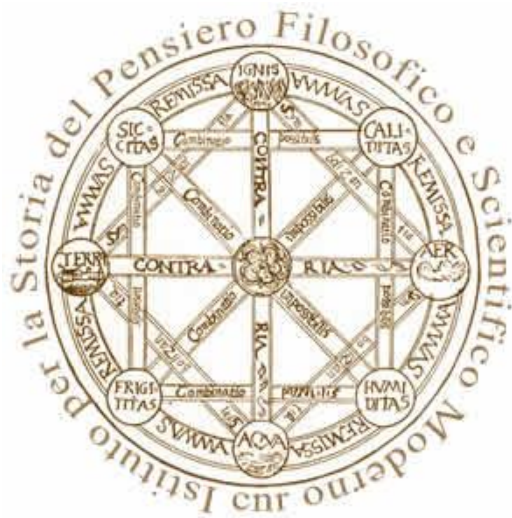


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**Ghirlandaio, Ficino and Hermes Trismegistus:
the *Prisca Theologia*
in the Tornabuoni Frescoes**



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In 1485 Giovanni Tornabuoni commissioned Domenico and Davide Ghirlandaio¹ to paint the main chapel in the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence². These frescoes, which were finished in 1490 and narrate the lives of the Virgin and St. John the Baptist, have attracted scholarly attention mainly because of the numerous portraits of the members of the Tornaquinci *consorteria* included in some of the scenes³. Already in 1902 in his essay *The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie. Domenico Ghirlandaio in Santa Trinita: The Portraits of Lorenzo de Medici and his Household*⁴ Aby Warburg stressed the importance of Ghirlandaio's juxtaposition of contemporary portraiture with biblical and hagiographical stories. He also underscored the votive function of the portraits included in the frescoes and argued that their main task was to build, reinforce and confirm the social bonds between the most influential families of the city, their protectors – the Medici – and other members of the Florentine society⁵. While Ghirlandaio's Tornabuoni Chapel frescoes feature a similar juxtaposition, the decoration is also greatly influenced by classical antiquity⁶. Warburg himself mentioned some of the classical motifs included there. The scholar was fascinated by some of the figures in the Tornabuoni frescoes, especially that of the “ninfà”, i.e. Saint Elisabeth's maid, who enters the room of the *puerpera* with dancing steps and lively movements. Not only did Warburg discuss the

¹ This study was made possible by the generous support of the Art and Humanities Research Council which sponsored my PhD studies at Durham University. I am especially grateful to my supervisor Dr Dario Tescini who supported and encouraged my investigations into the iconography of the Tornabuoni frescoes and became an important guide in my academic growth. I would also like to thank the professors, colleagues and friends who enriched this study with their precious comments and corrections: Professor Stéphane Toussaint, Professor Adrian Hoch, Luca Palozzi, Francesca Borgo, Alessandro Roffi, Giulio Marchisio and Michelle Tarnopolsky.

² Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF), *Notarile Antecosimiano*, 13186 [formerly M 237] (Ser Jacopo di Martino da Firenze, 1481-1487), ff. 159r-160r. The contract was first published by G. Milanesi, *Documenti inediti dell'arte toscana dal XII al XVI secolo*, in «Il Buonarroti», III, 1887, 2, pp. 335-338. An English translation is in D. Sanderson Chambers, *Patrons and Artists in the Italian Renaissance*, London, Macmillan, 1970, pp. 173-175. More recently, see: J. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio: Artist and Artisan*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 350-351.

³ J. Schmid, *Et pro remedio animae et pro memoria: bürgerliche repraesentatio in der Cappella Tornabuoni in S. Maria Novella*, München, Dt. Kunstverl., 2002; P. Simons, *Portraiture and Patronage in Quattrocento Florence with Special Reference to the Tornaquinci and their Chapel in S. Maria Novella*, 2 vols., PhD thesis, Department of Fine Arts, University of Melbourne, 1985; Id., *Patronage in the Tornaquinci Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence*, in *Patronage, Art, and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. F. W. Kent - P. Simons, Oxford, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 221-250.

⁴ A. Warburg, *Bildniskunst und Florentinisches Bürgertum. Domenico Ghirlandaio in S. Trinita: die Bildnisse des Lorenzo de Medici und seiner Angehörigen*, Leipzig, Hermann Seemann, 1902. English translation: *The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie. Domenico Ghirlandaio in Santa Trinita: The Portrait of Lorenzo de Medici and his Household*, in Id., *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity. Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, transl. D. Britt, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 1999, pp. 184-221.

⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 189-190.

⁶ N. Dacos, *Ghirlandaio et l'antique*, in «Bulletin de l'Institut Historique Belge de Rome», 1962, 34, pp. 419-455; V. Bonmatí Sánchez, *El humanismo renacentista florentino en las pinturas de Domenico Ghirlandaio*, in «Interpres», 2010, 29, pp. 192-206.

nymph motif in letters that he exchanged with his friend André Jolles, but he also analysed it further in his last project, the *Mnemosyne*, in which he gathered the visual material on this iconographic type in plates 46 and 47⁷. In fact, thanks to Warburg, the critical fortune of the nymph figure in the Tornabuoni fresco cycle has been quite remarkable⁸. Other figures that are also strongly rooted in pagan antiquity have not been as lucky, passing almost unobserved by critics despite their visual significance within the scenes. In the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* (figure 1), for instance, we can see a semi-nude man draped in a red cloth sitting on the temple steps in the right foreground. His nudity, the shape of his torso and the chiaroscuro modelling all clearly recall Roman sculpture and classical models. Next to him is a small wooden barrel with the top of a bottle sticking out. The man cups his chin with his elbow resting on his knee as though deep in thought. In the *Preaching of St. John the Baptist* (figure 2), on the other hand, a group of four men gather in the bottom right-hand corner. Two are seated holding each other's hands. One of the seated men wears purple and blue drapery and holds a walking stick; the other is dressed in red and white drapery with an oriental turban on his head. The two men standing behind them seem to be discussing something with St. John the Baptist. The older one points to St. John; the younger man indicates the ground. The four men share the foreground of the scene with St. John. They are sharply divided from the rest of the audience, grouped together, and their obvious gestures seem to convey that they are engaged in a serious dispute. To the average viewer they may seem like simple bystanders listening to the preaching. However, an attentive reading reveals that they could in fact be engaged in a highly intellectual and philosophical conversation. Their gestures and garments clearly differentiate them from the rest of the crowd. Behind them we can recognize two contemporary figures, one of whom looks out at the viewer. Their presence is consistent with the frequent recurrence of portraits in the Tornabuoni cycle even if their precise identification remains uncertain. They could be members of Ghirlandaio's workshop or some unrecognized members of the Tornaquinci *consorteria*. Whatever the case, they do not participate in the dialogue between St. John and the four men. The difference between the active attitude of the four listeners on the right and the passivity of the rest of the crowd is striking. At first glance, it seems that the four men in the foreground represent ideal interlocutors for the saint and the aim of this paper will be to critically evaluate this initial hypothesis.

Indeed, the present study aims to fill a gap in the scholarship on the Tornabuoni Chapel by offering an iconographic analysis of the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* and the *Preaching of St. John the Baptist* and proposing an interpre-

⁷ A. Warburg, *Ninfa fiorentina 1900*, Warburg Institute Archive, 118; E. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford, Phaidon, 1986, pp. 105-127; K. W. Forster - K. Mazzucco, *Introduzione ad Aby Warburg e all'“Altante della Memoria”*, Milano, Mondadori, 2002.

⁸ G. Didi-Huberman, *Ninfa fluida. Essai sur le drapé-désir*, Paris, Gallimard, 2015; Id., *Ninfa moderna. Essai sur le drapé tombé*, Paris, Gallimard, 2002; B. Baert, *Nymph: Motif, Phantom, Affect. A Contribution to the Study of Aby Warburg*, Leuven, Peeters, 2014.

tation of these mysterious figures. In fact, it is the author's contention that they introduce the Ficinian idea of the *prisca theologia* to the decoration by referring to the myth of the Saturnian Golden Age and the relationship between Christianity and pagan antiquity. According to this interpretation, the decoration represents an interesting example of a Neoplatonic reinterpretation of biblical narratives and apocryphal sources. Specifically, it will be suggested that the semi-nude sitting on the temple steps in the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* is an angel known from the apocrypha who in the Neoplatonic reinterpretation becomes Saturn inspired by Ficino's *Theologia Platonica*. It will also be proposed that the four men listening to St. John's preaching are Moses and Hermes Trismegistus (seated) with Aristotle and Plato standing behind them – i.e. Ficino's *familia philosophica*, whose dialogue conveys Ficino's belief in a continuity between Egyptian, Jewish, Greek and Christian philosophies, the *perennis philosophia* and the *prisca theologia*.

While scholars generally acknowledge the close relationship between the Tornabuoni Chapel frescoes and the Medicean circle of intellectuals, the peculiar presence of the aforementioned figures has passed almost unobserved. Ghirlandaio's frescoes are primarily famous for their realistic representations of the Medicean faction during the seminal years of Lorenzo il Magnifico's rule over Florence. The patron of the decoration, Giovanni Tornabuoni, was Lorenzo's uncle and manager of the Roman branch of the Medici bank. Moreover, the widely studied scene of the *Annunciation to Zacharias* (figure 3) not only represents members of the Tornaquinci *consorteria* but also people close to the Medici like Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo Landino, Angelo Poliziano and Gentile Becchi⁹, who appear in the foreground on the left (figure 4). Finally, the inscription painted above the arch on the right was likely composed by Poliziano himself¹⁰:

AN[NO] MCCCCLXXXX QVO PVLCHERRIMA CIVITAS OPIBVS VICTORIIS
ARTIBVS AEDIFICIISQVE NOBILIS COPIA SALVBRITE PACE
PERFRVEBATVR

(In the year 1490, when the most beautiful city, graced by richness, victories, arts, and monuments, enjoyed wealth, health and peace).

This inscription constitutes an excellent starting point for the present investigation. No analysis of the chapel's iconography has hitherto taken account of the close relationship between the decoration and the intellectual world of Ficino, Poliziano, Landino and Becchi, even if the inscription shows that at least one of the Medicean humanists was probably involved in the decoration's execution. Furthermore, the verses refer to the topos of the Golden Age, which remained seminal for Medicean political discourse¹¹. In fact, the scene repre-

⁹ P. Simons, *Portraiture and Patronage*, cit., vol. I, pp. 273-274.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 273.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 279.

sents Medici-ruled Florence as an ideal, prosperous city where Saturn's reign guarantees abundance, peace, wealth and military victories. Until now, these verses have been considered the only direct reference to the myth of the Golden Age conveyed by the decoration. However, as we will see, references to this subject may be found in other scenes, thus making it an important thread of the frescoes' densely interwoven meaning.

The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple

The nude figure sitting on the temple steps in the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* is one of the most curious in the entire decoration of the chapel. Its meaning has thus far remained rather enigmatic because it seems to break from the traditional iconography of this subject. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries representations of the *Presentation of the Virgin* included the temple with ten or fifteen steps leading up to the place where the Jewish rabbis received Mary and her parents, with St. Anne and Joachim at the bottom of the steps surrounded by other Jews and bystanders. This was how Giotto portrayed the scene in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua in 1305¹² and how Taddeo Gaddi represented it in the Baroncelli Chapel in the church of Santa Croce in Florence in 1328-38¹³. Ghirlandaio would not have introduced a new visual element to the composition if it did not have meaning in the context of the scene. From an iconographic point of view, the figure displays certain similarities to the Belvedere Torso¹⁴, which was discovered in the 1430s and became a model for fifteenth- and sixteenth-century artists. In fact, Ghirlandaio was one of the first to readapt this classical model in his own work. Though mentioned by Vasari¹⁵, this figure has attracted surprisingly little attention among art historians. Sheila McClure Ross has interpreted him as a pilgrim¹⁶, Alessandro Salucci argued that he represents the pagan religion defeated by Christianity¹⁷, and Anna Maria van Loosen-Loerakker has claimed that he represents Hermes Trismegistus¹⁸.

¹² See: L. Jacobus, *Giotto and the Arena Chapel. Art, Architecture and Experience*, London, Harvey Miller, 2008, p. 250.

¹³ See: A. Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi. Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1982, p. 96.

¹⁴ N. Dacos, *Ghirlandaio et l'antique*, cit., p. 435.

¹⁵ «In the third picture, which is above the first in the upper compartment, Our Lady is seen ascending the steps of the Temple, and in the background there is a building which recedes from the eye in very correct proportion; there is also an undraped figure, which at that time, as they were not frequently seen, was very much commended, although there is not to be discovered in it that entire perfection of the proportions which we find in those painted in our own day». G. Vasari, *Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, ed. E. Howland Blashfield - E. Wilbour Blashfield - A. Hopkins, vol. II, London, Bell, 1897, p. 179.

¹⁶ S. McClure Ross, *The Redecoration of Santa Maria Novella's Cappella Maggiore*, PhD thesis, University of California, 1983, pp. 124, 242, note 134.

¹⁷ A. Salucci, *Il Ghirlandaio a Santa Maria Novella, la cappella Tornabuoni*, Firenze, Edifir, 2012, p. 62.

¹⁸ A. M. van Loosen-Loerakker, *De Koorkapel in de Santa Maria Novella te Florence*, Zierikzee, LnO, 2008, pp. 111-114.

Yet, none of these interpretations provide a conclusive analysis of the motif, its sources or similar iconographic references. McClure Ross' identification of the figure as a pilgrim is based on the attribute of the food basket, with the figure's near nudity being a reference to the ritual of baptism represented on the opposite wall¹⁹. Unfortunately, this interpretation is not supported by convincing textual or iconographic evidence. The same can be said for Salucci's identification of the figure as the pagan religion. In fact, his reading offers no comparison of the motif with other representations of the same subject and it seems to be influenced by a highly religious approach to Ghirlandaio's frescoes, which is understandable considering Salucci is a Dominican friar²⁰. Van Loosen-Loeraker reads the semi-nude figure as Hermes Trismegistus and thus an expression of the philosophical ideas circulating among the Medicean circle of intellectuals at the time of the chapel's decoration. Yet, a comparison between this figure and other representations of Hermes Trismegistus, such as that on the floor of Siena Cathedral that presents the philosopher in obvious Eastern garb, including a turban, begs for a more philological analysis of the motif.

The textual sources upon which the iconography of the *Presentation of the Virgin* was traditionally based offer the key for a possible understanding the semi-nude figure. The description of this moment contained in the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (*Liber de Ortu Beatae Mariae et Infantia Salvatoris*) calls our attention to the figure of an angel. According to the sources, Mary received divine food from the angel's hand and often spoke to him while at the temple. The basket, or barrel with a bottle sticking out of it, sitting next to the mysterious semi-nude in Ghirlandaio's fresco demonstrates this figure's dependence on textual sources. An iconographic comparison with other representations of the Presentation in the Temple reinforces the connection between the figure sitting on the temple steps and food. The *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* by Cima da Conegliano (1496-97) (figure 5) contains a little boy sitting on the steps surrounded by what we could call bounty from the countryside: a small cage with birds and baskets full of food. Titian would go on to include this motif in his *Presentation in the Temple* for the Scuola della Carità (1534-38) (figure 6) in which an elderly egg-seller appears with her basket beside her at the bottom of the steps. Although this painting was executed later than Ghirlandaio's frescoes and thus cannot constitute a source for Domenico's figure, the iconographic similarities between the figures imply common textual roots. David Rosand interpreted this figure as *Carità*, the patroness of the confraternity for which the painting was created. The egg-seller would consequently be a beggar who asks for charity, as often happens in front of temples²¹. The semantics of the figure in Titian's painting corresponds to the context of the commission just as the representation of charity relates to the *Scuola della Carità*, the painting's patron. On the other hand, this motif may also recall and allude to the figure of

¹⁹ S. McClure Ross, *The Redecoration*, cit., p. 242, note 134.

²⁰ A. Salucci, *Il Ghirlandaio*, cit., pp. 61-63.

²¹ D. Rosand, *Titian's Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple and the Scuola della Carità*, in «The Art Bulletin», LVIII, 1976, 1, p. 74.

the angel from Pseudo-Matthew. Though the motif is related to a beggar asking for charity rather than an angel, the element of nourishment persists. However, according to the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* and Varagine's *Golden Legend*, the angel was originally concerned with the Virgin's spiritual growth and not only brought her divine nourishment but also became a frequent interlocutor through whom the Virgin could practice the art of contemplation.

[6.2.] [...] from the morning to the third hour she remained in prayer; from the third to the ninth she was occupied with her weaving; and from the ninth she did not again cease from prayer. She did not retire from praying until there appeared to her the angel of the Lord, from whose hand she received food; and thus she became more and more perfect in the work of God. [...] She was indeed steadfast, immoveable, unchangeable, and daily advancing to perfection. [6.3.] [...] She was always engaged in prayer and in searching the law [...]. She refreshed herself only with the food which she daily received from the hand of the angel; but the food which she obtained from the priests she divided among the poor. The angels of God were often seen speaking with her, and they most lovingly obeyed her²².

The same motif, with an equally strong emphasis on Mary's contemplative attitude, was repeated in the *Golden Legend*²³.

²² *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, transl. A. Roberts, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers. Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A. D. 325*, ed. J. Donaldson - A. Roberts, vol. VIII, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916, pp. 370-371. «[6.2.] Hanc autem regulam sibi statuerat, ut a mane usque ad horam tertiam orationibus insisteret; a tertia autem usque ad nonam textrino opere se occuparet: a nona vero hora iterum ab oratione non recedebat usque dum illi angelus domini appareret, de cuius manu escam acciperet, et melius atque melius in dei laudi bus proficiebat. [...] Erat enim constans, immobilis, immutabilis, atque cotidie ad meliora proficiebat. [6.3.] [...] Semper in oratione vel scrutatione legis permanebat [...]. Cotidie escam de manu angeli accipiebat ipsa tantum reficiebatur; escam vero quam a pontificibus conseqnebatur pauperibus dividebat. Frequenter videbant cum ea angelos loqui, et quasi carissimi eius obtemperabant ei». Pseudo Matthew (?), *Liber de Ortu Beatae Mariae et Infantia Salvatoris a Beato Matthaeo Evangelista Hebraice Scriptus et a Beato Ieronimo Presbytero in Latinum Translatus*, in *Evangelia Apocrypha Adhibitis Plurimis Codicibus Graecis et Latinis Maximam Partem nunc Primum Consultis adque Ineditorum Copia Insignibus*, ed. C. De Tischendorf, Leipzig, H. Mendelssohn, 1876, pp. 63-64.

²³ J. de Voragine, *The Golden Legend. Readings on the Saints*, transl. W. Granger Ryan, vol. II, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 152-153. «Mary advanced steadily in all holiness. Angels visited her every day, and she enjoyed the vision of God daily. In a letter to Chromatius and Heliodorus, Jerome says that the Blessed Virgin had made a rule for herself: the time from dawn to the third hour she devoted to prayer, from the third to the ninth hour she worked at weaving, and from the ninth hour on she prayed without stopping until an angel appeared and brought her food». («Perfecta igitur oblatione filiam cum aliis virginibus in templo dimittentes ad propria redierunt, virgo autem quotidie in omni sanctitate proficiens et ab angelis quotidie visitabatur et visione divina quotidie fruebatur. Ait Hieronymus in quadam epistola ad Chromatium et Heliodorum, quod beata virgo hanc regulam sibi statuerat, ut a mane usque ad tertiam orationibus insisteret, a tertia usque ad nonam textrino operi vacaret, a nona ab orationibus non recedebat, quousque angelus apparens sibi es eam daret»). J. de Varagine, *Legenda Aurea*, Leipzig, Impensis Librariae Arnoldianae, 1850, pp. 588-589).

An Angel, Saturn and Marsilio Ficino's "Theologia Platonica"

Textual sources indicate a semantic link between the nutrition provided to the Virgin from the heavens and her spiritual growth. Nevertheless, the iconography of the food carrier in Ghirlandaio's frescoes does not correspond to the traditional iconography of an angel. He has no wings, no angelic vest. His thoughtful pose relates instead to the iconography of melancholia, as represented in Albrecht Dürer's famous engraving²⁴. Certainly, Dürer's interpretation of the melancholic temper is later than Ghirlandaio's fresco as the print dates to 1514. However, the similarity between the two figures still deserves mention, considering the perfectly reasonable possibility that Dürer was acquainted with Ghirlandaio's frescoes during his second trip to Italy, including Florence, between 1505 and 1507²⁵. According to the theory of the four temperaments, the melancholic temper was thought to result from the strong influence of Saturn. The early modern iconography of melancholia therefore depended on the iconography of Saturn's Children. We can see a fifteenth-century example of this in the Salone della Ragione in Padua where a fresco shows one of Saturn's children seated with his head in his hand²⁶ (figure 7). The fact that the *Melencolia I* recalls the pose of Domenico's nude further reinforces the suggestion that the Tornabuoni figure represents Saturn. If this reading is correct, the meaning of this figure would be shaped by two different traditions. According to literary sources, food was carried to the Virgin by an angel, while in terms of iconography the figure in the fresco is a Saturnine. The significance of this intriguing combination becomes clearer when the figure is analysed in light of Marsilio Ficino's writings.

It seems that Ficinian philosophy may offer a direct link between images of angels and Saturn. Ficino's idea of angels is conflicting because of the major discrepancies between his sources. On the one hand, the philosopher based his idea of angels on Scripture, scholasticism and pseudo-Dionysius's hierarchy of celestial beings²⁷. On the other hand, Ficino adopted the Plotinian ontological system, in which the term "angel" is never used, to express his metaphysics. Ficino thus adopted the Plotinian *nous*, meaning "mind" or "intelligence", and adapted it to the pseudo-Dionysian, scholastic idea of angels²⁸. Ficino therefore considered angels to be spheres of pure intelligence²⁹ and claimed that Saturn had a direct influence on these celestial beings, bestowing upon them the most noble of faculties such as reason and speculation.

²⁴ P. L. Sohm, *Dürer's "Melencolia I": the Limits of Knowledge*, in «Studies in the History of Art», 1980, 9, pp. 13-32.

²⁵ A. Natali, *Albrecht Dürer e "la maniera moderna" a Firenze*, in *Dürer e l'Italia*, ed. K. Herrmann Fiore, Milano, Electa, 2007, pp. 68-69.

²⁶ For the relationship between Saturn and melancholy, see: R. Klibansky - E. Panofsky - F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, London, Nelson, 1964.

²⁷ M. J. B. Allen, *The Absent Angel in Ficino's Philosophy*, in «Journal of the History of Ideas», XXXVI, 1975, 2, pp. 219-221.

²⁸ Ivi, pp. 224-225.

²⁹ P. O. Kristeller, *Il pensiero filosofico di Marsilio Ficino*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1953, p. 177.

But in the *Statesman* Plato writes that the contemplation of divine things is bestowed by Saturn, since the ray of his intelligence, as it is raised to God, so in descending to us raises our intelligence too towards the divine countenance. In the *Laws* Book 4 Plato says Saturn is the true master of those who have intelligence³⁰.

In *Theologia Platonica*, however, Ficino attributes a sphere of influence to each planet, underlining Saturn's particular impact on contemplative skills³¹. Saturn's contemplative nature and its influence on angelic beings could explain the appearance of the Saturnian figure on the steps of the temple in Ghirlandaio's *Presentation*. The angelic, contemplative figure present during Mary's visit to the temple would excite her spirit and push her into deeper meditation on the Divine Word. Saturnian nourishment and the influence of the highest planet would encourage the Virgin's spiritual and intellectual growth and facilitate her awareness of divine truth and God's plan for humanity.

In addition to its significance described above, which corresponds to the role of the angel described in the apocrypha, Ficino's Saturnine represents another reference to the topos of the Golden Age in the cycle. As stated in chapter eight, book 18 of the *Theologia Platonica*, «De statu animae purae, praecipue secundum Platonicos»:

Plato adds that the souls are nourished there with the same foods as the gods, namely with ambrosia and nectar. He considers ambrosia to be the clear, delightful gazing at the truth, and nectar to be providence in its supreme goodness and effectiveness. Here is unfolded that ancient mystery celebrated by Plato in the *Statesman* before all

³⁰ M. Ficino, *The Philebus Commentary*, ed. M. J. B. Allen, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1975, pp. 242-243. «Divinorum vero contemplationem a Saturno datam in Politico scribit Plato, quia eius mentis prout in Deum erigitur radius in nos descendens mentem quoque nostram in divinum attollit intuitum. Et quarto Legum dicit Saturnum esse verum dominum eorum qui mentem habent».

³¹ M. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 18, 5, ed. J. Hankins with W. R. Bowe, transl. M. J. B. Allen, pp. 112-115. «Because the Moon, the mistress of Cancer, is closest to generation, however, while Saturn, the lord of Capricorn, is most remote, they say that souls descend through Cancer, that is, through the instinct that is lunar and vegetative, but ascend through Capricorn, that is, through the instinct that is saturnian and intellectual. For the ancients call Saturn the mind by which alone we seek higher things. Moreover, the dry power of Capricorn and of Saturn, while it internally contracts and collects the spirits, stimulates us ceaselessly to contemplation, whereas the wetness of the Moon disperses and dilates [the spirits] and distracts the rational soul with sensibles. In the descent, however, the rational soul receives, both from the divinity of Saturn through itself and from the light of Saturn through its ethereal body and idolum, certain aids or inducements to better prepare it for contemplation». («Sed quia luna, Cancri domina, generationi proxima est, Saturnus vero, dominus Capricorni, remotissimus, ideo per Cancrum, id est lunarem vegetalemque instinctum, descendere animas dicunt, per Capricornum vero, id est per saturnium intellectualemque instinctum, ascendere. Saturnum enim prisci mentem vocant, qua sola superiora petuntur. Accedit ad haec quod Capricorni Saturnique sicca virtus, dum spiritus ad intima contrahit atque colligit, ad contemplandum assidue provocat, lunaris autem humor spargit atque dilatat et animum circa sensibilia distrahit. In ipso autem descensu animus accipit, et a Saturni numine per se, et a Saturni lumine per corpus aethereum atque idolum adminicula quaedam sive incitamenta ad contemplationem aptius exsequendam»).

others: that the present circuit of the world from east to west is the fatal jovian circuit, but that at some time in the future there will be another circuit opposed to this under Saturn that will go from west back again to the east. In it men will be born of their own accord and proceed from old age to youth; and foods will be spontaneously furnished them at will in an eternal spring. He calls Jupiter, I think, the World-Soul, by whose fatal law this manifest order of the manifest world is disposed. Besides, he wants the life of souls in elemental bodies to be the jovian life, one devoted to the senses and to action, but Saturn to be the supreme intellect among the angels, by whose rays souls are illuminated over and above the angels and set on fire and wafted continually, according to their capacities, up to the intellectual life. As often as souls are turned back towards such a life, and to the extent they live by understanding, they are said correspondingly to live under the rule of Saturn. In that life consequently they are said to be regenerated of their own accord, because they are reformed for the better by their own choice. And they are daily renewed; that is daily (if days can be numbered there) they blossom more and more. This is what that saying of the apostle Paul refers to: "The inner man is renewed day by day". Finally foods arise of their own accord and are supplied to souls in abundance in a perpetual spring, because they enjoy the wonderful spectacles of Truth itself – enjoy not through the senses and through laborious training, but through an inner light and with life's deepest tranquillity and loftiest pleasure. The fragrance of such a life is perceived by a mind that has been separated insofar as it can be; but its flavour is tasted by a mind that has been absolutely separated³².

Here Ficino defines ambrosia as *perspicuum suavemque veritatis intuitum*. Ambrosia, divine nutrition brought from the heavens, allows one to recognize truth. It seems that the nude figure refers to the ideas Ficino expressed in the *Theologia Platonica*. Ficino's Saturn, who furnishes humanity with divine nutrition, is strikingly similar to the figure of the angel mentioned in the apocrypha. The food they both bring inspires a contemplative attitude, helps one recog-

³²Ivi, 18, 8, pp. 128-131. «Addit eisdem una cum superis illic alimentis, scilicet ambrosia et nectare vesci. Ambrosiam quidem esse censet perspicuum suavemque veritatis intuitum, nectar vero excellentem facillimamque providentiam. Hic panditur et vetus illud arcanum a Platone in libro De regno prae ceteris celebratum, praesentem mundi circuitum ab oriente ad occidentem esse Iovium atque fatalem; verum fore quandoque alterum huic oppositum sub Saturno ab Occidente vicissim ad Orientem, in quo sponte nascentur nomine atque a senio procedent in iuventutem, alimenta illis ultro aeterno sub vere ad votum suppeditabuntur. Iovem, ut arbitror, animam mundi vocat, cuius lege fatali manifestus hic manifesti mundi ordo disponitur. Praeterea vitam animorum in corporibus elementalibus Ioviam esse vult, sensibus actionique deditam, Saturnum vero supremum inter angelos intellectum, cuius radiis illustrentur ultra angelos animae accendanturque et ad intellectualem vitam continue pro viribus erigantur. Quae quotiens ad vitam eiusmodi convertuntur, aetenus sub regno Saturnio dicuntur vivere quatenus intellegentia vivunt. Proinde in ea vita ideo sponte dicuntur regenerari, quia electione propria in melius reformantur. Rursus in dies reiuvenescere, id est, in dies, si modo ibi dies dinumerantur, magis magisque florescere. Hoc illud Apostoli Pauli: Homo interior renovatur in dies. Denique illis alimenta sponte affatim sub perpetuo vere suppeditari, quia non per sensus operasamque disciplinam, sed per lumen intimum summaque cum vitae tranquillitate atque voluptate miris veritatis ipsius spectaculis perfruuntur. Eiusmodi vitae odor quidem mente pro viribus separata sentitur, sapor vero mente penitus separata gustatur».

nize divine truth and stimulates humanity on its path to perfection. The nude's visual form, which directly recalls the iconography of Saturn, convincingly links the figure with Ficino's understanding of Saturn's functions and abilities. The figure therefore testifies to a complex process to reinterpret Christian texts and sources in the light of Neoplatonism. The Saturnine angel illustrates the ideas expressed in the apocryphal sources in a new form. It functions as a visual synthesis for the ideas of spiritual growth and metaphysical nourishment, internal renewal, and divine abundance. At the same time, it represents a Christianisation of Ficino's Neoplatonism in an effort to present the traditions as complementary. It also accords with Ficino's ideal of the *prisca theologia*, his profound belief in the existence of an accord and continuity between classical philosophy, the Jewish tradition and Christianity. The importance of this ideal for the Tornabuoni fresco cycle is evidenced by the *Preaching of St. John the Baptist*.

The "Preaching of St. John the Baptist" and Ficino's "familia philosophica"

In the light of apocryphal texts and Ficino's *Theologia Platonica*, we could read the Saturn figure in the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* as being in dialogue with the four men beside St. John in the *Preaching of St. John the Baptist* (figure 2). At first glance these men seem to be mere bystanders listening to the prophet. However, closer examination reveals that they are strongly characterized by certain attributes, gestures and other visual details. The two seated figures seem easy to recognize. The elderly man with the long, white beard holding a rod closely resembles Moses. If this is the case, the iconography here follows a type developed in fourth-century Rome, the same environment in which the iconography of St. Peter was developed. Unlike the earlier Hellenistic type showing a young Moses-Hercules with a short beard wearing a garment *all'antica*³³, this iconography of Moses emerged to support the primacy of Rome in the Christian world. In fourth-century Roman art, this older Moses figure – a true sage with a long white beard – looks much like St. Peter³⁴. Indeed, both were legislators and guides of the People of God³⁵. Ghirlandaio's Moses also resembles the representation of the prophet in the *Stories of Moses* in the Sistine Chapel (1480-1482). This cycle remains an important point of reference for the Tornabuoni frescoes, as the decoration was executed just three years before work began in Santa Maria Novella. We even know that Ghirlandaio would have witnessed

³³ E. Becker, *Das Quellwunder des Moses in der Altchristlichen Kunst*, Strassburg, Heitz, 1909, pp. 3, 9, 12, 13, 14, 20, 22, 87. For illustration of young Moses in the Roman catacombs see: P. Testini, *Le catacombe e gli antichi cimiteri cristiani in Roma*, Bologna, Cappelli, 1966, p. 303, fig. 164, fig. 188. For illustration of Hellenistic type of Moses in mosaics in San Vitale in Ravenna see: *La Basilica di San Vitale a Ravenna*, ed. P. Angiolini Martinelli, vol. II, Modena, 1997, 244-245.

³⁴ E. Becker, *Das Quellwunder des Moses*, cit., pp. 131-145; Y. Christe - F. Wüest, *La figure de Moïse dans l'art paléochrétien*, in R. Martin-Achard, ed., *La figure de Moïse. Ecriture et relectures*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 1978, p. 120, fig. 8.

³⁵ L. Cracco Ruggini, *La tarsia rinascimentale di Mercurio Trismegisto, Mosé e l'uso della tradizione classica*, in M. Caciorgna - R. Guerrini - M. Lorenzoni, eds., *Studi interdisciplinari sul pavimento del Duomo di Siena. Iconografia, stile, indagini scientifiche*, Siena, Cantagalli, 2005, pp. 41-43.

the completion of these wall paintings in person since he was painting the *Vocation of the Apostles* in the Sistine Chapel at exactly in the same time³⁶. In Cosimo Rosselli's *Descent from Mount Sinai* and Botticelli's *Punishment of the Rebels* Moses is pictured with a white beard and a stick, just like in Ghirlandaio's *Preaching of St. John the Baptist*. In the *Punishment of the Rebels*, Botticelli added the detail of the shining rays on top of Moses' head. Yet Rosselli also portrayed the prophet without rays or horns, thus showing that such iconography was also accepted at the time. The similarity between Rosselli's Moses and the figure of the sage in Ghirlandaio's fresco confirms his identification.

In Ghirlandaio's fresco, the figure seated next to Moses could be identified as Hermes Trismegistus, shown as a younger man with a short brown beard wearing an Oriental turban. The *princeps sacerdotum Aegyptorum*³⁷ is represented here as younger than in his most famous depiction in Siena Cathedral, but his Oriental headgear confirms his Egyptian origin. Their meaningful hand gestures make it easier to recognize these prophets, since they clasp each other's hands in a classical *dextrarum iunctio*. This gesture was the most common iconographic detail of marriage scenes in Roman and Paleo Christian art from the last decades of the Roman Republic until ca. 600. It was also popular on sarcophagi (figure 8) and probably referred to the duration of the union in the afterlife. The motif was later adopted in the iconography of the *Concordia*³⁸. This could therefore be the subject of Ghirlandaio's scene, that is, an intellectual and spiritual union between Moses, the father of Christian theology and the first prophet of the Old Testament, and Hermes Trismegistus, the first of the Egyptian philosophers.

Two men stand behind the seated pair. The young man on the left has an almost child-like face with beautiful light brown hair falling behind his shoulders. He holds his right hand in front of him, his palm turned down. Next to him is a sage-looking older man with a long white beard wearing a sumptuous violet garment *all'antica*. The gesture of his right hand is more difficult to understand. On the one hand, he may seem to be pointing towards heaven with his palm facing up, which would contrast the gesture of his young companion. The motif of contrasting hand positions actually appears with some frequency in Florence during the second half of the fifteenth century. Botticelli used it for instance to portray Beatrice in two drawings for the *Divine Comedy*, in which she first directs her hand towards the ground and then points it towards the heavens³⁹. This gesture seems to indicate a conflict between an interest in spiritual matters and a concern for the earthly realm. On the other hand, while his palm

³⁶ L. D. Ettlinger, *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo. Religious Imagery and Papal Primacy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965, pp. 28-29.

³⁷ M. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, cit., 17, 1, 6.

³⁸ L. Reekmans, *Dextrarum iunctio*, in R. Bianchi Bandinelli - G. Becatti, eds., *Enciclopedia dell'arte antica, classica e orientale*, vol. III, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1960, pp. 82-85. See also: C. Ripa, *Iconologia*, vol. II, Lavis, La finestra editrice, 2010, p. 17.

³⁹ G. Reale, *Botticelli: la "Primavera" o le "Nozze di Filologia e Mercurio"? Rilettura di carattere filosofico ed ermeneutico del capolavoro di Botticelli con la prima presentazione dei personaggi e dei particolari simbolici*, Rimini, Idea libri, 2001, pp. 256-258.

faces up, his finger points to Saint John. Yet even if his gesture is ambiguous, the age difference between the two men in Ghirlandaio's fresco together with their *all'antica* garments could still suggest that the younger man is Aristotle and the older man his master Plato. In medieval iconography, both of these philosophers were often represented as master and pupil with Plato visibly older than Aristotle. If this reading is correct, the presence of the two philosophers in the *Preaching of St. John* behind Moses and Hermes Trismegistus would reflect and illustrate Ficino's vision of the history of Western thought. These four figures would further promote Ficino's ideal of the *prisca theologia*, the idea that there existed an agreement and a continuation between antiquity and Christianity. It would refer to the philosopher's effort to unify, to confirm profound concord between different philosophical currents and religions⁴⁰. Seen in this light, Plato's indication of Saint John may refer to Ficino's idea of reconciliation between Christianity and Antiquity.

This possible portrayal on Ghirlandaio's part of an imaginary dialogue between the philosophers of the past brings to mind the later *School of Athens*, painted between 1509 and 1511 by Raphael in the Vatican *Stanza della Segnatura*. Both artists portrayed one figure clearly older than the other, and Raphael's Aristotle stretches out his arm with his palm facing down in a gesture resembling that of Ghirlandaio's figure. These similarities suggest that Ghirlandaio's invention could have inspired Raphael in his search for iconographic solutions to represent the two philosophers. Though the books they hold – the *Ethics* and the *Timaeus*, respectively – make them recognizable, their presence is also justified by the function of the *Stanza della Segnatura*, the room decorated by this fresco, which was intended as a library and private study for Pope Julius II. By positioning Plato and Aristotle alone in the centre of the composition, Raphael was able to place greater emphasis on the figures and allow more freedom for their gestures, thus lending them more rhetorical strength⁴¹.

We could read the gestures of the four men in Ghirlandaio's fresco as conveying the idea of conciliation and agreement between classical thought and Christian revelation, thus reflecting Ficino's idea of the *prisca theologia*, the doctrine developed in the 1460s through Ficino's translations of the *Corpus hermeticum* and other texts like *Mercurii Trismegisti Liber de Potestate et Sapientia Dei, cui titulus Pimander*, *De Christiana religione* and the *Theologia Platonica*⁴². With his writings, Ficino became a propagator of this ancient concept of the continuity and unity of human *sapientia*, imbuing the idea with new meanings and making its mythical protagonists – Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster and Moses – propaga-

⁴⁰ See: E. Garin, *Recenti interpretazioni di Marsilio Ficino*, in Id., *Interpretazioni del Rinascimento*, ed. M. Ciliberto, vol. I, Roma, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2009, pp. 55-73.

⁴¹ A. Emiliani - M. Scolaro, *Raffaello. La Stanza della Segnatura*, Milano, Electa, 2002, p. 120; A. Chastel, *Art et Humanisme à Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique. Études sur la Renaissance et l'Humanisme platonicien*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1959, pp. 478-479.

⁴² See: C. Vasoli, *Da Giorgio Gemisto a Ficino: nascita e metamorfosi della prisca theologia*, in *Miscellanea di Studi in onore di Claudio Varese*, ed. G. Cerboni Baiardi, Manziana, Vecchiarelli, 2001, pp. 787-800; Id., *La "prisca theologia" e il neoplatonismo religioso*, in P. Prini, ed., *Il Neoplatonismo nel Rinascimento*, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1993, pp. 83-101.

tors of his philosophy⁴³. In fact, Ficino had adopted the idea of the *prisca theologia* from a long tradition of thinkers who had tried to conciliate Christian theology with the contributions of pagan philosophers starting immediately after the collapse of the Roman Empire. From Philo of Alexandria, to Clement of Alexandria, to Lactantius, to Bacon, to Georgius Gemistus, the Western tradition developed an interpretation of the past that not only invested Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus with prophetic powers, but also claimed the existence of a unity and a continuity in human knowledge and divine revelation from the beginning of time until its fulfilment in the Christian age⁴⁴. Ficino reopened this discussion and his philosophy became a sort of “archive” of classical knowledge in which the traditions of Moses, Hermes, Zoroaster, Plato and Pythagoras fused together and formed a true philosophical family. Ficino’s aim was to create a *communis religio* that could ultimately aspire to the status of a philosophical religion⁴⁵. In Ficino’s thought, the idea of the *prisca theologia* and philosophical concord became tightly interwoven with the deeply rooted discussion about a possible agreement between Plato and Aristotle. For Ficino, Plato was not only a pagan philosopher to be taken as a philosophical source, but also a religious authority whose writings were to be used just as Aristotle’s thought was used by Christian theologians⁴⁶.

The debate over the relationship between Plato and Aristotle can be traced back to the writings of Antiochus of Ascalon (130/20-68 B.C.) who claimed that they both represented the same philosophical tradition. Cicero, on the other hand, wrote that Aristotle’s Peripatetic philosophy and Plato’s Academy «differed in words while agreeing in fact»⁴⁷. The tendency to look for agreement between these two philosophers continued in the writings of Albinus and Porphyry. In the Middle Ages the debate was taken up by Boethius, who clearly expressed the intention of his work in his commentary on Aristotle’s *De interpretatione* «to reduce the opinions of Aristotle and Plato to a single concord and demonstrate that they, unlike most, do not disagree about everything, but rather agree to a great extent on the majority of subjects which comprise philosophy»⁴⁸. However, the influence of Georgius Gemistus on the idea’s fate

⁴³ C. Vasoli, *Da Giorgio Gemisto*, cit., p. 795.

⁴⁴ G. Civati, “*Si Homo idem Mercurius fuit atque Moyses*”. *Ancora un’indagine su “prisca theologia” e “perennis philosophia”*, PhD thesis, Università degli Studi di Milano, 2003-2004, pp. 64-97.

⁴⁵ P. Magnar, *Introduction*, in Id., ed., *Marsile Ficin. Les platonismes à la Renaissance*, Paris, J. Vrin, 2001, p. 7.

⁴⁶ F. Purnell, Jr., *The Theme of Philosophic Concord and the Source of Ficino’s Platonism*, in G. C. Garfagnini, ed., *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone. Studi e documenti*, vol. II, Firenze, Olschki, 1986, p. 401.

⁴⁷ «Platonis autem auctoritate, qui varius et multiplex et copiosus fuit, una et consentiens duobus vocabulis philosophiae forma instituta est, Academicorum et Peripateticorum, qui rebus congruentes nominibus differebant» (Cicero, *Academica*, I, iv, 17). F. Purnell, Jr., *The Theme of Philosophic Concord*, cit., p. 404.

⁴⁸ «His peractis non equidem contempserim Aristotelis Platonisque sententias in unam quodammodo revocare concordiam, et in his eos non ut plerique dissentire in omnibus, sed in plerisque quae sum in philosophia maxime consentire demonstrare». Boethius, *In librum*

within Italian Neoplatonism seems crucial. In the spring of 1439, as part of the Council of Florence, Pletho composed the treaty *περὶ ὧν Ἀριστοτέλης πρὸς Πλάτωνα διαφέρειται* (*De Platonicae atque Aristotelicae philosophiae differentiis*) in which he discussed the role of Aristotle's writing in Platonic schools of thought. The importance of Gemistus was irrefutable to Ficino, who also contributed to the discussion about the concordance between the two philosophers. In a letter to Diacetto in July 1493 – just three years after the completion of the Tornabuoni frescoes – Ficino wrote:

Those who think that the Peripatetic discipline is contrary to the Platonic are totally wrong. For a road cannot be contrary to its destination. Now whoever rightly considers it will find that Peripatetic doctrine is the road to Platonic wisdom, that *naturalia* lead us to *divina*; thus it was established that no one ever be admitted to the more hidden mysteries of Plato unless he be first initiated in the Peripatetic disciplines⁴⁹.

The pivotal importance of this issue for Ficino and the Medicean circle of humanists makes it plausible that the patrons decided to include this subject within the frescoes⁵⁰. The appearance of Plato and Aristotle in the *Preaching of St. John the Baptist* would allude to the dispute over the continuity between pagan antiquity and Christianity and that over the relationship between Peripatetic and Platonic philosophy.

This identification of the figures in the *Preaching of St. John the Baptist* emphasizes the centrality and philosophical importance of this scene for the entire decoration of the Tornabuoni Chapel. The representation conveys the theological meaning of both of the chapel's cycles and unites semantic threads included in various scenes of the decoration. St. John the Baptist, represented talking to Moses, Hermes Trismegistus, Aristotle and Plato, is shown here as the last of the prophets and a continuator of the great tradition of thinkers who gave voice to the Divine Revelation. The Holy Spirit, who descends from heaven, blesses the preacher and confirms the divine nature of his revelations. The time represented in the fresco does not correspond to the earthly dimension of the story but reveals the fulfilment of messianic prophecies in the figure of Christ. In fact, Jesus himself stands behind the Baptist. Next to him, we can see a small hill with a tree growing on top – a clear reference to Golgotha and the

Aristotelis De interpretatione libri sex. Editio secunda, seu maiora commentaria, in *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. LXIV, Paris, apud editorem, 1847, col. 43c-d.

⁴⁹ «Errant omnino, qui Peripateticam disciplinam Platonicae contrariam arbitrantur. Via siquidem termino contraria esse non potest. Peripateticam vero doctrinam ad sapientiam Platonica esse viam comperiet, quisquis recte consideraverit, naturalia nos ad divina perducere; hinc igitur effectum est ut nullus unquam ad secretiora Platonis mysteria sit admissus, nisi Peripateticis disciplinis prius initiatus». M. Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, vol. I, Torino, Bottega d'Erasmus, 1962, p. 982.

⁵⁰ P. Oskar Kristeller, *Ficino and Pomponazzi on the Place of Man in the Universe*, in Id., *Renaissance Thought and the Arts. Collected Essays*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 102-110; E. Garin, *Aristotelismo e Platonismo del Rinascimento*, in Id., *Interpretazioni del Rinascimento*, cit., vol. I, pp. 33-54.

Crucifixion. The completion of Jesus' sacrifice – his death and resurrection – are represented by the tomb painted directly behind him. Christ is therefore represented as the completion of the history of divine revelation, which unites Jewish and Christian theology with the pagan mystical tradition expressed in the figure of Hermes. The universal value of Christ's sacrifice and the mystical dimension of divine time, which encloses and penetrates human history, are represented by the inclusion of a contemporary city, possibly Florence, in the background. Salvation does not therefore belong to history but rather embraces the past and the present and gives sense to all past revelations.

Neoplatonism and the Medicean faction

If these interpretations are correct, why have the Neoplatonic figures in the frescoes gone unnoticed for so long? There are some important clues to suggest that the Neoplatonic notions conveyed by Ghirlandaio's frescoes were in fact intelligible to the contemporary public. They can be found in the decoration of the Strozzi Chapel, which is directly adjacent to the choir of Santa Maria Novella and was painted between 1494 and 1500 by Filippino Lippi. One aspect of Lippi's frescoes for the Strozzi family⁵¹ – one of the prime political opponents of the Medici – undermines the Ficinian concept of the *prisca theologia* and discredits Hermes Trismegistus, the key figure in Ficino's theological vision. According to Luciana Müller Profumo, the two-part inscription crowning the exedra of the altar in the scene of *St. Philip Driving the Dragon From the Temple of Hierapolis* (figure 9) ties Hermes Trismegistus to black magic, thus delegitimizing his prophecies. The abbreviation EX-H-TRI-D-M-VICT would stand for EXEMPLUM HERMETI TRISMEGISTI – DIVO MARTI VICTORI (following the example of Hermes Trismegistus – to God Mars victor), thus suggesting that the altar of Hierapolis was dedicated to Mars observing Hermes' teaching⁵². Lippi's frescoes not only present Hermes as a magician rather than a prophet, but they also refer to a theological tradition that was close to both Girolamo Savonarola and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Ficino's *prisca theologia* is here replaced by a spiritual magic that adopted a faith in the symbolic value of words and numbers from the Jewish mystical doctrine of Cabal. The Ficinian idea of continuation and agreement between pagan philosophy and Christian theology was thus denied and the only admissible continuation was that between Jewish and Christian thought and mysticism. Expressions of this current of thought can also be found in Pico's *Nonagentae conclusiones* and Savonarola's *De ruina mundi*⁵³. We can therefore see how discussions about Hermes Trismegistus led to both theological and political rivalries. In

⁵¹ J. Russell Sale, *The Strozzi Chapel by Filippino Lippi in Santa Maria Novella*, PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1976; P. Zambrano - J. Katz Nelson, *Filippino Lippi*, Milano, Electa, 2004, pp. 513-577.

⁵² L. Müller Profumo, *Per la Fortuna di Ermete Trismegisto nel Rinascimento. Filippino Lippi e la Cappella Strozzi*, in «Athenaeum. Studi Periodici di Letteratura e Storia dell'Antichità», LVIII, 1980, 3-4, pp. 433-434.

⁵³ L. Müller Profumo, *Per la Fortuna*, pp. 443-444, 446-447.

fact, the history and iconography of the Tornabuoni and Strozzi Chapels in the church of Santa Maria Novella support this argument. The Strozzi Chapel frescoes were commissioned in 1486 – just one year after the contract between Giovanni Tornabuoni and Domenico Ghirlandaio was signed. Considering that the sidewalls, which contain the scene of *St. Philip Driving the Dragon*, were probably painted between 1494 and 1502, their subject would have been decided just a few years after the Tornabuoni frescoes were completed. It is therefore highly likely that the patrons conceived the Strozzi frescoes in response to the theological-political message expressed by the circle of their main antagonists, the Medici.

The differences between the two decorative cycles are clearer when we consider the recurrent references to stoicism not only in the Strozzi Chapel but also in other paintings by Filippino⁵⁴. Carlo del Bravo argues that we can also identify allusions to Epictetus and stoicism in general in Filippino's Carafa Chapel frescoes in Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome frescoed from 1488 and 1493⁵⁵, his *Adoration of the Magi* in the Uffizi Gallery and his *Portrait of a Youth* in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. His predilection for the stoic vision of the soul and understanding of the world order and love would ostensibly have made him a more careful observer of human nature, thus making his art less exclusive and significantly less idealistic than the hermetic paintings of the Neoplatonic circles. The Strozzi family could in turn have used such characteristics to formulate an artistic answer to the idealistic and hermetic theories conveyed in the Tornabuoni chapel.

The suggested identification of the figures in this study proposes a new interpretation of two of the Tornabuoni frescoes, which seem to express a complex theological, philosophical and political idea based on Ficino's thought and were aimed at promoting the Medici family's rule over the city of Florence. The decoration shows that the arrival of Saturn's reign, the realization of the true Golden Age, had already been accomplished in Florence under the rule of Lorenzo de' Medici and his allies. The topos of the Golden Age is referred to by the inscription in the *Annunciation to Zacharias* and by the figure of Saturn in the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*. On the one hand, the decoration confirms the glorification of Saturn in Ficinian circles. In fact, Saturn became the patron of the Platonic Academy. A small group of Ficino's followers, the "Saturnines", even considered themselves linked to the deity by a special bond. This intimate group included the philosopher himself, Lorenzo de' Medici, Lorenzo's physician Pierleoni and Pico della Mirandola⁵⁶. On the other hand, the chapel's decoration shows that the glorification of Saturn and a repeated return to the topos of the Golden Age in Medicean intellectual circles was part of a complex religious and theological discourse related to Ficino's idea of the *per-*

⁵⁴ C. del Bravo, *Filippino e lo Stoicismo*, in «Artibus et Historiae», XIX, 1998, 37, pp. 65-75.

⁵⁵ P. Zambrano - J. Katz Nelson, *Filippino Lippi*, cit., pp. 531-532.

⁵⁶ R. Klibansky - Erwin Panofsky - F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, cit., p. 273. On Platonic Academy of Florence see: P. O. Kristeller, *The Platonic Academy of Florence*, in Id., *Renaissance Thought*, cit., 89-101.

ennis philosophia and the *prisca theologia*. Understanding the meaning conveyed by these two frescoes not only sheds new light on the fate of hermetic thought in Ficino's philosophy, but it also allows us to reconsider the work of Ghirlandaio, whose relationship with Neoplatonism has yet to be investigated.

Furthermore, this interpretation of the figures inspired by Ficino's writings provides new insight into the influence that Neoplatonism had upon the traditional patterns of religious iconography in fifteenth-century Florentine art. Claudia Villa's interpretation of Botticelli's *Primavera*⁵⁷ has already demonstrated the profoundly cryptic nature of Neoplatonic iconography, which remained intelligible only to the narrow group of intellectuals acquainted with the ideas pictured in the paintings. Ghirlandaio's frescoes in Santa Maria Novella further confirms this tendency. However, the criticism of Hermes Trismegistus expressed on the walls of the Strozzi Chapel confirms that the meaning of the four figures of philosophers pictured in the *Preaching of Saint John the Baptist* would have been understood by the Florentine public. Ghirlandaio's decoration demonstrates that Ficino's idea of the *perennis philosophia* constituted a serious cultural program aimed at fully reconciling Christianity and classical paganism. At the same time, it also illustrates fifteenth-century strategies to reinterpret traditional apocryphal and biblical sources in the light of Neoplatonism. These frescoes illustrate a dialogue between medieval traditions, theology, philosophy and politics, all of which became fields of intellectual interest for members of the Medicean circle of humanists.

⁵⁷ C. Villa, *Per una lettura della "Primavera". Mercurio "retrogrado" e la Retorica nella bottega di Botticelli*, in «Strumenti critici», LXXXVI, 1998, pp. 1-28.

FIGURES



Figure 1: Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, 1485-1490, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.
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Figure 2: Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Preaching of St. John the Baptist*, 1485-1490, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.
© Gabinetto Fotografico, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 3: Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Annunciation to Zacharias*, 1485-1490,
Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.
© Gabinetto Fotografico, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 4: Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Annunciation to Zacharias*, detail with portraits of Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo Landino, Angelo Poliziano and Gentile Becchi, 1485-1490, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

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Figure 5: Cima da Conegliano, *The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, 1496-1497, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.

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Figure 6: Tiziano Vecellio, *The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, 1534-1538, Accademia Galleries, Venice.

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Figure 7: Niccolò Miretto, Stefano da Ferrara, *Saturn with one of his children*, 1425-1440, Palazzo della Ragione, Padua.
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Figure 8: Roman sarcophagus from San Saba church, 3rd century, Rome.
© Photo: Eleonora Belli.



Figure 9: Filippino Lippi, *St. Philip Driving the Dragon from the Temple of Hierapolis*, 1494-1502, Strozzi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

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– Ghirlandaio, Ficino and Hermes Trismegistus: the *Prisca Theologia* in the Tornabuoni Frescoes

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ABSTRACT

The study offers a Neoplatonic reading of certain iconographic elements of Domenico Ghirlandaio's frescoes in the Tornabuoni Chapel in Florence. It focuses on the nude figure sitting on the steps in the "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple" as well as the group of four listeners gathered on the right in the "Preaching of St. John the Baptist". Following an investigation of the relationship between these figures and Marsilio Ficino's philosophical ideas and the apocryphal gospels the author suggests that the nude represents Saturn and that the four men are Ficino's *famiglia filosofica*: Hermes Trismegistus, Moses, Aristotle and Plato. This analysis therefore attempts to show that the decoration not only expresses the political supremacy of the Medicean faction but also conveys Ficino's ideas about the *prisca theologia*.

KEYWORDS

D. Ghirlandaio; Tornabuoni Chapel; Neoplatonism; Marsilio Ficino

SOMMARIO

Ghirlandaio, Ficino ed Ermete Trismegisto: la "Prisca Theologia" negli affreschi Tornabuoni. Lo studio presenta una lettura neoplatonica di alcuni elementi iconografici degli affreschi di Domenico Ghirlandaio nella Cappella Tornabuoni a Firenze, soffermandosi in particolare sulla figura nuda seduta sugli scalini nella "Presentazione della Vergine al Tempio" e sul gruppo di quattro ascoltatori riuniti sulla destra della "Predicazione di san Giovanni Battista". A partire da un'indagine sui rapporti di queste figure con le idee filosofiche di Marsilio Ficino e i vangeli apocrifi, l'autrice suggerisce che il personaggio nudo e i quattro uomini rappresentino rispettivamente Saturno e la famiglia filosofica di Ficino: Ermete Trismegisto, Mosè, Aristotele e Platone. L'analisi si propone quindi di mostrare come la decorazione non si limiti a esprimere la supremazia della fazione medicea ma comunichi anche la concezione ficiniana della *prisca theologia*.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Domenico Ghirlandaio; Cappella Tornabuoni; Neoplatonismo; Marsilio Ficino

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