

INTRODUCTION

The Metaphysics of Triumphal Arches

RES ET TEMPUS SUMMA CURA [...] / [...]
 [...]UIDENTIS MEMORATU[R] [...]

*Things and time with the greatest care [Prudence] notes and
 [...] remembers the eyewitnesses [...].*

FRAGMENTARY INSCRIPTION UNDER GIOTTO'S
 PRUDENCE IN THE ARENA CHAPEL

THIS BOOK ON Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua – the Cappella degli Scrovegni, circa 1300–1307 – takes its cues not so much from the familiar aspects of a celebrated and intensely studied monument as from its inbuilt surprises. Some of these are visual puzzles; some depend on mostly forgotten circumstances of the chapel's creation and reception; still others challenge academic boundaries and conventional assumptions about its place in the history of Western art. These lines of inquiry, taken sequentially and together, enable a decoding – and, I shall argue, a recoding – of the structure, visual appeal, and significance of the chapel. As an investigation of the different zones and historical styles represented in the chapel, this book constitutes an exercise in escaping from the quicksand of history that so quickly swallows important local and temporal context for art and architecture.

The starting point is the chapel's spatial structure. From top to bottom, this elongated, barrel-vaulted tunnel of a chapel is covered entirely with murals that

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Fig. I.1 Arena Chapel, detail of the wall curving into the vault with *Joachim in the Wilderness*. Courtesy of Steven Zucker.

purposefully deceive the eye with their depictions of specific materials – for instance the uninterrupted faux stone frames throughout the interior and around panels of marble relief in the dado zone, where faux relief sculptures of the *Virtues* and *Vices* alternate with ingeniously painted faux polychrome stone. The frames hold stony allegorical figures at the bottom, blue-grounded scenes with polychrome figures of the *Lives of Mary and Jesus* above, and an overarching blue barrel vault with golden stars.

The decoding of the structure begins with a simple observation: In Giotto's Arena Chapel, the architectural simulation of the painted sidewalls is painted on the wall itself so that the uppermost scenes curve into the vault (Figs. I.1–I.9). Why is this so? The curvature of those walls into the barrel vault emphasizes the classical character of the room, which is shaped like the bay of a Roman

arch. The painted scenes in the uppermost register illustrate the lives of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, and the early life of Mary from her birth to her triumphal Nuptial procession into the house of Joseph. The strict geometry of the cornice clashes with the curved radius of the arch, creating a dilemma for any systematic scene-by-scene reproduction of the full cycle of images. The painted scheme is counterintuitive to the actual architectural shape and to the relationship of walls to vault: The curved edges of the uppermost register on the walls compress the images, resisting conformity to the format of rectangular fields (see Figs. P.13–P.24). The lower scenes, in contrast, adhere to the flatness of the wall (see Figs. P.27–P.49). They can therefore easily be reproduced in two dimensions, while the first twelve polychrome stories from the top register are forced to bend in real space up into the vault's



Fig. I.2 Arena Chapel, detail of the wall curving into the vault with *Presentation of Mary into the Temple*. Courtesy of Steven Zucker.

embrace. Since the beginning of the age of photography, anyone who might try to fit those curved scenes together with the ones from the lower two registers, reproducing them in a flattened layout, had either to crop them all in order to obtain a unified rectangular shape, erasing the frames for the entire cycle, or to cut into the curved shapes of the upper scenes while maintaining clean cuts for the lower ones. More recently – to be precise, since the beginning of the age of digital image processing – it has become possible to distort the entire image or wall in order to make the subtle curve appear as flat as the page.

Another rupture in the visual regime derives from the striking placement of a faux architectural element in the center of the interior space that disrupts the orderly stars arranged on the two pieces of sky visible in the two halves. This piece of illusionistic painting simulates a richly ornamented marble transverse arch, with framed polychrome panels and prophets looking out of quatrefoils. The painter could have easily adjusted the fictive transverse arch or avoided

bending his scenes into that strange curve over the upmost register. Yet every corner and every fictive stone proves exactly matched to other parts as much as to the whole system. From painted pilasters to panels, from faux capitals to fictive frames, everything is calculated to fit to the square inch. Why, then, would Giotto bend those walls into the vault of the tunnel-shaped interior, awkwardly slanting the blue backgrounds over the scenes of *Joachim in the Wilderness* (see Figs. I.4–I.5) and the *Kiss at the Golden Gate* (see Fig. I.6); of the *Birth of Mary* (see Fig. I.7), her entry into the Temple in the *Presentation* (see Fig. I.8), the scenes around her *Betrothal*, and her *Nuptial Procession* (see Fig. I.9)? Like the coved edges deforming the upper fields, the disruptive placement of the transverse arch in the center of the barrel vault looks arrestingly, even provocatively strange. The system and its layered elements seem to communicate much more meaning than can be deciphered by the standard task of identifying a chapel's sum total of iconographies, scenes, symbols, and

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Fig. I.3 Arena Chapel, detail of the wall curving into the vault with *The Prayer before the Rods*. Courtesy of Steven Zucker.

saints. Separate elements of the interior appear to speak in a language of which one might know the words but not yet all its syntax. Tropes are elusive. Some kind of visual surplus hovers beyond the mere level of the familiar story of Salvation, some communication uniquely embedded in the spatial configuration of the whole, with space, placing, and even distortion of the images being part of their message. What is that visual surplus, and what might it signify?

The most productive answers to this question lie in the fraught relationship between motifs, forms, and themes in the Arena Chapel and in the triumphal arches of ancient Rome. Multiple clues point to such correlations and connections, too many to be random or incidental. To begin with the visual: the chapel's assertively rounded fictive and structural arches *alla romana*; the peculiar arched coving of the sidewalls into the

blue barrel vault; the romanizing style of the dado base painted to look like marble, with niches framing relief-like sculptural panels representing the *Virtues* and the *Vices*. Historical ties between the Paduan commission and Rome were especially close around the time when the Arena project began. The first Jubilee decreed by Pope Boniface VIII (1294–1303) in his bull *Antiquorum habet fida relatio* of 22 February 1300 drew more than 200,000 pilgrims to Rome, among them Giotto, who had been summoned to the Holy City by the Pope soon after his election and, most likely, also Enrico Scrovegni, who commissioned the chapel.¹ Benedict XI, eventual successor to Boniface, had conferred privileges on the Paduan chapel as the bishop of nearby Treviso and would see them confirmed during his brief tenure as Pope (1303–1304). Padua boasted of an ancient legacy in myth and history, a city

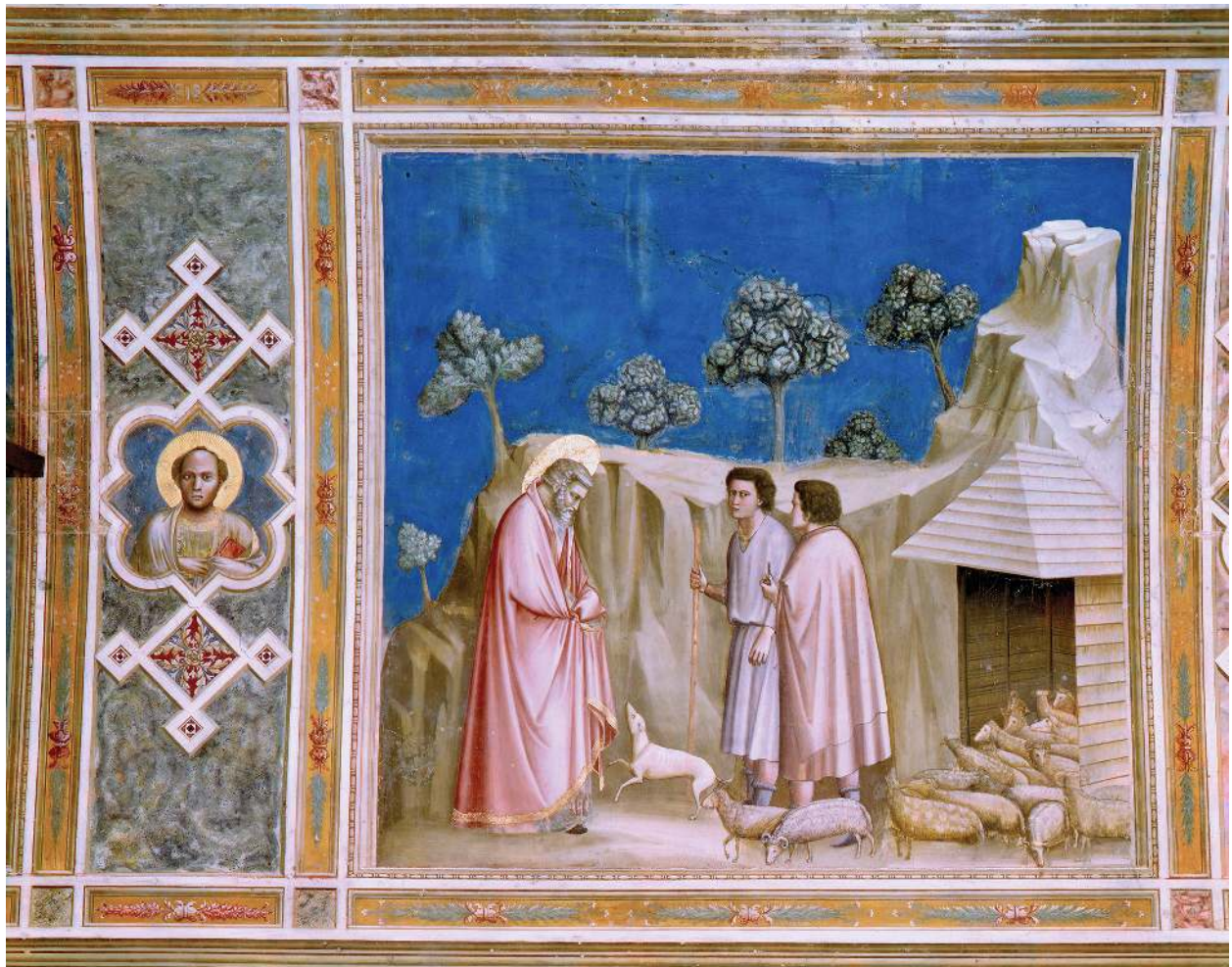


Fig. I.4 *Joachim in the Wilderness*. Scala / Art Resource, NY.

supposedly founded by Antenor, hero of the *Iliad*, and reputedly the birthplace of the Roman historian Livy. Shortly before and long after 1300 Padua was also home to groups of scholars whose studies of antiquity foreshadowed Renaissance humanism; in large part through its university, the city was a cosmopolitan intellectual and cultural center. And should these connections to the Rome of antiquity not suffice, we must not forget that the chapel arose from the ruins of Padua's ancient Roman arena, evoking the spirits of the place by location and by name.

The central proposition of this book is that precisely this interlacing network of possibilities is coded into the chapel as a response to Roman

triumphal arches as they were experienced by pilgrims (including Giotto) during the Jubilee of 1300. Specifically, I argue that the chapel follows the model of the Arch of Titus and the Arch of Constantine in and adjacent, respectively, to the ancient Roman Forum – the chapel's fictive marble paneling and sculptural relief recalling traces of polychrome stonework on the arches as evidenced today by digital reconstructions. This tribute to Roman antiquity has important implications for a fresh understanding of the combination of “classical” sculptural qualities and the “realistic” and “lifelike” illusionism that have been canonical in commentary on Giotto since Giorgio Vasari. In the sixteenth century, Vasari noted that

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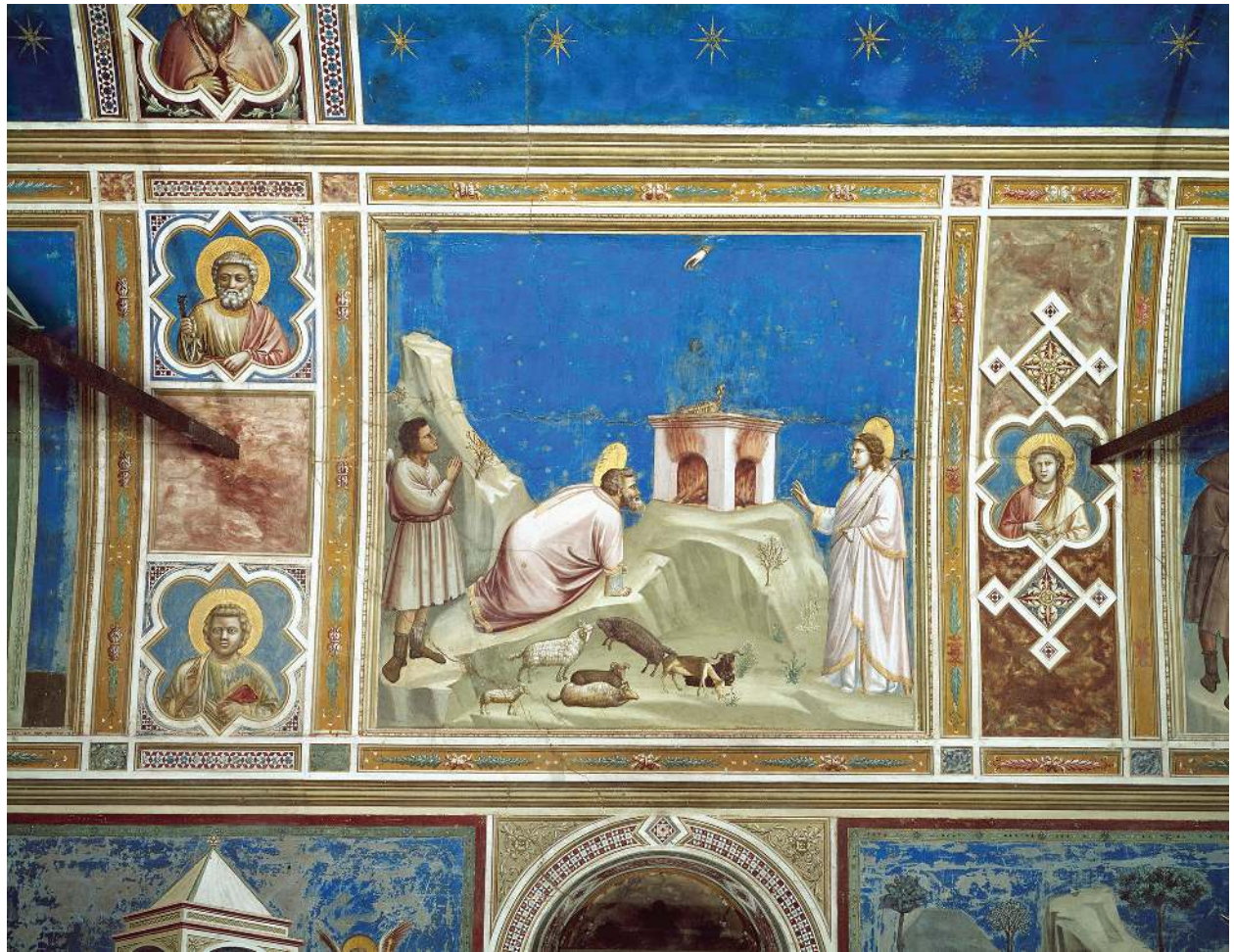


Fig. I.5 *Joachim's Sacrifice*. Scala / Art Resource, NY.

Giotto's work constituted a unique intellectual and aesthetic watershed for the late Middle Ages and the early modern age in Europe. The two greatest achievements often cited by Vasari – and endorsed ever since – are Giotto's innovative development of an extremely naturalistic style and his seemingly instinctive connection to sculptural models from ancient Rome. Giotto's naturalism, on the one hand, and his subtle sense of history, on the other, have indeed kept art historians and theorists occupied to the present day. Yet these are two answers to a single problem that, once seen in its entirety, opens entirely new perspectives on the intellectual environment around Giotto and ultimately challenges the art-historical periodization of the Italian Renaissance.

But the tribute and its implications are surely incomplete and therefore somewhat inadequate without considering the theological implications of the Christian conversion of military triumphalism, conquest, and the apotheosis of victorious emperors characteristic of ancient Rome and its monuments. At the heart of this reversal stands the ideal of peacefulness as embodied in Jesus Christ and his self-sacrifice for the Salvation of all. Ancient arches that would have been seen by Giotto, Scrovegni, and their contemporaries were all surrounded, walled, and incorporated by Christian places of worship built into or over the ruins of pagan Rome. The Arch of Titus itself listed in medieval sources as one of the most prominent station churches of Rome.



Fig. I.6 *The Kiss at the Golden Gate*. Scala / Art Resource, NY.

Among the many Roman arches still present in Giotto's time, the spiritual and historical charge of the Arch of Titus is indeed unique with its direct historical and visual connection to the Judaica, to the holy city of Jerusalem, to the Roman-Jewish war, and to the historical looting and transfer of the Menorah into Rome, as well as with its central bay relief of the emperor's apotheosis. Christians in medieval Rome worshipped under the Arch of Titus; this arch was the focus and destination of the papal Jubilee procession in 1300.²

The entire Jubilee, meant to confirm the triumph of the Roman church, was staged on a processional route connecting the Lateran with the Forum, incorporating the Colosseum, the Arch of

Constantine, and the Arch of Titus. This last was the most important, as it transported the imagery and spiritual charge of the yet more ancient Holy City of Jerusalem into the heart of the city of Rome with its relief showing the Menorah, the Shewbread Table, and the Torah Ark from the Temple that Titus had destroyed. To connect the Arena Chapel to the Arch of Titus is thus to link Padua not only to Rome but also to Jerusalem, tracing the triangulation of Christian history with the Judaic tradition from which it emerged as well as with the pagan Roman tradition it superseded in the era of the Holy Roman Empire.

An entire ensemble of ancient monuments in the center of Rome stands to be considered as a

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Fig. I.7 *The Birth of Mary*. Scala / Art Resource, NY.

typological template for Giotto's satellite project in Padua, namely, the Colosseum, the Arch of Constantine, the fortress and family towers of Palazzo Frangipani, and the Arch of Titus incorporated therein. Here it is important to register what exactly "pagan" meant for Christians after the historical decline of ancient Roman state religion, and why the term and concept endured long after any actual pagan threat had been overcome: On the one hand, following the historical shift from the old Roman state religion to Constantine's embrace of a Christian Rome, paganism came increasingly to be more broadly understood as any kind of oppressive and violent worldly power. On the other hand, the importance of the historical

moment of Mary, Christ, and the Crucifixion under Roman occupation – as well as the later efforts of Paul's mission, which took place in the context of pagan Roman persecution of Christians – have been continuously reactivated in Christian liturgy to the present day on the macro- and micro-levels of meditative and devotional practices built into the church calendar. In addition to annual celebrations of central moments such as Palm Sunday, which returns believers mentally and ritualistically to the Entry of Christ into Roman-occupied Jerusalem, liturgies and daily rites pronounce the idea of the "pagan" in Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran Bible readings, hymns, and prayers. Because of their biblical role as historical enemies of Christ

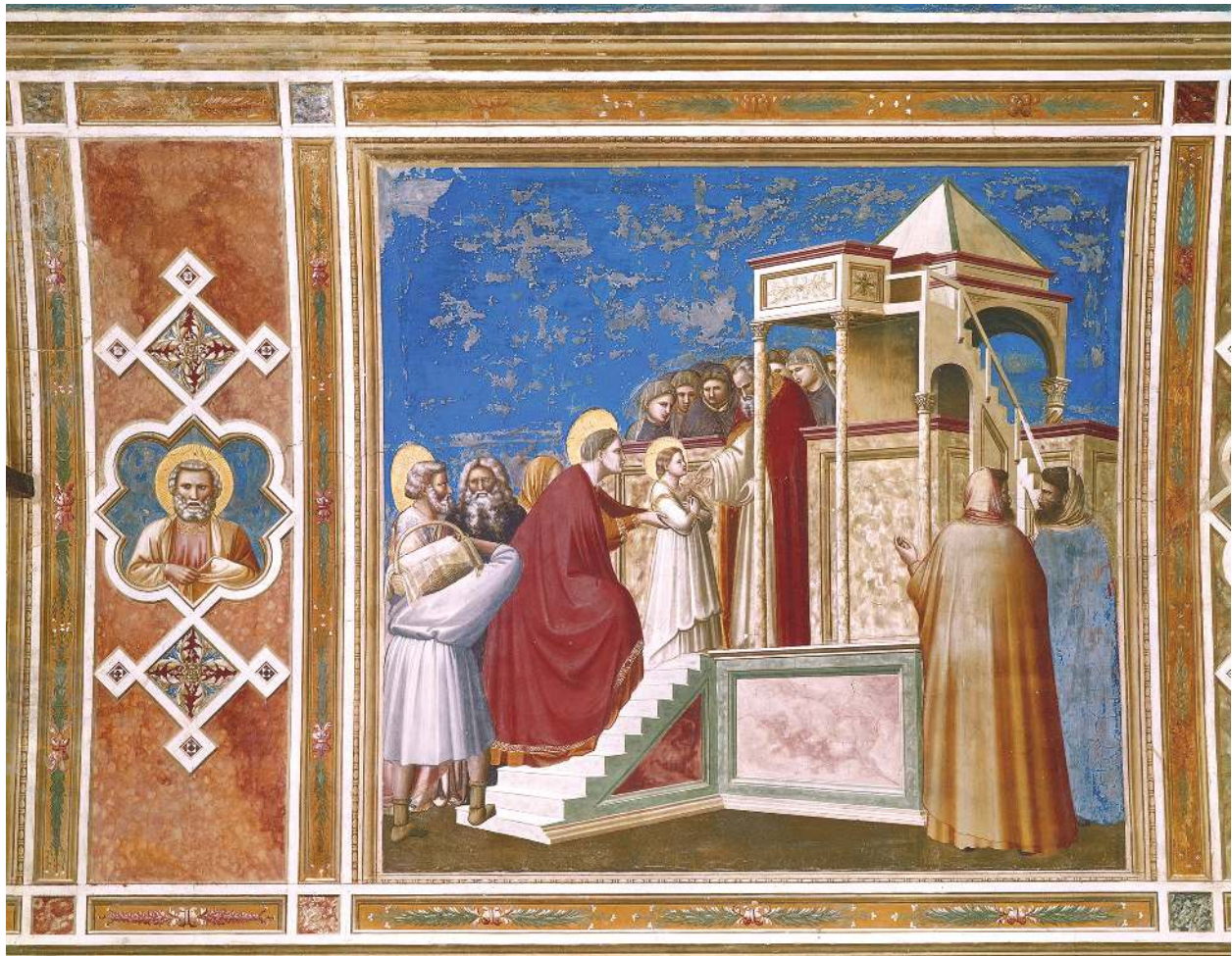


Fig. I.8 *The Presentation of Mary into the Temple*. Scala / Art Resource, NY.

and subsequently as personified antithesis of Christian values, the pagans had not become any less relevant just because they had disappeared from the stage of world history.

Halfway between the historical moment of Christ and today, in the late Middle Ages, these concepts were as relevant as ever. Specifically commemorated with the celebration of the Roman Jubilee in 1300, ongoing struggles with the ghosts of the past are clearly expressed in the most relevant written source that survives for the chapel. It is the only extensive textual source that has accompanied the chapel through time to today, fortunately recorded in the archives of Bernardino Scardeone's collection of Paduan inscriptions published in 1559 and 1560. This document states

Enrico Scrovegni's motivations and intended role as a donor in the context of historical change and transformation from the ancient Roman pagan to a Christian world, and from Christ's Entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to the current celebrations of the Annunciation in Padua:

This ancient place, called by the name Arena, becomes a noble altar, so full of divine majesty, to God.

Thus God's eternal power changes [earthly] fortune, and converts places filled with evil to honest use.

Behold, this was the home of abominable heathen, which was destroyed and sold over many years, and is [now] wondrously [re]built.



Fig. 1.9 *Mary's Nuptial Procession*. Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY.

Those who led a life of luxury in happy times, their wealth now lost, remain nameless and mute; but Enrico Scrovegni, the knight, saves his honest soul; he offers a revered festival here.

And indeed he had this temple solemnly dedicated to the Mother of God, so that he would be blessed with eternal mercy.

Divine virtue replaced profane vices; heavenly joys, which are superior to earthly vanities, [...].

When this place is solemnly dedicated to God, the year of the Lord is thus inscribed:

In the year 1303, when March had conjoined the feast of the blessed Virgin and the rite of the Palm.³

More than simply adding yet another case study to the long history of medieval renaissances,

the notion of a Christian recoding casts the chapel's spatial-visual "surplus" in a new light. Most immediately, it suggests that the double triumphal arch of the chapel's vault was meant to be seen as broken – a ruin opening onto an intensely and supernaturally blue heaven filled with golden stars (see Fig. P.6). Fictive roundels appear in this nocturnal sky, showing Christ the King and Mary with the infant Jesus surrounded by prophets. Echoing the organization of the central relief in the arch showing the Apotheosis of the ancient emperor, this symmetrical arrangement of heavenly apparitions on each side of the chapel's central transverse arch becomes a rhetorical gesture from the past towards the future. The ruins here, therefore, are redemptive – filled