

The Function of Antique Ornament in Luca Signorelli's Fresco Decoration for the Chapel of San Brizio

Rose Marie San Juan

Volume 12, Number 2, 1985

Proceedings of the Symposium on The Roman Tradition in Wall Decoration, Palazzo Cardelli, Rome, 7-9 June 1984
Comptes Rendus du Symposium sur La tradition romaine dans la décoration murale, Palazzo Cardelli, Rome, 7-9 juin 1984

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073675ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073675ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

San Juan, R. M. (1985). The Function of Antique Ornament in Luca Signorelli's Fresco Decoration for the Chapel of San Brizio. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 12(2), 235–241. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073675ar>

The Function of Antique Ornament in Luca Signorelli's Fresco Decoration for the Chapel of San Brizio

ROSE MARIE SAN JUAN

Toronto

Throughout the Renaissance the antique style of wall decoration was regarded primarily as a framing device. Even after the excavation of the Golden House of Nero in Rome revealed fully elaborated schemes of Roman decoration, painters continued to restrict the use of antique ornament to the definition of pilasters and vaults.¹ Luca Signorelli's bold adaptation of Roman decorative motifs in the Chapel of San Brizio is an exception and seems to transgress what were undoubtedly strongly held notions of decorum.² The murals of the chapel were intended to unveil the events of the Last Judgement, yet they also display an overriding interest in the illusionistic, decorative and even symbolic possibilities of Roman wall-painting. Inherent in the scheme is a conflict between religious functions and secular satisfactions; regardless of the intention, the presence of this conflict yields an insight into contemporary reaction to the fresco cycle and its unusual adaptation of the new *all'antica* style.

The decoration of the 'Capella Nuova' in the Cathedral of Orvieto is well documented.³ In 1447 Fra Angelico, already committed to a lengthy period of work in the Vatican, agreed to spend an unspecified number of summers painting the chapel.⁴ However, after only one summer, during which two segments of the vault were completed, Fra Angelico

did not return to Orvieto. Over fifty years later, in 1499, the Cathedral authorities commissioned Luca Signorelli to paint the rest of the vault, adhering as closely as possible to the original scheme.⁵ The following year Signorelli submitted a proposal for the decoration of the rest of the chapel, and on April 27th 1500, the Cathedral authorities met to discuss the scheme and immediately approved it.⁶

From the documents little can be gleaned about Signorelli's original proposal. The preparatory drawings that survive suggest that Signorelli incised most of the images directly onto the wet plaster and altered them repeatedly during the course of the work.⁷ Even so, there is every reason to believe that the original scheme, however loosely formulated, included antique decorative motifs on the walls (Fig. 1).

Signorelli's interest in the Roman style of wall decoration began as early as 1482.⁸ In Rome to execute a wall fresco in the Sistine Chapel, the painter joined the growing number of artists who visited and copied the newly discovered painted vaults of the Golden House of Nero. Perugino became a leading exponent of the new style, as did Pinturicchio whose use of antique decoration quickly found favour in the Vatican court; by the turn of the century, Pinturicchio had worked for four Popes – Innocent VIII, Alexander VI, Pius III, Julius II – producing secular and religious fresco cycles in which grotesque ornament

1 For the impact on Renaissance mural decoration of the excavation of Nero's Golden House during the 1480s, see Nicole Dacos, *La Découverte de la Domus Aurea et la formation des grotesques à la Renaissance* (London, 1969), 57-117; Juergen Schulz, 'Pinturicchio and the Revival of Antiquity,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xv (1962), 46-50.

2 The most recent discussions of the San Brizio Chapel are André Chastel, 'L'Apocalypse en 1500: la fresque de l'An-téchrist à la chapelle Saint-Brice à Orvieto,' *Humanisme et Renaissance*, xiv (1952), 124-140; Pietro Scarpellini, *Luca Signorelli* (Milan, 1964), 40-56; Enzo Carli, *Il Duomo di Orvieto* (Rome, 1965) 99-122.

3 Ludovico Luzi, *Il Duomo di Orvieto* (Florence, 1866), 432-472.

4 D.S. Chambers, ed., *Patrons and Artists in the Italian Renaissance* (Columbia, S.C., 1971), 193-194; Umberto Baldini and Elsa Morante, *L'opera completa dell'Angelico* (Milan, 1970), 84.

5 Carli, 100. Fra Angelico and his assistants completed two scenes on the vault (*Christ the Judge, Old Testament prophets*) and probably left designs for some of the other six scenes; see Baldini and Morante, 108.

6 Luzi, 471-472; Carli, 108.

7 Evc Borsook, *The Mural Painters of Tuscany. From Cimabue to Andrea del Sarto* (London, 1960), 33-34; Andrew Martindale, 'Luca Signorelli and the Drawings connected with the Orvieto Frescoes,' *Burlington Magazine*, ciii (1961), 216-220.

8 L.D. Eutlinger, *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo* (Oxford, 1965), 120-123; Dacos, ix.

became increasingly prominent.⁹ Between 1489 and 1499 the Orvieto Cathedral authorities had attempted to persuade Perugino to undertake the decoration of the 'Capella Nuova,' perhaps indicating an interest in the antique decorative style.¹⁰ The murals of the Chapel of San Brizio were intended to enhance the prestige of the Cathedral, and what would better have fulfilled this aim than incorporating the type of imagery currently celebrated in Vatican circles.

While the discovery of the Golden House of Nero stimulated a taste for Roman ornament, painters retained the conventional function of antique decoration; in religious and secular settings alike, grotesque motifs and simulated stucco panels are invariably relegated to the vaults and framing pilasters. In the Chapel of San Brizio, however, the spectator is confronted with entire walls covered in Roman ornament. What the viewer encounters is an inversion of the usual *all'antica* framing device. It is not the ceiling that is meant to be regarded as antique masonry but the walls. The 'real' walls physically support the 'unreal' religious narrative on the lunettes and vault which, by contrast, appears as a vision. While the location alone would have prompted careful examination of the grotesque motifs and stucco panels, their interest is more than decorative. As an integral part of a narrative scheme, the antique ornament provides an appropriate setting for, and is directly linked to, the pagan poets who appear seated behind a series of windows (Figs. 1, 5, 8). This unusual combination of elements was certain to surprise a spectator whose visual expectations had been formed by contemporary applications of the *all'antica* style.

The novel arrangement can be explained, at least in part, by Fra Angelico's layout of the Last Judgement. The presence of Christ the Judge and his Heavenly Court on the vault precluded what might



FIGURE 1. Luca Signorelli, left wall of the Chapel of San Brizio, Cathedral of Orvieto, 1499-1504.

otherwise have been a more conventional adaptation of Roman ornament. Be that as it may, this more prominent application of antique elements goes no further than contemporary *all'antica* decorations in recreating an overall Roman decorative format. The prototype for the illusionary scheme adopted in the Chapel of San Brizio is found not in the Golden House of Nero, but in Florentine chapel decoration of the 14th century.¹¹ Signorelli's model was probably Nardo di Cione's fresco cycle in the Strozzi Chapel of Sta. Maria Novella, which also depicts the Last Judgement.¹²

The Strozzi Chapel presents the religious narrative on the upper walls supported by a frieze of simulated marble panels on the lower walls (Fig. 2). Signorelli retains this basic scheme, even the arrangement of the Last Judgement, but he increases the impact of the supporting frieze by extending its size, illusionistic qualities and visual interest. Instead of plain marble panels, the Chapel of San Brizio has masonry panels decorated with flat grotesque motifs and stucco reliefs. These motifs, derived from the vaults of the Golden House of Nero, serve to reinforce the illusion of a real wall.¹³ By defining architectural members with grotesque ornament, painters were able to suggest the existence of space beyond that surface.

9 Pinturicchio's major papal commissions were the large loggia of the Villa Belvedere in the Vatican for Innocent VIII (1487), the Borgia Apartments in the Vatican for Alexander VI (1492-94), the Piccolomini Library in Siena for Pius III (1502), and the sanctuary of Sta. Maria del Popolo in Rome for Julius II (1510).

10 Carli, 100.

11 Fresco cycles with a simulated marble frieze on the lower part of the walls were particularly popular in Florence in the second half of the 14th and early 15th centuries but are ultimately derived from Giotto's frescoes in the Arena Chapel in Padua; examples include the Castellani Chapel in Santa Croce painted after 1483 by followers of Agnolo Gaddi, and the Bartolini-Salimbeni Chapel in Sta. Trinita painted by Lorenzo Monaco around 1423. Ornamental side borders with figures of prophets holding scrolls are even more commonplace.

12 The Strozzi Chapel was built around 1340-50, and its elaborate decorative scheme includes Nardo's fresco cycle of the Last Judgement (1351-57) and the celebrated altarpiece by his brother Andrea Orcagna (1354-57). The heads on the simulated marble panels resemble the prophets on the ornamental borders from the original decoration of the vault in the chancel of the same church; these borders, painted by Orcagna in 1348, are now kept in the museum of Sta. Maria Novella.

13 Dacos, 63.

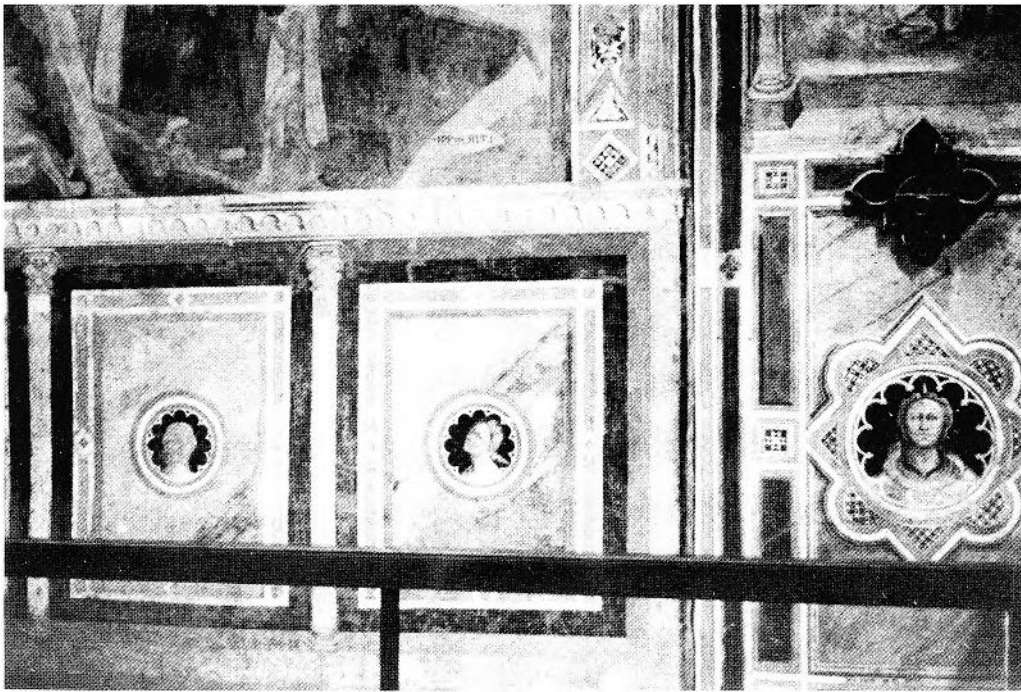


FIGURE 2. Nardo di Cione, lower right wall, Strozzi Chapel, Sta. Maria Novella, Florence, 1351-57.

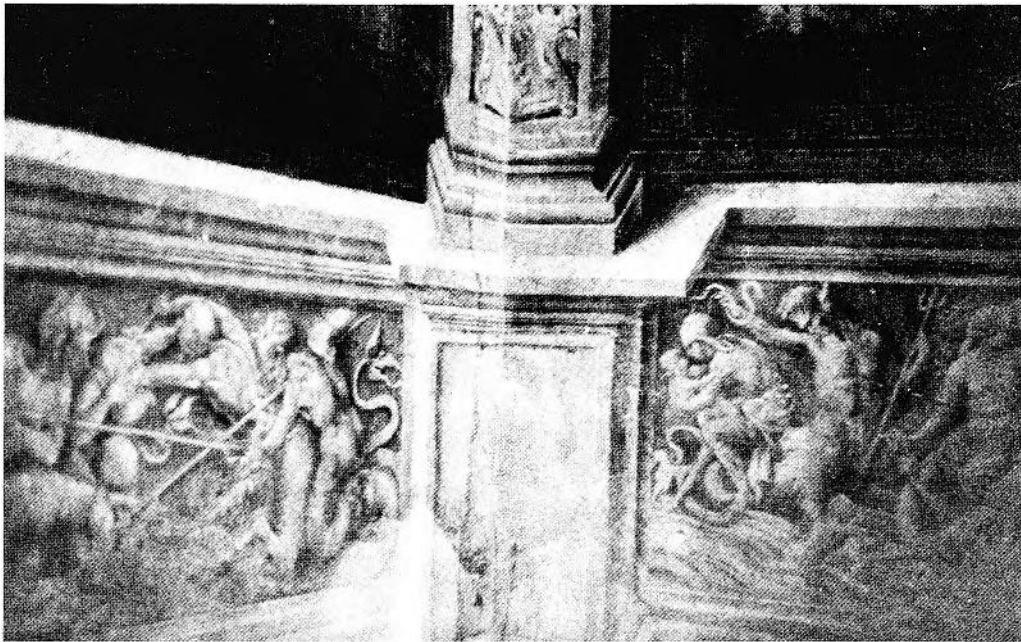


FIGURE 3. Luca Signorelli, lower platform, Chapel of San Brizio, Cathedral of Orvieto, 1499-1504.

The panels of both the Strozzi and San Brizio Chapels appear to be inserted behind a row of pilasters which is surmounted by a continuous entablature and rests on a projecting ledge. In Signorelli's scheme the pilasters support a proper antique frieze, and instead of a simple ledge, they rest on a platform that takes the form of a continuous band of Roman sarcophagus reliefs (Fig. 3). Also common to the two

decorative schemes is the window occupied by a figure at the centre of each panel. In both cases the figures, some looking directly at the spectator, others turning their heads to look at the Last Judgement, assume the same rôle. They are privy to the scenes of revelation, and they invite the spectator to witness their visions.

In addition to being illusionistic, the supporting structure of both chapels offers decorative interest. In this respect, Signorelli's frescoes surpass not only those in the Strozzi Chapel, but also contemporary *all'antica* decorations. The excavation and study of the Golden House of Nero altered the prevailing 15th century practice of depicting simple monochrome grotesque designs.¹⁴ Signorelli was one of the first painters to adopt the varied motifs and brilliant colours of the *Volta Dorata*, and he was certainly the first to introduce these elements in a religious setting. While the colour, variety and expanse of the grotesque motifs vividly convey the full splendour of the antique prototype, Signorelli only loosely follows his model.¹⁵ The grisaille compartments that are inserted among the grotesque motifs recall the figurative stuccos of the Golden House of Nero, but they actually follow the pictorial conventions used in Renaissance manuscript illumination for depicting antique cameos.¹⁶ As for the band of sarcophagus reliefs that encircles the room, there is no counterpart in Roman wall decoration. All of these elements, while not adhering strictly to classical models, comply with Renaissance notions of antique mural painting.

The most generally accepted uses of the *all'antica* style were the illusionistic and the decorative. In the Chapel of San Brizio, however, the antique walls are not limited to these functions. If Signorelli's scheme struck the viewer as novel, as it surely did, it was because the elements of Roman wall decoration were applied to a decorative scheme that was conventional, and even outdated, but that also carried symbolic potential.

The walls of the chapel certainly suggest a particular historical period, one that is distinctly different from the one represented by the religious scenes. The figures at the windows hold scrolls and books, and assume the rôle of prophesying the religious event nearby. Thus the grotesque ornament and grisaille compartments serve to establish a historical context for the writers. A similar use of grotesque motifs is found in the Chapel of Girolamo Basso della Rovere in Sta. Maria del Popolo in Rome.¹⁷ Here, Pinturicchio decorated each segment of the vault with grotesque ornament and a window that frames the half-length figure of a turbaned prophet or sibyl holding a scroll with a prophecy (Fig. 4). The figures



FIGURE 4. Bernardino Pinturicchio, vault of the Chapel of Girolamo Basso della Rovere, Sta. Maria del Popolo, Rome, mid 1490s (Photo: The Warburg Institute, University of London).

and the surrounding ornament, through their proximity, remind the viewer that they belong to a different historical period than the religious scenes below.

In the San Brizio Chapel, the close relationship between the eight figures on the walls and the religious narrative on the lunettes is apparent because the writers and their setting conform to the well-established tradition of the Old Testament prophet. In this rôle, some of the figures turn to gaze directly at the events of the Last Judgement while others appear engrossed by their writings. The writers, however, are not only aware of their books and the religious narrative, they are also conscious of each other, exhibiting facial expressions and hand gestures which suggest animated discussion. This type of interaction recalls representations of religious thinkers engaged in lively argument, such as those of apostles and martyrs in Donatello's celebrated bronze doors for the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo in Florence.¹⁸

While clearly recalling the visual traditions of prophets and religious thinkers, Signorelli's figures represent neither of these types. Whoever these figures are, and there are many reasons to doubt their traditional identifications, it is quite apparent that they are, for the most part, pagans. They are not even such revered pagans as Plato and Aristotle who some-

14 Dacos, 66-67.

15 Dacos, 73.

16 Depictions of cameos are most commonly found in the decorative borders of manuscript illuminations; see for example J.J.G. Alexander, *Italian Renaissance Illuminations* (London, 1977), pl. 40.

17 Signorelli had also been employed by Cardinal Girolamo Basso della Rovere; the fresco decoration of the Sacristy of St. John in Sta. Maria di Loreto was carried out during the late 1480s, just before Pinturicchio painted the chapel in Sta. Maria del Popolo in Rome; see Gloria Kury, *The Early Work of Signorelli 1465-1490* (New York, 1978), 127-131.

18 Signorelli used these reliefs in his depiction of the apostles in Sta. Maria di Loreto; see Kury, 204.

times assume the rôle of prophet.¹⁹ The laurel wreaths identify most of these figures as poets. Moreover their illusionistic appearance and prominent situation in the room, a departure from the secondary locations usually allotted to prophets, recall contemporary cycles of illustrious men.²⁰ Thus one finds an unusual amalgamation of Christian and secular traditions, with the figures presented both as foretellers of Christian events and as illustrious pagan writers.

The dual rôle of the writers provides the key to understanding the surrounding cameo-like scenes; these illustrate the particular ideas of the writer alongside whom they appear and, in addition, are prefigurations of the religious events represented immediately above. Signorelli's most original concept was to introduce the subject-matter of the writings pictorially rather than as inscriptions, enabling the spectator to draw a visual parallel between the prefiguration and its realization.

If one is to understand the relationship between the walls and the lunettes, it is necessary to identify the poets. As there are no inscriptions one assumes that there will be visual clues to the identity of the figures. Only Dante can in fact be identified by physical appearance. In all other instances the viewer is required to look at the figures in context, appraising the relationship between them, their relation to the surrounding cameos, and also their connection to the religious scenes on the lunettes.

The writer paired with Dante is traditionally identified as Virgil on the basis that both figures are surrounded with scenes from *Purgatorio* (Fig. 5).²¹ Yet this writer, who appears in the most privileged location along the wall – closest to the altar and to the right of Christ – is physically very different to the other poets in the room. He does not wear a laurel wreath, as one would expect of Virgil, and his long, unruly hair suggests a type of representation usually adopted for figures under the power of divine inspiration. This may be the intention here, for he is also the only figure in the room who is actually in the process of writing, and as he writes his gaze is directed at the scene of Christ in Judgement. Another discrepancy, and perhaps the most suggestive, is the fact that the writer looks nothing like the representation of Virgil in the cameos of *Purgatorio*; in these, Virgil has shortly cropped hair, wears a laurel wreath and a robe with a distinctive square collar (Fig. 6). There is, on the opposite side of the room, a poet fitting this description who is usually identified as Horace (Fig. 7).

In order to resolve this question of identity, one must turn to the cameos that surround the so-called Horace (Fig. 8). The cameo directly above the poet depicts Aeneas led into Hades by the Cumaean sibyl. This is followed on the right by a representation of Hercules defeating the dog Cerberus as he and Theseus leave Hades. Next in the sequence, below the poet, there is a scene of Orpheus playing the lyre

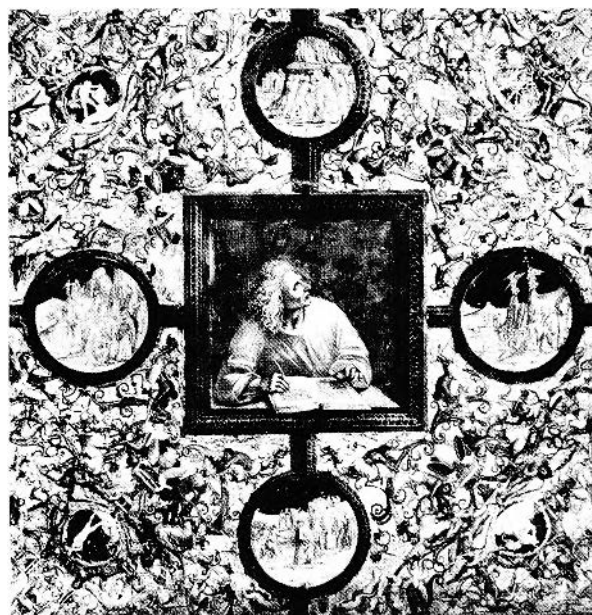


FIGURE 5. Luca Signorelli, *St. John the Evangelist*, San Brizio Chapel, Cathedral of Orvieto, 1499-1504.



FIGURE 6. Luca Signorelli, detail of *Virgil and Dante* from Canto 2 of *Purgatorio*, Chapel of San Brizio, Cathedral of Orvieto, 1499-1504.

19 Giovanni Pisanno's decorative scheme for the façade of the Siena Cathedral, completed in 1284, featured 14 prophets and sibyls including Plato and Aristotle.

20 Scaparellini, 54.

21 The traditional identifications of the poets in the chapel were originally made by Ludovico Luzi in 1866; see Luzi, 190-191.

to the inhabitants of the underworld, including Pluto and Proserpina. Finally, the cameo to the right of the poet shows Eurydice pulled back into Hades as Orpheus turns to look at her. The theme of the underworld evidently links all of these scenes, specifically the various journeys undertaken by heroes who attempted to defeat death. The underworld descents of Aeneas, Hercules, Theseus and Orpheus are grouped together in the 6th book of Virgil's *Aeneid*.²² In fact the first of the four cameos represents the very moment in Virgil's poem in which these characters are brought together. Aeneas, about to descend into Hades, compares himself with other heroes who entered the underworld while still in life and were able to overcome death. The literary evidence thus substantiates the identification of this poet as Virgil.

Virgil engages in a lively discussion with a poet who is also surrounded by scenes of the underworld. Since all four episodes deal with the abduction of Proserpina, the poet has been identified as Ovid. However, not all the scenes can be explained by the account of the myth in the *Metamorphoses*. The cameo at the top shows Proserpina gathering flowers with the goddesses Minerva, Diana and Venus, an incident which is not part of the Ovidian narration and originates in Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpinae*.²³ Claudian's version of the story had found its way – via a number of mythographers – to the immensely popular *Ovidio vulgarizato*, the first Italian version of Ovid's poem published in 1497.²⁴ In the Renaissance this much augmented paraphrase was generally regarded as being the work of Ovid. Thus the poet surrounded by the story of Proserpina must be Ovid.

It is appropriate that Ovid and Virgil, the two most popular Roman poets of the Renaissance, should be paired and presented as the foremost authorities on pagan Hades. The cameos that surround the two comprise a unit; not only do these scenes share a theme and feature many of the same characters, but they are also linked with formal devices.²⁵ Clearly the cycle of underworld stories is meant to be regarded as the counterpart to the sequence of scenes from *Purgatorio* on the opposite wall.

Ovid and Virgil surrounded by visions of pagan Hades are surmounted by the lunette with the Damned in hell; Dante and his companion surrounded by scenes which depict the upward climb of *Purgatorio* are surmounted by the lunette with the Elect in heaven. Even the narrative sequence of the cameos contributes to the complex symbolic scheme. The sequence of the scenes of *Purgatorio* begins below the poets and moves upwards, while that of pagan Hades begins above the poets and moves downwards. The implication of this arrangement is that each wall signifies the symbolic journey of the human soul, upwards towards salvation on the right, and downwards towards damnation on the left. The antique walls, which provide an illusionistic and decorative support for the religious narrative and repre-



FIGURE 7. Luca Signorelli, *Virgil*, Chapel of San Brizio, Cathedral of Orvieto, 1499-1504.

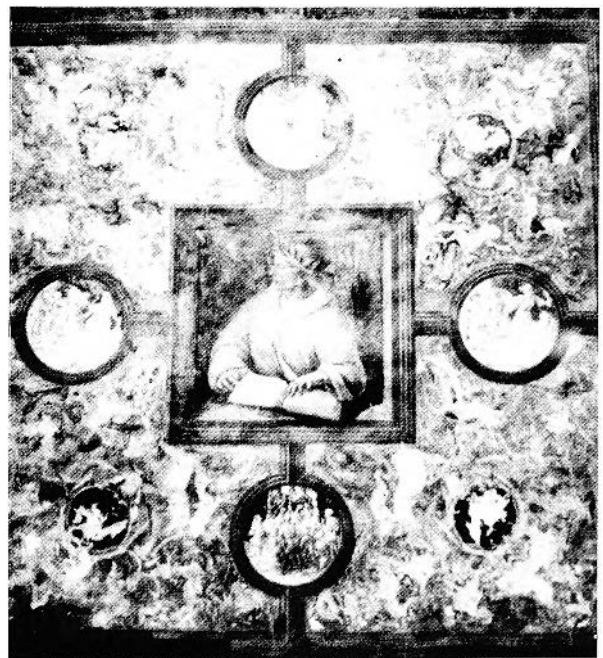


FIGURE 8. Luca Signorelli, *Virgil* and cameos with scenes of Hades, Chapel of San Brizio, Cathedral of Orvieto, 1499-1504.

22 Virgil, *Aeneid*, vi (119-123), in *Opera*, edited by R.A.B. Mynora (Oxford, 1969), 230-231.

23 Claudian, *De Raptu Proserpinae*, III (202-243), edited by J.B. Hall (Cambridge, 1969), 170-173.

24 *Ovidio vulgarizato*, v, XXI-XXV (Venice, 1497), pp. xxxviii/b-XL/a.

25 An example of the devices used to unite the two sets of cameos is the juxtaposition of the scene of Proserpina dragged into Hades by Pluto with the scene of Eurydice forcibly prevented by two devils from leaving Hades.

sent the historical epoch supplanted by Christianity, also convey the general progression of man's moral state, from the battling hybrid creatures on the lowest platform to the joyful figures in the lunette of heaven. While not in defiance of Christian doctrine, the important symbolic function of the antique walls, as well as their obvious secular interests, must have provoked contemporary spectators into actively assessing the scheme, perhaps leading some to question its propriety.

Regarding the identity of Dante's companion, I would suggest that he is not a poet but rather St. John the Evangelist. As the author of the *Apocalypse*, St. John is the most appropriate figure to be portrayed

writing while gazing directly at the Last Judgement, as well as to appear in the favoured position to the right of the altar. In the Renaissance Dante and St. John the Evangelist were the two major authorities on Christian eschatology, and although there is no visual tradition which links the two figures, it should be noted that Signorelli does not represent them as a pair, as he does in the case of Ovid and Virgil; Dante is preoccupied with his books, while St. John is conscious only of the Last Judgement. This identification is also in accordance with the chapel's overall symbolism. Only the Christian writers are shown as seers of Christian salvation; the pagan poets meanwhile are endowed with visions of lesser authority.