Sant'Agnese fuori le mura: Image, Text, and Gender in the 7th Century Apse Mosaic

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Abstract

On the Via Nomentana, outside the city walls, stands the 7th basilica of S. Agnese fuori le mura. Described as being "decorated to perfection" by the *Liber Pontificalis*, the church was built sometime during the papacy of Honorius I (625-638) and boasts the only extant medieval apse mosaic in Rome with a female martyr at the center. The image and life of Agnes in the city has a long and interesting history. Visual representations spanning from Late Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages shed a light on the development of medieval martyrological iconography in Rome and thereby also on the cult of saints. The late antique literary tradition on Agnes is equally rich, with authors such Ambrose and Prudentius providing the basis for her saintly profile throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Both texts and images also present us with insights regarding late antique and medieval ideas regarding the female body, gender, and sexuality. The 7th century apse itself, created at a period of reinvention and transition, underscores the presence and perceived importance of a distinctly female saint in the sacred topography of Rome. This thesis will explore the architectural, visual, textual, and social context of this unique representation of Agnes in the apse mosaic. The earlier visual and written tradition of Agnes in the city, along with a consideration of the cult of martyrs, will shape the understanding of her representation as gendered construct and, thereby hopefully, also allow for a more nuanced understanding of the apse mosaic in its 7th century context.

Dedication

To my mom and dad.

Thank you for your endless patience and support as I figure life out.

Acknowledgements

I am profoundly grateful to Professor Salvadori, I would not have become so interested in early medieval Rome without her fascinating and stimulating courses. Thank you for agreeing to be my advisor a second time around and for always pushing me to look at art from a different perspective. I am eternally grateful for not only your mentorship but also your friendship. Thank you.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction and Review of the Literature

Within the sight of all their palaces, that maiden guards the citizens of Rome.[1]

Saint Agnes' special relationship with the city of Rome dates back to at least the fourth century.[2] It remained at the center of the local cult of saints into the ninth century and beyond. While her representation is inscribed into the hagiography, topography, art, and liturgy of the city already in Late Antiquity, the most monumental and beautiful image of the saint is the 7th century apse mosaic commissioned by Pope Honorius (625-638) around 630 (fig. i.1). The image is the only extant -and perhaps earliest- example in Rome of a saint as the central, main focus of the composition in an apse. She is flanked, if at a distance, by Pope Honorius on the left and his predecessor Pope Symmachus on the right. While the two bishops endow her with institutional authority, Agnes, in regal attire and crowned by the hand of God descending from above, is, with the sole exception of the Virgin Mary, the only female saint accorded such a lofty, exalted presence in the city until the Early Modern period. This thesis examines the late antique and early medieval popularity of the saint in the art and architecture of Rome, as well as in the literature devoted to her. The primary aim, however, is to explore the intersection between iconography, text, and gender in the 7th century apse mosaic itself.

The 7th century basilica and its fantastic mosaic may not be properly understood without taking into consideration Agnes' remarkable popularity already in 4th century Rome. In the 340s a large circiform funerary basilica was commissioned on imperial land by members of the

[1] Prudentius, *Peristephanon*, XIV; translation by Len Krisak, Len. *Prudentius' Crown of Martyrs: Liber Peristephanon.* (Routledge, 2021), 161.
[2] See further in this chapter.

Constantinian dynasty on the Via Nomentana. A few decades later a grandiose centrally planned and lavishly decorated mausoleum was built adjacent to the basilica for one of the members of the Constantinian family, usually identified as Costantia (d. 354).[3]

The complex of buildings on the Via Nomentana fully attest to the importance of her cult in the first half of the 4th century. In this context it is perhaps not surprising that she was one of the first martyrs to be officially commemorated with a feast day to be celebrated in the Roman *Depositio Martyrum* of 354.[4] A few years later, Pope Liberius (352-366), Agnes' first known papal promoter, decorated her tomb in the catacombs on the site with a low-relief marble pluteus depicting her in the orans pose (fig. i.2). Her tomb was further enriched by Liberius' successor Damasus I (366-384), renowned for his energetic promotion of the cult of saints in the city. He added a monumental marble verse inscription (fig. i.3), the only known epigram he dedicated to a female martyr in Rome.[5]

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[3] See Gillian Mackie, "A New Look at the Patronage of Santa Costanza, Rome." *Byzantion* 67, no. 2 (1997): 383-406 for a reexamination of the evidence. She argues that the mausoleum could not have been completed by 354 and maintains instead that it is a product of the 360s or 370s built over an earlier funerary structure by Julian the Apostate for his wife Helena, with understanding that Constantia herself would be reinterred there.

[4] The feast of day of Agnes is celebrated on January 21st and on this day it is customary for two lambs to be brought to S. Agnese f.l.m. to be blessed. The lambs are tended and then the wool is sheared approximately one month before the feast day of Peter and Paul. Twelve pallia are woven from this wool and on the eve of the feast day they are taken to S. Peter's and then given to the archbishops the next day. For more on this see Amato Pietro Frutaz, *Il Complesso Monumentale di Sant'Agnese e di Santa Costanza*. (Città del Vaticano: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1960), 32-34.

[5] "Fama refert sanctos dudum retulisse parentes
Agnen, cum lugubres cantus tuba concrepuisset,
nutricis gremium subito liquisse puellam.
sponte trucis calcasse minas rabiemq(ue) tyranni
urere cum flammis voluisset nobile corpus.
viribus inmensum parvis superasse timorem
nudaque profusum crinem per membra dedisse
ne domini templum facies peritura videret.
O veneranda mihi, sanctum decus, alma, pudoris
ut Damasi precibus faveas precor, inclyta martyr."
"Legend has it that a short time ago her holy parents reported that,
when the trumpet had sounded its mournful music,
the girl Agnes suddenly abandoned her nurse's lap.
Freely she trod under foot the threats and madness of the savage tyrant
when he wished to burn her noble body with flames.
Despite her slight strength she vanquished the immense terror

It is also near impossible to understand the popularity of Agnes without considering the contributions of two other prominent church authorities of the late 4th and early 5th century: Ambrose, bishop of Milan, and the Spanish poet Prudentius. It is their writings that immortalized the life and death of the young virgin for centuries to come. It is fitting, therefore, to say a few words on Agnes' life and death at the outset. The story that we know now is constructed from varying written accounts- again the most notable are those by Damasus, Ambrose and Prudentius. In short, the tale is that of a young virgin who chose martyrdom over marriage. But her story became a highly fascinating narrative that gained traction during not only the formative years of Christianity but during the rise and spread of asceticism from the late 4th century onwards. The poetic version of Prudentius, perhaps the best-known version, is as follows: Agnes, who was just a child but "dearly loving Christ," was seen by the prefect's son on her way back from school. He fell in love with her and asked her to marry him but Agnes denied his request and was consequently summoned to court where she was sentenced to work in a brothel. She was then led through the streets and placed naked on a public square. People, saddened by the virgin's plight, refused to look at her. After finally arriving at the brothel, the prefect's son advanced towards Agnes to consummate his sexual desire but was struck down by lightning. Upon hearing the weeping of the prefect's son friends, Agnes prayed to Christ so that he might live again. Despite resuscitating the prefect's son she was still sentenced to die; after praying, she humbly bowed her head, bent her neck, and with a single stroke was decapitated.[6] Ambrose's hymn, while shorter than Prudentius' poem, recounts a similar story, and, just like Prudentius he

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and set loose her hair to flow over her naked limbs—
lest a countenance doomed to perish see the temple of the Lord.
O kindly saint, worthy of my veneration, holy glory of modesty,
I pray, renowned martyr, that you favour the prayers of Damasus." See Dennis Trout, "'Being Female': Verse Commemoration at the Coemeterium S. Agnetis (Via Nomentana)." In *Being Christian in Late Antiquity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 225.

[6] See Krisak, *Prudentius' Crown of Martyrs*, 161-164 for translation.

stresses the girl's double crown of virginity and martyrdom.[7] Later legend holds that Agnes was executed in the Stadium of Domitian, present day Piazza Navona.[8] (Today on the west end of Piazza Navona stands the church of S. Agnese in Agone which is believed to possess the skull of the martyr.[9])

The written tradition of Agnes stressed the importance of faith, virginity, and martyrdom, and as an important saint, Agnes was seen as a strong intercessor to Christ. Her gravesite, as will explained in more detail in the following chapter, was a popular site for pilgrims, the faithful, clerics and bishops. The 4th funerary basilica in her honor continued to receive papal attention throughout the centuries and was an important gathering place during the rise of the cult of martyrs in the early Middle Ages.

The secondary literature on the 4th century cult of Agnes is also relatively rich. The most comprehensive study of not only the Constantinian phase, but also the Honorian one is Amato Pietro Frutaz' *Il complesso monumentale di Sant'Agnese* published in 1960.[10] In this book Frutaz discusses the literary tradition of Agnes, traces her iconographic mutations, the construction of the 4th century circiform basilica, the adjacent mausoleum of Constantina, and the 7th century Honorian basilica. While at times the interpretative framework may seem dated and too succinct, it nonetheless remains the most carefully researched and all-inclusive publication on the history of the site and its titular saint.

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[7] "You have then in one victim a twofold martyrdom, of modesty and of religion. She both remained a virgin and she obtained martyrdom." In Philip Schaff, "De Virginibus." In *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 634.
[8] Lynda L Coon, "Racetrack to Salvation: The Circus, the Basilica, and the Martyr." *Gesta (Fort Tryon Park, N.Y.)* 59, no. 1 (2020): 11.
[9] More on this in Alan Thacker, "The Origin and Early Development of Rome's Intramural Cults: A Context for the Cult of Sant'Agnese in Agone." *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Moyen Âge* vol. 126, 1 (2014): 137-146.
[10] Frutaz, *Il Complesso Monumentale di Sant'Agnese,* 1960.

A publication as comprehensive as Frutaz's on the entire complex is hard to find, nevertheless, individual studies focusing on either the 4th century circiform basilica or its adjacent mausoleum do exist. For example, Lynda L. Coon's recent article "Racetrack to Salvation: The Circus, the Basilica, and the Martyr," provides an extremely insightful interpretation of the history and function of circiform funerary basilicas in Rome.[11] She convincingly connects the formal elements of the U-shaped basilicas to those of Roman circuses. This a hypothesis is not new, but has been increasingly dismissed in the literature. But Coon shows how the intended symbolic relationship grew out of the shared cultural traditions that permeated the meanings assigned at once to Roman athleticism -and chariot racing specifically- and Christian martyrdom.[12] Coon's inclusion of architectural diagrams and consideration of mosaics, scriptural exegesis, and frescoes allows for a new and more nuanced perspective of the ritual appropriation of these structures.

On the adjacent mausoleum, publications postdating Frutaz' publication include those of Gillian Mackie and David J. Stanley.[13] In "Mausolea of the Rulers in the West", Mackie offers a survey of the corpus of late antique funerary monuments in the West. She discusses each building in depth and so too accords attention to the present-day church of S. Costanza. She describes its layout, possible patronage, and decoration. As she explains it, the building is a prime example of a decorated late antique mausoleum, without specifically pagan or Christian connotations, something that is underscored by the extant mosaic program in the interior. In a later article "A New Look at the Patronage of Santa Costanza, Rome", Mackie builds on David J.

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[11] Coon, "Racetrack to Salvation," 4.
[12] Coon, "Racetrack to Salvation," 3.
[13] Gillian Mackie, "Mausolea of the Rulers in the West." In *Early Christian Chapels in the West: Decoration, Function, and Patronage*, (University of Toronto Press, 2003): 144-194; Mackie, "A New Look at the Patronage of Santa Costanza, Rome," 385; David J. Stanley, "New Discoveries at Santa Costanza." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 48 (1994): 257-61.

Stanley's "New Discoveries at Santa Costanza". Both authors argue that there was a previous structure on the site, however while Stanley focuses on evidence from a series of excavations in 1992, Mackie instead focuses her research on the possible patronage of S. Costanza.[14]

Pope Honorius' (625-638) 7th century basilica to the saint belongs to an upsurge in the construction and restoration of sites associated with martyrs and their relics that took place in the late 6th century and 7th century.[15] Besides, Frutaz, another thorough and important study of the site, and most specifically the 7th century basilica, is Richard Krautheimer's assessment of the church in the *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae.*[16] The entry on the 7th century church presents us with a wealth of architectural and historical information on the building that makes it possible to trace its changes through time. But perhaps even more informative, at least in terms of situating Honorius' church in a broader context of church building in Rome in the early medieval period (both preceding and succeeding the construction of the 7th century basilica) is Robert Coates-Stephens' "Dark Age Architecture in Rome." Indeed, this study is instrumental in providing a better picture of the development of ecclesiastical architecture in Rome in the so-called "Dark Age" before the "Carolingian Renaissance."[17] Relying on new archaeological data and textual evidence Coates-Stephens specifically argues against and provides a much-needed corrective to Krautheimer's cyclical model which is perhaps best appreciated in the latter's

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[14] See above note 3.
[15] Alan Thacker, "Rome of the Martyrs: Saints, Cults and Relics, Fourth to Seventh Centuries." In *Roma Felix: Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome,* edited by Carragáin, Éamonn Ó, Carol Neuman De Vegvar, Dr. Brenda Bolton, Professor Anne J Duggan, and Dr. Damian J Smith (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008): 47-48.
[16] Richard Krautheimer, *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae: The Early Christian Basilicas of Rome (IV-IX Cent.).* Monumenti Di Antichità Cristiana, Ii Ser., V. 1. (Città del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1937), 14-38.
[17] Robert Coates Stephens, "Dark Age Architecture in Rome." *Papers of the British School at Rome* 65 (1997): 177-232.

Rome. Profile of a City 312-1308.[18] Krautheimer argued that when resources, both economic and ideological, were available Roman patrons and architects inevitably returned to early Christian models for church architecture in Rome (basilicas like S. Peter and S. Paul serving as two of the most important blue-prints). When resources were dwindling, still according to Krautheimer, only smaller, less refined, and often Byzantinizing churches were built. But Coates-Stevens assembles evidence for a new provisional corpus of these periods of supposed decline and is able to show that the city not only invested in maintenance on existing structures, but constructed a number of smaller, but nonetheless architecturally interesting structures that were modeled on both Latin and Byzantine architectural traditions.

As will be explained in more detail in the following chapter, the centuries starting from the institutionalization of Agnes' cult up until the construction of the Honorian basilica were characterized by a steady development and spread of the cult of saints. The construction and apse mosaic of S. Agnese belong to this development and specifically, as mentioned to an upsurge that took place between the late 6th and early 7th century. Many studies have been dedicated to the Christian cult of saints and relics. One of the most seminal publications was Peter Brown's 1981 *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*.[19] In this groundbreaking study, Brown traces the development of the worship of saints in Late Antiquity and challenges the two-tiered model proposed by past scholars which distinguished the religious practices of the learned elite from those of the masses. Brown, instead, argues that the worship of saints was a dynamic and fluid practice shared by both the elites and the 'masses' and argues for its centrality in the religious practices of Late Antiquity.

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[18] Richard Krautheimer, *Rome : Profile of a City, 312-1308 / Richard Krautheimer, with a New Foreword by Marvin Trachtenberg.* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[19] Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Another important study on the cult of saints is Alan Thacker's recent contribution to the 2008 volume *Roma Felix – Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome.*[20] Thacker's opening essay "Rome of the Martyrs Saints, Cults and Relics, Fourth to Seventh Centuries", is an exhaustive survey of the cult of martyrs. He argues that the physical features of the cult, more specifically the monumental buildings, epigrams, relics, and literary tradition in honor of the martyrs, played a pivotal role both in the development of the cult and how it was imagined throughout Europe.

As noted above, Krautheimer's *Rome: Profile a City, 312-1308 has* been criticized for some of its overarching theses on the development of ecclesiastical architecture and topography in Rome between the 4th and 13th centuries.[21] However, his volume is a masterful historical overview of the city, including the period during which the 7th century basilica of Agnes was constructed. That said, understanding the context of the 7th century was supplemented by various studies in this thesis. Of particular importance were Dennis Trout's chapter "(Re-) Founding Christian Rome: The Honorian Project of the Early Seventh Century" and Thomas F.X Noble's chapter "Rome in the Seventh Century".[22] Noble explores the 7th century by delving further in depth with the following themes: the decline of the civil administration, the decline of the senatorial aristocracy and its replacement by the military and ecclesiastical one, the elaboration of an ecclesiastical culture, and the reorientation of papal interests away from the Mediterranean

[20] Thacker, "Rome of the Martyrs," 13-50.
[21] See also Goodson focusing on the 9th century, Caroline Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I: Papal Power, Urban Renovation, Church Rebuilding and Relic Translation, 817-824.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[22] Dennis Trout, "(Re-)Founding Christian Rome: The Honorian Project of the Early Seventh Century." In *Urban Developments in Late Antique and Medieval Rome: Revising the Narrative of Renewal,* edited by *Ann Dijk, Gregor Kalas.* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021): 149-175;

and towards the kingdoms and peoples of Western Europe.[23]While Noble provides an informative discussion of the general changes Rome underwent during the 7th century, Trout's essay focuses specifically on Honorius and his projects, thus offering a much more precise insight into the context around the construction of S. Agnese. As Trout argues, his building program distinctively capitalized upon Rome's growing reputation as a city of martyrs and as result his pontificate should be seen as a pivotal moment of transition from Late Antiquity to early medieval Rome.[24] This allows us to assess his project on the Nomentana as part of his strategic promotion of the cult of martyrs.

The apse mosaic of Honorius' church, with the figure of the saint at the center, can be argued to not only stand at the period of transition between the late antique and early medieval world but also at the beginning of the trend of monumental female representation in ecclesiastical settings. An important recent publication of apse mosaics in Rome is Erik Thunø's 2015 *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome: Time, Network, and Repetition.*[25] In his book Thunø identifies visual and textual links in the churches of early medieval Rome and argues that mosaics during this period relied on an interconnected visual network bound together by shared iconography, inscriptions, and the appearance of regular figures. More specifically on the apse at S. Agnese, Trout, in an article titled "Pictures with Words: Reading the Apse Mosaic of S. Agnese f.l.m. (Rome)", explores how contemporary 7th century viewers could have interpreted the apse and its inscription below.[26] In this article he examines the relationship between text and

[23] Noble 7th cent 69 Thomas FX Noble, "Rome in the Seventh Century," in *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on His Life and Influence*, edited by Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 68-87.
[24] Trout, "(Re-)Founding Christian Rome," 149.
[25] Erik Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome: Time, Network, and Repetition.* (New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[26] Dennis Trout, "Pictures with Words: Reading the Apse Mosaic of S. Agnese f.l.m. (Rome)," *Studies in Iconography* vol. 40 (2019): 1-26.

image and argues that words are important and those versed in classical poetry would have read the inscription in conjunction with the apse much differently than those that were or were not familiar with the saint's *passio.*

Taking into consideration Agnes' unprecedented representation on the apse, the visual and written representations of the Virgin Mary in Rome have proved to be a fundamental interpretative tool. One of the most useful sources has been Hans Belting's *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art.*[27] His documentation and interpretation of the various pictorial articulations of the Virgin Mary, and especially the rhetorical strategies employed in icons, many surviving in Rome, have informed a considerable amount of the discussion on the Virgin Mary. But equally important were Gerhard Wolf's "Icons and Sites: Cult Images of the Virgin in Medieval Rome" from 1994 and Thunø's 2003 "The cult of the Virgin, Icons and Relics in Early Medieval Rome: A Semiotic Approach".[28] The former, as the title suggests, focuses specifically on cult images of the Virgin in the context of the cult of Mary in Rome and its settings. Thunø, on the other hand, adopts a semiotic approach and argues that during the 6th century Rome experienced a change in attitude concerning the Virgin Mary, icons, and relics which led to the establishment of new sign systems based on religious practices, thus creating a new channel of communication with the invisible.

As will be explained in more detail in Chapter 3, the rise of the cult of Agnes also coincided with the rise and spread of asceticism. As a virgin martyr, this fact, is tightly embedded with her cult in the city and so too her connections to the Virgin. Many studies have

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[27] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art.* Trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994), 30-41.
[28] Gerhard Wolf, "Icons and Sites: Cult Images of the Virgin in Medieval Rome." In *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. by Maria Vassilaki (Ashgate, 2005), 23-50; Erik Thunø, "The Cult of the Virgin, Icons and Relics in Early Christian and Medieval Rome: A Semiotic Approach and a Sixth Century Proposal." *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 17 (1970): 79-80.

been dedicated to the ascetic movement in Italy during Late Antiquity. While most of these publications focus predominately on the 4th to 6th century, they provide invaluable insights into the perception of Agnes in the 7th century itself. One of the most important publications remains Peter Brown's 1988 *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*.[29] In his highly influential study, Brown examines the attitudes and practices around sex, the body, and marriage. His consideration and analysis of a myriad of primary sources are of particular importance as they provide greater insight into the context in which writer's such as Ambrose, an author of Agnes' life, were writing in. The topic of the body and virginity, which is touched upon in Chapter 3, is also supported by influential articles by Virginia Burrus, Lucy Grig, Elizabeth Castelli, and Kate Cooper, to name but a few. Burrus' "Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius", relies on the 4th century tales of the martyr in order to highlight the place of gender in late antique Rome.[30] Along a similar vein, in "The Paradoxical Body of Saint Agnes", Lucy Grig relies on the literary tradition on the saint, along with some visual representations of Agnes, to explain the paradox that is her body: according to Grig, while Agnes stands as an exemplar for sanctity, her body is nonetheless tightly bound with sexuality.[31] Elizabeth Castelli explores the issue of virginity and sexuality further in depth in "Virginity and its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity."[32]In this essay the author engages with the question of the attraction of aestheticism for women from a different perspective. Her aim, instead, is to investigate the effect and meaning of celibacy on the lives

[29] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
[30] Virginia Burrus, "Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius." *Journal of early Christian studies* 3, no. 1 (1995): 25-46.
[31] Lucy Grig, "The Paradoxical Body of Body of Saint Agnes." In Roman Bodies, ed. by Andrew Hopkins and Maria Wyke (London: British School at Rome, 2005), 110-122.
[32] Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity." *Journal of feminist studies in religion* 2, no. 1 (1986): 61-88.

and sexuality on women. Kate Cooper in "The Virgin as Social Icon" discusses the connection between how virgins are presented in text and how these could have been interpreted by women at the time. She argues against the idea that virgins were meant to be read as subversive and empowering figures, and instead contends that they were promoters of social coherence and order.[33]

Chapter 1 provide a discussion of the complex of S. Agnese on the Via Nomentana and its relationship to the development of the cult of saints from the 4th century up until the construction of the Honorian basilica in the 7th century.

Chapter 2 discusses the representations of Agnes in Roman art preceding the 7th century and a visual analysis of the Honorian apse mosaic itself.

Chapter 3, considers the interconnections of gender, virginity, and body. This includes an examination of the spread of asceticism; a discussion of the relationship between image and text, and more specifically the intersection between the literary tradition on the saint and her representation on the apse.

The thesis will conclude with a discussion of the relevance of Honorius' apse in relation to the development of monumental female representation and the cult of saints.

[33] Kate Cooper, "The Virgin as Social Icon: Perspectives from Late Antiquity." In *Saints, Scholars, and Politicians: Gender as a Tool in Medieval Studies Festschrift in Honour of Anneke Mulder-Bakker on the Occasion of Her Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, edited by Mathilde van Dijk and Renée Nip. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 24.

1. Sant'Agnese f.l.m and the Cult of Saints in Late Antique Rome

The rise and development of the cult of saints in Rome took place in the great cemeteries outside the city walls. The growth that the cult of martyrs experienced in the late 4th and 5th centuries led to a shift in the balance of the importance given to the areas of the dead. Opulent and grand architecture began to appear outside the city walls.[34]The tombs of martyrs became public places, accessible to all, and the location of ritual practices. Unlike cities in Africa or the East, which are argued to have suffered more than any city during the imperial persecutions, interestingly, before acquiring popularity as the indisputable home of the martyrs in Late Antiquity, Rome did not boast a developed cult of saints.[35] The lack of substantial records on martyrs from the early days of Christianity was most likely due to the difficulties in commemorating those subject during a period of imperial persecution.[36] A major turning point for the cult of martyrs was Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312. This watershed moment led to the construction by him and members of his family of a series of large scale basilicas; from S. Peter's on the Vatican to SS. Marcellinus and Peter on the Via Labicana, S. Paul on the Via Ostiense to S. Agnes on the Via Nomentana.

The complex of S. Agnese fuori le mura currently has three structures dating between the 4th and 7th centuries (fig. 1.1). The land possibly originally belonged to Helena, the emperor Constantine's mother and it is the Constantinians which are credited with commissioning both the funerary basilica of S. Agnese and the mausoleum, now known as the church of S. Costanza

[34] Brown, *The Cult of the Saints,* 7.
[35] Thacker, "Rome of the Martyrs," 20.
[36] Thacker, "Rome of the Martyrs," 23.

(fig. 1.2).[37] Both buildings certainly belong to the first campaign of monumental Christian architecture in Rome under imperial patronage and so too with the earliest monumentalization of the Christian cult of saints.

The funerary basilica of S. Agnese was a massive covered structure, almost 120 meters in length, in brick-faced concrete. It was U shaped, with the most salient element of its interior being an ambulatory that allowed pilgrims to walk around it (fig. 1.3). Today all that remains from that grand structure are parts of the outer wall, with the massive buttresses for the apse still visible today rising at the base of the hill. S. Agnese was one of the six funerary basilicas in the city's suburbs and their function has been extensively discussed.[38] Roman tombs were places not just for burial but for commemoration; they were places for both the dead and the living. Relatives and friends of the deceased visited the graves to honor the dead, and often shared a meal with them. With rise of Christianity these practices extended to the 'special' dead: martyrs, bishops and clergy, and included not only relatives and friends but members of the newly formed Christian communities of the city. As Robin M. Jensen has explained, participants of these celebrations read the heroic deeds of the martyrs, sang songs of praise, and shared food on the saint's anniversary. Martyrs were commemorated with offerings and a banquet, an event that also allowed participants of the rites to engage in a sort of communion with the deceased.[39] Paulinus of Nola (354-431), when talking of S. Peter's records: "I see the gathering being divided amongst separate tables, and all the people being filled with abundance of food."[40]He

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[37] Mackie, "A New Look at the Patronage of Santa Costanza, Rome," 397.
[38] The other five basilicas are argued to be: S. Sebastiano on the Via Appia, SS. Marcellino e Pietro on the Via Labicana, an anonymous basilica on the Via Prenestina, S. Lorenzo on the Via Tiburtina, and S. Maro on the Via Ardeatina. See Coon, "Racetrack to Salvation," 14.
[39] Robin M. Jensen, "Dining with the Dead: From the Mensa to the Altar in Christian Late Antiquity." In *Commemorating the Dead: Texts and Artifacts in Context. Studies of Roman, Jewish and Christian Burials*, edited by Laurie Brink and Deborah Green (1. Aufl. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH Co.KG, 2008), 128.
[40] Paulinus, and P. G. Walsh, *Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola / Translated and Annotated by P.G. Walsh.* (Westminster, Md: Newman Press, 1966), 127.

also goes on to say how this gathering took place on the atrium and whole area before the steps. This description lets us know that the activities that occurred at S. Peter's and most likely at S. Agnes too, were communal events.

As the cult of martyrs expanded and developed, the celebrations and banquets at the extramural funerary basilicas were gradually abandoned. The timing at different sites undoubtedly varied. But in the case of S. Agnese, once the Honorian basilica was completed in c. 630, the veneration of the saint was firmly relocated to the newly built church which had been constructed directly above the saint's grave. The funeral *banquets* which had taken place in the covered cemeteries and their grounds were adapted to the interior space of the *ad corpus* basilica and the funeral rites now invariably included a Eucharistic celebration.[41] While the late antique funerary basilicas were typically associated with martyrs, it has been argued that martyr cults were not the main motivation in their construction.[42] However, to some extent, this is also ignores the strong connection between these sites, the martyrs and their veneration. An inscription dedicated to S. Agnes and attributed to Constantina states: "Therefore, martyr and devotee of Christ, this worthy gift from our resources you will possess through the long ages, O happy maid, of the noteworthy name Agnes."[43]

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[41] Jensen, "Dining with the Dead,"134.
[42] Thacker, "Rome of the Martyrs," 26.
[43] Believed to have been installed in the ambulatory basilica Constantina's acrostic epigram is as follows:
C onstantina deum venerans Christoque dicata
O mnibus impensis devota mente paratis
N umine divino multum Christoque iuvante
S acravi templum victricis virginis Agnes,
T emplorum quod vincit opus terrenaque cuncta,
A urea quae rutilant summi fastigia tecti.
N omen enim Christi celebratur sedibus istis,
T artaream solus potuit qui vincere mortem
I nvectus caelo solusque inferre triumphum
N omen Adae referens et corpus et omnia membra
A mortis tenebris et caeca nocte levata.
D ignum igitur munus martyr devotaque Christo
E x opibus nostris per saecula longa tenebis,

The fourth century mausoleum of Constantina still survives relatively intact, although its interior mosaic decoration has been subject to both losses and restorations. The centrally-planned structure consists of domed circular chamber supported by twelve pairs of columns and an enveloping colonnaded circular ambulatory (fig. 1.4).[44] A large niche across the main entrance is believed to have housed the porphyry sarcophagus of Constantina. Following its initial construction in the mid-4th century, the funerary basilica of Agnes became a popular pilgrimage site. The *Depositio Martyrum* from 354 represents the first signs of strong interest in formally venerating and recording the city's local martyrs, and a shift in attitude in Rome regarding the martyrs. On the Nomentana, there is evidence of papal activity occurring at the complex from the decades following its construction all the way to 7th century when the new *ad corpus* church was built. Pope Liberius (352-366) is even believed to have lived under the protection of Constantina at the complex following his return from exile, after refusing to agree to the Arian heresy.[45] The *Liber Pontificalis* claims that it was as an expression of gratitude and that Liberius decorated the tomb of Agnes with a bas-relief pluteus depicting the martyr in an orant pose.[46] Liberius'

O felix virgo, memorandi nominis Agnes.
I, Constantina, venerating God and consecrated to Christ,
having devoutly provided for all expenses,
with considerable divine inspiration and Christ assisting,
have dedicated the temple of the victorious virgin Agnes,
which surpasses the workmanship of temples and all earthly (buildings)
that the golden gables of lofty roofs illumine with reddish glow.
For the name of Christ is celebrated in this hall,
who alone was able to vanquish infernal death,
borne to heaven, and alone carry in the triumph,
restoring the name of Adam and the body and all the limbs
released from the shadows of death and dark night.
Therefore, martyr and devotee of Christ, this worthy gift
from our resources you will possess through the long ages,
O happy maid, of the noteworthy name Agnes. See Trout, "Being Female," 222-223.

[44] Mackie, "A New Look at the Patronage of Santa Costanza, Rome," 384.

[45] Thacker, "Rome of the Martyrs," 30; Raymond Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis): the Ancient Biographies of the First Ninety Roman Bishops to AD 715 / Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Raymond Davis.* Revised third edition. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 27.

[46] Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis,* 28.

decision to seek refuge in Agnes' basilica reveals the symbolic role of these large-scale extra-mural structures. As argued by Samuel Cohen, not only were they a primary locus of Christian worship but these places were also seen as a shield of sanctity that protected the city and its residents.[47]

After the death of Liberius in 366, Damasus and Ursinus were elected bishops contemporaneously, a decision that led to a series of violent struggles over the bishopric of Rome. Supporters of Ursinus argued that Damasus led a bloody and vicious war for the control over the city. According to a pamphlet written by an Ursinian, the first clash among the supporters of both groups lasted three days, and after a month of conflict Damasus went as far as hiring gladiators, charioteers, and grave diggers who attacked the Ursinians.[48] The Ursinians and other schismatic groups in Rome were argued to have used the areas outside the city walls and near imperial *memoriae* as gathering places. And in November, two months after Liberius' death, Damasus organized another attack against the Ursinians near the tomb of S. Agnes.[49]

After securing his position as bishop of Rome, Damasus initiated in earnest the promotion of the cult of martyrs through a series of projects, the most notable one being his monumentalization and institutionalization at the sites of the tombs of martyrs. The *Liber Pontificalis* informs us that he "he searched for and discovered many bodies of holy martyrs, and also proclaimed their [acts] in verses".[50] In what can be considered a formative period for Christianity and the cult of martyrs, Damasus' epigrams played multiple roles. Taking into account the entire conflict surrounding Damasus' election as bishop of Rome, his promotion and

[47] Samuel Cohen, "The Cemetery as a Space of Exile in Late Antique Rome." In *Forced Migration in Late Antiquity: Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity*, edited by Dirk Rohmann, Jörg Ulrich, and Margarita Vallejo Girvés (Berlin: Peter Lang GmbH, 2018), 149.
[48] Marianne Sághy, "Scinditur in Partes Populus: Pope Damasus and the Martyrs of Rome." *Early medieval Europe* 9, no. 3 (2000): 380.
[49] Sághy, "Scinditur in Partes Populus," 380.
[50] Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis,* 28.

enhancement of the cult of martyrs should not be seen as a mere commemoration of the city's heroes but rather as a calculated and selective endeavor. In other words, his epigraphic project, while monumentalizing around those sites built under Constantine, was first and foremost a well thought out ideological program, one clearly heavily charged with a desire to control the cult of martyrs, pacify the factionalism in the city, and eradicate the memory of his rivals.

As Marianne Sághy has argued, the epigrams not only allowed Damasus to inscribe carefully thought out and strategic meanings on often contested sites within the topography of Rome, but they also promoted concord and consensus in the city.[51] Damasus' epigrams also consisted of two personal features: the presentation of the story on the inscriptions and the choice of martyr.[52] From the large and ever-expanding pool of martyrs to choose from, here is where Damasus' orchestrated enterprise and selectiveness shine through the most. Agnes' inscription is unique in being the only one dedicated to a woman. The site of Agnes on the Via Nomentana, however, had been a place of refuge for Damasus' rivals, and by monumentalizing around her funerary basilica he was also appropriating schismatic gathering sites.

Damasus' epigram to Agnes, engraved on a large marble slab and installed near the martyr's tomb, narrates not only the virgin's martyrdom and suffering but it also concludes with a plea by Damasus: "O kindly saint, worthy of my veneration, holy glory of modesty, I pray, renowned martyr, that you favour the prayers of Damasus."[53] In light of his tumultuous episcopacy, the epigram can be argued to play more than one role. Besides commemorating the virgin martyr, his decision to place it at a site of contest and calling on Agnes' intervention, can be seen as a warning to those against him.[54] Moreover, by dedicating one of his epigrams to

[51] Sághy, "Scinditur in Partes Populus,"273.
[52] Sághy, "Scinditur in Partes Populus,"279.
[53] See above note 5.
[54] Sághy, "Scinditur in Partes Populus,"381.

Agnes on the Via Nomentana, he was also attaching his name and presentation of the saint's story to an already existing imperial structure. And considering the popularity of the catacombs as gathering places, placing inscriptions there, besides being less costly than building entire churches, also allowed for greater visibility of Damasus' texts and the ideological readings that could be extracted from these. The appropriation of the bishops and the ruling class of the cult saints not only imbued it with a greater sense of authority but it also allowed it to develop resolutely. The patronage of Constantina at S. Agnese is an example of this and Damasus' ideological program at the catacombs highlights how martyrs were utilized by bishops.

Following Damasus' intervention at S. Agnese the *Liber Pontificalis*, records that in the early 5th century Pope Innocentius (401-417) ordered the decoration and re-roofing of the basilica of S. Agnese.[55] Years later Innocentius' successor, Pope Boniface (418-422), celebrated Easter in the basilica in 419.[56] Later Symmachus (498-514), who held the see during the first decade of the 6th century is documented by the *Liber Pontificalis* to have renewed the apse of S. Agnese which was said to have been on the brink of collapse. The *Liber Pontificalis* also suggests that he might have done further work on the building but it fails at specifying what else.[57] In any case, Symmachus' work on the basilica constitutes the last significant intervention on the structure before Honorius.

The 6th century saw the emergence of Rome as a pilgrimage city. This was due to the relatively peaceful conditions in Rome, coupled with the increased difficulty and danger of visiting the Holy Land following the collapse of Byzantine power in the East.[58] The Church in

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[55] Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis,* 32.
[56] Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis,* 32.
[57] "He renewed the apse of St Agnes' which was liable to collapse, and the whole basilica;" Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis,* 64.
[58] Thacker, "Rome of the Martyrs," 46.

Rome was definitely at the forefront of this development. It promoted the cult of martyrs, including purposefully the blurring of the spatial, spiritual and mental boundaries and relationships between the living and the dead, setting Rome apart from its Byzantine neighbors.[59] This, in turn, led to the renewed interest and investment in the catacombs and their sanctuaries.[60] Pope Symmachus, one of the restorers of the basilica of S. Agnese, was also involved in the restoration of multiple buildings following the earthquake of 508.[61] More work on the city's monuments continued to take place under John I (523-526), Felix IV (526-530), and Vigilius (537-555). Work on the city's monuments are said that have been most likely interrupted by Gothic Wars (535-554).[62] Nonetheless, Pelagius II's (579-590) late 6th century *ad corpus* basilica to Lawrence and Honorius' 7th century *ad corpus* basilica to Agnes' represent the reappearance of new lavish building projects near the sites of the tombs of martyrs.[63] Both structures were also built immediately adjacent to massive cemetery basilicas dedicated to the titular saints in the fourth century. The new basilica of S. Agnese, however, may be said to show continuity with its predecessor on site in one important sense: it remained the only monumental site dedicated to a female saint.

By the 7th century and the beginning of Honorius' papacy (625-638), the large funerary basilica, despite having had work done throughout the centuries, had purportedly fallen in disrepair. This is the reason, according to the *Liber Pontificalis*, that Honorius, built a new basilica in honor of Agnes "from the ground up."[64] The *Liber Pontificalis* also informs us that it was "decorated to perfection" and that "many gifts were put there." These included a bronze gilt

[59] Brown, *The Cult of the Saints,* 9.
[60] Thacker, "Rome of the Martyrs,"46, 48.
[61] Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis,* 44-45.
[62] See Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis.*
[63] Thacker, "Rome of the Martyrs," 46.
[64] Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis,* 64.

canopy, an extravagant 252 lb. of gold that he placed over her tomb, as well as three bowls of gold.[65] The new church to Agnes, modest in size compared to the large 4th century circiform basilica, consisted of a nave that culminated in an apse, two aisles composed of spoliated columns topped by colonnaded galleries. In light of the evolution of the cult of saints and the further rise in pilgrimage during the 7th century, it may also be assumed that, the state in which the funerary basilica was in was hardly the only reason for Honorius' commission. By the 6th century the great imperial basilicas had lost their main function as spaces for *refrigeria,* a development that also brought about drastic changes to the structures adjacent to them. The large funerary basilicas were abandoned in favor of much smaller structures, such as the two *ad corpus* basilicas of S. Agnes and S. Lorenzo.[66] Having the martyrial graves as their altars and focus was also important due to the expansion of international pilgrimage, of which relics were an essential part of the experience.[67]Taking into account all of this, Honorius' desire to build on top of the martyr's actual grave site must have been paramount. In other words, in the context of the developing cult of saints, the construction of the two *ad corpus* basilicas of Honorius and Pelagius II are architectural responses of this phenomenon. This strengthening of existing local holy sites reinforced papal presence in Rome and presented the city as the official Christian capital.

The Honorian basilica stands within an older monumental complex that celebrated both the female martyr and its female patrons. As we shall see presently, Honorius' motivations may not be separated from the aims of his larger building campaign outside the walls. Yet it should

[65] Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis*, 64.
[66] Thacker, "Rome of the Martyrs," 48.
[67] Thacker, "Rome of the Martyrs," 46.

not be overlooked that the construction of the 7th century basilica strengthened and underscored the importance of a distinctly female saint in the sacred topography of Rome.

Honorius inherited the episcopal see at a complicated time in Rome. While his papacy proved to be the longest one since that of Gregory the Great (590-604) and among the longest ones of the 7th century, he came to power at a moment in which the population of Rome had been drastically depleted after decades of wars and plagues.[68] Moreover, while the first decades of the 7th century, were more peaceful than those of the latter half of the 6th, they were marked by short lived papacies, a situation which prevented large scale papal projects and initiatives to take root much less come to fruition. Honorius' near 13-year term, on the other hand, provided the ideal environment for some of these projects to materialize and so too to project a new and renewed image of Rome. The entry for his life in the *Liber Pontificalis* exemplifies this by mainly focusing on his building campaigns. In fact, if the donations recorded by the *Liber Pontificalis* are to be trusted, it would take almost a century, under the pontificate of Hadrian I (772-795) to surpass Honorius' spending.[69] As Dennis Trout argues, in order to achieve his ambitious vision to solidify and build the city's status as both a Western power and as a container of sanctity commissions, Honorius looked back to the city's heyday in Late Antiquity and, at the same, time into its future.[70] Indeed, the city's rich tradition regarding the cult of saints offered a firm foundation of sanctity, one which was also deeply embedded in the fabric of the city's imperial past.[71] Through the numerous constructions, donations, and remodelings across the architectural and martyrial fabric of Rome, Honorius was able to simultaneously look back at that past while

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[68] Trout, "(Re-)Founding Christian Rome,"150.
[69] Trout, "(Re-)Founding Christian Rome,"153.
[70] Maya Maskarinec, *City of Saints : Rebuilding Rome in the Early Middle Ages.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 118; Trout, "(Re-)Founding Christian Rome,"150.
[71] Maskarinec, *City of Saints,* 8.

also materializing a new vision of Rome. As Trout again plausibly argues, Honorius' aims and building campaigns are indicative of his attention and interest in interfering on the "ancient topography of martyrdom" that lay outside of the city walls.[72] The *Liber Pontificalis* confirms that he intervened not only at Agnes' site on the Via Nomentana but also on sites of S. Peter on the Vatican where he replaced the early 4th century roof with bronze tiles from the temple of Venus and Roma.[73] His presence is also noted at SS. Marcellinus and Peter on the Via Labicana, S. Pancras on the Via Aurelia, S. Valentinus on the Via Flaminia, and S. Paul on the Via Ostiense.[74] With the single exception of Pelagius' *ad corpus* basilica of S. Lawrence in the mid-6th century, no significant intervention had taken place at these extramural sites of saint veneration since Pope Leo I's reconstruction of S. Paolo, flm in 410. Honorius was associating himself to the heyday of large-scale constructions erected under the patronage of imperial family members which carried with them the status of state-sponsored authority. He was also strategically making use of the great religious, social and political power of the cult of saints of his own day. His aim was to return 'imperial' order and monumental form to Rome by reshaping under the protection of its legendary martyrs and thereby re-launch Rome as an authoritative ruling power in Christendom. On a visual level, it must have certainly been an impressive display of wealth and patronage and a clear investment in Rome as a unique pilgrimage destination.[75] Moreover, the papacy was the purported representative of not only Rome but the Church universal. From the perspective of Honorius, as well as many of his papal predecessors and successors, the involvement in the cult of saints in Rome, a treasure trove of saints' remains,

[72] Trout, "(Re-)Founding Christian Rome,"156.
[73] Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis*, 64-65.
[74] Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis*, 64-65.
[75] Trout, "(Re-)Founding Christian Rome,"156.

provided religious, social and political empowerment and authority, as through the saints the pope mediated between heaven and earth.

So if Rome was presented as a "storehouse for sanctity," as Maskarinec aptly describes it,[76] then S. Agnese, a church built at a critical period in the city's reinvention, acts a sort of microcosm of this concept. It can be argued that it is both a storehouse of sanctity and massive bejeweled reliquary resting atop the saint's remains. Although it was one among the many churches that Honorius invested in, it alone continues to stand today almost in its original form and thereby provides the best insight into Honorius' vision. Moreover, it is due to Honorius that Agnes, as we shall see, one of the city's most beloved saints in Late Antiquity, that her cult was reinvigorated in the early Middle Ages and later outside of Rome.[77] Certainly, what made martyrs, such as Agnes, so special was that by dying as a human being she enjoyed a unique intimacy with God that could allow her to intercede for those on Earth.[78]Visually the apse mosaic at S. Agnese demonstrates Honorius' awareness of the saint's power in the cult of saints in the Roman milieu. Moreover, Honorius' unique composition with its almost unique emphasis on the female martyr's figure, not only stands at the starting point of a period of renewed and intense interest on the tombs of saints and their lives, but also near the start of monumental female representations in ecclesiastical settings.

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[76] Maskarinec, *City of Saints,* 118.
[77] Refer to Carolyn Diskant Muir, "Love and Courtship in the Convent: St. Agnes and the Adult Christ in Two Upper Rhine Manuscripts." *Gesta (Fort Tryon Park, N.Y.)* 47, no. 2 (2008): 123-145.
[78] Brown, *The Cult of the Saints,* 6.

2. The Visual Tradition of Agnes in Rome

As an exemplary Roman saint, the figure of Agnes has a long and interesting history in the city of Rome. Tracing the development of her story and representation during the early medieval period reveals the fascinating development of martyrological iconography and the cult of saints. The official monumentalization of her cult in the 4th century, along with Ambrose's, Damasus' and Prudentius' written accounts of her martyrdom, not only enhanced her worship but also transformed her into the archetypical virgin martyr of the city.[79] The aim of this chapter is to trace and explore the representation of the saint in Rome. Hopefully this will not only provide a clearer understanding of the apse mosaic in the church of S. Agnese fuori le mura, but it will also offer some insight into Christian monumental female representation in early medieval Rome.

Lucy Grig has justifiably emphasized that the Christianization of Rome constituted a tremendous cultural change in which the importance of visual record should not be underestimated.[80] Indeed, visual records provide an invaluable insight into this key period of transition. Gold glasses in particular reveal an early repertoire of Christian characters. From the almost five hundred gold glasses that have been unearthed an overwhelming majority were produced in Rome during the 4th century and most have been found in the Roman catacombs.[81] The use of gold glasses, which are essentially small gold leaf designs inserted between two layers of glass, can be traced back to the Hellenistic period. However, the ones found in Rome

[79] Grig, "The Paradoxical Body of Body of Saint Agnes,"111.
[80] Lucy Grig, "Portraits, Pontiffs and the Christianization of Fourth-Century Rome." *Papers of the British School at Rome* 1, no. 7 (2004): 203.
[81] Grig, "Portraits, Pontiffs and the Christianization of Fourth-Century Rome," 203.

are all late antique productions.[82] Those found in the catacombs, which occasionally depict the earliest portraits of quintessential Roman saints such as Agnes, were inserted in the mortar sealing *loculi*, shelf-like tombs lining the walls of both galleries and cubicula. Gold glasses with images of Agnes are the earliest extant figural representations of the saint in Rome. Her presence is not especially surprising given that portraits of religious figures and biblical narratives form the largest group of these 4th-century gold glasses. Portraits of Christ, martyrs, and in some occasions the Virgin Mary are rarely individually characterized. Male figures are generically dressed in a tunic and pallium, while female figures, Agnes included, are typically amply draped, sometimes elegantly, and standing in the orant pose.[83] If present, it is only the accompanying inscription spelling out the figure's name that identifies 'individualizes' the figures. The gold glasses, despite their relatively small size and at times unclear provenance, reveal invaluable information regarding the iconographic development of the cult of martyrs in 4th century Rome. As a testament to her popularity, it is interesting to note that, after Peter and Paul, Agnes was the figure most represented in gold glass.[84]

Although often of unclear provenance, it is the series of 4th century gold glasses depicting Agnes that attest to the popularity of her cult beyond imperial sponsorship. Indeed, the series is not only a fascinating glimpse into the early development of hagiographical and martyrological iconography but into Agnes' religious and social standing in Rome. A mid-4th century gold glass from the Catacombs of Pamphilus shows Agnes with arms outstretched in the orant pose (fig. 2.1). She is flanked on both sides by two birds that stand on two pillars. The saint is depicted haloed and wearing a long and elaborately embellished tunic whereas her hair is carefully pinned

[82] Grig, "Portraits, Pontiffs and the Christianization of Fourth-Century Rome," 203.
[83] Grig, "Portraits, Pontiffs and the Christianization of Fourth-Century Rome," 215.
[84] Grig, "Portraits, Pontiffs and the Christianization of Fourth-Century Rome," 215.

up in a high bun. Another similar gold glass, whose provenance is also unclear, depicts the saint in orant pose, accompanied by two birds that hold a diadem in their beaks (fig. 2.2). Grig argues the twin crowns held by the birds can be direct allusions to the literary tradition surrounding the saint, which claimed that Agnes received double acclamation as a virgin and martyr.[85] If this was indeed the case, then it shows an interesting intersection between written accounts of the virgin and her representation in art.

The 4th century in Rome was clearly an active period for the cult of Agnes. The massive funerary basilica built in her honor on the Nomentana monumentalized her presence in the sacred topography of the city. As mentioned in the previous chapter Liberius is reported to have decorated the tomb of the saint sometime after his return from exile.[86] The pluteus relief depicting the saint still survives to this day in the Honorian basilica, again shows the saint in orant pose. The representation, however, is to an extent unique, whether compared to the contemporary gold glasses or to the 7th century monumental representation on the apse. In the gold glasses, as discussed, she tends to be represented wearing long dresses, full of folds and volume and are beautifully embellished, as the one in the Catacomb of Pamphilus. In Liberius' relief, on the other hand, despite being shown in a long tunic, the fabric clings to her body, clearly revealing a shapely feminine body beneath. This is a stark difference. The tunic on the relief also lacks the dramatic folds and volume that those on the gold glasses have. Instead, her dress seems made up of a single piece of thin fabric. Fully dressed and covered, her body is revealed.

[85] See See Krisak, *Prudentius' Crown of Martyrs,* 161-164; Grig, "Portraits, Pontiffs and the Christianization of Fourth-Century Rome," 221; Grig, "The Paradoxical Body of Body of Saint Agnes,"112.
[86] Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis,* 28.

In "The Paradoxical Body of Saint Agnes", Lucy Grig argues that textual and visual representations of the saint's life present her body as a spectacle, one in which vision and voyeurism are entangled.[87] Literary accounts of her martyrdom constantly reference her virginity and body throughout the story. Indeed, her virginity and body are continuously contested throughout her *passio*. To cite the most famous example, after refusing the advances of the prefect's son, she is led naked to a brothel, however, she is miraculously surrounded by a blinding light that covers her body.[88] Once in the brothel, when her virginity is about to be violated by the prefect's son, he is, as mentioned, immediately struck down and killed. This attack against her body and virginity tightly binds her sanctity to her sexuality.[89] Hannah Jones, argues that the *passio's* focus on her virginity is tied to discourses on a purified civic order that made use of on-going conversations concerning the social meaning and value of virginity.[90] With this in mind, Liberius' relief may be argued to embody a voyeuristic attitude around Agnes' body, the same one which is also evident through the eroticized accounts of her martyrdom. We shall return to the issue in the following chapter.

The Apse Mosaic

While the site of Agnes' grave remained an important location for her worship and the cult of saints during the centuries that preceded the construction of her *ad corpus* basilica, the only figural images of the saint preceding the 7th century monumental apse were the 4th century

[87] Grig, "The Paradoxical Body of Body of Saint Agnes,"118.
[88] Krisak, *Prudentius' Crown of Martyrs*, 161-164.
[89] Grig, "The Paradoxical Body of Body of Saint Agnes,"118.
[90] Hannah Jones, "Agnes and Constantia: Domesticity and Cult Patronage in the Passion of Agnes." In *Religion, Dynasty, and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300–900*, (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 129.

gold glasses and Liberius' pluteus. It is hardly an understatement to maintain that the apse mosaic was and is an unparalleled exaltation of Agnes.

The saint is standing in the center of a vast gold background (fig. 2.3). She is flanked on either side by Pope Honorius and Pope Symmachus. The decision to depict the two popes is perhaps not surprising, considering that, according to the *Liber Pontificalis*, both were major benefactors to Agnes' church. While Honorius was responsible for building the 7th century basilica, Symmachus is said to have restored the original 4th century circiform structure at the beginning of the 6th century.[91]

In the uppermost part of the apsidal conch, on axis with Agnes' figure in the center, the hand of God emerges holding a bejeweled circular crown. It is comes out of semicircular shape depicting a white sky filled with what appear to be red discus-shaped clouds. Beneath are two other semi-circular blue bands. The first is light blue, while the second is a deep blue; both bands include a series of alternating white and gold stars. Immediately below the three celestial bands, and still on axis with the hand of God and the figure Agnes is an inscription in black tesserae which reads SCA AGNES, an abbreviation for *Sancta Agnes* (fig. 2.4). The martyr herself is depicted with a halo and a crown and a richly embellished purple gown. Her halo, which highlights her sanctity, is composed of a thin outer band of black tesserae and a less noticeable inner band of white tesserae. Encircling her head, is the crown which is set with colored gems and white pearls. It's pointed in the center and slants diagonally at the sides and so is divided into three equal parts, each with a large circular jewel at the center

The martyr's brown hair is almost hidden from view due to the pendilia of white pearls that frame her face, almost veil like. Long thin and curving eyebrows, large almond shaped eyes,

[91] Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis,* 45.

a long straight nose that departs from the eyebrows and ends in an arrow-like point, cheeks depicted as blushed through the addition of patches of red tesserae, and a small red mouth with pursed lips characterize her physiognomy. She appears almost pale in comparison with her other two male companions, but this is most likely due to 19th century renovations both popes underwent.[92] Her purple dress is embellished at the bottom left with a gold roundel depicting a small phoenix, thus symbolically pointing to the martyr's eternal life. The tunic's hem is decorated with a horizontal gold band filled with stones and jewels, however the most embellished, jewel encrusted, article of clothing is the martyr's shawl. Covering her shoulders and falling flat across the center of her body and neck almost to the hem of her dress is a shawl reminiscent of a pallium (fig. 2.5). It is riddled with alternating rectangular and circular stones of blue, green, and white. A small white stripe composed of flowers of red tesserae frames the entirety of the shawl. At the base of Agnes' neck and covering her sternum is a necklace made up of multiple strands of jewels of different sizes and shapes. A white shawl with a gold star-shaped decorative patch of embroidery near its bottom completes her attire.

Agnes is shown holding a closed white scroll with both hands (fig. 2.6). She stands atop a sword and burning fire, the instruments of her martyrdom (fig. 2.7). As recorded in Ambrose's account of Agnes' life, she was first burned at a pyre and when this failed to kill her she was subsequently stabbed with a sword.[93] The references to her ordeal not only add a narrative element to an otherwise mostly iconic mosaic but they also allude to her martyred body underneath the altar.

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[92] Frutaz, *Il Complesso Monumentale di Sant'Agnese,* 69; On restoration in the church see Ugo Fusco, "Considerazioni sul Rinvenimento di Sculture Antiche da S. Agnese Fuori le Mura." *Archeologia Classica* 55 (2004): 399-411.
[93] Refer to note 5.

The two popes are represented in clerical clothing. Pope Honorius, on the saint's right, is shown tonsured, with a short brown beard, and a long and voluminous brown tunic (fig. 2.8). His body is depicted in an almost three-quarter view towards the central figure of Agnes, even while he faces the viewer. A white pallium drapes over his shoulders in a V-shape and falls almost to the hem of his tunic. A Greek cross delineated in black tesserae decorates the pallium a quarter of the way up from the hem but because Honorius is shown holding up the model of the church toward Agnes with elbows bent and with his tunic covering both his arms and hands, the Greek cross appears at the level of his hips.

Across Honorius and to the saint's left stands the figure of Pope Symmachus (fig. 2.9). He is dressed similarly to Honorius: with a tonsured head, a short brown beard, and a long brown tunic. However, instead of holding a model of the church he holds a bejeweled codex in his hands. Most likely representative of the Gospels, the book is depicted as closed, with a gold cover enhanced by a large gemmed cross at the center.

Both Honorius and Symmachus are shown standing on a green band that stretches from one end of the apsidal conch to the other, presumably depicting a heavenly meadow or field. An earlier depiction of this heavenly meadow can be found in the 6th century apse mosaic of SS. Cosmas and Damian. Erik Thunø argues that the background in early medieval apse mosaics tend to seal off figures from any illusionistic space. Yet the strip of grass in which figures stand help evoke a sense of space reminiscent to paradise.[94] Beneath the three figures is an inscription in gold tesserae set against a deep blue. It reads:

> "Golden pictures rise out of the beaten metals, and day[light] itself is both confined and embraces. From snowy springs, you may believe that dawn enters into gathered clouds to

[94] Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome,* 64.

water the fields with dew. And the rainbow among the stars produces such a light, and the purple peacock shines with this color. He who can give an end to nights or lights, from here has repulsed Chaos from the tombs of the martyrs. What each sees with a single upward glance, [which is] this beautiful votive offering, the prelate Honorius gave. By clothes and deeds he is signed, the edge of his [garment] shines, bearing the aspect of bright hearts".[95]

Regarding the inscription beneath the apse, Trout argues that inscription's quantitative meter and mythological references were intended to reach those audiences familiar with classical poets and inter-textual reading practices.[96]In other words, while the already accessible and salacious written accounts on the saint's martyrdom would have been widely known by visitors and, as a result, would have accompanied the visual understanding of the images on the apse, the inscription below would have instead also offered an intellectual and spiritual reading. In any case, it is still worth noticing how the inscription mentions the "repulsion of Chaos from the tombs of the martyrs", not only is it a direct allusion to the importance of the cult of martyrs but it also, as Thunø suggests, hints at the access of not only Agnes but all the other martyrs buried in the catacomb below.[97]

Returning to the bejeweled figure of Agnes, her mosaic is rare among the repertoire of early medieval mosaics in Rome. A similar composition, if the extant illustration is to be trusted, is that of the 7th century apse mosaic in the basilica of S. Euphemia.[98] Although it no longer exists, the Liber *Pontificalis* does record that the church had an apse mosaic dating back to Pope

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[95] Translation in Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome*, 210.
[96] Trout, "Pictures with words,"17; see also, Dale Kinney, "Communication in a Visual Mode: Papal Apse Mosaics." *Journal of medieval history* 44, no. 3 (2018): 311–332.
[97] Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome*, 175.
[98] Paolo Liverani, "The Memory of the Bishop in the Early Christian Basilica: Essays in honour of Sible de Blaauw." In *Monuments & Memory: Christian Cult Buildings and Constructions of the Past*, edited by Verhoeven, M.C.J, L Bosman, and H. van Asperen, (ACSHA; 3, 2016), 188.

Sergius I (687-701), in which the saint appeared standing in the center with arms outstretched under the hand of God and in between two snakes (fig. 2.10).[99] Unfortunately, due to a lack of sources on this mosaic and the church itself, this comparison has to be considered critically. Nonetheless, if the mosaic did indeed depict an image as the illustration presents, then this would constitute another example, in a period very close to when the apse of S. Agnese was decorated, that showcases another female martyr in a prominent position.

The position, scale, and in some cases attire of Agnes on the apse was one usually reserved for the Virgin Mary. While S. Euphemia remains at the moment the only other possible representation of a female martyr on an apse, at least from this period, depictions of the Virgin Mary are not scant and they make it plausible to argue that Agnes and even later female saints could have been modelled on certain depictions of the Virgin Mary.

Agnes and the Virgin Mary

As early as the 4th century we can begin we can begin to see some parallels between the way Agnes is represented in early Christian art, and the way the Virgin Mary is. In gold glasses from the 4th century both Agnes and Mary are depicted in orant poses, a pose that in some contexts was associated to ideas of piety and intercession (figs. 2.11 and 2.12).[100]Both figures are shown wearing a long and embellished dress, nonetheless while Mary appears with a halo, Agnes instead appears with a decorated headdress, pendants, and a long veil that flows behind.

Moving forward in time, by the 5th century we begin to see large scale depictions of Mary in which she is assigned a more central in Christian iconography of Rome, a fact that was further

[99] Raymond, *Liber Pontificalis,*83.
[100] Grig, "The Paradoxical Body of Body of Saint Agnes,"112.

consolidated following the watershed moment that was the Council of Ephesus in 431 for the cult of the Virgin Mary. Culminating with her official title as Theotokos, and, as a result, key intercessor to Christ, interest in her cult is evident in the creation of new images, apocryphal literature, and the celebration of new feasts.[101]

The construction and dedication of the church of S. Maria Maggiore is a testament of these developments. Its triumphal arch depicts an early representation of a bejeweled and enthroned Mary, which may be argued to be the first Maria Regina type (fig. 2.13). Likewise on the opposite side, in the scene depicting the Presentation to the Temple, Mary is shown wearing a jewel encrusted dress and a crown (fig. 2.14). These images of the Virgin showcase a departure from less ornate depictions of Mary and instead show her as a regal, imperial figure, dressed presumably in accordance to her role as the Mother of Christ. Although predating the apse mosaic of Agnes by two centuries these two monumental images of the Virgin allow us to trace a line of female saintly representations in early medieval Rome.

However, it is usually the 6th century that is credited with introducing the Maria Regina type to Rome. John Osborne states this particular iconographic type has come to be associated specifically with the city and its popes.[102] The Maria Regina from the palimpsest wall in the church of S. Maria Antiqua, tentatively dated to the 6th century, shows a frontally enthroned Virgin with the Christ child seated on her lap (fig. 2.15). Although partly ruined by later re-paintings, what remains reveals a representation of the Virgin Mary that was not common at the time. On the triumphal arch in S. Maria Maggiore, although appearing in a jewel encrusted attire, she can be argued to be dressed more in the guise of an empress.[103] Whereas at S. Maria Antiqua

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[101] Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 34.
[102] John Osborne, "The Cult of Maria Regina in Early Medieval Rome." *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 21 (2017): 95.
[103] Osborne, "The Cult of Maria Regina in Early Medieval Rome," 96.

her elaborate headdress and fully bejeweled gown leave no doubt that she is both Mother of God and Queen of Heaven.

Almost contemporary to the apse mosaic at S. Agnese, if a 7th century dating is correct, is the icon of the Madonna della Clemenza in the church S. Maria in Trastevere (Fig. 2.16).[104] Here, once again, Mary is seen wearing a splendidly elaborate and jeweled headdress and gown. She is shown flanked by two angels while holding the Christ Child on her lap. From at least seven Maria Regina types that exist in the city from this period,[105] the Madonna della Clemenza is perhaps the one that most resembles Honorius' Agnes. But both the S. Maria Antiqua and Trastevere images are closely aligned with the image of Agnes in terms of not only female attire but also because of the icon-like frontality of the figures. Considering the lack of other extant monumental depictions of female saints in the city contemporaneous to the decoration Agnes' *ad corpus* basilica, the closest comparable material are therefore those of the Virgin Mary. It is interesting however, that the Virgin Mary depicted in the mid-7th century S. Venanzio chapel at the Lateran baptistery commissioned by the Dalmatian pope John IV (640-642) less than a decade after the construction and decoration of S. Agnese flm (fig. 2.17), shows Mary in an orant pose wearing a deep purple maphorion. The regina type was obviously a choice for Agnes. Although the appearance of another Mary in such a prominent position and monumental scale, coupled with the relics associated with the chapel, also create a strong connection to the function and decoration of S. Agnese.

These examples serve to illustrate, explain but, most importantly, trace a pattern of female representation in early medieval Christian art. A pattern that will become even more

[104] For dating see Osborne, "The Cult of Maria Regina in Early Medieval Rome," 95-106 and Wolf, "Icons and Sites," 23-50.
[105] Osborne, "The Cult of Maria Regina in Early Medieval Rome," 97.

evident in the following centuries. Yet, the apse of S. Agnese, by focusing on a single female martyr remains unique among the early medieval apse mosaics of Rome. As opposed to the earlier 6th century apse mosaic in SS. Cosmas and Damian, or the later 9th century apse mosaics of S. Mark, S. Cecilia, or S. Prassede, Christ does not occupy the center or top of hierarchy from which other figures are then balanced from. At S. Agnese that position is occupied by a single female martyr.

One explanation is provided by Erik Thunø, who argues that as opposed to the aforementioned examples, S. Agnese was situated directly above the extra-urban tomb of the third-century martyr.[106] As Thunø asserts, in this light the unique composition of just popes and martyr create a direct and singular line of focus between her representation on the apse and her body in the tomb beneath the altar.[107]

However the hierarchical representation of Agnes does have parallels elsewhere. In a small group of 4th century gold glasses Agnes can be seen standing, in orant pose, in between Peter and Paul, a position that was usually reserved for Christ. Likewise, in another gold glass, an almost identical composition shows the Virgin Mary presiding over Peter and Paul with arms outstretched (figs. 2.18 and 2.19). Agnes, in particular, is shown more than once in this position, perhaps conflating the role of Christ and the Virgin. Given the presence of Peter and Paul she can be argued to be acting as an embodiment of the Roman church.

Indeed, Honorius' mosaic can be argued to claim a connection between Rome as the embodiment of the church and Agnes, a connection that was also made in Prudentius' *Peristephanon*. In his hymn to the martyr he associates her to the "home of Romulus" and then

[106] Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome*, 110.
[107] Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome*, 110.

says "within the sight of all their palaces, that maiden guards the citizens of Rome."[108] And while it is true that martyrs, their relics, and shrines were believed to offer protection, Agnes was a fully Roman saint martyred and buried in Rome. Besides the literary associations between Agnes and Rome, Thunø argues that having her appear flanked by two representatives of the Roman church on the apse not only consolidates her position as a protector to the city and intercessor to Christ, but once viewed in conjunction with other mosaics, she can be seen as replacing the figure of Christ by being placed in the center.[109] And as was seen with the gold glasses, this wouldn't have been the first time that Agnes can be argued to replace the figure of Christ and it isn't the first time that she is shown flanked by two representatives of the church either. It is also not a stretch to associate the foundation and development of Christian Rome with Agnes. Besides being an early Roman saint, Agnes' main place of worship and site of her cult was monumentalized by the daughter of Constantine, a factor that alone also highlights her connection to imperial Christian Rome.

The Agnes we see on the apse was certainly a departure from her appearances as an orant on gold glasses and on Liberius' bas relief. To an extent her incredibly elaborate and bejeweled representation on the apse is almost a culmination of monumental depictions of the saint. In later mosaics, specifically, those from the 9th century she is shown still wearing jewel encrusted dresses and crowns, but so do other female saints such as Pudenziana and Prassede. At the church of S. Prassede, in the chapel of San Zeno, Agnes appears on the upper left wall carrying a crown while accompanied by Prassede and Pudenziana (fig. 2.20). She is shown wearing a yellow dress, a jewel encrusted collar, and a small diadem. She appears in a similar garb, yet in a much more prominent position in Gregory IV's basilica of San Marco (fig. 2.21). Here she

[108] Krisak, *Prudentius' Crown of Martyrs*, 161.
[109] Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome*, 111.

stands atop a pedestal bearing her name while holding a crown in her hand. As we can see, the figure and image of Agnes did not disappear from the collective memory of the citizens of Rome, if anything it just developed into something slightly different. What remains, though, is her privileged position among figures such as Christ and the Virgin. As the church's titular saint, and as a martyr with a long history in Rome, it is not surprising Honorius honored her in such a way, and considering the near contemporary representations of the only other female figure of greater importance to Christianity, her striking resemblance to the Maria Regina type exemplifies the visual links among monumental depictions of holy women in Rome.

3. Martyrdom and the Female Body

On the apse Agnes remained a sort of liminal figure between heaven and earth and the past and present, as a virgin, however, she stood as an emblem of the church. Agnes, an "avatar of realized eschatology,"[110] not only reinforced the authority of the bishops but also reminded the faithful of notions on life and immortality. On a deeper level, though, the image, life, and body of Agnes reveals a great deal about the relationship between early medieval Roman art and ideas on gender, virginity, and asceticism. While keeping the image and mosaic of Agnes at the center, this chapter will specifically explore the intersections and tensions between martyrdom and the female body. To do so, cultural ideas on asceticism will be considered in conjunction with an analysis of the written tradition on Agnes.

As Peter Brown has shown, when most of the late 4th century texts on Agnes were being composed, treatises on virgins and virginity were mostly addressed to members of the upper class. This included male members of the ruling class and part of the motivation to do so was to persuade wealthy widows and virgins to donate their riches to the church.[111] In other words, while asceticism was being encouraged it was done so with an underlying reason that went beyond virginity and was more focused on establishing the position and authority of the church even further. A number of women of the elites in the 4th and 5th centuries not only possessed wealth and prestige but their decision to dedicate themselves to a chaste widowhood or virginity also provided them with an opportunity to have a life of intellectual or spiritual pursuits. The

[110] Cooper, "The Virgin as Social Icon," 9.
[111] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 345.

alternative would have been marriage and childbearing. Asceticism, bluntly put, was a way for them to control their wealth, bodies, and sexuality.[112]

There is no doubt, in other words, that in Late Antiquity there was an increasing layering of meaning placed on virginity by a number of prominent churchmen. Its link to sanctity and thus to the cult of saints was, moreover, perfectly spelled out by Ambrose: "For virginity is not praiseworthy because it is found in martyrs, but because itself makes martyrs."[113] Considering the fact that the majority of Christians were married householders, marriage and childbearing continued to be highly praised. But the praise accorded to virginity threatened the institution as it gained a strong foothold. For women, asceticism and virginity in particular could be especially attractive. John Chrysostom (347-407), in *De Virginitate*, writes that a virgin "is not obliged to involve herself tiresomely in the affairs of her spouse and she does not fear being abused."[114] While speaking on childbirth he also goes on to say that the "virgins stand higher than this anguish or this suffering. For the one who annulled the curse of the law, annulled this curse along with it."[115]Along a similar vein Cyprian (210-258) in *De Habitu Virginum* writes that "you do not fear the sorrows of women and their groans; you have no fear about the birth of children, nor is your husband your master, but your Master and Head is Christ in the likeness of and in the place of a man."[116] Not surprisingly, given such statements, scholars such as Martha Malamud have argued that part of the attractiveness of virginity was dependent on the fact that it promised to inverse social values.[117] Virginity and the renunciation of earthly pleasures allowed women to

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[112] Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity,"82-85.
[113] Ambrose in Philip Schaff, "De Virginibus." 634.
[114] John Chrysostom, *De Virginitate*, 64; translated by Herbert. Musurillo, and Bernard. Grillet. *La Virginité / Jean Chrysostome; Texte et Introduction Critiques par Herbert Musurillo; Introduction Générale, Traduction et Notes par Bernard Grillet.* (Paris: Cerf, 1966).
[115] John Chrysostom, *De Virginitate*, 65.
[116] Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 22; translated from Michael A. Fahey, *Cyprian and the Bible: A Study in Third-Century Exegesis.* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1971), 59.
[117] Martha Malmud, "Making a Virtue of Perversity: The Poetry of Prudentius." *Ramus* 19, no. 1 (1989): 281.

have some agency in how to dedicate their life to the church.[118] If the patriarchal church was the framework, women could nonetheless explore beyond the cultural, social, and sexual constraints traditionally placed upon them. Among the wealthiest of them there was even the possibility yielding real power, to negotiate their worth.[119] Certainly, the two statements by Chrysostom and Cyprian are interesting because they highlight an articulated idea on how virginity benefitted women by liberating them, not least from childbirth and marriage. Cyprian's statement is also significant because it introduces the idea of Christ as Bridegroom, a concept that is also key in the texts of Prudentius and Ambrose on Agnes. In the context of female virginity the figure of the heavenly bridegroom is a paradox. A virgin wedded to Christ oscillates between challenging societal notions on marriage and abiding by them. Agnes renounces marriage on earth but she still becomes, in the end, someone's wife. In fact, the martyriology of Agnes shows the re-establishment of social order and gender norms from a male perspective.

The three main accounts on the virgin's martyrdom reveal a great deal on the shifting cultural paradigms on martyrdom, virginity, and the power of the cult of martyrs in Rome. Damasus' inscription from her grave on the Via Nomentana, may be read as an assertion of his moral and episcopal authority, as well as his triumph over his enemies. Indeed, as Grig has shown, Damasus' pontificate is particularly interesting, and perhaps one of the most fascinating ones of this early Christian period due to the scandals, schism, and corruption that surrounded his bid to the papacy.[120] His project on the tombs of martyrs, in a period of great interest in hagiography, was certainly part of his strategy to link his name and life to the history and heritage of the Roman church.[121]In other words, Roman martyrs and burial sites were politically

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[118] Brown, *The Body and Society,* 345.
[119] Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity,"61.
[120] Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity.* (London: Duckworth, 2004), 127.
[121] Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity,* 127.

manipulated by Damasus as a way to assert his orthodox authority. His famous inscriptions stand as a testament of his strategy. In this light, the inscription of Agnes by Damasus on the Via Nomentana plays a dual role. It recounts her martyrdom and it informs us not so subtly of Damasus' project.

While Damasus' inscription gives us a glimpse of what was happening in Rome during the late 4th century, the hymns of Ambrose and the poems of Prudentius, both composed far from the site of Agnes' grave, also cast a light into the culture of virginity and its relationship to gender. In Ambrose's, *De Virginibus,* composed sometime in 377 and consisting of three books, the famous hymn to Agnes, the first in the series of texts and composed on the anniversary of her martyrdom, is part of a much larger textual exploration on female virginity dedicated to his virgin sister Marcellina. As Burrus argues, crucial in this treatise is the bishop's complex manipulation of gender in which his ideas on asceticism destabilize traditional gender norms by minimizing them and turning them to its own advantage.[122] This tension, as Burrus contends, functions to both negotiate femininity but also reinforce masculinity.[123]Agnes is presented as a heroic virgin whose actions turn upside down the gender conventions ascribed to women, while simultaneously falling victim to the traditional expectations of marriage and submissiveness as she chooses Christ as her bridegroom.

Ambrose's recounting of Agnes' martyrdom is significantly less explicit of the saint's torture than that of Prudentius. Ambrose begins by noting and highlighting Agnes' size and age, he writes: "Was there room for a wound in that small body. And she who had no room for the blow of the steel had that wherewith to conquer the steel."[124] Nevertheless, it is precisely this that

[122] Burrus, "Reading Agnes,"30.
[123] Burrus, "Reading Agnes,"30.
[124] Ambrose in Philip Schaff, "De Virginibus." 633-634.

he commends and goes as far as to say "let men admire, let children take courage, let the married be astounded, let the unmarried take an example."[125] Ambrose then continues by praising her and says "she was fearless under the cruel hands of the executioners, she was unmoved by the heavy weight of the creaking chains, offering her whole body to the sword of the raging soldier, as yet ignorant of death, but ready for it."[126] However what initially seems to be a mere retelling of the saint's path towards martyrdom, suddenly acquires an underlying erotic nature. Upon Ambrose's description of the saint as "a virgin who joyfully went to the place of punishment with hurrying step, her head not adorned with plaited hair, but with Christ," his initial mention of Agnes' body and the steel sword can be read differently.[127] As Burrus argues, these erotic undertones shift our attention from the saint's martyrdom to her precarious virginity.[128]Indeed, the hymn concludes with Ambrose proclaiming "You have then in one victim a twofold martyrdom, of modesty and of religion. She both remained a virgin and she obtained martyrdom."[129]

Prudentius was a near contemporary to Ambrose and he belonged, like him, to a period of great literary activity in the West in which hagiography took pride and place alongside Christian faith and identity.[130] The *Peristephanon* is composed of fourteen poems celebrating and recounting the martyrdoms of Christian figures that died during the persecution. Regarding Agnes, however, it is interesting that he is clearly familiar with Damasus' inscription, making it plausible that he visited Agnes' tomb during his trip to Rome.[131] But while he also relied on the

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[125] Ambrose in Philip Schaff, "De Virginibus." 633-634.
[126] Ambrose in Philip Schaff, "De Virginibus." 633-634.
[127] Ambrose in Philip Schaff, "De Virginibus." 633-634.
[128] Virginia Burrus, "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity." *Journal of feminist studies in religion* 10, no. 1 (1994): 28.
[129] Ambrose in Philip Schaff, "De Virginibus." 633-634.
[130] Krisak, *Prudentius' Crown of Martyrs,* 3, 8.
[131] Krisak, *Prudentius' Crown of Martyrs,* 15.

same *Acta* of legends and oral tradition as Damasus and Ambrose to create his poems, Prudentius' accounts on Agnes differ greatly from those of his predecessors.

Prudentius' retelling of the story takes on an explicitly graphic and erotic tone. According to Malamud, Prudentius was writing during a time when the ancient paradigms of sexuality where undergoing immense changes due to the rise of the ascetic movement.[132]The *Peristephanon* can be read as a product of these drastic cultural and literary shifts. *Peristephanon* 14, one of only two poems dedicated solely to female martyrs provides a good insight into the developing ideas on sexuality, gender, and the nature of the body.

It is an account that simultaneously overturns, challenges, and lastly reinforces traditional gender conventions. Agnes is first introduced as a fully Roman saint who watches over the people of the city, thus taking on a role as protector. The traditional male role is underscored further on in the poem when he describes her courageous actions. Agnes is presented as an almost fearless warlike hero who defiantly welcomes death. Just as interesting is her transformation. At the beginning she is a passive, feminine child, but as the story advances she becomes a strong, traditionally masculine individual, a masculinity that is acquired through her actions. And while it might seem from her "masculine" rejection of marriage as well as her welcoming of death that she will indeed perish as a "masculinized woman," Prudentius makes sure to re-establish traditional gender norms by forcing her into a violent and sacrificial death.

The author makes sure to highlight that while just a child "—she took a stand…refusing to obey the foul command…of Roman power that would have her give…herself to idol worship, losing faith."[133] Agnes is then forced to work in a brothel and to be "used for sport by the city's men", but she responds by stating that Christ will not allow "the gift of purity to be defiled".

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[132] Malamud, "Making a Virtue of Perversity,"280.
[133] *Peristephanon* XIV in Krisak, *Prudentius' Crown of Martyrs,* 161.

Consequently, she is sent to be exposed in a public square. However, no one dared to look at her as they were. Only one man had the audacity to look but he was struck by lightning. Agnes emerged from these initial challenges triumphant and with what Malamud describes as a "paralyzing sexual power".[134] Following these events Agnes is finally sent to die and it is this part of the story that Prudentius' poem acquires and extremely sexual and erotic tone. Upon seeing her executioner Agnes exclaimed:

"I am ecstatic such a man
Has come—a sworded man who's cruel and wild—
And not some languid, perfumed, epicene,
And limp young thing, to ruin—if he can—
My honor, thinking I would be reviled.
This lover, rather—this one, I admit—
Pleases. I rush to meet him on my way,
His hot desires suffering no delay.
I'll take his steel deep in my breast, up to
The hilt, as deep as it can plunge. Thus wed
To Christ, I will out-leap the darkest sky
And rise to the empyrean on high.
Eternal Ruler, open heaven's gates
That once were barred against those born below,
And call a soul that follows You, O Christ,
That to the Father I be sacrificed."[135]

The focus on her body, virginity, and agency is explicit, despite being described as a child at the beginning, the language of the latter half of Prudentius' account tackles the topic of virginity and marriage without eschewing an erotic undertone. Most notable is the sexual language used in the final speech to her executioners. It is nearly impossible to not see the associations between "I'll take his steel deep in my breast, up to…the hilt, as deep as it can plunge. Thus wed to Christ, I will out-leap the darkest sky...and rise to the empyrean on high" and the loss of virginity following marriage. The sword itself acquires a phallic association and it

[134] Malamud, "Making a Virtue of Perversity,"290.
[135] Krisak, *Prudentius' Crown of Martyrs,* 161-164.

resonates deeply when one considers the emphasis placed by the author on the saint's small body and young age.[136] Moreover, as Burrus has argued, the swordsman can also be read as remaining ambiguously identified with a phallic Christ. Indeed, in her impassionate speech she says "This lover, rather—this one, I admit—pleases. I rush to meet him on my way…his hot desires suffering no delay". Yet, while it might seem that she is in charge of what will happen to her body, the executioner's decision to rob her of a hero's death and instead decapitate her curbs whatever "threatening female sexuality" Agnes possessed.[137] Burrus is therefore justified in claiming that while the story of Agnes may seem to make manliness available to a woman and as result also deconstruct and destabilize the gender conventions, the tale also re-feminizes the initial bold figure of the saint in relation to the manly and phallic Christ.[138]In other words, the overt imagery of marriage and of a virgin being "deflowered" by a sword ultimately enables, reinforces, and stabilizes a gender continuum in which a masculine Christian orthodoxy is upheld and sustained.[139]

The figure of Agnes in Prudentius' text oscillates between a young wronged virgin, a bold "masculinized" woman that welcomes death, and a sexual soon-to-be bride of Christ. It is as if the erotic tone and language employed by the poet paradoxically subverts the idea of virginity and purity. And while it has been argued that it is likely that Prudentius' *Peristephanon* was not intended for liturgical purposes but rather for private use by pious individuals[140], the tension between the interest on virginity and the way Agnes' martyrdom is told is remarkably telling of a phallocentric male view. Lucy Grig, suggests that the narrative is not merely erotic without a

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[136] Burrus, "Reading Agnes," 44-45.
[137] Malamud, "Making a Virtue of Perversity," 292.
[138] Burrus, "Reading Agnes," 46.
[139] Burrus, "Reading Agnes," 46.
[140] Anne-Marie Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 57-97.

purpose, and that perhaps it probably functioned in the context of a patriarchal attempt to control of the bodies of women and sustain a Christian masculinity.[141]

Ambrose's and Prudentius' writings show how female virginity had a profound effect and occupied a central role in the ongoing debate on women's individual bodies and place among men. These treatises on virginity and women were written by individuals with their own sexual, theological, and political agenda. This obviously distorts and prevents any opportunity of truly understanding female sexuality from a female point of view.[142]So while the content and wording of the texts might allow for subversive readings, in the end these men and the context and institutions that they belong, ultimately frame and preserve a masculine status quo.

Christian notions on sexuality and virginity by the 5th and 6th centuries were shaped by the profound changes in the political and religious structures of the city. Even though ascetics were the minority in these centuries, the absence of sexuality among the elites of the church and its imagined heroes played an important role in the collective imagination of Christian society. This, in turn, created the need for images that could convey ideas of authority among the faithful.[143] Keeping this context in mind, virgins may also be read as symbols of the church. Virgins such as Agnes were described as brides of Christ and thereby they were also "sacred vessels dedicated to the lord."[144] And a bishop could use the image and life of a virgin such as Agnes as a show of a power and solidarity. The rise of the cult of the Virgin Mary, along with the existing popular cult of the virgins, endowed churches with images of these individuals with a sacred aura. Indeed, virgins of the church bore similar bodies to that of Mary, in other words,

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[141] Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, 83.
[142] Burrus, "Word and Flesh," 45.
[143] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 443.
[144] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 260.

bodies untainted by intercourse of childbirth.[145] As the 6th and 7th ad corpus basilicas of Lawrence and Agnes exemplify, the shrines of martyrs and the resting place of their relics were visited with increasing fervor.

The apse in the church of S. Agnese, is marked by both vision and spectacle. As John Berger has said the practice of looking and being looked at exist on opposite ends of the gender spectrum but being looked at is coded for femininity while looking is coded for masculinity.[146] Agnes, whether it be on the apse or in her tale, challenges and simultaneously reinforces this notion. In the narratives of her martyrdom Agnes' body is looked at and desired by the prefect's son, thereby constricting her to traditional gender conventions in which she becomes an object to be wanted or looked at. However, further on in the story, her own body acquires an almost powerful sexuality that forces everyone to divert their gaze away from her figure. And when someone finally does stare, Agnes goes from momentarily being an object to be gawked at, to inverting the dynamic and blinding the man. Thus, taking away from this individual the one element that made him male in this particular interaction. Agnes, therefore, again vacillates between seeing and being seen. In the thought-provoking publication *Visions and Voyeurism: Holy Women and the Politics of Sight in Early Christianity,* by Elizabeth A. Castelli, the author explains how in the somatic sense, vision can be related to desire and bodily pleasure. As a result, vision can also incite emotional, physical and, spiritual upheaval.[147] The tale of the martyrdom of Agnes constitutes an extreme form of objectification and sexualization, one in which suffering is closely tied with her body. The spectacle of her suffering is coded with

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[145] Brown, *The Body and Society,* 444.
[146] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing : Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger / a Book Made by John Berger [and Others]*. (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972).
[147] Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Visions and Voyeurism: Holy Women and the Politics of Sight in Early Christianity*. Protocol of the Colloquy of the Center for Hermeneutical Studies, N.s. 2. (Berkeley, Calif.: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1995), 5.

sexuality and as Castelli argues, the spectacle is not only the creation or mere retelling of the act by individuals like Ambrose and Prudentius, but is more specifically embedded in the discourses around martyrdom itself and how this is communicated.[148]

Regarding the image of Agnes on the apse, she can be argued to become, once again, a figured to be looked at. In this light, Agnes goes from being objectified in texts, to being a passive body meant to be observed by anyone that steps inside her church. However, she can also be argued to embody some of the "maleness" that is seen in her tales. It is possible to see her as replacing the figure of Christ and thereby embodying a powerful and male role in the church. If the church of S. Agnese fuori le mura can be seen as a sort of "oversized reliquary" as Dennis Trout calls it, then the figure of Agnes can be said to be "objectified" even further. Her figure, completely bejeweled, becomes the centerpiece of that oversized reliquary, and her body underneath the altar is the relic. Indeed as argued by Patricia Cox Miller it is possible to see a connection between the affective qualities of the mosaics and the relics. In other words, the brilliance and light of mosaics, and in the case of S. Agnese, the vast gold background, could allow individuals to see the relics of the saint as living and spiritual objects.[149] Seen against this background, the idea of the basilica of S. Agnese being a sort of oversized reliquary makes more sense. As aptly put by Thuno, the gold tesserae of the background along with the gold letters of the inscription below operate together to enhance the experience of the relics and their sacred nature.[150] In this light, Agnes as a reliquary complicates the act of seeing even further. Cynthia Hahn has explained that a reliquary works to "represents" the relic and while the relic is made

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[148] Castelli, *Visions and Voyeurism*, 8.
[149] Patricia Cox Miller, '"The Little Blue Flower is Red", Relics and the Poetizing of the Body', Journal of Early Christian Studies, 8 (2000), 213–236.
[150] Erik Thunø, After Antiquity: Renewing the Past or Celebrating the Present? Early Medieval Apse Mosaics in Rome." In *Urban Developments in Late Antique and Medieval Rome*, (Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 191.

fully visible through association, it also hidden from view, obscured by bejeweled containers.[151] On the apse, Agnes' body, the true relic is twice obscured. Once literally by being placed underneath the altar in her tomb, concealed from view, and a second time on the apse conch by having her entire body, the true "object" of desire that led her to death, covered with gems. In short, Agnes complicates the act of seeing by tightly layering the real and the symbolic.

In the context of gender and religious experiences, the apse at S. Agnese ties the concepts of vision, spectacle, and power with those of martyrdom. Indeed, the latter can be then argued to be marked by both experiences of vision and spectacle. Agnes on the apse, standing in the center before a vast gold background, towering over the faithful, and as the focal point of the entire church ends up meant to be gazed at for centuries, with her martyrdom perpetually recalled through the instruments of her death, which serve as a reminder of the spectacle surrounding her death, and lastly her body underneath the altar. The power of the body itself, but more specifically Agnes in this case, functioned from the very beginning as a site of religious activity as the monumentalization around her gravesite testifies, and later on, once her figure began being depicted in images it gained additional signification, one that tied her to both the cultural and religious ideologies around the lives and bodies and women, and on a much broader scale with her nature as an essential and exemplary Roman saint.

[151] Cynthia Hahn, "What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?" *Numen* 57, no. 3/4 (2010): 289-90.

Conclusion

Altogether, as a city of martyrs Rome, was and remains unrivaled, and S. Agnese fuori le mura provides an exceptional insight into the aesthetic, architectural and spiritual interests of this period.[152] Church building and decoration had been since the 4th century a way for bishops to project papal power, yet as we have seen papal building activity of the scale of the 7th century basilica of S. Agnese had almost come to halt. The period of Honorius' papacy coincided with what Krautheimer considered the first "dark age", however as has been contested by Coates-Stephens and Ward-Perkins, these lulls in constructions did not mean that no building activity occurred in the city.[153] In fact as both authors have successfully demonstrated extant buildings were continuously carefully and successfully maintained. The construction and decoration of S. Agnese can be argued to stand at the start of a re-introduction of grander architectural patronage, a testament of the continued interest of the cult of saints, and the development of monumental female representation in ecclesiastical settings.

As has been discussed, visual articulations of Agnes were not new, what was novel, however, and remains unparalleled for a female saint in the context of an apse mosaic, is the scale and nature of her depiction, one which can be placed somewhere near the start of what would then become more recurrent in early medieval representations of holy women. The Virgin Mary from the Oratory of Pope John VII (705-707), while half a century later in date from S. Agnese shows a large centrally standing figure of the Virgin in orant pose. Similarly to Agnes,

[152] Trout, "(Re-)Founding Christian Rome," 157.
[153] Bryan Ward-Perkins, *From Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Urban Public Building in Northern and Central Italy AD 300-850*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 61; Coates-Stephens, "Dark Age Architecture in Rome," 177-232.

the Virgin is depicted wearing an embellished and jewel-encrusted purple gown. This is just one close example in date to the apse mosaic of S. Agnese but it serves to highlight the visual network among figures in early medieval mosaics. If Thunø's argument on the shared formula of visual and textual links among mosaics in Rome is considered, the apse of S. Agnese, while certainly being unique among its counterparts, can take place in the continuum of mosaics stretching from as early as the 6th century to the later compositions of the 9th century.[154] Against this background the apse at S. Agnese transcends time and can be linked to later mosaics.

That said, the discussion above has aimed at examining both the late antique and early medieval popularity of Agnes in the art and architecture of Rome, as well as in the literature devoted to her. By understanding the architectural, textual, visual, and social precursors for the apse mosaic at S. Agnese, it has been possible to see how tightly embedded her life and image is to the development of Christian Rome. Honorius and his projects in the city but more specifically this church exist at the beginning of a process of reinvention, a process in which "Honorius pushed forward by looking back".[155]As such, by discussing not only the cult of martyrs but also by exploring the intersection between iconography, text, and gender, three factors intrinsic to the saint's pictorial articulation and semantic synthesis in the city, it has been possible to analyze the 7th century basilica and the context around its creation in a different way.

[154] Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome.*
[155] Trout, "(Re-)Founding Christian Rome," 175.

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Figures

Fig. i.1: Interior of S. Agnese f.l.m, Rome, 7th

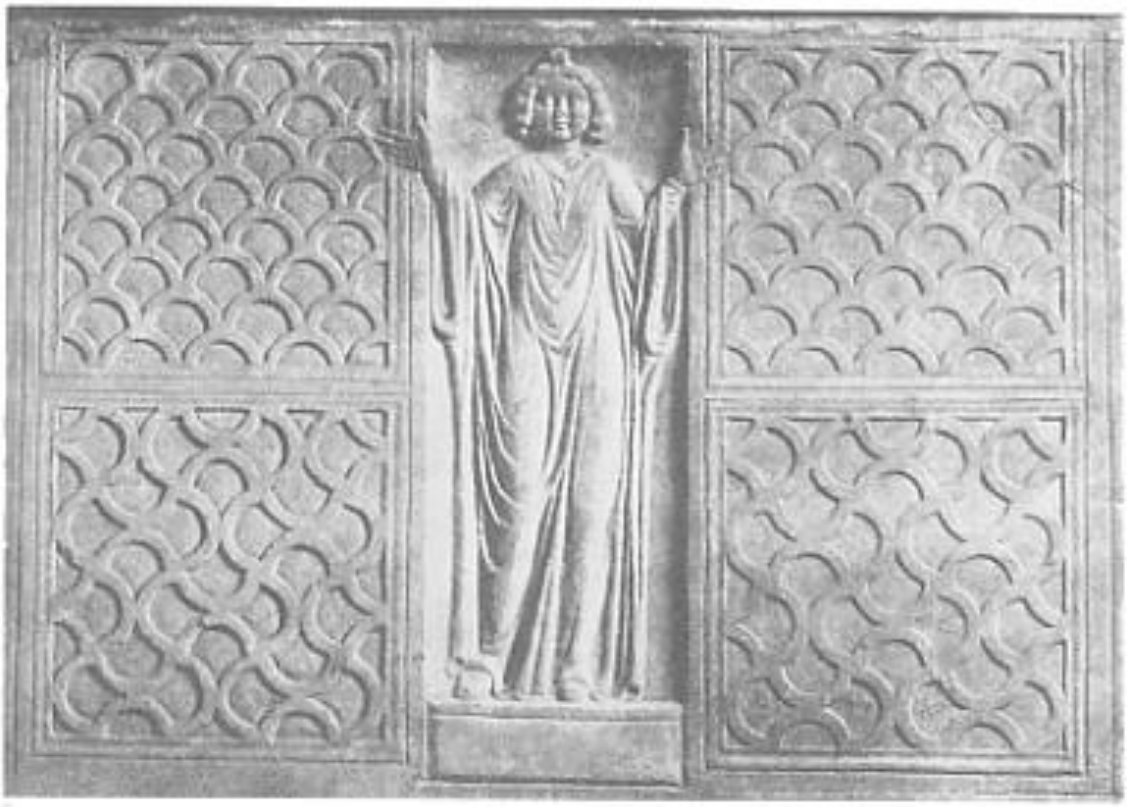

Fig. i.2: Bas-relief of Agnes, Rome, mid-4th century.

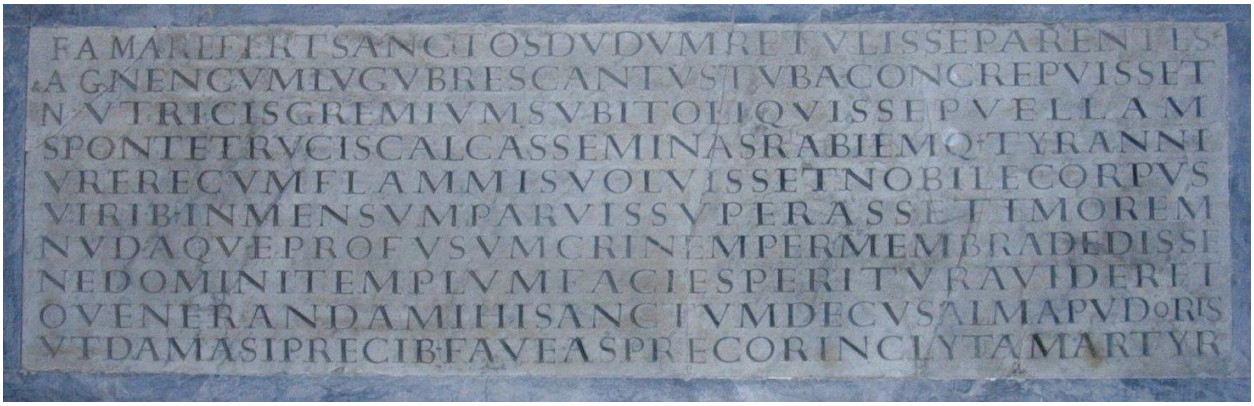

Fig. i.3: Damasian epigram to Agnes, Rome, 7th

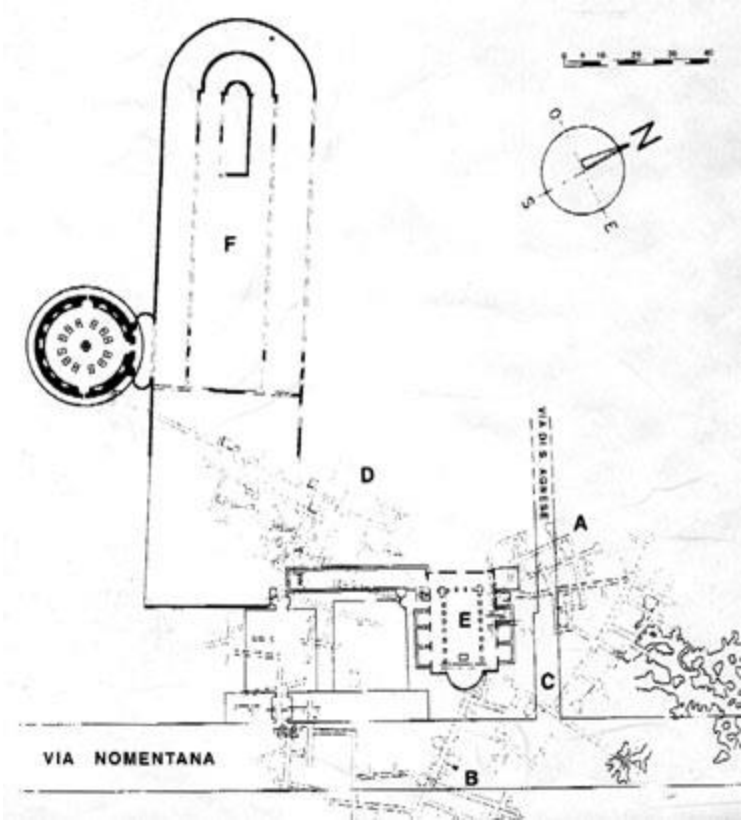

Fig. 1.1: Ground plan of S. Agnese f.l.m complex, Rome, 4th-7th

Fig. 1.2: S. Costanza, Rome, 4th

Fig. 1.3: Complex of S. Agnese f.l.m, Rome, 4th-7th centuries.

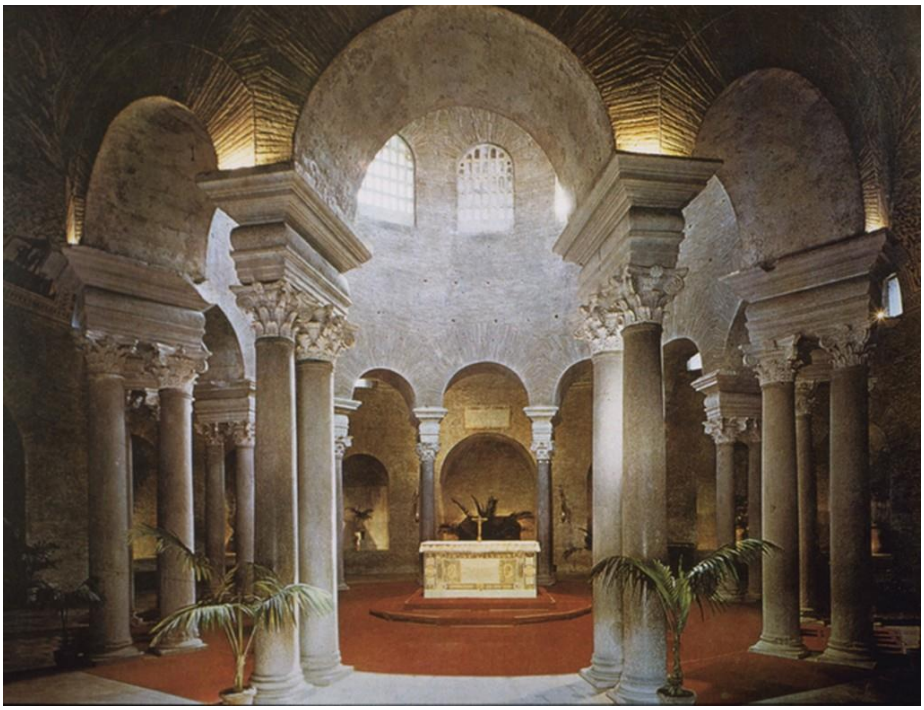

Fig. 1.4: Interior of S. Costanza, Rome, 4th

Fig. 2.1: Gold glass depicting Agnes, Catacombs of Pamphilus, Rome, 4th century.

Fig. 2.2: Gold glass depicting Agnes, unknown, Rome, 4th

Fig. 2.3: Apse mosaic of S. Agnese f.l.m, Rome, 7th century.

Fig. 2.4: Apse mosaic of S. Agnese f.l.m, detail of hand of God, Rome, 7th century.

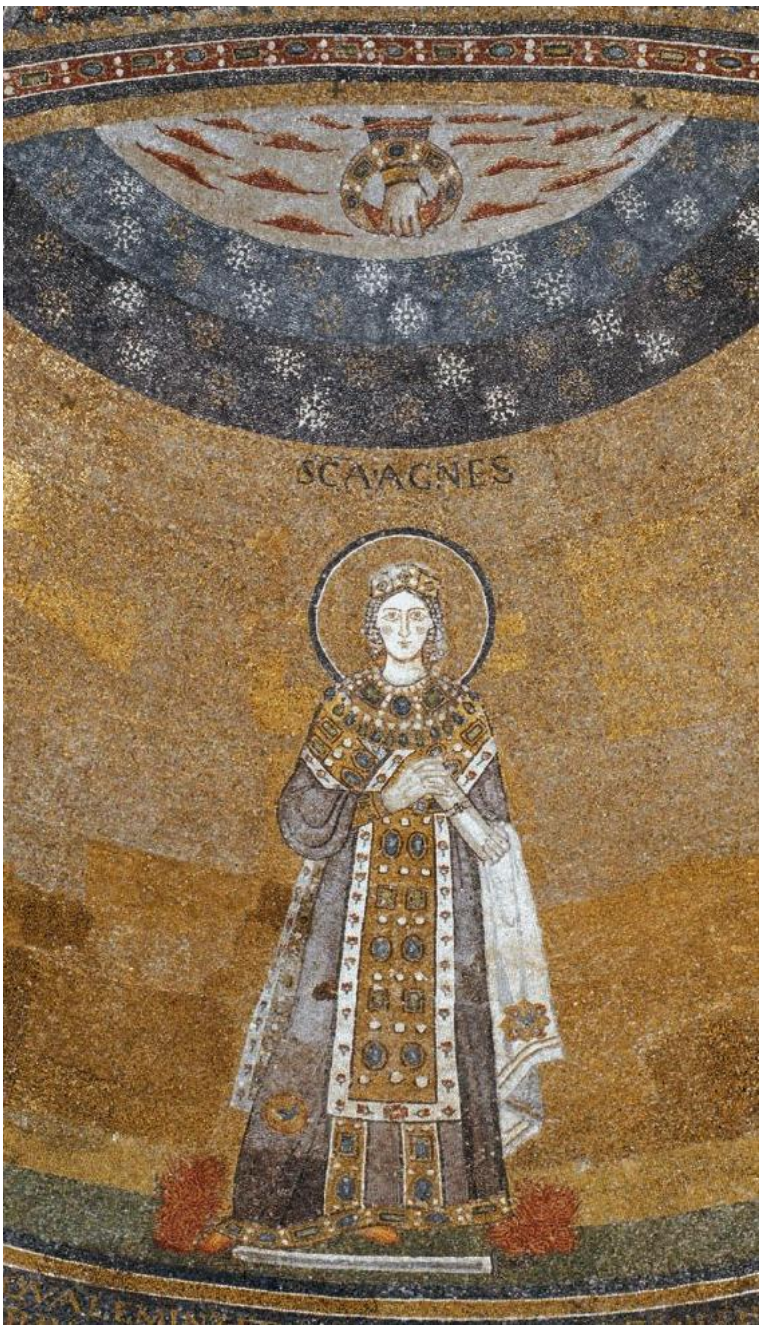

Fig. 2.5: Apse mosaic of S. Agnese f.l.m, detail of dress, Rome, 7th century.

Fig. 2.6: Apse mosaic of S. Agnese f.l.m, detail of scroll, Rome, 7th century.

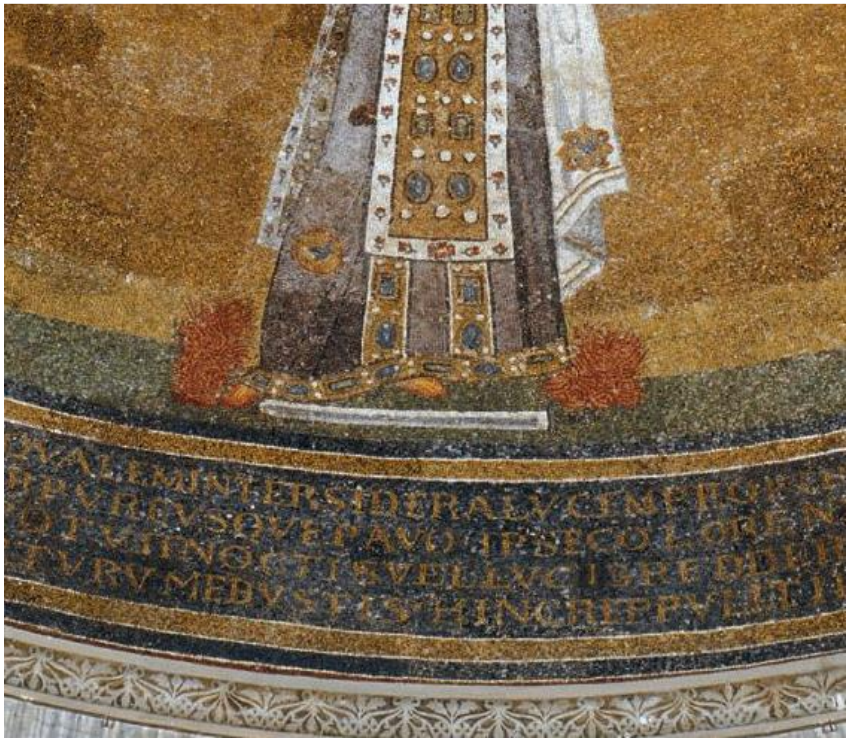

Fig. 2.7: Apse mosaic of S. Agnese f.l.m, detail of sword and flames, Rome, 7th century.

Fig. 2.8: Apse mosaic of S. Agnese f.l.m, Honorius, Rome, 7th century.

Fig. 2.9: Apse mosaic of S. Agnese f.l.m, Symmachus, Rome, 7th century.

42. S. Euphemia, Apsis (Kat. Nr. 84)

Fig. 2.10: Illustration of apse mosaic of S. Euphemia, Rome, 7th century?

Fig. 2.11: Gold glass depicting Agnes, Rome, 4th century.

Fig. 2.12: Gold glass depicting Mary, Rome, 4th century.

Fig. 2.13: Annunciation, S. Maria Maggiore, Rome, 5th century.

Fig. 2.14: Presentation to the Temple, S. Maria Maggiore, Rome, 5th century.

Fig. 2.15: Maria Regina, S. Maria Antiqua, Rome, 6th century.

Fig. 2.16: Madonna della Clemenza, S. Maria in Trastevere, 7th century.

Fig. 2.17: Apse mosaic of San Venanzio, Rome, 7th century.

Fig. 2.18: Gold glass depicting Mary between Peter and Paul, Rome, 4th century.

Fig. 2.19: Gold glass depicting Agnes between Peter and Paul, Rome, 4th century.

Fig. 2.20: Agnes, Prassede and Pudenziana, S. Zeno Chapel, Rome, 9th century.

Fig. 2.21: Agnes, S. Marco, detail, Rome, 9th century.