, allowed by the artisan's virtuosity, could be related to the desire to stimulate the cult of an

---

[34] Ivan Foletti, "Le tombeau d'Ambroise: cinq siècles de construction identitaire", in: *L'évêque, l'image et la mort. Identité et mémoire au Moyen Âge*, eds. Nicolas Bock, Ivan Foletti and Michele Tomasi, Rome 2013, 73-102, esp. 80.

[35] As does the asymmetrical placement of the pupils which, nevertheless, might be caused by the loss of a number of mosaic tesserae from the left eye.

[36] D'Ovidio, "Devotion and Memory", 98.

[37] On light as symbol of erudition, friendliness, virtue, sanctity, and divine immanence in Late Antiquity, see e.g. Vladimir Ivanovici, *Manipulating Theophany. Light and Ritual in North Adriatic Architecture (ca. 400–ca. 800)*, Berlin 2016, 1. On the luminosity of living holy individuals in the period, see Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity,* Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2000 (= *Transformations of Classical Heritage*, 30).

individual who had not been a local bishop and, as such, needed to have his worth explicated otherwise. It was thus necessary to supply him with a plausible and convincing physiognomy, which attested to his right to lie at the right of the initiator of the *ad sanctos* graves in this crypt.

[17] The portraits in the Neapolitan catacomb use physiognomy to express the diverse statuses of the figures depicted—their offices, as well as their personal and transcendental characters. This was achieved by balancing the image of the dignified individual, as imagined in late antique society, with the serenity and luminosity of the holy figure. The process has relevant parallels in the representation of rulers in the same period, where frontality and widening of the eyes often gain precedence over the representation of a highly individualised physiognomy, in order to indicate the rulers' divine inspiration.[38]

[18] In the representation of embodied sanctity, the philosopher's look thus was enriched with physiognomic features that anchored the individual in reality and attested to lives which allowed one to attain sanctity by turning towards the divine. With the overlapping of the ideal of the *homo spiritualis* on its terrestrial counterpart, physiognomy became an iconographic attribute used to compromise the two realities in which holy individuals lived simultaneously; an instrument that goes beyond the representation of the person's outlook and testifies to the person's ecclesiastic rank and theophanic quality.

About the Author

Chiara Croci has been Maître Assistante in Medieval Art History at the University of Lausanne since September 2019. She was previously a post-doctoral researcher at Masaryk University of Brno (2018-19), a graduate assistant (2013-17) and lecturer (2017-18) in Medieval Art History at the University of Lausanne, a lecturer in Early Christian Archeology (2013) and PhD fellow (2010-11) at the University of Münster, and a PhD fellow at the Swiss Institute of Rome (2012-13). She earned her PhD in 2016 (University of Lausanne/ University of Münster) with a thesis on Early Christian Art and Patronage in Campania which was published in 2017 under the title *Una 'questione campana'. La prima arte monumentale cristiana tra Napoli, Nola e Capua* (Rome 2017). Her research focuses on Late Antique and Early Medieval Art and Archeology in Central and Southern Italy.

E-mail: chiara.croci[at]unil.ch

---

[38] See the synthesis by Eugenio La Rocca, "Divina Ispirazione", in: *Aurea Roma. Dalla città pagana alla città cristiana*, eds. Serena Ensoli and Eugenio La Rocca, Rome 2000, 1-37. For the preceding period, see Marianne Bergmann, *Die Strahlen der Herrscher: theomorphes Herrscherbild und politische Symbolik im Hellenismus und in der römischen Kaiserzeit*, Mainz 1998.

Copy Editor

Susanne Kubersky-Piredda, Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome