

What is an Intercessory Image of the Virgin? The Evidence from the West

When the editors invited me to participate in this volume, they instructed me to discuss the intercessory function of Mary based on Art Historical evidence from Rome, Italy, and North Africa. This remit immediately raised an interesting and important question, namely: what is an intercessory image, and how can it be recognized? It is possible to argue that the very form of some image types, such as the Virgin depicted in prayer, or communicating with her son, imply the idea of intercession. But what can we say of the frontal representations of the Virgin and Child enthroned, which were by far the most common iconography in the sixth century, when portrayals of the Virgin first became numerous in Christian art? The composition of these frontal images often gives little indication that the Virgin is praying, or that she is engaging with Christ. She is usually shown sitting straight up, holding Christ on her lap, and staring out directly at the viewer. Her infant son, for his part, also sits bolt upright; there is no sign of interaction between the two. To what extent did these images, in which there is no indication of direct engagement between Christ and his mother, imply the idea of intercession?

In the pages that follow, I will first discuss the meanings of the frontal portraits of the Virgin in early medieval art, with an emphasis on western examples. Then I shall turn to the images whose form more explicitly implied intercession. I will conclude with some general observations about the creation of images with an intercessory function.

The existing evidence indicates that in the sixth century frontal portrayals of the enthroned Virgin and Child were polyvalent in their meanings. These images could function as doctrinal statements, demonstrating the humanity of Christ; as amulets, providing protection to patrons, wearers, or viewers; or as expressions of intercession. On some occasions it appears that the work of art could assume more than one of these roles at the same time.

A doctrinal significance for the frontally enthroned Virgin appears most clearly in the case of the splendid mid-sixth-century mosaic that fills the apse of the basilica built by Bishop Eufrasius at Poreč (Parentium) in Istria (fig. 1).¹ Here the enthroned Virgin and Child appear on axis with a portrayal of the mature Christ enthroned on the triumphal arch above, where he is flanked by his apostles.² Directly beneath the mosaic of the Virgin, on the central pier separating the windows of the apse, stands an angel holding an orb, which is filled with three concentric rings of differing shades of blue.³ This association of images can be read as an expression of Chalcedonian orthodoxy. Christ appears in his two natures, enthroned in heaven above, and held as an infant in the apse below. As for the globe with its three rings of blue, the sixth-century writer John of Gaza identified this motif as a symbol of the Trinity.⁴ The theological concerns of the program are further demonstrated by the selection of St. Euphemia as the leader of the choir of female saints who frame the apse; she appears at the top of the intrados of the vault, on the right side.⁵ It was in Euphemia's church that the council of Chalcedon had met in 451, and she subsequently became associated with the defense of the inviolability of its theology.⁶

A juxtaposition similar to that made by the mosaics in the apse of the basilica of Eufrasius can be found on sixth century ivories. For example, the two covers of the Saint-Lupicin Gospels, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, pair the enthroned Christ, depicted as the bearded ancient of Days, with the enthroned Virgin holding

¹ Ann Terry, Henry Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor: the Wall Mosaics in the Cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč*, 2 vols., University Park, 2007, pl. 2.

² In the original mosaic, before the restorations, the Christ of the triumphal arch may have been bearded; see Terry and Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor*, 54, 137–9.

³ Terry and Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor*, pls. 116–17.

⁴ P. Friedländer, ed., *Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentiarius: Kunstbeschreibungen justinianischer Zeit*, Leipzig, 1912, 137–8, lines 41–4; Terry and Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor*, 128.

⁵ Terry and Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor*, pl. 85.

⁶ Terry and Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor*, 133.

Christ as an infant.⁷ Each of these images is surrounded by subsidiary scenes, which emphasize the meaning of the juxtaposition. The Ancient of Days is framed by Christ's miracles, which demonstrate his divine nature, while the Virgin is framed by the episodes that preceded the birth of her son, which show his humanity. The latter include the journey to Bethlehem, where the carver shows Mary to be heavily pregnant.

In other contexts, the frontally enthroned Virgin may have been associated less with theology, and more with notions of amuletic protection. For a possible example of this kind of functioning of the image, we can turn to the ceramic tiles that were produced in North Africa during the sixth century for the decoration of churches and other buildings. These tiles bear a number of motifs, including animals, biblical subjects, and frontal reliefs of the Virgin enthroned with the Christ Child on her lap. Because the tiles were manufactured in molds, the same designs were repeated several times over, not only on different tiles, but also sometimes on the same tile. On an example found at Bou-Ficha in Tunisia, for example, we find identical reliefs of the Virgin placed side by side (fig. 2).⁸ This repetition of the image argues that its primary purpose was not for the purpose of devotion, as it would not have been necessary or practical for a worshipper to address prayers to two icons at the same time. On the other hand, the repetition of portraits is a feature associated with semi-magical imagery on clothing. On silk sleeve bands of the seventh or eighth centuries, for example, we find identical images of an anonymous holy warrior holding a cross in one hand and spearing a serpent with the other, each repeated four times. In the case of these textiles, the motif did not convey the idea that the nameless holy personage was interceding with Christ on behalf of the wearer. On the contrary, the image acted as a charm, which had protective powers in its own right. The repetition of the motif served to intensify its protective effect. Together with the four warriors, each sleeve band also portrays four identical eagles with their prey. The repetition of this known apotropaic device enhanced the magic of the holy defenders.⁹ A similar amuletic purpose may be attributed to the seventh-century tunics decorated with repeated identical tapestry-woven patches depicting the Adoration of the Magi (fig. 3). Some of these representations are so abbreviated that they are barely more than ciphers that evoke the scene.¹⁰ Again, it is hard to see how they could have been used as a focus for prayer. It is more likely that, like the depictions of the holy warrior on the silks, their function was amuletic. As Gary Vikan has pointed out, the Magi were archetypal travelers.¹¹ The repetition of their image on one piece of clothing was an assurance of protection for wayfarers. A gold locket in the British Museum bears nielloed scenes of the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi together with the inscription "The secure safety and averting of all the evils."¹² It is possible that a similar possible apotropaic function may have been attributed to the repeated images of the Virgin enthroned at Bou-Ficha.

Although the frontal image of the enthroned Virgin and Child might be given a doctrinal or an amuletic significance, it could also function as a means of intercession. Its intercessory use is sometimes made explicit by an inscription, at other times by the presence of a supplicant in the image. A magnificent gold medallion at Dumbarton Oaks presents the Virgin and Child seated frontally on a lyre-backed throne between two angels and flanked by an inscription reading "Christ, our God, help us!" (fig. 4) The piece can be dated to the end of the sixth or the beginning of the seventh century.¹³ A lower status item of jewelry, a silver arm band now in the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum at Toronto, also shows the Virgin with her Child sitting frontally on a lyre-backed throne, but this time she specifically is invoked by the inscription: "Mother of God, help Anna. Grace" (fig. 5). Evidence from the hoard in which it was found indicates that this armband can be dated late in the reign of Justinian.¹⁴

⁷ Jannic Durand, Ioanna Rapti, and Dorota Giovannoni, ed., *Armenia sacra: mémoire chrétienne des Arméniens (IV^e-XVIII^e siècle)* (exhibition catalogue, Musée du Louvre), Paris, 2007, 106–7, fig. 1.

⁸ A. Driss, *Treasures of the Bardo Museum*, Tunis, 1962, pl. 41.

⁹ Henry Maguire, *The Icons of their Bodies: Saints and their Images in Byzantium*, Princeton, 1996, 124–6, figs. 109–110.

¹⁰ Henry Maguire, "Garments Pleasing to God: the Significance of Domestic Textile Designs in the Early Byzantine Period," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 44, 1990, 215–24, esp. 221, fig. 29.

¹¹ Gary Vikan, "Pilgrims in Magi's clothing: the Impact of Mimesis on Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art," in Robert Ousterhout, ed., *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, Urbana, 1990, 97–107.

¹² O. M. Dalton, *Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities and Objects from the Christian East in the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography of the British Museum*, London, 1901, 46–7.

¹³ Marvin C. Ross, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, vol. 2, *Jewelry, Enamels, and Art of the Migration Period*, Washington, D.C., 2005, 33–5, pl. A.

¹⁴ Gary Vikan, "Two Byzantine Amuletic Armbands and the Group to which they Belong," *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, 49/50, 1991/2, 33–51, esp. 38, 41, fig. 5d.

Images of the frontal Virgin accompanied by supplicants are relatively frequent. Examples include a fresco in the Catacomb of Commodilla, in Rome, dated to around 528, which portrays the Virgin and Child enthroned between saints Felix and Adautus, both of whom were buried in the catacomb (fig. 6).¹⁵ Felix, standing on the left, places his right hand on the shoulder of a woman standing in front of him, in order to present her to the Virgin and the infant Christ. The woman, whose name, Turtura, is given by an inscription painted below, offers two candles to the holy mother and her son, which she proffers on a white cloth. The inscription informs us that Turtura has died at the age of sixty, and is buried in the catacomb. The picture, then, forms a visual prayer of intercession for the dead woman's soul.

A similar intercessory image that is centered on a frontal Virgin and Child could be found in the now lost sixth-century mosaics of the north inner aisle of the church of St. Demetrios at Thessaloniki.¹⁶ This mosaic portrayed the Virgin seated on a lyre-backed throne flanked by two angels. On her right stood St. Theodore, and on her left St. Demetrios, who, with a gesture similar to that made by St. Felix in the Turtura fresco, placed his right hand on the shoulder of a man in order to introduce him to the Virgin.

The painting of Turtura suggests another function for the apse mosaic of the Eufrasiana at Poreč (fig. 1). As we have seen, this composition makes a theological statement about the two natures of Christ. At the same time, however, it functioned as an intercessory image, as is made clear by the group of supplicants on the left of the throne, who include the Bishop Eufrasius, offering a model of the church that he has commissioned, his archdeacon Claudius, holding a book, and a small boy bearing candles who, according to the inscription above his head, is also named Eufrasius. This trio of mortals is introduced to the Virgin and her infant by an angel bearing a golden staff. The angel assumes the same role as the ostiarios, the official who, according to the tenth century compilation of ceremonies of the Byzantine court, introduced foreign ambassadors to the emperor in the throne room of the Magnaura.¹⁷ Thus the mosaic of the frontally enthroned Virgin, in addition to its role as a theological marker, is also a visual expression of intercession on behalf of the two adults and the child.

Although it is slightly later than the chronological scope of this book, it is worthwhile to look at a Roman mosaic whose iconography and function are very similar to those of Poreč, in that they are at the same time a demonstration of doctrine and an expression of intercession. However, in this later mosaic, the intercessory elements are made more explicit. The mosaic in question is in the apse of Santa Maria in Domnica, which dates to the pontificate of Paschal I, between 817 and 824 (fig. 7).¹⁸ As at Poreč, we find Christ seated at the center of the triumphal arch, flanked by the apostles. Below, at the center of the apse and on axis with the representation of the mature Christ above, we find Christ held as an infant by the frontally enthroned Virgin. At the Virgin's feet, on the left side, kneels the pope, who holds her right foot in his hands. Both the Virgin and her Child are staring straight ahead, as in earlier images of this type, but now she gestures with her right hand towards her supplicant in order to acknowledge his veneration. Thus the mosaics at the same time express the dogma of the two natures and the idea of the Virgin's intercession.

The mosaic at Poreč can be related to two mosaics in the eastern empire, which no longer survive, but are known through literary descriptions. The earlier one is the mosaic in the sanctuary of the chapel of the Soros at the Blachernai, which held the relic of the Virgin's robe. According to a sixth-century account of the translation of the Virgin's robe from Palestine to Constantinople, the mosaic portrayed the "Mother of God seated on a throne" flanked by the Emperor Leo I, together with his empress Verina, their daughter Ariadne and their grandson Leo. The text states that the empress was depicted holding the infant Leo, while she "fell before our Lady, the Mother

¹⁵ E. Russo, "L'affresco di Turtura nel cimitero di Commodilla, l'icona di Santa Maria in Trastevere, e le più antiche feste della Madonna a Roma," *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il medio evo*, 88, 1979, 35–85, esp. 35–49; C. Barber, "Early Representations of the Mother of God," in M. Vassilaki, ed., *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art* (exhibition catalogue, Benaki Museum, Athens, 2000), 253–61, esp. 254–5; Erik Thuno, "The Cult of the Virgin, Icons and Relics in Early Medieval Rome: a Semiotic Approach," *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia*, 17, 2003, 79–98, esp. 87, fig. 7; Terry and Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor*, 141, fig. 293.

¹⁶ Robin Cormack, "The Mosaic Decoration of St. Demetrios, Thessaloniki: a Re-examination in the Light of the Drawings of W. S. George," *Annual of the British School at Athens*, 64, 1969, 17–52, esp. 26–9, pls. 3, 7; idem, *The Church of St. Demetrios: the Watercolours and Drawings of W. S. George*, Thessaloniki, 1985, 70, pl. 32; Terry and Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor*, 146, fig. 296.

¹⁷ De cerimoniis, II, 15; J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, series graeca*, vol. 112, col. 1049B-C.

¹⁸ R. Wisskirchen, "Santa Maria in Domnica. Überlegungen zur frühesten apsidalen Darstellung der thronenden Maria in Rom," *Aachener Kunstblätter*, 61, 1995–7, 381–93.

of God.”¹⁹ The mosaic should date during the lifespan of Leo, which was between 467 and 474. In all likelihood, the image of the Virgin and Child was frontal, as in the mosaics at Poreč and Thessaloniki. The description of the mosaic in the chapel of the Soros, with the empress presenting her infant grandson, and the presence in the same chapel of the Virgin’s robe, which was known to have powers of protecting children, make it certain that the purpose of the image was to express the idea of the Virgin’s intercession.²⁰

The second text is a panegyric by the sixth-century orator Choricus of Gaza, which describes the now lost mosaics in the central apse of the church of St. Sergius in Gaza, built early in the reign of Justinian. According to the orator, the apse displayed “in the center the Mother of the Savior holding on her bosom her new-born son.” At the far side of the composition was a portrait of the governor of Palestine, Stephen, who had built the church. Stephen, says Choricus, was “worthy of being included in the register of God’s friends ... especially because... he has donated the church to his fellow citizens He it is who, standing next to the patron of the church [St. Sergius], asks him to accept the gift graciously; the latter consents and looks upon the man with a gentle gaze as he lays his right hand on the man’s shoulder, being evidently about to present him to the Virgin and her son, the savior.”²¹ Here, then, the chain of intercession is spelled out. At the top of the hierarchy is Christ, the savior, who is held by the Virgin, to whom St. Sergius, with the usual gracious gesture of the hand on the shoulder, introduces the governor Stephen. It is possible that Stephen, like Eufrasius at Poreč, held a model of the church that he had funded.

The mosaics at the Blachernai, Gaza, and Poreč suggest that the well-known portrayal of the enthroned Virgin and Child on the north wall of Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna may also originally have been an expression of intercession (fig. 8). The present mosaics on the north and south walls of the church incorporate interventions made after the Byzantine conquest of Ravenna from the Ostrogoths. The alterations can be assigned to the period after the appointment of Archbishop Agnellus, in 556. All that remain of the original mosaics, set before the death of Theodoric in 526, are the Virgin and Child at the east end of the north wall, the enthroned Christ in the opposing position on the south wall, the depiction of the port of Classe at the west end of the north wall, and the portrayal of the royal palace at the corresponding end of the south wall.²² Since there are the remains of figures in front of the walls of Classe and between the columns of the palace, it is possible that the excised mosaics depicted Ostrogothic supplicants before the Virgin and Child, just as the Virgin was approached by supplicants in the mosaic at the Blachernai, which was slightly earlier, or in the apse in Gaza, which was somewhat later. At Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo, the surviving figures of the mother and Child both raise their right hands, as if to acknowledge the presence of petitioners approaching from the left. When the Byzantines altered the mosaics, they took out all of the figures that had originally approached Virgin and Christ on the north and south walls, and replaced them with two files of saints, females on the north, and men on the south. At the same time, they gave a political resonance to the content of the mosaics, by placing St. Euphemia at the head of the female martyrs on the north wall, an expression of the triumph of Chalcedonian orthodoxy over the Arian heresy of the Ostrogoths.²³ The alteration of the mosaics at Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo shows how the one image type, the frontally enthroned Virgin, could be given different shades of meaning according to the context in which it was placed.

Another intercessory image of the frontal Virgin and Child that may be added here, even if of uncertain date, is the Madonna della Clemenza, a painted panel now in Santa Maria in Trastevere (fig. 9).²⁴ Its intercessory character is made explicit by the small image of a pope in prayer at the foot of the throne. In addition, the Virgin

¹⁹ Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453*, Toronto, 1986, 35; idem, “The Origins of the Blachernae Shrine at Constantinople,” *Acta XIII Congressus Internationalis Archaeologiae Christianae*, Split-Poreč, vol. 2, Vatican and Split, 1998, 61–75, esp. 70–71.

²⁰ As is evidenced by the story of the Virgin protecting a child with her robe that is told by Gregory of Tours; *Gregorii Turonis opera*, book I, 9; ed. W. Arndt and B. Krusch, *Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptores rerum merovingicarum*, vol. 1, part 2, Hannover, 1885, 494.

²¹ *Laudatio Marciani I*, 29–31; translation by Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*, 62 and note 37.

²² Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, *Ravenna, Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes*, vol. 1, *Geschichte und Monumente*, Wiesbaden, 1969, 175–6, figs. 257–260.

²³ Otto G. von Simson, *Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna*, Princeton, 1987, 86–7; Deichmann, *Geschichte und Monumente*, 199–200; Terry and Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor*, 133.

²⁴ Maria Andaloro, “La datazione della tavola di S. Maria in Trastevere,” *Rivista dell’Istituto Nazionale d’Archeologia e Storia dell’Arte*, 19–20, 1972–3, 139–215; Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Chicago, 1994, 126–9, plate 2; Barber, “Early Representations of the Mother of God,” 256–60, fig. 201; Gerhard Wolf, “Icons and Sites: Cult Images of the Virgin in Mediaeval Rome,” in Maria Vassilaki, ed., *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, Aldershot,

originally held a metal cross in her right hand, which had been affixed to the icon as a votive gift.²⁵ In the present state of this icon, both the Virgin and her son face straight ahead; the body of the Virgin, in particular, is characterized by a statue-like rigidity, which makes no concession to the presence of her son on her lap. Nor do the holy figures make any move to acknowledge the supplicant, who kneels at the foot of the throne, looking up at them.

I will now turn to the portrayals of the Virgin that explicitly conveyed the idea of intercession through their form. With these representations, it was not necessary to have an inscription or a depiction of a supplicant to fix the intercessory meaning of the image; the design of the portrait itself conveyed the message. The image types that expressed the idea of intercession on their own can be divided into two categories, those which depicted an engagement between the mother and her Child, and those which showed the Virgin in prayer.

The famous Madonna in the sacristy of the church of Santa Francesca Romana, which now portrays the Virgin holding Christ on her right arm, expresses the idea of intercession through a subtle exchange of glances involving the viewer, the mother, and her son (fig. 10).²⁶ The Virgin's eyes, which are enlarged and very prominent, stare out at the viewer, not at her infant. At the same time, she turns her head toward her Child, who responds by raising his eyes up to his mother. Christ looks in the direction of his mother, and not at the viewer. Thus, according to the logic of the gazes, the viewer engages first with the Virgin, and not with her Child. The Virgin, with her turned and tilted head, then engages with Christ.²⁷ The design of the image itself, therefore, clearly conveys the process of intercession.

Unfortunately, the Madonna in Santa Francesca Romana is undated; it is often assigned to the seventh century, but has been put as early as the second half of the sixth century.²⁸ An earlier stage of the same iconography can be seen on the ivories that at present form the covers of the Etschmiadzin Gospels in Erevan.²⁹ The two covers are related to the ivories of the Saint-Lupicin Gospels, and can be dated to the middle or the third quarter of the sixth century. They make a juxtaposition that is similar to the covers in Paris. The front of the book displays the enthroned Virgin and Child surrounded by scenes of Christ's nativity, while the back shows Christ enthroned and framed by portrayals of his miracles. In the carving of the Virgin and Child at the center of the front cover, the mother looks straight outwards, engaging directly with the viewer. The Child, however, does not sit bolt upright in his mother's lap, as in the other images of the enthroned Virgin that have been discussed above, but instead adopts a partly reclining posture, leaning against his mother's left arm, and turning his head to look up at her. Thus there is a clear indication of some communication between mother and Child, which is missing in the other frontal images of the enthroned Virgin.³⁰ On the other hand, in the ivory the Virgin does not turn or incline her head to acknowledge the direction of her son's gaze, as she clearly does the case of the Madonna in Santa Francesca Romana, but her head is strictly frontal. The carving of the Etschmiadzin Gospels, therefore, seems to be a half-way phase between the full frontality of the earlier images of the enthroned Virgin, and the more fully engaged icons of the type of the Madonna in Santa Francesca Romana.

An image with similar characteristics appears on a gold ring now in Dumbarton Oaks, which was found in a horde that also contained objects datable to the sixth century, including coins of Justinian I (fig. 11).³¹ On the bezel of the ring there is an engraving of the Virgin standing and bearing Christ in her left arm. The position of the Virgin's head appears to be frontal, that is, directed at the viewer, but she holds the body of her Child at an

2005, 23–49, esp. 37–9, fig. 3.8; John Osborne, "The Cult of Maria Regina in Early Medieval Rome," *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia*, 21, 2008, 95–106, esp. 97.

²⁵ Per Jonas Nordhagen, "Icons Designed for the Display of Sumptuous Votive Gifts," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 41, 1987 (= William Tronzo and Irving Lavin, ed., *Studies on Art and Archaeology in Honor of Ernst Kitzinger on the Seventy-Fifth Birthday*), 453–60; Barber, "Early Representations of the Mother of God," 259–60; Per Jonas Nordhagen, "In Praise of Archaeology: Icons before Iconoclasm," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*, 60, 2010, 101–113, esp. 101.

²⁶ Pico Cellini, "Una Madonna molto antica," *Proporzioni*, 3, 1950, 1–6, pls. 1–9; Ernst Kitzinger, "On some Icons of the Seventh Century," in K. Weitzmann et al., ed., *Late Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend, Jr.*, Princeton, 1955, 132–50, fig. 1 (reprinted in E. Kitzinger, *The Art of Byzantium and the Medieval West: Selected Studies*, ed. W. Eugene Kleinbauer, Bloomington, 1976, 233–55); Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 124–6, plate 1; Wolf, "Icons and Sites," 27–8, fig. 3.1.

²⁷ In the original icon, the inclination of the Virgin's head was greater; see Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 126.

²⁸ Kitzinger, "On some Icons of the Seventh Century," 132–46; Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 126.

²⁹ Durand, Rapti, and Giovannoni, ed., *Armenia sacra*, 105–107, no. 32.

³⁰ On the covers of the Saint-Lupicin Gospels, the Virgin looks down, but so does the Child, so that there is no communication between them; *ibid.*, 107, fig. 1.

³¹ Ross, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, vol. 2, 138–9, pl. 98 "O".

angle, as if he were reclining and looking up at his mother, a position that suggests a degree of engagement between them. Thus even if the Madonna in Santa Francesca Romana may be seventh century, as several scholars have proposed, there is evidence that images showing an engagement between the Virgin and her Child existed already in the sixth century, albeit in a less developed form.

To judge from the dated series of Roman mosaics, images that explicitly show the Virgin in prayer appear to have become popular at a later date, during the seventh and eighth centuries. In the apse of the chapel of St. Venantius in the Lateran Baptistery, the Virgin appears in the center of the apse raising both her hands in prayer.³² She is flanked by saints and, at either end of the composition in the apse, the popes Theodore (642–49), holding a model of the church, and John IV (640–42) with a book. Directly above the Virgin, at the apex of the vault, appears the cloud-wreathed bust of Christ, to whom the Virgin is directing her petitions on behalf of the pontiffs below. A later mosaic of the orant Virgin was set by John VII (705–7) above the altar of his oratory in St. Peter's basilica.³³ The pope was shown in the mosaic standing to the left of the Virgin and presenting to her a model of the chapel. On his death, John was buried in front of the altar, beneath the mosaic. His epitaph explicitly brings out the intercessory character of the chapel and its images:

"Here Pope John set up a tomb for himself, and ordered that he be laid under the feet of the Lady, committing his soul to the protection of the holy mother, the unwedded Virgin and parent, who brought forth God"³⁴

The eighth century also sees the first datable appearance of the orant Virgin on pectoral crosses. One of the earliest examples is a gold cross that was found in a horde discovered at Palermo, which also contained coins dating to the reigns of Tiberius II, Leo III, and Constantine V, indicating that the treasure was not buried before 741.³⁵

Another type of praying Virgin that appears on early icons from Italy shows her in a turning posture, in three-quarter view, with both hands outstretched, as if beseeching Christ beside her. A panel painting now in the convent of Santa Maria del Rosario has been dated between the sixth and the eighth century.³⁶ It depicts the Virgin with her head turned to the left, but staring directly out at the viewer with her eyes. Her raised gold hands are stretched out to her invisible interlocutor on the left, not shown in image, but left to the imagination of the viewer.³⁷ A similar image of the Virgin interceding with her hands stretched out was depicted in the now lost sixth-century mosaics in the north inner aisle of the basilica of St. Demetrios at Thessaloniki. In this mosaic, the Virgin was shown standing between a woman holding a child in her arms, on her left, and in all likelihood a portrait of Christ in a medallion above her to the right, to whom she addressed her intercessory request.³⁸

I return, now, to my initial question: what is an intercessory image and what are the formal characteristics by which it can be recognized? The answer appears to be that there were two types of image of the Virgin in the early medieval west. In one type, the composition of the image itself conveyed the idea of intercession, either through an engagement of the mother with her Child, or through the Virgin's gestures of prayer. These images may legitimately be called "intercessionary". In the other type, the frontal image of the enthroned Virgin and Child,

³² Walter Oakeshott, *The Mosaics of Rome*, Greenwich, 1967, 150–53, figs. 99, 101; Gillian Mackie, *Early Christian Chapels in the West: Decoration, Function, and Patronage*, Toronto, 2003, 212–30, fig. 107.

³³ William Tronzo, "Setting and Structure in Two Roman Wall Decorations of the Early Middle Ages," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 41, 1987 (= William Tronzo and Irving Lavin, ed., *Studies on Art and Archaeology in Honor of Ernst Kitzinger on the Seventy-Fifth Birthday*), 477–92, esp. 489–92, figs. 5–6; Thuno, "The Cult of the Virgin, Icons and Relics in Early Medieval Rome," 87, figs. 8–9; Osborne, "The Cult of Maria Regina in Early Medieval Rome," 97; Eileen Rubery, "Pope John VII's Devotion to Mary: Papal Images of Mary from the Fifth to the Early Eighth Centuries," in Chris Maunder, ed., *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, London, 2008, 155–99, esp. 158.

³⁴ *Hic sibi constituit tumulum, iussitque reponi*
Presul Iohannes sub pedibus domine,
Committens animam sanctae sub tegmine matris,
Innuba quae peperit virgo parensque Deum
Rubery, "Pope John VII's Devotion to Mary," 195–6, note 4.

³⁵ Brigitte Pitarakis, "Un groupe de croix-reliquaires pectorales en bronze à décor en relief attribuable à Constantinople avec le Crucifié et la Vierge Kyriotissa," *Cahiers archéologiques*, 46, 1998, 81–102, esp. 101.

³⁶ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 314–5, pl. 5; Maria Andaloro, "Le icone a Roma in età preiconoclasta," in *Roma fra oriente e occidente*, *Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo*, 49, 2002, 719–53, esp. 723–4, fig. 7; Wolf, "Icons and Sites," 39–40, fig. 3.9.

³⁷ On the practice of rendering the hands of saints in gold, see Nordhagen, "In Praise of Archaeology: Icons before Iconoclasm," 106.

³⁸ Cormack, "The Mosaic Decoration of St. Demetrios, Thessaloniki," 34; Barber, "Early Representations of the Mother of God," 255, fig. 198.

there was often no indication of either prayer or engagement between the holy figures. Nevertheless, both image types could be used to convey the concept of intercession, although the frontal type could also assume other roles, such as the demonstration of the two natures, or amuletic protection. The frontal images of the Virgin, therefore, may be called “potentially intercessory”, because they were multivalent, and not necessarily related to intercession in any one context.

The chronology of much of the material that we have examined is uncertain, but, on the evidence of the relatively few datable objects, it appears that in the West the frontal images, which were only potentially intercessory, preceded the explicitly intercessory images, which either showed an engagement between the Virgin and Child or depicted the Virgin in prayer. The explicitly intercessory images were created in response to a particular function of the older, less specific images, which were more ambivalent. The more the old frontal images Virgin were called upon to convey the idea of intercession, the more necessary it became to develop new image types that could illustrate this idea more effectively and better correspond with the viewer’s needs. Thus, by the early sixth century the frontal type of the Virgin and Child probably served as an expression of intercession in the mosaics at Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo, as it certainly did in the slightly later fresco of Turtura in the Catacomb of Commodilla and in the apse mosaic at Poreč, which dates to the middle of the sixth century. The dialogue between mother and son, which had not explicitly been shown in the early images, appeared in the Madonna in Santa Francesca Romana, which may be dated in the second half of the sixth or in the seventh century.³⁹ The orant Virgin, on the other hand, did not appear in the apses of Roman churches until the middle of the seventh century, although the type had appeared earlier in smaller scale objects elsewhere, such as the pilgrims’ flasks from Palestine.⁴⁰ The lesson of the western portrayals of Mary, therefore, appears to be that the function of the image preceded the adoption of the corresponding image type – or, in other words, the desire of the viewer preceded the artist’s response.

³⁹ A similar chronology can be found on imperial seals. The frontal image of the Virgin appeared on imperial seals at least as early as the reign of Maurice Tiberios, from 582 to 602 (John Nesbitt, *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art*, vol. 6, Washington, D.C., 2009, 16–20, nos. 9.1–9.9) and possibly as early as Tiberius Constantine, from 578–82 (*ibid.*, 16, no. 8.1), Justin II, from 574–8, or even Justinian, from 527 to 65 (*ibid.*, 14, no. 6.1). On the other hand, the Hodegetria type, with the Child reclining, did not appear until the late seventh century, on the seals of Constantine IV (681–5), Philippikos (711–713), and Leo III (717–20) (*ibid.*, 54, no. 24.1, 57, nos. 27.1–2, 58, nos. 28.1–2). See also Werner Seibt, “Die Darstellung der Theotokos auf byzantinischen Bleisiegeln, besonders im 11. Jahrhundert,” in Nicolas Oikonomides, ed., *Studies in Byzantine Sigillography*, Washington, D.C., 1987, 35–56, esp. 36–38, figs. 1–3.

⁴⁰ André Grabar, *Les ampoules de terre sainte* (Monza – Bobbio), Paris, 1958, 43–4, 60–61, pl. 53 (Bobbio, no. 20).



Fig. 1: Poreč, basilica of Eufrasius, apse mosaics.



Fig. 2: Tunis, Bardo Museum, ceramic tile from Bou-Ficha. Virgin and Child.



Fig. 3: London, British Museum, tapestry-woven medallion from a tunic. The Adoration of the Magi.



Fig. 4: Washington, D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Collection, gold medallion. Virgin and Child with the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi.

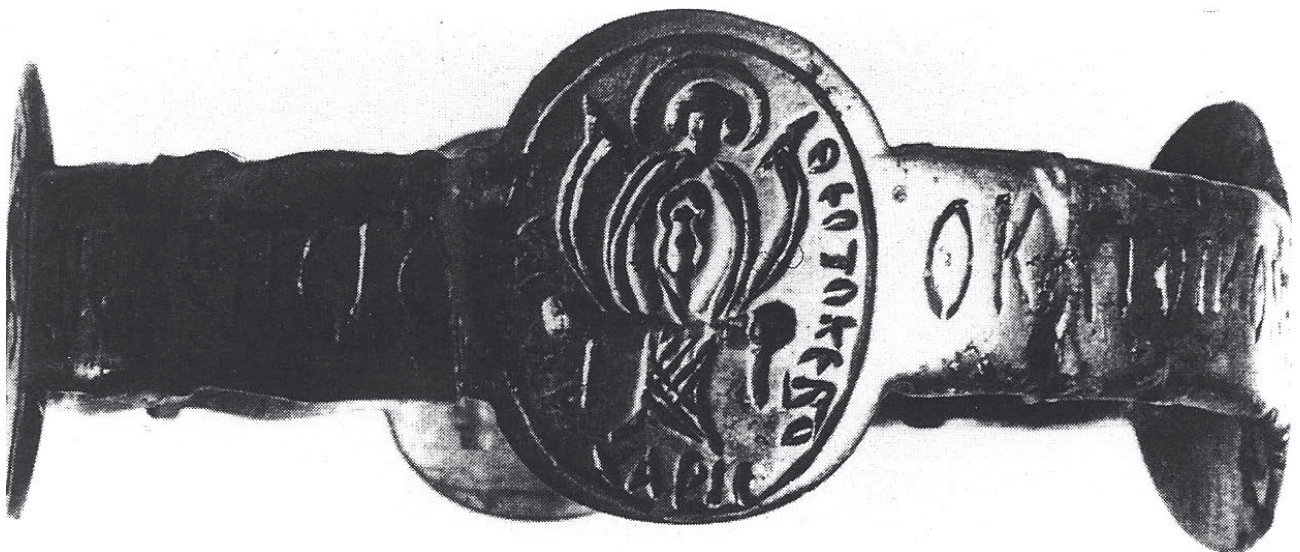


Fig. 5: Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum, silver armband. Virgin and Child.



Fig. 6: Rome, Catacomb of Commodilla, fresco. The Virgin and Child flanked by Turtura and Saints Felix and Adauctus.

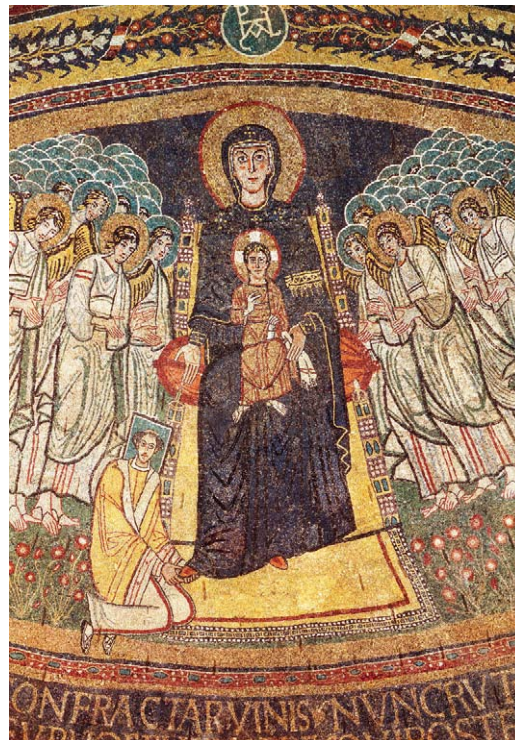


Fig. 7: Rome, Santa Maria in Domnica, apse mosaics.



Fig. 8: Ravenna, Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, mosaics of north wall.



Fig. 9: Rome, Santa Maria in Trastevere, painted panel.
The Virgin and Child with donor.



Fig. 10: Rome, Santa Francesca Romana, painted panel. The Virgin and Child.



Fig. 11: Washington, D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Collection, gold ring. The Virgin and Child.

