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Volatile Images: The Empty Throne and its Place in the Byzantine Last Judgment Iconography

Eschatological concepts entered the realm of the visual arts of Byzantium and the medieval West surprisingly late. It is not until the middle Byzantine period that we encounter images that depict the end of time, such as the Last Judgment. While the Last Judgment iconography was a relatively late invention, other iconographical motifs, such as images referring to the Book of Revelation had been in use since Late Antiquity. However, those did not acquire eschatological meaning before the high Middle Ages. Here, I concentrate on one particular motif, the empty throne, to illustrate the shift from present to eschatological meaning in the course of the Middle Ages. While it signified an imperial or divine presence during the first millennium, it was increasingly used to refer to the end of time starting in the tenth century.

In this study, I do not treat the terms eschatological and apocalyptic as synonyms. In popular use, apocalypse/apocalyptic are frequently understood as references to the end of time and the horrors associated with it and are thus used interchangeably with eschatology/eschatological. However, ancient and medieval apocalyptic literature is characterised by the revelation of otherwise invisible truths; in some cases, those texts might reveal information about the future end of time, but did not necessarily always do so. Therefore, I use apocalypse/apocalyptic only to denote texts or concepts relating to the field of apocalypticism without any temporal restrictions to past, present, or future meanings. Eschatology/eschatological is exclusively used to denote the Last Things and expectations of the future end of time.

The relationship between historical and art historical research is often as problematic as it is fruitful. Art historians frequently rely on historians for establishing the context in which a work of art was created, transformed, or destroyed. In return, art history reveals a historical understanding of the world not communicated in written form. The link between the two types of sources can be direct and conclusive, as in inscriptions or written descriptions of objects. It can also be circumstantial; if a historical event and the making of an image happened at the same time, we might assume a connection. The thirteenth century, for example, saw the conquest of Constantinople and the subsequent Latin rule. In Venice, it also witnessed the fashioning of the façade of San Marco with spolia from the Eastern Mediterranean (columns and capitals, a porphyry statue, a bronze quadriga etc.). Although the ma-

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terial might have arrived before 1204, we can assume that both actions, the conquest and the architectural decoration, are somehow connected.[1] This type of temporal coincidence can, however, also be entirely accidental and thus be potentially misleading. For example, scholars have proposed a similar relationship between eschatological accounts in written sources and some aspects of the material culture of late antique and Byzantine art. However, there is ample evidence that the interest in eschatology expressed in the visual sources did not emerge until the middle Byzantine period. As I shall argue here, in the case of one particular iconography – the empty throne – the assumption of eschatological meaning throughout the course of much of its lifetime is misplaced. Such interpretations are largely due to the reliance on historical documents to prove the existence of eschatological concerns at the time, ignoring the fact that the images themselves offer little support for such a reading.

As studies by Paul Alexander, Gerhard Podskalsky, Paul Magdalino, Wolfram Brandes, and most recently James Palmer have demonstrated, expectations and anxieties surrounding the end of time in fact circulated as early as Late Antiquity.[2] In a seminal article, Brandes not only showed that the number of predictions surrounding the end of time increased during the reign of Athanasios I (491–518 CE), but also noted heightened eschatological expectations during events that had a profound socio-political impact such as the Hunnic invasion in 395/96, and the Avar and Arab sieges of Constantinople (in 626 and three times between 669 and 717).[3] The chronicle written by the Constantinopolitan lawyer and historian Agathias around 579 is a well-known written source for the surge in eschatological anxieties. He famously mentions that earthquakes and outbreaks of plague in the capital in the mid-sixth century led people to believe that the end was near.[4] But Agathias also records that once the calamities had abated, the inhabitants of the city went back to their old ways. Another famous source, the Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodios, shows signs of a heightened eschatological awareness around times of natural or man-made disaster; the text can be linked to the Arab invasion of the eastern

1 Jacoff, *The Horses of San Marco and the Quadriga of the Lord*, 2–8.

2 Podskalsky, *Byzantinische Reichseschatologie*; Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*; Brandes, "Anastasios Ὁ ΔΙΚΟΡΟΣ;" Magdalino, "The History of the Future and its Uses;" Magdalino, "The End of Time in Byzantium;" Palmer, *The Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages*, particularly chapter 1 "The End of Civilization (c. 380–c. 575)," 25–54. On the influence of early Islamic eschatology on early Byzantine imperial eschatological concepts, see Greisiger, *Messias, Endkaiser, Antichrist*.

3 Brandes, "Anastasios Ὁ ΔΙΚΟΡΟΣ," 32–53.

4 Agathias, *Historiae*, 5.5.1–6. At the end of the section Agathias laments the fact that "all these good deeds, however, were performed for a limited period of time, as long as the terror was still fresh in people's minds. As soon, in fact, as there were signs that the danger had receded most people reverted to their old ways. It is in fact only under the stimulus of sudden fear and for as long as the emergency lasts that we make a few reluctant and perfunctory concessions to the ideal of charity." (transl. after Frendo: Agathias, *Histories*, 140–141.)

Mediterranean in the early seventh century.[5] Nonetheless, the intention of the present study is not to disprove the general tendency to interpret late antique visual culture in an eschatological light, nor to examine the historiographical reasons for the overlooked but notable absence of eschatological imagery in Late Antiquity.[6] Rather, in this article I concentrate on one case study, the image of the empty throne in Late Antiquity and middle Byzantine times. I aim to reveal the image's non-eschatological *present* meaning during the early period and to trace its transformation in later centuries, when it was incorporated into the iconography of the Byzantine Last Judgment and acquired an eschatological layer of meaning.

The following paragraphs give a short summary of the origins of the motif in Antiquity and list some of the most important examples from Late Antiquity and the middle Byzantine period. The empty throne had its roots in ancient imagery, where it was depicted on coins and sculpture;[7] free-standing sculptures such as the Lansdowne throne (c. 38–41 CE; Inv. no. 50.33.14), which is decorated with Apollo's insignia and is now located at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, are very rare. **(fig. 1)** Cornelius Vollmer has recently presented a study on the ancient motif interpreting its meaning in relation to concepts of initiation. He further suggests that the thrones represent the *absence* of the deity.[8] While the ruler or deity is certainly visually absent, it would be difficult to explain why, for example, the sign of a divine absence would be imprinted on imperial coins. More convincingly, Eugenio La Rocca has supported the conventional interpretation of an empty throne in antiquity as a symbolic representation of a divine or imperial *presence*.[9] This interpretation finds support in the research on images of ancient divinities more broadly; Tanja Scheer, for example, has used the concept of ἕδος (seat) for ancient statues, meaning a vacant seat that the divinity might fill with his or her presence.[10]

The earliest extant Christian image of an empty throne with a cushion, a piece of garment, and a very large Christogram is a relief on a sarcophagus from Frascati (Rep. II.115) dated to the end of the fourth century. Subsequent late antique images tend to be more elaborate; the throne is often surrounded by the Tetramorph, the four celestial beings from the vision of Ezekiel and from the Revelation to John. Visual signs linking the throne to the Christian God often appear on top of it and include a codex or a scroll, a cross or Christogram, a purple chlamys, and in later ex-

5 Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 13–60. *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, trans. by Garstad. See also the article by Grifoni and Gantner in this volume.

6 For these questions see Bergmeier, *Visionserwartung*.

7 For the coins see table 29 in Vollmer, *Im Anfang war der Thron*. The Musée du Louvre in Paris owns a famous relief depicting the throne of Saturn (MA 1662), a fragmentary ancient or early modern copy of which is kept at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Venezia (Inv. No. 9; originally from S. Vitale in Ravenna).

8 Vollmer, *Im Anfang war der Thron*, 29, 154 and 363.

9 La Rocca, "I troni dei nuovi dei," 77–104. See also, Weyl Carr, "Hetoimasia," 926.

10 Scheer, *Die Gottheit und ihr Bild*, 120–123.

amples a sponge and a lance, signs of Christ's passion (e.g. on the middle Byzantine enamel of the Pala d'Oro in Venice fig. 2). The throne along with these supporting objects appears on the apse wall of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. (fig. 3) In addition, at SS. Cosma e Damiano in Rome, a lamb occupies the empty throne, a symbol for Christ. (fig. 4) Other examples, such as the one in the Santa Matrona Chapel in San Prisco near S. Maria in Capua Vetere (fig. 5) and on the no longer extant sanctuary mosaics of the Church of the Koimesis in Nicaea (early eighth century?; fig. 6), depict a dove, which was probably understood as a sign of the Holy Ghost, the quintessential concept of the invisible divine presence. The so-called St. Mark's Throne, an alabaster reliquary throne in San Marco in Venice, is a fairly unusual object originally from the cathedral in Grado belonging to the same tradition as the three-dimensional Lansdowne throne. (fig. 7) Unlike the earlier pagan object, of course, this throne bears the signs of the Christian God, with a cross placed on top of the backrest.[11] In addition, imagery taken from the apocalyptic visions in the Book of Revelation decorates the back and arms. The front of the backrest shows a tree and a lamb, and on the back two of the celestial beings are depicted – the eagle and the lion. The two remaining celestial beings are found on the armrests, thus completing the number of attendants of the throne vision. The upper portion of each side shows five burning candles, possibly a reference to the seven candelabra from the Book of Revelation (Rev. 1:12–13).

Although the iconography would continue in the East, in the West its popularity waned after Late Antiquity. One rare, late example from the West is the ninth-century fresco on the back of the triumphal arch in the Lombard church at Castelseprio. (fig. 8) Here, the throne is surrounded by scenes from the childhood of Christ, not unlike the images on the apse wall of Santa Maria Maggiore. Several middle Byzantine examples have been preserved in ivory, enamel, manuscript illumination, mosaic, and fresco painting. In the church of St Panteleimon at Nerezi (1164) the empty throne appears behind the altar framed by two angels carrying liturgical fans, thereby duplicating the altar. (fig. 9)

While this image and the above-mentioned enamel from the Pala d'Oro (1105) are not inscribed within an eschatological context,[12] other images depict the throne within the iconography of the Last Judgment, starting in the tenth century. Among the early examples are an ivory plaque from the Victoria and Albert in London,[13] two miniatures from the Tetravangelion today in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Par. grec. 74, fols. 51v and 93v; fig. 10), the mosaics on the west wall of Torcello cathedral (second half twelfth century; fig. 11 and 12), and the Mavriotissa

11 Although the cross and throne are not monolithic, it is extremely likely that the tondo with the cross is part of the original object; see, Gaborit-Chopin, "Stuhl des heiligen Markus. Thronreliquiar," 106.

12 For an eschatological reading of the enamel, cf. Pincus, "Venice and Its Doge in the Grand Design," 264–268.

13 Inv. no. A. 24–1926. Williamson, *Medieval Ivory Carvings*, 129–130, cat. no. 30.

Church in Kastoria (generally dated to the early twelfth century).[14] A fresco in the dome of the twelfth-century Panagia Theotokos in Trikomo, Cyprus (1105–1107 CE) does not show the throne within the typical Last Judgment iconography, but it establishes the connection with the end of time through the accompanying inscription.[15]

1 Modern Historiography

Scholarship on the late antique and middle Byzantine images usually interprets all images of the empty throne as eschatological, based on the fact that the throne features prominently in the middle Byzantine Last Judgment iconography. Paul Durand coined the term *hetoimaisa* or *etimasia* in his discussions of the iconography.[16] Durand's term is directly inspired by middle and late Byzantine inscriptions identifying the throne as ἑτοιμασία, the preparation for the Second Coming of Christ, and is thus eschatological.[17] This interpretive mode received a great boost from Violet Quarles van Ufford, who strongly argued for the late antique images' eschatological meaning in an article from 1971. His argument focused less on the visual similarities between the late antique empty thrones and the middle Byzantine Last Judgment thrones, instead pointing to the motif of the cross on top of the throne.[18] Ufford interprets this cross as the appearance of the sign of Christ predicted in the Synoptic Apocalypse, the Gospel texts detailing Christ's eventual return and the events surrounding it (Mk. 13, Mt. 24, Lk. 21). In the same year that Ufford's article appeared, Thomas von Bogyay published two important encyclopaedia entries on the *etimasia*.[19] Seemingly without knowledge of each others' writings, they arrived at exactly opposite conclusions; von Bogyay argues decisively that the empty throne outside of the Last Judgment iconography has negligible eschatological meaning if any.

14 This early date is supported by Pelekanides and Wharton-Epstein (Pelekanides, "Kastoria," 1217; Pelekanidis and Chatzidakis, *Byzantine Art in Greece*, 72; Wharton Epstein, "Middle Byzantine Churches of Kastoria," 206). Chatzidakis argues for a later date in the first half of the thirteenth century (Pelekanidis and Chatzidakis, *Byzantine Art in Greece*, 81) and Velmans just gives a general date before 1259 (Velmans, *Byzanz: Fresken und Mosaike*, 201).

15 Stylianou and Stylianou, *The Painted Churches of Cyprus*, 486–488.

16 The first one was Durand in *Étude sur l'Étimacia, symbole du jugement dernier dans l'iconographie grecque chrétienne* (Chartres 1867). See von Bogyay, "Hetoimasia," 1191 and von Bogyay, "Thron (Hetoimasia)," 306.

17 A steatite icon in the Louvre (early eleventh century) is the oldest surviving image to inscribe the empty throne with the word Ἡ ΕΤΟΙΜΑΣΙΑ (Inv. no. OA 11152): Evans and Wixom, *The Glory of Byzantium*, 156–157, cat. No. 103.

18 Ufford, "Bemerkungen über den eschatologischen Sinn der Hetoimasia."

19 Bogyay, "Hetoimasia;" Bogyay, "Thron (Hetoimasia)." Bogyay first developed his ideas during the eleventh International Congress for Byzantine Studies: von Bogyay, "Zur Geschichte der Hetoimasie."

While Hugo Brandenburg only recognised allusions to the end of time in images connected to the four apocalyptical beings, such as the one on the apse wall of Santa Maria Maggiore,[20] eschatological readings of late antique images – including those of the throne – have proliferated in the wake of Ufford's article. Josef Engemann viewed the images of crosses such as those in the apse of S. Pudenziana (fig. 13) and in the vault of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia as signs of the Second Coming according to Matthew 24:30.[21] In a seminal article on the images of the Apocalypse, John Herrmann and Annewies van den Hoek list an impressive number of motifs that they associate with the Last Things, among them the empty throne. They therefore term the mosaics in the S. Matrona chapel an "elegant vision of the Second Coming".[22] In the section on Christian thrones, Vollmer equally interprets the Christian images as depictions of the prepared throne for the Last Judgment.

Eschatological interpretations are attractive for scholars because they appear to be specific and intuitively correct. However, several recent publications have distanced themselves from the larger trend in eschatological readings of late antique imagery. Dale Kinney has cautioned against identifying images as apocalyptic that are not directly taken from the Book of Revelation.[23] Geir Hellemo has specifically questioned the tradition of viewing late antique images of the empty throne as the eschatological *etimasia*, instead understanding it as an image of "God's glory and invisible presence".[24] Most fervently, Yves Christe has rejected eschatological interpretations of images associated with the Apocalypse of John, preferring to see them as images of the *ecclesia*.[25] Elisa di Natale and Stefano Resconi similarly set out to minimise the dominant futuristic-eschatological narrative. But they undermine their intention by concluding that eschatological concerns represent nonetheless a "valore aggiunto" in these images, a secondary meaning.[26] Instead of looking for a new primary meaning for those images, di Natale and Resconi avoid one coherent interpretive system, breaking the images up into single iconographical sub-elements and arguing that each of these elements has its own meaning. Thus the cross becomes an image of the passion, while the date palms are read as references to saints' martyria.

In contrast to other scholarship on the empty throne, La Rocca coherently argues for a non-eschatological reading of the motif. He suggests that the Christian images signify power and universal rulership, in contradistinction to their classical predecessors' signification of divine presence. He thereby draws a boundary

20 Brandenburg, "Ein frühchristliches Relief in Berlin," 139.

21 Engemann, "Images parousiaques dans l'art paléochrétien," 79 and 92–93.

22 Herrmann and Hoek, "Apocalyptic Themes in the Monumental and Minor Art of Early Christianity," 55.

23 Kinney, "The Apocalypse in Early Monumental Decoration."

24 Hellemo, *Adventus Domini*, 102–108.

25 Christe, *L'Apocalypse de Jean*, 66–71, particularly 67–68.

26 Natale and Resconi, "L'immagine della cosiddetta 'Etimasia' dal V al IX secolo," 700.

between ancient and Christian images, although he does not explain why the latter would have departed from their ancient counterparts' meaning.[27] While it might be possible that Christians only availed themselves of the pagan iconographic pattern without also using the meaning attached to it, this hypothesis seems much less likely than the assumption that the ancient meaning continued into the Christian era. As I shall argue, this motif was actually chosen exactly *because* of its ancient meaning, which was in fact entirely non-eschatological.

2 Ancient and Late Antique Images of the Empty Throne

The empty throne finds its origins in ancient rites called *sellisternia* (or *solisternia*) and *lectisternia*, the draping of a chair or a couch during offering ceremonies. The chair or couch of the deity served as a backdrop and focus for the offerings. *Pulvinaria*, cushions, were usually placed upon them, on top of which were placed the material signs of the god or goddess, that is crowns, busts, or other attributes. The function of these rites was to elicit a divine epiphany.[28] Vollmer has argued against La Rocca, seeing the images of the empty throne as signifying the *absence* of a ruler or deity, not their potential or invisible presence.[29] A depiction of this absence would, however, be a questionable choice for the reverse of an imperial coin just as it would be strange on the apse wall of a church.

The empty throne emerged in Christian visual culture around the year 400, possibly slightly earlier. While the earliest Christian images depicted the historical Jesus, by the middle of the fourth century we can sense a desire to also represent the divine Christ. Representing the Son of Man in his divine nature was problematic since the second commandment forbids images of God. But after the middle of the fourth century images emerged that did just that. Unlike most other areas of Christian iconography, theophanic images broke with ancient traditions and instead invented new motifs. The only complex ancient motif to have entered Christian theophanic imagery was the empty throne. Linked as it was to the divine presence, the iconography was easy to adapt to a Christian context, and its non-figural character fit the Christian aniconic agenda. For example, in Santa Maria Maggiore the throne appears between the Tetramorph crowning the cycle of images depicting Christ's

27 La Rocca, "I troni dei nuovi dei," 104.
28 La Rocca, "I troni dei nuovi dei," 79.
29 Vollmer, *Im Anfang war der Thron*, 29.

childhood. (fig. 3) Here the image above the altar engages with the presence of the divine in non-figural form.[30]

When appropriating the empty throne iconography, Christians not only replaced the signs of the ancient gods with those of the Christian God (cross, codex/scroll, dove etc.), they also presented it in the guise of biblical theophanic visions, specifically the throne visions of Ezekiel (Ezek. 1 and 10) and Isaiah (Isa. 6), and in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 4). The Tetramorph is a very conspicuous visionary element. In Santa Maria Maggiore there is even an emerald rainbow drawn around the throne referencing the description at Revelation 4:3. The two prophets, Ezekiel and John, both see a person sitting on the throne. Therefore, the ancient non-anthropomorphic motif of the empty throne does not appear to have been the first choice for Christian image-makers wanting to represent the divine figure seated on the throne. Indeed, the image of the enthroned Christ already existed, such as in the apse mosaic of S. Pudenziana. Thus, the empty throne motif was not chosen for its mimetic likeness to the prophetic text, but for the meaning it already held for late antique viewers. It was reused precisely because of its association with invisible presence and its rejection of anthropomorphism, which echoed well with the Christian belief system.

But besides the obvious iconographic parallels, the Christian images also introduced new elements into the throne motif. Their alleged connection to the end of time needs to be addressed in the following section. Two aspects – the connection with the Apocalypse of John and the depiction of the cross – have been used to support eschatological readings. The allusions to the Book of Revelation are only relevant for the images from the Latin West, as this biblical book was not canonical in the Greek-speaking East. In SS. Cosma e Damiano, for example, the throne is surrounded by depictions of the seven candelabra, the sea of crystal, and the book with the seven seals is placed before the throne, all taken from the Book of Revelation. (fig. 4) The late seventh- or early eighth-century mosaics that decorated the sanctuary vault in the now – destroyed Church of the Koimesis in Nicaea instead reference the Old Testament vision in Isaiah 6. (fig. 6) Here four angels frame the composition holding up signs with the Trishagion, the chant of the Seraphim surrounding God's throne. The inscription below the angels quotes the Letter to the Hebrews and translates the composition of the angels accompanying and venerating God's throne: "And let all the angels of God adore him."[31] While Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon read the inscription as referring to the apse mosaic depicting Mary with the Christ-child, it should primarily be understood as a reference to the throne vision under which it is placed.[32] This image in the Church of the Koimesis demon-

30 Engemann has unconvincingly proposed that the image in Santa Maria Maggiore replaced an image of the nativity that is otherwise missing from the cycle. He does not venture an explanation for this alleged image swap. Engemann, "Images parousiaques dans l'art paléochrétien," 88–89.

31 Καὶ προσκυνησάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες ἄγγελλοι θεοῦ.

32 Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, 206.

strates the original intention of the throne depictions, namely the visualisation of the otherwise invisible Christian God through a theophanic vision.[33]

Modern scholarship has frequently treated the exegesis of the Book of Revelation as a monolithic, uninterrupted succession of eschatological understandings throughout the past two millennia.[34] However, this was not true for the early medieval readings of this biblical book. Throughout the early Middle Ages, it was predominantly understood as a description of the current state of the *ecclesia*, the present world under the reign of Christ. The fourth-century bishop Tyconius was instrumental in propagating such an ecclesiological reading. His hugely influential commentary on the Apocalypse does not survive in its original form, but parts of it can be reconstructed through the writings of authors such as Augustine and Hieronymus who followed Tyconius' approach.[35] This exegetical reading of the Apocalypse focusing on the present state of the ecclesia would continue unchanged well into the high Middle Ages. It was not until the twelfth century that the writings of Joachim of Fiore, Ruppert von Deutz, and Anselm von Havelberg gave the exegetical tradition a new historical-teleological direction. This eschatological understanding would intensify in the early modern period – Savonarola being only one very prominent figure who exploited it for his own aims – and still informs our current understanding of the Apocalypse. The connection of images with the Book of Revelation therefore cannot be used as an argument for eschatological content in the first millennium. Although religious scholars largely agree on the rejection of eschatological readings of the Biblical text before the high Middle Ages in favor of ecclesiological/present readings,[36] art historians have been slow to pick up on these findings. A notable exception, Yves Christe has tried to draw art historians' attention to the fact that early medieval apocalyptic imagery held a decidedly non-eschatological significance, representing the medieval present.[37]

One controversial object in this regard is the Grado Throne, with its unique trumpeting angels shown on the left side. (fig. 7) Such angels are indeed not only mentioned in the Book of Revelation but also feature in later images of the Last Judgment. Scholars have pointed to the heavenly figures to support an eschatologi-

33 On the concept of divine visions, see Bergmeier, *Visionserwartung*.

34 See, for example, Herrmann and Hoek, "Apocalyptic Themes in the Monumental and Minor Art of Early Christianity."

35 See Mégier, "Die Historisierung der Apokalypse." On Hieronymus's adaptation of Victorinus' commentary and the cancelling of eschatological passages see Dulaey, "Jérôme 'editeur' du Commentaire sur l'Apocalypse de Victorin de Poetovio."

36 See, for example, Konrad, "Apokalypse und Geschichtstheologie im Mittelalter;" Auffarth, *Irdische Wege und himmlischer Lohn*, 85–96; McGinn, "The Emergence of the Spiritual Reading;" McGinn, "Turning Points in Early Christian Apocalyptic exegesis." Cf. Landes, "Lest the Millennium be Fulfilled;" Richard Landes, "The Silenced Millennium."

37 See, for example, Christe, "Apocalypse et interprétation iconographique;" Christe, "Traditions littéraires et iconographiques."

cal interpretation of the object.[38] Such angels also feature prominently on the apse wall of San Michele in Africisco (today in the Byzantine Museum in Berlin). However, trumpets in Late Antiquity also carried non-eschatological connotations that have been largely ignored. Beyond their narrow association with the Last Judgment, the sound of trumpets and angels playing the trumpet had a much more general meaning. Gregory of Nyssa devotes a lengthy paragraph to the sound of trumpets characterising it as a sign of the presence of God and his proximity. In the context of a description of Moses' encounter with God, the church father explains that the sound gets louder the closer you are to God.[39] The theophanic encounter he describes is the one recorded at Exodus 19, which also mentions trumpets playing, but has likewise no connection to the impending end of the world. Therefore, there is no compelling reason to interpret throne images as eschatological on the basis of their connection with imagery taken from the Book of Revelation. The same is true of the visual sign of the cross that often stands or hovers on top of the thrones, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

As noted above, the cross placed on top of the throne has been a major stumbling block for non-eschatological interpretations. Hellemo, for example, agrees with von Bogyay on the non-eschatological character of the empty throne, but emphasises eschatology as one of the central layers of meaning for images of the cross.[40] Scholars commonly justify eschatological interpretations by referencing Christ's announcement regarding the sign of the Son of Man appearing in the clouds before his eventual return (Mt. 24:30). Eduard Stommel has shown that the church fathers generally interpreted this eschatological sign as having the shape of the cross.[41] Interestingly, Ps.-Ephrem, the author of an apocalyptic account of the Last Judgment, interprets the apocalyptic sign as a star shining among the other stars.[42] With regard to the visual culture of Late Antiquity, Stommel has argued for understanding the crosses in the Albenga and Naples baptisteries as images of the Last Judgment. (fig. 14) He interprets the doves surrounding the cross in Albenga as the apostles sitting next to Christ on Judgment Day.[43] Twelve animals in proximity to Christ are, however, not unusual in late antique images (images of the *traditio legis*, the apse mosaic at Sant'Apollinare in Classe etc.). It should be noted that while the sign appearing at the end of days may very well be the sign of the cross, not every depiction of the cross represents the eschatological sign.

38 For example, Gaborit-Chopin, "Stuhl des heiligen Markus. Thronreliquiar," 113; Hahn, "The Meaning of Early Medieval Treasuries," 9.

39 Εἰ δέ τις Μωυσῆς εἴη, γένοιτ'ἂν καὶ ἐπὶ πολὺ τῆς ἀνόδου, χωρῶν τῇ ἀκοῇ τὰς τῶν σαλπίγγων φωνάς [...] ἐν τῷ προβαίνειν γίνεσθαι. (Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Moysis*, 2.158.)

40 Hellemo, *Adventus Domini*, 112–113.

41 Stommel, "Σημεῖον ἐκπετάσεως (*Didache*, 16.6)," 21–31.

42 Ps.-Ephrem, *On Judgment*, 3 (Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion,* 14–16).

43 Stommel, "Σημεῖον ἐκπετάσεως (*Didache*, 16.6)," 39.

The eschatological meaning of the cross was only one among many, and it was not the most important aspect of this central Christian symbol. Accounts of apparitions of crosses that interpret them as the sign of the impending end are notably absent from late antique sources. Instead even where one would expect them, the authors prefer to view the cross as a sign for Christ, of salvation or guidance. Such is the case in an account by Sozomen in which he narrates the story of the sick Probianus who had a vision of a cross and subsequently experienced its healing powers.[44] Another more striking event is recorded in a letter from Cyril of Jerusalem to Emperor Constantius II, in which he tells the emperor about the apparition of the cross in the sky over Jerusalem for several consecutive nights.[45] Instead of reading it as the sign announcing the Second Coming, and even despite mentioning the prediction at Mt. 24:30, he wishes the emperor many healthy years and only notes that from now on this sign will appear again and again in even bigger form.[46] Unlike the eschatological interpretations of natural phenomena at later points during the Middle Ages,[47] Cyril consciously avoids any suggestion that it might announce impending disaster. Such an understanding of natural phenomena simply continued ancient forms of understanding the world as signs of divine intervention or as results of the gods' wrath. Reading natural disasters as signs of the final destruction of the world and the end of time was not the default reading it would become in the later Middle Ages.[48]

With this more proper understanding of the meaning of the cross-sign, we can revisit the mosaic of the empty throne with the cross in the vault of the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna (fig. 15), which has elicited more eschatological readings than other iterations of this motif. Here, the cross seems to hover in front of the throne instead of being firmly placed on top of or behind the cushion. Its hovering state has been taken as a visualisation of the sign appearing in the sky before the Second Com-

44 Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.3.13.

45 Bihain, "L'Épitre de Cyrille de Jérusalem." See also Chantraine, "Die Kreuzesvision von 351."

46 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Letter to Constantios*, 6 (Bihain, "L'Épitre de Cyrille de Jérusalem," 290).

47 Philostorgios, the author of a church history, uses traditions from Jewish apocalyptic writings to list natural disasters in order to argue that the end was near. While other late antique chroniclers also mention disastrous events and supernatural phenomena, Philostorgios is unique in tying it to the unfolding of sacred time and its impending end. See Bleckmann, "Apokalypse und kosmische Katastrophen," 29. See also Fried, *Aufstieg aus dem Untergang*, 15.

48 In antiquity, Giants were blamed for earthquakes and volcanic activity. The giant Enkelados was believed to inhabit the earth underneath the Etna, from where he would send fiery attacks towards the sky. The Abrahamic religions often linked catastrophes to key theophanic events in sacred time. In the Hebrew Bible, God frequently appears in the clouds and in the midst of earthquakes, lightning, and smoke, most famously in Moses' vision of God on Mount Sinai. The predominant line of interpretation was to understand natural disasters as signs of God's wrath. Another very common explanation was as signs of impending war and man-made disaster. Alcuin, for example, interpreted blood rain as a portent of the sack of the Lindisfarne monastery in 793. See Conti, "Ende des Herrschers – Ende der Welt?," 61; Dutton, "Observations on Early Medieval Weather," 175–178.

ing.[49] However, neither sky nor clouds are depicted, nor would it be logical to show Christ's baptism surrounded by apostles who converge towards the sign of the end of time. It is much more likely that this procession might allude to ancient processions to the *sellisternia* of the gods. The cross should therefore be read as what it appears to be, the sign of Christ in the absence of his visible presence.

The ability of an empty seat to signify the possible presence of absent holiness has also engendered practices, not just images. For example, during church councils of the first millennium a bible was usually placed on a throne, visually representing the Christian God in the midst of the attendants. This practice is recorded in an image in the Paris Gregory manuscript (Paris Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec. 510, fol. 355r) depicting the Council of Constantinople (381 CE).[50] (fig. 16) Similarly, the Grado Throne might have been used as such a lectern for gospel books during the liturgy. It is just barely big enough for a very slim person to sit on, and although it has an opening for relics its substantial size makes it unlikely that it was a 'mere' reliquary. It is also possible that the somewhat enigmatic depictions of four thrones in the Orthodox baptistery at Ravenna represent such a practice, except that here the four gospels rest on altars between the chairs, leaving the latter empty. (fig. 17) Alternatively, the thrones might also just be ornamental, which would not be surprising in the otherwise highly ornate context of the dome mosaics.

3 Continuities and Changes in the Middle Byzantine Period

After the sixth century, the motif of the empty throne did not fall entirely into disuse, but was certainly depicted less frequently. It appears in the Lombard church at Castelseprio (fig. 8) and in Rome's small San Zeno chapel (817–824), where Peter and Paul are shown venerating a reduced version of the empty throne motif. Nothing indicates a departure from its ancient and late antique significance. After the period of Iconoclasm, the motif continued to be used in Byzantium. It frequently appears in Pentecost images, such as in a miniature (fol. 301v) from the Paris Gregory, and in the domes of Hosios Loukas (c. 1048) and San Marco in Venice (twelfth century). (fig. 18) In these images, rays of light representing divine inspiration emanate from the central throne, likely demonstrating the empty throne's ability to visualise the divine source non-figuratively.

49 Ufford, "Bemerkungen über den eschatologischen Sinn der Hetoimasia," 202; Engemann, "Images parousiaques dans l'art paléochrétien," 94; Vollmer, *Im Anfang war der Thron*, 357.

50 On the miniature, see Bogyay, "Zur Geschichte der Hetoimasie," 59; Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium*, 210–217 and fig. 36.

The throne also appears by itself in the upper enamel of the Pala d'Oro (1105) in Venice[51] (fig. 2) and in the sanctuary of S. Panteleimon at Nerezi (1064). (fig. 9) In this middle Byzantine church, it is depicted behind the altar, flanked by two officiating angels waving liturgical fans. It has been suggested that in this specific arrangement the throne acquires Eucharistic significance,[52] but despite the obvious spatial analogy with the altar, this interpretation seems implausible. Unlike in images of Christos Melismos, the body of the Christ-child lying on the altar (for example at Kurbinovo), the Nerezi throne is not a visual equivalent of the Eucharistic offerings. Rather, the image-makers have noticed and represented an important parallel between the theophanic apparition during the Eucharist and the empty throne's theophanic meaning. In fact, the visual equivalent of the priestly activities appears in the upper zone of the apse wall high above the altar. (fig. 19) Here Christ is depicted handing out bread and wine. We therefore still find the old significance of the empty throne as a non-anthropomorphic image of the divine presence exploited in images as late as the twelfth century.

At the same time the motif already appears in quite different contexts. From the tenth or eleventh centuries onwards, we find the throne in a new context, the iconography of the Last Judgment. Among the earliest depictions are an ivory now at the Victoria and Albert Museum (tenth or eleventh century),[53] two icons from the Monastery at Sinai,[54] and the two miniatures in the Tetravangelion BnF grec. 74, fols. 51v and 93v. (fig. 10) These images closely resemble each other and clearly share a common prototype with the best-preserved monumental rendering of the Byzantine Last Judgment on the west wall of the Cathedral of Torcello.[55] (fig. 12) The throne is usually positioned below the seated Christ, between Mary and John the Baptist (Deesis) and the seated apostles. It is sometimes flanked by the angels rolling up the scroll of heaven and calling the dead eaten by animals and those devoured by the sea. The lowest register is usually comprised of the juxtaposed representations of paradise and hell. The throne sometimes awkwardly shares the space with the river of fire (τὸ πῦρ τῶν αἰώνων), which connects the seated Christ with the depiction of hell. Sometimes the throne is shown straddling the river, but more commonly the river loops around the throne. This and other elements feature in

51 On the Pala d'Oro see, for example, Volbach, "Gli smalti della Pala d'Oro;" Polacco, "La Pala d'Oro." Volbach identifies the empty throne as the one prepared for the Last Judgment (Volbach, "Gli smalti della Pala d'Oro," 12). There are, however, no other images alluding to that specific event among the enamels.

52 Sinkević, *The Church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi*, 35–37.

53 See above fn. 13. Although often dated to eleventh century, Weitzmann and Brenk argue for a date in the tenth century: Brenk, *Tradition und Neuerung in der christlichen Kunst des ersten Jahrtausends*, 84, fn. 7.

54 Cat. no.s 150 and 151 in: Sotiriou and Sotiriou, *Icones du Mont Sinai*. Color image of icon no. 151 in: Weitzmann, *Die Ikone*, 23.

55 On the dating of large parts of the mosaic decoration to the second half of the twelfth century see Andreescu, "Torcello. III.," 250–251 and 261.

Daniel's vision (the stream of fire is mentioned at 7:10) and the Synoptic Apocalypse. A quotation from this Gospel text (Mt. 25:41) is even inserted below the seated Christ of the Last Judgment in the Panagia ton Chalkeon in Thessaloniki (founded in 1028 CE).[56] This narthex fresco, however, is missing the empty throne, because it would be where the arch of the door is located. Similarly, the fresco of the Last Judgment in Sant'Angelo in Formis near Naples (1072–1087 CE) does not depict the empty throne, either. While the empty throne could become a visual placeholder for the entire motif of the Last Judgment, it was paradoxically also the one element that could be dispensed with most easily without loosing any critical information.

The Last Judgment iconography has no direct textual origin. Psalm 9:8 only mentions the preparation of the throne for judgment, which likely inspired the term *etimasia*. The most important biblical texts are the predictions of the end in Daniel, Matthew, and in the Book of Revelation. Furthermore, the fourth-century homily by Ps.-Ephrem (with seventh-century interpolations) has long been credited with having influenced the middle Byzantine motif.[57] It is a particularly extensive account of the events at the end of time, but contains few ideas that cannot also be found elsewhere in apocalyptic, hagiographic, and homiletic writing. Interestingly, Ephrem's text mentions a throne being decorated and Christ being seated to the right of it.[58] Other literary references include John Rufus' *Life of Petrus Ibericus*, in which he describes an extensive vision of the end of time, and a homily by Anastasios Sinaita, in which he describes the eschatological events mentioning the scroll of heaven, the extinguished sun, the falling stars, trumpeting angels, the empty throne, and the river of fire that takes everything away.[59] In sum, there is little strong evidence that Ps.-Ephrem played a dominant role in the conception of this new iconography.

The eschatological throne also appears outside of the Byzantine Last Judgment iconography. Interestingly, in these cases, inscriptions play an important role in underscoring the eschatological intention. A steatite icon now at the Louvre (fig. 23) and a miniature from a psalter manuscript (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 752, fol. 27v; fig. 24), both dated to the eleventh century and discussed below, depict abbreviated versions of the Last Judgment. The psalter miniature bears an inscription identifying the throne as an image of the Second Coming (ἡ δευτέρη παρουσία),[60] while the steatite icon clarifies the purpose of the throne with the inscription Η ΕΤΟΙΜΑΣΙΑ.[61] In both cases, the inscriptions identify the motif as

56 Brenk, *Tradition und Neuerung in der christlichen Kunst des ersten Jahrtausends*, 83–84; Papadopoulos, *Die Wandmalereien des XI. Jahrhunderts*, 62.

57 Voss, *Das Jüngste Gericht*, 66–71; Brenk, "Die Anfänge der Byzantinischen Weltgerichtsdarstellung," 109–111; Papadopoulos, *Die Wandmalereien des XI. Jahrhunderts*, 91.

58 Pseudo-Ephrem, *Homily*, 12. ll. 289–290. Transl. Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion*, 32.

59 Guillou, "Le monastère de la Théotokos au Sinai," 252, ll. 3–9.

60 Brenk, *Tradition und Neuerung in der christlichen Kunst des ersten Jahrtausends*, fig. 25.

61 Kalavrezou, *Byzantine Icons in Steatite*, 95–96 and Pl. 4.

the prepared throne for Christ's return, thus ensuring an eschatological reading of the otherwise neutral image. An image of the throne in the dome of the Panagia Theotokos in Trikomo (Cyprus) similarly acquires its eschatological meaning through an inscription. (fig. 20 and detail fig. 21) The throne is the focus of two processions of angels led by Mary and John the Baptist around a central medallion containing the image of Christ Pantokrator. The inscription warns the beholder to be "fearful of the Judge",[62] the ετοιμασία inscription immediately above the throne indicates the eschatological valence, and even the open book on the throne is inscribed with a fitting passage from Matthew 7:1: "Judge not, that you may not be judged." Apart from the inscriptions no other visual element makes an eschatological reading imperative. The procession around a central medallion recalls early Christian compositions such as the dome of the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna, where the twelve apostles converge towards the empty throne. The inscription directly above the heads of the angels at Trikomo quotes Hebrews 1:6, just as in the sanctuary vaulting of the Koimesis church at Nicea, asking beholders to worship God in the present.

Without additional information, Christ Pantokrator, the bust-length figure of Christ, cannot be taken as the image of God at the end of days, as shown by Nikolaos Mesarites' description of the Pantokrator image in the church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople. Mesarites described the bust-length figure of Christ as a vision that we cannot yet see clearly, using a quotation from the First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 13:12) that has been used since Late Antiquity to describe mankind's (visual) relationship with the invisible divine in the present.[63] Many inscriptions around similar medallions depicting the Pantocrator likewise refrain from allusions to the Last Judgment: for example, the thirteenth-century church of Hagios Ioannis at Kerami (Naxos) quotes Psalm 14:2: "The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men."[64] (fig. 22) Even the Deesis can only be taken as a reference to the Last Judgment when it appears alongside further eschatological references. If Mary and John appear without eschatological references, such as above the apse conch of the Hagia Sophia at Ohrid, they can only be taken to point to their role as intercessors. However, the inscriptions at Trikomo make overt allusions to the act of judging and the prepared throne for Judgment Day and thus it can safely be considered an image that evokes the end of time.

Therefore we can note that inscriptions played a crucial role in the image of the *etimasia*'s shift in meaning. Prior to the eleventh century there was no need to identify the meaning of the image for the beholders, as it was part of a long, continuous tradition stretching from antiquity until the eleventh century (and beyond). Even in

62 Stylianou and Stylianou, *The Painted Churches of Cyprus*, 486.

63 Nikolaos Mesarites, *Descriptio ecclesiae sanctorum apostolorum*, 14.1 (Downey, "Nikolaos Mesarites," 869–870).

64 Chatzidakis, Drandakis, Nicos, Acheimastou-Potamianou, Vasilaki-Karakatsani, *Byzantine Art in Greece: Naxos*, 91 and fig. on page 95.

the eleventh century and after, the motif could still be used as the aniconic visualisation of God's invisible presence, as exemplified by the fresco at Nerezi. However, within a more complex eschatological motif or accompanied by an inscription orienting the image towards the end of time, it could now also be used to signify the expectation of the Last Judgment. It is thus imperative that we carefully scrutinise each image and its contextual evidence in order to decide which of the possible meanings was intended in each middle Byzantine example.[65]

To understand the implications behind the change in the image's meaning, we might take a look at the context of some of these images. The steatite icon mentioned above depicts the empty throne flanked by two archangels in the upper register and four warrior saints below, who normally are not related to Last Judgment imagery. (fig. 23) However, the poem written on the horizontal band divides and links both registers. It reads:

> The stratelatai, having appeared from the four ends (of the world) as witnesses to the divine pronouncements, are most ready to be awarded a place (in heaven).[66]

The language alludes to the apocalyptic writings – the Synoptic Apocalypse states that the attendants of the Last Judgment will gather from the four corners of the earth (Mt. 24:31) – and thus connects the "military leaders" (*stratelatai*) to the eschatological content of the upper register. The choice of *warrior* saints might have further been influenced by apocalyptic accounts, which often emphasise the wars and fighting that will occur at the end of the world. Ps.-Ephrem's homily is a particular case in point, devoting several chapters to the detailing of the fighting at the end of time.[67] Perhaps an increasing number of threats from outside the Empire (Avars, Persians, Arabs) triggered the heightened interest in eschatological concepts.

The psalter manuscript Vat. gr. 752 (before 1059) offers further evidence regarding the reasons for depicting the empty throne.[68] Fragments of the Last Judgment iconography are scattered across the manuscript, with paradise on fol. 42v, the raising of the dead on fol. 44v, and the eternal fire on fol. 28r. The *etimasia* appears in a miniature on fol. 27v illustrating Psalm 6. Its upper zone is taken up by the enthroned Christ surrounded by the heavenly host and inscribed ὁ ΧC καθήμενος ἐπὶ θρόνου δόξης ("Christ sitting on the throne of glory"). (fig. 24) The lower zone with the empty throne surrounded by clerics is inscribed ἡ δευτέρη παρουσία ("the Second Coming"). At Psalm 6:2 David asks to be saved from God's wrath and from judg-

65 Von Bogyay has similarly stressed the need to assess each image case by case: Bogyay, "Zur Geschichte der Hetoimasie," 61.

66 Trans. Kalavrezou, *Byzantine Icons in Steatite*, 96.

67 See Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion*, e.g. chapters 6 and 7, at 18–24.

68 On the manuscript see most recently, Crostini and Peers, *A Book of Psalms From Eleventh-Century Byzantium*.

ment. The patristic text of the accompanying catena strikes a similar chord, suggesting a heightened concern with the afterlife and judgment.[69] Glenn Peers has argued that the manuscript reflects an interest in repentance and remission.[70] Dedicatory inscriptions, such as at the Panagia ton Chalkeon at Thessaloniki and the Panagia Phorbiotissa tis Asinou at Nikitari (Cyprus) also reflect these anxieties about Judgment Day. While in Thessaloniki the Last Judgment frescoes in the narthex reference Matthew's text of the Synoptic Apocalypse, an inscription above the apse of the church asks for forgiveness of sins and for salvation for the patrons (ΥΠΕΡ ΛΥΤΡΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΑΦΕΣΕΩΣ ΤΩΝ ΕΓΚΛΗΜΑΤΩΝ ΑΥΤΩΝ).[71] In Nikitari, the south lunette depicts the patron next to Mary interceding on his behalf at Christ's throne. (fig. 25) The inscription appears between Christ and Mary and reads: "Having been blessed in life with many things of which thou, oh! Virgin, wast seen to be the provider, I, Nicephoros *Magistros*, a pitiful suppliant, erected this church with longing, in return for which I pray that I may find thee my patron in the terrible Day of Judgment."[72] Thus, while Last Judgment images were often confined to the narthices of churches, and the images in the naoi mostly continued a tradition of showing the heavenly hierarchy and past biblical and hagiographic narratives, eschatological concerns about the future end of time entered these spaces via inscriptions and in abbreviated form. The cupola at Trikomo is one example for the depiction of the empty throne, while the frescoes in the domed diakonikon at Nerezi show John the Baptist, beneath an image of Christ, as the Ancient of Days holding a scroll inscribed with the words of Matthew 3:2 "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

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Returning to the initial rumination that prompted this essay, namely the complex relationship between textual and visual sources, we can see that the mere existence of a concept in texts does not necessarily engender its translation into visual forms. Eschatological concepts can be traced in written sources from Late Antiquity, but hardly any visual manifestations are extant from before the inception of the middle Byzantine iconography of the Last Judgment. Ps.-Ephrem's text, which might or might not have influenced middle Byzantine invention of the Last Judgment iconography, was written and must have been known to a select group of readers in Late Antiquity. But only the specific concerns current in the tenth or eleventh centuries triggered the translation of this and similar texts into a visual pattern. Therefore, while the interdisciplinary reading of images against texts – and texts against images – is bound to become more important, we should be careful not to make one medium fit the concepts expressed by the other.

69 Brenk, *Tradition und Neuerung in der christlichen Kunst des ersten Jahrtausends*, 88.

70 Peers, "Process and Meaning," 456–457.

71 Papadopoulos, *Die Wandmalereien des XI. Jahrhunderts*, 57.

72 Stylianou and Stylianou, *The Painted Churches of Cyprus*, 114 and fig. 57. For a similar inscription in the Panagia tou Arkou at Lagoudera (before 1191), see the same publication at 159.

Long-lived and malleable images such as the empty throne present a further challenge to historical studies. Their ability to adopt new meanings made them attractive both to image-makers and beholders. But in the absence of inscriptions or contemporary descriptions it can be difficult to decide which meaning was preferred in any given context. The motif of Christ enthroned between the apostles is another such example. The late antique image as it appears in the apse of S. Pudenziana *visually* resembles the arrangement of the seated Apostles in the upper zone of Last Judgment scenes. However, the late antique apse motif does not represent the eschatological future,[73] but rather the theophanic Christ in the midst of his disciples.[74] Convincing visual arrangements were reused like *spolia* and adapted to the new surroundings most probably without the beholders even recognising the change. Very likely they predominantly saw an unbroken tradition. As scholars we must be careful to not let ourselves be fooled by visual similarities, instead identifying the obscured breaks and the historic specificity of the images. A possible reason for why people in middle Byzantine times revived the empty throne motif and included it in the Last Judgment iconography may have been that they felt this preexisting image succinctly visualised the connection between the current state of waiting while God is invisible on Earth – a concept that is close to the original late antique meaning – and the expected return of Christ in the eschatological future. The image thus visualises the time that lies between now and the end of time.

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73 See for example, Engemann, "Images parousiaques dans l'art paléochrétien," 80–81.

74 See for example, Bergmeier, *Visionserwartung*, 102–108..

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