This paper asks a deceptively simple question: of the human figures painted on Byzantine and Western medieval church walls, which ones should be considered donors? The ones shown in the act of donating, literally giving something to a recipient, certainly deserve that label, but what about painted persons who are empty-handed or hold something other than a miniature church? And what if a person is not represented pictorially but rather in the form of a painted text? The scholarly literature consistently calls all of these people “donors” and their nearby texts “donor inscriptions”; there is frequent reference to “donor portraits”. “Donor” has become a convenient label for painted human figures or their textual surrogates in both Byzantine and European medieval art. In what follows, I critique the overuse of the “donor” designation by focusing on three sites in a single geographical area: the Salento, in southeastern Italy.

Comprising most of the modern Italian provinces of Lecce, Brindisi, and Taranto, the entire region was part of the Byzantine Empire from about 870 to 1070; Orthodoxy survived there until the seventeenth century, the Greek language even longer. I consider alternative meanings and functions for the people named or represented on church walls, paying particular attention — given the aims of this volume and the colloquium that preceded it — to the women. I conclude that there are many potential explanations for the presence of these painted figures and names, and that they are better understood from the viewers’ or readers’ perspective than from that of the individual allegedly represented. Along the way I offer some observations about medieval South Italian prac-

I am grateful to the organizers of the Vienna conference for the invitation to present this material, which derives from work on my forthcoming book, *The Medieval Salento: Art and Identity in Southern Italy*, Philadelphia 2014. Preliminary versions were presented at the Johns Hopkins University (November 2007) and the University of Toronto (March 2008), and I am grateful to those institutions and individuals in Baltimore, Toronto, and Vienna who helped me critique the “donor” concept. In addition, I extend particular thanks to Nancy Ševčenko, Herbert Kessler, Vasileios Marinis, Elizabeth Bolman, and, as always, Adam S. Cohen.

tices of piety and viewership. While my inquiry is geographically circumscribed, many of its conclusions should prove more broadly applicable.

The Gründerinnen und Stifterinnen of the original colloquium title are only a small subset of the larger category of so-called “donors.” As founders, re-founders, or extensive decorators, these ktetores are often associated with a lengthy dedicatory text; they may occupy a privileged location in the church; and they often have a special iconography that communicates their role as major givers by actually showing them in the act of donation. A well-known example is Theodore Metochites kneeling in the narthex of the Chora in Constantinople, miniature church in hand. Such images elevate features of the terrestrial gift economy, the social system of gift-giving, to a different plane: by proffering such a lavish gift as a whole church building, the givers expect something in return from the recipient(s).

These people are appropriately called “donors”. However, it seems wrong to then assign the same label to painted figures who do not share their pose or gesture and who neither claim nor receive credit for extensive patronage activity.

In any event, there are no examples of this unambiguous visual donor iconography in the Salento. Instead, there are painted texts that name individuals who claim to have made large-scale contributions. Because they were clearly visible in the public space of the church, it is unlikely that such epigraphic claims were fabricated. In addition to several comparable Latin texts, the Salento preserves six painted inscriptions in Greek that record significant acts by, in every case, men whom I am willing to call donors or significant patrons. They built or rebuilt, or, in one lengthy verse, excavated (a tomb); they painted or reclad; and they directed these activities toward a most venerable church or the most venerable, holy, or new icons. However, these longer texts seem never to have been accompanied by human figures. A textual record of names and accomplishments, evident to all, apparently was deemed sufficient to ensure the desired reward.

**CARPIGNANO SALENTINO**

Three of the male claims of extensive patronage activity are made in a single site that was excavated and decorated during the Byzantine era, the rock-cut or “crypt” church of Sta Christina at Carpignano. In stark contrast to virtually all of its contemporaries in Byzantine Cappadocia, it contains only one image that is not strictly iconic, the Annunciation flanking an enthroned Christ in a shallow niche on the east wall (Fig. 1). To Christ’s right (the viewer’s left) is the earliest text in what would later become a heavily inscribed interior: an invocation naming a husband and wife, precisely dated to 959. Six decades later, a second enthroned Christ, flanked by the Virgin

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2 “Donor” comes from the Anglo-Norman and Old French dono(u)r, ultimately rooted in the Latin donator; the first definition in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary is “a person who gives or [LAW] conveys something.”

3 See especially Franses, Symbols, Meaning, Belief (cit. n. 1), who asserts that all “donors” are gift-givers seeking to influence a positive outcome for themselves in the life beyond.


5 Remember, Lord, your servant Leo the priest, and his wife Chrysolea and all his family, Amen. Painted by the hand of Theophylact, painter, month of May, second indiction, year 6467. A. Guillou, Notes d’épigraphie byzantine, Studi medievali, ser. 3, ii, 1970, pp. 403–408, repr. in: Culture et société en Italie byzantine (VIe–XIe s.), London 1978, VIII. All translations are by the author.
and Child and the archangel Michael, was painted in another niche on the opposite end of the east wall. In this case Christ is supplicated through an inscription by an individual who claims personal agency in addition to offering a prayer. Within fifty years, two more male patrons at Carpignano claimed significant involvement in the crypt: one had holy icons painted in 1054/55 and another provided new images and a tomb for his dead son a few years later. These longer statements about pious activity often include the painter’s name. They are interspersed with shorter invocations containing supplicants’ names and sometimes kinship information, but no dates or painters’ names. With one exception, all of the shorter texts use the phrase Μνήσθητι Κύριε τοῦ δούλου σου, Remember, Lord, your servant, a formula derived from the commemoration of the dead and extremely widespread in Salentine painted inscriptions; the two prayer formulas preferred elsewhere in Byzantium, Δέησις τοῦ δούλου σου and Κύριε βοήθει, were rarely used in this region.

On the east wall, to the north of the Annunciate Virgin who abuts the 959 inscription, is the only Greek text in the medieval Salento that names a woman alone. Unaccented black capitals on the red border of a rare tenth-century image of St Anna holding the infant Virgin read: ΜΝΗΣΟ[HTI ΚΕ THC Δ(ΟΤ)ΑΗ C(ΟΤ) ΑΑΝΑΝ (sic) KE (TOY) ΤΕΚΝ/ΟΥ AΤΤ[HEC] Α[ΜΕΝ], Remember, Lord, your servant Anna and her child, Amen (Figs. 1, 2). This seems to be an unequivocal conjuction of a putative donor’s name with a homonymous saint. But why do we assume that Anna was the “donor” who commissioned the panel with her name saint? Nothing in the text indicates Anna’s personal agency; the invocation is on behalf

6 Remember, Lord, your servant Apolitos and his wife and children, he who with an intense desire had [these walls] built and had these venerable images painted in the month of May of the third indiction, 6528 [2020]. Painted by the hand of the [painter Eustathios], Amen. A. Jacob, Inscriptions byzantines datées de la Province de Lecce (Carpignano, Cavallino, San Cesario), in: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rendiconti della Classe di Scienze morali, storiche e filologiche, ser. 8, 37, 1982, pp. 41–51, correcting an earlier misreading by André Guillou.

7 Remember, Lord, your servant John Pankitzes the priest [and his children] who with intense desire had these holy images painted. Amen. Year 665, indiction… painted by the hand of Constantine, painter. J. Jacob, Inscriptions byzantines datées (cit. n. 6), pp. 45–46.

8 Here is buried the gentle Stratigoules, my very dear [child] loved by all and above all, I would say, by his father and his mother, by his brothers and at the same time by his cousins, by all his friends and at the same time by his schoolmates, a generous benefactor of slaves. Like a sparrow, he [flew] from our hands and filled with sadness his father and his mother, his brothers and his beloved friends. O Mary, divine mistress, since you are the source of all graces, with Nicholas, the wise shepherd, with the victorious martyr Christine, place my very dear child in the bosom of the great patriarch Abraham… I have recovered with new images, I have excavated a tomb for the shrouding and burial of my body, which was formed of earth. But regarding the name itself, you say, Who could this mortal have been, and from where is he?… yra… is his name, virtuous his habits, spatharos and resident of Carpignano, servant of Christ and of the saints seen here, the all-immaculate Lady Theotokos and Nicholas of Myra… A. Jacob, L’inscription métrique de l’enfeu de Carpignano, in: Rivista di studi bizantini e neoeolittici, 20–21, 1983–84, pp. 103–122; L. Safran, Cultures textuelles publiques: une étude de cas dans le sud de l’Italie, in: Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale, 52, fasc. 3, 2009, p. 259.

9 Petition of is found once among the extant medieval Greek texts in the Salento; Lord, help is used 10 times, compared with 42 instances of Remember, Lord (or another sacred figure). For South Italian commemorations of the dead see A. Jacob, Épidémies et liturgie en Terre d’Otrante dans la seconde moitié du XIVe siècle, in: Helikon, 31–32, 1991–92, pp. 93–126.

1: Carpignano, Sta Cristina, view of central pier (on the left) and south end of east wall: niche with painted pidea, St Anna and the Virgin, Annunciation flanking enthroned Christ (959)

2: Carpignano, Sta Cristina, east wall, St Anna and the Virgin, with supplication of Anna on frame, detail
of Anna and her child, but it is not necessarily by her. Could not Anna’s husband, or the beneficiary of her will if she was the widowed head of her household, have funded a post-mortem commemoration? Perhaps the local preference for the verb μιμνίσκομαι, rather than Δέησις, deliberately emphasizes memory rather than active prayer.

Carpignano contains an extraordinary number of named women and female saints. In addition to Anna, two other women are identified as mothers or wives: Chrysolea, the wife of Leo in the 959 apse inscription; and Anastasia, whose husband’s name is now lost. The latter appears on one of the crypt’s five Byzantine-era depictions of St Christina that includes at least one on the east wall to the left of St Anna. In addition, Sts Agatha and Catherine were painted on the north wall, for a total of eight extant female saints (not counting the Virgin, who is represented six times) compared with sixteen identifiably male saints (excluding Christ), all between 959 and ca. 1075 (Fig. 3). Of the male saints, Nicholas, John, and Michael are duplicated but none is shown five times.

The presence of at least two female saints on the crypt’s east wall probably rules out a regular liturgical function for the church. Even one female saint in a Byzantine sanctuary is uncommon, although they could be depicted there in exceptional cases.11 It is more likely that Carpignano was a funerary church and that the text of Anna on the east wall was visible and accessible to an entire community of users instead of being hidden behind a sanctuary barrier. The space certainly served a funerary function by the second

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11 Intriguingly, the Orthodox feast days of Sts Anna and Christina are contiguous, on July 24 and 25. One of the St Anna is visible behind the right edge of the central pier in Fig. 1.
quarter of the eleventh century, when Ἡμέρα τῆς ψυχῆς (sic) commends the souls of men named John and Vincent on the north wall; this was supplemented a few decades later by an arcosolium tomb for a dead boy in the northwest corner.13 Evidence of sub-floor burials is hidden by a modern concrete floor, but there is no reason that the dead could not have been buried both beneath and above the crypt, as tombs atop a nearby rock-cut chapel attest.14

Sharon Gerstel has shown how the images of female saints and St Anna in particular could serve as focuses for female piety.15 At Carpignano, however, the female saints are interspersed with males in a way that makes it difficult to identify their locations as exclusively female or even women-oriented spaces. If the crypt served primarily for burials, women would have been frequent visitors because they were intimately involved in Byzantine funeral rites and commemorations. However, it would be quite surprising if all of these women had personal funds with which to commission wall paintings. The devotion to female saints seen here must be due, at least in part, to male patronage.16 In my next case study, too, there is no clear correspondence between female saints and the gender of their textual or pictorial supplicants.

The unparalleled repetitions of St Christina may be linked to how the crypt was used by an extended family or group of families. She must have been an effective saint to merit so many images, which then create so many possibilities for proximate interment. Christina was an early Christian martyr whose cult may have been popularized in ninth-century Byzantium thanks to the five troparia written in her honor by Kassia (or Kassiane), the first female hymnographer.17 Her flourishing Italian cult at Bolsena, near Rome, might have been known in the Byzantine south.18 Yet in Byzantine art Christina was rarely depicted, and without recourse to an onomastic parallel it is difficult to understand her popularity at Carpignano among both men and women. The crypt’s first named woman, Chrysolea, may have introduced the cult of her near-name saint around 959; there was no St Chrysolea, and almost no women were named Christina.19 Sub-
sequent generations at Carpignano continued to depict St Christina, and even if there is no firm evidence that they named their daughters Chrysolea, Orthodox naming patterns – both medieval and modern – would suggest that this was the case. That John and Vincent were commemorated near their name saints further supports the notion of a local preference for homonymy. More important, if God is being asked to assign the souls of those two men to the “place of light”, a phrase from the funeral liturgy, they surely were dead and not actively paying for the inscription. I suggest the same possibility for Anna and her child. Despite the absence of explicit reference to her soul, Μνήσθητι Κύριε used in a funerary chapel likely signals that Anna, too, was not a living “donor”.

**VASTE**

Byzantine Carpignano contains supplicatory texts about individuals but no people are depicted. To investigate so-called “donor images,” I move forward in time, but not far in space, to a triple-apsed rock-cut church dedicated to Santi Stefani at Vaste. Decorated in the early and later eleventh century with a program of apostles on the piers, bishops in the left apse, and Christ between angels in the right apse, it was partly repainted in 1379/80 with a new series of saints and a renovated central apse. In the four centuries between the first Byzantine paintings at Carpignano and the last ones at post-Byzantine Vaste, significant changes occur. The longer claims of extensive patronage disappear, and instead of stand-alone short texts there are now texts paired with small figures, both male and female. The range of invocations expands to include three Μνήσθητι Κύριε, one Μνήσθητι Χριστέ, two Μνήσθητι Αγιε, and a Μνήσθητι Δέσποινα directed to a Woman of the Apocalypse in the apse. Finally, the number of painted female supplicants increases to three – Kalia (on the east wall), Donna (on a south-wall pilaster), and Margaret (on a north pier) (Fig. 5). Another three named women – Douilizia, Maria, and Ioanna – are included in the prayer of their husband and father in the central apse (Fig. 4). Greek-language churches with so many women represented are extremely rare; only the Asinou narthex, which also dates to the fourteenth century, comes to mind. However, if the paintings mirror contemporary practices, worship at Vaste might have made Orthodox visitors from elsewhere uncomfortable: the miniature supplicants adopt the kneeling pose with clasped hands common in the Roman rite since the thirteenth century; several of them carry a string of prayer beads; and the image in the apse is the expected Virgin Mary, but of an unrecognizable apocalyptic type.23

20 Gerstel, Painted Sources for Female Piety (cit. n. 12), p. 95, adduces examples of female preference for their name saints in wall painting of southern Greece, but this is not corroborated by evidence from the rest of Greece or from Cyprus: cf. Kalopissi-Verti, Dedicatory Inscriptions and Donor Portraits (cit. n. 1); A. Stylianou/J. A. Stylianou, Donors and Dedicatory Inscriptions, Supplicants and Supplications in the Painted Churches of Cyprus, in: Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft, 9, 1960, pp. 97–128.


22 Although Byzantine literature is widely considered a “distorting mirror” vis-à-vis Byzantine life (see C. Mango, Byzantine Literature as a Distorting Mirror, reprint. in: C. Mango, Byzantium and Its Image, Aldershot 1984, II), Byzantine art contains many realia: see especially M. G. Parani, Reconstructing the Reality of Images. Byzantine Material...
There is a high degree of similarity among all of the painted humans at Vaste. Except for one tonsured priest and a second male who wears white, every one of them wears a red overgarment, often with a belt. All of the women, except the two presumably unmarried daughters in the apse, have a white veil over their hair. That these iconographically homogeneous figures are well-to-do is evidenced by their tight buttoned sleeves, belts trimmed with metal appliqués, and perhaps by their red-dyed clothes. The fact that this is a rock-cut church should not make us think that its users were poor.

Village churches served many functions other than worship: they were burial spaces, sites of physical protection during storms, social centers, venues for some of the most important moments in the lives of individuals and communities. Whenever people gathered there was potential for envy, and one of the most salient cultural phenomena in the Mediterranean region was (and still is) the fear of attracting the evil eye, of exposing oneself in a position where others, especially others with malign powers, might be envious. In such an environment, displaying one’s wealth or good fortune was foolhardy. The implications of this habitus have hardly been explored by art historians, and I am not suggesting that this is a complete explanation for the appearance of human figures in Salentine wall paintings. How-

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24 The Italian for “evil eye” is malocchio or invidia, Latin for greed; cf. the Septuagint’s ὀφθαλμὸς πονηρὸς, φθονερὸς (Wisdom of Sirach [Ecclesiasticus] 14:10), lit. “an evil eye, evil [things]” and modern Greek κακό μάτι.

25 Fear of the evil eye was widespread in antiquity and persisted among medieval (and many modern) Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In a famous Talmudic statement (JT, Shab. 14c; BT, B.Me. 107b), 99 of 100 people in a Jewish cemetery are said to have died through the evil eye and only one from natural causes; Maimonides was the rare medieval commentator who opposed the notion of the evil eye. I cite Jewish literature here because in the Middle Ages it was
ever, I fully agree with Herbert L. Kessler’s recent assertion that the evil eye “needs to be added to other medieval models of viewing art that existed side-by-side with it.” The omnipresence of the evil eye may help explain why none of the painted female figures is ever shown wearing jewelry, even though the painted female saints are frequently bejeweled, and earrings and other adornments are common in Salento tombs. It also could be one reason that likeness was avoided in every one of these images even though portraiture was emerging in fourteenth-century Italy. Individualization at Vaste occurs only in the accompanying texts, which were not susceptible to the envious gaze. To interpret these figures as living and recognizable donors is to ignore a pervasive belief system that militated against ostentation.

Evidence for local fear of the evil eye is not based only on textual references and modern ethnographic studies, although both are plentiful. It also includes evil-eye charms, like the bone amulet excavated at the deserted medieval village of Apigniano, about 25 kilometers from Vaste (Fig. 7). The mano fica or “fig” gesture, in several variations, was employed by Jews and Christians all over medieval Europe, underscoring the ubiquity of both the superstition and its solutions. Such a gesture repelled the evil gaze, and so did the color red. The Talmud had recommended the use of red as protection against bewitchment, and it was the apotropaic color of choice in southern Italy. Red coral charms are frequently worn by the Christ Child in Salentine wall paintings beginning in the early fifteenth century, and it is possible that the red clothing worn by most of the painted people at Vaste was thought to have a protective quality.

widely believed that the Jews, and particularly Solomon, had special knowledge of magic. In the Orthodox realm, the evil eye was constantly invoked to protect children, birthing mothers, grooms, and others at liminal and dangerous moments in the life cycle. See, e.g., the prayer for parturients that asks God’s protection from jealousy, and envy, and from the evil eye (ζῆλος, καὶ φόνος, καὶ φθάλαμον βασκανίας): J. Goar, Euchologion sive Rituale Graecorum, Graz 1960, p. 261; K. Hartnup, ‘On the Beliefs of the Greeks’. Leo Allatios and Popular Orthodoxy (The Medieval Mediterranean, 54), Leiden/Boston 2004, esp. pp. 146–149. Belief in the power of the evil eye pervaded all Byzantine social levels; see the various studies in: H. Maguire (ed.), Byzantine Magic, Washington, DC 1995; on line at http://www.doaks.org/resources/publications/doaks-online-publications/byzantine-studies.


30 BT Shab. 67a. The Jewish presence in the Salento was very strong and outsiders were amazed that Jews and Christians were neighbors. Vaste even depicts on its “triumphal arch” the Vision of Zechariah (Zech. 4:2), a very unusual iconographic choice perhaps inspired by the presence in nearby Otranto of a monumental lampstand in the Cathedral modeled on the Temple menorah and described as much admired by the Jews who gathered to look at it from the cathedral doorway. See now L. SAFRAN, Betwixt or Beyond? The Salento in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, in: M. S. BROWNLER/D. H. GONDICAS (ed.), Renaissance Encounters: Greek East and Latin West, Leiden/Boston 2013, esp. pp. 126–127.


32 In Massafra and other towns in the Salento today, special precautions are taken to protect infants from the evil eye, including dressing them in maroon-brown or reddish-green garments, “the colors of the thaumaturgic saints”: F.
All of the figures at Vaste and other regional sites are shown with both eyes visible to their viewers; sometimes only one pupil, or neither, is turned toward the nearest saint (Fig. 5). As is well known, the profile had a negative valence in medieval art, and I venture to suggest that one of the reasons behind this convention is that the *malocchio* was effected with one eye, not both. Linguistically and pictorially, the evil eye is invariably single. A Hebrew text explains that when both eyes are open man is in the image of God and cannot do evil, but when one eye is closed he resembles an evil demon. There are parallels in the myths and literature of many countries: the Norse god Odin could shackle his enemies with his one eye, and the monophtalmic Hannibal was justly feared.

There is, however, another reason that the painted supplicants turn both eyes out into the space of the church rather than sideways or upwards to their adjacent sacred figures: this three-quarter view made them more accessible to pious viewers. On the piers and pilasters at Vaste, five of the six kneeling humans slightly overlap the sacred

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Ladiana, La culla di paese. Massafra ritualità popolare della nascita, in: F. Ladiana (ed.), Puglia e Basilicata tra medioevo ed età moderna. Uomini, spazio e territorio, Miscellanea di studi in onore di C. D. Fonseca, Galatina 1988, p. 372. By contrast, blue is the preferred evil-eye color in Greece and other areas formerly under Turkish control:


figures whom they invoke (as in Fig. 5). In so doing, they occupy space in the church, before the picture plane, and so mediate between real worshippers and the sacred persons with whom they are intimately connected. While the family group in the apse does not touch the Virgin, it appears to be fully involved in John the Evangelist’s apocalyptic vision (Fig. 4). Whether via proximity or actual overlap, all of the painted suppliants are visually united with the nearby objects of their supplication. And that, I believe, is the real message of these so-called donors – not that they are recognizable individuals who have paid for the paintings and therefore have privileged and enviable access to the saints, but that they are generalized simulacra, incapable of inspiring envy, shown in appropriate attitudes of prayer to serve as models for real humans’ behavior. To attain comparable proximity to the sacred, a supplicant at Vaste must, like Margaret (Fig. 5), kneel in prayer with joined hands. The painted people participate in an ideal anagogical transmission: they are placed at, or close to, the viewers’ eye level; their gazes attract the viewers’ gaze; their praying gesture directs attention to, and in most cases onto, the very fabric of the saint; and through this mimetic process the viewer accesses the saint and, ideally, God himself. Whether they are imagined to be living or dead, and whether their saintly proximity would occur in this life or the next, the painted figures help bridge the space between the sacred and the human realms.

**MOTTOLA**

The last putative donor figures I examine here are neither Byzantine nor Orthodox, but they appear in a triple-apsed rock-cut church in Mottola that retains much of its original templon barrier, employs Greek on Christ’s book in the central apse Deesis, and includes the Orthodox saints Pelagia and Paraskeve in its thirteenth-century redecoration (Fig. 7). Now dedicated to St Nicholas, this space may have been used for more than one rite or, more likely, by converts from Orthodoxy to the Roman church. There is evidence here for local beliefs...
and limited information about patronage. On the north wall, the infant Christ on his mother’s lap appears to wear a circular evil-eye amulet around his neck. Next to him, on a panel with St Nicholas, a so-called donor is represented textually with a supplication in Latin: *Remem-ber, Lord, your servant Sarulus, priest.* The Latin *Memento Domine* formula, identical to the Greek Μνήσθητι Κύριε, again raises the question of whether the *sacerdote* Sarulus – who is also named in a nearby crypt alongside St Margaret – must be a living donor, or whether he might be a worthy dead man being commended to the company of the saints by others.

On the south wall are two more supposed donors, this time pictorial. These figures are painted on a pilaster between recessed niches that contain pairs of saints; they are at eye level for anyone seated on the rock-cut bench that encircles the naos (Fig. 8). While the saints – Peter and Pope Leo on the left, Helena and Blasios on the right – may date originally to

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42 For the meaning and efficacy of concentric circles in late antiquity see E. Dauterman Maguire / H. P. Maguire / M. J. Duncan-Flowers (ed.), *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House* (Illinois Byzantine Studies, 2), Urbana 1989. On S Nicola at Mottola see now L. Safran, *Scoperte salentine*, in: Arte medievale, 7-2, 2008 [2010], pp. 86–92, where the infant Christ with amulet is reproduced in color in Fig. 45.


44 Following Lavermicocca, *Programma decorativo di S. Nicola* (cit. n. 40), p. 319, this figure is usually identified, because of his proximity to Helena, as Cyril of Jerusalem, Cyriakus, or James the Less; Fonseca, *Civiltà rupestre* (cit. n. 40), posits St Nicholas; and just as frequent is his non-identification as a “santo ignoto” (see, e.g.,
the eleventh century and thus to the era of Byzantine rule, they were almost certainly overpainted in the thirteenth century. Hence the human figures between them probably have nothing to do with the fragmentary text visible in the left niche, next to Pope Leo, which is in the masculine voice and seems to refer to an individual named Leo⁴⁵ (Fig. 9). That these figures are both women is not in doubt: they are dressed identically, and both have long hair falling down the back.⁴⁶ Such long tresses were not the fashion for men in thirteenth-century Italy, not even in the formerly Byzantine south, where the rare depictions of long-haired men also show them with facial hair.⁴⁷ The two women at Mottola are more differentiated than those at Vaste; perhaps one is meant to be older than the other. Except for Vaste, even a single painted woman is unusual, and no other regional monument contains a pair of them.

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⁴⁶ They are identified as women by Fonseca, Civiltà rupestre (cit. n. 40), p. 183, and Tortorelli, Aree cultuali e cicli agiografici (cit. n. 40), pp. 277–278. The closest comparison for this long (braided?) hairstyle is that worn (with a headdress) by a kneeling woman at Muro Leccese, analyzed and dated to the thirteenth century in Safran, Scoperte salentine (cit. n. 42), p. 71, figs. 16–17.
⁴⁷ R. Levi Pisetzki, Storia del costume in Italia, I, Milan 1964, pp. 289, 305. My collection of supplicant images from the Salento contains few long-haired men. One thirteenth-century example is a kneeling monk (with beard and mustache) in a trio of male supplicants at Sta Marina at Miggiano. See M. De Giorgi, La Koimesis bizantina di
Here each woman carries a large, lit candle, and this constellation of women, candles, and specific saints suggests possible alternatives to their usual identification as “donors.”

Candles figured in many medieval rituals, including baptisms and funerals, but women were most closely associated with tapers on two occasions. The first was the feast of Candlemas (equivalent to Greek ὑπαπαντή, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple). The purification of the Virgin, celebrated on February 2, was regularly marked by candle-lit processions and the wearing of white garments, and candles were blessed in church for many uses throughout the year. The second occasion was when a woman emerged from her home for churching forty days (more or less) after childbirth; at that event, too, she carried a candle that had been blessed on Candlemas. For her churching, the woman knelt at the church entrance with candle in hand and was escorted inside after psalms were recited. In the Orthodox realm, the infant preceded its mother, and this constellation of women, candles, and the Virgin, celebrated on February 2, was regularly followed by candle-lit processions and the wearing of white garments, and probably both, would have counted as white in the Middle Ages, when color values were far from absolute.

That viewers would intuitively associate the candle-bearing Mottola women with Candlemas and/or with churching is confirmed, I believe, by their proximity to saints Helena and especially Blasios, whose feast day in the West immediately follows Candlemas on February 3 (Fig. 10).

In the Golden Legend, the popular compendium of saints’ lives and feast days compiled in Italy around 1260, St Blasios encourages a woman to make an annual offering of a candle in his church after he expels a fishbone from the throat of the woman’s son. This episode seems to be the origin of his association with both throat remedies and candles (in Catholic practice today, throats are blessed annually with two crossed candles).

48 I discussed the Mottola women in Sfaran, Scoperte salentine (cit. n. 42), pp. 89–92.
51 Golden Legend (cit. n. 50), p. 152. Old photographs show the letters A/IVS alongside the head of the elderly saint whom I identify as Blasios; others have suggested Sabinus, depicted elsewhere in the crypt. In the Orthodox calendar Blasios’s feast day is February 11 (Pope Leo’s, in the next niche, is February 8).
52 Already in the sixth-century medical writings of Aëtius of Amida (Tetrabiblos VIII), Blasios was invoked in a conjuration for objects stuck in the throat: Come up, bone, whether bone or stalk or whatever else, as Jesus Christ brought Lazarus from his tomb and Jonah from the whale. Then take him by the throat and say ‘Blasius, the martyr and servant of Christ, saith, ‘Either come up or go down.’ See J. D. Rolleston, Laryngology and Folk-Lore, in: Journal of Laryngology and Otology, 57, 1942, p. 528; J. D. Rolleston, The Folklore of Children’s Diseases, Folklore, 54.2, 1943, p. 292.
Significantly, Blasios had connections with childbirth as well: Western ritual books and fourteenth-century Slavic miscellanies both contain prayers for women in labor that are identical to the prayer for removing a bone from the throat.\(^{53}\)

Sharing the niche with St Blasios at Mottola is the crowned St Helena, who was venerated in Europe without her son, Constantine. Old photographs preserve the letters SA/ELENA, but only SA/N is visible today after a problematic restoration. St Helena was famous for her maternity, which explains her juxtaposition to images associated with purification and childbirth. Moreover, according to several European liturgical calendars – but not the Roman one – her feast day was in February, a few days after that of St Blasios.\(^{54}\)

Curiously, St Helena seems to be visually amalgamated here with St Elizabeth of Hungary, who died in 1231 and was canonized in 1235; the \textit{Golden Legend} spends considerable time describing her churcing and other activities associated with maternal care.\(^{55}\) After her husband died – in the Salento – en route to the Holy Land in 1227, Elizabeth, the daughter of a king, apparently became a Franciscan tertiary. Later tertiaries wore a corded rope belt, and a twisted rope is exactly what outlines Helena’s green cloak at Mottola. Perhaps on the bases of imprecise verbal description and the widely circulated \textit{Golden Legend}, an

\(^{53}\) A. Angusheva/M. Dimitrova, Medieval Slavonic Childbirth Prayers: Sources, Context and Functionality, Scripta and e-Scripta, 2, 2004, p. 281. I thank Adelina Angusheva for sharing her work with me.

\(^{54}\) Commemoration for St Helena on February 8 at Magdeburg, Utrecht, Minden; on February 7 at Langres, Bamberg, Antwerp: W. H. J. Weale, \textit{Analecta Liturgica}, Bruges 1879.

\(^{55}\) \textit{Golden Legend} (cit. n. 50), II, pp. 303–318.
existing image of a crowned female saint was amplified with a thirteenth-century vair-lined, rope-edged cloak in order to evoke a new royal saint; just how the rope should be worn may not have been known by an artist depicting an early Franciscan devotee for the first time. The accounts of saints Leo and Peter, represented in the adjacent niche, occur together soon after that of St Elizabeth in the *Golden Legend.*

This would be the earliest known image of St Elizabeth and I advance the identification cautiously. It is unclear to what degree the inscription identifying Helena was well preserved in the thirteenth century and whether isolated letters would obviate an artist’s or patron’s or viewer’s assimilation of two crowned female saints. Regardless of whether the female saint is Helena or an amalgam of Helena/Elizabeth, the southern aisle of the San Nicola crypt at Mottola contains several images that cohere around archetypal female themes. It may well have marked a site of gender-oriented veneration, perhaps used with particular devotion in the month of February.

The candle-bearing duo represented at Mottola might commemorate specific women, paid for by themselves; this is the usual “donor” interpretation. But the image also could have been donated by their loved ones. It could record offerings of real candles from women or their husbands, perhaps in thanks for successful recovery from childbirth; candles may have been lit before the saints in the adjacent niches especially by women. Or the painted pair could memorialize two women who had died in childbirth and so failed to experience their first or last churching. Indeed, their lack of hair covering may strengthen the likelihood that the women are deceased (and thus not donors), given that living mothers went to church with their hair covered. The image might refer to any dead women, for Candlemas tapers were placed in the hands of the dying.

All of these interpretations are speculative, and only one thing is certain: calling the figures “donors” closes off exploration of other possible meanings. In addition to making a very large assumption about finances, the “donor” label places exclusive emphasis on intentionality. Since we can rarely ascertain that from images, even if they appear in conjunction with texts, it is more profitable to consider most medieval supplicating figures from the perspective of viewer response. These differentiated but still generic painted women with candles must have conjured viewers’ recollections of the occasions when women in Mottola held candles. Whatever these women were originally supposed to be, or to do, they became nonspecific: they were exempla for (female?) behavior in perpetuity, encouraging the donation of candles or of pious behavior in general. It is worth noting again how their eyes are accessible to the viewers’ gaze and thus able to activate the mimetic function that I posited for the supplicating figures at Vaste.

**Conclusions**

In an article about the emergence of portraiture in fourteenth-century Italy, Georgia Sommers Wright wrote that “We live in a culture so saturated with likenesses that we tend to find them

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56 In the account of St Peter, candlesticks with lit candles feature prominently: *Golden Legend,* II, p. 349. Elizabeth was especially devoted to St Peter, who appears in the adjacent niche at Mottola. The connection between Peter and Pope Leo dates to the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in 451, when it was said that *Peter speaks through Leo* thanks to his *Tome* about the Virgin as the mother and not just the bearer of Christ. Moreover, in the Roman rite Peter and Leo are venerated on June 29 and 28, respectively, in addition to other dates. I also wonder whether the juxtaposition of Peter and Leo might reflect the historical situation at the time of the church’s donation to the Trinity at La Cava: in 1081 the new abbot’s name was Peter, and his immediate successor was named Leo.
While we can recognize some differentiated characterizations in the medieval Salentine monuments, they are relative: older and younger, perhaps, at Mottola; parents and children in the apse at Vaste. These are not individual portraits and, I have argued, any evocations of specific persons are secondary to their value as mimetic models. This interpretation helps explain why so many of the alleged “donors” are allowed to remain on the church walls, not overpainted or expunged once their “donation” had been forgotten. They have meaning, or meanings, that transcend the individual, and they help the faithful in church transcend time and space; they visibly cross the boundaries between earth and heaven, eliding the lines between the past, present, and future of the living, the dead, and the saved. But it is not my intention to interpret all of the painted figures or their textual proxies in the same way, for that would simply be substituting one homogenizing interpretation for another. In my case studies at Carpignano, Vaste, and Mottola, I hope to have demonstrated a range of possible readings.

My thoughts about the human presence on Salento church walls are informed in part by studies on marginalia. The figures and texts I have examined are all on the margins, small in scale, skirting the edges of the sacred figures or separated from them by painted or architectural borders. Only a few entirely “westernized” late medieval monuments in the Salento contain painted humans entirely integrated into sacred scenes, at the same scale as the saints or the Virgin and receiving attention from them. As Michel Camille pointed out, the margins are both a physical and a cultural space. Just as most scholars no longer dismiss marginalia as irrelevant to the main action or maintain a simplistic dichotomy between sacred and secular, so it is not possible to draw too firm a line between our pictorial or textual humans and the divine figures they flank. Nor is it possible to completely separate those represented humans from the living and even the dead ones nearby because there is visual movement between these groups: the painted eyes facing outward compel acknowledgment (and not, in my view, recognition), and the praying gestures oblige pious spectators to move from noticing the humans to recognizing the divine.

In the same way that marginalia are now understood to lack a single fixed meaning, the so-called donors are iconographically unstable and dependent on regional or even local context. These figures and texts should be evaluated individually and not reflexively assigned to a fixed category. As almost all of their accompanying inscriptions claim, the painted people in the Salento are servants of God or his mother or his saint; at the same time, they served complex social, cultural, and spiritual needs and no doubt had a range of meanings for viewers. In many cases these meanings might be quite far from the conventional notion of “the donor.” If we must, for convenience, refer to the painted figures and texts collectively rather than individually, it is best to use a descriptive term – supplicant, supplication – rather than an interpretive one that, in the absence of corroborating information, may very well be incorrect.

Illustration credits: Figs. 1–5, 7–10: L. Safran. – Fig. 6: P. Arthur, Laboratory for Medieval Archaeology, University of Salento (P. Pulli).

57 Wright, Reinvention of the Portrait Likeness (cit. n. 27), p. 117.