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Article abstract

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Venerating a Pagan Prophecy: The *ara coeli* Legend between Humanist Erudition, Reformation Theology, and Popular Piety

FINN SCHULZE-FELDMANN

This article examines the ara coeli *legend, a tale in which the Tiburtine Sibyl showed Emperor Augustus a vision of a virgin holding a child proclaiming the child's greatness. Based on both texts and art works, mainly from the Holy Roman Empire, it argues that the legend owed its widespread popularity to the way in which it was grafted onto the fifteenth-century Marian cult. While flourishing in coexistence with the humanist reconsideration of the Sibylline heritage, this incorporation into popular belief ultimately led to the legend's decline during the Reformation, as reformers and later Catholic theologians revised Mary's role in the unfolding of Christian salvation. In the face of Protestant and post-Tridentine theology, the* ara coeli *legend thus subsided into religious irrelevance, giving way to political, mythological, and gendered interests in the Sibyls.*

*Cet article s'intéresse à la légende de l'*ara coeli*, un récit dans lequel la sibylle triburtine expose à l'empereur Auguste la vision d'une vierge tenant un enfant en proclamant la grandeur de celui-ci. En s'appuyant à la fois sur des textes et des œuvres d'art, principalement du Saint-Empire romain germanique, il soutient que la légende doit sa grande popularité à la manière dont elle s'est greffée sur le culte marial du XV^e^ siècle. Tout en s'épanouissant en coexistence avec la reconsidération humaniste de l'héritage sibyllin, cette incorporation dans l'imaginaire populaire a ultimement conduit au déclin de la légende pendant la Réforme, lorsque les réformateurs et, plus tard, les théologiens catholiques ont réévalué le rôle de Marie dans le déroulement du salut chrétien. Face à la théologie protestante et post-tridentine, la légende de l'*ara coeli *a ainsi perdu sa pertinence religieuse, laissant place à des intérêts politiques, mythologiques et genrés pour les sibylles.*

Introduction

In pagan antiquity, the Sibyls were commonly seen as prophetesses who, in a state of frenzy, divined mainly disasters and calamities. Ever since the Sibylline pronouncements were interpreted by the Church Fathers as prophecies foretelling the coming of Christ and other key tenets of the Christian faith, they have prompted strong responses: they were firmly rejected as counterfeit fabrications by some, while others wholeheartedly embraced them as pristine, yet clandestine truths. Despite some reservations, the Sibyls came to be accepted in medieval Europe as Christian prophetesses and, with the arrival of Renaissance humanism, reached the zenith of their popularity as they promised

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humanists Christian revelations originating from classical antiquity.[1] More than merely gentile equivalents of the Biblical prophets, they were considered to have paved the way for a universal Church, as was most famously expressed in the Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes by Michelangelo (1475–1564).[2]

However, the visual culture from the Middle Ages right into the sixteenth century features a Sibylline tale without any claim of patristic legitimization, the so-called *ara coeli* (altar of heaven) legend. Indeed, more recently, the notion that the interest in Sibylline lore was revived during the Renaissance has been challenged by the study of texts such as the *Sibylla Tiburtina* and the *Sibilla Erithea Babilonica*, which circulated widely throughout central Europe, first in manuscript form during the high Middle Ages and later in print.[3] Yet, the increase in the devotional interest in the *ara coeli* legend as well as the effects of the shifts in the religious and intellectual landscape following the Renaissance and Reformation have been left largely undiscussed. While Hannes Möhring suggests that this story was merely the popular form of the *Sibylla Tiburtina*, Carlo de Clercq went so far as to exclude the legend in his extensive research on the Sibyls in late medieval images.[4] This lack of scholarly attention seems to be partly because the legend is scantly discussed in scholarly and literary works from the medieval and early modern periods. The abundance of visual evidence, however, suggests an enduring reverence for the *ara coeli* legend and a highly complex and variegated tradition.

Therefore, this article maps out the development of the *ara coeli* legend in the Holy Roman Empire and its adjacent regions from its heyday during the early Renaissance until its downfall during the Reformation, not only in

1. See Raybould, *Sibyl Series*; Green, *Printing and Prophecy*; Galley, *La Sibylle*, 107–44; Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis*; Settis, "Sibilla Agripa."

2. See Wind, *Religious Symbolism*, 124–48.

3. See Holdenried, *Sibyl*, 173–97; Jostmann, *Sibilla Erithea Babilonica*, 431–93. For a sketch of the Sibyls' influence during the Middle Ages, see Dronke, "Medieval Sibyls." Robin Raybould identifies five Sibylline traditions circulating at the end of the Middle Ages; in addition to the *Sibylla Tiburtina*, *Sibilla Erithea Babilonica*, and the *ara coeli* legend, he includes the acrostic poem transmitted by Augustine in his *De civitate Dei* (18.23) and the so-called *Sibyllenweissagung*, a fifteenth-century prophecy in German verse studied by Ingeborg Neske (Raybould, *Sibyl Series*, 34–38). See also Neske, *Die spätmittelalterliche deutsche Sibyllenweissagung*; Augustine, *City of God*, ed. McCracken et al., 5:440–51.

4. Möhring, *Der Weltkaiser der Endzeit*, 350–52; Clercq, "Quelques séries italienes"; "Les Sibylles"; "Contribution […] des Sibylles I"; "Contribution […] des Sibylles II"; "Quelques séries de Sibylles."

terms of the formulation of and reflection on doctrine but also with regard to the expression of beliefs and manifestation of pious practices. By taking into account textual testimonies, such as dogmatic and literary works, and material objects, such as interiors of churches, textiles, and other forms of figurative representation, I challenge the thesis that the intensified interest in the Sibyls and their prophetic utterances was mainly a result of the humanist revival of classical learning and the rekindled engagement with patristic theology. While this may hold true for Italian humanists and Renaissance artists, in Europe north of the Alps it was specifically the *ara coeli* legend and the new meanings it had obtained from the fifteenth century that constituted the authority of the Sibyls and enabled the Sibylline lore to reach the height of its popularity and significance in Christian thought at the turn of the sixteenth century. Indeed, the *ara coeli* legend grew so important precisely because it was appropriated into the late medieval cult of Mary.[5] Only after the Reformation had challenged these beliefs did the popularity of and devotional preoccupation with the *ara coeli* legend recede, thereby giving way to more political and gendered readings of Sibylline lore across central Europe.

To first bring to light the significance of the *ara coeli* legend, the emergence of the legend and its consolidation as a popular medieval belief will briefly be outlined. I will then suggest that, coincidental with the revival of patristic theology and its appropriation of the classical Sibyls, the veneration of the legend increased mainly among the laity. Thanks to its interpretative adaptability, the legend penetrated the Marian devotion of the late Middle Ages as a device glorifying the Virgin. Lastly, I will show that by the mid-sixteenth century it was not so much the objections to the validity of the Sibylline tradition expressed by the reformers but the reinterpretations of Mary in all denomational camps that rendered the narrative dispensable, letting it diminish into irrelevance.

The legend's rise and medieval veneration

To this day the origins of the *ara coeli* legend remain unclear. While some have traced it to early Christian writers, such as John Malalas (c. 491–c. 578 CE) or the sixth-century historian Eustathius of Epiphania, others maintain it originated

5. For contemporary adaptations of Sibylline lore in France, for example, see Thérel, "Etude iconographique"; Le Merrer, "Des sibylles."

in pagan antiquity.[6] The version that was finally to become one of the chief narratives of the Sibylline tradition in Western Christianity was first codified in the *Mirabilia urbis Romae* during the 1140s.[7] According to this work, Emperor Augustus was approached by the Roman people, who wanted to venerate him as a god. He refused their demand so he might seek counsel from the Tiburtine Sibyl first. After three days of consideration, she revealed a celestial vision of the Virgin standing over an altar with the Christ Child in her arms. He was the Son of God, the Sibyl proclaimed, and greater than all mortals, including the all-powerful emperor. She also recited an acrostic poem rife with apocalyptic imagery, which Augustine (354–430 CE) later included in his *City of God*.[8]

The idea that the Sibyl, as the Roman state oracle, revealed Christian tenets of faith had much older roots in the patristic notion of a twofold revelation: God had revealed Himself to the gentiles through the Sibyls and to the Hebrews through the prophets canonized in the Old Testament.[9] The two Church Fathers most influential for the *Nachleben* of the Sibyls in Western Christianity were Lactantius (c. 250–c. 325 CE) and Augustine. With his *Divinae institutiones*, the former presented a powerful attempt to reconcile Christianity with the polytheistic beliefs of antiquity. Based on a wealth of ancient writings, he demonstrated that the pagans had received a number of revelations that granted them insight into the realm of the divine and the coming of Christ. Among them were the Sibyls, whose utterances Lactantius classified as divine testimonies. Following a since lost account by Varro (116–27 BCE), he enumerated ten, providing basic information for each.[10] On the other hand, Augustine shaped the later image of

6. See Raybould, *Sibyl Series*, 37. According to the version by John Malalas (*Chronographia* 10.5), the Pythia, who was earlier in this work described as a Sibyl, was approached by Augustus and asked who was to succeed him as emperor. Upon her pronouncement that a Hebrew child was requesting her to leave the house and so should Augustus himself, he decided to set up an altar on the Capitol bearing the inscription that it was the altar of the first-born God (Malalas, *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, ed. Thurn, 176). Philippe Verdier traces its origin to the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (Verdier, "La naissance," 85–86). Peter Burke has suggested that the foundation of the legend was laid by Suetonius (69–122 CE) in his *De vita Caesarum* (Burke, "Augustus and Christianity," 213–15).

7. "Le quide più antiche," 55; *Mirabilia urbis Romae* 11.

8. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 18.23; *City of God*, 5.440–51. See also Hooker, "Use of Sibyls," 343–95; Dronke, "Medieval Sibyls," 591–97.

9. See Jonge, "Sibyl," 16–17, 19.

10. See Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones* 1.6.8–12; *Divinarum institutionum libri septem*, ed. Heck and Wlosok, 1.24–25.

the Sibyls as apocalyptic prophetesses by granting the Erythraean Sibyl access to his "City of God" on account of her apocalyptic foreknowledge revealed in the acrostic poem mentioned above. Later entitled *Iudicii signum*, this composition became highly significant, not least because it was the most extensive Sibylline utterance known during the Middle Ages.

Soon after the story of Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl was included in the *Mirabilia*, the myth began circulating in medieval Europe, attracting huge popularity throughout all echelons of society.[11] In medieval chronicles it was cited either to exemplify Augustus's eminence, as Gervase of Tilbury (c. 1150–1228) did in his *Otia imperialia*, or to underline the universality of the Christian message and to elevate Rome as the place where God had chosen to reveal Himself through a pagan prophet, as Martin of Troppau (d. 1278) did in his *Chronicon pontificum et imperatorum*.[12] With regard to popular belief, its most important vehicles of dissemination appear to have been two devotional works. In the thirteenth-century *Legenda aurea* by Jacobus da Varagine (c. 1230–98), the *ara coeli* legend was categorized as an annunciation of Christ's birth revealed by corporeal entities, that is, *lapides* (stones), for it was by means of the sun that the apparition had been granted.[13] In the fourteenth-century *Speculum humanae salvationis*, on the other hand, the legend featured as a prefiguration of the birth of Christ alongside the blossoming of Aaron's rod (Numbers 17:8) and Abraham's dream of God promising him an offspring (Genesis 20) or, as in a Franconian exemplar from the mid-fourteenth century, with the dream of Pharao's butler (Genesis 40:9–15) (see Fig. 1).[14] Drawing on this combination of Biblical types and the *ara coeli* legend as a narrative from outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, the *Speculum* popularized the patristic idea, mentioned above, that the Christian message of salvation and redemption was universally accessible to all peoples. Even after the narrative was

11. Foundational for the study of the Sibyls during the Middle Ages is also McGinn, "*Teste David cum Sibylla*."

12. Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia imperialia* 2.16; *Otia imperialia*, ed. Banks and Binns, 372–75; Martin of Opava, *Chronicon pontificum et imperatorum* 1.

13. Jacobus de Varagine, *Legenda aurea*, ed. Grässe, 43–44. For the development of the legend prior to its inclusion in the *Legenda aurea*, see Verdier, "La naissance," 85–99.

14. Breitenbach, *Speculum humanae salvationis*, 127–29. For a comprehensive overview of modern scholarship on the *Speculum humanae salvationis* and a discussion of its authorship and date, see Niesner, *Das* Speculum humanae salvationis, 2–25.

transmitted more difusely as the *Speculum* and *Legenda* were rewritten, extended, and translated into different vernaculars, the *ara coeli* legend remained in firm association with the coming of Christ.[15]

Fig. 1. *Speculum humanae salvationis*, mid-fourteenth century, in Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, lat. fols. 329, fol. 8^{v}–9^{r}. © The Warburg Institute.

Medieval veneration between humanist erudition and popuar belief

Around the turn of the fourteenth century, a shift in the Sibylline tradition is evident with the emergence of humanism on the Italian peninsula. Whereas the Middle Ages had been preoccupied with narratives that focused on a single

15. For examples, see a fourteenth-century codex from the library of the Abbey of Kremsmünster, which omits the recital of the apocalyptic acrostic and instead recounts that "Herr Jesus Christ" (Lord Jesus Christ) had been born in Bethlehem, a piece of information not found in the *Mirabilia* (Niesner, *Das* Speculum humanae salvationis, 55–56, 164–69, 196 image 8d). For another example of a corruption by translation, see Daniëls, *De Spieghel*, 48–49. Similarly, the exemplar of a *Bible historiale* owned by the Solothurn family vom Staal recounted the *ara coeli* closely following the *Speculum humanae salvationis*, though the Tiburtine Sibyl was omitted from its illuminations (Saurma-Jeltsch, *Pietät*, 314–16).

Sibyl each, like the *ara coeli* legend, the *Sibylla Tiburtina*, and the *Sibilla Erithea Babilonica*, humanists now turned their attention to the many Sibyls of the classical tradition as described in the *Divinae institutiones*; accordingly, cycles of multiple seeresses began to emerge across Europe.[16] One of the earliest is shown on Giovanni Pisano's (c. 1250–c. 1315) pulpit of 1301 in the Sant'Andrea in Pistoia, which displays eight Sibyls modelled after Lactantius. These cycles with up to twelve Sibyls so grew in popularity that they could be considered as a stock image of Renaissance artists.

This mode of representation was soon replicated in transalpine regions. These depictions did not replace the hitherto popular *ara coeli* legend, however, but appeared side by side with it. A volume of the so-called Furtmeyr Bible, whose illuminations Berthold Furtmeyr (fl. 1465–1501) completed between 1465 and 1470, opens with an elaborately embellished cycle of twelve Sibyls on one side and, on the other, with an image of Mary nursing the Christ Child, flanked by Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl.[17] In fact, these two manners of representing Sibyls—the medieval figure in the *ara coeli* legend and the Renaissance cycles—did not just coexist; in some instances, the Tiburtine Sibyl of the *ara coeli* legend replaced the homonymous prophetess in Lactantius's *Divinae institutiones*. This proved particularly influential in the case of *Discordantiae sanctorum doctorum Augustini et Hieronymi* (1481) by Dominican friar Filippo Barbieri (1426–87).[18] Most probably based on this appropration of Sibylline sayings on the grounds of patristic theology, Hartmann Schedel (1440–1514) gave a detailed description of the *ara coeli* legend in his *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493), despite claiming to follow Lactantius's account (Fig. 2).[19] This conflation of humanist ideas with previously dominant traditions in theology and historical scholarship demonstrates a stronger continuity in thought and artistic motif than has previously been assumed.[20] With regard to the attempt to accommodate

16. See Raybould, *Sibyl Series*, 43–47, 73–91.

17. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (hereafter BSB), MS Cgm 8010a, fols 1v–2r. See Otto, "Kat.-Nr. 11 and 12"; Hernad, "Die Furtmeyr Bibel Cgm 8010a," 327.

18. Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones* 1.6.12; *Divinarum institutionum libri septem*, 1:25; Barbieri, *Discordantiae*, 21r. For this treatise, Barbieri relied on a lost Sibyl cycle in the palace of Cardinal Orsini. See Hélin, "Un texte"; Dempsey, *Early Renaissance*, 117–316.

19. Schedel, *Liber chronicarum*, 93v.

20. For example, Raybould, *Sibyl Series*; Wolfger Stumpfe, "Sibyllendarstellung"; Clercq, "Quelques séries italienes"; "Les Sibylles."

classical antiquity to Christianity, the contemporary intellectual and religious atmosphere was much more sympathetic towards appropriating or combining the newly revived classical Sibyls with the Sibylline narratives present throughout the Middle Ages.

Fig. 2. Hartmann Schedel, *Liber chronicarum* (Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 1493), fol. 93^{v}. © The Warburg Institute.

This new popularity of Sibylline lore is evident in the unprecedented degree of its representation, not only in theological and scholarly texts but also in liturgical spaces in as far north as the Aarhus Cathedral. Compared to the *Mirabilia*, which highlighted Christ's First Coming in His incarnation

and the apocalyptic foreboding of His Second Coming, the visual omission of the apocalyptic acrostic *Iudicii signum* being recited led to a fading of the legend's eschatological dimension and a new focus on the birth of Christ in line with the *Legenda* and the *Speculum*. Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400–1464) combines in his Bladelin altarpiece the *ara coeli* legend on the left wing with an iconographically rich representation of the Nativity on the centre panel.[21] Similarly, in two psalters produced by the workshop of Albrecht Altdorfer (c. 1480–1538) for the Tegernsee Abbey between 1514 and 1517, the Sibylline depictions emphasize the soteriological expectations raised by the birth of the Messiah by adorning readings from Isaiah intended for Christmas, the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ, Epiphany, and the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.[22] This is also evident in a wealth of devotional objects used to mark Christ's birth, including the so-called *Weihnachts-* or *Sibyllenteppich*, made in the Lüne Abbey of Benedictine nuns in about 1502.[23] Like the manuscript illuminations, this piece reveals the extent to which the *ara coeli* legend had come to be engrained in the celebrations of Christmas. It was Christ's incarnation and its revelation that now took centre stage in the *ara coeli* legend, an observation shared by Anke Holdenried, who argues that the manuscript

21. For an example of the *ara coeli* legend featuring in sacred architecture of France, see the façade of the Cathedral of Rouen; Bottineau-Fuchs, "La représentation." Another oft-cited representation of Augustus meeting the Tiburtine Sibyl is the Bordesholm altarpiece by Hans Brüggemann (c. 1480–c. 1540), though recent scholarship has cast doubts on this identification. The crowned turban, the unusual dress, and the standing position of the male figure differ from contemporary representations of this scene. What is more, the Virgin with the child as the focus point of the narrative would not have been visible in the Bordesholm altarpiece when it was closed throughout the year. The central focus of the composition therefore seems to be Christ, who, represented as the world's judge, is towering over the altarpiece. As a result, the two figures are now identified as King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, who was commonly believed to have been a Sibyl. That these two figures somewhat resemble the *ara coeli* legend is in fact not surprising given that in the so-called Goschhof altarpiece ascribed to Brüggemann these two narratives are also conflated. For the most comprehensive discussion of the Bordesholm altarpiece and the Goschhof altarpiece, see, respectively, Richter, *Hans Brüggemann*, 26–31; and "91 Retabel."

22. BSB, MS Clm 19201, fol. 179^{v}; MS Clm 19202, fol. 207^{v}. For other examples of early illuminations, see Cardon, *Manuscripts*, 176–77, 194, 214–15; Appuhn, *Heilsspiegel*, 23; Morgan Library (hereafter ML), MS M.140, fol. 11^{r}; MS M.766, fol. 30^{r}. For illuminations of books of hours, see ML, MS M.271, fol. 113^{r}; MS M.286, fol. 26^{r}.

23. Michael, *Die Inschriften*, 136–44. Other examples include the Sibylline tapestry, made by the Augustinian female canons in Heiningen in 1517. See Falk Eisermann, "Die Inschriften," 266–68. For a detailed analysis, see Mersch, *Soziale Dimensionen*, 304–14; Kruse, *Stiftsbibliotheken*, 332–42.

tradition of the *Sibylla Tiburtina* was largely read as pagan prophecy of the birth of Christ, not for its apocalyptic content.[24]

The *ara coeli* legend as a device of Marian glorification

In addition to this semantic shift, an opposing interpretation of the *ara coeli* legend emerged during the fifteenth century in the areas in and around the Holy Roman Empire. Rather than focusing on Christ's Comings, it placed much greater emphasis on Mary's role in mankind's salvation. Key for this absorption into the contemporary Marian cult was the conflation of the legend with the Book of Revelation. Initially connected by Eike of Repgow (c. 1180–c. 1233) in his *Breve chronicon Magdeburgense*, it was based on the resemblance of Mary in the *ara coeli* legend with the Woman of the Apocalypse (Revelation 12:1–6), who had been identified with the Virgin since the thirteenth century.[25] Both were depicted in the sky surrounded by beaming rays of the sun, as if clothed in them, and holding the Christ Child. Since the early fifteenth century, the crescent moon on which the Lady of the Apocalypse stands (Revelation 12:1) was beginning to be used also in the Marian apparition of the Tiburtine Sibyl, as in case of the *Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry (1340–1416).[26] The use of this iconography in a full-figure wooden sculpture, possibly by Marquard Hasse (fl. 1426–45/6), and in the altarpiece of St. Gertrud's in the Swedish town of Falsterbo suggests its spread across the Baltic Sea with a particularly strong popularity in the vivid Marian cult in Rostock, as can be seen in the churches of the Mecklenburg villages of Rosenow, Klein Helle, Cölpin, Lindow, and Kublank, which now house such altarpieces.[27]

24. Holdenried, *Sibyl*.

25. Verdier, "La naissance," 99–100. This identification was first noted by Francis Salet (Salet, "L'iconographie," 176). See also O'Hear and O'Hear, *Picturing the Apocalypse*, 115, 122.

26. The Cloisters, New York, MS 54.1.1, 20v.

27. See Bonsdorff, "Der Revaler." For examples of this iconography in manuscript illuminations, see ML, MS M.1078, fol. 120^{v}; MS H.5, fol. 14^{v}; MS S.1, fol. 16^{r}. See also Trinkert, *Flügelaltäre*, 103–4, 130, 274–75, 305–6, 327–28; Wagner, *Rosa Mystica*, 3, 23–30; Dufberg, *Falsterbo kyrka*.

Fig. 3. *Marian altarpiece*, c. 1450–1500, Rosenow, Dorfkirche. Author's photo.

All these compostions used the Sibyl's prophecy to glorify Mary as the mother of God. In the Rosenow altarpiece it was included alongside three Biblical episodes, which, framing the Virgin in the centre panel, each exalt an aspect of her holiness (Fig. 3): in the upper-left corner, the burning bush (Exodus 3:1–4:17) alludes to Mary's integrity; in the upper-right corner, Ezekiel is pointing at the closed gate (Ezekiel 44:2–3), commonly interpreted as Christ's incarnation by a virgin; and in the lower-right corner, Gideon is kneeling behind the golden

Fig. 4. Detail of the *Marian altarpiece*, c. 1450–1500, Rosenow, Dorfkirche. Author's photo.

fleece (Judges 6:36–40), a type of Mary's conception via the Holy Spirit. While the choice of these scenes is conventional, the inclusion of the apocryphal *ara coeli* legend in the lower-left corner of the centre panel (Fig. 4) is not.[28] Rather

28. The epitaph for Elsbeth and Ulrich Starck in the Nuremberg St. Sebald Church (c. 1450) is one of many examples of those three Biblical scenes being used in conjunction. See Weilandt, *Die Sebalduskirche*, 268. Another example for this combination is a plate praising the Virgin from Ottobeuren. See Zsellér, *Die Künstlerfamilie Strigel*, 221.

than relying on the *Protoevangelium of James* and other aprocryphal sources from which most of the Marian lore on the eve of the Reformation was derived, the little that the New Testament recounts of her life was bolstered not by another typological interpretation from the Old Testament but by the hugely popular *ara coeli* legend.[29] This narrative was particularly apt for this purpose, for unlike the Biblical types included in the cycle, it explicitly referred to Mary as the virgin bearing the Son of God in a way readily accessible for the lay, thereby ameliorating the paucity of scriptural evidence for her exceptional role in Christian salvation. In fact, this association in turn also corroborated the insufficient scriptural authority of the legend itself.

The legend was not just grafted onto the Marian cult, but, in a time preoccupied with the end of times, its apocalyptic dimension was highlighted by utilizing the resemblance of the legend's Marian apparition with the Woman of the Apocalypse. This is evident in how the *ara coeli* legend was depicted in the Lower Rhine region and Brabant, two areas culturally linked to the Baltic by Hanseatic trade.[30] This apocalyptic aspect was highlighted by juxtaposing the *ara coeli* legend with John of Patmos, a combination that, despite being described by Francis Salet, still awaits further analysis.[31] The earliest surviving examplar of this can be found in a book of hours, copied and probably illuminated by Nicolas Spierinc (fl. 1455–99) in 1486 (Fig. 5). Here, the Tiburtine Sibyl appears together with John of Patmos, who is shown haloed and seated, writing the Book of Revelation, as the inscription on the banderole above him suggests: "mulier amicta sole et luna sub pedibus eius apocalipse."[32] This depiction is visually connected to the *ara coeli* by the Virgin appearing as the Woman of the Apocalypse in an initial, to whom the Sibyl and the angel point; according to the *Legenda aurea*, John was accompanied by an angel.[33] While a number of religious texts and devotional objects feature this iconography to emphasize

29. Rubin, *Mother of God*, 3–8.

30. Evidence suggests that by way of personal contact with Joos van Cleve (c. 1485–1540/1), this kind of representation influenced the so-called lost *Altar der Stockholmfahrer* (Altarpiece of the travellers to Stockholm), formerly in the St. Mary's Church in Lübeck. See Albrecht, "26* Trinitätsretabel."

31. Salet, "L'iconographie," 176.

32. British Library (hereafter BL), Harley MS 2943, 17^{v}–18^{r}. "A woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet. Apocalypse." All translations are my own. Cf. Revelation 12:1. For contemporary depictions of John of Patmos, see Boxall, "Figure of John of Patmos."

33. Jacobus de Varagine, *Golden Legend*, ed. Ellis, 163.

apocalyptic concern, Henrick Douwerman (c. 1480–1543/44) created a complex program in two of his altarpieces.[34]

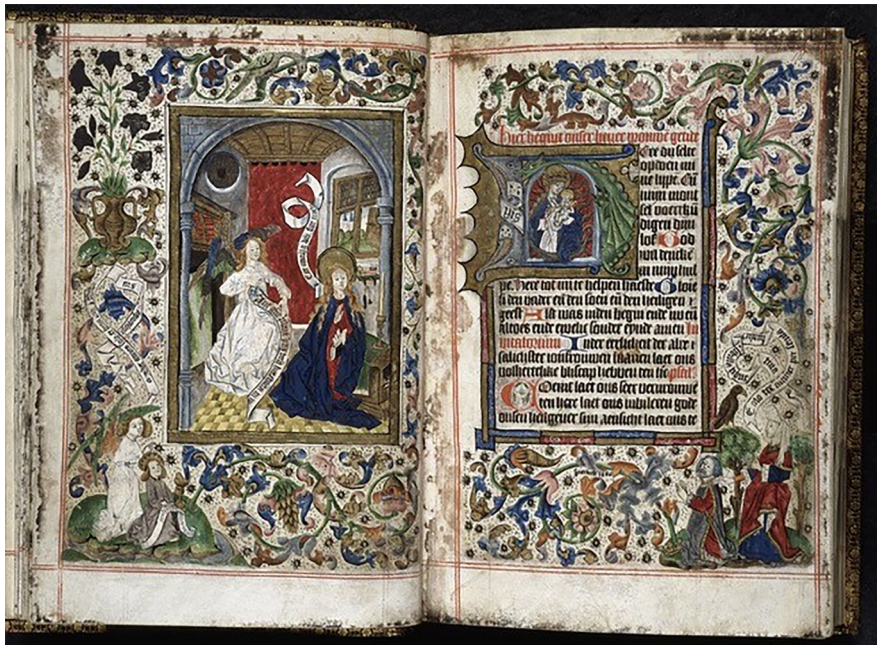

Fig. 5. Nicolas Spierinc, *Annunciation with John of Patmos, and the* ara coeli *legend*, 1486, in BL, Harley MS 2943, fols. 17ᵛ–18ʳ. © British Library Board.

Douwerman boosts the prophetic authority and significance of the Sibyl by visually suggesting that she not only provided testimony of how the coming of the Messiah had fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament in a way similar to the Evangelists, but also that she had prophesied about the end of times and

34. This particular imagery also featured in items both for private prayer, as in the case of a Flemish prayer book whose engravings were made by Jacob Binck (1494/1500–1569), and for more public forms of worship, as in the case of the retable produced by Adriaen van Wesel (c. 1417–c. 1490) for the "Brotherhood of Our Lady" in 's-Hertogenbosch and the shutters of the high altar in the local St. Nicolai Church produced by Jan Joest (1462/5–1529) for the Kalkar *Liebfrauenbruderschaft* (Brotherhood of the Dear Lady). See Halsema-Kubes, "Der Altar," 31–36, 144–56; Wolff-Thomson, *Jan Joest von Kalkar*, 118–20, 134–53; Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 9a:11–13, 51, plate 6. See also Hollstein, *German Engravings*, 4:28; Preising and Reif, *Niederländische Skulpturen*, 59–62.

therefore is still relevant for contemporary exegetes; in fact, unlike her counterpart John of Patmos, whose prophecy depended on the angel's assistance, the Tiburtine Sibyl need not rely on an intermediary. Douwerman achieves this in his Marian altarpiece created for the Xanten Cathedral in about 1535 and his Seven Sorrows retable probably produced between 1518 and 1521 for St. Nicolai in Kalkar.[35] At the top of the altarpieces, Mary is flanked by the Tiburtine Sibyl and Augustus on the left and by John of Patmos and the angel on the right. Both pairs are supported by branches entwining upwards from the pedrella containing the Tree of Jesse, in which the Biblical forefather of the House of David is resting.[36] Initially a visualization of Christ's lineage (Matthew 1:1–14), the Tree had lost its genealogical function soon after Bernhard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) considered it to represent the Virgin as the earthly mother of Christ, an identification in line with the dedications of the retables under discussion.[37] To the viewers' eyes, Mary appears firmly anchored in the Old Testament, whose messianic prophecy she fulfilled by giving birth to Jesus.[38] Yet, the presence of the Tiburtine Sibyl in combination with John of Patmos links Christ's birth to the end of times, when upon His return in the Last Judgement, Mary will again stand by humankind as its intercessor. In this manner, Mary's role in the soteriological narrative and in the eschatological expectation of Christianity is elevated and glorified as the everlasting *mediatrix*. It is she who, by interceding between God and mankind, will initiate man's redemption before defeating evil at the end of times. For Douwerman, the *ara coeli* legend therefore retained a high degree of relevance for its apocalyptic import.

The combination with John of Patmos also led to the *ara coeli* legend corroborating the Immaculate Conception. This uniquely liberal appropriation can be found in a triptych by the Master of the Holy Blood (fl. first quarter of the

35. See Rommé, "13 Relief," 174–76; *Henrick Douwerman*, 29, 45–49, 216–31.

36. In the predellas of altarpieces, Jesse is accompanied by four figures. In a retable for the Bruges cathedral of St. Donatian, Jan Provost (c. 1465–1529) used a similar combination of figures, which besides King Solomon and King David includes the Virgin and three Sibyls. Probably during a stay in Kalkar he got to know the Seven Sorrow retable. By adopting two Sibyls who reveal Mary's celestial emergence as Queen of Heaven to the Biblical kings Solomon and David, and a third one who draws the attention of the viewer to the Virgin, Provost produced a unique composition. See Rommé, "13 Relief," 174; Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 9b:88–89, 116, 182–83.

37. Watson, *Early Iconography*, 1–8; Schiller, *Ikonographie*, 6.2:157–62.

38. On the motif of the Tree of Jesse in Marian veneration, see Gelin, "*Stirps Jesse*," 25–27.

sixteenth century), commissioned by Franciscans probably from the Church of St. James in Bruges, where the retable is housed today (Fig. 6).[39] Originally advanced by the Franciscan Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1308), the Immaculate Conception describes the belief that Mary had been preserved from Original Sin, for after the soul of Mary had been sanctified through becoming the mother of Christ, it was united with her body at the very moment of her conception.[40] This belief is visually codified in the Bruges retable.[41] On the central panel, the Virgin is framed by angels holding the Instruments of the Passion. She is radiating light, which resembles the celestial apparitions of the Tiburtine Sibyl on the left shutter and John of Patmos on the right shutter (Fig. 7).[42] Against this background, Mary's humanity is demonstrated in her youthful complexion and her cradling the Christ Child. On either side, her parents Joachim and Anne are shown connected to Mary as the flowering end of the Tree of Jesse rooted in King Solomon, who can be identified by the inscription on the scroll he holds: "Tota pulchra es amica."[43] By the sixteenth century, this line from the Song of Songs had come to be associated with the Immaculate Conception.[44] This reading was further supported by Mary's plain white dress, a reference to the continuation of the *Tota pulchra es* hymn, "Vestimentum tuum candidum

39. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 9b:96–97, 118, 197–99.

40. Levi d'Ancona, *Iconography*, 5–11; Gay-Canton, *Entre dévotion*, 80–86.

41. Before Counter-Reformation theologians and artists adopted the motif of the Virgin standing on a crescent moon as a symbol of the victory over evil, a wealth of different visual devices represented the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Levi d'Ancona, *Iconography*, 25; Hodne, *Virginity*, 43.

42. Stratton, *Immaculate Conception*, 46–58.

43. Song of Songs 4:7. "Thou art all fair, my love." See Stratton, *Immaculate Conception*, 12–20. A group of five at the bottom of the centre panel features two prophetesses, each holding rolls: the one on the left, almost illegible, reads, "tenebit illum in gremio virgo" (The virgin will hold him in her womb), and the one on the right reads, "Gremium virginis salus populi" (The womb of the virgin is the salvation of the people). Relying on the influential treatise *Discordantiae* by Barbieri, the sayings can be attributed to the Libyan Sibyl and to the Persian Sibyl, respectively (Barbieri, *Discordantiae*, 11^{r}, 12^{r}). By this juxtaposition they are compared to the central figure of the five, Jesse, the progenitor of David and Christ, as well as the prophet Isaiah, identifiable by his scroll reading "Egredietur virga" (There shall come forth a rod; Isaiah 11:1), and Balam, whose scroll reads, "Orietur stella de Iacob" (The star of Jacob will rise; Numbers 24:17).

44. Stratton, *Immaculate Conception*, 39–46; Consolino, "*Veni huc a Libano*," 400, 410–11.

quasi nix, et facies tua sicut sol,"[45] omitted here but more than familiar to most contemporaries. Above the Virgin's head, there is the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descending onto her.[46]

Fig. 6. Master of the Holy Blood, *Marian altarpiece with the* ara coeli *legend and John of Patmos*, c. 1524, Church of St. James, Bruges. Author's photo.

The way in which Sibylline lore was harnessed for the corraboration of the Immaculate Conception in the Bruges altarpice is exceptional to the Franciscans, for whom both traditions were essential to their order's identity. The latter had been vehemently promoted by the Minor Brothers, most prominently by Francesco della Rovere (1414–84), who, as Pope Sixtus IV, approved

45. "Your dress is as white as snow and your face shines like the sun." See Stratton, *Immaculate Conception*, 46–58.

46. Levi d'Ancona, *Iconography*, 46. For other contemporary images of the Immaculate Conception following the same iconographic model, see Osten, "Niederdeutsche Bildwerke," 105, 107. The centre panel of this retable has some similarities with the *Deipara Virgo* by Ambrosius Benson (fl. 1519–d. 1550) and a miniature by Simon Bening (1483–1561) in the so-called *Livre d'heures aux fleurs*, as first recognized by Hans Semper. The resemblance of these two images is much greater than that with the retable. Notably, although in his *Deipara Virgo* Benson only alluded to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, its provenance from the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception in the Franciscan Chapel of Rockox in Antwerp implies the same association. BSB, Clm 23637, fol. 118^{v}; Semper, "Über einige Kompositionsentlehnungen," 446–47; Clercq, "Quelques séries de Sibylles," 50–52.

Fig. 7. Master of the Holy Blood, central panel of the *Marian altarpiece with the* ara coeli *legend and John of Patmos*, c. 1524, Church of St. James, Bruges. Author's photo.

the feast of Mary's Conception and commissioned its liturgical office.[47] The Franciscans also fostered a certain level of reverence for Sibylline lore, not least because their Roman church was the Basilica of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli, whose foundation the *ara coeli* legend had mythicized.[48] Additionally, Bartholomew of Rinonica (c. 1338–c. 1401) had claimed that Francis of Assisi (1181/82–1226) had been prophetically announced in the *Sibilla Erithea*

47. For the Franciscan influence on the consolidation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, see Lamy, *L'Immaculée conception*, 399–408.

48. For the representation of the *ara coeli* legend in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli, see Vayer, "L'affresco absidale."

Babilonica.[49] While contemporary theologians had refrained from utilizing the exegetical potential of the vast Sibylline lore and instead limited their study of the Sibyls to the patristic tradition, the Franciscans had readily combined two strands of tradition to create a unique reading of the *ara coeli* legend.

The adoption of the *ara coeli* legend into the Marian cult by 1500 found a parallel in contemporary sacred poetry.[50] In the 1500s, new Sibylline sayings appeared in a Venetian print of Barbieri's *Discordantiae*.[51] These six-verse poems, each allocated to a Sibyl as if it were her utterance, were composed in dactylic hexameters without any chronological or narrative progression evident. Written in an allusive style, they instead present prophecies glorifying the virgin birth of Christ as found in contemporary visual representations.[52] The poems mention a virgin who would give birth to the Son of God, describing her as a woman of particular beauty and as the queen of the world.[53] In identifying Christ's two natures, they highlight Mary's intercessory role between the divine and human realms, as she provides the material conditions for God's incarnation.[54] While Christ is characterized as a just ruler who will bring peace, it is His birth from

49. Bartholomew of Rinonica, "De conformitate vitae beati," ed. Collegio di San Bonaventura, 43–44. For the persistence of the *Sibilla Erithea Babilonica* into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Jostmann, *Sibilla Erithea Babilonica*, 489–93.

50. The lack of the Marian reading of the legend has led to rather distorted analyses of contemporary references to the *ara coeli*. For example, Alfred Wendehorst explains the naming of a Marian altarpiece in the Cathedral of Würzburg after this tale with a hypothetical trip of the altarpiece's donor, Kilian Geyer, who he believed to have found the position of the altarpiece above the Cathedral's choir as resembling the location of the Roman Basilica of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli at the top of a perron (Wendehorst, "Ara coeli"). However, the popularity of the legend and its absorption into the contemporary Marian cult presents the intellectual and religious context that sufficiently explains this attribution.

51. Because of this Marian praise, the authorship can be assumed to be contemporary with the appearance of the print, and, for its stylistic features, the poems are possibly rooted in the milieu of Italian humanists, as claimed by Peter Bergquist. Yet Bergquist's hypothesis that the author of the poems was acquainted with a manuscript of the Sibylline oracles appears rather unlikely considering the Marian emphasis of the poems and the small amount of information about the Virgin in the Sibylline oracles. See Bergquist, "Poems," 528–30; Bauer, "Die Messiasmutter," 118.

52. Jessica Malay claims that these are nativity prophecies (Malay, *Prophecy*, 52). Confining them to the birth of Christ, however, ignores the strong focus on Mary and other aspects of Christ presented in the poems. See Barbieri, *Opusculum de vaticiniis Sibyllarum*.

53. Barbieri, *Quattuor hic compressa opuscula*, Bii^{v}, [Biv^{v}], [Div^{v}].

54. Barbieri, *Quattuor hic compressa opuscula*, D^{v}.

Mary that is given most emphasis.[55] Similarly, in his *Heroidum Christianarum epistolae* (1514), a collection of fictitious letters by Christian figures imitating Ovid's *Heriodes*, Helius Eobanus Hessus (1488–1540) referenced the *ara coeli* legend with the intention of praising Mary. In a letter that Eobanus imagined Emmanuel, the son of God, had written to Mary, the Sibyl's presentation of a divine revelation marks Mary's crucial contribution to overthrowing the pagan cults and the ultimate victory of Christianity.[56] Remarkably, even Desiderius Erasmus (1469–1536) mentioned the Sibyls in the context of Marian devotion: "Regis aeterni fore te parentem / Deliae cantant liquido Sybillae / Scripta, membranis temere caducis / Credita, virgo."[57] He did not specify that it was the Tiburtine Sibyl who had spoken of Mary but instead linked the Sibyl to the original oracular tradition of ancient Greece, with Apollo as the source of inspiration; nevertheless, Erasmus placed the Sibylline revelation in a continuous chain of prophecies about Mary. It is this context that is typical of the knowledge attributed to the Sibyls in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century poetic culture. The Sibyls and, more specifically, the *ara coeli* legend had become engrossed in the Marian cult on the eve of the Reformation.

The Reformation and the legend's loss of devotional relevance

Yet this apparent flourishing of and continued reverence for the *ara coeli* legend stands in stark contrast to a sense of uncertainty among contemporary scholars about this narrative in particular and the Sibylline legacy in general. In his *Ecclesiastes* (1535), Erasmus highlighted two issues: first, too little of the oracles was extant for them to be employed meaningfully; second, the majority were fabrications. Without refuting their authenticity and their appropriation as

55. Barbieri, *Quattuor hic compressa opuscula*, Bii^{v}, [Biv^{v}], Cii^{v}, [Civ^{v}], Diiv. For the attribution of astrological powers to the Sibyl, see Smoller, "Astrology," 432–36; "*Teste Albumasare cum Sibylla*."

56. Eobanus, *Heroidum Christianarum Epistolae*, ed. Vredeveld, 168–69. Although Augustus maintained his polytheistic beliefs, Eobanus did consider the Sibyls as prophets who generally were heard. In the fictitious letter from Catherine of Alexandria to Christ, he had her read the Hebrew prophets as well as the Sibylline oracles and the Orphic Hymns, all of which are "filled with the light of your face." This is also confirmed by the letter Monica allegedly wrote to her son Augustine. Eobanus, *Heroidum Christianarum Epistolae*, 192–93, 252–53.

57. Erasmus, *Paean divae Mariae*, ed. Vredeveld, 361. "O Virgin, the writings of Apollo's Sibyl, which were rashly entrusted to fallen leaves, clearly sing that you would be the mother of the eternal king." See Rice, "Erasmus."

Christian prophets, Erasmus objected implicitly to the practice of, for example, adapting Sibylline stories into Marian devotion until the prophecies had been proven genuine.[58] Much more explicit in his criticism of specific myths was Lilio Gregorio Giraldi (1479–1552), who in his *Historiae poetarum tam Graecorum quam Latinorum dialogi decem* (1545) attacked the *ara coeli* legend directly. According to Giraldi, it must be a *commentitia* (fictitious invention), given that no authority—that is, neither Lactantius nor Augustine nor Prosper of Aquitaine (c. 390–c. 455 CE)—substantiated it. He even went so far as to describe those theologians who conflated Lactantius's account with medieval traditions as an *irritabile genus* (irritable sort), possibly alluding to Barbieri, who in his *Discordantiae* had replaced Lactantius's Tiburtine Sibyl with that of the *ara coeli* legend.[59] All these reservations were finally confirmed in 1545, when the previously lost Sibylline Oracles were published, revealing the absence of any written confirmation of the *ara coeli* legend and thus calling its status in contemporary belief into doubt.[60] The lack of any consideration of the tale after the 1545 publication of the Sibylline Oracles suggests further that scholars did indeed lose interest in this particular tradition and instead diverted their attention to the published oracles and their exegetical import, leaving aside the *ara coeli* legend.[61]

The arguments advanced by Erasmus and Giraldi against Sibylline lore, including the *ara coeli* legend, are indicative of the paradigmatic shift in the intellectual approach to written revelations that came to a head in the Reformation movements. As the principle of *sola scriptura* was disputed by theologians of all persuasions, the attitude towards non-Biblical scriptures was tested, especially those lacking ecclesiastical approval or comprehensive source foundation confirming their authencitiy, like the *ara coeli* legend.[62] Even if no comments specifically about the legend have come down to us, the spearheads of the two major Reformation movements left no doubt as to their outright rejection of the Sibylline legacy. Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), although oscillating in his approach to this lore, condemned the Sibylline sayings in 1527

58. Erasmus, *Ecclesiastes*, ed. Chomarat, 5.4:74.

59. Giraldi, *Historiae poetarum*, 255; Barbieri, *Discordantiae*, [21ʳ].

60. Birck, ΣΙΒΥΛΛΙΑΚΩΝ ΧΡΗΣΜΩΝ ΛΟΓΟΙ ΟΚΤΩ.

61. Schulze-Feldmann, "Frenzied Sibyls"; Roessli, "Sébastien Castellion"; Schiano, *Il secolo*, 35–71; Bracali, *Il filologo ispirato*, 131–67; Grafton, *Defenders*, 174–77.

62. Hamilton, *Apocryphal Apocalypse*, 70–73.

as no less a fraudulent and deceptive form of divination than fictitious Egyptian practices.[63] Martin Luther (1483–1546) for his part derided the reliability of the Sibyls' prophecies when stating that his own predictions were worth more.[64] In light of this condemnation and Luther's disapproval of any innovations in the veneration of saints, including the Virgin, as expressed in his *Vermanung an die Geistlichen* (1530), it seems safe to assume that he did not accept the recent developments of the *ara coeli* legend either.[65] That this dismissal pervaded Protestant culture and thought is evident in the *Chronicon Carionis* (1532), a chronicle that, even before Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560) adopted it for his historical work, was hugely popular with Protestants. Still featuring in Hartmann Schedel's *Nuremberg Chronicle* as true prophetesses, the Sibyls in the *Chronicon Carionis* were eyed with scepticism concerning their allegedly divine inspiration. Their prophecies, so suggested the *Chronicon Carionis*, were outdated and irrelevant to contemporary Christianity.[66]

Contrary to this reprobation by early reformers, the many images of the Sibyls and the *ara coeli* legend produced until the mid-sixteenth century indicate that even in areas sympathetic to teachings of the Reformation the Sibyls were no less popular than before. Yet there is clear evidence that suggests a denominational disintegration of the way in which the Sibyls were perceived. The differences between the emerging denominations, including the different Protestant camps, are particularly evident in two observations: the first pertaining to the theological relevance and devotional context in which Sibylline imagery was used, and the second pertaining to the purpose it served.

Especially at the beginning of the Reformation, when the different movements had not yet fully distinguished themselves from and positioned themselves against one another, various beliefs coexisted, and the meanings attributed to specific devotional practices were fluid. In her seminal study on the cult of the Virgin in early modern Germany, Bridget Heal demonstrates the high degree of variation in the devotion to Mary in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. She identifies a prolonged Marian veneration in the duchy

63. Zwingli, *Farrago*, 459–60. By contrast, Zwingli also used the Sibyls as a means to refute Anabaptist beliefs (Zwingli, *In Catabaptistarum*, 145).

64. Luther, "Omnibus amicis," Eiij^{v}.

65. Luther, *Vermanung*, [Cvjr^{v}].

66. Carion, *Chronica*, 26^{v}–27^{r}; Schedel, *Liber chonicarum*, 35, 56v^{v}, 64^{v}, 69^{v}, 78^{v}, 93^{v}; Holdenried, *Sibyl*, 147–65; Ben-Tov, "Eine späthumanistische," 132–35.

of Mecklenburg and the imperial city of Lübeck, which eased the transition from the old to the new faith.[67] Indeed, the Rosenow and other Mecklenburg altarpieces mentioned above are evidence of the *ara coeli* legend continuing to function as a support of Marian belief. By contrast, the Protestant reinterpretation of the Virgin as a humble *Hausmutter* took hold much more swiftly in Upper Germany, an area under strong influence of the Zwinglian movement.[68] Together with the vehement rejection of Sibylline lore articulated by the main reformers, this new understanding of Mary influenced the presentation of the Sibyls in Barbieri's once so-popular tract *Discordantiae*. After a new Latin edition and a German translation first appeared in the city of Oppenheim in the mid-1510s, the *Zwölff Sibyllen weissagung* was reissued again, this time by the Protestant printer Christian Egenolff (1502–55).[69] Unlike the figural representations discussed above, a change of the texts accompanying these images enabled the new editors to assimilate this work to Lutheranism (Fig. 8). By removing the Marian poems and replacing them with synopses of Biblical passages and Sibylline sayings, Egenolff's editions removed the emphasis on Mary, which would have conflicted with Protestant theology.[70] In line with Reformation teachings, the general tone of the treatise was now much more Christocentric, and the precedence of the Bible over any other purported divine revelations was affirmed. Rather than being part of a narrative facilitating the contemplation or invocation of Mary as the intercessor in the redemption of mankind, the Sibyls featured as pagan authorities whose sayings were shown to be in agreement with the Christian message. Stripped of the devotional context that was formerly key to the legend's popularity, even the representation of the Tiburtine Sibyl according to the *ara coeli* legend was retained. Because the Sibyls' significance was justified by their great concordance with Scripture, the *Zwölff Sibyllen weissagung* was able to continue to attract interest from the laity as the many editions published by numerous Protestant printers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries evidence.[71]

67. Heal, *Cult of the Virign*, 80, 82–83, 146–47, 305.

68. Heal, *Cult of the Virgin*, 99, 109.

69. Barbieri, *Opusculum de vaticiniis Sibyllarum*; *Zwölff Sibyllen weissagungen*.

70. For an example, see *Zwölff Sibyllen weissagungen*, B^{rv}.

71. Editions of *Zwölff Sibyllen weissagungen* include those of Christian Egenolff (Frankfurt, 1531, 1532, 1534, 1535); Martin Lechler, Sigmund Feyerabend, and Simon Hüter (Frankfurt, 1565); Valentin Fuhrmann (Nuremberg, 1575); Zacharias Bärwald (Leipzig, 1594); Hermann Möller (Hamburg,

Fig. 8. Filippo Barbieri, *Opusculum de vaticiniis Sibyllarum* (Oppenheim: Jakob Köbel, c. 1514), sig. c iv^{v}. © The Warburg Institute.

The second observation relates to the new functions of Sibylline images. In the regions that stood under strong Zwinglian influence in the first decades of the Reformation, no depictions of the *ara coeli* legend survived the

1600); Johann Francke (Magdeburg, c. 1620); Tobias Fritzsche (Erfurt, 1637); and Michael and Johann Friedrich Endter (Nuremberg, 1676, c. 1700).

whitewashing of churches.[72] By contrast, the series of Sibyls on the choir stalls in the St. Martin Church of Memmingen were spared by the iconoclasts and left largely intact.[73] Similarly, in the Ulm Minster, for which an iconoclastic cleansing was ordered by the city council on 19 June 1531, there is evidence that Jörg Syrlin the Elder's (c. 1425–91) choir stalls with their Sibylline imagery were specifically excluded from the removal of the church images.[74] A late nineteenth-century transcription of a council report reads, "Die Bilder auf dem Chor sollen bleiben."[75] Unfortunately, however, no explanation is given as to why that was. Unlike retables in which the *ara coeli* legend and the Sibyls were represented for specific theological meanings, the Sibyl cycles on choir stalls appear to have been of little concern for contemporaries. As objects that were neither the focus of individual nor communal prayer and services, nor communicated ideas contradicting Protestant teachings, they were probably regarded more as a means to express social status, the city's inner order, and humanist erudition. Therefore, the presence of Sibyls and pagan philosophers was less problematic for contemporaries. Also, as an act of patronage, the patricians in Ulm and Memmingen had an interest in defending these symbols of their status in a place as central to the community as their church.

The secular context of the Goslar city hall can serve as another case where the survival of Sibylline imagery is owed to a profane function. The continued reverence for the Sibyls in the imperial free city of Goslar, which adopted the Protestant faith in 1531, is attested by a series of Sibyls and emperors dating from about 1507.[76] Embellishing the Huldigungssaal, this cycle culminates in the *ara coeli* legend: the Tiburtine Sibyl points to an apparition of the Virgin, while Augustus, who bears unmistakable traits of Emperor Maximilian I (1459–1519), is kneeling on Mary's left. Banderoles displaying prophetic sayings clearly identify the Sibyls as Christian prophets, whereas their pairing with a Holy Roman emperor each alludes to their ancient role as the oracle

72. For an in-depth study of how iconoclasm shaped the worship in reformed Bern, see Rüfenacht, "Bildersturm."

73. Created in 1501–8 under the direction of Hans Dapratzhauser (fl. 1501–8), the Memmingen choir stalls have reliefs showing Memmingen burghers, saints, and scenes from the Old Testament, with references to pagan prophecy. See Litz, *Die reformatorische Bilderfrage*, 148.

74. Litz, *Die reformatorische Bilderfrage*, 116.

75. Quoted in Keidel, "Ulmische Reformationsakten," 277. "The images on the choir stalls shall remain."

76. Magin, *Die Inschriften*, 58–69.

of the Roman state. Thus this hall, where the city council was held, not only puts emphasis on the idea of the *sacrum imperium* (sacred power), which enjoys especial protection from the Virgin, but also endorses the idea of the Holy Roman Empire as the legitimate successor of the Roman Empire. This notion of *translatio imperii* (transfer of power) is further complemented by the *translatio studii* (transfer of learning), which is underlined by the representation of celebrated thinkers on the hall's ceiling. As a device to exalt the Holy Roman Empire, the Sibyls and the *ara coeli* legend were able to survive in Protestant territory. What was central to this composition in Goslar was not the representation of the Sibyls as Christian prophets but the construction of a continuity in state, scholarship, and cult from the Roman Empire to its successor, the Holy Roman Empire. Similarly void of devotional qualities, the Sibylline series in Memmingen and Ulm were not shown as intervening in Christian salvation but instead either illustrated the lineage to the Roman Empire or showcased the humanist erudition of civic representatives; as such, they did not pose a threat to the purity of Protestant teachings.

The Catholic lands witnessed a much more gradual disappearance of the *ara coeli* legend from places of worship. Unlike in Protestant realms, new artistic interpretations did continue to be produced. In the early 1530s, George the Bearded, Duke of Saxony (1471–1539), had his residential palace in Dresden extended by the Georgenbau.[77] Clearly visibile to those passing through the Georgentor, which connected the city with the bridge over the River Elbe, the gate's façade displayed an elaborate mural culminating in a representation of Mary as revealed by the Tiburtine Sibyl. According to Heinrich Magirius, the Georgentor, which has come down to us in two etchings from a 1680 chronicle by Anton Weck (1623–80), was a response from the strongly Catholic regime introduced in Dresden in 1519 to the Lutheran teachings and the antithetical depiction of Law and Grace by Lucas Cranach (1472–1553).[78] On the north side of the gate, a motto was written over a skull in the crest: "per invidiam diaboli mors intravit in orbem."[79] Envy is illustrated in a depiction of Cain murdering his brother in the *aedicula* over the gate. The composition is crowned by the

77. There is evidence that the building works were underway between 1530 and 1535. See Magirius, "Das Schloss," 62.

78. Weck, *Dresden*, 24–25; Magirius, "Das Schloss," 64–65. The gate was damaged in the fire of 1701 and, since the palace was rebuilt in 1899–1901, lost for posterity.

79. "Death has come into the world through the envy of the devil." See Weck, *Dresden*, 24–25.

Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil flanked by Adam and Eve. The thus emphasized Original Sin is overcome by Mary, who bore the Redeemer. She is the focal point of the south façade of the gate, allowing the sun to naturally illuminate her apparition just like in the *ara coeli* legend. The Tree of Life climbing up the front supports the Virgin with Child, which the Tiburtine Sibyl on the right reveals to Augustus on the left. Even if functioning as a device to glorify the Virgin in form of a medieval *Hausmadonna* (house Madonna) alongside the two *Hausheiligen* (house saints) St. George and St. Christopher, the *ara coeli* legend as the framing narrative is removed here from liturgical spaces.

In later Catholic depictions of the *ara coeli* legend this shift away from the devotional use is completed. In a painting by Antoine Caron (1521–99) from the late 1570s, the narrative is used to exalt the French kings by constructing a continuous tradition from ancient Rome to France under the ruling house of the Valois.[80] The scene of the Sibyl revealing the Marian apparition to Augustus was put in a theatrical setting in what seems to be contemporary Paris. Yet prominent landmarks of Rome, such as an aqueduct in the background, suggest an identification of Paris with Imperial Rome. In addition, the French capital is heavily decorated with temporary triumphal arches, columns, and other architectural features like those used to stage the sumptuous entrées on the occasion of the wedding celebrations of Charles IX (1550–74) and Elisabeth of Austria (1554–92) in 1571.[81] Indeed, the figure of Augustus resembles Charles IX. Therefore the *ara coeli* legend no longer serves as an exaltation of Mary but as a lascivious idealization of France and its ruling dynasty as the successors of ancient Rome, just as the murals in the Goslar Huldigungssaal were a claim to the continuity of the Roman Empire to the Holy Roman Empire. Rather than choosing any equivalent pagan motif to construct this succession, as the Spanish King Philip II (1527–98) would do by personifying himself as the pagan god Apollo, this Christian narrative appears to be a deliberate allusion to the French monarch as the most Christian king, a title that had been hereditary since Charles VII (1403–61).[82] In addition, the Sibylline motif not only feeds into the previously strong veneration of the Sibyls in France but could also be understood as an allusion to Joan of Arc (1412–31), for whom there is evidence

80. This painting was ascribed to Caron in the 1930s by Gustave Lebel; see Lebel, "Un tableaux."

81. For this identification, see Yates, "Antoine Caron's Paintings," 133; Prevosteau, *Entrée de Charles IX*, 19.

82. Tanner, *Last Descendant of Aeneas*, 223–25.

dating from 1429 suggesting that she was called a Sibyl.[83] The fondness for the Sibylline tradition that Frances A. Yates attested for Catherine de Médicis (1519–89), the queen mother, thus becomes less relevant to the image of the glorification of France and her kings as evoked by these symbols of strength, piety, and tradition.[84] More importantly, the choice of depciting the Sibyl of the *ara coeli* legend is no longer grounded in her prowess in glorifying Mary but in her multi-faceted meanings. Indeed, with the shift from Mary's intercessory role in man's salvation to her exceptionality within Counter-Reformation theology, as the theological and visual preoccupation with her Immaculate Conception and Assumption demonstrate, the *ara coeli* legend finally lost its appeal as a devotional image.

In this regard, Caron's painting reveals the new means by which contemporary artists expressed a sense of reverence for the *ara coeli* legend in particular and the Sibyls more generally. As devotional veneration subsided due to Mary's changed role in the different denominations, other, more secular dimensions of the legend became more prevalent. In addition to legitimizing and illustrating certain aspects of political power and its continuity, the legend was used as a motif to bestow a sense of antiquity and *auctoritas*. As Tamara Formicheva argues, the painting by Paris Bordone (1500–71), presumably created in Augsburg in 1538–1540, that captures the moment of the Sibylline revelation was not intended as a depiction of the *ara coeli* legend itself but rather used it as the narrative framework for a sumptuous architectural *veduta* painting.[85] Furthermore, the inclusion of the *ara coeli* legend in a cycle of *Worthy Women* in the Abbey Church at Herkenrode in about 1547 indicates that it was no longer the pagan origin of the Sibyls that captivated contemporaries' thoughts but their gender. While Lambert Lombard (c. 1505–66), the author of the design on which this classicizing painting is based, was much more invested in the marriage of the arts and philosophy underpinning this rendition of the *ara coeli* legend as the humanist ideal of *storia* (history), the focus on the Sibyls as exceptional women was indicative of a wider trend.[86] It was in this context that after almost a century the Sibyls were newly depicted

83. Raybould, *Sibyl Series*, 64–65.

84. Yates, "Antoine Caron's Paintings," 133; Ehrmann, *Antoine Caron*, 124–34.

85. Formicheva, "Architectural Perspective," 154–55.

86. Wouk, *Frans Floris*, 68–69.

in a Lutheran territory. In the Berg- und Lusthaus Hoflößnitz, a summer residence built by the Saxon elector Johann Georg I (1585–1656) and his successor Johann Georg II (1613–80), the Sibyls feature in the pictorial program embellishing the state rooms of the electresses.[87] The walls of the reception room display in their lower part eight putti representing the seven liberal arts and the art of "painting" (*Malerei*), and on the upper part twelve Sibyls in grisaille.[88] Their busts rest on pedastals and plinths bearing their names in French.[89] As a motif for such representations in state homes, the Sibyls were rather unusual, a fact that has led scholars to conclude that they served as an allusion to the name of Saxon electresses Magdalene Sibylle of Prussia (1586–1659) and Magdalene Sibylle of Brandenburg-Bayreuth (1612–87).[90] Since the Sibyls complemented a group of Amazons, the figures appear to be part of a program of strong women, as was not uncommon in contemporary French literature.[91] As representatives of strong females of the past, neither their prophetic office nor their pagan origin were the primary motivation for their depiction but rather it was their gender that was important.

By the second half of the sixteenth century the former devotional element of this tradition had receded. Apart from the *Zwölff Sibyllen weissagungen*, which preserved the conflation of the twelve classical Sibyls and that of the *ara coeli* legend in new editions issued up until about 1700, no image of the *ara coeli* legend from after the 1550s is known to have ever existed in a religious context. Possibly the latest installation of this iconography in a liturgical space was in the Church of the Teutonic Order in Siersdorf in the Rhineland. On the arch of the rood screen by the Master of Elsloo stands a Marian figure with the Tiburtine Sibyl and Augustus on either side. Simple in their artistic execution, these figures, according to Heinrich Neu, were commissioned by Johann of Ghoir (fl. 1539–54), suggesting that the arch dates from between 1551, when Johann assumed the office of commander in Siersdorf, and his departure from

87. Although the building was finished in about 1650, the interior paintings took another six years for their completion. See Herz, "'Zur Lust,'" 47–52.

88. The ninth putto appears to be a later addition with no specific iconographic meaning but required by the need to fill the gap on the wall left by the moved oven. Herz, "'Zur Lust,'" 68.

89. Schmidt, "Sibyllendarstellungen," 94.

90. Herz, "'Zur Lust,'" 70.

91. Schmidt, "Sibyllendarstellungen," 94; Herz, "'Zur Lust,'" 70. For this genre, see Maclean, *Woman Triumphant*, 64–87.

the city in 1554.[92] Assuming that the arch was not free-stranding but connected to the choir stalls, which bear the coat of arms of the Reuschenberg family, others consider it likely that the arch was erected during the commandership of either Konrad Reuschenberg (r. 1491–1522) or Franz von Reuschenberg (r. 1524–47). Because the inscription of the pulpit, which was installed as part of the refurbishment of the Siersdorf church, is dated to 1535, a similar date of origin for the arch is most probable.[93] Irrespective of the exact date of its installation, this comparably late production gives reason to assume that the beliefs held at the local commandry were steeped in the traditional late medieval Marian devotion present in nearby Cologne, as illustrated by Heal, and the *ara coeli* legend, with its continued reverence for Mary as intercessor.[94] Elsewhere, the fact that Counter-Reformation theology was keen to focus on glorifying and exalting Mary's exceptionality rather than her intercessory role in human salvation had led to a degree of devotional disinterest in this narrative, giving way to mythological, political, and even gendered readings of the *ara coeli* and other Sibylline legends.

Conclusion

As the change in Marian beliefs caused the disappearance of the *ara coeli* legend from places of worship, the extent to which it had become engrained in late medieval piety becomes apparent. Once a ramification of the Sibylline tradition that reflected the message of the universality of Christian salvation as formulated by the Church Fathers Lactantius and Augustine, the legend of the Tiburtine Sibyl revealing a Marian apparition to Emperor Augustus had since the fifteenth century evolved into a branch with its own distinct role in contemporary piety and thought. Indeed, its authority and appeal was so established that its place in contemporary piety remained unaffected, if not even strengthened, by the humanist return to the classical Sibyls. As humanists turned to Lactantius and Augustine, the legend was increasingly used to emphasize the soteriologial aspect of Christianity and, more importantly, Mary's intercessory role; incorporated into the cult of the Virgin, it thus came to corroborate the otherwise very thin scriptural foundation of Marian beliefs. It

92. Neu, *Der Lettnerbogen*, [4–5].

93. Peez, "Die spätgotische Skulpturen," 243.

94. Heal, *Cult of the Virgin*, 207–61.

was this incorporation into the Marian cult that allowed the *ara coeli* legend not just to maintain its relevance to contemporary Christians but even to flourish in coexistence with the humanist reverence for its classical counterpart, at times even intermingling with the Renaissance series of Sibyls.

The reason for the survival of the humanist reconsideration of the Sibylline heritage would, however, prove fatal during the beginning of the Reformation, as first reformers and then, in response to them, Catholic ecclesiasts set out to revise the role Mary played in the unfolding of Christian salvation. As much as the Protestant renunciation of her exceptional status in the evolution of Christianity rendered the medieval attributions to the *ara coeli* legend untenable, so did the post-Tridentine glorification and exaltion of Mary as heaven's queen. Although the continued veneration of the *ara coeli* legend in a manner characteristic of previous centuries had withstood the paradigmatic shifts in the intellectual landscape prompted by the humanist endeavour to revive the classical heritage, it eventually fell victim to new religious beliefs introduced by the Reformation. The *ara coeli* legend subsided into irrelevance, giving way to a gendered and mythological interest in the classical Sibyls.

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