

**MICHAEL, MONASTICISM, MYSTICISM:  
A THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN PAINTED PANEL OF  
ST MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL**

John Fisher

A small number of painted wooden panels in Italy have survived mostly from around the thirteenth century which show a representation of a saint surrounded by deeds from his or her legend. They remain such a distinct group of works that they form a cohesive category or genre. Examples include the St Peter Altarpiece which originated in the central Italian hilltown of Siena and dates from about the mid-century. Characteristic of this type of painting of sainthood, it reveals the saint enthroned in the central compartment flanked by episodes from his life and, on this panel, as is sometimes included, scenes from the life of Christ. Another such work is the slightly earlier St Francis panel from the town of Prato about twenty-five kilometres west of Florence. This vertical and gabled painting shows Francis standing rather than enthroned and surrounded by eight scenes from his life and miracles associated with him. These two paintings indicate part of the range of depicted sainthood that is one traditional and established, the other recent and Christ-like. Outside this scope of sanctified humanity is a most remarkable painting of St Michael the Archangel; the subject of this investigation.<sup>1</sup>

Here the formulaic system is repeated again: like the St Peter panel it is horizontal in format and Michael is centrally placed and flanked on both sides by episodes associated with him. Briefly, it can be easily discerned that Michael is shown in all but one compartment and engaged in a narrative event. The painting is dated to about 1250 but the artist or workshop is unknown although some speculation has engaged several art historians without convincing conclusion. Knowing the artist might provide an extra dimension to an interpretation of a work but a preoccupation with authorship at a time when choice of subject and treatment seemed unavailable to individual artists or workshops seems far less helpful in an explanation of the painting than the commission of the work. The patrons were almost certainly monks from a very small monastery whose church was dedicated to Michael the Archangel at Vico l'Abate about twenty kilometres south of Florence.

This monastery, set up on the site of an older church dedicated to Michael and first recorded in 1149, was established under the jurisdiction of a Vallombrosan monastery at nearby Passignano which was also dedicated to the Archangel. These associations provide an obvious connection between the site and the painting's subject matter. There is, however, an as yet unacknowledged nexus between the founder of the Vallombrosans, St John Gualberto, and angels in general. He reported visions of angels in monasteries. In addition, monastic intellectualism was expressly opposed to things corporeal which went so far as to mortify the flesh through ritual flagellation and deprivation. A goal of monastic life was to pray, attain a freedom from quotidian concerns and soar into conceptual experiences. As a consequence, a picture of an angel for the community of monks to view daily acted as a representation of a spiritual state to be desired, that is, a non-corporeal being provided a constant reminder of the spiritual and higher world as a valued objective. Furthermore, the persuasive and ubiquitous writings of the great mystic from southern Italy, Joachim of Fiore who had died only about forty to fifty years earlier, in 1202, specifically called monks 'spiritual men' thereby explicating the often-perceived status of a monk at this time as close to the celestial realm.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in terms of the monastic hierarchy, abbots were often characterised as saints, which thereby regarded them as even closer to this celestial realm than ordinary monks.

Realms of sanctity themselves reveal a construct of a hierarchy to explain the cosmos. Generally attributed to the fifth-century writer known as the Pseudo-Dionysius, the word 'hierarchy' was attached to levels of celestial authority informing lower tiers eventually leading to the earthly levels.<sup>3</sup> Knowledge of God was communicated through revelation. Nine choirs of angels were divided into three groups of triads with the seraphim in the highest triad, for example, closest to and full in the knowledge of God, while the Archangels were located in the lowest group and therefore close to humanity. The concept of hierarchy was taken up by a number of theological writers from St Augustine onwards, and in the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas clarified this construction and largely based his thoughts of hierarchy on those of Dionysius. St Thomas Aquinas saw angels as an aesthetic rather than an empirical reality, whose particular function was divine disclosure.<sup>4</sup> This 'revelation theology,' of course, required a mechanism which in turn led to the creation of both time and angels.

A second element in this notion of revelation also emanates from Pseudo-Dionysius: God created a system which constantly returned glory to him. This adoration was returned via the hierarchy in balance with the

revelations travelling down. It is at the crucial division between the spiritual and the terrestrial that the lowest triad angels and the monastics are located. More particularly, a named Archangel, Michael reported in the Old and New Testaments, who had visited the earth on several occasions, was a most likely choice for a cult dedicated to him in the hope that revelation by the Archangel and adoration by the monks could take place according to the theory of hierarchy. Indeed, shrines dedicated to Michael were almost always located atop a mountain, that is cosmologically closer to heaven.

Michael's popularity for cultic devotion is witnessed by widespread shrines dedicated to him from the Michelaion near Constantinople, created in patristic times, to the places of apparition like Monte Sant' Angelo on the Gargano promontory in southern Italy, Castel Sant' Angelo in Rome and Mont St Michel on the Brittany coast. Each of the early shrines were linked with miracles of healing. This later gave way somewhat to an emphasis on places associated with Michael as intercessor especially related to overcoming conflicts. Even, his name, Micha - el, derives from a battlecry meaning 'He who is like God?' indicates his forthright confrontation against pride especially associated with military coercion.

Michael is depicted enthroned wearing the *loros* or knightly-cum-military costume of the Byzantine Empire from where the generalised style of the painting derives. His lance is emphasised by being held diagonally across his image and he presents a large host, symbol of his charge of the heavenly host. His wings and hair tied back with flowing strings iconographically reveal both his ability to act with swift action and his role as messenger of God. Further military references abound in the flanking episodes: the top right shows Michael and his host of angels accepting lances from God enthroned on the far right while, most dramatically, Michael leads his celestial army in the rout of Lucifer, shown being forced by the point of the Archangel's lance out of heaven and towards the earth and the creation of hell.

The production of the painting at a time of the great crusades to the Holy Land and military involvement against heretical sects would have emphasised the need to defend the faith. Associations such as the Knights Hospitallers had been established since 1099 and the Knights Templar founded in 1128 recall an older healing role in combination with a military involvement for such defenders. Heretical sects in the south of France like the Albigensians were still under the Dominican Inquisition, with their extirpation ordered by Gregory IX in 1233. Moreover, the monstrous and constant threat of civic disorder and violence from outside the fortified

walls of the monastery created an atmosphere conducive to praying for the intercession of celestial military aid. Sanctity in the form of the military was the result of the mindset created by long-term factors and those brought to acute necessity.

The militarism of the centre compartment and the two sections showing Consignment of the Lances and the Michael Conquering Lucifer is implied in the top left compartment which shows the Preparation of the Heavenly Throne - perhaps one of the ministering tasks of the Archangel, and quite understandably a place left vacant after the fall of Lucifer. It is indeed a place left for virtuous humanity to occupy. This last interpretation requires an abandonment of conventional sequencing of events and their presentation in time. More of this notion of narrative later. Nonetheless, half of the narrative compartments, the two top left scenes and the top right scene, along with the enthroned figure are devoted very strongly to the celestial realm where military involvement and associations are revealed.

The other half of the scenes are grounded on earth and demonstrate the celestial Michael's earthly intervention, further reinforcing the nexus between the two realms, and acted to remind the viewing monastic of their proximity. The central scene on the right shows a bull belonging to a cattle farmer called Gargano outside a cave. Gargano shoots an arrow at the bull for not returning with the rest of the herd; but his arrow, in a move protective of the bull, miraculously turns in the air only to hit the archer in the eye. Unseen, the narrative continues that takes Gargano and the neighbours to the local Bishop of the nearby town of Siponto to ask the meaning of the miracle. Told to fast for three days, the townspeople are not shown in the episode beneath where on the third night the Bishop experiences an apparition of the Archangel Michael. The Bishop is told that the cave on Mount Gargano is sacred to Michael and that a holy shrine should be built dedicated to him. Note the form of the announcement: the angel approaches the clergyman cloistered in his monastic-like cell or oratory; the Bishop's hands are covered to indicate the sanctity of the event.. Controversy surrounded the interpretation of the lowest scene on the left. Initially believed to be the sequential episode in the Gargano story where the townspeople ask the bishop the meaning of the miracle of the bull, but this seems too minor an episode for inclusion. Besides, economy would dictate that it is not required since the resolution is offered in the appearance of Michael in the following scene. More likely, however, is the interpretation of the scene as the day of the appearance of Michael in Rome atop a building

to indicate the end of the plague in that city in 590 during the papacy of Gregory the Great.

Without the depiction of Michael himself in this compartment, more definite evidence is needed and supplied by the tiny round building in the centre background. This is seen as the then Mausoleum of Hadrian and thereafter titled Castel Sant' Angelo. The narrative of his appearance at Rome always emphasises his action of wiping blood off his sword as the signal of the end of the pandemic: his military might and healing are combined. Whatever the interpretation, the apparition of Michael and his involvement is no doubt implied either in promoting his sacred shrine as an aid to humankind or as a messenger of the end of a catastrophe.

Both of the lowest scenes, those closest to the viewers, emphasise the role of the clergy in actively seeing the Archangel, a significant power in itself, but also interpreting the meaning of the apparitions for the hierarchically-lower public. Here is a demonstration of the Pseudo-Dionysius's Hierchia both in heaven and on earth, just as he wrote it. God in the top left delegates authority and power to Michael and the other angels; from here Michael's victorious battle against Lucifer's pride which in turn created a space for mankind on a throne in heaven is pictured above apparitions and interventions of Michael to assist in the success of humankind in occupying the throne in heaven prepared for them. Both a downward movement of revelation and upward movement of potential adoration. A major part of the message of the panel is the interconnectedness of the cosmos and significantly through the receptive intellect of the clergy: those able to receive knowledge from above. Indeed it was St John Gualberto who emphasised the authority of the bishops and the loyal obedience required of the Vallombrosan monks.

Crucially though, the monastic beholders of the altarpiece would associate themselves with the clergy and therefore close to the angels because of their profession. Yet as a cult artefact it was fundamentally activated during the liturgy. Just as angels surround the throne of God so painted representations of angels, and one in particular, stood behind the altar where the sacrifice of the mass was celebrated. On the other side of the altar were the monks mirroring the angel and associating themselves with his image. The monks were corporeality struggling against its form, desiring to be spiritual, heightened by picturing the incorporeal, using aesthetics to reveal the spiritual and the beholder's communion with it.

The contiguity of liturgy and aesthetic is manifest: the sacrifice celebrated in the mass as the ransom paid for evil first revealed in the Fall of

the Rebel Angels is apprehended simultaneously with a glowing painting whose original background was silver reflecting all light sources, and completing the circle around the altar were the monks aspiring to be like the angels. Representation and likeness is revisited in a functional form. Yet such continuance and homogeneity was under threat, not least from a profound paradox. Aesthetic contemplation is not action. The Church Triumphant, that celestial fortitude and consummate strength, was painted as active but the beholders were inactive: not the Church Militant. Monastical life was based on a love of learning and a desire for God, but changes outside monasteries were becoming more aligned with the corporeal, more in tuned with human needs and more apostolic, less accepting of passive privilege and assumed spiritual status close to the angels. The mendicant orders in the thirteenth century were indicators of a widespread crisis. The Dominicans, for example, legislated, for a considerable part of the century, against aesthetic riches in church decoration in favour of poverty and preaching. Meanwhile, the Franciscan Order, although adopting the view of the zealous 'Spirituals,' who wanted to retain the message of Francis of simplicity and poverty, were under constant threat of mitigating reform of their Rule in order to accumulate property. Nonetheless, both of these orders demonstrate a level of active engagement with the corporeal that is closer to the notion of the Church Militant: unlike the Vallombrosans at Vico l'Abate praying before the altar decorated with a representation of the powerful figure of Saint Michael the Archangel.

Two emergent issues about the painting remain for comment. First is the notion of a narrative cycle. How to read episodes in a cycle has been an enduring task for art historians, but the Michael panel gives an indication not widely visited. It takes a cue from a paratactical system where little use is made of linking passages. To this end, a reading, say, from top left to right and top to bottom does not always yield cohesive sequential meaning. For example, the scene of the Preparation of the Throne is chronologically out of sequence. It could induce a simultaneity: that the throne had to be prepared for humankind because of the Fall of the Rebel Angels. Alternatively, this could be seen as the cause of Lucifer's jealousy and pride. On the other hand, the lack of sequence in the lowest register might relate more closely with other saints' panels which illustrate timeless instances of sanctity.

This introduces the second issue emerging from the investigation: the idea of sainthood applied to a spirit. Even calling the Archangel 'Saint Michael' could simply indicate holiness, but this is tautological since the term 'angel' already indicates such a state. All other painted saints' panels

show sanctified human beings. The incorporeal Archangel Michael who adopted a visible form when visiting the earth was treated by the painter using the formula used to verify sainthood by showing a virtuous life and miracles: a formula which functioned differently for Michael. It demonstrated Michael's celestial and earthly deeds rather than confirmed his sanctity.

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#### REFERENCES

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<sup>4</sup> Aquinas, St Thomas, *Treatise on Separate Substances*, trans. Francis J. Lescoc. West Hartford, Connecticut, St Joseph College, 1959; Luscombe, David E., 'Thomas Aquinas and Conceptions of Hierarchy in the Thirteenth Century,' *Thomas von Aquin: Werk und Wirkung im Licht neuerer Forschungen*, ed. A. Zimmermann, edn ed. Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1988, 19, 261-277.

