A Journey through Sacred Space: Medieval Tree and Cross Symbolism in the Apse Mosaic and Floor of San Clemente in Rome

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Introduction: Cross, Tree, and Vine Symbolism in the Church of San Clemente

In medieval Rome, the cross – also called the lignum vitae (tree or wood of life) – represented a Christian belief that the sins of humankind, associated with the tree of knowledge, were overcome through Christ’s sacrifice.¹ The cross and vine in the apse mosaic of the twelfth-century church of San Clemente in Rome are a case in point (Figs. 1-2). In the center of the mosaic, on top of a gold inlaid background, Christ appears crucified on a black cross. A lush, green acanthus plant grows beneath him. Sinuous vines surround the cross on either side. The mosaic’s theme follows a typical fourth- or fifth-century configuration, which likens the emblematic cross to the paradisiacal “Tree of Life.”² The visually literate laity of the twelfth century would have understood the image as a symbol of redemption and renewal. As such, the apse mosaic also depicts the cross as the Vine of Christ that abundantly provides the wine of the Eucharist and represents Christ’s sacrificial blood.³ The ornament and furnishings of San Clemente emphasize this central tree and vine motif. For example, San Clemente’s iconographic

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¹ All translations are the authors’ own. For more on the semiotics of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, see Gerhart Ladner’s influential article “Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism: A Comparison.” *Speculum* 54/2 (1979), 223-256. I owe many thanks to Ladner’s work for launching my investigation into the multiple signified meanings of the tree in a medieval context.


³ In particular, Chesterton, *Resurrection*, 342, relates the idea that the cross is akin to a sword being wielded by the Hand of God shown at the head of the apsidal arch. The vines are like the blood flowing from the earth into which the cross has been thrust. While such an interpretation may be overly violent, it captures the sanguineous nature of the vine in the apse mosaic.

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and spatial congruity manifests itself in the twisting sinusoidal strands of its pre-Cosmatesque floor. The floor’s central *guilloche* forms a *quincuncx*: a five-point symbol that resembles a crucifix (Fig. 3). In shape and form, the marbled pavement echoes the central cross/tree of the apse mosaic.

Figure 1. San Clemente, Rome, 1120-1128, Apse Mosaic, mosaic with gold inlay. Photograph, Marie-Lan Nguyen, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AAns%5Celsius_mosaic_San_Clemente.jpg.

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4 The term “Cosmatesque” derives from the Cosmati family name, a prolific marble workshop in the thirteenth century. For more information on medieval workshops and the elevated role of marble workers, see Ann Priester, “Bell Towers and Building Workshops in Medieval Rome,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 52/2 (Jun. 1993), 199-220. I use the term “pre-Cosmatesque” as Richard Krautheimer does in *Rome: A Profile of a City 312-1308* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 162-201, to indicate that the floor in San Clemente was made before the Cosmati workshop was in operation in Rome.

5 Here *guilloche* refers to an architectural pattern that normally features two or more interlacing ribbons or sinusoidal threads. It was commonly used in classical Greece and Rome as well as neoclassical architecture. It also appears in medieval pre-Cosmatesque stone and marble inlay. In particular, San Clemente’s design is a *guilloche of eyelets*, which is the term used when strands interlace to create circular interspaces. For more on this term and related terminology, see Paloma Pajares-Ayuela, *Cosmatesque Ornament: Flat Polychrome Geometric Patterns in Architecture*, trans. Maria Fleming Alvarez (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 146-195. Pajares, 196-247, also provides an extensive analysis of the *quincuncial* form in her study.

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Figure 2. San Clemente, Rome, 1120-1128, Cross/Tree of Life Detail, mosaic with gold inlay. Photograph, Marie-Lan Nguyen, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Apsis_mosaic_San_Clemente_n2.jpg. © 2014 The Middle Ground Journal Number 9, Fall 2014 http://TheMiddleGroundJournal.org See Submission Guidelines page for the journal's not-for-profit educational open-access policy
The verdant imagery in the mosaic and the quincuncial form in the pre-Cosmatesque floor evoke a mental space: an imagined form of paradise. As Henri Lefebvre would remind us, San Clemente’s lived or social space equally defines the church’s ontology.\textsuperscript{6} In particular, Lefebvre discussed three distinct fields in space: mental, physical, and social. According to his “unitary theory,” these separate fields join together to create a sense of place.\textsuperscript{7} In San Clemente, the decorations of the physical space evoke a mental space. In tandem with social rituals performed in the church, these elements would affect the meaning of medieval San Clemente.

\textsuperscript{6} Henri Lefebvre, \textit{The Production of Space} (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 11; and John Brinkerhoff Jackson, \textit{A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time} (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1994), who advocates for time-based rituals as the primary defining characteristic of a place.

\textsuperscript{7} Lefebvre, \textit{The Production of Space}, 11, notes that there is often tension between mental and social fields.
As medieval pilgrims entered the church during feast day celebrations, such as the Eve of the Assumption, the spiral design of the pre-Cosmatesque floor would lead the audience toward the mosaic and the central cross/tree motif. The elevated position of the cross/tree and vine symbol, punctuated by luminous gold material flickering in torch light, would naturally call the devotee’s eye. The floor’s elaborate pathway, laid out in spoliate roundels of red porphyry and green serpentine, would lead these spiritual pilgrims in a straight line toward the central apse.

The notion that the pre-Cosmatesque floor could direct the audience’s attention toward the apse mosaic raises a question: is there a discourse between the mosaic, the floor, and the audience in twelfth-century Rome? I argue that the twelfth-century audience in San Clemente would have experienced the mosaic as an interchange between the pre-Cosmatesque floor and Christ on the lignum vitae. Moreover, I contend that the creator or patron of the mosaic sought to affect the interchange between apse, floor, and viewer. The interior design of the Roman basilica appropriated past traditions to communicate new, complex meanings to a Christian audience, both Roman resident and visiting pilgrim. For example, Byzantine techniques inspired the design of the pre-Cosmatesque floor, while spoliate marble provided its material. The lignum vitae of the apse mosaic likewise featured a spiraling vine appropriated from early

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8 For a description of this procession, see Herbert Kessler and Johannes Zacharias, *Rome 1300: On the Path of the Pilgrim* (New Haven, Connecticut; London: Yale University Press, 2000), 65-89.

9 Spoliate is the adjectival form of spolia, a Latin term referring to military spoils often used as decoration by a victorious party. Ancient Greeks and Romans commonly used military spoils to demonstrate their authority and triumph, as famously illustrated in the image of Jerusalem being sacked on the arch of Titus in Rome. For more information on spolia generally, see Maria Fabricius Hansen, *The Eloquence of Appropriation: Prolegomena to an Understanding of Spolia in Early Christian Rome* (Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2003); Dale Kinney, “Rape or Restitution of the Past? Interpreting Spolia,” in *The Art of Interpreting*, ed. Susan C. Scott (University Park, Pennsylvania: Department of Art History, Pennsylvania State University, 1995), 52-67; and Rebecca Müller, *Sic hostes ianua frangit: Spolien und Trophäen im mittelalterlichen* (Genua. Weimar: VDG, 2002).

10 The notion of discourse is common in academic literature. Here I am referring directly to Riccioni, *Il mosaico*, xxiii: *discurso* in Riccioni’s study refers to the exchange between the viewer and the apse mosaic. I include the floor, audience, and apse mosaic in my consideration of the term.

Christian ornament and ancient Roman iconography. In analyzing these connections, I employ a semiotic approach in order to understand the didactic spiritual and political message of the cross/tree symbol in the floor and apse mosaic. In so doing, I seek to understand how the iconographic program constructed a mental, paradisiacal space. This requires that the phenomenological experience of the audience moving through San Clemente’s spatial program be considered by first positioning the cross/tree and vine symbol of the apse mosaic within the larger context of tree symbolism and then contextualizing the social rituals of the church as a means to discover what messages, political or religious, the interior design of San Clemente communicated.

**The Semiotics of Trees: The Vine and Quincunx**

The cross as a representation of the Tree of Life connects to a long tradition in Rome. The site of Rome’s very foundation is marked by an iconic fig tree. During the Roman Republic, Plutarch wrote that the twins Romulus and Remus, the fathers of Rome, were nursed by a she-wolf and guarded by a woodpecker underneath the branches of a fig tree. The foundation of the city under a tree may be lore and mythology, but the tale reveals that arboreal forms have shaped the Roman environment and its history. Under the shade of a great oak tree, for example, Romulus allegedly founded the temple *Jupiter Feretrius* to hold the *spolia optima* (great military spoils) from his heroic battles. Five thousand years later, in Imperial Rome, Emperor Augustus Octavian Caesar appropriated arboreal forms like laurels and palm trees to indicate his divine

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According to Suetonius, Augustus imagined the verdant and non-deciduous palm tree to be a symbol of his victory and an omen of his god-like status as the son of Apollo.

In the Roman Empire, the elite used the symbolic imagery of verdant trees and foliage to create a connection to the gods, to form mental space: a paradise on earth. This imperial notion of paradise most famously appears in the Garden Room of Livia Drusilla, Emperor Augustus’s wife. Like the mosaic in San Clemente, Livia’s garden in the Villa ad Gallinas features blooming, healthy plant life normally found in the spring. For the Romans, the changing seasons were analogous to the passage of human life. The exclusive depiction of verdant nature in Livia’s garden would indicate a paradise of everlasting growth, much like the signification of the abundant green acanthus plant beneath the cross/tree and the winding vine of Christ in San Clemente’s apse mosaic.

It is as a result of this Roman heritage that imagery of nature appeared commonly in early Christian art, but the old Roman gods and their connotations were largely deposed. The Vine of Dionysus or Bacchus, for example, shows up frequently in Christian ornament without the pagan god. It commonly appeared in funereal contexts to conjure an image of paradise and everlasting life for early Christians. The fourth-century ceiling of Santa Constanza’s mausoleum, which resembles “a temple of Bacchus,” provides an early example of this repurposed pagan symbol. Visually, the vines in San Clemente are similar to those found on Santa Constanza’s ceiling in Rome. They are further reminiscent of vines ornamenting the apse mosaic of the surviving fifth-century Lateran baptistery. Though differences exist between the two apse mosaics in color...

16 Suetonius, The Twelve Caesars (Harmondsworth, Middle Sex, 1957), 92 and 94.11.
17 For a complete analysis of this garden, see Kellum, “Constructions of Landscape,” 211-226.
18 Bratton, Environmental Values, 9-37.
19 Ibid., 15
20 Barclay, Medieval Church, 43-49.
and background, their similar use of a Dionysian-cum-Christian vine demonstrates that San Clemente drew a great deal of inspiration from earlier Christian designs.

Interestingly, these early Christian motifs might be drawn from the very foundation of San Clemente itself. In 1857, Friar Joseph Mollooly began excavating the lower church of San Clemente. Through these efforts, a largely intact fourth-century basilica, second-century temple of Mithras, and first-century Roman house were unearthed in remarkable condition. It is beyond the scope of this study to give a synopsis of these lower structures, but it is important to note how their presence affected the form of the upper church, which mirrors the previous church in many ways.21 In particular, both structures were basilicas and the upper church, with the exception of its right side aisle, was built on top of the first church’s original structure. In addition to a structural similarity, it is possible that the fourth-century church possessed a similarly themed apse mosaic. According to Joan Barclay, however, the twelfth-century mosaic could not be an exact replica, as the apsidal space in the older church is almost three meters larger.22

Whether or not San Clemente’s apse mosaic was a replica of the previous church’s design, its imagery is consistent with numerous artistic depictions of vines and verdant nature found in Roman and early Christian art. These artistic natural motifs suggest that physical trees were revered in both ancient and early Christian Rome. The abundance of trees surrounding medieval Churches, like the palm trees in San Clemente’s atrium, resonates with ancient practices. The palm tree, in particular, was a symbol of Christian victory similar to Augustus’s

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21 For more information on the excavations and the lower structures, see Barclay, *Medieval*, 7-10, and Boyle, *Short Guide*, 1-15. For information on the atrium outside San Clemente and how its form may compare to the ancient Roman house it was built upon, refer to Shelly Hales, *The Roman House and the Social Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For the Mithraic temple and the worship of Mithras, see Boyle, *Short Guide*, 63-79.

use of the palm to signify divine providence.\(^{23}\) The semiotics of the arboreal symbol in Rome is not the only way to understanding the tree’s significance, however. One should also consider the social meaning of the tree in its place or context.\(^{24}\) Since the time of ancient Rome, for example, rags were hung on trees as a way to both praise and appease the forces of life and death.\(^{25}\) In this respect, the tree/cross of San Clemente as a symbol of life overcoming death departs from pagan traditions.\(^{26}\) As a sacrifice for humankind, Christ is akin to the rags and offerings that ancient people would hang on trees. In a Christian context, however, Christ acts as the ultimate sacrifice to overcome sin and death. This is clear in San Clemente’s apse mosaic, which features Christ’s crucifixion witnessed by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist on either side (Fig. 2). The metaphysical paradox of the mosaic is centrally displayed: the death of Christ brings everlasting life. Christ as the ultimate sacrifice circumvents the need to hang rags or give offering to the \textit{lignum vitae}.

Ancient rituals reveal that trees were once thought to be a direct connection to supramundane forces of life and death: an \textit{axis mundi} (a world axis).\(^{27}\) This is true in the medieval context as well. Such a notion may provide a key to understanding how tree symbolism functioned in San Clemente. First, let us address the notion of duality – the tree as force for life and death. Ancient Mediterranean people were not alone in their belief that trees provided access to malevolent and benevolent supernatural forces; the tree is traditionally associated with duality in multiple cultures. Arab tribes, for instance, continue to hang rags on

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\(^{24}\) Lefebvre, \textit{Production}, 11.
\(^{26}\) Ladner, “Medieval and Modern,” 233-240.

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trees in the Holy Land today to appease and praise forces of good and evil.  
Similar rituals are executed at the base of trees in parts of Latin America, Africa, and Australia. While it should not be over-determined, these more-current performances resemble ancient and medieval beliefs regarding the sacred nature of trees. Though the cross/tree of San Clemente represents life overcoming death, the dual nature of the tree as force for good and evil was still recognized in a medieval context. In medieval material culture there are often two kinds of trees depicted: the verdant and the dry tree. The verdant tree represents everlasting life. It is frequently shown as a cross. The dry tree signifies the desiccating effects of sin and non-Christian practices. The dry tree often served as a symbolic illustration of ecclesiastic leadership that could fell earthly sins. This is the case, for example, in the illuminations of Gregory the Great’s *Moralia in Job*. In San Clemente, however, only a verdant tree appears. The central depiction of Christ’s sacrifice on the *lignum vitae* thus unifies the symbolic duality of the tree. The body of Christ, hung on the Tree of Life, overcomes all evil.

Beyond an object of good and evil, the tree is also an *axis mundi* in many cosmological belief systems. With roots that burrow into the ground, a trunk that emerges and exists in the visual plane, and branches that stretch out of human sight, trees are effective symbols of a three-

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29 Ibid., 234. The tree as a power for both good and evil is well-noted among anthropologists. In Cuba, for example, see Lydia Cabrera, *El monte: igbo, finda, ewe orisha, vititi nfinda: notas sobre las religiones, la magia, las supersticiones y el folklore de los negros criollos y el pueblo de Cuba* (Miami, Fla: Ediciones Universal, 1975), 149-194; and Migene Gonzales-Wippler, *Santería: the Religion*, (New York: Harmony Brooks, 1982), 135. These authors observe that practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions, such as Santería, believe that the ceiba tree has the power to enact great good and evil. It is considered an *axis mundi* and home to the gods. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 166, notes similar beliefs among tribes in Australia.
32 For more on these illuminations, see Mickey Abel, “Recontextualizing the Context: The Dispute Capital from Saint-Hilaire in Poitiers and Storytelling in the Poitou around the Time of the Peace of God Movement,” *Gesta* 47/1 (2008), 51-66.
tiered universe – the underworld, the earth, and the heavens.  

Similarly, in San Clemente, the cross and design of the church also references a three-tiered universe (Fig. 4).


Traditionally, the Christian cosmological division of the universe includes heaven, earth, and hell. There are no depictions of hell per se in the apse mosaic of San Clemente. There are, however, references to ancestral origins, often associated with the underworld. For example, beneath the cross is a depiction of the Garden of Paradise. A green acanthus bush appears to grow from the depths of the earth. Four streams stem from its base. This is a reference to the biblical Garden of Eden from the book of Genesis, where four streams are said to stem from

33 Ladner, “Medieval and Modern,” 223-258.
Eden and flow “to water the garden.” There are deer drinking from the splitting stream, which are like the hart from Psalm 42 that longs for the water as the soul thirsts for the living God. A representation of a snake wrapping around a fawn above the two deer signifies the original sin, which sprang from the words of a serpent.

In the apse mosaic of San Clemente, the sacrifice of Christ absolves the first sin of humankind; his life-giving blood symbolically spills out in the form of a sinuous vine that covers the apsidal space. In Christian tradition, the symbolic power of the vine derives from John 15, in which Christ states: “I am the true vine.” Early Christian thinkers, such as the English monk Bede, later expanded upon this theme. In the twelfth century, theologians like Stephen of Grandmont or Gerhoh of Reichersberg would take up the symbol again, as they compared the vine to monastic renewals. Furthermore, the inscription of the mosaic itself makes a connection between the church and the vine. It states, in Latin, “We will compare the Church of Christ to the Vine.” The church thus symbolically evokes the “true vine” of Christ, the ultimate ecclesiastic ancestor.

The area around the base of the mosaic also connects to the ancestral origins of the Roman Catholic Church and San Clemente itself. In front of the apsidal area is a spoliated reconstruction of the old church’s schola cantorum: a physical reference to the ancestral origins

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35 Psalm 42:1, The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 811. Several authors have noted this connection including Barclay, Medieval Church, 43-49; Boyle, Short Guide, 28-32; and Chesterton, Resurrection, 340-42. Most recently Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, made a similar observation in his work Images of Hope: Meditations on Major Feasts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 75-79.
36 Genesis 3: 1-8, The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 14. This motif is also noted by Riccioni, Il mosaico, 46.
37 John 15:1, The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Testament, 173; the entire passage reads “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.”
of the church itself (Fig. 4). Directly beneath the apse mosaic, the remains of the church’s patron Saint Clement putatively rest under the altar and canopy. The architectural decoration of this altar features an anchor – the symbol of Clement’s martyrdom. The area beneath the cross and altar is literally an underworld, where the remains of the church’s martyr reside. The use of ancestral remains was a common feature in medieval churches. Since the second council of Nicea, the legitimacy of any church was drawn from the relic of a Christian ancestor.

Furthermore, trees were commonly associated with ancestry during this period. The tree as an ancestral image appears in medieval genealogical illustrations, such as Trees of Jesse or *Arbores Consanquinitatis*.

Christian heritage is further emphasized in the apse mosaic. The Vine of Christ winds itself around scenes and symbols from Christian history, including birds, animals, and church fathers. These references of animal life, much like the vine itself, echo ancient Roman imagery, or, more accurately, these references come directly from early Christian imagery inspired from late-antique art. Along the side of the cross, within the sinuous vines, one can see a peacock, a symbol of paradise in both ancient and medieval Rome. As Joan Lloyd Barclay notes in her study of this imagery, there is also an image of birds and nestlings, symbolizing

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39 There is a glut of lore attached to Saint Clement. For example, there are accounts of early Christians worshipping his remains as the tide ebbs; this is the case because his body was thought to rest at the bottom of the sea. In one of these tales, the saint’s spirit protects a child left at Clement’s aquatic altar. This and other tales are accounted in Barclay, *Medieval Church*; and Leonard Boyle, *Short Guide*.


42 There are also depictions of a highly stylized oil lamp and fruit basket. These may relate to symbols of abundance and ever-lasting light associated with Christian cosmological beliefs. They are portentously placed on either side of Christ on the *lignum vitae*. Accounts of the icon are found in Chesterton, *Resurrection*, 340-42.
Christian souls, while twelve doves, representing the twelve apostles, rest on the Tree of Life in the form of a cross. The redemptive Blood or Vine of Christ even loops around depictions of ancient Jupiter and Neptune. These apotropaic symbols simultaneously encompass the old gods and foundational mythology of ancient Rome. The Church fathers Ambrose, Gregory, Augustine, and St. Jerome sit at the foot of the cross. Like the roots of the tree, their position at the base of the cross connotes the importance of the Church, its ancestry, and its foundation within the mosaic of San Clemente.

These references largely symbolize the ancestral origins of the Christian faith. Yet, the image of the cross/tree as an axis mundi partially extant in the lived world manifests itself in the mosaic as well. This is especially the case in the images of the Christian faithful, who live their day-to-day life under the fostering shelter of the vine. The common people depicted along the bottom edge of the mosaic seem to represent life on earth. As G. K. Chesterton’s interpretation suggests, the people of earth come in various pastoral forms: they are shepherds and herdsmen with their animals or a woman feeding her hens. These images visualize the Church body that earns everlasting life on earth through the Vine or Blood of Christ, which springs from the Tree of Life. The audience of the mosaic may have identified with these agrarian models and could thus place themselves within the mental space of the apse mosaic.

Finally, the cross/tree as an axis mundi can be said to connect to the heavens at its highest point, for above the cross in San Clemente’s apse one can see the Hand of God reaching down from the cosmos, indicated by surrounding stars and clouds. This Hand of God appears to hold a celestial crown and white vine – a gesture that gives the power of redemption to Christ on the

43 For the iconography of these images refer to Barclay, Medieval Church, 43-49; and Chesterton, Resurrection, 340-42. Chesterton’s account describes a bird in a cage, a possible symbol of Incarnation.
44 See Chesterton, Resurrection, 340-42. There are also two family scenes, which Chesterton notes could be a reference to the artist’s patrons.

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cross/tree. In the center of the vault, above all, is the monogram of Christ: the Greek letters Chi Ro, also called the chrismon, enclosed by an elliptical clipeus or disc. The Chi Ro forms a five-point symbol resembling the Christian cross - a quincunx. According to the studies of Dorothy Glass and Paloma Pajares-Ayuela, the quincunx related directly to the cross and Christ’s body during the medieval period. This symbol originated from geometric designs in ancient Rome. It was later adopted in Byzantium. From there, the symbol would appear in churches throughout coastal Italy and then Rome. The quincunx, like the tree and the cross, signifies an axis mundi that reaches into multiple spiritual and physical realms. It also geometrically articulates the tetrarch and Christ as pantokrator, an image from Revelations that forms the head of the apsidal arch (Fig. 1). Christ as pantokrator is shown as the ultimate judge, no longer a martyr on the lignum vitae. He holds a book in one hand and reaches up to bless the chosen with the other.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are shown as a winged human, lion, ox, and eagle. Surrounding the apsidal arch are the words Gloria in excelsis Deo sedente sup(er) thronum et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis (“Glory to God in heaven seated on his throne and on earth peace to men of good will”). This alludes to the role of Christ as victor over death, the alpha and omega. Alongside these celestial symbols, the apsidal arch includes more verdant tree

45 Accounts of this symbol can be found in Barclay Medieval Church, 43-49; and Chesterton, Resurrection, 340-342.  
46 The connection of the chrismon symbol with the quincunx is extensively discussed in Pajares, Cosmatesque Ornament, 217-238. Pajares suggests that the chrismon serves as a graphic depiction of a Christian cosmoverse. The latitudinal and longitudinal lines correspond with the cardinal directions and all their inherent symbolism (East is where the sun rises and the West is where it sets: life and death). The diagonal axes may represent a third dimension, or a connection to extra-worldly powers. In the center, all three parts of the universe – the underworld, the earth, and the heaven – meet. The fact that these lines also forms the symbol for Christ is visual evidence that Christ, as alpha and omega, is the foundation of the earthly and spiritual worlds.  
47 Glass, “Papal Patronage,” 386-390; and Pajares, Cosmatesque Ornament, 196-247.  
48 For examples of the Gloria in other contexts and within San Clemente, refer to Stefanie Waldvogel, “The Ascension at San Pietro in Tuscania: An Apse Painting as Reflection of the Reform Movement and Expression of Episcopal Self-Confidence,” in Shaping Sacred Space and Institutional Identity in Romanesque Mural Painting, eds. Dale Thomas and John Mitchell (London: Pindar, 2004), 223-224. She notes that trees are frequently part of South Italian (and Middle Byzantine) ascension pictures. Considering this fact, there seems to be a shared Byzantine influence in the apse mosaic and the pre-Cosmatesque floor. The quincunx as a geometric translation of Christ as pantokrator and the tetrarch is discussed in Pajares, Cosmatesque Ornament, 217-238.  
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symbolism. Two palm trees are directly beneath the tetrarch, giving further emphasis to the tree as a symbol of victory over death.49

As this iconographic and semiotic analysis reveals, the cross/tree and vine symbol anchored the mosaic and the surrounding apsidal area. I would assert, however, that this theme is not isolated to the apse. Rather, the essential form, the cross and quincunx, repeats itself in the spatial and iconographic program of the entire church and can be shown to be embedded in the ceremonies and social experiences that would take place there. To understand the meaning and function of these repeated forms, it is important to analyze the images “on the ground,” specifically focusing on how they would have affected the laity. Therefore, the floor mosaics of San Clemente should be investigated in relation to the resplendent apsidal mosaic that these devotees most certainly admired.

**The Experience of ‘Being’ in San Clemente: Quincuncial Pavement and Practice**

The history of pre-Cosmatesque pavement helps clarify the role played by the floor mosaics in the spatial program of San Clemente. This is particularly true when one considers the floor’s quincuncial form. The pavement, like the images within the apse mosaic, features appropriated forms that are found in earlier traditions. Those sources are two-fold. First, locally, artists and craftsmen would have been impressed with the opus sectile pavement of ancient

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49 Pajares, *Cosmatesque Ornament*, 223. Directly next to the trees on the left and right side of the apsidal arch is a depiction of Paul and Peter talking to Ignatius and Clemente, the principal saints of San Clemente. The apostles are identified by their Greek titles. Clement and Ignatius are shown above the symbols of their martyrdom, a boat and a grill. To the left of the triumphal arch, beneath Ignatius and Paul is an image of the prophet Isaiah holding a scroll that reads *vidi dominum sedentem sup(er) solium* (I saw the lord seated on [his] throne). On the right side of the arch Peter instructs Saint Clement *respice promissum Clemens a me tibi xum (Christum)* (“Behold, Clement, Christ promised to you by me.”) Beneath them is the prophet Jeremiah with a scroll declaring *Hic est Deus noster et n(hil) estimabitur alius absq(ue) illo.* (“This is our Lord, and no other can compare with Him”) (Bartholomew 3:36). These images illustrate the notion that the foundation of the apostolic church is connected to the founding of the Roman Church and San Clemente. A review of these images can be found in Barclay, *Medieval Church*, 43-49; Boyle, *Short Guide*, 27-32; Chesterton, *Resurrection*, 340-42; and Riccioni, *Il mosaico* 23-37.

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Roman edifices. The ancient marble floors were commonly recut to build medieval pavements. Second, in a broader context of medieval Europe and Italy, many of the designs and styles that define the floor are strongly reminiscent of Byzantine work. Byzantine floor design would have been available and visible to Italian artists via Eastern-styled structures, such as San Giovanni Evangelista in Ravenna or San Marco in Venice. These edifices could have provided a visual and symbolic model for the floor of San Clemente.

The creators of pre-Cosmatesque flooring in the twelfth century were neither ancient Romans nor Byzantines, however. The style they developed was unique to its time and context. Italian pavements from the early twelfth century form a stylistic group: all featured longitudinal type decoration. The longitudinal form commences with a set of roundels, twelve in San Clemente, followed by a *quatrefoil* or *quincunx* (Fig. 5).

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50 The notion of a Roman precedent is addressed by Frothingham, “Notes,” 189-203; Pajares, *Cosmatesque Ornament*, 122-146; and Glass, “Papal Patronage,” 386-390. For more on *opus sectile* work in Roman homes, like the home on which the church is built, see Hales, *The Roman House*, 177, 200, 227, 229.

51 Pajares, *Cosmatesque Ornament*, 201.

52 Glass, “Papal Patronage,” 386-390.

53 The term *quatrefoil* is originally seen in Glass, “Papal Patronage,” 386-390. Pajares, *Cosmatesque Ornament*, 205, notes that Glass has since changed her terminology from *quatrefoil* to *quincunx*.
The largest design element, the *quincunx*, generally appeared at the center of the nave. This is evident in several churches, such as S. Croce in Gerusalemme, S. Maria in Cosmedin, and SS. Quatro Coranati. It was likely visible at San Clemente, though the center of the church is now hidden beneath sixteenth-century tomb slabs.\(^54\) I would argue that as a signifier, the *quincunx* design mirrors the cross and vine symbol of the apse mosaic. The five-point symbol, with four arms radiating out, looks like a crucifix.\(^55\) Furthermore, it is important to note that the sinusoidal strands of the floor replicate the twisting rinceaux of the vine symbol in the apse mosaic.

In addition to visual resonances, the floor’s central design narrates the church’s very

\(^{54}\) Glass, “Papal Patronage,” 386.

\(^{55}\) Pajares, *Cosmatesque Ornament*, 205.

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dedication ceremony. One can partially reconstruct this event through a reading of church foundations, such as those described in the Liber Pontificalis of Andreas Agnellus in the ninth century. According to this text, bishops and clerics would first circle the church three times, blessing it with holy water. They would then enter the church and spread ashes on the pavement in the form of a cross. A third and final time, the ashes were spread to form a cross along the central longitudinal and latitudinal lines of the basilica. This third gesture, the illustration of a horizontal and vertical ash cross, has particular significance for San Clemente. The roundels of San Clemente’s floor meet orthogonally in the church’s center. As such, San Clemente’s permanent floor design can be said to manifest the same shape made during the church’s dedication ceremony. Based on this visual evidence, the argument can be made that San Clemente’s apse mosaic and the pre-Cosmatesque pavement were intended to resemble one another, as both reflect the space’s ritual use.

The common social use of the floor lends further insight into its symbolic meaning, because unlike the apse mosaic, the floor could be physically touched. The laity stood and moved on the western edge of the pavement during processions. Under their sandaled feet, the marbled pieces of the floor would have reminded these faithful pilgrims of the gilded mosaic that

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57 “… incipiat… de sinistro angulo ecclesiae ab oriente scribere per pavimentum cum cambuta sua totum alphabetum graecum, usque in dextrum angulum occidentalem,” in Michel Andrieu and Guillaume Durand, Le pontifical romain au Moyen-Âge (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1938), 180, as quoted in Glass, “Papal Patronage,” 388-389.

58 “Deinde aspergat in modum crucis per medium ecclesiae in longum et in latum per pavimentum,” Andrieu, Le pontifical roman, 180, as quoted in Glass, “Papal Patronage, 389.

59 Andrieu, Le pontifical roman, 180.
sparkled above them, just out of reach, above an area that was only accessible to the bishop. One might draw a parallel here to the typological relationship between Heavenly and Earthly Jerusalem. The pilgrim moves through the earthly space of San Clemente, but cannot access its heavenly space without going through Church officials. A division between social and mental spaces thus applies to medieval conceptions of Jerusalem as well as San Clemente’s interior. The floor’s central pathway forms the top of a Latin cross in the apsidal area past the walls of the *schola cantorum*. This point features a square that is entirely red porphyry where the bishop would stand. Laity participating in a procession, such as the Eve of the Assumption, would stop at the edge of the *schola cantorum* as the bishop, canons, and priests moved toward the apsidal area. Commoners would see the opulent pathway and Latin cross, but could not tread upon it. The power of redemption through Christ’s sacrificial blood was symbolically positioned within an area that only church officials could access. As the procession left the church, laity would move to either side of the central path designated by the marble work. This performance allowed church officials to go out first and re-establish the hierarchy of the procession.

Aside from these contemporary performances, the historic use of porphyry in Byzantine pavements further demonstrates the hierarchical organization of San Clemente’s interior space. The central design of the floor evokes an imperial Byzantine conception: the royal pathway. Porphyry roundels appear in Eastern palace design during Constantine’s era and through the sixth and seventh centuries with the palaces of Constantine’s sons Justinus II and Justinianus II.

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60 For more on the development of Heavenly and Earthly Jerusalem during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, see Sylvia Schein, *Gateway to the Heavenly City: Crusader Jerusalem and the Catholic West (1099-1187)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); and Bianca Kühnel, *From the Earthly to the Heavenly Jerusalem: Representations of the Holy City in Christian Art of the First Millennium* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1987).

61 Pajares, *Cosmatesque Ornament*, 243, notes that the roundels and strands that form the long stem of the cross are predominantly red porphyry and green serpentine, symbolizing the blood of Christ and the hope for everlasting life. The short arms of the cross are formed by two rectangles filled with an isotropic surface pattern featuring the same materials.

62 There are accounts of bishops giving sermons from this position: “[...] *ante altare subtus pирfireticum lapidem, ubi pontifex stat, quando missam canit,*” Agnellus, *Liber Pontificali*, as cited in Glass, “Papal Patronage,” 388.
There are even accounts of Justianus II being worshiped while standing on top of a porphyry roundel, much like the bishop on his porphyry square. More importantly, roundels acted as a processional tool in the east, as means to form a path from the palace entrance to the throne. One could compare this design element to the red carpet laid out in modern churches or Hollywood publicity events. The directional impulse and idea of a royal pathway is clearly visible in the design of San Clemente, which features the bishop’s elevated throne under the canopy of the altar. The raised throne is visible to the laity moving along the path of roundels towards the apsidal space. Stopping at the edge of the schola cantorum, they would not be able to process to the bishop’s exclusive location, however, where the implements of salvation – the “body” and “blood” of Christ – were held in the tabernacle. This spatial hierarchy is a signifier of the bishop’s “imperial” role at the head of the church body, at the gates of redemption. The royal pathway to the bishop, marked out by the pre-Cosmatesque floor, thus communicates both political and religious meanings. In San Clemente’s interior space, the Roman Church and its leadership appear at the head of the spiritual kingdom on earth.

A Game of Patrons: The Ambiguous Origins of San Clemente

As explicated above, the iconographic program of San Clemente carried meaning to those who entered its space. I would suggest, moreover, that the floor and apse mosaic reinforced a central theme: good overcoming evil. Christ on the quincuncial form of the lignum vitae visualized this triumphal message. The good that overcomes evil would have supported Roman ecclesiastic leadership. The social rituals of the medieval audience embodied this theme and its hierarchical connotations. These rituals, informed by the visual and spatial elements of the

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63 Ibid., 387.

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church’s interior design, emphasize church hegemony over the passage to redemption. In order to understand why this theme was so central in San Clemente, it is fruitful to consider the twelfth-century context in which the church was built, particularly the political motives of the church’s patron(s).

In the twelfth century, the tree and its message of redemption were tied to Gregorian Reforms and inner-church politics. When one considers the issues being addressed at the time, an encroachment of imperial power, the investiture controversy, and the Concordat of Worms that resulted, the imagery of the cross/tree and vine in the apse mosaic and the quincuncial floor design take on a particular meaning. At the core of this historic moment was a struggle for power between ecclesiastic and imperial authorities, especially regarding the appointment of church officials. I assert that the interior design of San Clemente served as a tool to illustrate the Church’s exclusive power to grant appointments, redemption, and absolution. It did so by visually reifying the first sin in the Garden of Eden being overcome through Christ’s sacrifice.

Aside from the iconographic program of the church’s apse mosaic and floor design, the church’s entire construction may have upheld a message of papal authority. The twelfth-century restoration of San Clemente, for example, intertwined itself in a tense dialectic between Church officials and a rising middle class in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Church authorities perceived the nascent merchant class as a threat to ecclesiastic hegemony. The church’s redesign was part of an overwrought urban environment that culminated in the riots of 1144. Indeed, Dale Kinney has argued that rebuilding San Clemente in the twelfth century on top of the old church

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structure served as a signifier of papal authority over the rising merchant class.  

The church had to be redesigned due to damages sustained in the eleventh century. The fires of Robert Guiscard, a Norman adventurer and raider, supposedly destroyed the original church structure. Yet, this notion does not hold up to scrutiny. The reality of the church’s destruction remains unclear. No actual evidence of fire was found in San Clemente. If not fire, historians Louise Hamilton and Dale Kinney have suggested that an eleventh-century earthquake may have wrecked the church and others nearby. Regardless of how it sustained damages, San Clemente underwent major restorations in the twelfth century and its new design would signify multiple meanings to local merchants and wandering pilgrims. To understand these messages, let us consider the old church’s original design and decoration.

Working with the original church built in the fourth century, the merchant Benito de Rapiza and his wife Maria Macellaria redecorated San Clemente in the eleventh century. Those decorations are largely extant in the old basilica, now located under the newer twelfth-century building. Yet, these merchant-sponsored designs never appeared in the new basilica’s ornament. Instead, whoever decorated San Clemente’s interior in the twelfth century scrapped Rapiza and Macellaria’s contributions. Such a gesture would have undermined the influence and/or spiritual needs of the merchant class. This fact follows with the general mode of design at the time when more modest, common churches were built and humbly decorated with the aid of middle class investments. These churches did not attract the attention of most pilgrims journeying to

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66 Ibid., 199.
68 See Hamilton, “Memory, Symbol, and Arson,” 398 and fn. 75; Hamilton cites Dale Kinney, “S. Maria in Trastevere From Its Founding to 1215” (PhD diss., New York University, 1975), 57, 195, who suggests that an earthquake in Rome in 1091 may-well have damaged the church of San Clemente, as it wreaked similar havoc on S. Crisogono and S. Maria in Trastevere.
Rome from afar. San Clemente and other churches built in Rome during the twelfth century and patronized by Roman Church authorities, on the other hand, acted as popular visual cues of piety and religious significance for pilgrims. Their resplendent designs diverted attention away from the merchant-funded churches, as they attracted the eyes and imaginations of well-traveled pilgrims. San Clemente, with its opulent apse and pavement, served as a form spiritual propaganda for the authority of the Roman Church.

The Roman Church’s authority appeared legitimate in the construction and design of San Clemente, especially through the abundant use of early Christian themes revived in the twelfth century. The spoliate or spoliate-inspired capitals of its columns, the use of animal and vegetal symbolism, and the marble flooring that echoes forms found in imperial Byzantium, demonstrate that past traditions helped to legitimate the Church’s role in Rome and Europe. Such a message would clearly reflect the powerful position of the San Clemente’s papal benefactor and patron.

While the date of the second church’s ornamentation and its patron are debated, Barclay’s well-researched opinion suggests that the second church’s structure would have been finished terminus ante quem 1119. Basing her argument on several inscriptions within San Clemente, Barclay asserts that it was Cardinal Anastasius who began the rebuilding of the second church.

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70 The sheep emerging from Jerusalem and Bethlehem along the apse mosaic’s bottom edge is an example of appropriated animal imagery. This motif was commonly employed in early Christian design to signify Christ and the twelve apostles. For more information on this imagery, see Barclay, Medieval Church, 43-49; Boyle, Short Guide, 38-32; and Chesterton, Resurrection, 340-42.
71 Barclay gives an extensive account of these various dates in her article “The Building History of the Medieval Church of S. Clemente in Rome,” Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 45/3 (1986), 197-223.
72 Barclay emphasizes that this was not the first rebuilding or restoration of San Clemente. Restorations were first made in the ninth century and again 1080-1099 CE. Furthermore, this was not the last restoration. There is a plaque affixed in the courtyard that honors Pope Clement XI. It states: “the ancient church has withstood the ravages of time.” This quote refers to the dilapidated state in which Clement found the church in the eighteenth century. He hired Carlo Stefano Fontana to create a new façade in 1719. The carved and gilded coffered ceilings, its paintings, the stucco décor, ionic capitals, and many frescos date from this period. John Gilmartin, “The Paintings Commissioned by Pope Clement XI for the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome,” The Burlington Magazine 116/855 (June 1974), 304-312, could not find any evidence of recent restorations to the upper church, restorations have been
Yet, ornamentation of the church continued into the middle of the twelfth century. There is, in fact, no written evidence in San Clemente that attributes the apse mosaic or the pre-Cosmatian pavement to anyone in particular. Part of the issue muddying the exact origin of the apse mosaic and floor may be entwined in the politics of the time period, especially the papal schism of 1130-1138.

Deacon Gregory of St Angelo, known as Innocent II, was illegally elected pope in 1130. He failed to occupy the papal see and fled to France in exile. Petrus Pierleoni, assuming the name Anaclet II, was elected a few hours after Innocent II. Anaclet II maintained power until his death in January 1138, but he was branded an antipope by virtually all the Christian world. The essential difference between these two popes can be found in their reaction toward imperial power and the investiture controversy. Innocent II, along with followers like Bernard de Clairvaux, supported the Concordat of Worms that acted as a compromise between secular and religious powers. They believed such a compromise would allow for internal reform. Anaclet’s camp, which included supporters like Peter of Pisa and Leo of Ostia, supported taking a hard-line approach to imperial investiture. They wished the spiritual acquisition of power, the ability to give or take vestal honors, to remain in the hands of the Church alone.

Given the difference between these two popes and the strong connection between the cross/tree symbol, the quincuncial floor, and the spatial hierarchy of the church, it is likely that the creator of this iconographic program would have supported church power above imperial compromise. They would not have been a follower of Innocent II. Mary Stroll posits that the


Stroll, Symbols as Power, 118, suggests that scholars generally agree that remodeling the church began in the first quarter of the twelfth century, though even that time frame is suspect as the inscription that supports it could be false.

Krautheimer, Rome, 162-201.

Stroll, Symbols as Power, xvii. 

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remodeling of San Clemente should be attributed to Anaclet II’s supporter Peter of Pisa.

Inscriptions have been found outside San Clemente crediting the ornament of the church to a Petrus (Peter). The strong emphasis on the church and its leadership as the path to salvation found in the floor’s design, the church’s spatial division, and the revival of early Christian iconography in the apse mosaic itself make a compelling argument: the patron of the church’s ornament was likely a supporter of Anaclet II and his principles, like Peter of Pisa. This attribution is visually supported by the Benedictine dress of the four church fathers in the apse mosaic, the same order to which Anaclet II belonged.

Though the iconographic program seems to match the ideals of Anaclet II, there is evidence to suggest that followers of Innocent II later inserted the mosaic’s inscription. The text, which compares the church to the true vine of Christ, makes a subtle reference to the sins of Judaism and may be a jibe at Anaclet II’s purported Jewish heritage. Regardless of who was

76 Barclay, “The Building History,” 204; and Stroll, Symbols as Power, 118.
77 Stroll, Symbols as Power, 127.
78 For more on this possible interpretation, see Stroll, Symbols as Power, 119-12. As one reads the entire inscription carefully, it becomes clear that the latter portion of the script is a metaphor for conflict between church and synagogue. This trope was commonly used as propaganda against Anaclet II during the papal schism. The entire inscription reads:

ECCLESIAM CRISTI VITI SIMILABIMUS ISTI DE LIGNO CRUCIS JACOBI DENS IGNATIQ(UE): IN SUPRASCRIPTI REQUIESCUNT CORPORE CRISTI QUAM LEX ARRENTEM SET CRUS FACIT E(SS)E VIRENTE .

We will compare the Church of Christ to the Vine – underneath the inscription by the body of Christ rests the wood from (Christ’s) cross and a tooth of Jacob and Ignatius – which the law makes to be dry, but the cross makes to be green.

The middle portion (de ligno crucis iacobi dens ignatig(ue) insuprascripti requiescunt corpore cristi) is an inserted note about the relics on which the church is founded. The full sentence without that insert is ecclesiam cristi viti similabimus isti quam lex arretem set crus facit e(ss)e virente (“We will compare the Church of Christ to this Vine, which the law makes to be dry, but the Cross makes to be green”). What is meant by lex (law) is a key to unlocking the enigma behind this inscription. It is important to know whether lex refers to secular, canon, or Jewish law. Nineteenth-century scholar, Giovanni Battista de Rossi, “Il mosaic absidale di S. Clemente in Rome,” Bollettini d’Arte ser 29 (1935-36): 49-68, who was involved in excavating the lower church with Mullooly, proposes that lex is a metaphor for the synagogue. The term lex could conjure an image of Judaism itself. Stroll, Symbols as Power, 119-127, notes that the form and grammar of the inscription indicate that it does not belong with the rest of the iconographic program in the apsidal area. The writers of the inscription used the word CRUS instead of the proper nominative form CRUX. In other inscriptions of the mosaic the noun declines correctly. This improper word-form © 2014 The Middle Ground Journal Number 9, Fall 2014 http://TheMiddleGroundJournal.org See Submission Guidelines page for the journal’s not-for-profit educational open-access policy
responsible for the ornament and writing inside San Clemente, the cross/tree served as a compelling symbol of good overcoming evil, which tied to debates between political parties at the time and sweeping reforms. The remodeling campaign of San Clemente likely occurred all at once, so that the mosaic and the floor would have functioned together in this effort.  

Conclusion: The Production of Space in the Apse Mosaic and Floor of San Clemente

From political affairs let us return to the meaning of art and architecture. Trees historically have symbolized supernatural power. This is true in San Clemente. The audience in San Clemente experienced the interior design as a discourse between the floor’s quincunx and the Tree of Life in the apse mosaic. The patron of the interior decoration sought to affect the viewer through a comprehensive program. The pre-Cosmatesque floor, reminiscent of royal pathways in Byzantium, and the lignum vitae and vine, similar to the verdant trees of pagan Europe and images on early Christian monuments, demonstrate that past traditions reappeared in a twelfth-century context to communicate meaning to Christian audiences from Rome and abroad. The ornamentation of San Clemente’s physical space shaped a mental space: a paradise on earth. The rituals that fashioned San Clemente’s social space reinforced the church’s exclusive authority. The floor and mosaic worked together with the social experience of moving through the church to effectively communicate a message of redemption and hierarchical power to a twelfth-century audience, particularly in light of contemporary ecclesiastical politics.
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