

## Sample Student Work

### a. Final Paper

## **Mother, Virgin, and Protectress: The Importance of Mary's Mediation in the Art and History of Santa Maria Maggiore**

The Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore is a Major papal basilica, as well as the largest Catholic church dedicated to Mary, Mother of Christ, in the city of Rome. From the first rebuilding and groundbreaking ceremony in 432 CE, the basilica has experienced a rich and culturally significant history. Mary's importance as a Christian figure cannot be understated, and this great influence can be seen in the depictions of Mary in the art of Santa Maria Maggiore. Mary's relation to Jesus as the mother of Christ can translate as a metaphorical relation as the mother of Christians, and this maternal connection is reflected in Christian art. The art and history of Santa Maria Maggiore tie in to this sacred relationship, seen acutely in the fifth-century CE mosaics, and the icon known as the *Salus Populi Romani*, or the 'Salvation of the Roman People,' a cult image dating from the sixth century CE. This maternal relationship is evident in the artistic and architectural program of Santa Maria Maggiore, in particular in the depiction of Mary as the protectress of the Roman people.

One of the first churches dedicated solely to the Virgin Mary as well as the first in Rome, Santa Maria Maggiore was dedicated by Pope Sixtus III to commemorate the proclamation of the Council of Ephesus, who in 431 CE declared Mary to be the Mother of God.<sup>1</sup> The council condemned the teachings of Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople, who enforced the

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Vassilaki, *The Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art* (Milan, Italy: Skira, 2000), 10.

viewpoint that Mary could be referred to as the Christotokos, or ‘Christ-bearer,’ but not the Theotokos, or ‘God-bearer.’ Before this point in Christian history, Mary’s role was not as ubiquitously accepted and understood; whether she was the bearer of a mortal man who would later be granted divinity, or if she in turn gave birth to Incarnate God affected the way that Mary was viewed in the Church. The size of the role Mary plays in Christianity still differs from denomination to denomination, and the Council’s decision would cause a schism between Roman Catholicism and the Nestorian Church. The decision to recognize Mary as not just the Bearer of Christ, but as the Bearer of God would lead to a surge in the erecting of worship sites dedicated to the Virgin, including Santa Maria Maggiore. Such worship sites often housed relics associated with Mary; in the case of Santa Maria Maggiore, the Holy Crib, pieces of the Holy Manger, a shard of the True Cross, and the tombs of several saints, including Saint Jerome.

According to legend, in August of 358 CE, the Virgin Mary appeared in a vision to a Roman patrician and his wife, both of whom were childless, and wished to leave all that they had to the Virgin. Mary came to the couple in a dream, instructing them that come the following day, they would find a patch of snow where they were to build a church in her honor. The couple approached Pope Liberius about the vision they had both experienced, only to find that he, too, had the same dream. Miraculously, despite the notorious late summer heat of Rome, Liberius would discover a patch of snow the next day, exactly as the Virgin had foretold, outlining a space located on the Esquiline Hill. He would, as Mary instructed, go on to begin work on the structure that would later be known as Santa Maria Maggiore, funded by the couple’s wealth.<sup>2</sup>The miraculous snowfall gives Santa Maria Maggiore the name “Our Lady of the

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret R. Miles, “Santa Maria Maggiore’s Fifth-Century Mosaics: Triumphal Christianity and the Jews.” *Harvard Theological Review* 86 (1993): 157-158.

Snows,” a title which has remained popular into modernity, where the divine weather event is celebrated every August in front of the basilica. This miracle on behalf of Mary, Mother of God, would not be the last, and would set the tone for the future of the basilica, one in which Mary’s life, theological significance, and maternal nature are at the forefront.

The architectural program of Santa Maria Maggiore was a commonly used fifth century plan, including a tall, wide nave, flanked by aisles, capped by a semicircular apse.<sup>3</sup> The original exterior of the basilica adhered to Classical Roman conventions, closely resembling the imperial basilica typical of the second century.<sup>4</sup> This callback to earlier Imperial Rome, when the city itself was a triumphal monument to the greatness of the empire, may have been a way of connecting the church to the ancient history of the city, as well as its new Christian future. In the Imperial Period, Rome was viewed as the center of the Empire, but now, it was thought of as the center of the Christian world. In typical Roman fashion, much of what is visible today does not represent the original structure. Over the centuries, the church received numerous additions, repairs, and reconstructions, some of which were purely practical, and some which represented the changing tastes in art and architecture of their respective periods. In the eleventh century, for example, the church was given a decorative facade, which would later be covered by Pope Benedict XIV in 1743. Santa Maria Maggiore also preserves parts of Rome’s imperial past, such as the forty repurposed columns which support the nave, thirty-six of which are marble and four of which are granite. These Athenian columns either come from the original basilica, or from another antique structure. Additionally, the Marian Column erected in the piazza in 1614 is the last surviving column from the Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine in the Roman Forum,

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 46.

<sup>4</sup> Miles, “Santa Maria Maggiore’s Fifth-Century Mosaics: Triumphal Christianity and the Jews,” 158.

where eight identical pillars once stood.<sup>5</sup> Once more in typical Roman fashion, if it were not for the use of these spolia in a Christian setting, it is likely they would be lost to time forever.

Santa Maria Maggiore's interior space also contains a treasure trove of history, spanning from the fifth century to the present. Significantly, the surviving fifth-century mosaics represent some of the oldest representations of the Virgin Mary, providing insight as to her role in the Christian Late Antique and very early medieval periods. The mosaics appear to assert two central themes; first, that the Virgin Mary was indeed the Theotokos, or God-bearer, and to make a connection between the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament, in which the Old Testament foreshadows the New. This connection, historically and theologically speaking, is incredibly important, as it reinforces the life and death of Jesus Christ as being foretold in Judaic teachings. The triumphal arch, originally referred to as the apse arch, contains mosaics depicting scenes of the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary, while the nave mosaics contain Old Testament scenes.<sup>6</sup> Despite both works dating from the fifth century, the two differ in the way they present their respective narratives. The triumphal arch mosaics are flatter and more linear, with scenes of the lives of Mary and Christ depicted in a straightforward and relatively unemotional manner.<sup>7</sup> They chronicle milestones in the life of Mary, from the birth of Christ to Mary's death, and her ultimate coronation as the Queen of Heaven. The nave mosaics, contrastingly, are filled with movement, color, and emotion. The Old Testament scenes, in particular Moses parting the Red Sea, are depicted in a more harrowing manner.<sup>8</sup> This combination of the calm grace of the Virgin and the emotion and action of the Old Testament scenes impress upon the viewer the

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel B Platner, *A 1929 Topography of Ancient Rome* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), 76.

<sup>6</sup> Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308*, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Robin Cormack, "Chapter 30: The Visual Arts." In *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 14, ed. Averil Cameron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 889.

<sup>8</sup> Robin Cormack, "Chapter 30: The Visual Arts." 889.

serenity of Mary, as well as the tumultuous movement of the foretelling of Christianity. The mosaics impress upon the viewer both the prophetic nature of Christianity through the Old Testament's foretelling of the coming of Christ, as well as the importance of the Virgin Mary in the Christian faith. Mary functions in these mosaics not simply as a vessel from which Christ was born, but as an integral part of the Christian faith as a whole. In the coronation panel, we see the scenes of Mary's mortal life come to a symbolic ending with the crowning of the Virgin as the Queen of Heaven.

The *Salus Populi Romani* first arrived in Rome in 590 CE, under the Pontificate of Pope Gregory the Great. The Byzantine icon depicts the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child, who in turn holds what is presumably a Gospel book, with his right hand raised in a gesture of blessing. The Virgin dons a blue mantle embroidered delicately with gold, and holds a mappa, or ancient ceremonial handkerchief, in her right hand. While the mappa would have once been a consular or imperial symbol, in this new Christian context it almost certainly enforces Mary as the *Regina Coeli*, or "Queen of Heaven."<sup>9</sup> The image would have originally been adorned with jeweled regalia and Canonical crowns, though these have since been removed and preserved. The image has been heavily restored, to the extent that the term overpainted is often used instead. This overpainting is likely one of the reasons why the icon has been dated to nearly every period between the fifth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>10</sup> Presently, the piece is most commonly dated to sometime in the Late Antique period, from roughly the third to eighth centuries CE, although no specific date has ever been definitively agreed on by historians.<sup>11</sup><sup>12</sup> The icon is one of several

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<sup>9</sup> Mayke de Jong et al., *Topographies of Power in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2001), 64.

<sup>10</sup> de Jong et al., *Topographies of Power in the Middle Ages*, 64.

<sup>11</sup> Gerhard Wolf, "Icons and Sites." In *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005), 33. <sup>12</sup> Gerhard Wolf, *Salus Populi*

said to have been created by the hand of Luke the Evangelist; according to legend, he painted the work in Jerusalem, while the Virgin Mary spoke directly to him, events which Saint Luke would go on to record in his Gospel. Legend also states that the icon was later discovered by Saint Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, in the fourth century. While the title *Salus Populi Romani* ties back to the pagan era of the Roman Republic, after the 313 CE Edict of Milan, Constantine sanctioned the phrase as a title for the Virgin Mary.<sup>12</sup>

From at least the fifteenth century onwards, the *Salus Populi Romani* was honored as a miraculous image, due in part to the use of the icon by Pope Gregory I in response to the Roman Plague of 590. Most likely the bubonic plague, the Roman Plague swiftly followed the plague of Justinian, which had begun just fifty years prior and would last until the end of the Late Antique period.<sup>13</sup><sup>14</sup> As a Pope whose reign began with Rome essentially in ruins, Gregory the Great organized a Papal procession through the streets of Rome, terminating at Santa Maria Maggiore, with the purpose of asking the Virgin's aid in protecting the people of Rome from the devastation of the plague. Asking for the protection of the Virgin Mary would have perhaps been unusual at the time, due to the fact that the task of protecting the city was typically associated with Saint Peter, who was viewed as one of the Christian founders of Rome. It is speculated that perhaps the act of turning to Mary rather than Peter was influenced by Pope Gregory's time as an *apocrisiarius* to the East Roman Empire, where he may have in turn assimilated to Byzantine practices. It was common practice in Constantinople, a city dedicated by Emperor Constantine to

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*Romani: die Geschichte römische Kultbilder im Mittelalter* (Weinheim: VCH Acta Humaniora, 1990), 167.

<sup>12</sup> Wolf, *Salus Populi Romani: die Geschichte römische Kultbilder im Mittelalter*, 170.

<sup>13</sup> George C Kohn, "Roman Plague of A.D. 590." In *Encyclopedia of Plague and Pestilence* vol.

<sup>14</sup>, ed. George C. Kohn (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 323.

the Virgin Mary, to hold processions with the hope of appeasing God's wrath.<sup>15</sup> Natural disasters, in particular plagues, were commonly believed to be punishment from God, typically for a variety of sins, such as lack of piety or witchcraft.<sup>16</sup> According to legend, Gregory the Great would experience a vision on this very procession, in which Saint Michael the Archangel appeared atop the mausoleum of Emperor Hadrian.<sup>17</sup> In his vision, Michael sheathed a sword, a symbolic gesture implying that God's wrath had been appeased, and apparently, it was at this point that the devastation of the Plague of Rome ceased. Following this, the faithful thanked Mary, believing the procession, including the *Salus Populi Romani*, to have been the driving factor which ended the suffering.

The icon has since been venerated by multiple Popes, from Pope Gregory I in the sixth century to Pope Francis in the present day. In 2018, Pope Francis officiated a Pontifical Mass in honor of the image, on the anniversary of the icon's translation to the permanent marble shrine where it still remains. In 2020, incited by the COVID-19 pandemic, the icon was presented during an extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* blessing, almost certainly drawing on the *Salus Populi Romani's* role in the sixth century Plague of Rome. This time, unlike the mass procession of Gregory the Great, Pope Francis stood in front of Saint Peter's Basilica alone to address the city of Rome. Mary's protection of the people of Rome in many ways mirrors the protection she provides to Christians; since Late Antiquity, the Virgin Mary's role in Christian devotion has been one of intercession. Rather than speaking directly to Christ, a sinner begs his mother to

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew J Ekonomou, *Byzantine Rome and the Greek Popes* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007) 17.

<sup>16</sup> Michael W Dols, "The Comparative Communal Responses to the Black Death in Muslim and Christian Societies." In *Medieval and Renaissance Studies* vol. 5, ed. Lynn White, Jr. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 272.

<sup>17</sup> Kohn, "Roman Plague of A.D. 590," 323.

intercede on their behalf. Mary, though divine in her own right, acts as a nurturing force rather than the harrowing fear which God's wrath could incite.

The history of Santa Maria Maggiore, the first church dedicated to Mary in the city of Rome, shows a clear trend of glorification of the Virgin. The fifth-century mosaics and icon in particular demonstrate the clear veneration and power that Mary held, and continues to hold, in Catholic Mariology. Revered by many and even referred to in some contexts as the greatest saint, Mary's importance in Catholicism in many ways draws on the personal, maternal relationship that many faithful seek out from the Mother of Christ. Mary's mediating nature, as well as her piety, purity, and unconditional, eternal love for her son come together to form a figure of comfort and hope. In the same way that the Virgin has taken on the role of protectress in times of crisis, the faithful pray to Mary for divine intervention in times of their own personal crisis, hoping to experience her maternal mediation. In the same way that Mary's love for Christ as his mother was undying, her role as Mother of the Church enforces that her love for Christians will never die.

Mary's role in Christian devotion has, since the fourth century, been one of intercession and nurture. The Virgin's presence as a motherly figure and her role as protectress is evident in the *Salus Populi Romani*, where the Holy Mother is shown as a protecting, guiding force for the people of Rome, who protects the faithful from plagues and intercedes on their behalf to deliver their prayers to Christ. Her mediating, maternal nature is enforced in artistic depictions of the Virgin as the Queen of Heaven, the Theotokos, and as the Protectress of the Roman People. The artistic program of Santa Maria Maggiore as a whole ties back to Mary's importance as the mother of Christianity, from the mosaics which connect the Old Testament to the New, the linear

retelling of her lifetime milestones, and the *Salus Populi Romani*, an icon believed to be the savior of the Roman people.

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#### b. Site Visit Reflection

When I first applied to transfer to LMU, I made the very risky choice of not applying to any other schools, including safety schools in case I didn't get in. I never told anyone, but around the time acceptance letters were making their rounds, I was in a very bad place mentally. I was burned out, drained, and just really in need of some good news. My family was fortunate when COVID hit, and throughout everything, and we lost very little, especially compared to the unimaginable losses which so many have had to suffer through. I had never had any real connection to the school I had been going to previously, and when schools nationwide closed, I didn't bother with zoom courses; I just left. I made wonderful, lifelong friends there, but I never felt at home. It has always been surreal, looking back; one day, I was on campus picking up my ceramics project, and when I glanced at the campus in the rearview mirror, I didn't realize I would likely never see it again.

In my experience, family is subjective. I have known blood relatives for years who couldn't provide the sense of comfort and belonging that friends I've known for months have. My mother was concerned when I expressed interest in LMU, worried that coming from a non religious family, I wouldn't fit in at a Catholic school. As a child, we moved around frequently, and I was always suffering with outsider syndrome, always watching my peers from the outside looking in. Throughout my time at LMU, I can't say that I've never had feelings of loneliness, but these spare moments are overshadowed by an overall sense of belonging. I had always

considered most university value statements to be essentially empty words, meaningless when it really came down to it, but the feeling of family and commitment to others has made my time at LMU really magical. Even now, whenever I feel ungrateful, I look back to where I was in the spring of 2020, waiting every day to see if I had been accepted. I remember pleading with the universe, saying *please just give me this, I need this, I know I can do this*. I remember that when I opened my acceptance letter, I realized that my life was going to change. When I feel ungrateful, I look back on my past self, and I tell her that she has no idea how right she is.