INTRODUCTION

Between the sixth and ninth centuries in Rome, the popes commissioned a series of splendid apse mosaics that hold a unique place in the medieval visual culture of the *Urbs*. The well-known mosaic decoration in the church of S. Prassede on the Esquiline, built and decorated between 817 and 824, can serve as a paradigm, illuminating how this special series of early medieval mosaics is tied together as a group and set off from its earlier and later counterparts (Plate I). The mosaic in the apse vault is the most eye-catching and interactive part of the whole impressive early ninth-century visual ensemble (Plate II). Terminating the nave and suspended above the main altar, a shimmering hierarchy of frontally gazing saints, gathered against a deep-blue background around a hovering golden robed Christ, attracts and then fixes the eye of the beholder as he or she enters the early medieval basilica. From here, the viewer's gaze is drawn upward to the other parts of the mosaic decoration that are configured to interact with the celestial realm in the apse: the Book of Revelation's Adoration of the Lamb by the Four Living Creatures and the Twenty-Four Elders on the apsidal arch surrounding the vault, and the unique depiction of the Heavenly Jerusalem, as defined by a gem and pearl encrusted golden wall, on the monumental triumphal arch in front (Plate III; Figure 1). In this way, the mosaic in the apse conch serves as the fulcrum around which the entire pictorial decoration pivots and the locus that both begins and concludes the viewer's visual journey.

Augmenting the interest of the apse vault as a point of attraction for the beholder is the monumental inscription that runs across its lower rim. Its Latin hexameter verse, executed in golden capital letters that flicker against a deep-blue background, honors the saint to whom the church is dedicated and credits the pope with its patronage. Moreover, it consciously and purposefully emphasizes the power of its apse mosaic to pervade the entire space of the church with dazzling light: "[This is the] hall of the devout

1. S. Prassede, Rome, triumphal arch (center), 817–824 (photo: Soprintendenza Speciale per il Patrimonio Storico, Artistico ed Etnoantropologico e per il Polo Museale della città di Roma).

Praxedis … shimmers in light, adorned with diverse metals through the zeal of Paschal the supreme pontiff, foster-son of the Apostolic See" (Appendix).

It is the non-narrative imagery in the apse vault, the focal point within the basilica, which undergoes the most significant transformations during the Roman Middle Ages. The triumphal arch mosaic of S. Prassede, to be sure, is an unusual ad hoc expansion of a decorative program that typically consists only of the apse vault and its surmounting arch. The representation of the Adoration of the Lamb, by contrast, is standard on apsidal arches from the early Christian to the late medieval period. Thus, whereas this narrative theme from the Apocalypse remains largely unchanged in that it continues to include all or some of the same protagonists (Lamb/Living Creatures/Elders), the apse vault in S. Prassede displays a number of specific features that, as we shall see, are as distinctive among early medieval apse mosaics in Rome as they are unprecedented in the mosaics of the fourth and fifth centuries and discontinued in those of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Certainly the idea of making a timeless hierarchy of heavenly figures organized around Christ directly face the viewer goes back to the earliest known apse decorations, but it is the choice of some of those figures within that celestial order that should draw our attention. Similarly, while inscriptions are known to have accompanied apse mosaics from the earliest times, their contents and appearance become particularly uniform among the early medieval apse mosaics in question.

With one exception, the early medieval Roman apse mosaics focus on the presence of post-apostolic saints – that is, saints who lived and were

martyred in eras post-dating the apostles, chiefly during the Christian persecutions of the second and third centuries. In this way, the mosaics always represent the basilica's dedicatee(s), but often introduce other related saints. In the apse of S. Prassede, for instance, S. Prassede is accompanied by her sister, S. Pudenziana. The Roman sisters, recorded to have lived in the second century, are shown presenting their crowns of martyrdom as they are introduced to Christ by Saint Peter and Saint Paul. In the far right margin of the group stands an additional saint who is represented as a deacon holding a book (S. Zeno?). Along with the introduction of post-apostolic saints, another and somewhat unexpected type of figure was chosen for inclusion in the heavenly hierarchy of saints – that is, the living pope as patron. Thus, in S. Prassede from the left margin of the apse conch, Pope Paschal presents a model of his newly built church to Christ.

In addition to the visual inclusion of such figures – post-apostolic saints (titular saint included) and donor pope – the inscriptions glossing the early medieval apse mosaics also stand out among their earlier and later counterparts in Rome, both, it would appear, for formal qualities (golden capital letters on deep blue) and for their combined concern with the titular saint(s) and papal patron on the one hand and the light emitting qualities of the artistic medium on the other. In this way, the shimmering mosaics and their golden inscriptions jointly underline the new figures, while making light and material splendor key topoi. As we shall see, the saints, the popes, and the topic of radiating light are thereby intertwined in ways that originate in the cult of relics and are in turn significant for the embodiment of the divine as well as for the agenda of the papal self-promotion.

This particular combination of iconographic and epigraphic features, as witnessed by the apse vault in S. Prassede, constitutes what I define a "formula" that is constituent to the early medieval apse mosaic in Rome. Hence, the presence of the titular saint(s) and the patron pope in conjunction with an inscription similar in appearance and contents to that discussed earlier is far from new to S. Prassede but is shared by a larger number of apse mosaics created in Rome between the sixth and ninth centuries and still in situ in their churches: Ss. Cosmas and Damian (526–530; Plates IV and V); S. Agnese fuori le Mura (625–638; Plate VI; Figure 2); the San Venanzio Chapel in the Lateran Baptistery (640–642; Plates VII and VIII); S. Maria in Domnica (817–824; Plates IX and X); S. Cecilia in Trastevere (817–824; Plate XI); and San Marco (827–844; Plate XII) (Appendix). Except for S. Agnese and S. Cecilia, the mosaic decoration in these settings to this day comprises the apse vault, or apse conch, and the arch above it, the apsidal arch.[1] None of them, however, is known to have extended further into the church nave with narrative cycles in mosaic or fresco like those of S. Maria Maggiore and San Paolo fuori le Mura, for example.

2. S. Agnese fuori le Mura, Rome, general view, 625–638 (photo: Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max–Planck–Institut für Kunstgeschichte).

This book focuses on this particular series of apse mosaics. I propose that owing to the specific formula of their apse vaults, the early medieval apse mosaics produce an inter-visual network that collapses their linear succession in time into a continuous present. This argument, in turn, builds on two essential premises. The first is that the mosaics as a series relate to one another in ways that counteract their linear chronology. The second premise is that each of the early medieval apse mosaics represents the heavenly part of a timeless fellowship that includes the visualized saints as well as the living viewers in attendance in the church. We might say that the first type of interaction, from one apse to the next, operates along a horizontal axis (across linear time), and that the second, the one between apse and viewer, does so along a vertical axis (heaven-earth). This study examines these intersecting dynamics and makes the case that through them the mosaics and their viewers conjoin in building a collective body of faithful – a *communio sanctorum* – across space and time that identifies

with the Church of Rome, the *Ecclesia Romana*. Whereas the first and last chapters are concerned with identifying and interpreting the mosaics' horizontal relationships, the second and third chapters deal with their vertical interactions.

For more than a century, the early medieval apse mosaics of Rome have continuously held pride of place in what now amounts to a whole series of corpus-like volumes aimed at providing a chronological overview of this rather extensive body of visual material. At the end of the nineteenth century, the distinguished Christian archaeologist Giovanni Battista de Rossi published a monumental work dedicated exclusively to the medieval mosaics in the churches of Rome. This two-volume corpus with text in Italian and French is notable for its critical analysis of the inscriptions embedded in the mosaics – De Rossi was also an eminent epigraphist – as well as its colored lithographs.[2] Several decades later, Christa Belting-Ihm contributed a study that was at once both narrower and broader in scope than De Rossi's. By focusing only on apse decorations from the fourth to the eighth centuries, the German scholar compiled a catalog of all extant and recorded examples – both painted and in mosaic – and discussed them chronologically on the basis of their iconography.[3] In 1967, the Italian art historian Guglielmo Matthiae followed in De Rossi's footsteps by offering a new and updated overview of the Roman medieval mosaics. However, unlike De Rossi, who was mainly concerned with documenting the mosaics by means of their inscriptions and additional written sources, Matthiae paid critical attention to their stylistic and technical execution. He supported his evolutionary narrative with detailed photographs, partly in color, and a chart for each mosaic showing subsequent restorations.[4]

Also in 1967, Walter Oakeshott published the first comprehensive survey of the Roman mosaics in English. Although in a less detailed and rigorous manner than his Italian colleague, but typical of his time, Oakeshott also focused on style and technique in his attempt to determine the influence of, as he put it, "the Byzantine schools" on the Roman mosaics.[5] During the past four decades, several or all of the early medieval apse mosaics examined in this book have continued to occupy a central place in subsequent surveys on Roman pictorial arts in the Middle Ages.[6] The most ambitious and recent among these is the corpus on monumental wall decoration in Rome edited by Maria Andaloro and Serena Romano, partially completed at this writing, which offers splendid photographs, diagrams, and extensive, updated bibliographies.[7]

For a stretch of more than a hundred years, then, the early medieval apse mosaics have lent themselves to the creation of diachronic overviews, which in turn have given them canonical status among the monumental arts of the Middle Ages. Yet as much as these contributions have rendered the mosaics increasingly accessible and set their styles and iconographical

subjects within a broader, albeit largely descriptive narrative, they have fallen short of an in-depth analysis of the individual work and failed to acknowledge the early medieval apse mosaics as a distinct group connected by a specific array of iconographic and epigraphic features.

Over recent years, a number of contributions on individual mosaic decorations have attempted to fill this lacuna. Nonetheless, scholars – myself included – have tended to concentrate on the same few mosaics while continuing to ignore others. For instance, more attention has been given to the apse imagery in Ss. Cosmas and Damian than to its counterpart in S. Cecilia, often considered a somewhat distant "copy" of the former and barely studied at all. In the case of the mosaic program at S. Prassede, had it not been for the significance of it being a direct "copy" of the mosaic decoration in Ss. Cosmas and Damian and its exceptional depiction of the Heavenly Jerusalem on the triumphal arch, the mosaic program in S. Prassede might have remained as much in the shadow of their sixth-century prototype as has S. Cecilia.[8] Whereas the mosaics in the apse of the San Venanzio Chapel and S. Maria in Domnica have continued to draw scholarly attention as iconographic knots to be untangled, S. Agnese has instead drawn attention largely for its distinctive style. And only recently has the apse mosaic in San Marco been the subject of a specific study, which relates the mosaic's atypical iconographic features to its mid-ninth-century political context.[9]

This pattern in the scholarship seems indicative of familiar art-historical practices. That is, "originals" are favored over "copies," and iconographic differences that help provide the imagery with a more specific or even unique character are sought. The latter approach facilitates anchoring the apse mosaic in its own time, to make it the direct product or consequence of a particular cultural context whereby the apse mosaic would receive its "explanation."[10] In following such analytical goals, thereby privileging some mosaics over others, scholarship has bypassed a broader and fuller understanding of the early medieval apse mosaic as a type and of the way it operates within the church space. Although this tendency also extends to other apse mosaics that are both earlier and later than those treated in this study, a few recent contributions have begun to make up for this oversight by addressing more overarching questions concerning the modes of representation, the pictorial origins, and the liturgical function of apsidal imagery.[11]

Seen within a larger perspective, the iconographical-historical focus on the individual apse mosaic is the offshoot of a longstanding and largely unchallenged diachronic approach to the medieval art and architecture of Rome of which the most prominent example is indisputably Richard Krautheimer's *Rome. Profile of a City, 312–1308*.[12] In this majestic and superbly written work, which – as the author states – aims

"to outline a history of Rome *through*, rather than *of*, her monuments," the early medieval apse mosaics are presented as visual evidence of the changing cultural circumstances of the city.[13] The "late antique monumentality" of the figures in the apse of Ss. Cosmas and Damian, for example, embodies Christian art in Rome before the Byzantine conquest, attested to, in turn, by the antisculptural and "dehydrated" bodies in the mosaic of S. Agnese.[14] Eastern presence in Rome is also discernible in the style and iconographic scheme of the San Venanzio Chapel, commissioned by a pope from Dalmatia, John IV, after he had the remains of the local martyrs of Salona brought to the chapel.[15] In drawing on early Christian compositional schemes, such as in Ss. Cosmas and Damian or its presupposed early Christian prototype, the ninth-century mosaics of S. Prassede, S. Cecilia, San Marco, and S. Maria in Domnica are seen as witnesses to a papally orchestrated "revival" of Christian antiquity in Rome during the Carolingian period.[16] Although most successfully crafted by Krautheimer, this diachronic trajectory, which initiates on a high note with the local classicism of Ss. Cosmas and Damian, then stiffens and disintegrates with the Byzantine influenced mosaics of San Venanzio and S. Agnese, to finally bounce back again with a revival of earlier schemes in the mosaics of the ninth-century, has long been the standard and conventional prism through which to view the mosaics of early medieval Rome.[17]

Although Krautheimer's visual distinctions and their historical explanations hold much validity, it is also true that the apse mosaics share a number of features, which, by contrast, makes it difficult to anchor them in their own time of production. It is telling that the previously mentioned constituent features shared by these apse mosaics have only been analyzed in isolation (as iconographical or historical curiosities) and never as a means toward situating the early medieval apse mosaic in its specific historical context, an endeavor they would have failed to fulfill. In fact, the appearance of these salient characteristics, from Ss. Cosmas and Damian to San Marco, cannot be attributed to any specific pope's agenda, a wave of outside influence, or a larger cultural program during this time interval. Instead, these features, in sharp contrast to the style in which they were executed, do not provide change. They continue to appear in one apse vault after another and give the mosaics a somewhat static if not stubborn look that resists the course of time and, hence, context.

In contrast to previous studies, it is precisely the repetitive features of the early medieval apse mosaics that are the focus of this book. Rather than basing my study on visual changes over time, I have chosen to explore the opposite: why do the early medieval apse mosaics in Rome continue to represent some of the same constituent features across more than three centuries? Each mosaic, to be sure, has its own context to which particular

aspects of its imagery respond in one way or the other. Yet, the fact that the features shared by the mosaics create a broader visual and textual framework, which accommodates the variations among them, suggests that there is a larger story to be told. An underlying principle or overarching concept may empower the apse mosaics with meanings and functions of deeper and more fundamental significance than their internal differences in style and iconography reveal in terms of cultural change. Seen from this perspective, the specific context of each mosaic and the way in which it makes the mosaic distinct from its counterparts should be considered a subtext, a historical imprint on a larger and more fixed scheme that operates beyond the moment of its production.

The overall repetitive features of the apse mosaics have apparently left art historians little inspired to move beyond the study of individual examples and pursue a more comprehensive analysis. In failing to convey change, repetition as an artistic process was neither an efficient nor an attractive tool in a discipline in which Renaissance ideals of progress and originality traditionally have been the dominant parameters. Only in recent years has the focus in medieval art history on the icon, its replication, and the theoretical concepts governing this process seriously challenged the application of those standards to the visual culture of the Middle Ages, in which portraits of Christ and the saints were not created by artists of renown in competition, or influenced by aesthetic theories, but were copied over and over again by anonymous craftsmen to secure their venerability.[18]

One reason why the apse mosaic has not been a part of this latter, fruitful trend appears to reside in the somewhat ambiguous or evasive character of its imagery. As we have already seen, it frequently combines narrative scenes from the Book of Revelation on its arch with a handful of iconic figures in the apse vault, whose presence and interaction there may not always seem readily logical. While isolated in time and seeking contact with the viewer, these figures also form part of multilayered associations and events that often seem to converge on the central figure of Christ, whose majestic appearance in the apse itself is fraught with spatial and temporal multivalence.[19] The ambiguity and fusion of both iconic and narrative features on the same picture surface, sometimes even within the same figures, make the typology of the apse mosaic's imagery difficult to pinpoint; simultaneously it conflates and escapes what may be seen either as icon or as narrative.[20] If viewed through the mutually exclusive lens of either of these two established image categories, the apse mosaic resists incorporation, challenging efforts to categorize this type of imagery and understand its modus operandi. Yet, as this analysis shows, recent studies on both the icon and the pictorial narrative can prove helpful to that end.

I view repetition as a positive and constructive force that both invests the individual mosaic imagery with a specific function within

the collective group of early medieval apse mosaics and links them as a connected series. This process, in turn, has significant implications for how we discuss the mosaics in relation to time. In so doing, I depart from both older and more recent studies on how artifacts are capable of creating durations in real historic time that are different from what we usually perceive as a mere flow of ever-changing events from past to future through the present. Through a formalist approach to Mesoamerican terra-cotta-pots and votive statues, George Kubler famously proposed that such durations, or "envelopes," consist of objects that form a linked sequence or series by virtue of certain "group properties."[21] These group properties give each object a "positional value," which requires that it be seen as part of a series of related works as determined by an innovative "prime" object followed by a chain of replicas. In addition to its own value as an object, our comprehension of each object is incomplete until its "positional value can be reconstructed or recovered" within its intended serial setting.[22] Fundamental to this notion is that, whereas our awareness of history depends on "unforeseeable change and variety," our perception of time takes shape through "regularly recurrent events."[23] When considered in relation to one another, then, objects can assume a temporal dimension that is different from and complimentary to the specific historic moment to which each one belongs.[24]

The previously described relationship between serial objects, as determined by an archetype and its replicas, and historic time, has recently been examined in terms of medieval buildings and icons. In *Anachronic Renaissance*, Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood argue that by following, and explicitly referring to, an older prototype through certain structural and compositional features, the copy as substitute for the older original assumes a degree of "anachronism" that lifts it above the linear flow of time.[25] In the words of the two authors, the anachronic work is "late, first because it succeeds some reality that it re-presents, and then late again when that re-presentation is repeated for successive recipients."[26] Repetition over time, then, creates anachronism. Building on a study by Jacques Rancière, the authors propose that anachronism should not be judged negatively – as if the object it defines had erroneously fallen behind its proper historical time – but as a force that imbues the object with larger-than-life significance.[27] As such, the object may serve poorly as a document of history, but it takes on a life of its own by generating what Georges Didi-Huberman describes as an "ontological temporality" that is unaffected by historical change.[28]

This study builds on *The Shape of Time* and *Anachronic Renaissance* in so far as it considers the early medieval mosaics, not in isolation from each other, but as a series that through repetition of certain "group properties" (a shared formula of iconographic and epigraphic features) enables them to

substitute linear time with an alternative duration. In contrast to Kubler, however, I propose that this intervention in time does not depend on a "prime object" or archetype that initiates a chain of copies. Furthermore, whereas Kubler ignored the issue of signification, I argue that the ways in which the mosaics interact with one another within the chain produces an accrued meaning that reaches beyond the individual artifact. As such, I follow the model of substitution, as proposed by Nagel and Wood, through which the act of reference generates meaning. The mechanism by which the referential system works among medieval buildings and icons, however, is not identical to how it operates among the mosaics. In the first case, the mechanism is still tied to copying (as in Kubler's model), whereas in the second, it works through repetition. As artistic processes, both copying and repetition serve toward creating a series with group properties. But whereas copying submits to an authoritative prototype, repetition operates to bring a group of mosaics under the same conceptual umbrella. What drives repetition is not an object but an idea. The series of early medieval apse mosaics, therefore, is strictly horizontal. No example is more privileged than the other. Instead, each mosaic brings something different to the series and the latter's endeavor to build a continuous present that rises above changes in early medieval society. Thus, rather than relating to a specific referent within the chain, the mosaics produce signification by serving as equal referents to one another.[29]

As discussed previously, the early medieval mosaics have already been acknowledged as bearing the imprint of historical change by way of their style, choice of saints, or patronage. What this study essentially attempts, then, is to breathe life into the mosaics so that they are no longer perceived as merely "symptoms," "causes," or "mirrors" of a certain historicity. More precisely, it offers a discussion of the otherworldly and timeless dimension of what Didi-Huberman summarizes as the object's "double-faced temporality," a concept that already finds relevance through Aby Warburg.[30] On the one hand, the object should not be reduced to a simple historical document – as a "dot on a line." Yet, on the other hand, one should also caution its idealization as some "pure" creation of the "absolute" that is insensitive to external circumstances. Only when its historical component is considered together with its anachronism are we able to recover the object's temporality.[31] My study makes no attempt to outweigh let alone replace previous historical approaches, but aims to balance those efforts through an analysis that seeks to enhance our awareness of how the early medieval apse mosaic acts and functions as an image proper. As such, I take note of the mosaics as invested with agency – that is, an animating power of their own.[32]

Through a synchronic approach that removes the early medieval apse mosaics from their historical isolation and brings them together as a unified