Abstract – In the so-called *Letter of Eusebius of Cesarea to Constantina*, the section devoted to the Transfiguration of Christ lends itself particularly to comparison with other Early Christian texts that use the Tabor episode as an argument to deny the possibility of seeing or representing Christ. Examples include a portion of the *Fragmenta in Lucam*, also attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea, and a fragment by Leontius presbyter, quoted in Nicephorus of Constantinople's *Refutatio et Eversio*. Such consonance helps support the letter's authenticity, an object of an extensive scholarly debate, or at least indicates its early chronology. Furthermore, the interpretation these texts offer seems to be reflected in the visual production. The Transfiguration scene was never represented until the late fourth century; conversely, from the sixth century onwards, it was depicted in several works of art. During the iconoclast controversy, both those who favored icons and their opponents who rejected icons paid great attention to the Tabor episode, which confirms the crucial link between the Transfiguration and the "representability" of Christ.

Keywords – Transfiguration, Eusebius of Caesarea, question of images, icon, iconoclasm, Byzantine texts, Byzantine iconography

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The Transfiguration and the *Eikon* of Christ. From Eusebius' Letter to Constantina to the Iconoclast Era*

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The so-called letter of bishop Eusebius of Caesarea to the princess Constantina, sister of the Emperor Constantine the Great, is one of the most famous and controversial Early Christian texts on images. It is preserved only within sources tied to the Iconoclastic Controversy of the 8th and the 9th centuries and it seems to anticipate the arguments of the iconomachs in a truly astonishing way. This is why the letter aroused an extensive scholarly debate regarding its authenticity, a debate which has been going on until very recent times, thanks to the contributions of Timothy Barnes and Jean Pierre Caillet[1]. The source of inspiration for the current study was Aaron Johnson's reconsideration of some texts connected to the letter, and specifically of a passage of Eusebius' *Fragmenta in Lucam* on the Transfiguration of Christ[2].

The *Epistula ad Constantiam Augustam*

The longer version of the text of Eusebius' letter to Constantina handed down by Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople (9th century)[3] includes some preliminary remarks on the supreme

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[1] Timothy D. Barnes, "Notes on the Letter of Eusebius to Constantia (CPG 3503)", *Studia Patristica*, XLVI (2010), pp. 313–318; Jean-Pierre Caillet, "Eusèbe de Césarée face aux images: vers une interprétation plus positive – et moins incertaine – de ses attitudes?", *Antiquité tardive*, XXII (2014), pp. 137–142.

[2] Aaron P. Johnson, "The Ends of Transfiguration: Eusebius' Commentary on Luke (PG 24.549)", in *Eusebius of Caesarea: Tradition and Innovations*, Aaron P. Johnson, Jeremy M. Schott eds, Washington, DC 2013, pp. 189–206.

[3] Jean Baptiste Pitra, *Spicilegium solesmense, vol. I, In quo praecipue auctores saeculo V antiquiores proferuntur et illustrantur*, Paris 1852, pp. 387–466; Hans G. Thümmel, *Die Frühgeschichte der ostkirchlichen Bilderlehre: Texte und Untersuchungen zur Zeit vor dem Bilderstreit*, Berlin 1992, pp. 282–284.

nature of the Son of God, who sits at the right hand of the Father[4]. Then the core of the letter is passage in which the Bishop of Caesarea rejects the princess' request for a portrait-image of Christ. Eusebius' denial is grounded on the following reasoning: an image of the divine form is inconceivable, because no one knows the Son except for the Father[5]; an image of the bodily form of Christ not only does not do justice to the majesty of the divine Logos, but is itself impossible, because after the Ascension Christ's body was swallowed up and transformed by the glory of God, and he took the blazing form which he had already shown to the disciples during the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor[6]. The glorious face of Jesus is still unknown to the Christians, who will be able to contemplate it only at the end of time; therefore, if they tried to represent him, they would commit the error of the Gentiles, depicting deities whose appearance they do not really know, and consequently creating idols. The presumption of representing the body of the Lord in the form he had before the Transfiguration is also unacceptable, since in Exodus 20, 4 God forbade the creation of images of "what is in heaven above, or on earth below, or in the water under the earth"[7]. Eusebius' refusal was not only a theoretical assumption. In fact, in the letter he narrates the following episode: a woman brought to Eusebius two panel paintings, which, according to her, represented Christ and Paul. Eusebius confiscated them, in order to prevent the Christians from being blamed for carrying around the pictures of their God, as the idolaters. The disciples of Simon Magus and Mani owned images of this kind. Therefore, Christians should not imitate practices popular among the pagans and the heretics[8]. Finally, he urges the princess to seek for the purification of the heart, as an essential condition to reach the vision of God in the afterlife[9].

Authenticity *versus* forgery

Within the horizon of the Early Christian literature, where the question of the legitimacy of Christian images is never thoroughly discussed, this letter is undoubtedly an exceptional case. Consequently, doubts about its authenticity were expressed from very ancient times, starting from the earliest editors of the text. However, the Eusebian authorship was not seriously challenged until the 1970s, when Sister Charles Murray published the essay "Art and the Early Church". For the supporters of the theory of the hostility of the Early Christian church towards images, the letter represented indeed a *testimonium* of unquestionable relevance[10]. However, as outlined by several scholars, the letter raises serious concerns, because of the contrast with other Eusebian works, which actually show more moderate attitudes towards images, and also because there is no independent tradition of this text prior to the literature of the Iconoclastic age[11]. Long passages are quoted in the *Horos* of the Iconoclastic Council of Hiereia (754), which was read and rebutted during the sixth session of the

[4] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Epistula ad Constantiam Augustam,* in Thümmel, *Die Frühgeschichte* (n. 3), p. 282.1–5.
[5] *Ibidem*, p. 282.6–29.
[6] *Ibidem*, pp. 282.30–283.49.
[7] *Ibidem*, pp. 283.50–284.67.
[8] *Ibidem*, p. 284.68–79.
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 284.79–85.
[10] Hugo Koch, *Die altchristliche Bilderfrage nach den literarischen Quellen*, Göttingen 1917, pp. 41–58; Walter Elliger, *Die Stellung der alten Christen zu den Bildern in den ersten Vier Jahrhunderten: nach den Angaben der zeitgenössischen kirchlichen Schriftstellen*, Leipzig 1930, pp. 47–53; Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age Before Iconoclasm", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, VIII (1954), pp. 83–150, p. 93 n. 28. See Mary Charles Murray, "Art and the Early Church", *Journal of Theological Studies*, XXVIII (1977), pp. 303–345, sp. pp. 326–327, for a summary.
[11] Murray, "Art" (n. 10); Stéphane Bigham, *Les chrétiens et les images: les attitudes envers l'art dans l'Église ancienne*, Montreal 1992, transl. *Early Christian Attitudes Toward Images*, Rollinsford, NH 2004; Knut Schäferdiek, "Zu Verfasserschaft und Situation der Epistula ad Constantiam De Imagine Christi", *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, XCI (1980), pp. 177–186; Claudia Sode, Paul Speck, "Ikonoklasmus vor der Zeit? Der Brief des Eusebius von Kaisareia an Kaiserin Konstantia", *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*, LIV (2004), pp. 113–134.

Second Council of Nicaea (787)[12]. A more extensive portion – although with some gaps – is included in the *Contra Eusebium et Epiphanidem* penned by Nicephorus of Constantinople[13].
A detailed analysis of all the arguments *pro* and *contra* its Eusebian authenticity is beyond the scope of this paper. Recent contributions on the letter by Jean Pierre Caillet and Timothy Barnes provide updated *status quaestionis*. Both of the scholars admit the substantial authenticity of the letter, although they suggest that the original text was possibly altered at a later date[14]. Here, I wish to draw attention to some elements considered by Barnes as particularly anachronistic. According to him, the request for a portrait of Christ was not possible at the time of Eusebius. By way of confirmation, he quotes a passage of *De Imagine* by Eusebius of Emesa, a disciple of the Bishop of Caesarea, who died around 360. This text states that if the Son was not like the Father there would be many depictions of Him on the earth, as we can see with the images of the emperor. This is to say that there are no images of Christ on earth[15]. However, the passage of *De Imagine* should not be literally interpreted as a testimony that certifies the absence of Christian images in the 4th century Church. Rather, it seems appropriate to see in it the expression of an iconophobic attitude. Even the author of the *Epistula ad Constantiam* states that "these things are banned and excluded from churches all around the world"[16], and in an iconophobic writing attributed to Epiphanius of Salamis we read that "the presence of these things in the church is a disgrace"[17]. Already in the time of Eusebius, however, it was impossible to ignore the role of images in Christian society. If anything could be questioned, it is their presence inside the most ancient Christian basilicas[18]. We may think that when the 4th century authors state that there are no images of Christ in the churches they are referring to panel paintings. According to Murray, the icons are precisely the kind of Christian images that did not exist at the time of Eusebius[19]. Barnes also believes that the request of the princess is an anachronism, since he sees the requested portrait as an *acheiropoieta* image of Christ[20]. *Acheiropoietai* were images "not made by human hands", but miraculously created through the impression of the face of Christ on a material support, like the textile (Mandylion) sent by Christ to king Abgar of Edessa[21]. Indeed, the legend of the Mandylion of Edessa did not begin to circulate before the 5th century[22].

[12] Mansi XIII, 313 A–B; *Concilium Universale Nicaenum Secundum: concilii actiones VI–VII*, Erich Lamberz ed., Berlin 2016, pp. 730–733.
[13] Murray, "Art" (n. 10), pp. 327–328; Hans G. Thümmel, "Eusebios' Brief an Kaiserin Konstantia", *Klio*, LXVI/1 (1984), pp. 210–222, sp. pp. 210–211; Sode/Speck, "Ikonoklasmus" (n. 11), pp. 115–116. On *Contra Eusebium* see Alexis Chryssostalis, "La notion de morphé dans le Contra Eusebius de Nicéphore de Constantinople", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, LXXIX (2013), pp. 139–158, with earlier bibliography.
[14] Barnes, "Notes" (n. 1), pp. 315–318; Caillet "Eusèbe" (n. 1), pp. 137–139. Both the scholars partly rely on Stephen Gero, "The True Image of Christ: Eusebius Letter to Costantia Reconsidered", *Journal of Theological Studies*, XXXII (1981), pp. 460–470.
[15] Eusebius of Emesa, *De Imagine*, in *Discours conservès en latin: textes en partie inédits / Eusèbe d'Émèse*, Éligius M. Buytaert O.F.M. ed., 2 vols, Louvain 1953–1957, p. 130ff; Barnes, "Notes" (n. 1), p. 315.
[16] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Epistula ad Constantiam Augustam* (n. 4), p. 284.64–65.
[17] Epiphanius of Salamis, *Epistula ad Iohannem Hierosolomytanum*, in Thümmel, *Die Frühgeschichte* (n. 3), p. 297.
[18] See the wide debate on the decoration of the Constantinian basilicas. Only few references can be listed here: Luigi A. Canetti, "Costantino e l'immagine del Salvatore: una prospettiva mnemostorica sull'aniconismo cristiano antico", *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum*, XIII (2009), pp. 233–262; Jean-Michel Spieser, "Le décor figuré des édifices ecclésiaux", *Antiquité tardive*, XIX (2011), pp. 95–108; Paolo Liverani, "Old St. Peter's and the Emperor Constans? A debate with G. W. Bowersock", *Journal of Roman Archeology*, XXVIII (2015), pp. 485–504, with further bibliography.
[19] Murray, "Art" (n. 10), pp. 331–332.
[20] Barnes, "Notes" (n. 1), p. 316.
[21] Ernst von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder; Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende*, Leipzig 1899; Emanuela Fogliadini, *Il volto di Cristo: gli acheropiti del Salvatore nella tradizione dell'Oriente cristiano*, Milan 2011; *Sacre impronte e oggetti "non fatti da mano d'uomo" nelle religioni*, Atti del convegno internazionale (Torino, 18–20 maggio 2010), Adele Monaci Castagno ed., Alessandria 2011.
[22] The first mention of the image of Christ within the legend of Edessa is provided by the *Doctrina Addai*. See Martin Illert, *Doctrina Addai. De imagine edessena. Die Abgarlegende. Das Christusbild von Edessa*, Turnhout 2007.

Eikones and debates on the Incarnation of Christ

However, the existence of panel paintings depicting Christ and the Apostles is attested not only by the subsequent part of the letter - which mentions the *eikones* that the author confiscated from a woman - but also by another text of undisputed Eusebian authorship, i.e. a passage of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*[23]. Both testimonies should be referred to the field of private devotion rather than to public spaces of worship[24]. Christian panel paintings could already have existed at such an early date, although there are no examples preserved and these *eikones* should not be fully assimilated as Byzantine icons of later centuries. The theoretical conception of the icon was probably not so advanced, considering that the dogmas of the Incarnation and of the double nature of Christ had not been fixed by ecumenical councils yet. Studies on late antique panel paintings conducted in the last decades – especially by Thomas Mathews – confirm the plausibility that Christian panel paintings were already produced in the 4th century[25]. Therefore, the request of Constantina should not be considered necessarily as an anachronism.

What is really problematic – as observed by Barnes and previous scholars– is the pioneering connection between Christian images and the Christological debate: indeed, this is surprising, more than a century before the councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), which defined the dogma of the two natures of Christ, human and divine. Barnes points out that, although as early as the second century Church Fathers agree in affirming that Christ is by nature man and God[26], the distinction between the human and the divine nature (*physis*) of Christ becomes common in the theological language only starting with the writings of Apollinaris of Laodicea, that is several decades after the death of Eusebius[27].

However, some other texts could confirm that the connection between the question of images and the debate on the Incarnation and on the natures of Christ was already in the making during the 4th century[28].

The iconophile florilegium preserved in Codex Parisinus Graecus 1115 includes two fragments attributed to Gregory Thaumaturgos (3rd–4th centuries), in which the author anathematizes the heretics who do not venerate the image of the Son, incarnate God and consubstantial with the Father[29]. However, we know these texts only because of their inclusion in the florilegium; indisputable writings of Gregory Thaumaturgos offer no comparison for them. Therefore, the doubt that these are Iconophile forgeries can legitimately arise. However, a clue in favor of their authenticity can be found in the fact that the reference to the Incarnation is expressed in a very simple, embryonic way, without getting into the complex folds of the two natures' debate. At the same time the relevance of the consubstantial relationship between the Father and the Son in the first fragment is noteworthy, since it is a crucial issue in the theological debates of the fourth century.

Another testimony is offered by a text attributed to Epiphanius of Salamis, commonly known with the title *Tractatus contra eos qui imagines faciunt*[30]. The author of this text blames those who claim

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[23] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Epistula ad Constantiam Augustam*; *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII, 18; Thümmel, *Die Frühgeschichte* (n. 3), p. 285.

[24] For the role of icons in public and private spaces, see Kim Bowes, "Christian Images in the Home*", Antiquité Tardive*, XIX (2011), pp. 171–190; Leslie Brubaker, John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850: A History*, Cambridge 2011, p. 26. See also note 25.

[25] Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Princeton 1993; Siri Sande, "Pagan Pinakes and Christian Icons: Continuity or Parallelism?", *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia, N.S.*, XVIII (2004–2005), pp. 81–100; Katherine Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons: Between Reality and Spirituality in Byzantine Art*, Turnhout 2013; Thomas F. Mathews, *The Dawn of Christian Art in Panel Paintings and Icons*, Los Angeles 2016, with previous bibliography.

[26] See for example Melito of Sardis, *De Pascha*, 58; Barnes, "Notes" (n. 1), p. 316.

[27] Apollinaris of Laodicaea, *Fragmenta in Epistulam ad Romanos*, 68.37–38; Barnes, "Notes" (n. 1), p. 316.

[28] Caillet "Eusèbe" (n. 1), pp. 138–139.

[29] Gregory Taumaturgos (?), *Commentary on the Book of Wisdom* and *Horos Synodikos.* See Alexander Alexakis, *Codex Parisinus Graecus 1115 and its archetype*, Washington, DC 1996, Appendix II, quotes nn. 49 and 50, pp. 320–321.

[30] Epifanius of Salamis (?), *Tractatus contra eos qui imagines faciunt,* in Thümmel, *Die Frühgeschichte* (n. 3), pp. 299, 41.

to depict Christ as a man because he became man through the Virgin Mary. The fact that he was made man does not imply that we can represent the incomprehensible divinity that holds the entire universe. Christ is always strictly connected to the power and glory of the Father, therefore we cannot depict Him in a bodily form. In a negative sense this text attests that some Christians used the topic of the Incarnation to support the production and the veneration of Christian images. Nonetheless, the authenticity of the *Tractatus* is still under debate[31]. The text, which was used by the iconoclasts for the council of 815, is only preserved in the writings of Nicephorus, *Contra Eusebium et Epiphanidem* and *Refutatio et Eversio*[32].

Another fragment preserved in the Horos of 815, by a presbyter named Leontius, establishes a similar negative connection between the Incarnation and the impossibility to represent Christ, but I will focus on it later in this paper[33].

This connection can be found also in the *Homilia in Lazarum* of Bishop Asterius of Amasea. Asterius blames the habit of some Christians to wear lavishly decorated and embroidered clothes, even with Christian scenes. After listing a catalog of episodes which were widely popular in the Christian art of the second half of the 4th century, he urges the faithful not to depict Christ, apparently on the basis of a theological reason. The image cannot represent Christ in the fullness of His divine glory, but only in His bodily form; therefore, it renews the humiliation he already underwent through the Incarnation, which He has overcome. It is preferable to bring a mental, spiritual image of the Logos in our soul[34]. However, Asterius is an author who in no way can be suspected of iconophobic trends. Suffice it to mention, in this respect, the description of a painted veil representing the martyrdom of saint Euphemia, included in his *Homily XI,* a text frequently quoted by the iconophiles during the iconoclastic controversy[35]. Rather, the apparent hostility shown in the Homily on Lazarus is due to an intention of condemning luxury and of exhorting Christians to adopt a sober and more frugal life style, as observed by Nicephorus in his *Refutatio et Eversio*[36].

Finally, we have to remember the *Second Homily on Romanus Martyr*, handed down under the name of John Chrysostom. The author states that God cannot be circumscribed by walls, because He has no limits, and the Lord cannot be seen with the eyes of the human body, because in his essence He is invisible and formless; only in His human nature he can be seen and depicted. He does not dwell in the stone or in the wood, and he does not favor those who offer animal sacrifices[37]. Part of this text was included in the florilegium of the iconoclastic council of 815. Iconomachs interpreted the sentence "God cannot be circumscribed by walls" as a statement on the impossibility of representing Christ in paintings[38]. This quote was the object of a long rebuttal by the iconophile Theodore of Stoudios[39]. However, the passage intends to explain the difference between Christ and the pagan

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[31] The *Tractatus* belongs to the *corpus* of writings against Christian images attributed to Epiphanius of Salamis. See Karl Holl, *Die Schriften des Epiphanius gegen die Bilderverehrung*, Tübingen 1928; Georg Ostrogorskij, *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinisches Bilderstreites*, Breslau 1929, pp. 67–73; Thümmel, *Die Frühgeschichte* (n. 3), pp. 297–302; Stéphane Bigham, *Epiphanius of Salamis, Doctor of Iconoclasm? Deconstruction of a Myth*, Rollinsford, NH 2008.

[32] Nicephorus of Constantinople, *Refutatio et eversio definitionis synodalis anni 815*, 160–165, in *Nicephori Patriarchae Constantinopolitani Refutatio et eversio definitionis synodalis anni 815*, Jeffrey M. Featherstone ed., Turnhout/Leuven 1997, pp. 256–265; *Adversus Epiphanidem*, VIII–XIII, in Jean Baptiste Pitra, *Spicilegium Solesmense*, vol. IV, Paris 1858, pp. 305–335.

[33] Leontius, *Fragmentum*, in Nicephorus of Constantinople, *Refutatio et eversio definitionis* (n. 32), 89, 3–21, pp. 157–158.

[34] Asterius of Amasea, *Homilia I De Lazaro et divite*, PG 40, 165–168; Asterius of Amasea, *Homilies I–XIV*, Cornelis Datema ed., Leiden 1970, pp. 8ff.; Thümmel, *Die Frühgeschichte* (n. 3), pp. 308–309; Nicephorus of Constantinople, *Refutatio et eversio definitionis* (n. 32), 85, 4–9, 17–43, pp. 148–150.

[35] Asterius of Amasea, *Homilia XI*, PG 40, 333–337; Asterius of Amasea, *Homilies* (n. 34), 1970, pp. 153–155; Thümmel, *Die Frühgeschichte* (n. 3), pp. 306–308. For the quotes in the iconophile sources, see: Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea, in Mansi XIII, 16–17; XIII, 20; XIII, 308 A–309; XIII, 417; Nicephorus of Constantinople, *Refutatio et eversio definitionis* (n. 32), 105, 84–87, p. 187.

[36] Nicephorus of Constantinople, *Refutatio et eversio definitionis* (n. 32), 85, 56–69, pp. 150–151.

[37] John Chrysostomus (?), *Homilia in Romanum martyrem*, PG 50, 611–618.

[38] Nicephorus of Constantinople, *Refutatio et eversio definitionis* (n. 32), 143, 2–9, pp. 233–234.

[56] Theodore of Stoudios, *Epistula Dogmatica de sanctis imaginibus*, PG 99, 1241 B; *Theodori Studitae Epistulae*, Georgios Fatouros ed., Berlin 1992, vol. II, p. 535.

Gods, whose statues are enclosed within the *cellae* of the temples and to whom sacrifices of animals are offered. The spurious character of the sermon attributed to Chrysostom has been unanimously recognized by several scholars, while its author and date are still to be defined[40]. Although it is not by the hand of John Chrysostom, there is no specific reason to consider it an iconophile forgery.
In sum, several texts could attest to a precocious connection between the question of images and the debate on the Incarnation and on the two natures of Christ at an early date, before the Iconoclastic controversy. Unfortunately, the majority of them are controversial, because they have been preserved only in sources of the 8th and 9th centuries. However, at least the texts by Asterius and Pseudo-John Chrysostomos seem to be free of the suspicion of being iconophile forgeries.

Old Testament Theophanies and the Transfiguration in other Early Christian texts

In the current paper, nevertheless, I would like to draw attention especially to one element which could be helpful to prove the authenticity of the *Epistula ad Constantiam,* or at least of its core. The connection between the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor and the possibility/impossibility of seeing God is attested in other works by Eusebius. The closest parallel is offered by a passage of the *Fragmenta in Lucam.* Aaron Johnson has recently drawn attention to it, suggesting a re-examination of the question of the authenticity of the letter[41].
In this passage, the Transfiguration is presented as an anticipation of the vision "face to face" (I Cor 13, 12) of Christ that will be possible only at the end of time. This final vision is also contrasted with Moses' vision of the burning bush (Es 3,1–4,17)[42]. Even in Eusebius' *Eclogae Propheticae* the vision of the burning bush is considered as an imperfect experience, inferior to Abraham's vision of the three angels at the Oak of Mamre (Gen 18, 1–8)[43]. Establishing a hierarchy of visions is a recurrent theme in the homilies and commentaries devoted to the Transfiguration by eastern Church Fathers and Christian authors from the 3rd to the 9th centuries[44]. In the Commentary to the Gospel of Matthew by Origen, as in the homilies on the Transfiguration by Pseudo-Ephrem, John of Damascus and Leo VI the Wise[45], for example, the episode on Mount Tabor is contrasted to Old Testament theophanies, and especially to those granted to Moses on Mount Sinai and to Elijah on Mount Horeb. The authors point out that the visions of Moses and Elijah were partial and imperfect, and their wish to meet God "face to face" was fulfilled only on Tabor, where they could see the transfigured person of Jesus[46].

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[40] PG 50, 605–606 (Mountfaucon); Hippolyte Delehaye, "S. Romain martyr d'Antioche", *Analecta Bollandiana*, L (1932), pp. 241–284; Assunta Bartolozzi, "Le due omelie crisostomiane sul martire S. Romano", in *Studi dedicati alla memoria di Paolo Ubaldi*, Milano 1937, pp. 125–132; José Antonio De Aldama, *Repertorium Pseudochrysostomicum*, Paris 1965, n. 373.

[41] *Fragmenta in Lucam*, PG 24, 549 A–D; Johnson, "The Ends" (n. 2), readable also online: http://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5876.

[42] *Fragmenta in Lucam*, PG 24, 549 A–B; Johnson, "The Ends" (n. 2), ll. 5–25.

[43] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Eclogae Propheticae*, 1, 12, PG 22, 1061B.

[44] Useful inventories of these texts in Michel Aubineau, "Une homélie grecque inédite sur la Transfiguration", *Analecta Bollandiana*, LXXXV (1967), pp. 402–427; Maurice Sachot, *Les homélies grecques sur la Transfiguration: tradition manuscrite*, Paris 1987. A precious collection of the most important of them in English translation has been recently offered by Brian E. Daley, *Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord*, Yonkers 2013. For the reception of the Transfiguration in patristic literature, see Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, Scarsdale, NY 2005; Bogdan G. Bucur, "Matt 17:1–9 as a Vision of a Vision: A Neglected Strand in the Patristic Reception of the Transfiguration Account", *Neotestamentica. Journal of the Testament Society of South Africa*, XLIV (2010), pp. 15–30; *Idem*, "Exegesis and Intertextuality in Anastasius the Sinaite's Homily on Transfiguration", *Studia patristica*, LXVIII (2013), pp. 249–260, with previous bibliography.

[45] Origen of Alexandria, *Commentari in Matthaeum*, XII, 43, PG 13, 1084A–B. Pseudo Ephrem, *Sermon on the Transfiguration of our Lord and God and Saviour, Jesus Christ*, par. 9. For the Greek text, see *Οσίου Ἐφραίμ τοῦ Σύρου Ἔργα*, Konstantin G. Phrantzolas ed., Thessaloniki 1998, vol. 7, pp. 13–30. An English translation by Ephrem Lash is available online at http:/www.anastasis.org.uk/on_the_transfiguration.htm. The numbering of the paragraphs is by Lash. John of Damascus, *Oratio de gloriosa Domini nostri Iesu Christi Transfiguratione*, PG 96, 545B–548A; Daley, *Light* (n. 44), p. 206. Leo VI, *Homilia 39 in Transfigurationem*, in *Leonis VI Sapientis Imperatoris Byzantini Homiliae*, Theodora Antonopoulou ed., Turnhout 2008, p. 560.28–35; Daley, *Light* (n. 44), p. 256.

[46] Bucur, "Matt 17" (n. 44); *Idem*, "Exegesis" (n. 44).

However, in the *Fragmenta in Lucam* the Tabor episode is not presented as a fulfillment of Old Testament theophanies. The vision of Moses is contrasted with the one which will be granted to the saints in the end times, the redeemed people who will be allowed to see the face of God, and, "reflecting the Glory of the Lord […] will be transfigured into the same image". When compared to this final and perfect contemplation, the vision of the apostles, like that of the prophets, is also weak and imperfect: "No longer [will it be] like it was at that time when only three disciples fell on their face when they heard the voice on the mountain and were afraid […]"[47].

Indeed, interpreting the Transfiguration within an eschatological perspective as a preview of the vision of Christ at the end times was quite common in the Early Christian and Byzantine homilies[48]. Some authors also outline the partiality of the vision of the apostles, who were allowed to contemplate what their human eyes were able to bear[49]. However, generally there is no emphasis on their incapability of seeing. Rather, the Transfiguration is presented as a visual revelation of the divine glory of Christ to the apostles[50]. Taking this into account, the passage from the *Fragmenta in Lucam*, highlighting the incompleteness of the vision both of the prophets and of the apostles, seems noteworthy and absolutely coherent with the central nucleus of the *Letter to Constantina*, where the author stresses the glorious transfiguration of the person of Christ in order to affirm the impossibility of depicting his corporeal appearance in matter.

However, we have to remember that also the Eusebian authorship of the *Fragmenta in Lucam* is under debate. Actually, the fragments are known since they are included in a *catena* on the Gospel of Luke by Nicetas of Heraklea (11th century), who attributes them to Eusebius[51]. This attribution, accepted for a long time by scholars, also thanks to an influential study by Wallace Hadrill[52], was recently questioned by Alice Whealey. According to Whealey the *catena* handed down by Nicetas, while containing some more or less *verbatim* quotes from Eusebius and other authors, is to be attributed to Eusebius of Emesa[53]. Even assuming that the author of the passage on the Transfiguration is Eusebius of Emesa, we could suppose that he reworked some materials of the bishop of Caesarea. As recalled by Whealey, the bishop of Emesa was a disciple of Eusebius of Caesarea and he knew very well his works, which he often quoted without explicitly mentioning the source[54].

We can also notice that in the narrative of the Tabor episode in the *Fragmenta in Lucam* some details coincide very significantly with the *Letter to Constantina*. The author, while commenting on a passage from the Gospel of Luke, incorporates elements from the Gospel of Matthew. First of all, the face that shines "like the sun": Matthew is the only one of the evangelists to use this expression (*ἔλαμψεν τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἥλιος*)[55]. Mark and Luke simply state that Christ "transfigured" or "changed appearance" in front of his disciples[56]. The text of Matthew highlights with particular emphasis the glorious splendor of the face of Jesus, unbearable to human eyes. The most powerful

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[47] *Fragmenta in Lucam*, PG 24, 549; Johnson, "The Ends" (n. 2), ll. 20–25, 30–35.

[48] John Chrysostom, *In Matthaeum Homilia LXVI*, par. 4, PG 58, 554–555; Daley, *Light* (n. 44), pp. 79–80; Anastasius I patriarch of Antioch, *Sermo in Transfigurationem Domini nostri Jesu Christi*, PG 89, 1364–1365; Daley, *Light* (n. 44), pp. 133–136; Theodore of Stoudios, *Parva Catechesis*, Catechesis XX, in *Sancti patria nostri et confessori Theodori Stoudiosi praepositi parva catechesis*, Emmanuel Auvray ed., Paris 1891, pp. 71–72.

[49] See for example Pantoleon Deacon, *In gloriosissimam Domini ac Dei et Salvatoris nostri Jesu Christi Transfigurationem Oratio I*, PG 98, 1249 B–C; Daley, *Light* (n. 44), pp. 108–109; Timothy of Antioch, *Homilia in crucem et transfigurationem*, PG 86.1, 261 B–C; Daley, *Light* (n. 44), pp. 149–150.

[50] Cyril of Alexandria, *Homilia in Transfigurationem Domini et Dei et Servatoris nostri Jesu Christi*, PG 77, 1013 B; Daley, *Light* (n. 44), p. 102; Anastasius I, *Sermo in Transfigurationem* (n. 48), 1369 B; Daley, *Light* (n. 44), p.137; Pseudo Ephrem, *Sermon on the Transfiguration* (n. 45), par. 8.

[51] PG 24,529–605; Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, v. 3, *The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicaea to the Council of Chalcedon*, Westminster 1960, II ed. 1966, p. 337; Alice Whealey, "The Commentary on Luke Attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea", *Vigiliae Christianae*, LXVII (2017), pp. 169–183, sp. p. 169.

[52] David Sutherland Wallace Hadrill, "'Eusebius of Caesarea''s Commentary on Luke: Its Origin and Early History", *Harvard Theological Review*, LXVII (1974), pp. 55–63; Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge, MA / London 1981, pp. 170–171, 362; Johnson, "The Ends" (n. 2).

[53] Whealey, "The Commentary" (n. 51), pp. 178–183.

[54] *Ibidem*, p. 178.

[55] Mt 17, 2; Johnson, "The Ends" (n. 2), ll. 10–15.

[56] Mc 9, 2–3; Lc 9, 29.

diurnal visibility, enhanced beyond the usual limits of the human senses, turns into its opposite[57]. Consequently, Peter, John and James "fell on their faces" (*οἱ μαθηταὶ ἔπεσαν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον αὐτῶν*)[58]. Again, Matthew's words particularly stand out in comparison with the other synoptic gospels, which only say that the disciples were filled with fear[59]. The *Letter to Constantina* incorporates the same details from Matthew[60].

The face shining like the sun is mentioned also in another fragment, attributed to an otherwise unknown author named Leontius, quoted by Nicephorus in his *Refutatio et Eversio*, since it was included in the *Horos* of the Iconoclastic Council of 815[61]. Nicephorus especially outlines the consonance of this text with the *Letter to Constantina*[62]. According to Hans Georg Thümmel the passage by Leontius can be referred to a period between the second half of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century[63].

In the fragment by Leontius the Transfiguration is mentioned with other episodes of the apparition of Christ's glory – Baptism, Crucifixion, Jesus in the tomb, Resurrection – as a proof of the impossibility of depicting him: that is the reason why "the painters never depicted a single image of Jesus". It would be interesting to compare this text with the homily on the Transfiguration traditionally attributed to Ephrem Syrus (4th century), but undoubtedly spurious. The homily, after focusing on the Transfiguration, dwells on many moments of the life of Christ, from His infancy, miracles, passion and resurrection. All these episodes show the glory of Jesus, who was at the same time true man and true God[64]. Besides the scenes in common, we can find some details also noticed by Leontius, such as the sun darkening while Christ is dying on the cross and the underworld entities who are horrified in seeing Him rise from his grave[65]. Nonetheless, there is a remarkable difference: Pseudo-Ephrem quotes these episodes not as negative topics to affirm the impossibility of representing the son of God, but in a positive way, as proofs of the sensible and visible manifestation of the divine glory of Christ during his earthly life. In this homily the technical lexicon expressing the two natures of Christ, established by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, appears in such an explicit way to suggest that the text must date back at least to mid 5th century[66]. Consequently, we might consider moving forward the dating of Leontius' text as well. However, the chronology of the fragment remains uncertain and should be clarified; there is no terminology of the two natures and the Christological thought is not as developed as in Pseudo Ephrem's homily, also because of its brevity.

Anyway, the passage of *Fragmenta in Lucam*, the *Letter to Constantina* and the fragment by Leontius appear tied through a *fil rouge* which connects the discussion on the Transfiguration to the impossibility of seeing and representing Christ, Son of God.

The figural depiction of the Transfiguration and other episodes of Christ's glory from the Early Christian to the Iconoclast era

A comparison between the passage of Leontius and the commentary provided by Nicephorus some centuries later in the *Refutatio et Eversio* shows us that such a debate was not an entirely abstract theological speculation, but it was intimately connected to the coeval development of Early Christian

[57] Maximus the Confessor draws attention to the face of Christ shining like the sun, which he considers the supreme place of God's concealment: Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones et Dubia*, 191, in *St Maximus the Confessor's Questions and Doubts*, Despina Prassas ed., DeKalb 2010; Andreas Andreopoulos, "The Mosaic of the Transfiguration in St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai: A Discussion of its Origins", *Byzantion*, LXXII (2002), pp. 9–41, sp. p. 16; Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis* (n. 44), p. 201.

[58] Johnson, "The Ends" (n. 2), ll. 30–35;

[59] Mt 17, 6; Mc 9, 6; Lc 9, 35.

[60] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Epistula ad Constantiam Augustam*, in Thümmel, *Die Frühgeschichte* (n. 3), pp. 283.36–37, 40–41.

[61] Nicephorus of Constantinople, *Refutatio et eversio definitionis* (n. 32), 89, 3–21, pp. 157–158.

[62] *Ibidem*, 89, 35–37, p. 159.

[63] Thümmel, *Die Frühgeschichte* (n. 3), pp. 81–82.

[64] Pseudo Ephrem, *Sermon on the Transfiguration* (n. 45), par. 15–17.

[65] *Ibidem*, par. 15.

[66] This is the opinion of the translator Ephram Lash, quoted by Bucur, "Matt 17" (n. 44), P. 258, n. 22.

art. Both texts list some episodes from the life of Christ. However, except for the Baptism[67], the scenes mentioned by Leontius are quite rare in the 4th century artistic production. They start to be more frequent between the second half of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th.
It has been proposed that the Transfiguration can be recognized in two artworks dating back to an age earlier than the 6th century: an ivory casket known as the Lipsanotheca of Brescia (late 4th century)[68] and a panel of the wooden door of Santa Sabina in Rome (ca 422–440)[69]. In both cases the iconography of the scene includes only three characters and it is not so clear and developed as it is in later versions; consequently, its identification has been the subject of intense debate among scholars. Concerning the scene depicted on the Brescia casket, the main obstacle to the identification as the Transfiguration is the wavy base, which appears closer to a body of water than to Mount Tabor or to the bright cloud surrounding Christ and the prophets; however, the hand of God could confirm the theophanic nature of the event [Fig. 1]. Furthermore, the cover hosts two theophanies of Moses, the burning bush and the reception of the Law[70]. In the panel of Santa Sabina's wooden doors the haloes attributed to the two figures flanking Christ can be regarded as a significant clue in favor of the Transfiguration hypothesis, while the other interpretations suggested by previous scholars are more difficult to maintain, as recently highlighted by Ivan Foletti[71] [Fig. 2]. Even a miniature of the Rabbula Gospels (586) shows on the left border of folio 7a a probable depiction of the Transfiguration limited to three figures, haloed and included within a semicircular line; however, another part of the scene, now lost, was possibly depicted on the right border[72].
As far as the Crucifixion is concerned, some very rare and precocious representations are preserved on Late Antique gems: a heliotrope in the British Museum, dating back to the 3rd century, and two carnelians depicting Christ crucified among the twelve apostles, assigned by the most recent studies to the 4th century[73]. However, the depiction of the scene becomes more common starting from the early 5th century, as attested by a panel from the wooden door of St Sabina in Rome and one of the Maskell ivories in the British Museum[74].

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[67] Robin M. Jensen, *Living Water: Images, Symbols and Settings of Early Christian Baptism*, Leiden 2011; Chiara Sturaro, "Hic est filius meus dilectus: l'iconografia del Battesimo di Cristo e il Vangelo di San Matteo tra alto e basso medioevo", *Annali Online di Ferrara – Lettere*, VIII/1 (2013), pp. 288–359.
[68] Andreopoulos, "The Mosaic" (n. 53), pp. 33–34; Catherine Brown Tkacz, *The Key to the Brescia Casket: Typology and the Early Christian Imagination*, Notre Dame 2002, pp. 41–42, 93, 221–222; Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis* (n. 44), pp. 106–108, with previous bibliography.
[69] Joachim J. Berthier, *La porte de Sainte-Sabine à Rome: étude archéologique,* Fribourg 1892, pp. 70–71; Richard Delbrueck, "Notes on the Wooden Doors of Santa Sabina", *The Art Bulletin*, XXXIV (1952), pp. 139–145; Félix Darsy, *Santa Sabina*, Rome 1961, pp. 80–81; Gisela Jeremias, *Die Holztür der Basilika S. Sabina in Rom*, Tübingen 1980, pp. 77–80; Jean-Michel Spieser, "Le programme iconographique des portes de Sainte-Sabine", *Journal des savants*, I–II (1991), pp. 47–81, pp. 63–69; Andreopoulos, "The Mosaic" (n. 53), pp. 33–34; Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis* (n. 44), pp. 102–106; Ivan Foletti, "Corpus iconografico e critico", in Ivan Foletti, Manuela Gianandrea, *Zona Liminare. Il nartece di Santa Sabina, le sue porte e l'iniziazione cristiana*, Rome 2015, pp. 153–199, sp. pp. 160–163.
[70] Brown Tkacz, *The Key* (n. 68), pp. 41–42, 170–175, with earlier bibliography; Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis* (n. 44), p. 107.
[71] Foletti, "Corpus" (n. 69), pp. 160–163.
[72] See the different interpretations of Massimo Bernabò, *Il Tetravangelo di Rabbula: Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 1.56: l'Illustrazione del Nuovo Testamento nella Siria del VI Secolo*, Rome 2008, pp. 94–96, figs 32–36, tav. XIII, and Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis* (n. 44), pp. 108–111, both with previous bibliography.
[73] Felicity Harley, "The Constanza Carnelian and the Development of Crucifixion Iconography in Late Antiquity", in *Gems of Heaven. Recent Research on Engraved Gemstones in Late Antiquity, c. AD 200–600*, Chris Entwistle, Noël Adams eds, London 2011, pp. 214–220; Felicity Harley-McGowan, "The Maskell Passion Ivories and Greco-Roman Art: Notes on the Iconography of Crucifixion", in *Envisioning Christ on the Cross. Ireland and the Early Medieval West*, by Juliet Mullins, Jenifer Ni Ghradaigh, Richard Hawtree, Dublin 2013, pp. 13–33, sp. p. 19.
[74] Harley-McGowan, "The Maskell Passion Ivories" (n. 73), with earlier bibliography; Foletti, "Trassfigurazione" (n. 69), pp. 153–157, tav. VI; Ivan Foletti, "The British Museum Casket with Scenes of the Passion: The Easter Liturgy and the Apse of Saint John Lateran in Rome", in *The Fifth Century in Rome: Art, Liturgy, Patronage*, *Idem* ed., Rome 2017, pp. 139–142.

The Resurrection was mostly represented through the episode of the holy women at the tomb, which avoids showing directly the figure of the risen Christ[75]. In the second half of the 4th century, the apparitions of the risen Christ became more frequent: Christ is fully visible in these episodes, but the glorious and ineffable moment of the Resurrection continued to be not depicted. For example, the Doubting of Thomas and the apparition of Christ to the women are included in the Santa Sabina doors, besides the women at the tomb[76].

In sum, Leontius testifies the negative reaction that some ecclesiastical authorities showed towards the enlargement of the iconographic repertoire in the second half of the 4th century and at the beginning of the 5th. The scenes of the Passion and of the Resurrection became more frequent and theophanic subjects such as the so-called "Traditio Legis"[77] – which Leontius does not mention, but which he presumably could not approve – acquired an increasingly important role; yet part of the Church continued to harbor strong doubts about the possibility of representing Christ, particularly in episodes which pretended to show the fullness of His divine glory.

In his refutation of the passage of Leontius, Nicephorus states that "rightly painters have not learned to paint only one image of Christ, but many images", because God has shown himself at different ages and in different situations. In response to the episodes mentioned by Leontius, the patriarch lists some scenes of a Christological cycle: the Nativity, the Baptism, the Transfiguration, the Crucifixion, the Anastasis and Ascension[78]. The patriarch proves to be informed about more recent developments of Byzantine art since he mentions the dead figure of Christ on the cross and the Anastasis: as far as we know, these subjects do not appear earlier than the end of the 7th century[79]. Between the testimony of Leontius and that of Nicephorus there is not only an enrichment of the Christian iconographic repertoire, which appears natural considering that some centuries have passed by, but also a significant overcoming of undeniable difficulties in front of a full and explicit visual representation of the sacrifice and the glory of Christ.

Almost two centuries after Leontius, the apse mosaic of St Catherine on Mount Sinai, datable to the late Justinianic age (ca 548–565), provided a canonic model of the Transfiguration followed by later Byzantine art[80]. The mosaic was evidently intended to show the glory of the transfigured Christ, who is shining in his garments "radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them",

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[75] Myla Perraymond, s. v. "Donne Pie", in *Temi di Iconografia Paleocristiana,* Fabrizio Bisconti ed., Vatican City 2000, pp. 168–169; Agnese Pergola, "La discussa scena delle donne al sepolcro nel battistero di Dura Europos. Alle origini dell'iconografia della resurrezione di Cristo", *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana,* LXXXVI (2010), pp. 315–352.

[76] Foletti, "Corpus" (n. 69), pp. 157–158, 180–181, 181–182, tavv. VII, XIV and XV, with previous bibliography. On the Doubting of Thomas, see also Myla Perraymond, "L'incredulità di Tommaso (Io. 20, 25–29): iconografia e cenni patristici", *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni,* LVII (1991), pp. 21–42.

[77] Jean-Michel Spieser, *Autour de la Traditio Legis,* Thessaloniki 2004; Ivan Foletti, Irene Quadri, "Roma, l'Oriente e il mito della Traditio legis", *Opuscula historiae artium,* LXII (2013), pp. 16–37.

[78] Nicephorus of Constantinople, *Refutatio et eversio definitios synodalis anni 815*, 90, 1–29, in *Nicephori Patriarchae* (n. 32), pp. 159–160.

[79]Anna Kartsonis, *Anastasis, The Making of an Image*, Princeton 1986, pp. 40–81; Chiara Bordino, "I Padri della Chiesa e le immagini nella 'Refutatio et Eversio' di Niceforo di Costantinopoli", in *Vie per Bisanzio,* Atti del VII Congresso Nazionale dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Bizantini, (Venezia, 25–28 Novembre 2009), Antonio Rigo, Andrea Babuin, Michele Trizio eds, Bari 2012, pp. 573–592, sp. pp. 586–589.

[80] Jaś Elsner, "Image and Iconoclasm in Byzantium", *Art History,* XI (1988), pp. 471–491, sp. pp. 474–475; *Idem*, "The Viewer and the Vision: the Case of the Sinai Apse", *Art History,* XVII/1 (1994), pp. 81–102; Silvana Casartelli Novelli, "La 'Transfigurazione' alla metà del VI secolo in Sant'Apollinare in Classe e a Santa Caterina al Sinai", in *Le vie del Medioevo:* atti del convegno internazionale di studi (Parma, 28 settembre – 1 ottobre 1998), Arturo C. Quintavalle ed., Milan 2000, pp. 63–72; Andreopoulos, "The Mosaic" (n. 53); *Idem*, *Metamorphosis* (n. 44), 127–143; Solrunn Nes, *The Uncreated Light: An Iconographical Study of the Transfiguration in the Eastern Church*, Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, MA 2007, pp. 75–76; Jaś Elsner, Gerhard Wolf, "The Transfigured Mountain: Icons and Transformations of Pilgrimage at the Monastery of St Catherine at Mount Sinai", in *Approaching the Holy Mountain. Art and Liturgy at St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai*, Sharon Gerstel, Robert Nelson eds, Turnhout 2010, pp. 37–73, sp. pp. 45–58; Sean V. Leatherbury, "Reading and Seeing Faith in Byzantium: the Sinai Inscription as Verbal and Visual 'text'", *Gesta,* LV (2016), pp. 133–156; Armin F. Bergmeier, *Visionserwartung: Visualisierung und Präsenzenfahrung des Göttlichen in der Spätantike*, Wiesbaden 2017, pp. 129–136; Andrew Paterson, "Climbing the Invisible Mountain: The Apse Mosaics at St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai and their Sixth Century Viewers", in *Mountains, Mobilities and Movement,* Christos Kakalis, Emily Goetsch eds, London 2018, pp. 107–128.

in the words of Mark the Evangelist[81] [Fig. 3]. Furthermore, the Transfiguration is accompanied by two scenes of Moses depicted on the triumphal arch: the Burning Bush and the reception of the Law. The two episodes, both happened on Mount Sinai, create the aforementioned hierarchy of visions celebrated by several early Byzantine homilies on the Transfiguration[82]. Even the lighting system in the church helped to emphasize this hierarchy: Moses' scenes received only the light coming from the windows, while the apse mosaic was illuminated by a hanging candlestick, which remained lit at night[83]. The apse of St Catherine was not an isolated case. In the 6th century the Transfiguration became a more frequently depicted episode in the East and in the West. A close example, although with some relevant differences, was painted in the southern apse of the South Church at Shivta (formerly Sobata) [Fig. 4], in the Negev Desert (Israel), tentatively dated to the 6th century[84]. We must remember also the non-figural version of Sant'Apollinare in Classe (549) [Fig. 5], as well as some cases entirely or almost entirely lost, such as the cathedral of Naples and the Euphrasian Basilica in Poreč[85]. To these examples could perhaps be added the scene included in the mosaic decoration of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, described by Constantine Rhodius in the 10th century, and by Nicholas Mesarites at the beginning of the 13th century[86].

It is no coincidence that the elaboration of the Transfiguration's iconography reached its real fulfillment in the 6th century. As highlighted by Maria Andaloro, the appearance of the Transfiguration in Christian Art is contemporary with the dissemination of icons[87]. As I mentioned above, I believe that panel paintings with Christian subjects existed earlier than the 6th century. There is no doubt, however, that in this period the icon reached a position of greater strength. Legends about *acheiropoietai* images prove the connection of icons with the dogmas of the Incarnation and of the two natures of Christ, although they do not explicitly address the problem of justifying Christian images[88].

Apart from the above-mentioned mosaics, the monastery of Saint Catherine preserves the main group of icons dating back to the age before Iconoclasm. Among these, there are two panels representing the Prophet Elijah, one of the protagonists of the episode of Tabor[89]. The interest in the theme of theophany is undoubtedly inherent to the place (Mount Sinai), as suggested by Elsner and Wolf[90]. However, Maria Andaloro has rightly highlighted a very deep connection that links the Transfiguration episode to the diffusion of icons: both are founded on the dogma of the two natures of Christ, defined by the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. This was still a hot topic in the 6th

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[81] Mc 9, 3.

[82] Elsner, "The Viewer" (n. 80), pp. 86–90.

[83] Vladimir Ivanovici, *Manipulating Theophany: Light and Ritual in North-Adriatic Architecture (ca. 400 – ca. 800)*, Berlin 2016, p. 183.

[84] Pau Figueras, "Remains of a Mural Painting of the Transfiguration in the Southern Church of Sobata (Shivta)", ARAM *Periodical*, XVIII–XIX (2006–2007), pp. 127–51; Leatherbury, "Reading" (n. 80), pp. 149–150; Emma Maayan-Fanar, "The Transfiguration at Shivta: Retracing Early Byzantine Iconography", *Zograf*, XLI (2017), pp. 1–18.

[85] Erich Dinkler, *Das Apsismosaik von S. Apollinare in Classe*, Cologne 1964; Elsner, "Image" (n. 80), pp. 474–475, figs 4–5; Novelli, "La 'Trasfigurazione'" (n. 80); Alžběta Filipová, "Santo, vescovo e confessore. L'immagine di sant'Apollinare nei mosaici di Classe", in *L'évêque, l'image et la mort, Identité et mémoire au Moyen Âge,* Nicholas Bock, Ivan Foletti, Michele Tomasi eds, Rome 2014, pp. 431–444; Carola Jäggi, "Sant'Apollinare in Classe. Ein ravennatisches Gegenstück zu Alt-Sankt Peter in Rom?", *ibidem*, pp. 445–466.

[86] *Constantine of Rhodes. On Constantinople and the Church of the Holy Apostles*, Liz James, Ioannis Vassis eds, Farnham 2012, vv. 804–828, pp. 72–75; Glanville Downey, "Nikolaos Mesarites, Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople", *Transactions of the American Philosophical Association*, XLVII/6 (1957), pp. 855–92, chapter XVI, pp. 871–873, 902–903. For the debate on the chronology of the mosaics, see *Constantine of Rhodes* (n. 86), pp. 204–217, with previous bibliography.

[87] Maria Andaloro, *La Trasfigurazione e l'icona di Cristo*, paper given at the international conference *Il volto oscuro del divino*, organized by Maria Stella Calò Mariani, (Bari, Foggia, Lucera, 20th–20rd January 2010). The proceedings of this conference have not been published.

[88] See note 21.

[89] Kurt Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: the icons, vol. I, From the sixth to the tenth century*, Princeton 1976, no. B 17, pp. 42–43; no. B 25, p. 49; Kathleen Corrigan, "Visualizing the Divine: An Early Byzantine Icon of the 'Ancient of Days' at Mount Sinai", in *Approaching the Holy Mountain* (n. 80), pp. 285–304, 285–286; Elsner/Wolf, "The Transfigured Mountain" (n. 80), pp. 44–45.

[90] Elsner/Wolf, "The Transfigured Mountain" (n. 80), pp. 46–50.

century because of the spread of the Monophysite heresy as pointed out by Andreas Andreopoulos. Therefore, we can say that the Transfiguration becomes such an important theme in the 6th century precisely because it provides a perfect demonstration of the dogma of the two natures[91]. Indeed, the revelation of the two natures of Christ on Mount Tabor is affirmed with great emphasis in some Byzantine homilies on the Transfiguration: for example, those of Anastasius and Timothy of Antioch and of Pseudo-Ephrem, whose Chalcedonian terminology we have already mentioned[92]. Above all we have to remember John of Damascus (8th century), who dwells at length on the divine glory irradiating from the person of Christ. According to John, this glory comes to the body not from outside, from Heaven, but from inside, thanks to the hypostatic union of the human nature of Christ with the divine[93].

This link appears to be crucially important, since it shows how the episode of Tabor is intimately connected to the problem of the representability of Christ, in its dual nature of man and God.

The connection between the Transfiguration and the icon was significantly anticipated by the *Epistula ad Constantiam*, by the *Fragmenta in Lucam* and by Leontius, and by no coincidence it was a major topic also during the iconoclastic controversy. The iconomachs used the Transfiguration episode as an argument to deny the legitimacy of the images. The *Letter to Constantina* was part of the anthology of the Council of Hieria of 754. Later, the Second Council of Nicaea (787) accused Eusebius of being an Arian and the text was not included in the florilegium of the iconoclastic council of 815, which conversely incorporated the fragment by Leontius. However, the *Epistula ad Constantiam* was still considered a significant foothold for the iconoclastic thought, as proved by the fact that the iconophile patriarch Nicephorus considered it necessary to refute it in his *Contra Eusebium*[94]. The patriarch, nonetheless, not only rejects the literary testimonies provided by the iconoclasts, but also uses the Transfiguration as a positive argument to support Christian images. In his *Refutatio et Eversio*, while listing some famous *acheiropoietai* icons, he recalls a "Roman image of the Transfiguration", which was believed to have been painted by Peter and Paul during their stay in Rome[95]. This image is also mentioned by George Monachus, and although it seems of legendary nature it confirms the crucial importance of the link between the Transfiguration and the icons[96].

The relevance attributed to the Transfiguration by iconophile textual sources is confirmed by the artistic production of Rome in the 8th and in the 9th centuries, especially in wall paintings. The pictorial cycle realized in the church of Saint Sabas on the Aventine hill in the second quarter of the 8th century included scenes of the life of the Virgin and of the Infancy of Christ on the right wall and a big, oversized representation of the Transfiguration on the left wall. As remarked by Giulia Bordi, the choice of the episodes and the special prominence given to the Transfiguration are connected to the role that the dogmas of the Incarnation and of the two natures of Christ had in the theological debates of the 7th and of the 8th centuries, and particularly in the Iconoclast era. According to Bordi, the cycle of saint Sabas dates back to the age of Pope Gregory III (731–741), who in 731 convened a synod in Rome to condemn the Iconoclast policy recently launched by the Byzantine court[97]. Later, the theme of the Transfiguration was apparently even more popular in Rome between the late 8th century and the beginning of the 9th. During the pontificate of Leo III (796–816) it was included in the mosaic

[91] Andreopoulos, "The Mosaic" (n. 53), pp. 15–17; Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis* (n. 44), pp. 133–136.

[92] Pseudo Ephrem, *Sermon on the Transfiguration of our Lord* (n. 45), par. 13; Anastasius I, *Sermo in Transfigurationem* (n. 48), 1373B–C; Daley, *Light* (n. 44), pp. 141, 151; Timothy of Antioch, *Homilia in crucem et transfigurationem*, PG 86.1, 264A. Other examples provided by Andreopoulos: see the previous note.

[93] John of Damascus, *Oratio de gloriosa Domini nostri Iesu Christi transfiguratione*, 2, 4, 12–13, PG 96, 548C–549A, 552C, 564B–565A; Daley, *Light* (n. 44), pp. 207, 211, 220–221.

[94] Nicephorus of Constantinople, *Contra Eusebium et Epiphanidem*, in Pitra, *Spicilegium* I (n. 3), pp. 383–386 (quotation of the letter), 387–466 (refutation).

[95] Nicephorus of Constantinople, *Refutatio et eversio definitionis synodalis anni 815*: for the list of *acheiropoietai* icons, 82, 55–92, in *Nicephori Patriarchae* (n. 32), pp. 142–143; for the icon of Transfiguration see especially 82, 65–73, in *Nicephori Patriarchae* (n. 32), p. 142.

[96] Giorgius Monachus, *Historia*, IV, 268, in Dobschütz, *Christusbilder* (n. 21); pp. 108*–109*; Michele Bacci, "L'effigie sacra e il suo spettatore", in *Arti e storia nel Medioevo*, III, *Del vedere: pubblici, forme e funzioni*, Turin 2004, pp. 199–252, sp. p. 207.

[97] Giulia Bordi, *Gli affreschi di san Saba al Piccolo Aventino: dove e come erano*, Milan 2008, pp. 110–111.

decoration of saints Nereus and Achilleus, on the apsidal arch, flanked by two eloquent representations of the Incarnation, the Annunciation and the enthroned Theotokos[98] (ca 815-816) [Fig. 6]. The Transfiguration was also depicted in the mosaics of the chapel of St Zeno in Santa Prassede (ca 818-819) [Fig. 7], commissioned by Paschal I (817–824)[99], a pope who took a stand against the second iconoclastic wave, addressing to the Emperor Leo V the Armenian a letter in defense of sacred images, written in Greek language[100]. In Santa Prassede the Transfiguration is also unusually combined with the depiction of the Heavenly Jerusalem in the mosaic of the triumphal arch, thanks to the presence of Moses and Elijah at the side ends. The inclusion of the two prophets can be explained on the basis of the parallel between the Tabor theophany and the vision of John led by the angel on a high mountain (Ap 21, 10)[101], but it could also have an iconophile meaning. In the second half of the 8th century even the Gallic theologian Ambrose Autpert paid significant attention to the Transfiguration. Monk and abbot of San Vincenzo al Volturno, Autpert had a primary role in the dissemination of Greek iconophile culture in central and southern Italy, also influencing the visual production, as shown by the studies of Francesca Dell'Acqua[102].

Conclusions

Going back to the *Letter to Constantina*, the affinities with the *Fragmenta in Lucam* (4th century) and with the passage by Leontius (late 4th – early 5th century), but also the rarity of the episode of Mount Tabor in Early Christian visual art suggest that the relevance attributed to the Transfiguration in the letter can be considered an important argument in support of the authenticity or at least of an early chronology of the text, within the 4th century. Both the written sources and the visual evidence show how for a long-time span – from the Early Christian era to the age of Iconoclasm – the connection between the Transfiguration and the possibility of representing Christ in his dual nature of man and God was deep, crucial and full of consequences for the artistic production.

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[98] Gaetano Curzi, "Reflexes of Iconoclasm and Iconophilia in the Roman Wall Paintings and Mosaics of the 8th and 9th Centuries", *Ikon*, XI (2018), pp. 9–20, sp. pp. 10–11; Francesca Dell'Acqua, "Iconophilia in Italy, c. 680–880: a European Project and its Method", *ibidem*, pp. 31–46, sp. p. 35, with previous bibliography.

[99] Gillian Mackie, "The Zeno Chapel: a Prayer for Salvation", *Papers of the British School at Rome*, LVII (1989), pp. 172–199; Ivan Foletti, Valentine Giesser, "Il IX secolo: da Pasquale I (817–824) a Stefano V (885–891)", in *La committenza artistica dei Papi a Roma nel Medioevo*, Mario D'Onofrio ed., Rome 2016, pp. 219–238, sp. pp. 228–230; Curzi, "Reflexes" (n. 98), p. 16; Francesca Dell'Acqua, *Iconophilia. Religion, Politics, and Sacred Images in Italy c. 680–880*, forthcoming, especially chap. 3, *A redeeming light*, par. *The light of the Redeemer in S. Zeno*. I wish to thank Francesca Dell'Acqua for giving me the chance of reading this work.

[100] Alia Englen, "La difesa delle immagini intrapresa dalla chiesa di Roma nel IX secolo", in *Santa Maria in Domnica, San Tommaso in Formis e il Clivus Scauri*, Alia Englen, Franco Astolfi eds, Rome 2003, pp. 257–278.

[101] Peter Anthony, *Interpreting Vision: a Survey of Patristic Reception of the Transfiguration and its Earliest Depiction, with Special Reference to the Gospel of Luke*, PhD thesis, Oxford 2014, pp. 299–308, with previous bibliography. See also Rotraut Wisskirchen, *Das Mosaikprogramm von S. Prassede in Rom: Ikonographie und Ikonologie*, Münster 1990, pp. 63–99, 119–123.

[102] Ambrose Autpert, *Homilia de transfiguratione Domini*, in *Opera* III, CCCM 27B, R. Weber ed., Turnhout 1979, pp. 1003–24; Dell'Acqua, "Iconophilia in Italy" (n. 98), with previous bibliography; Francesca Dell'Acqua, *Iconophilia. Religion* (n. 99), chap. 3, par. *Beyond the Transfiguration: Christ–Light in S. Prassede and S. Cecilia.*

Fig. 1 – Transfiguration of Christ, Lipsanotheca of Brescia, ivory casket, back, central band, left side, last quarter of the 4th century, Brescia, Museo di Santa Giulia (© Civici Musei di Brescia – Fotostudio Rapuzzi)

Fig. 2 – Transfiguration of Christ, panel of the wooden doors of Santa Sabina, Rome, ca 422–440 (from Ivan Foletti, Manuela Gianandrea, *Zona Liminare. Il nartece di Santa Sabina, le sue porte e l'iniziazione cristiana*, Rome 2015, tav. IX)

Fig. 3 – Transfiguration of Christ, Moses and the Burning Bush, Moses receiving the plates of the Law, mosaics of the apse and of the apsidal arch of the basilica of Saint Catherine's monastery at mount Sinai, ca 548–565 (from Vladimir Ivanovici, *Manipulating Theophany. Light and Ritual in North Adriatic Architecture [ca. 400 – ca. 800]*, Berlin 2016, fig. 31, p. 151; photo by Centro di Conservazione Archeologica – Rome)

Fig. 4 – Transfiguration of Christ, fragmentary pictorial decoration of the southern apse of the Southern church of Shivta, Negev, 6th century, graphic reconstruction by Emma Maayan Fanar (from Emma Maayan-Fanar, "The transfiguration at Shivta: retracing Early Byzantine iconography", in *Zograf*, XLI (2017), pp. 1–18, fig. 10, p. 9)

Fig. 5 – Transfiguration of Christ with saint Apollinaris, apse mosaic of the basilica of saint Apollinaire in Classe, Ravenna, 549 (from Vladimir Ivanovici, *Manipulating Theophany. Light and Ritual in North Adriatic Architecture [ca. 400 – ca. 800]*, Berlin 2016, fig. 46, p. 209; photo by P. Dell'Angelo)

Fig. 6 – Annunciation, Transfiguration of Christ, Enthroned Theotokos with the Child and an angel, Mosaic of the apsidal arch of santi Nereo e Achilleo, Rome, ca 815–816 (© Wikimedia Commons)

Fig. 7 – Transfiguration of Christ, detail of the mosaic decoration of the Zeno Chapel, Santa Prassede, Rome, ca 818–819 (photo by Domenico Ventura)

Transfigurace a *eikon* Krista. Od Eusebiova dopisu Konstantině po ikonoklasmus

Chiara Bordino

Článek se zabývá tzv. dopisem Eusebia z Kaisareie Konstantině a dalšími raně křesťanskými texty, které se dotýkají otázky, zda je možné vidět a zobrazovat Krista. Původnost dopisu byla předmětem četných odborných debat. Pochybnosti o autorství Eusebia se mimo jiné zakládaly na skutečnosti, že autor dopisu vytváří spojitost mezi obrazem a inkarnací a předkládá tak argument, který se zdá být předčasným pro čtvrté století. Soudobé texty, které autorka představuje, však ukazují, že o zmíněném spojení je skutečně možné uvažovat již ve čtvrtém a pátém století. Autorka analyzuje část Eusebiova dopisu, která se zaměřuje na transfiguraci Krista a zmiňuje příběh odehrávající se na hoře Tábor jako důkaz nemožnosti zobrazit Krista: Kristovo lidské tělo totiž nelze oddělit od Božské slávy, která je nezobrazitelná. Zmíněnou pasáž dopisu autorka srovnává s jinými raně křesťanskými a protobyzantskými texty, které používají příběh o proměnění Páně, jako argument pro popření možnosti vidět a zobrazit Krista. Jedná se o tzv. *Fragmenta in Lucam,* text, který je rovněž připsaný Eusebiovi z Kaisareie, a fragment presbytera Leontia citovaný v díle Nikefora z Konstantinopole *Refutatio et Eversio definitionis synodalis anni 815*. Taková shoda by mohla podpořit tvrzení o autenticitě dopisu (či alespoň jeho části) nebo přinejmenším o tom, že byl sepsán v období před ikonoklasmem. Navíc se zdá, že interpretace, kterou nám poskytují zmíněné texty, se odráží i ve vizuální produkci: do druhé poloviny čtvrtého století není scéna na hoře Tábor nikde zobrazena, od šestého století se ale zobrazení transfigurace znatelně rozšiřuje – zajisté i proto, že skvěle ilustruje dogma o dvojí podstatě Krista. Není překvapivé, že během ikonoklasmu se o transfiguraci zajímali jako odpůrci, tak i zastánci obrazů, a používali ji jako argument, aby popřeli, nebo potvrdili možnost Krista zobrazit. Scény transfigurace nacházíme také na památkách z osmého a devátého století, které se pojí s ikonofilským prostředím.
Textové i obrazové důkazy od raně křesťanského do ikonoklastického období tak potvrzují zásadní spojení mezi epizodou z hory Tábor a otázkou viditelnosti a zobrazitelnosti Krista.