

Where Theodora Episcopa Rests: A Gendered Analysis of the Chapel of San Zeno at Santa Prassede in Rome

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John Cabot University

Department of Art History

Bachelor of Arts in Art History

Where Theodora Episcopa Rests: A Gendered Analysis of the Chapel of San Zeno at Santa Prassede in Rome

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Abstract

The chapel of San Zeno is one of the best-studied ninth-century monuments in Rome due to its remarkable state of preservation and gleaming mosaic program. Despite this, the present study attempts to fill a surprising gap in its centuries-long historiography. Although scholars generally acknowledge that the chapel serves as a mausoleum for Paschal I's mother, Theodora, it has yet to be analyzed as her commemorative monument. The scholarly oversight may partially be due to the seemingly atypical nature of her representation in the northern niche of the chapel, where she is presented alongside Santa Prassede, Santa Pudenziana, and the Virgin Mary. A blue square nimbus surrounds her head, her hair is covered by a white headdress, and, most unusually, an inscription identifies her as Theodora *Episcopa*. As this *titulus* translates to a feminized version of the word "Bishop," her portrayal ostensibly defies early medieval gender norms.

This thesis re-centers the chapel's narrative on Theodora *Episcopa* rather than focusing on the iconographic and geographical sources of the chapel's imagery, as has often been the case. The iconography of the chapel's mosaics will instead be analyzed through a gendered lens. The unique title *Episcopa* will be examined in the context of the titlature of imperial and high-ranking religious women. This methodology proposes a new link between Theodora *Episcopa*, Helena Augusta, and Galla Placidia Augusta to be made. This connection, in turn, generates novel insights into the relationship between mother and son, Theodora *Episcopa* and the *Episcopus* Paschal – that allow a gendered reassessment of the Virgin and Child imagery throughout the chapel and its basilica.

Dedication

To the women who were written out of history

... oh, and my family, of course.

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List of Abbreviations

LP

Liber Pontificalis

CBCR

Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae

Introduction

A marble inscription affixed to a pier near the entrance to the San Zeno chapel describes the translation of no fewer than 2,300 martyrs' relics to the Basilica of Santa Prassede on July 20, 817, from cemeteries outside the city walls (Figure 1).¹ This monumental undertaking by Pope Paschal I (817–824) was the most ambitious transfer of relics in all Christendom. It imbued the basilica with a heightened status in the powerful spread of the cult of saints.² It also made the Basilica of Santa Prassede, entirely rebuilt by Paschal I, a cornerstone of his efforts in asserting papal authority within the urban fabric of Rome.³ Dedicated to its eponymous female saint whose relics Paschal also claims to have recovered, the Basilica of Santa Prassede was lavishly adorned with costly materials, from mosaics to new and spoliated marbles and stones.⁴

The *Liber Pontificalis* records that the basilica was reconstructed near the original location of Prassede's titular church, which the Pope stated was decaying because of its "great age."⁵ The materiality, architectural plan, and sheer volume of relics enshrined within the

¹ The unusual specificity of this dating is explained by the fact that July 20th is the date of the vigil of Santa Prassede's *natale* (heavenly birthday). See Mary M. Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*, ed. Joyce Louise Rilett Wood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

² John Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century: A History in Art*, British School at Rome Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 58.

³ For a discussion about how the cult of saints was used in Santa Prassede to shape Rome as a papal city, see Judson Emerick, "Altars Personified: The Cult of the Saints and the Chapel System in Pope Paschal I's S. Prassede (817-819)," in *Archaeology in Architecture: Studies in Honor of Cecil L. Striker*, ed. Judson Emerick and Cecil L. Striker, 2005, 57.

⁴ Prassede is a female saint traditionally identified as the daughter of Pudens, in whose home the apostle Paul is believed to have stayed. Caroline Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I: Papal Power, Urban Renovation, Church Rebuilding and Relic Translation, 817-824*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, Fourth Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 93.

⁵ Raymond Davis, *The Lives of the Ninth-Century Popes (Liber Pontificalis): The Ancient Biographies of Ten Popes from A.D. 817-891* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 9.

basilica distinguishes it as the pinnacle of Paschal I's architectural patronage.⁶ It is situated near Santa Maria Maggiore and the fourth-century church dedicated to Prassede's sister, Santa Pudenziana, in proximity to a processional route for the papal liturgy.⁷ It is arguably Paschal's greatest legacy to this day.

After listing names of numerous martyrs and virgins whose relics were translated to the basilica, lines 36–42 of the inscription specify that the remains of Paschal I's mother, Theodora Episcopa, were placed on the basilica's right-hand side, alongside the bodies of San Zeno and “two others.”⁸ In other words, it attests to Theodora's burial *ad sanctos* within the basilica. Yet, the chapel within which she was laid to rest has historically been associated with its dedication to San Zeno rather than identified as her mausoleum. This thesis, as will presently become clear, seeks to redress this assumption.

Stepping through the mosaic-adorned portal into Theodora's mausoleum off the right aisle of the Basilica of Santa Prassede profoundly affects modern visitors.⁹ Transitioning from the basilica's grandeur to the intimate 3.5 x 3.6-meter space evokes a sense of trespassing, an

⁶ Paschal's architectural program included rebuilding the churches of Santa Maria in Domnica on the Caelian Hill and Santa Cecilia in Trastevere. He also made some minor renovations to Santa Maria Maggiore and St. Peter's. Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 3.

⁷ Goodson, 81.

⁸ *Quocirca et in ipso ingressu basilicae manu dextra ubi vique benignissimae suae genetricis, scilicet domnae Theodoraepiscopae corpus quiescit, condidit iamdictus Praesul corpora venerabilium haec: Zenonis presbyteri et aliorum duorum.* Ursula Nilgen studied this inscription in most detail, concluding that lines 37 onwards are a Quattrocento addition in pavonazzetto marble. Nevertheless, scholars widely agree that this section is based on an original text and, therefore, reliable. See Ursula Nilgen, *Die Grosse Reliquieninschrift von Santa Prassede: Eine Quellenkritische Untersuchung zur Zeno-Kapelle* (Rome: Herder, 1974). A transcription and translation of the inscription can be found in Goodson, 327–28. There has recently been some debate about whether the chapel of San Zeno was indeed Theodora's mausoleum because this part of the inscription may have been replaced in the fifteenth century. For this view, cf. Nine Miedema and Daniëlle Sloop, “Visiting a ‘Home of the Saints’: S. Prassede in Rome,” in *Monuments & Memory: Christian Cult Buildings and Constructions of the Past*, ed. Mariëtte Verhoeven, Lex Bosman, and Hanneke Van Asperen (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2016), 69–84.

⁹ Annie Montgomery Labatt explores the effect of passing through the impressive portal, describing how it elicits a sense of being “cowed” as viewers transition from a grand space to a more confined one. See Annie Montgomery Labatt, *Byzantine Rome* (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Arc Humanities Press, 2022), 87.

understanding that the splendors within were perhaps never meant for such public access.¹⁰ Although the chapel's interior is now illuminated by electricity, one can easily picture the scintillating effects the mosaics produced in the candlelight of the ninth century. Not only are the *tesserae* composed primarily of polychromatic glass, which almost entirely blankets the upper surfaces, but these have been inlaid at an angle favorable for refracting light, creating a coruscating microcosm within (Figure 2).¹¹ The unequal size of the tesserae further enhances the light-interactive qualities of the mosaics. Due to its elaborate iconography, by the late medieval period, the chapel became renowned as the *Hortus Paradisi* (Garden of Paradise).¹² This iconography includes vegetal ornaments, abstract patterns, animals, bejeweled martyrs, male and female saints, apostles, and a central image of Christ at the apex of its celestial gold-ground mosaic dome, supported by four pendentive angels.¹³ The chapel's magnificence and sacrality in themselves are a statement of how Pope Paschal intended to honor his mother in an extraordinary manner. There is no extant mausoleum parallel in the city of Rome or elsewhere from ninth-century Western Christendom to rival its splendor. As Gillian Mackie notes, Paschal must have loved his mother very much, as there is evidently a personal dimension to the chapel.¹⁴

The chapel is well-known not only as the best-preserved ninth-century monument in Rome but also for a distinctive feature: the portrait of Theodora beneath the lunette of its

¹⁰ For the dimensions of the chapel see Richard Krautheimer, Frankl Volfango, and Corbett Spencer, *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae: The Early Christian Basilicas of Rome (IV-IX Cent.)*, vol. 2, Monumenti Di Antichità Cristiana, II Ser. (Città del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1977), 253.

¹¹ For a discussion on the positioning of tesserae at an angle to refract light, see Maria Andaloro and Carla D'Angelo, eds., *Mosaici Medievali a Roma Attraverso Il Restauro Dell'ICR 1991-2004* (Rome: Gangemi, 2017) as cited in Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 60.

¹² Miedema and Sloopjes, "Visiting a 'Home of the Saints,'" 82, n.51.

¹³ A comprehensive analysis of the ornamental and paradisiacal iconography can be found in Gillian Mackie, "Abstract and Vegetal Design in the San Zeno Chapel, Rome: The Ornamental Setting of an Early Medieval Funerary Programme," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 63 (1995): 160.

¹⁴ Gillian Mackie, "The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 57 (1989): 198–99.

northern niche, where she is presented together with Santa Prassede, Santa Pudenziana, and the Virgin Mary (Figure 3). Alongside these saints, Theodora is depicted in bust-length with a so-called “square halo” and an intriguing *titulus*, designating her as Theodora *Episcopa*, which translates to “Bishopess Theodo(ra)” or “Of the Bishop” if the Latin is understood in the genitive sense (Figure 4).¹⁵ Even if the last two letters of Theodora’s first name have been effaced because the tesserae fall within a restored section, her title *Episcopa*—the feminine form of her son’s title *Episcopus* (Bishop) in Latin—remains fully intact.¹⁶

As mentioned, the only other contemporary source to mention Theodora *Episcopa* with this title is the relic inscription.¹⁷ It further suggests that she was already deceased when her body was placed in the chapel in 817, the first year of Paschal’s pontificate. In his seminal article about the so-called square halo, John Osborne discusses the possible meanings of this attribute. Theodora *Episcopa*’s depiction in the Zeno Chapel has played an essential role in reshaping the understanding of the square nimbus. While initially thought to signify a living person, it is now generally accepted, partly due to the relic inscription’s allusion to Theodora *Episcopa* as already deceased, that the square halo denotes a physical portrait likeness.¹⁸

The representation of Theodora *Episcopa* has, in fact, been a point of contention in the last few decades. During the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, her *titulus* was first

¹⁵ To avoid confusion with the term *titulus* as it relates to churches, this thesis uses it to refer specifically to Theodora *Episcopa*’s epithet *Episcopa*. The Latin term *episcopus*, which means bishop, derived from the Greek (ἐπίσκοπος) “to oversee” (ἐπί + σκοπέω). In Latin, the feminized version *episcopa* referred to a wife of the bishop, see “Episcopa, -Ae,” in *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (BAdW), (<https://publikationen.badw.de/en/thesaurus/lemmata#38685>); Henry George Liddell et al., eds., “Episkopē,” in *Greek English Lexicon* (Clarendon Press, 1996).

¹⁶ Gillian Mackie, “The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 57 (1989): 184.

¹⁷ *Et In Ipso Ingressu Basilicae Manu Dextra Ubi Utque Benignissimae Suae Genetricis Scilicet Domnae Theodoraepiscopae Corpus Quiescit Condidit Iamdictus Praesul Corpora Venerabilium Haec: Zenonis Presbyteri Et Aliorum Duorum*, translated to English as “Therefore, at the entrance of the basilica, on the right-hand side where truly the body of his benign mother, Mistress Theodora *Episcopa*, rests, the above-mentioned pontiff placed these bodies of the venerable Zeno the Priest, and of the other two.” in Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 328.

¹⁸ John Osborne, “The Portrait of Pope Leo IV in San Clemente, Rome: A Re-Examination of the So-Called ‘Square’ Nimbus, in *Medieval Art*,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 47 (1979): 58–65.

discussed in various published literature as evidence of women ordained into priestly offices in the early Christian church.¹⁹ More recent studies have instead counter-argued, if only in passing, that it is far more likely that her *titulus* was conferred as an honorific for her role as the mother of Pope Paschal I, the *Episcopus*. John Osborne, Gillian Mackie, and Caroline Goodson are all in agreement that it may represent an honorific title bestowed upon Theodora in relation to her son.²⁰ Conversely, Karen Jo Torjesen maintains that it presents evidence of the existence of female priesthood in the early medieval period.²¹

In either case, her *titulus* raises compelling questions about women's roles in ecclesiastic power structures and issues of lineage within the context of the ninth-century Roman episcopacy. Theodora's *titulus* is even more unusual when one considers that, while not entirely unprecedented, a pope constructing a funerary chapel as a burial chamber for a parent was exceptionally rare in the early medieval period, even more so for a mother. John Osborne, for instance, discusses the two other known instances: Pope Theodore (642-649) buried his father in a chapel attached to Santo Stefano Rotondo in the mid-seventh century, and an epitaph for John VII's (705–707) attests that he buried both his parents in the church of Sant' Anastasia.²²

By positioning Theodora Episcopa at the forefront of the analysis, both as a woman and in her role as the mother of the pope, this thesis will consider the chapel through a gendered lens. It examines what this might reveal about Paschal I's pontificate in commemorating her alongside Santa Prassede, Santa Pudenziana, and the Virgin Mary within such a prominently positioned yet

¹⁹ For an example, see Joan Morris, *The Lady Was a Bishop: The Hidden History of Women with Clerical Ordination and the Jurisdiction of Bishops* (New York, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973).

²⁰ For the view of her *titulus* as an honorific, see Mackie, 184; Osborne, 69; Goodson, 166.

²¹ Torjesen further suggests that the erasure of the last two letters of Theodora's name was perhaps deliberate, aiming to obscure her role as a female bishop, see Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 10.

²² Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 69.

nevertheless private and opulent space. Further, it attempts to reinterpret Theodora Episcopa's status in the context of a longer line of women from imperial or ecclesiastical backgrounds, spanning from late antiquity to the ninth century. Theodora's intriguing *titulus* will, therefore, be one of the critical areas of research that the present thesis investigates, although a definitive conclusion may, admittedly, remain elusive.²³

To achieve its goal of reconsidering Theodora Episcopa's role and *memoria*, this study adopts various avenues of research. Beyond simply considering her supposed honorific and portrait within the chapel, it compares her mausoleum to other titles and monuments associated with elite women, such as Helena Augusta and Galla Placidia Augusta. Specifically, it questions how the chapel combines formal innovations with deliberate connections to traditional precedents. This study ultimately investigates the relationship between mother and son, *Episcopus and Episcopa*, examining how the imagery of the Virgin and Child interrelates to these matrilineal themes within Theodora's mausoleum. It thus provides a comprehensive and long-overdue reassessment of Theodora's commemoration within the space and her potential role in Paschal I's pontificate, reframing her as the protagonist within the chapel's narrative.

The thesis is divided into three chapters, excluding the present introduction. The first chapter is a literature review that introduces the most noteworthy historiography about the Zeno Chapel. For obvious reasons, it also focuses on how Theodora Episcopa has been marginalized in the early literature and how this affects the current state of research. The second chapter is a visual analysis. After situating the chapel in the basilica's original layout, it begins with its interior, extends outwards to its façade, and connects relevant elements to the basilica's

²³ Scholars continue to find Theodora's *titulus* perplexing. Schaefer, for instance, notes how Nilgen addressed the "incomprehensible" nature of Theodora's title in her research about the relic inscription, see Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*, 109 citing Ursula Nilgen, *Die Große Reliquieninschrift von Santa Prassede: Eine Quellenkritische Untersuchung Zur Zeno-Kapelle* (Rome: Herder, 1974).

sanctuary to elucidate the connections between mother and son. The third and final chapter explores how Theodora Episcopa's portrait and title may be interpreted in continuity with Ancient Roman and Late Antique traditions of honorifics for women. It concludes by addressing the broader implications of these findings and identifying venues for further research.

Chapter 1 – Beyond the Footnote: The Revival of Theodora Episcopa in Scholarship

Introduction to the Literature Review

The chapel of San Zeno, as a whole, has been the focus of extensive study due to its remarkable state of preservation and its unique iconography.²⁴ Despite some minor renovations, the extant mosaic program, with its diverse eschatological imagery, largely retains its original design and provides significant material for analysis and inquiry.²⁵ It is unsurprising that the Basilica of Santa Prassede's historiography spans hundreds of years. The literature on the chapel may even be said to mirror broader socio-cultural trends within the field of art history and its tangential disciplines. These shifting approaches have directly affected the reading of Theodora Episcopa's representation. This chapter begins by retracing how Theodora Episcopa was marginalized in the early historical record, then reviews the most noteworthy studies of the Zeno Chapel to date, contrasting this to the current state of the field. The goal is to assess how, if at all,

²⁴ Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 170.

²⁵ Liz James, *Mosaics in the Medieval World: From Late Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 304.

these authors engage with Theodora Episcopa's portrait and the gender dynamics within the mosaics of the chapel and broader basilica.

Early Marginalization in Historical Records

One of the earliest sources that mentions the chapel of San Zeno is Paschal's *vita* within the *Liber Pontificalis*. Its anonymous author makes no mention of Theodora Episcopa, describing the chapel solely as an oratory dedicated to San Zeno by Paschal I.²⁶ This omission is brought into stark relief by the fact that Paschal's father, Bonosus, is explicitly mentioned in the *LP*.²⁷ This nuance presumably suggests that Theodora's gender was a factor in her exclusion. Sometime after Giovanni Colonna placed the Column of Flagellation within the chapel during the thirteenth century, the chapel became known by its alternative name, *Hortus Paradisi*. In other words, the column's renown gradually overshadowed Theodora Episcopa and even San Zeno himself.²⁸

These two medieval fonts may partially explain why Giovanni Ciampini, the first modern scholar to study the chapel's mosaics first-hand in the seventeenth century, similarly neglected to include any reference to Theodora Episcopa. Instead, Ciampini tentatively identified her representation as a "virgin," grouping her with the three other women depicted to her right—Santa Prassede, the Virgin Mary, and Santa Pudenziana (Figure 5).²⁹ The reverberations of

²⁶ Davis, *The Lives of the Ninth-Century Popes (Liber Pontificalis)*, 12. Henceforth referred to as *LP*.

²⁷ Admittedly, the only information provided about Paschal's father is that Bonosus is described as "Roman." Davis, 5.

²⁸ Miedema and Sloopjes, "Visiting a 'Home of the Saints,'" 82. The column is now housed in a recessed chamber accessible via the southern exedra of the chapel.

²⁹ Giovanni Ciampini, *Vetera Monumenta: In Quibus Praecipue Musiva Opera Sacrarum, Profanarumque Aedium Structura, Ac Nonnulli Antiqui Ritus Dissertationibus, Iconibusque Illustrantur*, vol. 2 (Rome, 1699), 152–53. As noted by Mary Schaefer in *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 109, citing G. Ciampini, *Vetera Monumenta* (Rome: Komarek, 1690–1699), vol. 2, 143.

Theodora Episcopa's marginalization in the early historical record persisted into later centuries. Following Ciampini's writings, the Benedictine monk Dom Davanzati omitted any mention of her portrait in his 1725 pilgrim guide to the chapel, exemplifying how, by the eighteenth century, Theodora's resting place became a celebrated public monument with no reference to her at all.³⁰

Ciampini's work laid the foundation for subsequent studies, which saw a surge of interest in the nineteenth century.³¹ But these, too, continued to relegate Theodora, and the depiction of the other female figures in the chapel, to a peripheral role.³² Although scholars have historically approached the depiction of women in the chapel superficially, this directly contradicts the visual importance afforded to them within its space—none more so than Theodora Episcopa.³³ As Leslie Brubaker has shown, the study of Late Antique and Byzantine women only became acknowledged as a valid topic of academic inquiry in the second half of the twentieth century. Before this, historical research generally tended to prioritize male figures and their narratives; this bias in the scholarship evidently subsumed women in the ninth century.³⁴

³⁰ By the eighteenth century, the chapel also had an established history of being off-limits to women “under pain of excommunication.” Ciampini had already documented this restriction in his 1699 text, though, as Schaefer observes, the origins of this tradition remain unclear. See Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*. 109

³¹ Margo Pautler Klass, “The Chapel of S. Zeno in S. Prassede in Rome” (Ann Arbor, Mich., Bryn Mawr, 1972), 7. Klass lists the most noteworthy publications from the nineteenth century, which are as follows: Bunsen and Knapp (1843), Canina (1846), Hübsch (1862), Dehio and Bezold (1887), and Cattaneo (1888).

³² For discussions on the marginalization of women in art history due to male-normative biases, see Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art*, Reprinted (London: Routledge, 2000), 10–11.

³³ Art-historical analyses are inevitably shaped by their time's cultural and socio-historical situatedness as argued in Stephen Bann, “Meaning/Interpretation,” in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 256–68.

³⁴ Leslie Brubaker, “Memories of Helena: Patterns in Imperial Female Matronage in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries,” in *Women, Men, and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (London: Routledge, 1997), 53.

San Zeno Chapel Former Frameworks of Analysis

Until the twentieth century, and arguably even into the twenty-first, much of the scholarship offered only a cursory treatment of Theodora Episcopa's depiction, even if it began to acknowledge that the chapel functioned as *her* mausoleum, as opposed to being exclusively considered an oratory dedicated to San Zeno. Richard Krautheimer, in his seminal publication, the *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae: The Early Christian Basilicas of Rome (IV-IX Cent.)*, henceforth *CBCR*, does not refer to her as "Episcopa" but solely as Theodora. However, he does mention that the chapel functions as her mausoleum and that its left exedra niche features her bust-length portrait.³⁵ In his later work, *Rome: Profile of a City* (1980), published after decades of research about the city's monuments, Krautheimer continues to acknowledge the chapel as Theodora's mausoleum but finally refers to her as Theodora *Episcopa*, granting her title some degree of consideration.³⁶ Krautheimer does not explore the significance of Theodora's portrait and titulus or their implications in this work either.

While Krautheimer did not focus very much on Theodora, he did comment on the remarkable level of physiognomic facial modeling in the mosaic figures at Santa Prassede. He particularly emphasized the rather individualized portrayals of women in both the chapel and the basilica. Krautheimer observed that Paschalian mosaicists executed the representations of women with a high degree of care. However, he fell short of exploring the reasons behind what this attention may suggest in a basilica dedicated to a female saint that also contains a mausoleum for the Pope's mother. The distinctly rendered facial features of these women's

³⁵ Krautheimer, Volfango, and Spencer, *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae: The Early Christian Basilicas of Rome (IV-IX Cent.)*, 2: 255.

³⁶ Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 130.

depictions led him, in a striking and decidedly unconventional turn of phrase, to refer to them as “Paschal’s Lolitas”:

The female saints in particular, swaying and slender, with pert little faces, sumptuously decked out, seem teenagers of seductive charm—‘Paschal’s Lolitas,’ as the best connoisseur of these mosaics calls them off the record.³⁷

East Versus West Debate

In a brief but important 1974 article, Beat Brenk further solidified the acknowledgment of the chapel as Theodora’s mausoleum.³⁸ Yet, like the scholars before him, he did not analyze the mausoleum from the perspective of a commemorative framework for a female figure. Instead, he focused on the chapel’s purportedly early Byzantine iconography and its chronology in the context of iconoclasm.³⁹

Beat Brenk was not the only author to adopt this approach; as one of the predominant analytical models within twentieth-century scholarship examined whether the chapel’s materiality, design, and iconography should be categorized as “Byzantine” or “Roman.”⁴⁰ Margo Pautler Klass, Marianne Wirenfeldt Asmussen, Beat Brenk, and Gillian Mackie have all debated

³⁷ Krautheimer, 34.

³⁸ Beat Brenk, “Zum Bildprogramm der Zenokapelle in Rom,” *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 45/47, no. 12 (1974): 213.

³⁹ The Iconoclastic Controversy refers to the period when the use of images in religious worship was forbidden. It began in Byzantium between 726 and 786 and was subsequently addressed by the Council of Nicaea II in 787, which reversed the iconoclastic stance established by the first Council of 754. During this period, many Byzantine monks sought refuge in Rome. Iconoclasm was revived in a milder form between 813 and 843 in Byzantium. For further discussion, see Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede*, 52–53; Francesca Dell’Acqua, *Iconophilia: Politics, Religion, Preaching, and the Use of Images in Rome, c.680-880*, Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies (London New York (N.Y.): Routledge, 2020), 45–87; Labatt, *Byzantine Rome*, 77–109.

⁴⁰ Particularly considering its construction during the second Iconoclastic Controversy (813-842).

at length whether the chapel represents “Roman” or “Eastern” elements.⁴¹ Only recently has Annie Montgomery Labatt made the compelling case that these analyses have been somewhat limiting and fail to regard the Chapel of San Zeno’s distinctive cultural hybridity, emerging during the period of the Iconoclastic Controversy but at the confluence of East and West.⁴² The dyadic preoccupation with identifying the chapel’s design origins has even extended to speculation that Theodora, due to her “Greek-sounding” name and Paschal’s support of iconodule “Greek” monks, may have been of Hellenophone background herself.⁴³

Margo Pautler Klass’s 1972 doctoral dissertation on the chapel of San Zeno marked a turning point in this line of inquiry.⁴⁴ Her primary objective was to demonstrate its role as a Byzantine sanctuary in Rome, positioning Pope Paschal I as a protector of iconodule monks persecuted by iconoclasm in Constantinople. Labatt has recently pointed out that the portrayal of Paschal as a savior-like figure for these “Greek” monks has profoundly influenced historiographical narratives and, consequently, the reading of the chapel as a Byzantine sanctum.⁴⁵ Though Klass was not the first to connect the chapel to Byzantine religious art, her dissertation catalyzed a series of articles investigating the origins of the chapel’s imagery and its implications for Paschal’s pontificate within the context of post-Nicaean (787) Rome.⁴⁶ For instance, in 1986, Marianne Wrenfeldt Asmussen published a paper asserting that the Chapel of

⁴¹ For the view that the chapel’s connections to Byzantium, see Mackie, “The Zeno Chapel”; Brenk “Zum Bildprogramm der Zenokapelle in Rom”; and Klass, “The Chapel of S. Zeno.” For the interpretation of the chapel as distinctly Roman, owing much to classical antiquity, cf. Wrenfeldt Asmussen, “The Chapel of S. Zeno in S. Prassede in Rome.”

⁴² Labatt, *Byzantine Rome*, 85.

⁴³ The first scholar to propose this view was Raimond van Marle, whose suggestion has remained largely uncontested, see Raimond van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1970), 94. As mentioned, Paschal’s mother is only known through the relic inscription and her portrait accompanied by the *titulus*. By contrast, little is known about Paschal’s father, aside from his name, Bonosus, and that he was identified as “Roman” in the *LP*, see Davis, *The Lives of the Ninth-Century Popes (Liber Pontificalis)*, 5.

⁴⁴ Klass, “The Chapel of S. Zeno in S. Prassede in Rome.”

⁴⁵ Labatt, *Byzantine Rome*, 86.

⁴⁶ The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 sought to reverse the iconoclastic stance of the first Council in 754.

San Zeno, while evidently influenced by Ravennate-Byzantine iconographic traditions, deliberately subverted these visual conventions marking it as an example of a distinctly “Roman Renovatio.”⁴⁷ This argument reflects the scholarly focus of the time on the aesthetic, material, and geographical context of iconographic development. It is further established by the ensuing publication by Gillian Mackie a few years later, which aimed to bolster the interpretation of the chapel’s elements as Byzantine.⁴⁸

Gillian Mackie’s numerous articles have been highly instrumental in informing this study. Especially her two in-depth and groundbreaking works focused on the imagery (both figural and ornamental) of the Chapel of San Zeno: *The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation* and *Abstract and Vegetal Design in the San Zeno Chapel, Rome: The Ornamental Setting of an Early Medieval Funerary Programme*. Moreover, her other early medieval research on chapels and mausolea has continued to provide linkages and insights into situating the Zeno Chapel within a wider network of monuments commemorating imperial or ecclesiastic family members throughout history.⁴⁹ *A Prayer for Salvation* remains one of the most frequently cited sources about the chapel today. Mackie’s comparative approach, which includes parallels with the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, is particularly relevant to this thesis, as are her tentative reconstructions of some renovated sections of the chapel concerning the Virgin and

⁴⁷ Marianne Wrenfeldt Asmussen notes that the hierarchical size order of figures, as outlined by the Council of Nicaea (787), is disrupted in the San Zeno Chapel, diverging from Byzantine conventions, which prescribe the following: Christ, the angels, the Mother of God, apostles, prophets, martyrs, and saints. In the Zeno chapel, the order in size is instead: Christ, angels, apostles, martyrs, other saints, and the mother of God (Mary), who is unusually placed last. See Marianne Wrenfeldt Asmussen, “The Chapel of S. Zeno in S. Prassede in Rome: New Aspects on the Iconography,” *Analecta Romana Instituti Danici / Ed. by Accademia Di Danimarca, Roma*, 1986, 69.

⁴⁸ Mackie, “The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation.”

⁴⁹ Mackie’s expertise regarding chapels is perhaps most effectively encapsulated in her survey monograph on early Christian chapels: Gillian Mackie, *Early Christian Chapels in the West: Decoration, Function, and Patronage* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

Child. In essence, her studies remain pertinent even though the present research does not seek to draw links to Byzantium exclusively.

The Question of the Carolingian Renaissance

The second overarching analytical model in the twentieth century, which has since become central to contemporary efforts at re-evaluation, is the concept of the “Carolingian Renaissance.”⁵⁰ This section examines this approach, which was primarily championed by Krautheimer, and its recent adjustments in light of new archaeological evidence.⁵¹ In his canonical works, *CBCR* and *Rome: Profile of a City*, Krautheimer propagated the reading of the Basilica of Santa Prassede and its contents as prime examples of a “Carolingian Renaissance,” in which fourth and fifth-century basilica styles were “revived” after a period marked by a hiatus of more than two centuries.⁵² Krautheimer supports his view by highlighting Santa Prassede’s apparent formal emulations of the Constantinian Old St. Peter’s, albeit on a smaller scale.⁵³

⁵⁰ It is important to note that the Carolingian Renaissance model was frequently intertwined with the “East or West” iconography debate, as discussed above. A brief note on terminology is also warranted here. In this thesis, “Renaissance” is used in the Panofskian sense to distinguish earlier medieval revivals from the Renaissance of the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Specifically, the term *Carolingian Renaissance* (sometimes referred to as *Renovatio* in other literature) should not be confused with Paschal’s own *renovatio* program, which sometimes refers to his architectural campaign that completely rebuilt Santa Prassede, Santa Maria in Domnica, and Santa Cecilia, along with smaller interventions at Santa Maria Maggiore and Old St. Peter’s. For more on the distinction between “Renaissance” and “Renaissance,” see Carl Landauer, “Erwin Panofsky and the Renaissance of the Renaissance,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (1994): 255–81.

⁵¹ Krautheimer’s prolific writings have established his name as synonymous with the Carolingian Renaissance. This reputation began with his seminal article: Richard Krautheimer, “The Carolingian Revival of Early Christian Architecture,” *The Art Bulletin* 24, no. 1 (1942): 17.

⁵² Krautheimer, *Rome*, 128. For an overview of the rebuttal on the Carolingian Renaissance as a framework, cf. Catherine Carver McCurrach, “‘Renovatio’ Reconsidered: Richard Krautheimer and the Iconography of Architecture,” *Gesta* 50, no. 1 (2011): 41–69; Robert Coates-Stephens, “Dark Age Architecture in Rome,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 65 (1997): 177–232.

⁵³ Richard Krautheimer, “The Carolingian Revival of Early Christian Architecture,” *The Art Bulletin* 24, no. 1 (1942): 17.

These similarities include an ascension through a flight of steps and a portico and the comparable annular crypt structure, marble-sheathed walls, and vault mosaics.⁵⁴

As Caroline Goodson explains in her 2017 article, *Revival and Reality: The Carolingian Renaissance in Rome and the Basilica of S. Prassede*, Krautheimer did not originate the concept of a Renaissance, but he did become its main expounder.⁵⁵ Later investigations, based on new archaeological evidence carried out since the 1980s, have permitted the recontextualization of Santa Prassede within a broader body of evidence supporting a continuity from late antique church building, thereby challenging the idea of a “Renaissance” occurring in the ninth century.⁵⁶ In other words, the same basilica, once heralded as a pinnacle example of a revival, has been reinterpreted as evidence of continuity with the past—Judson Emerick, in particular, has proposed that Santa Prassede was not a replication of St. Peter’s under Constantine but rather a modernized version reflecting ninth-century innovations.⁵⁷ The Krautheimer schema remains insightful despite being further refined by scholars such as Hendrik Dey and Robert Coates-Stephens.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Emerick, “Altars Personified: The Cult of the Saints and the Chapel System in Pope Paschal I’s S. Prassede (817-819),” 131.

⁵⁵ Goodson, “Revival and Reality: The Carolingian Renaissance in Rome and the Basilica of S. Prassede,” 169. Richard Krautheimer’s perspective that suggests a micro “rebirth” in architectural styles and forms following a period of intermission was largely influenced by Erwin Panofsky’s writings about the medieval period.

⁵⁶ Coates-Stephens, “Dark Age Architecture in Rome.”

⁵⁷ Judson Emerick, “Focusing on the Celebrant: The Column Display inside Santa Prassede,” *Mededelingen Van Het Nederlands Instituut Te Rome* 59 (2001): 129–59. In a later article, Emerick Judson further outlines that the similarities between Old St. Peter’s and Santa Prassede arise from Santa Prassede’s translation of the relics of 2,300 martyrs, which elevated it to the status of a shrine church significant to the cult of the saints in asserting papal authority, see Emerick, “Altars Personified: The Cult of the Saints and the Chapel System in Pope Paschal I’s S. Prassede (817-819),” 50.

⁵⁸ Dey’s monograph is a comprehensive update of Krautheimer’s seminal work based on the newly available archaeological evidence and is, therefore, a highly valuable resource for this research, see Hendrik W. Dey, *The Making of Medieval Rome: A New Profile of the City, 400-1450* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Robert Coates-Stephens’s celebrated article challenges the notion of the early medieval period (especially the late seventh to early eighth centuries) as a “Dark Ages” lacking architectural activity before the Carolingian Renaissance. Using new archaeological data, he highlights it instead as an intensive building period. He further argues that the survival of original structures has skewed historiographic perception toward them. See Coates-Stephens, “Dark Age Architecture in Rome.”

Caroline Goodson emphasizes how Krautheimer’s approach has significantly influenced historical analyses of the chapel and the basilica more broadly. Her evaluation of Krautheimer’s line of inquiry has been critical to this study. It has facilitated a shift away from the notion of a distinct “Renaissance” and toward an exploration of how Paschal I may have deliberately sought to establish continuous associations with late antiquity, not in a revival, but in an evolution of it.⁵⁹ Beyond architecture, the concept of the Carolingian Renaissance continues to shape discussions of iconography, materiality, and even social constructs. It has recently been proposed, for example, that Theodora Episcopa’s *titulus* might be best interpreted either as part of a revival or, more plausibly, as a continuation of the Roman practice of conferring a male family member’s honorific upon a female relative.⁶⁰ The rethinking of the Carolingian Renaissance through the lens of the *titulus*, and consequently of onomastic models, offers a particularly compelling avenue for investigation.

Recent Evolutions in the Scholarship

Current scholarship continues to re-assess the past modalities outlined above. These paradigms have not lost their value – on the contrary, they continue to generate critical insights by building upon these pioneering works, expanding their scope, and revealing new connections. For instance, while Paschal I evidently sought to establish a sense of continuity with early Christianity and, indeed, with Antiquity, this does not suggest a complete rupture during the intervening period, as the term “Renaissance” might imply. Instead, there are apparent efforts to deliberately engage with earlier traditions and monuments, such as Constantinian churches and

⁵⁹ Goodson, “Revival and Reality: The Carolingian Renaissance in Rome and the Basilica of S. Prassede.”

⁶⁰ Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 70.

Ravennate chapels, as they were understood in the ninth century. Recent publications have identified the previously overlooked gaps in research alongside new and intriguing ones.

While the present study was initiated before encountering Francesca Dell'Acqua's recent observation regarding the themes of mother and son recurring throughout the chapel and basilica, which are areas underexplored in scholarship, her insights have proven invaluable.⁶¹

Dell'Acqua's broader monograph on iconophilia (particularly her chapter on the Zeno Chapel) examines the Virgin Mary's role and her connection to the veneration of sacred images in the ninth century. Her research has, therefore, significantly enriched and deepened the hypothesis that the Virgin Mary and Christ Child create a form of parallel between Paschal I and Theodora Episcopa. This idea was foundational to the thesis but further refined and advanced, in no small part, thanks to Dell'Acqua's analysis.

In an attempt to fill this research gap, this study is profoundly indebted to the work of Caroline Goodson and John Osborne. Their recent monographs have significantly broadened the understanding of ninth-century Rome within the model of the now-updated Krautheimer hypothesis. Goodson's *The Rome of Pope Paschal I: Papal Power, Urban Renovation, Church Rebuilding, and Relic Translation, 817–824* provides a comprehensive basis for contextualizing the chapel within Paschal I's pontificate. In this way, Goodson successfully addressed what had previously been engaged with fragmentarily. Her work presents a unified analysis of Paschal's architectural program and, more specifically, how the building of Santa Prassede along a processional route has resulted in increased visibility for papal authority and, crucially, the episcopal family.⁶²

⁶¹ Francesca Dell'Acqua, *Iconophilia: Politics, Religion, Preaching, and the Use of Images in Rome, c. 680-880*, Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies (London New York (N.Y.): Routledge, 2020), 136.

⁶² Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 136.

Osborne's 2023 publication, *Rome in the Ninth Century: A History in Art*, offers the most up-to-date information about the chapel.⁶³ The monograph re-situates the basilica within the urban fabric of Rome. However, unlike Goodson, Osborne does not center his analysis specifically on Paschal, instead adopting a broader perspective on Rome in this period and how it developed through time. Osborne's book is understood as a continuation of his previous publication *Rome in the Eighth Century*. The two monographs, Goodson's and Osborne's, complement one another, and their contributions have been central to the development of this research.

Returning briefly to Krautheimer's earlier observations, it is perplexing that, while he identified the idiosyncratic representation of women in the chapel decades ago, and considering that it was exceedingly rare for a woman to be depicted with a square nimbus, few scholars have applied gender studies frameworks to the analysis of the chapel since.⁶⁴ Mary Schaefer is the sole author of a monograph on gender in the Basilica of Santa Prassede thus far, published posthumously in 2013.⁶⁵ This work is the first of its kind to consider the Paschalian approach to women's representation and roles. Though it considers Theodora Episcopa in more depth than other scholarship has done, it nevertheless does not focus on her exclusively.

Schaefer is notably the first scholar not to treat the chapel hermetically from the wider basilica to which it is attached.⁶⁶ It is essential to note, however, that Schaefer was a professor of liturgy, not art history. While her work is interdisciplinary, it focuses primarily on the ecclesiastical significance of women in the church rather than being a detailed analysis of the

⁶³ One would be remiss not to mention that Theodora Episcopa's portrait graces the front cover.

⁶⁴ The only other example of a female with a square nimbus in Rome is the daughter of Theodotus in the Theodotus Chapel at S. Maria Antiqua, though it is poorly preserved. See Gillian Mackie, "The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 57 (1989): 185.

⁶⁵ Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*.

⁶⁶ For this observation see Dell'Acqua, *Iconophilia*. 136

iconography or materiality of the chapel and Basilica, or as mentioned above, an exploration of Theodora Episcopa's representation. She commendably emphasizes the balance of female and male imagery throughout the chapel. As such, Schaefer's research remains indispensable for the present thesis, especially considering her research on the legends of Prassede and Pudenziana and how they fit into Paschal's pontificate.⁶⁷

To conclude, as this study seeks to reintegrate Theodora into a broader lineage of women, it turns to the works of scholars such as Leslie Brubaker, Julia Hillner, and Judith Herrin, all of whom have extensively examined women's gender roles in Late Antiquity and Byzantium. More specifically, to provide a comparative analysis of the representation of gender and memory in the Basilica of Santa Prassede alongside historical women of similar status, this study draws on Judith Herrin's writings on Galla Placidia,⁶⁸ as well as Leslie Brubaker's *Memories of Helena: Patterns in Imperial Female Patronage in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries*, and Julia Hillner's recent monograph *Helena Augusta: Mother of an Empire*.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*.

⁶⁸ Judith Herrin, "Galla Placidia, Builder and Empress Mother," in *Ravenna, Capital of Empire, Crucible of Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 46–60.

⁶⁹ Brubaker, "Memories of Helena: Patterns in Imperial Female Matronage in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries"; Leslie Brubaker and Helen Tobler, "The Gender of Money: Byzantine Empresses on Coins (324-802)," *Gender & History* 12, no. 3 (November 2000): 527; Julia Hillner, *Helena Augusta: Mother of the Empire, Women in Antiquity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023).

Chapter 2 – In Light of Gender and Likeness

Structuring the Analysis

This chapter analyzes the formal elements of the Zeno Chapel, exploring how gender dynamics are conveyed through its mosaic program, with a strong emphasis on matrilineal themes. A significant emphasis is placed in the consideration of the north wall within the chapel, as this is where Theodora Episcopa and other women are depicted. Extensively renovated sections will be discussed only when necessary. Given that the chapel belongs to the same campaign of mosaic decoration that survives on the triumphal arch and sanctuary apse, it is useful to contextualize the chapel's decorative program within the broader basilica. The analysis will, therefore, begin by situating the chapel in the basilica following the ninth-century architectural plan (Figure 7). It will then proceed from within the chapel and move through the interior mosaic cycles based on cardinal direction and elevation before extending the analysis outwards to the façade mosaic above the chapel's entrance. Finally, it will connect these elements, from within the chapel and its entrance façade to the pertinent sanctuary area, from the triumphal arch to the apse.

The Chapel's Location Within the Basilica

The Basilica of Santa Prassede on the Esquiline Hill is one of three churches rebuilt during Pope Paschal I's brief but architecturally ambitious pontificate. In the aftermath of the instability following Charlemagne's death, Paschal I's patronage aimed to reassert papal

authority and restore order.⁷⁰ Unlike his predecessors, Paschal I preferred to reconstruct fewer basilicas comprehensively rather than many superficially. The three churches that Paschal rebuilt in Rome, namely Santa Maria in Domnica, Santa Cecilia, and Santa Prassede, are all dedicated to female saints.⁷¹

Today, Santa Prassede is accessed from a side street through a rather discreet entrance, guiding visitors from the side of the apse down into the nave. While modern visitors now enter the Chapel of San Zeno from the left and approach it almost immediately upon entering, this was not the case in the ninth century. This means that the modern entrance through which visitors enter today skews the impression of grandeur that the layout would have originally conveyed. The chapel is off the right aisle on the basilica's northeastern side, between the fifth and sixth intercolumniations from the apse (Figure 6). This dextral positioning would have been more conspicuous in the medieval period, as the chapel projected outward from the basilica. Only subsequent architectural additions enclosed it into its present form.⁷² In the ninth century, a person first ascended a set of steps and passed through an atrium before walking through the vastness of the church to reach the chapel. Undoubtedly, such a lengthy passage would have left a lasting impression.

The Basilica of Santa Prassede's slight northwest-facing apsidal orientation replicates that of Santa Maria Maggiore 90 meters away (Figure 8). Both structures share the unique feature of a continuous transept, highlighting the relationship between the two churches. Marian themes permeate the basilica's contents. It is, therefore, tempting to draw a symbolic link between Paschal's veneration of the Virgin Mary and his dedication to his mother. Especially

⁷⁰ Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 51.

⁷¹ Goodson, "Revival and Reality: The Carolingian Renaissance in Rome and the Basilica of S. Prassede," 190.

⁷² Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*. 68

since Theodora's mausoleum occupies the most prominent and favorable position within the basilica, near the apse on the right-hand side. In topographical terms, moreover, this is the closest possible point in the basilica to Santa Maria Maggiore. Paschal presumably aligned himself, and especially his mother with the Virgin, in this way. The chapel's eastward orientation is intended to capture the morning light, reinforcing themes of resurrection fitting for a mausoleum.⁷³ It also makes the extensive use of mosaics especially suitable, as this medium is most effective in interacting with light, capturing and refracting it.

The Mausoleum as a Unified Whole

The chapel of San Zeno is modestly sized, measuring a mere 3.5 x 3.6 meters. The dimensions create an intimate setting that recalls a vaulted catacomb *cubiculum*.⁷⁴ Despite its small measurements, the chapel's materiality rivals, or perhaps even surpasses, the sumptuousness of the basilica. It is centrally planned, with a cross-in-square layout, with deep niches in all but its western side (as this is the entrance wall), rendering it a cruciform space topped by a semi-spherical gold dome. The decoration in the interior is exceptionally well-preserved. Its original *opus sectile* floor is characterized by a large porphyry disc at the center, directly beneath the dome, which echoes the image of Christ set in a circular laurel wreath at its apex.⁷⁵ This interplay between spatial, decorative, and material elements is just one of many that

⁷³ Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*, 45.

⁷⁴ Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 75. The chapel's three transept niches have varying widths and depths. The eastern niche, encountered frontally upon entering the chapel, is 2.5 meters wide and 1.5 meters deep and now houses a Baroque altar, whereas the side niches are both 1.7 meters wide and 1.3 meters deep as described in Brenk, "Zum Bildprogramm Der Zenokapelle in Rom," 215.

⁷⁵ The *opus sectile* floor and the large porphyry disc at its center (an impressive 1.55 meters in diameter) were likely spoliated from imperial monuments. Porphyry roundels have had many uses since the Late Antique period; in Rome, they trace back to Old St. Peter's, see Charles B. McClendon, "The Revival of Opus Sectile Pavements in Rome and the Vicinity in the Carolingian Period," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 48 (1980): 157–65.

allow an interpretation of the chapel as a carefully constructed unified composition. The arrangement and subject matter of the mosaics particularly emphasize that the lower sections represent the earthly realm, gradually ascending—or, more perhaps accurately, transcending—toward the golden vault of heaven, where four angels triumphantly hold up Christ (Figure 2).⁷⁶

To visually analyze this richly decorated three-dimensional space, we shall however begin from the apex, with Christ in his oculus, and gradually descend downward. The chapel is organized into distinct levels. The highest being the “vault of heaven” in the soffit, which will hereafter be referred to simply as the “vault.” Beneath this is a “middle section,” as it is referred to here, that features figural elements within each supporting arch of the vault. These arches include processions of male apostles and female martyrs on each lateral side, with scenes of the *Hetoimasia* and *Deesis* depicted on the anterior and posterior walls, respectively. Below this middle section, three lunettes within niches display additional figural and decorative imagery.

The Vault (Christ and Angels in Heaven)

The vault of the Chapel of San Zeno features a youthful Christ with brown hair and a beard, set within a large circular roundel with a dark blue background. Mackie notes that he bears a “mild expression.”⁷⁷ His gold halo has a red cruciform shape within. Christ’s medallion is supported by four caryatid angels, who extend their arms around a laurel wreath encircling Christ’s roundel (Figure 2). A ring of thin red tesserae borders the laurel wreath, giving it a halo-like effect. The motif of angels holding up Christ from the spandrels of architectural spaces has numerous precedents, appearing in now-lost compositions like the chapel of S. Croce in the

⁷⁶ Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 165.

⁷⁷ Mackie, “The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation.” 174

Lateran, known only from early modern drawings.⁷⁸ Further, the formula of caryatids supporting a central medallion from the corners of an architectural space is deeply rooted in Antiquity, with origins in Roman and even Etruscan funerary art.⁷⁹ Presumably the layout would have been well known by the ninth century, perhaps even considered traditional.

Nevertheless, the vault of San Zeno most closely resembles, or even indeed replicates, that of the Archbishop's Chapel in Ravenna from the sixth century (Figure 9).⁸⁰ A key difference in San Zeno is that Christ is shown not as the Chi-Rho but as a man, in bust-length, with his right arm extending beyond the roundel and his left arm, draped in a *himation*, holding a scroll.⁸¹ Though the composition introduces iconographic innovations, specifically by depicting a youthful but bearded Christ, coinciding with the age of his death and resurrection, the image of Christ in different forms in vaults was relatively well established, as the Ravenna chapel shows.

Unlike the other decorative sections of the chapel, which combine elaborate acanthus and vine vegetation, abstracted ornaments, animals, and flowers, the vault is free from any extraneous decoration. Instead, a gold-ground mosaic entirely fills the background around Christ's wreath. The groin vault creates a striking contrast that commands visual focus toward Christ and his angel retinue. Christ's orientation, facing the viewer upon entering the chapel, similarly captures the visitor's gaze. The medium of mosaic, one of the most expensive and

⁷⁸ Mackie, 173, cites the drawing by Giuliano da Sangallo, *Vat. Barb. lat. 4424, fol. 33r*.

⁷⁹ Gillian Mackie, "A Sole Survivor: The Chapel of the Archbishops of Ravenna," in *Early Christian Chapels in the West, Decoration, Function, and Patronage* (University of Toronto Press, 2003), 107.

⁸⁰ Mackie, "The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation," 174.

⁸¹ Some scholars, such as Mackie, have classified this figure as a "Pantokrator" type, see Mackie, 174. However, this classification is widely debated; for an alternative perspective cf. Labatt, *Byzantine Rome*, 90. Christ's appearance as man is particularly noteworthy given that the chapel was constructed between 817 and 824, during the Iconoclastic Controversy, which has sparked discussion on how the chapel of San Zeno might be interpreted as a statement in support of religious imagery. For more discussions on this see Brenk, "Zum Bildprogramm Der Zenokapelle in Rom," 214–15.

durable, creates a sense of timeless permanence.⁸² As Mackie has proposed, Christ's appearance may be considered true to life, and this is how the clergy envisioned his "actual physical appearance" in the ninth century.⁸³ In fact, the emphasis on physical likeness appears to permeate all the figural representations in the chapel.

The angels framing Christ are uniform in appearance, with elongated bodies and an indeterminate gender: their angular chins have no beards, though some have an Adam's apple (Figure 10). Their androgynous appearance and zoomorphic wings further emphasize their ethereality.⁸⁴ Their hair is a lustrous blend of brown interwoven with blonde, held in place by a white fillet. Symmetry defines their faces and expressions; nevertheless, closer inspection reveals subtle variations in each visage. Pinkish tesserae on the high points of their faces, such as the cheeks, add a touch of vivacity to their countenances.

The angels are dressed in tunics with pronounced drapery folds, which are almost entirely white, emphasizing their purity. Strength is conveyed in their triumphant upholding of Christ's wreath while appearing effortless. Their slender bodies enhance the impression of lightness and are designed to work structurally with the architectural demands of the vaulted dome, aligning with its curvature. The angels are most distinguished by their round blue halos, outlined with a rim of white tesserae, echoing the color of the celestial spheres they balance upon. These mosaic spheres appear to rest on top of the spoliated Corinthian columns, each surmounted by an impost block, creating a *trompe l'oeil* effect. In this way, the angels also produce a supernatural effect

⁸² For a discussion on the qualities of mosaics as "structural polychromy" and how their interaction with light implies the eternal, see Claudia Bolgia, "New Light on the 'Bright Ages,'" ed. L. James and C. Entwistle, *New Light on Old Glass: Recent Research on Byzantine Glass and Mosaics*, 2013, 217.

⁸³ Mackie, "The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation," 174.

⁸⁴ The winged angel is a motif that appears in the Book of Revelation 14:6, where St. John mentions "another angel flying in the midst of heaven," and it first appeared in Christian art under Constantine, see Gunnar Berfelt, *A Study on the Winged Angel: The Origin of a Motif* (Almqvist & Wiksell, 1968), 17–22.

because they break the pictorial frame.⁸⁵ They are the largest figures in the chapel, only Christ would be of greater size if he were depicted at full length rather than as a bust in his roundel. As Caroline Goodson points out, the angels' positioning connotes "Victories atop Victory columns."⁸⁶ They could be interpreted as representations of triumphs over death and celestial intermediaries to Christ.⁸⁷

Their symbolic placement within the four pendentives of the chapel bridges the earthly and heavenly realms. As mentioned, they are physically beyond the pictorial medium as they stand perched atop mosaic spheres that appear to balance on real architectural elements. The angels' gender ambiguity, like their bodies crossing the earthly and celestial domains, transcends and mediates the male-female binary. It is thus all the more significant in this context that they are shown to stand on real columns.⁸⁸ The angels' gender ambiguity may offer a visual resolution to the challenge of depicting the "physical likeness" of an inherently ethereal being—neither distinctly male nor female, neither fully terrestrial nor celestial, but liminal in every respect.⁸⁹

The Middle Zone – Arches Below Vault (Deesis, Processions, Hetoimasia)

Upper Eastern Wall - Deesis (Eastern Wall)

⁸⁵ This *trompe l'oeil* effect appears to be unique to the Zenon Chapel, as the angels in the Archbishop's Chapel in Ravenna do not "break out" beyond the pictorial frame.

⁸⁶ Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 175.

⁸⁷ The angels may also be understood to have psychopomp qualities, that is, to guide the souls to Christ in eternity, see Berelant, *A Study on the Winged Angel*, 16.

⁸⁸ I am indebted to Dr Sharon Salvadori for this insightful observation.

⁸⁹ Although not central to this discussion, the Byzantine imperial court perceived a parallel between angels and eunuchs during the medieval period; their designation as a "third gender" marked them as symbols of status for the imperial family. Consequently, the presence of angels here could also be interpreted as indicators of status for Christ, and Theodora Episcopa. For discussions on this social phenomenon, see Maria Parani, "Look Like an Angel: The Attire of Eunuchs and Its Significance Within the Context of Middle Byzantine Court Ceremonial," in *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Alexander Daniel Beihhammer, Constantinou Stavroula, and Maria G. Parani (Leiden: Brill, 2013). For a discussion on the role of angels and central issues of iconoclasm such as how to represent absolute transcendence in pictorial form, see Glenn Peers, *Subtle Bodies: Representing Angels in Byzantium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

On the upper eastern wall of the chapel is a composition often described as a *Deesis*, aligning with themes of intercession and Judgment Day, fitting for a funerary context.⁹⁰ The scene represents the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist gesturing towards the chapel's primary window (Figure 11).⁹¹ Asmussen convincingly argues that this *Deesis* composition (which typically depicts the Virgin and John the Baptist flanking Christ in intercession) uses the light through the window to signify Christ, whose absence is otherwise conspicuous.⁹² This is yet another example of how the chapel engages with spatial dynamics, relying on the interrelation between images and the directionality of light to convey its meaning. More interestingly still and a point yet to be explored in scholarship, the chapel's design employs negation and absence as devices to signify presence. Put differently, Christ's absence inherently conveys a mystical "presence" through the metaphor of Divine Light from the chapel's eastern window.⁹³

The Virgin Mary is positioned to the window's left, in the northernmost part of the wall. She wears a dark blue *maphorion*, crowned with a light gold halo and accompanied by a vertical inscription of her name (Figure 12).⁹⁴ On the opposite side, John the Baptist wears a yellow and brown *himation*.⁹⁵ Like the Virgin, he gestures toward the window, and his halo is also a rim of gold tesserae, identical to hers, giving parity to the two figures. Their positioning and gestures toward the window may directly reference the iconography of saints shown interacting with

⁹⁰ We should note, however, that the term *Deesis* was coined after the chapel's construction, see Labatt, *Byzantine Rome*, 89.

⁹¹ The two other windows on the lateral sides were walled in at a later date. Although this observation is not directly relevant to the present study and has not been previously proposed, it is possible that these three windows were originally arranged to create a chiasmic effect as light passed through them. As the chapel was originally outwards from the church, light could have permeated simultaneously, producing such an effect.

⁹² Wrenfeldt Asmussen, "The Chapel of S. Zeno in S. Prassede in Rome: New Aspects on the Iconography", 74.

⁹³ The windows in the Zeno chapel were likely filled with sheaths of *selenite spatula*, creating a jewel-like effect through its interaction with natural light. See Claudia Bolgia, "New Light on the 'Bright Ages'," 219.

⁹⁴ Her inscription reads [*SCA MARIA*].

⁹⁵ His inscription reads [*SCS IOHANNIS*].

similar windows in the so-called Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna (Figure 13). As we shall see, has other connections to the chapel of San Zeno.

Christ in the vault is notably positioned upside down relative to the Virgin and John the Baptist, facing the visitor upon entering the chapel. The two figures are scaled to fit the architectural space, appearing much smaller than the angels or Christ above in the vault yet still occupying the entire height of the available wall on either side of the window. Unlike the angels or Christ above, they give the impression of standing on greenish or turquoise patches, presumably verdant fields of paradise—representing a heavenly space, but on an “earthlier plane” than Christ in the vault above. The light that symbolizes Christ shining through the window illuminates the western counter-façade wall, where the *Hetoimasia* (the throne prepared for His Second Coming) is positioned between Peter and Paul (Figure 14).

Upper Western Wall - The *Hetoimasia* Above the Entrance Wall

Like the *Deesis* opposite, the arrangement of the *Hetoimasia* wall is symmetrical. Saints Peter and Paul are divided by an arched aperture that mirrors and aligns with the *Deesis* window on the eastern side. Above this aperture is the seemingly empty, jeweled throne of the *Hetoimasia*, cushioned and adorned with a small cross. Saints Peter and Paul direct their hands towards it, echoing how the Virgin and John the Baptist lift their arms towards the eastern window on the opposite side. Once more, the emptiness of the throne suggests that the “negation” or absence of visible presence serves as a recurring visual rhetoric.⁹⁶ Alternatively, it has also been suggested that the four figures—the Virgin, John the Baptist, Saints Peter, and

⁹⁶ The *Hetoimasia*, although it may appear “empty” to a modern audience, was understood to be filled with Christ’s mystical divine presence due to the presence of light, see Dell’Acqua, *Iconophilia*, 137.

Paul—may be interpreted as a part of an expanded *Deesis* composition, all gesturing toward Christ in the oculus above.⁹⁷

Both understandings can be true simultaneously. It is possible that a dual interpretation emerges, as the viewer is encouraged to parse out interactions between the chapel's numerous elements. Christ is represented through the light streaming from the eastern window, forming a *Deesis* with the Virgin and John the Baptist. At the same time, this *Deesis* could be read to expand and include Peter, Paul, the Virgin, and John the Baptist. In this case, their gesturing should be considered toward Christ in the vault above and understood as a unified composition.

Although the light from the eastern window reaches the *Hetoimasia* directly, it does not culminate there; instead, it passes through the aperture to the opposite side, flowing outwards to the chapel's exterior. Furthermore, the *Hetoimasia* motif within the Zeno chapel may directly reference Santa Maria Maggiore, where it also appears (Figure 15).⁹⁸ As in the Chapel of San Zeno, it is flanked by Saints Peter and Paul. This visual allusion to Santa Maria Maggiore, located only 90 meters away, suggests that the light passing through the eastern window may not only have evoked Christ but also, in this context, perhaps the Virgin Mary.

In the Zeno Chapel, Peter and Paul are identifiable by their typical attributes: Peter holds the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 16:19). In contrast, Paul holds a scroll referencing his epistles. Peter is depicted with his characteristic white beard and full head of hair. Paul has darker gray hair, an elongated beard, and a receding hairline. While their appearance may have been grounded in a standardized iconography by the ninth century, their distinct physiognomic features ultimately set the two apart from one another. Despite wearing similar white tunics that visually resemble those of the angels, each figure is nonetheless highly individualized. Both

⁹⁷ Mackie, "The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation," 194.

⁹⁸ Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 72.

Peter and Paul stand on verdant patches of grass, similar to the Virgin and John the Baptist opposite them. However, the apostles have the addition of two intricate red flowers that bloom directly beneath their feet. The red of the flowers is echoed in the light red halos encircling Peter and Paul's heads and in the accents of their tunics.

Upper Southern Wall (Male Procession)

The upper southern wall, on the visitor's right upon entering, depicts three male figures (two of whom are apostles) in procession toward an immured window (Figure 20). Inscriptions identify them: the solitary figure on the far left is John the Evangelist, son of Zebedee, while the two figures on the other side of the window are Andrew, brother of Peter, and James, also son of Zebedee.⁹⁹ Andrew and James proceed eastwards, while John the Evangelist is the only figure turning in the opposite direction, facing west. There are notable visual distinctions in the portrayal of these male figures. John the Evangelist is depicted with short brown hair and no beard, emphasizing his youth. His isolation is further highlighted by being the only male figure to wear a gold and white garment. Andrew and James are presented more uniformly, with white beards and tunics, accentuating their age and kinship. Their appearance recalls that of Peter and Paul on the western wall. Despite their commonalities, there is a distinction in their appearance; for instance, Andrew has longer hair than James.

John the Evangelist is depicted holding a bejeweled book, with his hands covered by a cloth—a detail Mackie speculates may signify the Book of Revelation, traditionally attributed to being authored by him.¹⁰⁰ The funerary setting provides an appropriate context for this representation of the book on the Second Coming of Christ. Andrew and James hold scrolls, their hands veiled by cloths. All three figures stand on the same verdant plane as the Virgin, John the

⁹⁹ Mackie, 178.

¹⁰⁰ Mackie, 178.

Baptist, Peter, and Paul, which may suggest that they are hierarchically in the same paradisiacal realm. However, as Mackie has stated, their arrangement sequence reflects the order of precedence among the apostles.¹⁰¹ The entire male procession is counterbalanced by the north wall, where three female martyrs, Prassede, Pudenziana, and Agnes, are depicted in a procession towards the Virgin in the Deesis of the eastern wall.

Upper Northern Wall (female procession)

Prassede and Pudenziana are shown together on the left, separated from Agnes by a presently walled-in window (Figure 21). As the relic inscription attests, on July 20, 817, Pope Paschal I transferred Prassede and Pudenziana's relics from the catacombs to this basilica.¹⁰² The three female saints, Prassede, Pudenziana, and Agnes, identifiable by their accompanying inscriptions, are all intimately connected to this site. Although Agnes's remains were housed in her *ad corpus* basilica on the Via Nomentana, the relic inscription outside the chapel specifies that an oratory was once dedicated to Agnes within the Basilica of Santa Prassede. However, its exact location is now unknown.¹⁰³ In addition, by the eighth century, a monastery was dedicated to Agnes on the Esquiline.¹⁰⁴ The significance of these three female saints is underscored by the size and complexity of the red flowers that bloom beneath their feet, slightly more intricate than

¹⁰¹ Mackie, 177.

¹⁰² Mackie, 177. A strigillated sarcophagus in the crypt of the basilica has an inscription on it with the names of Prassede and Pudenziana, suggesting that their relics were housed within it – though it is not entirely clear when this inscription was added, as personal observations indicate that it is unlikely to be from the ninth century.

¹⁰³ Furthermore, The Basilica of Santa Prassede was once described as jointly dedicated to Saint Agnes in early medieval documents, see Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 172.

¹⁰⁴ Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*, 42.

the others in the chapel.¹⁰⁵ Each saint holds her crown of martyrdom with her hands respectfully veiled, symbolizing both submission to Christ and triumph over death.¹⁰⁶

The attire of these martyrs closely resembles that of the virgins depicted in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (Figure 16). In the Zeno Chapel, as in Ravenna, they are shown in long, flowing garments with intricate patterns and gem-encrusted details. Over their tunics, they wear bejeweled pallia, underscoring their appearance of sanctity and reverence. Similarly to the Ravenna procession, where the virgins are on the left aisle of Sant'Apollinare's nave, the female martyrs in the Zeno vault are positioned to Christ's left within his oculus. This is also to the visitor's left upon entering the chapel.

Another parallel between the Ravenna procession and the Zeno chapel is that the female martyrs are in a procession towards the Virgin Mary. However, in the Zeno Chapel, the figures could be understood not only as processing toward the Virgin on the adjacent arch vault. Since the window in the eastern wall opens to the exterior, where Santa Maria Maggiore is located close by, they could also be interpreted as processing northeast toward that site. By contrast, the male figures, John the Evangelist, Andrew, and James, are positioned on the southern wall to the visitor's right, illustrating how spatial arrangement in the chapel is distributed along gendered lines. Male figures are paralleled by female figures, with the brothers Andrew and James corresponding to the sisters Prassede and Pudenziana.

As Corine Schleif has shown, a convention in the early medieval period positioned women on the left and men on the right in architectural spaces (she uses Sant'Apollinare Nuovo

¹⁰⁵ The celestial flowers have been identified as rosebuds, which have had funerary connotations since Roman times and later came to symbolize the blood of martyrs. See Mackie, "Abstract and Vegetal Design in the San Zeno Chapel, Rome: The Ornamental Setting of an Early Medieval Funerary Programme," 178.

¹⁰⁶ Erik Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome: Time, Network, and Repetition* (New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 66.

as an example). In this way, genders were aligned based on the northern and southern axes, as the north was symbolically associated with darkness, cold, and dampness, ergo, connected with women.¹⁰⁷ The Zeno Chapel follows this approach, with women depicted exclusively on the northern side, to the left of Christ in his oculus in the vault—like the procession of female martyrs on the left side of the nave in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo.

The Lower Zones – Barrel-Vault Niches (Transfiguration, Males, Females)

Transfiguration (Eastern) and the Virgin and Child

Within the lower zones of the chapel, the first niche encountered upon entering the space, positioned centrally and directly below the Deesis, contains an image of the Transfiguration. Today, this mosaic is largely obscured by a Baroque altar, leaving only a glimpse of the scene where Jesus reveals his divine nature in the presence of the prophets Moses and Elijah on Mount Tabor. The little one can observe from the mosaic shows that the figures are individualized, just as in other parts of the chapel. The barrel vault of this niche is adorned with sumptuous vegetal motifs and animals, including leopards, birds and phoenixes that correspond with resurrection imagery.

The Baroque altar frames a thirteenth-century mosaic of the Virgin and Child. This mosaic is speculated to be based on an earlier representation within the chapel, possibly destroyed during early modern renovations (Figure 17).¹⁰⁸ It is, therefore, of interest in the present context even if it is not original to the ninth century. This small mosaic depicts the enthroned Virgin wearing her

¹⁰⁷ Corine Schleif, “Men on the Right - Women on the Left: (A)Symmetrical Spaces and Gendered Places.,” ed. Virginia Chieffo Raguin and Sarah Stanbury, *Women’s Space*, 2005, 225.

¹⁰⁸ Mackie, “The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation,” 184.

maphorion, with the Christ child on her lap; Prassede and Pudenziana flank the figures on either side.¹⁰⁹ The Christ child holds a scroll inscribed with the words “Ego Sum Lux.”¹¹⁰

The Female Niche (North)

On the northern side, to the visitor’s left upon entering the chapel and beneath the procession of the female martyrs, is the niche containing the representation of Theodora Episcopa (Figure 3). This niche is the most richly decorated in the chapel, signaling that it has particular importance. It is the only niche to feature an additional extant narrative image to its right, the *Anastasis*, also known as the Harrowing of Hell, as well as an iconic image above it within the lunette, depicting the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God) with the Four Rivers of Paradise, where pairs of stags and does drink from its outflowing streams.

On the left wall of this barrel-vault niche, there likely would have been another similar scene removed during restoration. Mackie suggests this panel would also have had resurrection imagery, most probably the raising of Lazarus.¹¹¹ Above this, the barrel vault is decorated with complex lattice patterns of tesserae in a handsome range of shades in green, blue, and gold. It is in this setting, presumably positioned between scenes of resurrection and accompanied by near life-size portraits of Santa Prassede, Santa Pudenziana, the Virgin Mary, and herself, that Theodora Episcopa’s sarcophagus was likely once placed.

Theodora Episcopa’s portrait is positioned on the far left, clearly identifiable and set apart by her distinct appearance (Figure 4). She is the only figure wearing an entirely unadorned, plain, heavy white headdress. The whiteness of her veil sharply contrasts with the blue square halo

¹⁰⁹ Bruno M. Apollonj Ghetti, *Santa Prassede*, Chiesa di Roma (Roma: Marietti, 1961), 75.

¹¹⁰ Given the chapel’s materiality and interaction with light, this text may be understood as particularly fitting in this context. It perhaps interrelates as self-reflexive commentary on the medium of mosaics and their relationship with Divine Light represented in the Deesis above.

¹¹¹ Mackie, “The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation,” 186.

framing her head, further emphasizing her prominence. The whiteness of her veil likely signifies her purity.¹¹² Her face is subtly rounder than the figures to her right. The softened contours of Theodora's visage are visually accentuated by the angular edges of her halo and veil.

Both Prassede and Pudenziana wear their crowns of martyrdom, visually linking the sisters together, though subtle distinctions in their appearances remain. For instance, Prassede's skin is slightly darker than her sister's, even if their oval-shaped facial silhouettes are exceedingly similar. The extensive jeweled adornments of these two figures juxtapose them with the images of the Virgin and Theodora. The latter both have their hair covered. The Virgin wears her dark blue *maphorion*, like in the *Deesis* of the eastern wall. Their veils visually connect Theodora and the Virgin, even if they are of different types. Schaefer has also observed that the alternation pattern of Theodora, Prassede, Virgin Mary, and Pudenziana links the virginal sisters to one another and identifies the "matron Theodora" with the Virgin Mary as the mother of Christ.¹¹³

Unlike the other figures to her right, Theodora lacks an outlined red halo; her square nimbus instead specifically indicates that her depiction was intended as a portrait likeness.¹¹⁴ Further, her square halo serves as a significant marker of negotiation: while she is positioned on the same hierarchical plane as Santa Prassede, Santa Pudenziana, and the Virgin, she does not assume the status of a saint, which a round halo would otherwise signify. Instead, her square nimbus differentiates and signals a more humble identity compared to the other figures.

Francesca Dell'Acqua has proposed that the female saints serve as witnesses to Theodora's faith

¹¹² Further exploration of her attire presents compelling opportunities for research, particularly as this headdress remains almost entirely understudied. Mackie suggests that it may signify her "religious vocation," though she does not elaborate on this aspect further, see Mackie, 184.

¹¹³ Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*, 109.

¹¹⁴ Osborne, "The Portrait of Pope Leo IV in San Clemente, Rome," 64.

as her celestial companions and as imitators of Mary. She also speculates that Theodora's titulus may signify her "consecration to God."¹¹⁵ Schaefer, on the other hand, suggests that beyond being merely a symbolic title, Theodora's titulus may indicate that she was the overseer of the papal household in the Lateran palace, as her white veil suggests an "ecclesial, but not abbatial" role.¹¹⁶

Theodora is the only figure accompanied by an inscription in this register: the letters spelling "THEODO(ra)" are vertically placed along her nimbus, with the last two letters missing, presumably because they are within a restored section.¹¹⁷ The second part of her epithet, "EPISCOPA," is placed horizontally across her halo. The tesserae spelling her name were not reset; they are original. The perpendicular arrangement of her titulus emphasizes the structure of her square halo, working along its straight sides.

As Mackie points out, the lack of a border pattern beneath the four figures in the northern niche is due to their truncation when the space was altered to connect with the adjoining room, now accessible via the passage beneath them. She further argues that their dress below the shoulders cannot, therefore, be considered original either.¹¹⁸ However, she does tentatively propose that the Virgin, notably positioned with pronounced spacing between the figures of Prassede and Pudenziana that flank her, may have originally been depicted as the enthroned Virgin with Christ Child.¹¹⁹ The thirteenth-century mosaic in the Baroque altar could have been based upon the design of this no longer extant composition (Figure 17).¹²⁰ However, this reconstruction remains speculative, making it a plausible yet unsubstantiated hypothesis. If the

¹¹⁵ Dell'Acqua, *Iconophilia*, 131.

¹¹⁶ Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*, 110.

¹¹⁷ Mackie, "The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation," 184.

¹¹⁸ Mackie, 183. Mackie has stated that the Virgin Mary's front opening cloak is "anachronistic."

¹¹⁹ Mackie, 184.

¹²⁰ It is an appealing reconstruction, as Prassede and Pudenziana would flank both Virgin and Child compositions, see Mackie, 184

Virgin and Child imagery were, in fact, directly above Theodora Episcopa's sarcophagus, it would have reinforced the suggestion that the Virgin and Child were to be understood as counterparts to Theodora Episcopa and Paschal I.

Lamb of God with Four Harts

The scene directly above the four female figures represents the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God) on Mount Zion with the Four Rivers of Paradise, from which four harts drink.¹²¹ This motif references Psalm 42, "As the deer pants for water, so I long for you, O God."¹²² What is interesting about this lunette, however, is that unlike Galla Placidia's so-called Mausoleum in Ravenna, where this motif also appears (Figure 19) in the Zeno chapel the design incorporates both male and female harts: there are two stags and two does. The stags are given primacy by being placed in the forefront, and the does are behind them. In other words, there is a purposeful representation of both males and females, metaphorically symbolizing both sexes' devotion to God.

The Anastasis Panel

On the right side of this barrel vault is a scene representing the *Anastasis* (the Greek word for Resurrection).¹²³ This small panel depicts Christ descending into Limbo to save the souls of the righteous (Figure 18).¹²⁴ Unfortunately, like the scene of the female figures directly to its left, the *Anastasis* panel has been truncated below, meaning that only part of its original composition is still extant. Nevertheless, what remains provides significant material for analysis and has been

¹²¹ Dell'Acqua, *Iconophilia*, 139.

¹²² Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 168.

¹²³ It is also known as the Harrowing of Hell.

¹²⁴ Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 168.

the focus of intense scholarly focus, as the *Anastasis* in the Zeno Chapel is one of the earliest such compositions.¹²⁵

Christ is depicted in a blue *mandorla* with emanating white rays descending towards Adam and Eve.¹²⁶ A gold halo crowns his head with a blue cruciform shape within. An angel is peering out from behind Christ's *mandorla*; its appearance resembles the angels in the four corners of the chapel. Adam is depicted at an advanced age and positioned in front of Eve (like in the panel of the four harts that drink from the streams of Paradise, the male figure is foregrounded). Similarly to Theodora and the Virgin Mary in the adjacent scene, Eve's hair is covered by a yellow hood. The positioning of this panel adjacent to where Theodora's tomb would have been creates a powerful statement: a representation of the promised salvation and triumph over death by Christ's redemptive power.¹²⁷

The Male Niche (Southern)

Directly across the northern barrel vault, Christ is depicted in the lunette flanked by two male saints in the southern niche (Figure 20). As in the upper sections above, where the processions balance male and female imagery directly across from each other, this niche similarly creates a foil to the northern one. Christ, the largest figure in the composition, has a halo featuring a blue cruciform cross. He holds a jeweled book. The figure to his left is likely Zeno, identifiable by his red chasuble, tonsured head, and white hair, suggesting advanced age. The figure to Christ's right remains unidentified but may represent Valentine, considered Zeno's

¹²⁵ Dell'Acqua, *Iconophilia*, 140.

¹²⁶ Brenk notes that Christ's white rays resemble Christ's halo in the Chludov Psalter, following the hypothesis that the chapel's imagery is an ideological statement favoring images during iconoclasm. See Brenk, "Zum Bildprogramm Der Zenokapelle in Rom," 217–18.

¹²⁷ Mackie, "The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation," 185.

brother, whose relics were also likely placed here as well.¹²⁸ Like the female figures in the niche across, they were at some point truncated below their busts to make way for an adjoining room.¹²⁹

The Façade Mosaic Above the Chapel's Entrance

The entrance portal to the chapel is topped by an elaborate mosaic façade that Caroline Goodson has described as a *propylaeum* (Figure 22).¹³⁰ Margo Pautler Klass has instead proposed that it functions as an *iconostasis*, like those in Byzantine sanctuaries, which form a screen that separates the space of the liturgy from the main body of the church.¹³¹ This façade mosaic, as it is presently referred to, may be considered part of the chapel, as its iconography anticipates themes found within. Particularly the balance of male and female imagery, with a strong focus on the Virgin and, by extension, matrilineal connections. The understanding of the chapel as a space connected to the Virgin Mother seems to have been more prominently considered at a certain point in the chapel's history than today, as it was known by the name *Sancta Maria Libera Nos a Poenis Inferni*.¹³²

The façade mosaic is framed below by a pair of black antique granite column shafts topped with medieval Ionic capitals and bases ornately carved *all' antica*.¹³³ The carving of the volutes and other details of the Ionic capitals and bases similarly herald the chapel's interior paradisiacal decorations, as they feature stylized vegetal ornaments and flowers adorned with

¹²⁸ Mackie, 188.

¹²⁹ The antechamber now houses the Column of Flagellation brought over by Giovanni Colonna in the thirteenth century.

¹³⁰ Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 161.

¹³¹ Klass, "The Chapel of S. Zeno in S. Prassede in Rome," 122.

¹³² Apollonj Ghetti, *Santa Prassede*, 66. It is not known when the chapel was first called as such nor when it ceased to be referred to by this name. It is possibly linked to the thirteenth-century mosaic of the Virgin and Child within.

¹³³ Krautheimer was the first to describe their carvings as *all' antica*.

various *intreccio* patterns. The use of Ionic capitals conceivably has a twofold effect.¹³⁴ First, they may have intended to recall the capitals used in Santa Maria Maggiore's nave, evoking associations with the Virgin Mary. Maria Fabricius Hansen and Barbara J. Haveland have proposed that the "homogeneous and subdued quality" of the Ionic volutes in Santa Maria Maggiore reflects the Virgin's modesty.¹³⁵ As a result, they persuasively demonstrate that the Ionic capitals came to be interpreted as feminine in the medieval period, especially when contrasted with the Doric order, traditionally understood as their masculine counterpart.¹³⁶ Secondly, the use of Ionic capitals certainly creates a visual distinction from the rest of the church, where they were Corinthian throughout.¹³⁷

The columns support a heavy marble entablature that was also repurposed from earlier structures.¹³⁸ Above the entablature rests what has been described as a funerary urn, which, as Beat Brenk has also suggested, was intended to mark the chapel's function as a mausoleum.¹³⁹ While Brenk considers it to be Late Antique and that it was used as an *objet trouvé* recalling mausolea from the imperial period, it is also possible that this urn was carved *all'antica* in the ninth century.¹⁴⁰ The urn is placed within a curved archlike aperture, aligned with the sole

¹³⁴ While in the nave, the columns are now of the Composite order, this would be a result of modern renovations as they were originally Corinthian, see Emerick Judson, "Focusing on the Celebrant: The Column Display inside Santa Prassede," *Mededelingen Van Het Nederlands Instituut Te Rome* 59 (2001): 131.

¹³⁵ Maria Fabricius Hansen and Barbara J. Haveland, "Principles for the Distribution of Spolia," in *The Spolia Churches of Rome, Recycling Antiquity in the Middle Ages* (Aarhus University Press, 2015), 33–48.

¹³⁶ One example introduced by Hansen and Haveland is the use of Doric spoliated columns at San Pietro in Vincoli, which, though uncommon for the period, serves as a visual metaphor for the masculine qualities of St. Peter—the proverbial "rock" (*Πέτρος, Petros*) upon which the Church is built. See Hansen and Haveland, 44.

¹³⁷ Emerick Judson has written an interesting article about columns throughout the Basilica of Santa Prassede, including the "fancy" foliated columns, to borrow Emerick's term, now in the sides of the church's transept, which he proposed were arranged as a pergola. See Emerick, "Focusing on the Celebrant: The Column Display inside Santa Prassede."

¹³⁸ Maria Fabricius Hansen and Barbara J. Haveland, "Other Noteworthy Spolia Churches," in *The Spolia Churches of Rome, Recycling Antiquity in the Middle Ages* (Aarhus University Press, 2015), 221–34.

¹³⁹ Beat Brenk, "Zum Bildprogramm Der Zenokapelle in Rom," *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 45/47, no. 12 (1974 1972): 219.

¹⁴⁰ Further examination is needed to determine whether the urn is from the antique or from the early medieval period like the capitals. Schaefer, however, dates it to the third-century, see Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*, 95.

window in the chapel of San Zeno, in its eastern wall. In the mornings, one can observe how the light streaming through the two windows aligns perfectly from the vantage point of standing at the entrance to the chapel. The alignment between the aperture on the façade mosaic and the window within the chapel has generally been overlooked in the literature. The possible significance of this alignment will be addressed later in this chapter.¹⁴¹

The lintel, directly beneath the entablature, was apparently carved in the ninth century. Goodson observes that the medieval sculptors worked the entrance's entablature to purposefully integrate the imperial-era egg-and-dart molding from the *spolia* to the medieval lintel.¹⁴² A medieval audience would likely have perceived no distinction between the antique and the contemporary elements, lending weight to a sense of continuity with antiquity.¹⁴³

The lintel is inscribed: "Through the work of the Prelate Paschal, ornament gleams in this wall because he gave pious prayers and was earnest in devotion to the Lord."¹⁴⁴ It ends with Paschal's monogram, presumably heralding a personal dimension to the chapel's contents. This inscription may perhaps convey a meaning beyond merely referencing the iridescence of the mosaics within and imply the presence of the Virgin Mary. As Erik Thunø states, a ninth-century church inscription that emphasizes splendor relates not only to relics and mosaics but also to the Virgin. This, he explains, was through a well-known sermon by Venantius Fortunatus where the Virgin Mary is described as "gleaming" and "radiating."

Then the Mother of God, the pious Virgin Mary, gleams and leads the sheep from the virginal flock of the Lamb. She herself, in the center of a crowd of young girls who

¹⁴¹ See the section about the *Hetoimasia*.

¹⁴² Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 161.

¹⁴³ Labatt, *Byzantine Rome*, 86.

¹⁴⁴ *PASCHALIS PRAESVLIS OPVS DECOR[E] FVLGET IN AVLA QVOD PIA OPTVLIT VOTA STVDVIT D[OMIN]O P[A]SCHAL*. Quoted in Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 161, citing Nicolette Gray, "The Palaeography of Latin Inscriptions in the Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Centuries in Italy," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 16 (1948).

surround her, draws the army radiant with the light of her chastity. They celebrate their vows in the banquets of paradise. One collects violets, another picks roses.¹⁴⁵

The façade mosaic is bilaterally symmetrical, creating a harmonious and balanced design; it features multiple roundels of men and women arranged within two stacked concentric registers.¹⁴⁶ These roundels may be compared to *clipei* that framed the portraits on Roman sarcophagi. However, a more recent connection is the portrait busts found within the vault of the Archbishop's chapel mosaic in Ravenna (Figure 9).

In the outer arched register, the bust of a bearded Christ is flanked by Peter and Paul, followed by his apostles on either side, making the outermost register entirely male. The inner register includes representations of eight bejeweled women, culminating with the Virgin and Child at the apex, flanked by two tonsured males, which Schaefer has identified as a deacon and a priest. She cleverly observes that, in the façade mosaic composition, the Virgin Mary's placement between a deacon and a priest therefore symbolically positions her as the *episcopa*, by virtue of being the Mother of the Son, "hinting" at Theodora Episcopa's relationship with Paschal.¹⁴⁷ The female saints appear relatively homogenous in appearance and dress since they all wear ornate tiaras and jewels, though they have slightly individualized facial features. By contrast, the Virgin is presented in a simple dark blue *maphorion*; her distinction is marked through the absence of any such bejeweling. There is a clear demarcation between an outer male zone and an inner female zone, even if the Virgin is flanked by two males. The identity of the

¹⁴⁵ Inde dei genetrix pia virgo Maria coruscat, virgineoque agni de grege ducit oves. Ipsa puellari medio circumdata coetu luce pudicitiae splendida castra trahit. Per paradisiacas epulas sua vota canentes ista legit violas, carpit et illa rosas." in Erik Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome: Time, Network, and Repetition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 76. Roses are prominently featured throughout the Zeno chapel, further aligning with this association.

¹⁴⁶ Most of the polychromatic mosaic is original, except for the two outermost oblong roundels at the bottom, depicting mitred popes, which are modern additions.

¹⁴⁷ Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*, 97.

males framing the Virgin has been the subject of speculation, with many believing them to be Saint Zeno and his brother Valentine, whose remains were possibly housed in the Chapel of San Zeno as well.¹⁴⁸ It has also been suggested that they are the brothers of Saints Prassede and Pudenziana, Saint Timothy, and Saint Novatus.¹⁴⁹ This is less likely, however, as Zeno appears inside the chapel again on the interior southern wall, wearing the same red chasuble and tonsured hair.¹⁵⁰

The women's roundels on the inner register are set against a gold background, but the interior of their round frames is distinctly green. The only exception is Mary, with the infant Christ in her lap, whose roundel, doubling as a halo, remains gold, like Christ's directly above. The female saints are not labeled, but Santa Prassede and Santa Pudenziana can be identified since their physiognomic likeness is repeated inside the chapel, just as the portrait of Saint Zeno likely is. They are presently identified as the two outermost female saints positioned at the base of the composition. Mackie suggests that the absence of identifying inscriptions in the women's roundels implies their representations were likely self-evident to a ninth-century audience, in a similar fashion to the recognizability apostles above them, portraying well-known virgins or martyrs.¹⁵¹ While this is possible, it is perhaps more likely these women represent the female martyrs whose relics were translated to the Basilica of Santa Prassede. The relic inscription mentions the following women: "(5) virgins and widows, Praxedes, Pudenziana, Juliana,

¹⁴⁸ Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 71; Apollonj Ghetti, *Santa Prassede*, 69–70.

¹⁴⁹ Ciampini, *Vetera Monumenta: In Quibus Praecipue Musiva Opera Sacrarum, Profanarumque Aedium Structura, Ac Nonnulli Antiqui Ritus Dissertationibus, Iconibusque Illustrantur*, 2: 150.

¹⁵⁰ Zeno's attire only differs if we understand him to be the deacon in the basilica's apse, where his brown hair suggests a younger appearance.

¹⁵¹ Mackie, therefore, identifies them as Felicitas, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucia, Agnes, Cecilia, or Anastasia – though the sisters Prassede and Pudenziana are almost certainly depicted. Mackie, "The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation," 190.

Symphorosa, Felicula, Marina, Candida, Paulina, Daria, Basilla, Paulina, Memmia, Martha, Emerentiana and Zoe.”

If we accept that Zeno is depicted on the façade mosaic as the tonsured man in a red chasuble to the right of the Virgin and that Prassede and Pudenziana are likewise repeated within, then Theodora Episcopa is decidedly the only figure absent from this composition. Theodora’s portrait, in other words, is exclusively found inside the chapel. It may be worth considering that the Virgin is a transposition for Theodora Episcopa on the façade mosaic, underscored by her noteworthy absence. It may be significant in this context to consider that in Paschal’s time, the Virgin and Child was often referred to as “Mater-Virgo.”¹⁵² The composition’s focal point of the façade mosaic is the roundel of Christ in the outer register, positioned directly above the Virgin and Child, connecting the three figures in a vertical axial line.¹⁵³

The arrangement along this perpendicular plane, from top to bottom, features Christ, the Virgin, and then the Christ Child once more, emphasizing matrilineal themes and the reciprocal relationship between Mother and Son. Christ’s roundel, which also functions as a halo, extends into the Virgin’s register, further illustrating their bond. Directly beneath this matrilineal plane lies the entrance to the chapel. However, between these elements, namely the entrance and the Virgin and Child, the morning light from the chapel’s eastern window aligns with the aperture that frames the urn. This alignment creates a remarkable manifestation of light that emanates from directly beneath the Virgin and Child’s haloes, as if in an extension of them.

¹⁵² Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome*, 76.

¹⁵³ In Paschalian mosaics, the alignment of elements along the vertical axis is consistently emphasized, as seen in the apse of the basilica and in other churches from his architectural campaign, such as Santa Maria in Domnica.

The overlapping arrangement in the halos of Christ and the Virgin invites a parallel between the Virgin and Son and the relationship between Pope Paschal I and his mother, Theodora Episcopa. This is not only because the entrance to her funerary monument is located directly below Virgin and Son's central roundels but also because Theodora's honorific, "Episcopa," derives from Pope Paschal I's position as Bishop (*Episcopus*) of Rome. In this way, the mother is conferred her honorific from her son's ecclesiastical role, as in the façade mosaic, the son's halo spills over into the mother's. More directly still, in the same way that Christ and the Virgin share matching gold halos, Paschal I and Theodora Episcopa share identical blue square nimbi, even though he is represented in the basilica's apse (Figure 23), and she is portrayed solely within her mausoleum.

Connecting the Arches and Apse Conch to the Chapel

The Basilica of Santa Prassede presents an original and distinctive iconographic and architectural program within its sanctuary. Rather unusually, there is a transept arch, referred to as the triumphal arch, the apsidal arch, and the apse conch (Figure 23). Scholars often examine each of these parts in isolation, just like the Chapel of San Zeno is typically treated separately from these sanctuary mosaics. However, there are visual elements that interconnect them, and which further elucidate the ties between Paschal and his mother. This section will concentrate on these interrelated motifs, as a comprehensive analysis of the entire mosaic program lies beyond the scope of this study.

Each architectural element of the sanctuary is richly decorated in multiple registers. The triumphal arch features a jeweled Heavenly Jerusalem at the apex of its upper register, with Christ at the center. The Virgin and Prassede flank him on either side, granting them prominence

in the composition.¹⁵⁴ The lower register of the triumphal arch, on both sides, features a procession of young male figures holding palm branches, presenting imagery that evokes Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem.¹⁵⁵

The apsidal arch depicts the twenty-four Elders worshipping the *Agnus Dei* on a jeweled throne. The *Agnus Dei* is the focal point of the apsidal arch, situated at its pinnacle, and therefore lies directly in line with Christ at the apex of the triumphal arch. The *Agnus Dei* is flanked by seven candlesticks, three to the left and four to the right. The Four Living Creatures with bejeweled books are in the spandrels.¹⁵⁶

The conch represents a well-known theophanic formula that likely originated from Saints Cosmas and Damian in Rome.¹⁵⁷ In it, Peter and Paul introduce two saints to Christ – in this case, Santa Prassede and Santa Pudenziana – in the presence of the Paschal holding a model of the church.¹⁵⁸ Once more, Christ is centrally positioned and directly in line with the *Agnus Dei* in the apsidal arch above. Along the central axial line between these three sanctuary elements (the triumphal arch, apsidal arch, and apse conch), Paschal's blue and white monogram appears on the intrados of each arch (Figure 24). This arrangement forms a deliberate pattern: Christ, Paschal's monogram, the *Agnus Dei*, Paschal's monogram once more, and finally, Christ again,

¹⁵⁴ Heavenly Jerusalem is a motif that comes from the Book of Revelation, see Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 67. Hendrik Dey has argued that the bejeweled city is modeled on the Aurelian walls see Hendrik W. Dey, *The Aurelian Wall and the Refashioning of Imperial Rome, AD 271-855* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 147–49. Cited in Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 67.

¹⁵⁵ Marchita B. Mauck, "The Mosaic of the Triumphal Arch of S. Prassede: A Liturgical Interpretation," *Speculum* 62, no. 4 (1987): 824.

¹⁵⁶ Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome*, 15–16.

¹⁵⁷ Thunø, 16.

¹⁵⁸ Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 62. The crucial difference is that instead of introducing the brothers Cosmas and Damian, Peter and Paul introduce the sisters Prassede and Pudenziana. In this way, there is an emphasis on genealogy. Just as inside the Zeno chapel, the brothers Andrew and James counterbalance the sisters Prassede and Pudenziana in the supporting arch vaults. For a comparative study between Saints Cosmas and Damian and Santa Prassede, see also Rotraut Wisskirchen and Franz Schlechter, *Die Mosaiken der Kirche Santa Prassede in Rom*, revidierte Buchausgabe, Zaberns Bildbände zur Archäologie 5 (Mainz am Rhein: von Zabern, 1992), 27–50.

thereby establishing a strikingly explicit association between Paschal and Christ. It echoes the way the façade mosaic also relies on the axial relationship between elements.

Triumphal Arch

As mentioned above, the Triumphal Arch is divided into two main registers, with the upper one depicting a jeweled city with six apostles on each side within its walls. In the center, Christ is foregrounded by The Virgin and Prassede, while two angels stand behind them, framing the scene (Figure 24). The gates to the jeweled city are on either side, where angels guard the gates. The angels resemble the ones in the Zeno chapel, with white *himations* and blue halos outlined with white tesserae. On either side, large crowds of figures are depicted. The left side features a mix of male and female figures. The female figures are identifiable as martyrs due to their crowns, which they hold in their veiled hands, as in the Zeno chapel. The female martyrs are positioned at the front of the congregation. The crowd depicted on the right side solely features male figures.

Marchita Mauck discusses how the composition of the triumphal arch has puzzled scholars, with some suggesting that it depicts Heavenly Jerusalem and others connecting it to themes of the Transfiguration. It has even been suggested that the female figure at the apex, recognizable as Prassede, is a version of *Mater Ecclesia*.¹⁵⁹ More saliently to the present analysis, Mauck has made two interesting arguments about the triumphal and apsidal arch imagery. Firstly, that the crowds represented on the sides of the arch are linked to the liturgical rituals of the church of Santa Prassede and the antiphon *In Paradisum*.¹⁶⁰ Secondly, they are

¹⁵⁹ Marchita B. Mauck, "The Mosaic of the Triumphal Arch of S. Prassede: A Liturgical Interpretation," *Speculum* 62, no. 4 (1987): 813.

¹⁶⁰ Mauck, 814. An antiphon is a liturgical chant, with *In Paradisum* specifically about angels leading the faithful into paradise. It is possible that this antiphon would, therefore have been applicable to the Zeno chapel too, as these angels are also prominently featured there.

linked to the liturgical rituals which occurred in 817 when the relics were translated to the Basilica of Santa Prassede. Therefore, the triumphal arch iconography relates to the *translatio* of the 2,300 relics organized by Paschal and reflects the high visibility of the church and its program.

The apse conch also includes some contemporary references: Pope Paschal I, shown on the far left with a blue square nimbus – like his mother, Theodora Episcopa, in the Chapel of San Zeno – dedicates the church of Santa Prassede to Christ. He holds a model version of it in his hands. Paschal's appearance is distinctive, characterized by a tonsure, dark brown hair, and a slightly rounded face (his chin notably resembles his mother's in its subtle shaping.) Paschal is dressed in a yellow chasuble with white *clavi* and stands beside an elaborately bejeweled Prassede, who appears directly to his right. The composition reflects Prassede's position beside her mother, Theodora, in the chapel, where she, like Paschal, is situated on the far left.¹⁶¹ Moreover, Paschal is placed in the ideal part of the conch for his line of sight to align directly with the entrance to his mother's mausoleum.¹⁶²

Saint Paul has his arm around Prassede in the introduction to Christ. On the opposite side, in a symmetrical arrangement, Saint Peter is depicted with his arm around another female saint, presumably Santa Pudenziana.¹⁶³ It is generally agreed that Saint Zeno is depicted on the farthest right of the apse conch's composition, where he counterbalances Paschal I on the other side. Schaefer, however, suggests that this is more likely to represent Stephen, the proto-deacon of Jerusalem.¹⁶⁴ This deacon is represented wearing a white long-sleeved dalmatic over his

¹⁶¹ Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 168.

¹⁶² I am grateful to Dr Sharon Salvadori for sharing this observation.

¹⁶³ Not only are the two sisters Prassede and Pudenziana repeatedly represented together, but the Basilica of Santa Prassede itself is near Santa Pudenziana's fourth-century church.

¹⁶⁴ Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*, 50.

tunic.¹⁶⁵ Considering that, unlike Zeno depicted on the façade mosaic and within the chapel, this figure has brown hair and hence appears younger, and that he is wearing a different kind of dress, it is likely that Schaefer is indeed correct in this identification.

Christ at the center of the apse conch is shown levitating slightly; he stands against a dark blue background with clouds. Beneath his feet, an inscription specifies that he is above the Jordan River.¹⁶⁶ Below this register are twelve lambs in procession towards the *Agnus Dei*, which stands on Mount Zion and from which the Four Rivers of Paradise flow. The motif of the Four Rivers with the *Agnus Dei* is repeated within the Zeno chapel.

Interconnected Elements – Color and Monogram

Another unifying aspect between the Zeno chapel and the sanctuary is that winged angels are prominently featured throughout the triumphal and apsidal arch: they guard the gates to Jerusalem, flank Christ, and levitate behind the Virgin and Prassede at the apex. As in the Zeno Chapel, the angels are dressed in white tunics and have blue halos bordered by white tesserae. Labatt points out that the combination of blue and white holds particular significance in the Zeno Chapel and the basilica, encouraging viewers to seek out manifold associations between elements with these color schemes.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, blue and white not only distinguish Paschal and Theodora Episcopa from their retinues, with their blue square halos outlined in white, but are also replicated in Paschal's monogram. As mentioned, Paschal's monogram appears on both intrados of the triumphal arch and the apsidal arch, emphasizing the vertical axial relationship between the arches and the apse, culminating in the figure of Christ in the conch. Christ notably has a blue and white cruciform shape in his halo in the apse conch.

¹⁶⁵ Erik Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome: Time, Network, and Repetition* (New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 67.

¹⁶⁶ The inscription reads "IORDANES."

¹⁶⁷ Labatt, *Byzantine Rome*, 92.

Chapter 3 – From Augusta to Episcopa: A New Interpretation

Theodora's Mausoleum as a Successor to Past Monuments

As the preceding chapter has demonstrated, Theodora Episcopa's final resting place was decorated to an exceptional degree in materials and imagery.¹⁶⁸ Paschal I evidently sought to grant his mother the highest honors in her final resting place. The chapel and basilica reveal that Paschal purposefully referenced and re-interpreted various elements from Ravennate-Byzantine and Roman monuments, including the Archbishop's Chapel, Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Galla Placidia's so-called Mausoleum, Saints Cosmas and Damian, Santa Maria Maggiore, and Old St. Peter's in a ninth-century Roman context.¹⁶⁹ Santa Prassede and San Zeno appear to fuse these Roman and Byzantine architectural precedents and collapse temporal dimensions. Theodora's mausoleum was presumably viewed as a modern successor of this long line of monuments. It was created, moreover, at a time of significant political factional strife and instability in Rome and while the Iconoclastic Controversy divided Christendom.¹⁷⁰ While Paschal restored linkages with the past, he also positioned himself as an innovator. His concern with his own self-representation and posterity manifests itself in no uncertain terms in his repeated use of his blue

¹⁶⁸ Mackie concludes her seminal essay with the observation that Paschal decorated his mother's final resting place with the most "modern and innovative" iconographic program possible, though it is full of references to antique compositions, see Mackie, "The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation," 199.

¹⁶⁹ The formal and ideological connections between Old St. Peter's and the Basilica of Santa Prassede have been extensively studied within the framework of the so-called Carolingian Renaissance and more recently, reinterpreted by scholars such as Judson Emerick and Caroline Goodson. See Krautheimer, "The Carolingian Revival of Early Christian Architecture"; Emerick, "Focusing on the Celebrant: The Column Display inside Santa Prassede"; Goodson, "Revival and Reality: The Carolingian Renaissance in Rome and the Basilica of S. Prassede."

¹⁷⁰ Charlemagne's death in 814 led to political divides in Rome. For discussions on the challenges faced by Paschal, see Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 267; Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 51.

and white monogram (Figure 24).¹⁷¹ Similarly, he placed importance on ensuring that his physical likeness and that of his mother were plainly distinguishable and linked to one another. Their kinship is accentuated, just as the genealogy of Christ and the Virgin, Prassede and Pudenziana, Andrew and James, and perhaps Zeno and Valentine are emphasized throughout the chapel.

The deliberate focus on reinterpreting historical precedents and lineage invites a broader question. Could the portrayal of Paschal's mother with her unusual *titulus* be understood as the pope's reinterpretation that draws from a repertoire of earlier traditions? This chapter attempts to answer this query by forging new connections between Theodora Episcopa and two of the most famous elite women of Late Antiquity: Helena Augusta (c. 246/8 – 330) and Galla Placidia (c. 392/393 – 450).

Theodora's Episcopa's Visibility

Even with the limited extant historical evidence regarding Theodora Episcopa, it is possible to tentatively reconstruct her prominence in Paschal's pontificate through the basilica's architecture and the relic inscription. The chapel's materials are extraordinarily expensive and, like the basilica, communicate Christian triumph, glory, salvation, and a heightened level of sanctity. Its original architectural configuration, jutting outwards from the right-hand side of the Basilica of Santa Prassede, offered it considerable visibility from both the interior and exterior. Especially given that the basilica was near a pilgrimage route and in proximity to Santa Maria Maggiore, making it accessible to a broad range of viewers.

¹⁷¹ This monogram appears not only on the intrados of the triumphal arch and apse but is also carved into the lintel at the entrance to Theodora's mausoleum.

The distinctive iconography of the triumphal arch, depicting a jeweled Heavenly Jerusalem surrounded by the imagery of crowds of people, also reflects the basilica's role as a place where large processions occurred.¹⁷² The original ceremony when thousands of martyrs' relics were translated from extramural catacombs certainly had an element of public spectacle. As the marble relic inscription indicates, this was also the time when Theodora Episcopa's remains were placed in the purpose-built chapel. This chronology implies that Theodora's commemoration was integral to Paschal's official messaging. Theodora's remains were quite possibly tied into the relics' translation ceremony, elevated to a status comparable to that of the martyrs. It cannot be excluded that her commemoration attained an even higher level of distinction than some of the martyrs, since Zeno is listed as interred alongside her, with "two others," in the wondrously decorated mausoleum annexed to the church.¹⁷³

Theodora Episcopa's inclusion in the relic inscription is, of course, also inherently significant, as her name was among the only 86 martyrs mentioned out of the 2,300 translated into the basilica.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, the arrangement of the inscription itself is of particular interest in attempting to piece together Theodora's original standing. The inscription is formulated along gendered lines, and this further emphasizes Theodora's eminence and distinction. The upper half lists the male martyrs' names first (up to line 31), while the second lists the female virgins and martyrs. However, the section that mentions Theodora Episcopa, lines 36–42, breaks with the

¹⁷² Joseph Dyer, like Mauck, links this imagery to the liturgy and relic translation ceremonies held at the church in 817, see Joseph Dyer, "Prolegomena to a History of Music and Liturgy at Rome in the Middle Ages," in *Essays on Medieval Music in Honor of David G. Hughes*, ed. Graeme M. Boone (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 87–115, cited in Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 68. Hendrik Dey suggests that the forms of the jeweled Heavenly Jerusalem were modeled on the Aurelian walls, see Dey, *The Aurelian Wall and the Refashioning of Imperial Rome, AD 271-855*, 147–49.

¹⁷³ The relic inscription mentions two chapels within the Basilica of Santa Prassede, one to St. John the Evangelist and the other to St. Agnes. Unfortunately, both are now lost. The St. John chapel housed the relics of St. Maurus and 40 other martyrs, whereas the St. Agnes one housed the relics of Pope Alexander. See Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 69.

¹⁷⁴ Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome*, 60.

gendered form above, listing *her* name before Zeno's, suggesting a higher precedence in the chapel. In other words, despite the chapel being traditionally called San Zeno, the relic inscription prioritizes the *benignissimae* (most benign) Theodora, positioning Zeno as secondary to her.¹⁷⁵

As we have seen, the façade mosaic above the entrance to Theodora's Mausoleum heralded, as it still does today, the importance of its occupant even without requiring general access to its interior.¹⁷⁶ But it is especially the Virgin and Child imagery (or the Mater-Virgo, the term used in Paschal's time)¹⁷⁷ that is striking: it may be construed as the heavenly analog to Paschal and his mother. It is reasonable to assume that Paschal granted his mother such prominence for ideological purposes beyond simply expressing his filial devotion. The questions to be addressed are: what were these ideological, political, and social advantages, and what did they intend to communicate about Paschal's episcopacy?

Dovetailing Theodora Episcopa to Helena Augusta and Galla Placidia Augusta

An intriguing comparison emerges between Constantine I (ca. 272–337 AD), the Augustus, and his mother, Helena Augusta, and Paschal I, the Episcopus, and Theodora the Episcopa.¹⁷⁸ Constantine was the first Christian emperor who prominently integrated the image

¹⁷⁵ *Quocirca et in ipso ingressu basilicae manu dextra ubi utique benignissimae suae genetricis scilicet dominae Theodoraepiscopae corpus quiescit con didit iamdictus praesul corpora venerabilia haec: Zenonis presbiteri et aliorum duorum.* Translated in Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 328–29.

¹⁷⁶ Judson Emerick discusses how churches were a form of communication comparable to “mass media” in the medieval period. Therefore, Theodora Episcopa's resting place within this context would have also conveyed a specific ideological message. See Emerick, “Focusing on the Celebrant: The Column Display inside Santa Prassede,” 129.

¹⁷⁷ Thunø, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome*, 76.

¹⁷⁸ Constantine was proclaimed Augustus in 306 AD, see Max Cary and H. H. Scullard, *History of Rome: Down to the Age of Constantine* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1975), 521–22.

of his mother, Helena, into his public messaging to assert and legitimize his rule.¹⁷⁹ Constantine granted Helena the “Augusta” honorific, alongside his wife, in 324.¹⁸⁰ This act continued the custom initiated by Augustus in Antiquity (b. 63 BC – d.14 AD), bestowing the feminized version of the title “Augustus” upon imperial women due to their association with male kin.¹⁸¹

Constantine also established his mother as an alternative to the legendary “Venus Genetrix” of Rome in his new capital, Constantinople; he acknowledged her as Constantinople’s co-founder by associating parts of the city’s urban fabric with her.¹⁸² In doing so, he prolonged the ancient tradition of female founders in a Christian context, using his mother’s image to his strategic advantage. To associate Helena with the *securitas* of the Empire, he also propagated her image through coinage, statues, prominent commemorations, and not least by having the Augusta title bestowed on her.¹⁸³

Despite her significance in Constantinople, Helena Augusta was closely associated with Rome. Not only did she tend to Constantine’s Roman affairs between 312 and until her passing in ca. 329, but she was buried here, in her mausoleum on the Via Labicana.¹⁸⁴ Her mausoleum

¹⁷⁹ Diliiana N. Angelova, “The Christian Founders Constantine and Helena,” in *Sacred Founders*, 1st ed., Women, Men, and Gods in the Discourse of Imperial Founding, Rome through Early Byzantium (University of California Press, 2015), 120.

¹⁸⁰ Antonina Harbus, “Helena in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages,” in *Helena of Britain in Medieval Legend* (Boydell & Brewer, 2002), 16. Following Augustus’s example, the title Augusta was frequently, though not universally, used for imperial wives in the centuries that followed, especially after the reign of Claudius (41–54 AD) and in the Eastern Roman Empire. In more exceptional cases, such as Helena, the title was also bestowed upon other female family members (Pulcheria, the sister of Theodosius II, is another notable example), see Leslie Brubaker and Helen Tobler, “The Gender of Money: Byzantine Empresses on Coins (324-802),” *Gender & History* 12, no. 3 (November 2000): 580.

¹⁸¹ Brubaker, “Memories of Helena: Patterns in Imperial Female Matronage in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries,” 59. Before he became Augustus in 27 BC, he was known as Octavian. The title was willed to Augustus’s wife, Livia, after his death in 14 AD, see Leslie Brubaker and Helen Tobler, “The Gender of Money: Byzantine Empresses on Coins (324-802),” *Gender & History* 12, no. 3 (November 2000): 575.

¹⁸² For instance, a square near the imperial palace featured a porphyry column topped with Helena’s statue. Angelova, “The Christian Founders Constantine and Helena,” 118.

¹⁸³ Numismatic evidence shows her portrait was accompanied with the legend “(SECURITAS REIPUBLICAE [sic]),” see Brubaker, “Memories of Helena: Patterns in Imperial Female Matronage in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries,” 57.

¹⁸⁴ Angelova, “The Christian Founders Constantine and Helena,” 120.

was attached to the narthex of the funerary Basilica of Saints Marcellinus and Peter.¹⁸⁵ Although the mausoleum is thought to have originally been intended for Constantine, her monumental tomb is the first example of an imperial burial attached to an explicitly Christian structure. Constantine, perhaps even in collaboration with Helena, oversaw the construction of this basilica.¹⁸⁶ Her tomb may even be considered an antecedent model for the Chapel of San Zeno in that it was annexed to a Christian building.¹⁸⁷ Equally notable is that Saints Marcellinus and Peter was a basilica built above the catacombs, in which the martyrs were believed to have been interred. One might contend that Paschal effectively transformed the Basilica of Santa Prassede into an even grander site of martyr worship and maternal commemoration through his relic translations.¹⁸⁸

While little remains of Helena's mausoleum today, scholars have posited that it featured mosaics with biblical imagery in its interior, much like Theodora's.¹⁸⁹ Admittedly, Helena's mausoleum as an imperial commission was significantly larger than the Zeno chapel (it measured 26 meters in height and 20 meters in width). Nevertheless, the mausoleums shared certain formal features, including a central plan with interior niches covered by a domed ceiling.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, both were positioned on the eastern sides of the structures they were attached to, symbolizing themes of resurrection, as they align with the sun's rising, windows permitted natural illumination to flood into the spaces.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁵ Mackie, *Early Christian Chapels in the West*, 56.

¹⁸⁶ Brubaker, "Memories of Helena: Patterns in Imperial Female Matronage in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," 57.

¹⁸⁷ It is true that while other mausolea followed the precedent set by Helena's mausoleum in being attached to Christian spaces (and the practice, therefore, is not exclusively for women), it is noteworthy that both Theodora Episcopa and Helena were mothers of rulers.

¹⁸⁸ Once more, I am grateful to Dr Sharon Salvadori for this insight.

¹⁸⁹ Hillner, *Helena Augusta*, 252.

¹⁹⁰ Hillner, 252.

¹⁹¹ For the orientation of Theodora's mausoleum eastwards in alignment with the morning sun, see Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*, 98. For a reconstruction showing the orientation of Helena

The importance of Helena Augusta in Roman collective memory is evident from the fact that her remains were highly prized as relics by the ninth century.¹⁹² The broader topographic setting of her mausoleum, the *Fundus Laurentius*, situated just outside the Aurelian walls, already bore a longstanding association with Helena's *memoria* by the time of Paschal.¹⁹³ From the fifth century, for instance, this tract of Rome earned the name *Subaugusta* in direct reference to her.¹⁹⁴ In the ninth century, it is likely that the church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme was also referred to as *Basilica Beate Elene*.¹⁹⁵ Helena Augusta's legend likely served as an evident, if not almost unavoidable, precedent for Paschal to honor his own mother. Finally, although the evidence is tenuous, just as Theodora Episcopa is thought to be of Eastern origin from a relatively obscure background, Helena is believed to have been born in Drepanum, Bithynia, to a modest family.¹⁹⁶ Still, it is difficult to imagine that Paschal did not appreciate or relish the similarities between the first Christian emperor, his illustrious saintly mother, and himself and his own, most benign mother.

Helena is perhaps most associated with the legend of her discovery of the True Cross. This story is certainly posthumous and probably apocryphal.¹⁹⁷ Nevertheless, her *memoria* became somewhat of an archetype for elite women in later centuries.¹⁹⁸ Most interesting in the

Augusta's mausoleum, see Fabrizio Mancinelli, *Catacombs and Basilicas: The Early Christians in Rome* (Firenze: Scala Books, 1981), 40, fig 77.

¹⁹² Jan Willem Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, v. 27 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 75. Later in the ninth century, in 841, her relics were moved to the diocese of Reims in France.

¹⁹³ The area *ad duas lauros*, as it was also known, was on Helena's property. See Drijvers, 31.

¹⁹⁴ Drijvers, 31.

¹⁹⁵ Drijvers, 34.

¹⁹⁶ Brubaker, "Memories of Helena: Patterns in Imperial Female Matronage in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," 57. John Osborne discusses how Paschal was *mancipatus* (given) to the church during his youth, possibly indicating his modest background, see Osborne, *Rome in the Ninth Century*, 52.

¹⁹⁷ Helena was credited with discovering the True Cross 65 years after her death, see Brubaker, "Memories of Helena: Patterns in Imperial Female Matronage in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," 52.

¹⁹⁸ For the honors of being called a "New Helena" see Angelova, "The Christian Founders Constantine and Helena," 118. Helena as a role model has a long history: in the sixth century, Eusebius wrote in the *Vita Constantini* that

present context is the example of Galla Placidia. Like Helena, she was the mother of an emperor, Valentinian III,¹⁹⁹ and received the title of Augusta. But the fact that she modeled herself on Helena is evident in her patronage of two sites. She renovated or embellished Helena's chapel in Santa Croce in Gerusalemme.²⁰⁰ Even more significant, she built a chapel, the so-called Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, as an annexed structure to the church of Santa Croce in Ravenna.²⁰¹ This "mausoleum" has numerous similarities to Theodora's mausoleum, making it almost impossible not to consider it as a model.²⁰²

Admittedly, the question of whether the Ravenna structure is indeed Galla Placidia's tomb is complicated due to a lack of evidence. Mackie has persuasively demonstrated, however, that the iconography within the structure is linked to Galla Placidia's life, thereby confirming her associations and sponsorship of it.²⁰³ Furthermore, while many scholars agree that Galla Placidia was buried in Rome, Mackie has effectively made the case that the mausoleum in Ravenna was built for her infant son, Theodosius.²⁰⁴ Therefore, the structure can still be treated as a mausoleum-martyrium associated with a mother figure, like the Zeno chapel. It is plausible to suggest intentional connections between Zeno's chapel, Galla Placidia's "mausoleum," and, by

Helena also formed the model for a *Senatrix*. See Maddalena Betti, "Sull'uso del Titolo di Senatrix: Strategie di Definizione e di Rappresentazione di una Parentela a Roma Nel X Secolo," *Nuova Rivista Storica* 104 (2020): 627–60.

¹⁹⁹ Herrin, "Galla Placidia, Builder and Empress Mother," 51.

²⁰⁰ Brubaker, "Memories of Helena: Patterns in Imperial Female Matronage in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," 61.

²⁰¹ Herrin, "Galla Placidia, Builder and Empress Mother," 46. The chapel of San Zeno's floor features a large, spoliated porphyry disc at its center. The *LP* also has a famous passage about Galla Placidia praying all night amidst four porphyry roundels in the Church of Santa Croce, see McClendon, "The Revival of Opus Sectile Pavements in Rome and the Vicinity in the Carolingian Period."

²⁰² These formal associations include their comparable size, iconography, material, quincunx (cross-in-square) layout, and the fact that they are both attached to a Christian church.

²⁰³ In her short but seminal essay about the re-identification of the Saint Lawrence lunette in the Ravenna "mausoleum" to the Spanish Saint Vincent of Saragossa, Mackie makes the case that the imagery within the chapel is personally related to Galla Placidia's life. She thereby confirms her sponsorship of the mausoleum. Galla Placidia spent time in Spain; therefore, the cult of this saint may have held a personal significance for her. See Gillian Mackie, "New Light on the So-Called Saint Lawrence Panel at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna," *Gesta* 29, no. 1 (1990): 54–60.

²⁰⁴ Gillian Mackie, "The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia: A Possible Occupant," *Byzantion* 65, no. 2 (1995): 396–404.

extension, Helena Augusta's mausoleum and her palatine church of Santa Croce. By drawing direct connections to Galla Placidia's structure, Theodora Episcopa's final resting place invoked both Helena Augusta and Galla Placidia Augusta. It connected their roles as mothers of rulers to her status as the pope's mother.

Were There Other Episcopas?

While Paschal could obviously not bestow the Augusta honorific on his mother, it is plausible that he recontextualized this ancient tradition within the framework of the episcopacy. Conferring upon Theodora the *titulus* of Episcopa presumably served as a contemporary ecclesiastical counterpart to the title of Augusta.²⁰⁵ Theodora Episcopa can be interpreted as embodying a form of "New Helena" in her role as a mother to the Bishop of Rome.²⁰⁶ However, this was not a replication of Helena's role. Theodora was, in some ways further exalted by being aligned with the image of the Virgin Mary. From the time of Gregory the Great (590-604), the bishops of Rome began establishing themselves as the heads of the universal Church and gradually taking over the civic and political roles in authority previously held by the Roman secular authorities.²⁰⁷ Augustae and, indeed, other imperial and elite women had often served as signifiers of political stability for male rulers. In bestowing the title Episcopa on his mother, Paschal likewise sought to assert and legitimize the effectiveness of his rule through female lineage.

²⁰⁵ The distinction between *Episcopus* and *Augustus* is clearly illustrated by Paschal's act of bestowing the titles of Augustus and Emperor upon Lothar on April 5, 823, see Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 31.

²⁰⁶ For the concept of a "New Helena" see Angelova, "The Christian Founders Constantine and Helena," 118.

²⁰⁷ Krautheimer, *Rome*, 59–89. For a discussion of how this affected women's titulature, see also Betti, "Sull'uso Del Titolo Di Senatrix: Strategie Di Definizione e Di Rappresentazione Di Una Parentela a Roma Nel X Secolo," 628.

The title of “Episcopa” was, after all, not entirely without precedent. There is evidence of this title being conferred upon women in sixth-century Gaul, albeit used with some ambivalence. This feminized version of “episcopus” evidently carried negative and positive shades of meaning. This is illustrated by the poet Venantius Fortunatus, who attempted to counterbalance the Episcopae’s pejorative portrayals by Gregory of Tours.²⁰⁸ However, in all preceding cases, the Episcopae were the wives of bishops and not the mothers. Theodora Episcopa, therefore, remains an anomaly.²⁰⁹

In a footnote, Caroline Goodson suggests that *Episcopa* may have been merely an honorific bestowed upon Theodora, as there were other early medieval instances of women being granted the feminized versions of the titles of their male kin.²¹⁰ Goodson implies that it did not denote a position of actual significance but instead served as a symbolic title, useful as an appendage to the pope and his status. However, once again, the source she references describes an instance where a wife received a feminized version of her husband’s title and not a mother. In this case it is the wife of a *Vestiarius*, who was referred to as *Vestiarina*.²¹¹ While these examples provide valuable insight into the broader context of women receiving titles in the early medieval period, they do not directly parallel Theodora’s distinct representation within the chapel. Rather, they further illustrate the singularity of Theodora’s commemoration in her mausoleum, built for her by her son.

²⁰⁸ As was the case of Placidina, wife of Bishop Leontius II of Bordeaux, see Brian Brennan, “‘Episcopae’: Bishops’ Wives Viewed in Sixth-Century Gaul,” *Church History* 54, no. 3 (1985): 322.

²⁰⁹ Brennan, 322.

²¹⁰ Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 166 n.11.

²¹¹ Victor Saxer, “La Chiesa Di Roma Dal V al X Secolo: Amministrazione Centrale e Organizzazione Territoriale,” in *Roma Nell’alto Medioevo*, *Settimana Di Studio* 48 (Spoleto, 2001), 528. Cited in Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 166.

Conclusions

This study has concentrated on the architectural and especially the pictorial elements of the Chapel of San Zeno. For the first time, it has examined these elements in the context of the chapel's function as the mausoleum of Pope Paschal's mother, Theodora Episcopa, who has been unduly marginalized in early historiography. I hope to have shown that she likely held a more important position in the pontiff's self-representation and self-promotion than previously acknowledged by scholarship. It may now be worthwhile to reconsider the designation of the Chapel of San Zeno, recognizing it in its own right as Theodora's Mausoleum.

The chapel's size, iconography, orientation, and annexation to the basilica reference structures linked to two earlier prominent Christian women who were also mothers of rulers: Helena Augusta and Galla Placidia Augusta. The *titulus* Episcopa is proposed as a modern adaptation of the Augusta honorific, reinterpreted within the context of the episcopacy. The pontiff aimed to assert himself as the universal head of the Church, taking over certain administrative and social responsibilities previously held by the Roman secular authorities. By emphasizing lineage and positioning himself as a sort of New Constantine and his mother as a form of New Helena, Paschal presumably aimed to legitimize his rule. However, as also shown, Paschal and Theodora, unlike Helena Augusta and Galla Placidia, were also carefully aligned with the imagery of the Virgin and Child.

Challenges and Future Opportunities for Research

One of the principal limitations of this study has been the scarcity of extant primary written sources regarding Theodora Episcopa. Consequently, it may be impossible to definitively determine whether the title *Episcopa* was purely symbolic, serving as an honorific, or if

Theodora held any active duties within the Church or the Lateran palace, as Schaefer has speculated.²¹² Furthermore, a question that may remain frustratingly unanswered is the timing of her receiving the title—was it bestowed in life or posthumously, and in either case, how was this received by the broader ninth-century public?

Despite these constraints, numerous opportunities remain for further research that may bring Theodora's role into sharper focus. For example, her distinctive headdress could be contextualized to identify whether it represented a specific role in the ecclesial context of the ninth century, as this has currently remained underexplored. Furthermore, given the connection between Helena Augusta and Theodora Episcopa, re-assessing Paschal's Reliquary Cross, which purportedly contains minute fragments of the True Cross and features intricate imagery of the Virgin and the infancy cycles of Christ, may offer valuable insights.²¹³ Finally, while this thesis has concentrated on Theodora's commemoration in death, an in-depth investigation into women's roles in the early medieval Roman Church may shed light on Theodora's potential influence, agency, and perhaps even her role in life.

²¹² Schaefer, *Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede, Rome*, 110.

²¹³ The Reliquary of the True Cross is now in the collection of the Vatican Museums.

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Appendix 1

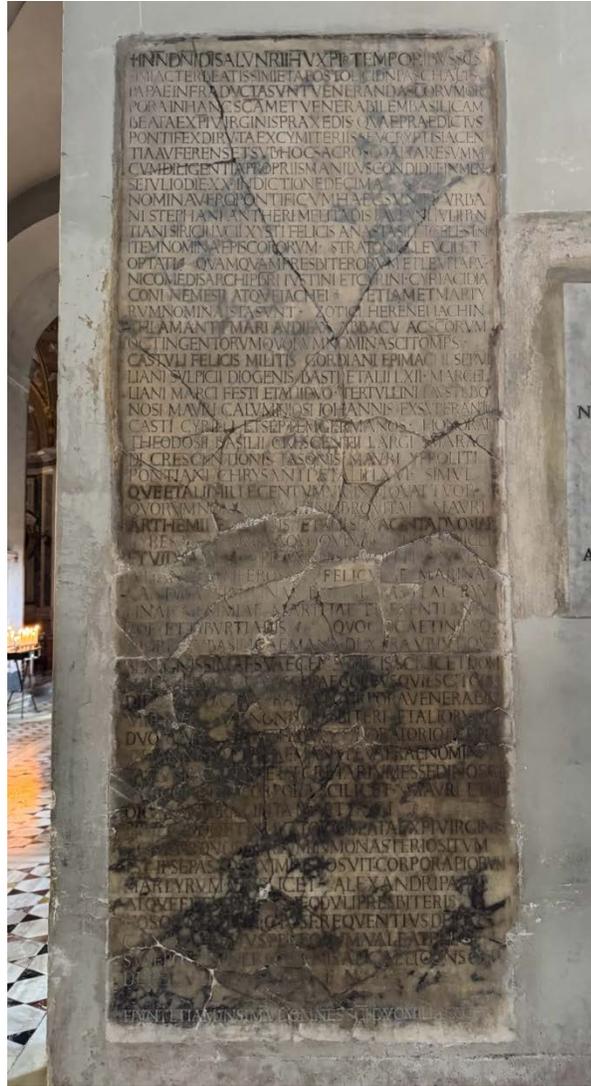


Figure 1 – Relic inscription

marble, ninth century with fourteenth-century addition, Basilica of Santa Prassede, photo by the author.



Figure 2 – Vault detail

Chapel of San Zeno, mosaic, ninth century, commissioned by Paschal I, Basilica of Santa Prassede, Rome.



Figure 3 – Detail of the female northern niche

Chapel of San Zeno: Theodora, Prassede, Virgin Mary, and Pudenziana, depicted beneath the Lamb of God and the Four Rivers of Paradise, mosaic, commissioned by Paschal I, ninth century, Basilica of Santa Prassede, Rome, photo by the author.

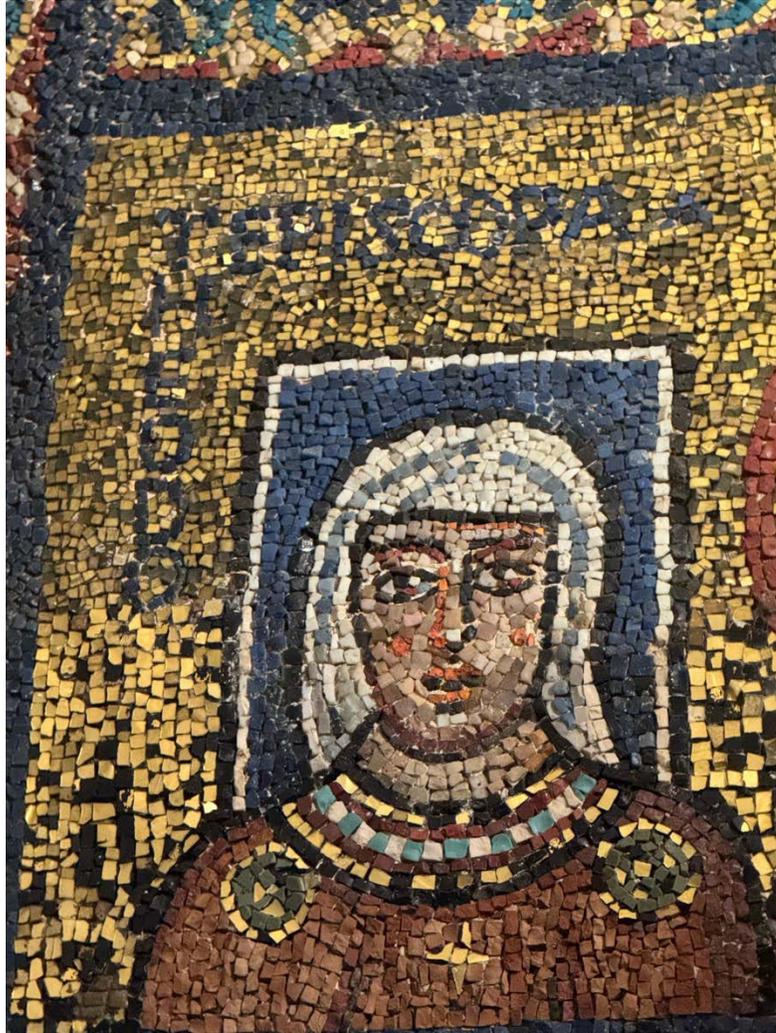


Figure 4 – Detail portrait of Theodora Episcopa with inscription

Chapel of San Zeno, mosaic, commissioned by Paschal I, ninth century, Basilica of Santa Prassede, Rome, photo by the author.



Figure 5 – Illustrations by G. Ciampini of the Zeno Chapel

from Vetera Monumenta: In quibus praecipue Musiva Opera Sacrarum, Profanarumque Aedium Structura, ac nonnulli antiqui Ritus Dissertationibus Iconibusque illustrantur.

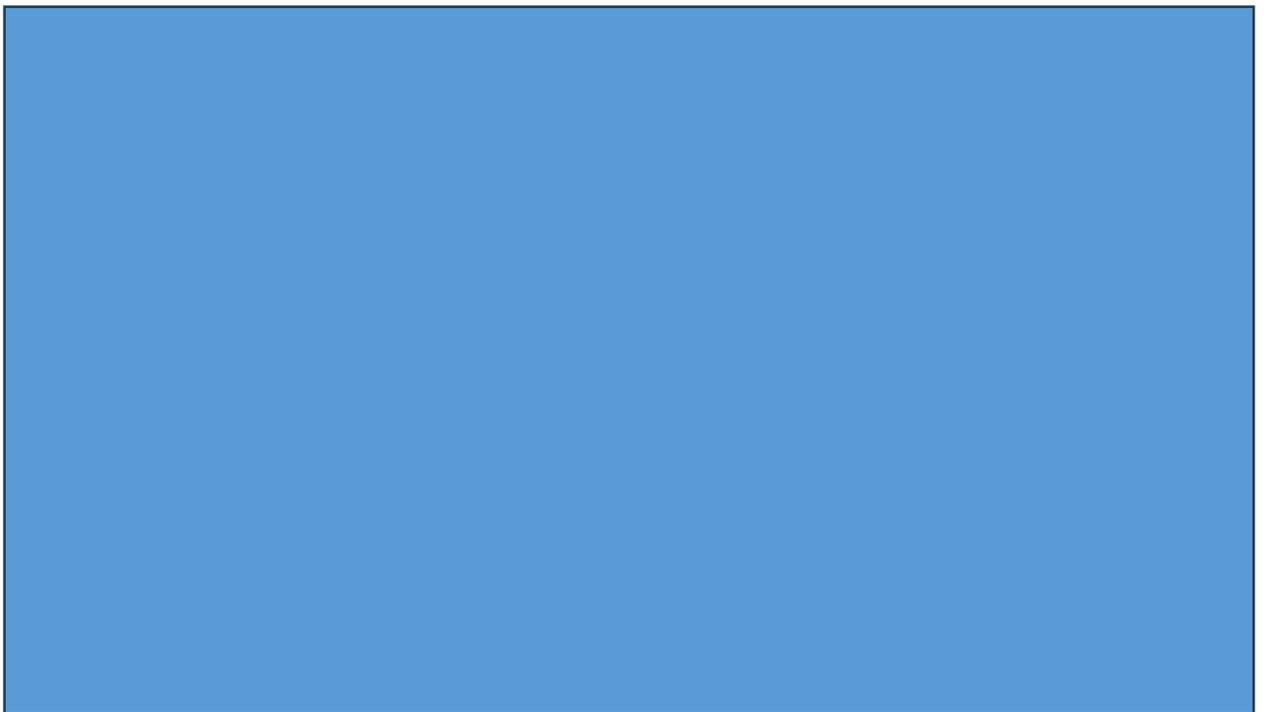


Figure 6 – Labeled isometric reconstruction for visualization

Basilica of Santa Prassede, from Mary M. Schaefer, Women in Pastoral Office: The Story of Santa Prassede.



Figure 7 – Isometric reconstruction by Spencer Corbett

Santa Prassede in the ninth century from Richard Krautheimer's CBCR

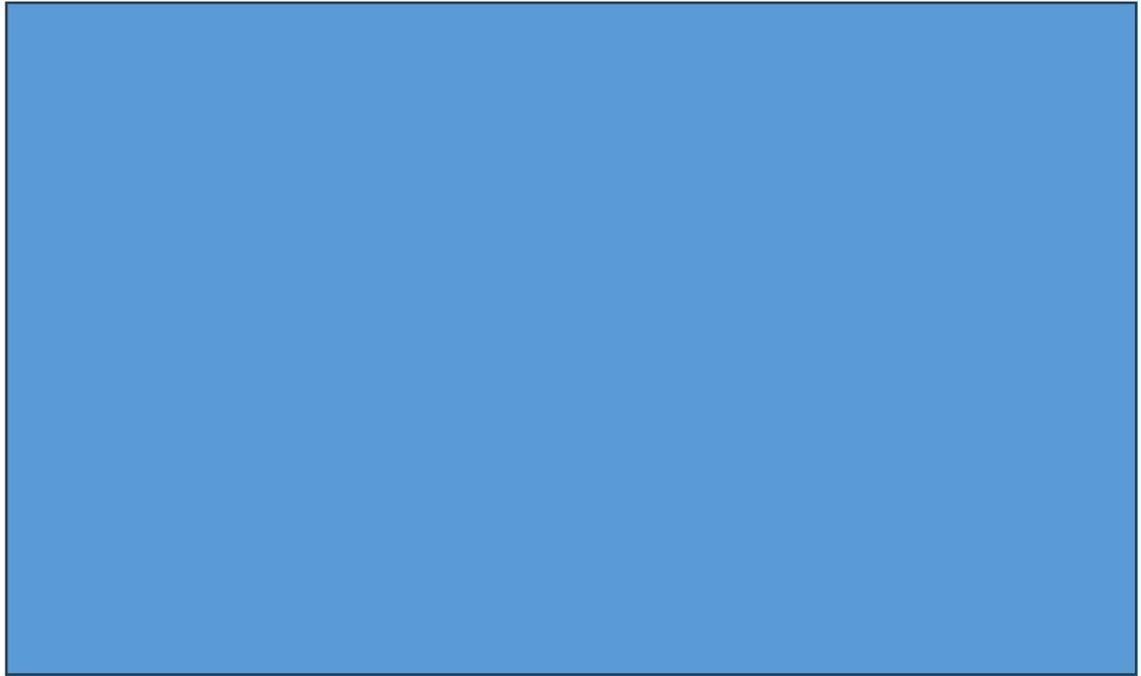


Figure 8 – Side-by-side comparison of orientation

Left: Santa Maria Maggiore layout; Right: Santa Prassede, from Caroline Goodson, The Rome of Pope Paschal I: Papal Power, Urban Renovation, Church Rebuilding.



Figure 9 – Vault mosaic, Archbishop's Chapel, Ravenna

c. 494–519 AD, four angels surrounding the monogram of Christ and symbols of the evangelists, Ravenna, Italy, photo by author.

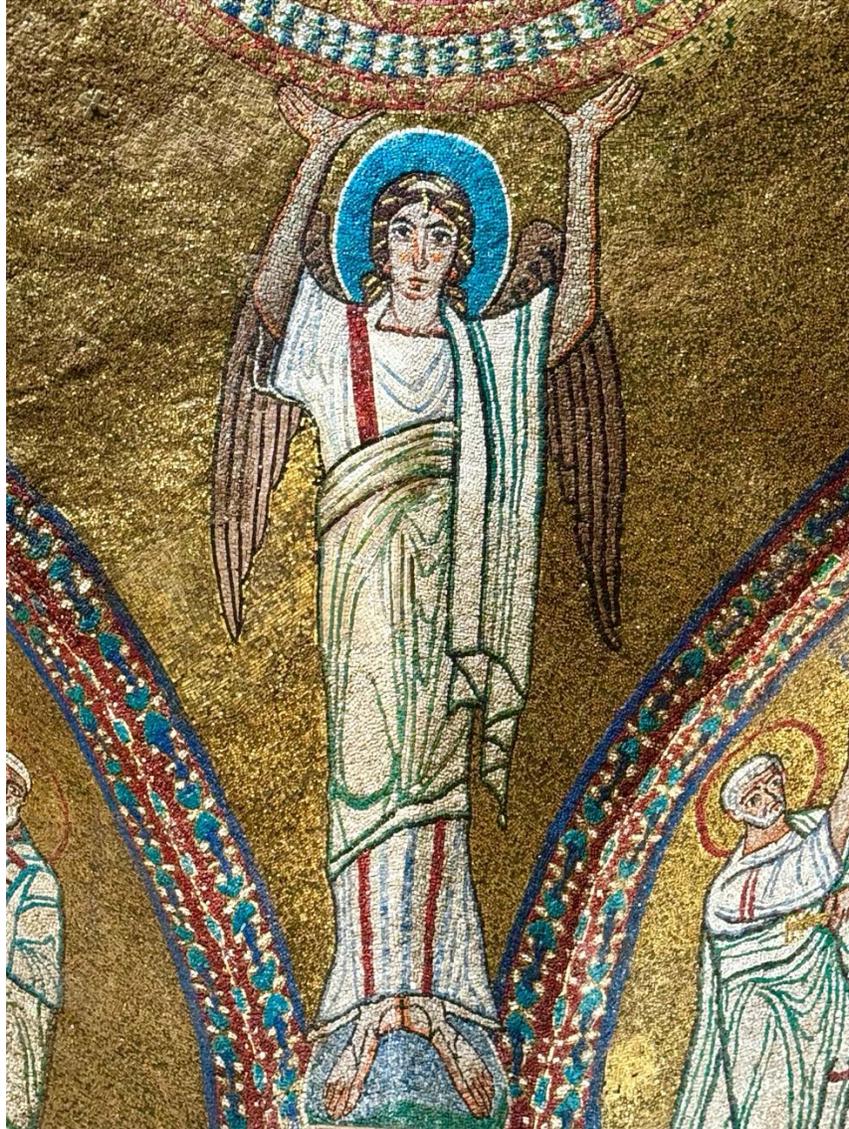


Figure 10 – Detail of an angel holding up Christ's wreath

Mosaic, chapel of San Zeno, Commissioned by Pope Paschal I, Basilica of Santa Prassede, Rome, photo by the author.



Figure 11 – Detail view of the vault with Deesis

eastern window, Chapel of San Zeno, mosaic, commissioned by Paschal I, 817, photo by the author.

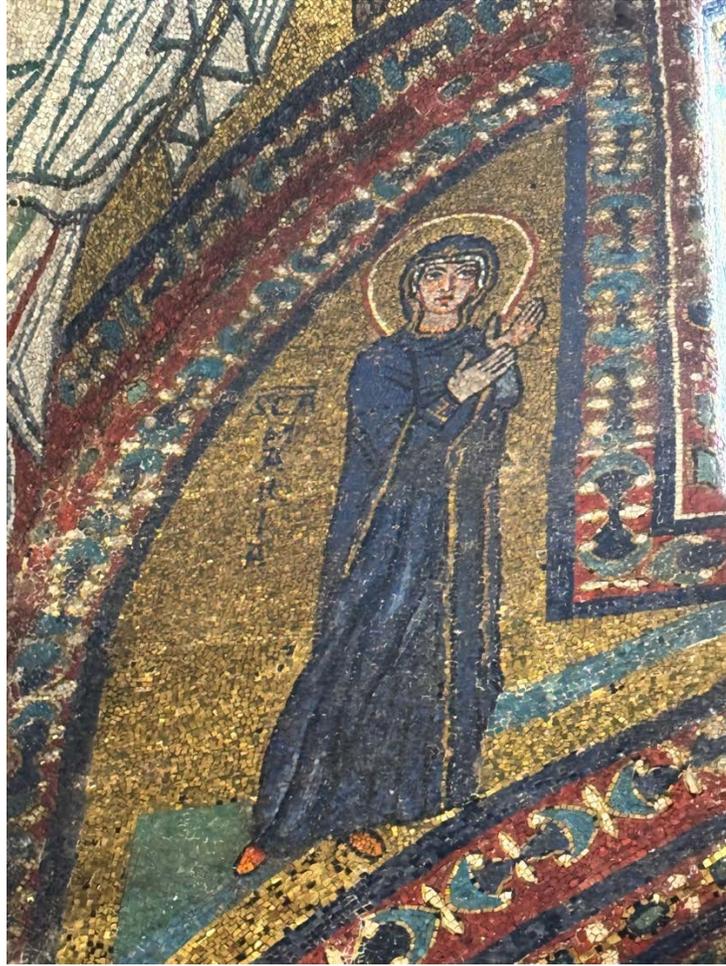
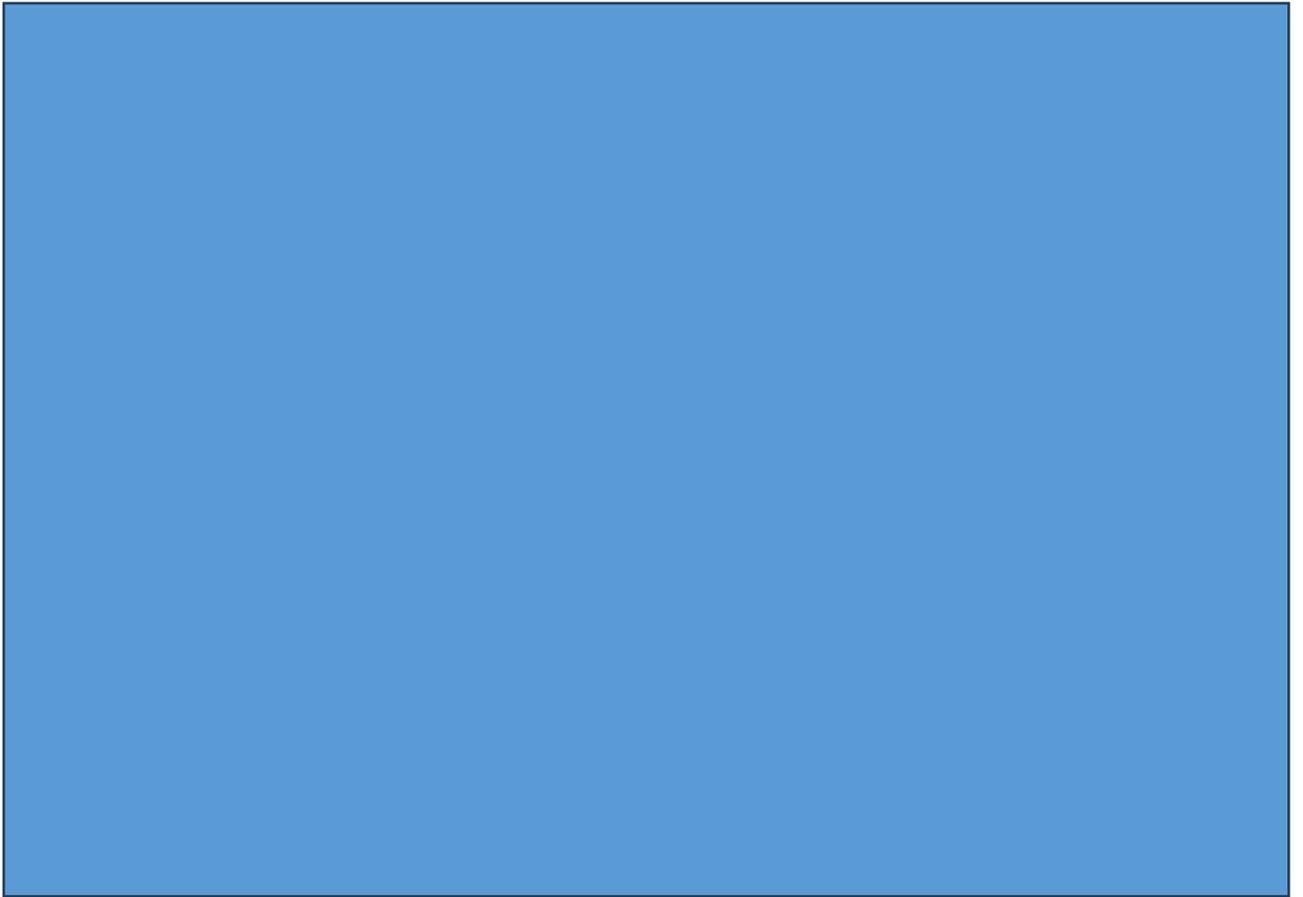


Figure 12 – Detail of the Virgin on the eastern wall of the San Zeno Chapel

Mosaic, 817, commissioned by Paschal I, Santa Prassede, Rome, photo by the author.



*Figure 13 – Interior view towards the south, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia
showing mosaic decoration of vaults and lunettes, mosaic, ca. 425–450 CE, Early Christian, Ravenna, Italy.*



Figure 14 – Interior view of the Hetoimasia on the western wall

Chapel of San Zeno, mosaic, ninth century, commissioned by Paschal I, Basilica of Santa Prassede, Rome.



*Figure 15 – Detail of the Hetoimasia, apex of the triumphal arch, Santa Maria Maggiore
Rome, mosaic, c. 432–440.*



*Figure 16 – Interior view of the processional mosaic of Holy Virgins
left wall above the nave arcade, Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, mosaic, ca. 504 CE, Early Christian, Ravenna, Italy.*



Figure 17 – Virgin and Child flanked by Prassede and Pudenziana

mosaic, 13th century, altar niche, Chapel of San Zeno, possibly a reconstruction of a lost composition, Basilica of Santa Prassede, Rome, photo by the author.



Figure 18 – Detail of the Anastasis (Harrowing of Hell)

panel, northern niche, Chapel of San Zeno, mosaic, commissioned by Paschal I, ninth century, Basilica of Santa Prassede, Rome, photo by the author.



Figure 19 – East lunette, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna

circa 450 CE, Stags at a pool, mosaic, Early Christian/Byzantine, Ravenna, Italy, photo by the author

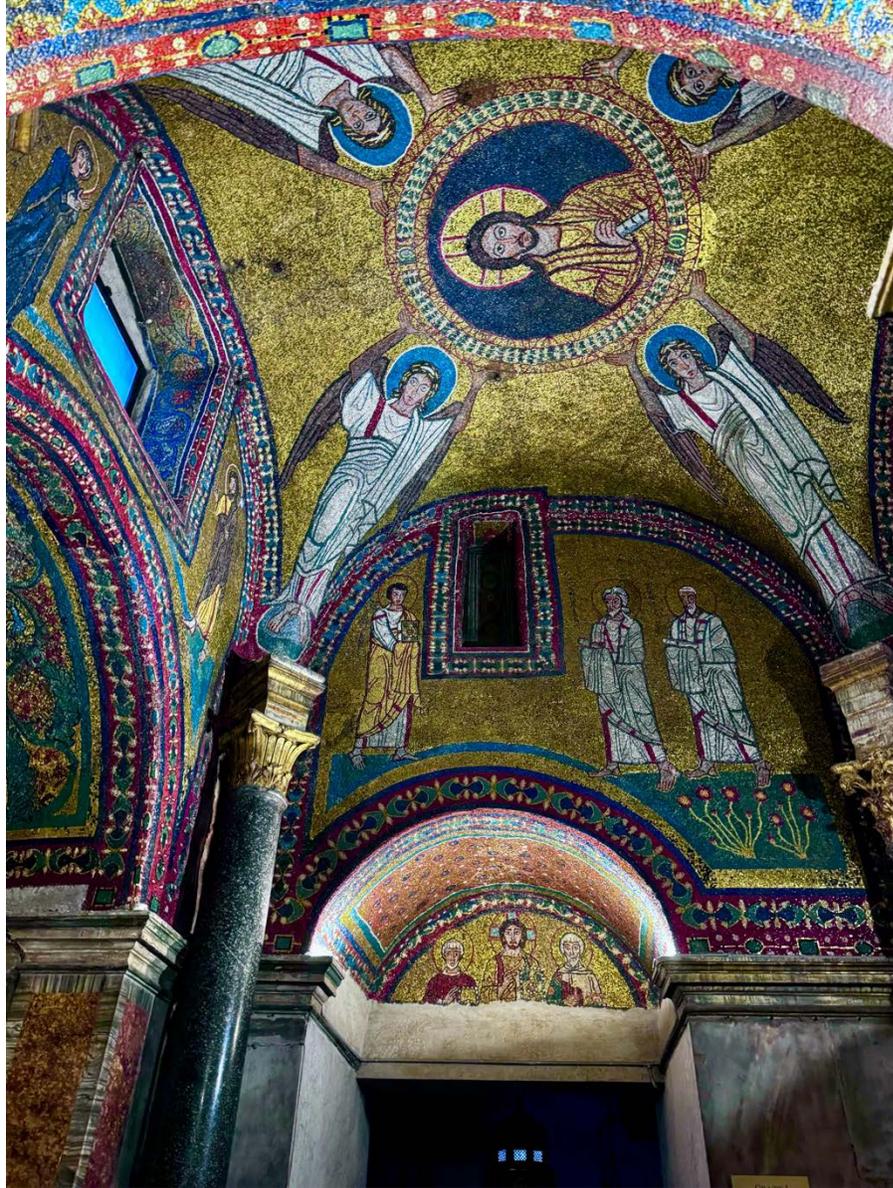


Figure 20 – View of the south wall (male figures)

Chapel of San Zeno, mosaic, Basilica of Santa Prassede, commissioned by Paschal I, ninth century, photo by the author.



Figure 21 – Detail of Prassede, Pudenziana, and Agnes in procession on the upper north wall of the chapel of San Zeno

Mosaic, 817. Commissioned by Paschal I. Santa Prassede, Rome.



Figure 22 – Facade mosaic above the entrance to the Chapel of San Zeno

glass mosaic, ninth century, commissioned by Paschal I, Basilica of Santa Prassede, Rome, photo by the author.



Figure 23 – Sanctuary view of the triumphal arch, apsidal arch, and conch

Santa Prassede, commissioned by Paschal I, 817.

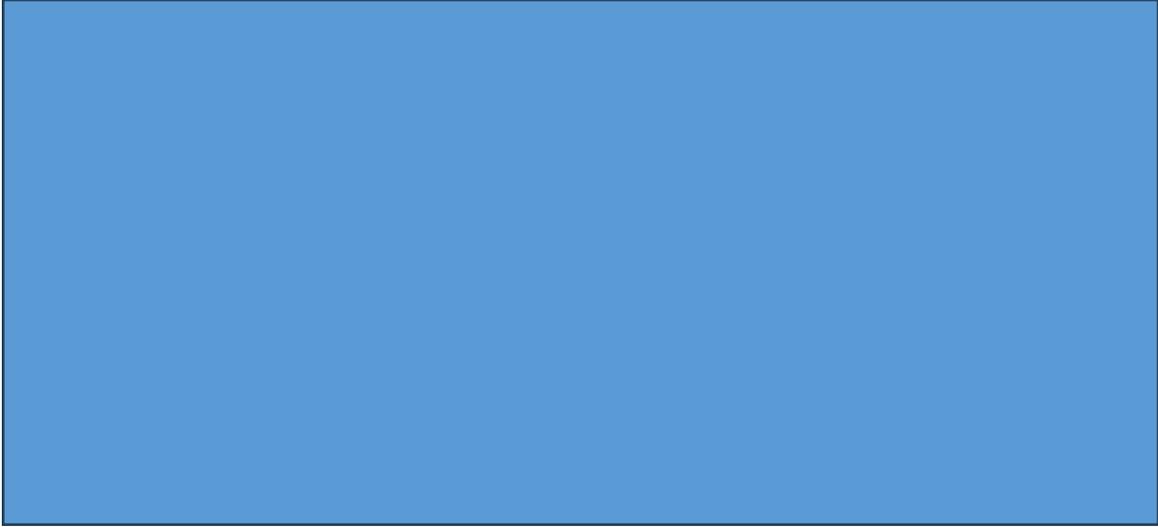


Figure 24 – Detail of the triumphal arch apex and intrados with Paschal's monogram mosaic, 817, commissioned by Paschal I, Basilica of Santa Prassede, Rome.