

# BOTTICELLI'S *MYSTIC NATIVITY*, SAVONAROLA AND THE MILLENNIUM\*

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The *Mystic Nativity* by Sandro Botticelli in the National Gallery in London was painted in early 1501 (Fig. 36).<sup>1</sup> Quite small (108.5 by 75 centimetres), the painting is on canvas, a most unusual support for both its tempera medium and the period. It is entirely possible that Botticelli painted it for himself or in order to give it to another party, rather than on commission.<sup>2</sup> The painting has five unique features, all of which appear to relate to Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98), the inspired and perhaps megalomaniac Dominican Observant who preached to huge audiences in Florence during the last decade of the fifteenth century. The first of these features is an extraordinary rendering of the Nativity in which angels accompany mortals and show them the newborn Child; secondly, there are three couples of angels and mortals who embrace and kiss; thirdly, there is a wreath of twelve angels hovering above with branches of young olive, inscribed ribbons, and little crowns; fourthly, there is a lengthy inscription at the top in (not very good) Greek, with references to the Book of Revelation; and fifthly, there are five smitten demons. All except one of the angels bear branches of young olive, and there are wreaths of young olive on the heads of the mortals. All of the angels are (or were) in white, green, or red; indeed, these colours are (or were) distributed among the dress and wings of each of the angels holding hands and circling overhead.

In the eighty-fifth Psalm we read:

Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.  
Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

...

Righteousness shall go before him; and shall set us in the way of his steps.

(Misericordia et veritas obviaverunt sibi: iustitia et pax osculatae sunt.  
Veritas de terra orta est: et iustitia de coelo prospexit.

...

Iustitia ante eum ambulabit: et ponet in via gressus suos.)<sup>3</sup>

These verses were related to the Nativity by Savonarola in a sermon purportedly delivered on Christmas Eve 1493.<sup>4</sup> In it Savonarola imagines the following scene:

\* The following abbreviation is used throughout:  
BNCF = Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale.

<sup>1</sup> On the painting see H. Horne, *Botticelli, Painter of Florence*, Princeton 1980, pp. 293–301; M. Davies, *The Earlier Italian Schools* (National Gallery Catalogues), 2nd edn, London 1961, pp. 103–8; R. Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1978, i, pp. 134–8 and ii, pp. 99–101. In the painting there has been some discoloration, especially in the greens of the gowns of the angels overhead, which now appear to be browns.

<sup>2</sup> It was possibly done for a member of the Aldobrandini family; see Lightbown (as in n. 1), ii, p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 85.10–11, 13 (=Vulgate 84.11–12, 14). Cf. also Psalms 25.10 (=24.10); 37.24 (=36.24); 52.8 (=51.8); 89.2, 14 (=88.2, 14); and 108.4 (=107.4).

<sup>4</sup> *Prediche nuovamente venute in luce del reverendo Padre Fra Girolamo Savonarola da Ferrara... sopra il Salmo 'Quam bonus Israel Deus', predicate in Firenze in santa Maria del Fiore in uno Advento nel MCCCCXCIII...*, Venice (Agostino de Zanni) 1528, fols 112<sup>v</sup>–20<sup>v</sup>. In spite of what we read in the title of this edition, it is far from certain that the sermon was delivered in 1493, as Ridolfi points out (*Cronologia e bibliografia delle prediche con contributi storici e filologici di Roberto Ridolfi*, Bibliografia delle opere del



Courtesy of the National Gallery, London

Fig. 36—Sandro Botticelli, *Mystic Nativity*, 1501. London, National Gallery

Behold, the sky opened, and right away I see descending from the bosom of the Eternal Father a venerable woman with an olive branch in hand, and she came singing, *Misericordia Domini plena est terra*. That is, the earth of the Holy Virgin was filled with the mercy of the Lord. She urged and begged the Child to come forth, and thus, *Veritas de terra orta est*. Suddenly from this 'earth' was born Truth. The Holy Child came forth. Then he set himself on the bare ground in front of the Holy Virgin. Now as soon as this Truth had come forth, Mercy met with her, and the two embraced each other and said, *Universe vie Domini misericordia et veritas*: All the ways of the Lord are mercy and truth. And while these things were being done on earth, *Iustitia de celo prospexit*: Righteousness looked from the sky. And seeing this marriage of the Son of God with human nature, and wishing to come to that banquet, she took leave of God and descended forthwith to earth, shouting and singing, *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. And lo, from the other part of heaven came a woman in a simple, white, and pure dress who was most beautiful and graceful, and with great haste she ran towards Righteousness, and they kissed each other; and thus, *Iustitia et pax obsculate sunt*. And forthwith one of them, who was Lady Peace, said, *Et in terra pax hominibus bone voluntatis*. And so all four met together and united forever, so that anyone who might have one of them should have them all.

(Ecco che il cielo s'aperse, et subito veggio descendere dal seno del Padre Eterno una veneranda donna con un ramo d'ulivo in mano, et veniva cantando, *Misericordia Domini plena est terra*: Ciò è la terra della Vergine santa fu ripiena della misericordia del Signore. La quale sollecitava et pregava il Fanciullo che uscisse fuori, et così, *Veritas de terra orta est*: Subito di questa terra nacque la Verità. Uscì fuori il Bambino santo; posesi quivi in sulla nuda terra dinanzi alla Vergine santa. Hor subito che questa Verità fu uscita fuori, la Misericordia si scontrò con lei, et tutt'a due insieme s'abbracciarono et dissono, *Universe vie Domini misericordia et veritas*: Tutte le vie del Signore sono misericordia et verità. Et mentre che queste cose si facevano in terra, *Iustitia de celo prospexit*: La Giustizia risguardò dal cielo. Et vedendo queste nozze del figliuolo di Dio con la natura humana, et desiderando di venire a tal convito, prese licenzia da Dio, et discese subito in terra, clamando et cantando, *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. Et ecco dall'altra parte del cielo venne una donna in habito semplice, bianco et puro, bellissima et gratiosa; et con empito grande corse inverso la Giustizia et insieme si baciorno; et così, *Iustitia et pax obsculate sunt*. Et subito una di loro, che era Madonna Pace, disse, *Et in terra pax hominibus bone voluntatis*. Et così tutt'a quattro convenno insieme et feciono lega perpetua che chi n'havesse una le havesse tutte.)<sup>5</sup>

There are two main points to this charming moral allegory. Firstly, Mercy, Truth, Righteousness, and Peace, which, Savonarola says, are simply four of the names that David applied to Christ, were first united through his birth.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, we must have mercy, truth, righteousness, and peace with us if we wish to find the holy manger:

Go, my son, to this holy manger, if you want to see the Child and taste how sweet her spouse is. Take Mercy along with you, that is, see to it that you have a good and perfect contrition of your sins, with the hope of finding mercy from this Child. As soon as you have this contrition with this hope, you will be the friend of Truth and will go to a good confessor who can tell you the truth. This done, through priestly absolution and the infusion of Grace, you will be made righteous in the sight of God, and Peace will kiss you, because you will be at peace with

Savonarola, i, ed. P. Ginori Conti, Florence 1939, pp. 21–2). Savonarola's Latin draft for it is in *Sermones quinque et xx<sup>ta</sup> super psalmo 'Quam bonus Israel Deus' et alia opuscula F. Hieronymi Savonarolae eius propria manu conscripta, etc.*, Florence, Museum of San Marco MS 14 (ex-BNCF MS Sav. 480, and MS Palat. E.5.10.76; hereafter San Marco codex), fols 34<sup>v</sup>–7<sup>r</sup>. The order there is slightly different from that in the printed version.

<sup>5</sup> *Prediche... 'Quam bonus'* (as in n. 4), fol. 116<sup>r</sup>. The heavenly virtues described here are evidently interchangeable with the angels of the Gospel. Cf. Luke

2.13–14: 'And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men'. The phrases 'Gloria in excelsis Deo' and 'et in terra pax hominibus bone voluntatis' are found among the inscriptions carried by the angels in Botticelli's painting.

<sup>6</sup> *Prediche... 'Quam bonus'* (as in n. 4), fol. 114<sup>r-v</sup>.

God and will be worthy to be taken by these four venerable matrons into the holy stable, where you will find Joseph and Mary and the one you most desire: the Child Jesus Christ lying on the hay and beginning to suffer for the love of mankind. Then you will kneel together with the simple and pure shepherds and worship your God.

(Va', figliuol mio, a questo santo presepio, se tu vuoi vedere il Bambino, et gustare quanto è dolce lo Sposo suo. Mena teco la Misericordia, ciò è, fa' d'havere una buona et perfetta contritione de' tuoi peccati, con speranza di trovare misericordia da questo Bambino. Immediata che tu harai questa contritione con questa speranza, tu sarai amico della Verità, et andrai a un buono confessore che ti dica la verità. Fatto questo, mediante l'assoluzione sacerdotale et l'infusione della Gratia, tu sarai nel cospetto di Dio giustificato, et la Pace ti bacerà, perché tu sarai pacificato con Dio et meriterai d'essere introdotto mediante queste quattro venerande matrone nel santo tigurio; dove tu troverai Giuseppo et Maria et quello che più desideri: Giesù Christo bambino giacere in sul fieno, et cominciare a patire per l'amore dell'huomo. All'hora tu t'inginocchierai insieme con li pastori semplici et puri, et adorerai il tuo Dio.)<sup>7</sup>

That the clause 'Truth shall spring out of the earth' refers to the birth of Christ is a commonplace of medieval interpretation.<sup>8</sup> It had also become customary by Botticelli's day to understand the tenth verse of the Psalm ('Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other') as a prophecy of the reconciliation through Christ of the two pairs of heavenly virtues, the members of each of which at first might seem to be inimical. The idea occurs especially in discussions or dramatisations of the Annunciation to Mary and the Crucifixion.<sup>9</sup> But it seems never to have been attached to the Nativity until Savonarola and Botticelli,<sup>10</sup> and after them never again until Milton. Nor does there appear to be any precedent for Savonarola's Christmas scenario or his idea of a spiritual progression that takes us in strict order from one of the heavenly virtues to the next until finally we are brought to the manger.

Savonarola's Christmas sermon was first proposed as the source of Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity* by John Pope-Hennessy in 1945.<sup>11</sup> The proposal has since been rejected at least three times.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, the correspondence between the painting and the sermon is not precise. But it is hardly more imprecise than the correspondence between Botticelli's *Mystic Crucifixion* in the Fogg Art Museum (Fig. 40) and the visions of Savonarola that are generally agreed to have inspired it.<sup>13</sup> In any case there is, as we shall soon see, another Savonarolan source for the painting about which there can be no reasonable doubt and which proves, once and for all, that Botticelli was influenced by Savonarola.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., fol. 116<sup>r-v</sup>. Simplicity was one of Savonarola's favourite virtues, on which he wrote an entire tract: *De simplicitate Christianae vitae*, Florence (Lorenzo Morgiani and Johann Petri), 1496; ed. P. G. Ricci, Rome 1959.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. St Augustine's *Expositions on the Book of the Psalms*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. P. Schaff, Grand Rapids 1974, viii, pp. 408–9.

<sup>9</sup> See S. C. Chew, *The Virtues Reconciled: An Iconographic Study*, Toronto 1947. For bringing this book to my attention I thank Leatrice Mendelsohn.

<sup>10</sup> Chew (as in n. 9), p. 65, I believe correctly, connects the tradition with Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity*; he did not know about Savonarola's Christmas sermon. There is the beginning of a connection between the reconciliation of the heavenly virtues and Christmas in a sermon by St Bernard; see H. Cornell, *Iconography of the Nativity of Christ*, Upsala 1924, pp. 97–8.

<sup>11</sup> J. Pope-Hennessy, *Sandro Botticelli, The Nativity in the National Gallery, London* (The Gallery Books, xv), London 1947, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Davies (as in n. 1), pp. 105–8; R. M. Steinberg, *Fra Girolamo Savonarola, Florentine Art, and Renaissance Historiography*, Athens, Ohio 1977, p. 80; Lightbown (as in n. 1), ii, p. 101.

<sup>13</sup> On the painting see Steinberg, op. cit., pp. 69–77; and Lightbown, op. cit., i, pp. 130–3 and ii, p. 94. For Fig. 40 see below, p. 113.

<sup>14</sup> See below, p. 94. Steinberg, op. cit., pp. 19–24, 69, argued that the *Mystic Crucifixion* in the Fogg might simply have been done to a client's specifications. But the inscription to the *Mystic Nativity* proves that Botticelli was committed to the beliefs expressed in it.



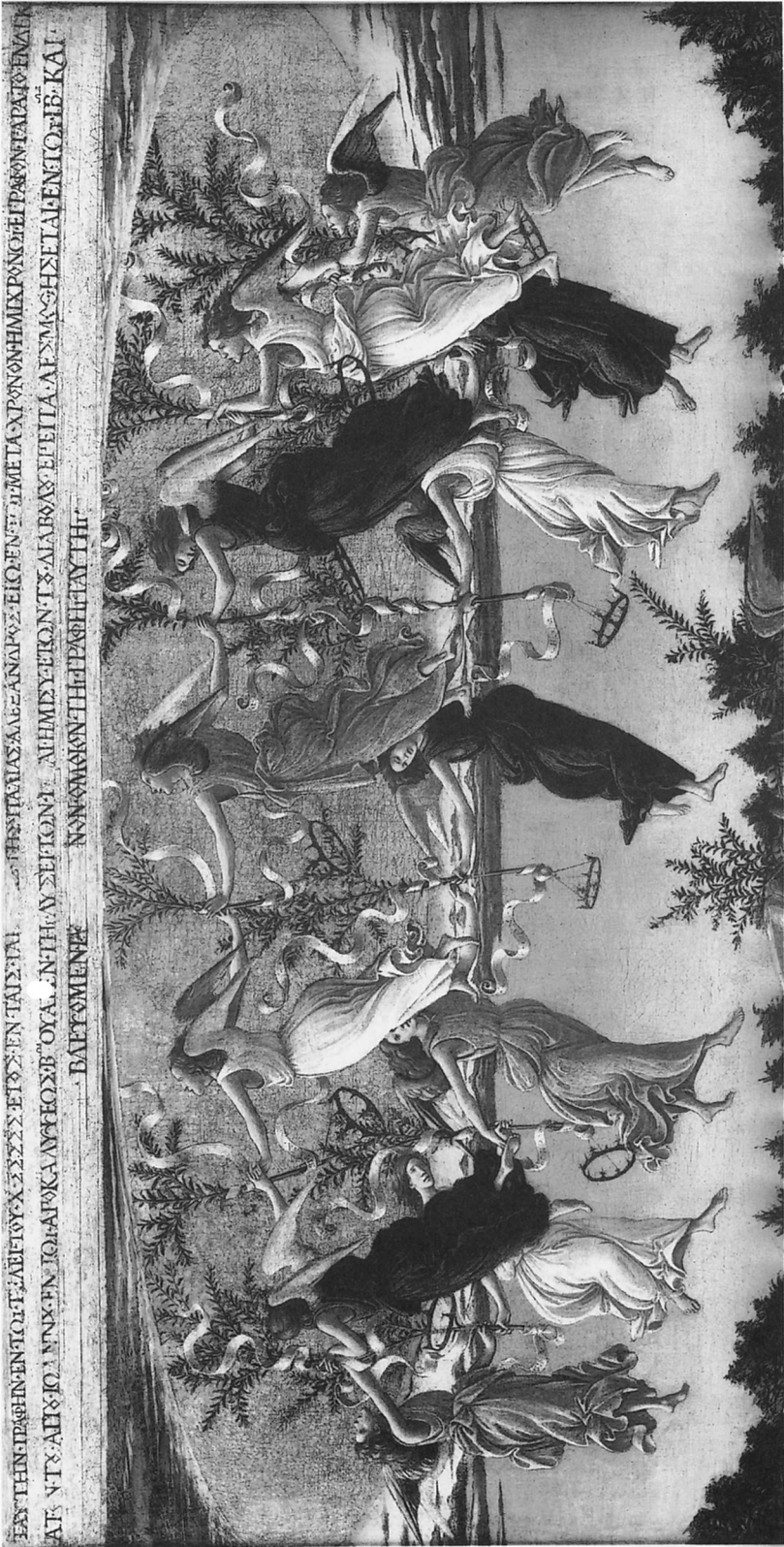


Fig. 37—Sandro Botticelli, *Mystic Nativity*, detail

Already by 1400 the theme of the reconciliation of the heavenly virtues was being used for reform propaganda. According to the chronicler Luca Dominici, notices relating to the Book of Revelation (so he says) were posted on the doors of the main churches of Bologna, reading:

Through the world a multitude of the peoples dressed in white and shining stoles, shouting, 'Lord, grant us peace and mercy'. And at last, when Righteousness and Peace had descended from heaven, they kissed each other. And Truth and Peace arose upon the earth, and the true shepherd of all will become known, and the righteous king will arise on earth...

(Per universum gentium multitudo stolis albis et candidis induta, clamans pacem et misericordiam da nobis, Domine, da nobis, et demum cum iustitia et pax de coelo descenderit invicem osculatae sunt, et veritas et pax super terris orta est, et verus pastor omnium cognoscetur, et justus rex surget in terris...) <sup>15</sup>

The purpose of such notices was to encourage the Bianchi, then converging in great numbers upon Rome for the Jubilee.<sup>16</sup> We encounter three of the heavenly virtues in a song by Girolamo Benivieni, one of Savonarola's closest followers, in which he describes a visit by Christ to Florence in order to see and judge the newly reformed city. Mercy and Righteousness come before him and embrace each other and are then joined by Peace. The song, published in 1500, was probably written during Savonarola's lifetime, to be sung by groups of his most ardent followers.<sup>17</sup> In a sermon given in December 1494 Savonarola himself used the image of the heavenly virtues to illustrate how great God's love was for Florence:

I have told you several times in the past, Florence, that even though God has everywhere prepared a great scourge, nevertheless on the other hand he loves you and is fond of you. And so it can be said that in you has been realised that saying, 'Mercy and truth are met together', that is, Mercy and Righteousness [sic] have come together in the city of Florence. From the one side came the scourge, and Mercy came towards it from the other side, and, 'righteousness and peace have kissed each other', and have embraced together, and God has wished to show you justice and on the other hand be merciful to you, and save you...

(Io t'ho detto più volte nel tempo passato, Firenze, che benché habbia Dio apparecchiato per tutto un gran flagello, nondimanco che dall'altra parte Dio ti ama e vuolti bene, e però si può dire che in te sia verificato quel detto: *miser cordia et veritas obviaverunt sibi*, cioè la misericordia e la iustitia sono venute l'una incontro all'altra nella città di Firenze. El flagello veniva da una parte et la misericordia se gli è fatta incontro dall'altra parte, et *iustitia et pax osculatae sunt*, et sonsi abbracciate insieme et Dio t'ha voluto mostrare la iustitia e da altra parte farti misericordia e salvarti...) <sup>18</sup>

This passage appears to bear not only on the *Mystic Nativity* but on the *Mystic Crucifixion* as well.

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<sup>15</sup> Luca Dominici, *Cronache*, ed. G. C. Gigliotti, Pistoia 1933–9, i, p. 137. See also Giovanni Sercambi, *Le croniche*, ed. S. Bonghi, Rome 1892, ii, p. 304.

<sup>16</sup> On the movement of the Bianchi see esp. R. Rusconi, *L'attesa della fine: Crisi della società, profezia ed Apocalisse in Italia al tempo del grande scisma d'Occidente (1378–1417)*, Rome 1979, pp. 204–18.

<sup>17</sup> *Commento di Hieronymo Benivieni sopra a più sue canzone et sonetti dello amore et della bellezza divina*, Florence (Antonio Tubini, Lorenzo di Francesco Veneto and Andrea Ghirlandi) 1500, fols 116<sup>v</sup>–17<sup>r</sup> (=118<sup>v</sup>–19<sup>r</sup>). On Benivieni see esp. D. Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance*, Princeton 1970, pp. 216–19; and below, p. 104.

<sup>18</sup> *Prediche del Rev. P. F. Hieronymo Savonarola... sopra alquanti salmi et sopra Aggeo Profeta fatte del mese di Novembre et Dicembre l'anno Mcccclxxxiii raccolte dalla sua viva voce...*, Venice (Bernardino Bindoni) 1544, fol. 59<sup>r</sup>; *Prediche sopra Aggeo*, ed. L. Firpo, Rome 1965, pp. 133–4. Psalm 85.10–11 (84.11–12) also constitutes the ending of a very 'Savonarolan' sermon delivered in 1499 by Bernardino dei Fanciulli: 'Predica di Pietro Bernardo da Firenze inutile servulo di Iesù Christo, et di tutti li fanciulli di [buona] volontà. Facta a Spugnoles di Mugello, loco di Giovanni Pepi. Adì ii di marzo Mcccclxxxix', in *Prediche*, Florence (Bartolomeo de' Libri) 1500 (copy in BNCF: Magl. L.6.22), sig. e6<sup>v</sup>.



Fig. 38—Girolamo Savonarola, *Compendio di revelatione*, Florence 1496, fol. 29<sup>v</sup>

Each of the twelve angels in the circle at the top of the *Mystic Nativity* has at least one ribbon bearing an inscription in Latin or sometimes Italian (Fig. 37).<sup>19</sup> Each of the seven surviving inscriptions conforms exactly to one of what Savonarola, in his *Compendio di revelatione*, first published in 1495, calls **the twelve 'privileges' of the Virgin**.<sup>20</sup> The 'privileges' are part of an allegorical crown offered to Mary by the Florentine people, and occur on banderoles surmounting the twelve hearts in the lowest of its three tiers (Fig. 38):<sup>21</sup>

In the which banderoles were written twelve privileges of the Virgin with words of prayer, which are these: Two in relation to the Everlasting Father: The first: *Sposa di Dio Padre vera*, because God the Father and she have one and the same son. The second: *Sposa di Dio Padre admiranda*, because just as the Father gave birth from eternity to his Son in heaven without a mother, so she gave birth on earth to that same Son without a father. Two others in relation to the Son: First: *Madre di Dio*. Second: *Madre del suo padre*, because Jesus Christ was the Son and is God the Creator of the Universe, who created her.

Two in relation to the Holy Ghost: First: she is *Sacrario dello Spirito Sancto singulare*, because by it she was singularly full of all of the graces. Second: *Sacrario ineffabile*, because the Holy Ghost made her fit to be the mother of the Creator of the Universe. Two in relation to her virginity: First: she is *Vergine delle vergine*, because no other virgin can be compared to this one, who was never spotted by any venial or mortal sin. Second: she is *Vergine fecunda*, because she alone is virgin and mother. Two in relation to the Church Triumphant and the whole universe: First: that she is *Regina sola del mondo*, because she is the true Spouse and Mother and Shrine of the King of the World, who is God Threefold and One. Second: *Regina sopra tutte le creature honoranda*, because ... she is honoured much more highly than all the saints, and with an honour that is called 'hyperdulia'. Two last ones in relation to the present Church Militant: First: she is *Dolcezza di cuore delli giusti*, because through her they beg for many favours from God, and her love is 'sweeter than honey and the honeycomb', which love amazingly makes their souls and bodies chaste. Second: that she is *Speranza delli peccatori et delle persone miserabili*, because through her prayers and merits they hope to beg for mercy from God. These twelve privileges, then, were written on those twelve banderoles in this form: *Sponsa Dei Patris vera, ora pro nobis*; *Sponsa Dei Patris admiranda, intercede pro nobis*. And thus also followed all the others.

<sup>19</sup> See next page. The most complete transcriptions of the surviving inscriptions are in Lightbown (as in n. 1), ii, p. 99. They are: 'SACRARIUM I[NEFFABILE]', 'MATER DE[I]', 'VIRGO VIRGINUM', 'SPO[N]SA DEI PATRIS ADMIRA[N]DA', 'VE[RGINE] FECHUNDA', 'SPERAN[TIA]...', 'REGINA SOPRA TUT[TE]...', 'REGINA SOLA MUN[DI]'.

<sup>20</sup> *Compendio di revelatione*, Florence (Francesco Bonaccorsi) 1496, fols 30<sup>r</sup>–6<sup>v</sup>; *Compendio di rivelazioni*, ed. A. Crucitti, Rome 1974, pp. 75–92.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 30<sup>r</sup>; ed. Crucitti p. 75.



(Nelle quale banderuole erano scripti dodici privilegi della Vergine con parole deprecatorie, li quali sono questi: Dua per relatione al Padre Eterno: El Primo: *Sposa di Dio Padre vera*; perché Dio Padre et lei hanno uno medesimo figliuolo. El secondo: *Sposa di Dio Padre ammiranda*; peroché così come al [sic] Padre generò ab eterno il suo Figliuolo in cielo senza madre, così lei generò poi in terra quel medesimo Figliuolo senza padre. Due altri per relatione al Figliuolo: Primo: *Madre di Dio*. Secondo: *Madre del suo padre*: peroché Iesù Christo fu Figliuolo et è Dio Creatore dell'universo, el quale ha lei creata. Dua per relatione allo Spirito Sancto: Primo: è *Sacrario dello Spirito Sancto singulare*; perché da lui lei fu piena singularmente di tutte le gratie. Secundo: *Sacrario ineffabile*; peroché lo Spirito Sancto la fece idonea ad essere madre del Creatore dell'universo. Dua per relatione alla sua verginità: Primo: è *Vergine delle vergine*; però che niuna altra vergine a questa si può comparare, la quale non fu maculata d'alcun peccato né veniale né mortale. Secundo: è *Vergine fecunda*; peroché lei sola è vergine et madre. Dua per comparatione alla Chiesa triomphante et a tutto l'universo: Primo: che lei è *Regina sola del mondo*; peroché è vera Sposa et Madre et Sacrario del Re del mondo, el quale è Dio Trino et Uno. Secundo: *Regina sopra tutte le creature honoranda*; perché ...è honorata molto più altamente che tutti li sancti, et di uno honore el quale si chiama hyperdulia. Dua ultimi per relatione alla presente Chiesa Militante: Primo: è *Dolcezza di cuore delli giusti*; perché per lei impetrano molte gratie da Dio, et il suo amore è più che il mele et più che il favo suave, el quale mirabilmente fa caste le anime et li corpi loro. Secundo: che lei è *Speranza delli peccatori et delle persone miserabili*; peroché per li prieghi et meriti suoi sperano impetrare da Dio miserichordia. Questi dodici privilegi dunque erano scripti sopra quelle dodici banderuole in questa forma: *Sponsa Dei Patris vera, ora pro nobis; Sponsa Dei Patris ammiranda, intercede pro nobis*. Et così seguitavano ancora tutti gli altri.)<sup>22</sup>

Savonarola thus gives the 'privileges' in Italian but makes it clear that in his vision of the crown he saw them in Latin. (They of course are all in Latin in the Latin version of the *Compendio*.) It is most unlikely that Botticelli had them from any other source.<sup>23</sup> Savonarola's peculiar use of the word 'privileges' suggests that he must have made them up himself. In fact he states that during this period he rarely read anything other than the Bible.<sup>24</sup> The 'privileges' are really the invocations in twelve supplications to Mary to pray for us; indeed, the whole crown is effectively an elaborate set of prayers. At its summit (but not visible in the woodcut illustrated in Fig. 38) is Christ's command that we love one another as he loved us.<sup>25</sup> This is written around a heart composed of many little hearts, signifying the union of charity of all good persons, as well as the general 'peace' (that is, amnesty) recently made at Savonarola's urging by the Florentines.<sup>26</sup>

The lowest tier of the crown in Savonarola's vision has hearts of a stone like jasper, the second hearts of pearl, and the topmost hearts of carbuncle.<sup>27</sup> The crown's colours are therefore green, white, and red. The second tier has ten hearts;<sup>28</sup> the same number of little crowns hang from the circle of angels in Botticelli's picture (Fig. 37). Small crowns figure later on in Savonarola's allegory when, now in heaven and taking the crown to Mary, who is 'clothed with the sun',<sup>29</sup> he encounters a multitude of guardian angels each bearing 'certain little crowns surrounded with

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., fol. 30<sup>r-v</sup>; ed. Crucitti pp. 75–6. Davies (as in n. 1), p. 104, was not far from the truth in supposing that the inscriptions were taken from a litany. It does not appear that the words 'ora pro nobis', or 'intercede pro nobis', were included in the painting.

<sup>23</sup> Horne (as in n. 1), p. 300, reports having searched a great deal for the sources of the inscriptions. Some of the 'privileges' occur in other of Savonarola's sermons: e.g. *Del Reverendo Padre Frate Hieronimo Savonarola nella prima epistola di San Giovanni et altri luoghi della Sacra Scrittura sermoni XIX*, Venice (Speranza) 1556, fols 66<sup>v</sup>–7<sup>r</sup>; *Alcuni sermoni devoti di F. Ieronimo Savonarola sopra il*

*principio de la Cantica et altri luoghi de la Sacra Scrittura*, Venice (Speranza) 1556, sig. a4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> *Compendio* (as in n. 20), fol. 17<sup>r</sup>; ed. Crucitti p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., fol. 31<sup>r</sup>; ed. Crucitti p. 78 (John 15.12, 13.34).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., fol. 32<sup>r</sup>; ed. Crucitti p. 80: 'El cuore di molti cuori composto che è nella sommità della corona significa la unione della charità di tutti e buoni, et significa etiam la pace universale nuovamente facta intra loro [dai] ciptadini Fiorentini'.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., fols 30<sup>r</sup>–1<sup>r</sup>; ed. Crucitti pp. 74, 76–7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., fol. 30<sup>v</sup>; ed. Crucitti p. 76.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., fol. 38<sup>r</sup>; ed. Crucitti p. 96.



little written slips or rather tags and attached with gold thread'.<sup>30</sup> The crowns are those of the souls the angels are guarding, the little written slips their prayers, and the gold threads their charity.<sup>31</sup>

The crown did not remain merely a figment of Savonarola's vision. Its prayers were apparently recited by his followers and by the groups of boys that he caused to be organised. Both he and Bernardino dei Fanciulli, one of the organisers of Savonarola's boys' groups, instructed their listeners to say the Virgin's 'corona' or 'coronella'—apparently an abbreviated version of the prayer.<sup>32</sup> In Botticelli's painting, then, the twelve angels circling overhead are not really Mary's crown as such. Rather, they are taking the 'crown'—that is, our prayer to her—to heaven. The crown was also represented in a painting of the *Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* that was carried in procession, together with two real crowns, one dedicated to Christ and the other to Mary, on Palm Sunday of 1496.<sup>33</sup> The boys who participated in the procession were dressed in white and carried little red crosses as well as branches of olive, some of which they had fashioned into wreaths.<sup>34</sup> (They were therefore bedecked in white, red, and green.) Savonarola had admonished the adults at least to carry branches of olive with crosses of palm.<sup>35</sup> The Lord, Savonarola stated in his sermon for that day, had come into Florence.<sup>36</sup> Savonarola would remind the Florentines that this had happened during a sermon delivered on Palm Sunday 1497, on which occasion, alas, Christ did not come in.<sup>37</sup> It was Savonarola's wish that just as Christ was to be Florence's king, Mary would become her queen;<sup>38</sup> he implied at least once that she was queen already.<sup>39</sup>

On Assumption Day 1496, Savonarola preached in the Cathedral of Florence. Among his listeners was the Signoria of the Republic. His sermon, on the verse 'Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, ye righteous...',<sup>40</sup> was published around 1500 as part of the collection on Ruth and Micah.<sup>41</sup> It begins with discussions of the Lord's Incarnation and the pre-eminence of Mary. Savonarola then turns to the last verse of the eleventh chapter and all of the twelfth chapter of the Book of Revelation,

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., fol. 36v; ed. Crucitti p. 92: 'certe coronelle circundate di breve o vero cartule piccoline scripte et leghate con fila d'oro'.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> *Prediche del reverendo padre frate Hieronymo da Ferrara facte l'anno 1496 ne' giorni delle feste...*, Florence (Antonio Tubini, Lorenzo d'Alopa and Andrea Ghirlandi) c. 1500, sig. n3v; *Prediche sopra Ruth e Michea*, ed. V. Romano, Rome 1962, ii, p. 61: 'Dite quella coronella della Vergine ogni dì'. For Bernardino see 'Epistola di Bernardino de' Fanciulli della città di Firenze... a dì xi giugno mcccclxxxvii', in *Prediche* (as in n. 18), sig. a5r: 'dite el suo uficio et la sua coronella'; and 'Predica di Pietro Bernardino da Firenze inutile servulo di Iesù Christo et di tutti li fanciulli di buona volontà, facto nel populo di Sanc[to] Lorenzo in chasa sua... Dominica prima Septuagesime Mcccclxxxviii'; ibid., sig. c4r: 'Dite la chorona della Vergine Maria—quella bella. Io dico, quella grande. Et se la direte ogni dì, non la lasciando, io vi prometto che andremo in paradiso.' Before inventing this one, Savonarola had directed his followers to say a 'crown' of four Pater Nosters, 12 Ave Marias and one Magnificat; as well as one of just 12 Ave Marias.

<sup>33</sup> See the descriptions of the procession by Piero Parenti in G. Schnitzer, *Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte Savonarolas*, iv, Munich 1910, pp. 112–14; and the 'Pseudo-Burlamacchi', *La vita del beato Jeronimo Savonarola scritta da un anonimo del secolo XVI e già attribuita*

*a fra Pacifico Burlamacchi*, ed. P. Ginori Conti [and R. Ridolfi], Florence 1937, pp. 127–9. For these references I thank Jonathan Nelson.

<sup>34</sup> Lightbown (as in n. 1), i, p. 134; and *Prediche quadregesime del reverendo Frate Ieronimo Savonarola da Ferrara sopra Amos propheta, sopra Zacharia propheta, et parte etiam sopra li Evangelii occorrenti et molti Psalmi di David...*, Venice (Octavianus Scotus) 1539, fol. 393v; *Prediche sopra Amos e Zaccaria*, ed. P. Ghiglieri, 3 vols, Rome 1972, iii, p. 152.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., fol. 382v; ed. Ghiglieri iii, p. 123.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., fol. 391r; ed. Ghiglieri iii, p. 146. See also below, p. 104.

<sup>37</sup> *Prediche di frate Hieronymo da Ferrara sopra Ezechiel*, Bologna (Benedetto di Ettore) 1515, sig. DD5v; *Prediche sopra Ezechiele*, ed. R. Ridolfi, Rome 1955, ii, pp. 307–8. Savonarola was careful to point out that Christ would nevertheless come in the Sacrament.

<sup>38</sup> *Prediche... sopra Amos...*, *Zaccaria* (as in n. 34), fol. 380v; ed. Ghiglieri iii, p. 118.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., fol. 69r; ed. Ghiglieri i, p. 179, 'saravi con lui la Vergine nostra Regina'. The scene described is the Last Judgement; the place is the Mount of Olives. He also stated on various occasions that she is our 'Mamma' or 'Mother', e.g. *Prediche... delle feste* (as in n. 32), sigs n3v, n7v, u4v; ed. Romano ii, pp. 61, 83, 353 ('quella santa Mamma, Regina nostra'; 'la nostra Madre'; 'la Mamma nostra').

<sup>40</sup> Psalm 32(31).11.

dealing with the opening of the temple of God in heaven, the woman clothed with the sun and having a crown of twelve stars who brought forth a man child who was to rule all nations, and the great red dragon that made war in heaven, was cast out of it, and afterwards greatly persecuted the woman.<sup>42</sup> Paraphrasing—and greatly distorting—the tenth and eleventh verses of the twelfth chapter, Savonarola states that ‘Now is come the power of Christ on earth; the dragon has lost; our brethren have won by the blood of the Lamb’.<sup>43</sup> He explains that this is the fourth of the visions of St John, figuring the fourth state of the Church—and reminds his audience that ‘we are now in the last part of the fourth state’. And so, Savonarola concludes, the vision will soon be fulfilled.<sup>44</sup> Now, the outcome of the war in heaven, in which the dragon, whose tail ‘drew the third part of the stars in heaven’ (Revelation 12.4), is defeated by Michael and his angels, is what is normally thought of as the Fall of the Rebel Angels. The ninth verse of the twelfth chapter plainly states that the dragon is Satan; but Savonarola identifies it as Antichrist.<sup>45</sup> His listeners must therefore have been under the impression that Savonarola believed the coming of Antichrist to be imminent.<sup>46</sup> He applies the vision to Florence, for example identifying the temple of God which was opened in heaven and the ark inside it as the Holy Writ, Christ, and Mary, which and who have been ‘opened’ to the Florentines.<sup>47</sup> He himself is the thunders and hail with which the eleventh chapter closes.<sup>48</sup>

Savonarola naturally discusses the ‘great wonder in heaven’, that is, the ‘woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars’.<sup>49</sup> She is Mary, ‘that glorious Mother’. The stars in her crown signify her ‘privileges’, of which Savonarola gives the entire list, reminding his listeners that he had previously discussed Mary’s twelve ‘privileges’ in his ‘Book of Revelations’.<sup>50</sup> Long ago she gave birth to Christ. Now she wants to give birth to ‘the Florentine people, a spiritual people, a good people’.<sup>51</sup> Later on, somewhat shifting his ground, he states that this woman’s desire to give birth signifies that ‘this Church’ has Christ in its heart and would like to give birth to him in the hearts of one and all in order that everyone may be good.<sup>52</sup> Again shifting his ground, he identifies the great red dragon with the tribulations of the Florentines (which are for their own good and which also, by implication, must be due to the persecutions of Antichrist). He

<sup>41</sup> *Prediche... delle feste* (as in n. 32), sigs n5<sup>r</sup>–o4<sup>r</sup>; ed. Romano ii, pp. 71–108.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. n6<sup>r</sup>; ed. Romano ii, p. 76.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*; ed. Romano ii, p. 77: ‘Ora è fatta la potestà di Christo in terra, el dracone ha perduto, e’ nostri fratelli hanno vinto per el sangue dello Agnello’. Revelation 12.10–12 in fact states that the power of Christ has come in heaven and Satan has been cast out of it. In this passage Satan is not defeated on earth but comes to it, ‘having great wrath’. The reign of Christ on earth does not come until chapter 20, when Satan is bound with a great chain.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. n6<sup>v</sup>; ed. Romano ii, p. 77 (see next note).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*; ed. Romano ii, pp. 77–8: ‘Questa, come è detto, è la quarta visione che ebbe santo Giovanni, la quale fu imaginaria, cioè che per imaginatione vedeva tutte queste cose. E però vedi tu che, se tu andassi leggendo e credessi la Scrittura, crederresti ancora le altre cose che ti sono state dette. Questa visione è esposta da’ Dottori antichi per il corpo mistico della Chiesa, e il dracone per Anticristo e per il quarto stato della Chiesa. E essendo noi adesso nel fine del quarto stato, si ha pure a verificare questa profetia e visione di santo Giovanni.’

<sup>46</sup> In fact he did not so believe; see below, p. 103.

<sup>47</sup> *Prediche... delle feste* (as in n. 32), sig. n8<sup>r</sup>; ed. Romano ii, pp. 85–6.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. o1<sup>r</sup>; ed. Romano ii, pp. 91–2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. o1<sup>v</sup>; ed. Romano ii, p. 95: ‘*Et signum magnum apparuit in coelo: mulier amicta sole, et luna sub pedibus eius, et in capite eius corona stellarum duodecim*’.

<sup>50</sup> That is, the *Compendio. Prediche... delle feste* (as in n. 32), sig. o2<sup>r</sup>; ed. Romano ii, pp. 96–7. Cf. also the description of the crown given in connection with a discussion of the Assumption in the annotations by Fra Domenico da Pescia (but long believed to be by Savonarola himself; see below, p. 100) to a Bible of 1491: *Biblia sacra*, Basle (Johannes Froben); BNCF, Banco Rari 308; annotations transcribed by F. Bencini, *Scripta Hieronymi Savonarolae inedita* (BNCF MS Nuovi Acquisti 576), Florence 1860, ii, pp. 122–7, cols 36–7.

<sup>51</sup> *Prediche... delle feste* (as in n. 32), sig. o2<sup>r</sup><sup>v</sup>; ed. Romano ii, p. 98: ‘Ella vuole partorire el populo fiorentino, uno populo spirituale, uno populo buono’.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. o2<sup>v</sup>; ed. Romano ii, p. 99: ‘questa Chiesa ha nel core suo Cristo, e vorriale partorire nel core di quello e di quell’altro, e fare che ognuno fussi buono’.

further identifies the dragon with the *tiepidi*, the uncommitted Florentines whom he hated almost as much as those who opposed him openly.<sup>53</sup> Commenting on the way in which the woman's child was 'caught up unto God' (Revelation 12.5), Savonarola says this means that she drew our hearts up to heaven.<sup>54</sup> The woman herself fled to the wilderness, where God had prepared a place for her. There she was to stay and be fed for 1260 days—that is, three and a half years or 'times' (Revelation 12.6, 12.14). Savonarola says that he does not wish to tell his listeners what this means.<sup>55</sup> He ends with the statement that Satan wants to fight, the angels want to fight, and the angels will win.<sup>56</sup>

As Savonarola's Assumption Day sermon connects the 'privileges' of Mary with the two chapters of Revelation to which reference is explicitly made in the painting's inscription, and also prophesies the coming of the power of Christ on earth and the defeat of the dragon, it seems likely that the sermon, which was probably in print by early 1501, has a great deal to do with the imagery of Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity*.

\*

The inscription to the *Mystic Nativity* reads:

This picture, at the end of the year 1500, in the troubles of Italy, I, Alessandro, painted in the half time after the time; at the time of the fulfilment of the eleventh of St John, in the Second Woe of the Apocalypse; in the loosing of the devil for three and a half years; then he shall be chained according to the twelfth, and we shall see him [here a word or two is missing] as in this picture.<sup>57</sup>

(ΤΑΥΤΗΝ · ΓΡΑΦΗΝ · ΕΝ · ΤΩΙ · ΤΕΛΕΙ · ΤΟΥ · Χ · ΣΣΣΣΣ · ΕΤΟΥΣ · ΕΝ · ΤΑΙΣ · ΤΑΡ[ΑΧ]ΑΙΣ · ΤΗΣ · ΙΤΑΛΙΑΣ · ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΣ · ΕΓΩ · ΕΝ · ΤΩΙ · ΜΕΤΑ · ΧΡΟΝΟΝ · ΗΜΙΧΡΟΝΩΙ · ΕΓΡΑΦΟΝ · ΠΑΡΑ · ΤΟ · ΕΝΔΕΚ/ΑΤΟΝ · ΤΟΥ · ΑΓΙΟΥ · ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ · ΕΝ · ΤΩΙ · ΑΠΟΚΑΛΥΨΕΩΣ · Β'ΩΙΟΥΑΙ · ΕΝ · ΤΗΙ · ΛΥΣΕΙ · ΤΩΝ · Γ · ΚΑΙ · ΗΜΙΣΥ · ΕΤΩΝ · ΤΟΥ · ΔΙΑΒΟΛΟΥ · ΕΠΕΙΤΑ · ΔΕΣΜΟΘΗΣΕΤΑΙ · ΕΝ · ΤΩΙ · ΙΒ'ΩΙ · ΚΑΙ · /ΒΛΕΨΟΜΕΝ ... ΝΟΝ · ΟΜΟΙΟΝ · ΤΗΙ · ΓΡΑΦΗΙ · ΤΑΥΤΗΙ)

Botticelli clearly accepts the responsibility for what we see here. But he evidently wanted this responsibility, as well as the astonishing information that the inscription insinuates, to be known only to persons able to decipher it. Even for those who can read Greek it is far from clear at first glance what he is driving at. The inscription invites us to recall chapters 11 and 12 of the Book of Revelation. Each of these deals with a three-and-a-half-year period in world history, in the second of which Botticelli believes himself to be living (perhaps in a figurative sense). The period in chapter 11, which completes the Second Woe of the Seventh Seal, concerns two holy witnesses (traditionally supposed to be Enoch and Elijah)<sup>58</sup> clothed in sackcloth and having fire coming from their mouths. They are to prophesy in the holy city for 1260 days before being slain. Their bodies are not to be suffered to be buried, and they are to ascend in a cloud. The clear implication of Botticelli's inscription,

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., sigs o2v–o3r; ed. Romano ii, pp. 100–3.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., sig. o3v; ed. Romano ii, p. 104.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.; ed. Romano ii, p. 105: 'Che significa questo? Io non ti voglio dire uno secreto qua. Io ti darò così una esposizione mistica; quando verrà tempo ti potrò aprire quella chiave.''

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., sig. o4r; ed. Romano ii, p. 107: 'Hor su, Satana vuole combattere; li angeli vogliono combattere. Chi vincerà? Vinceranno li angeli, che sono più forti.'

<sup>57</sup> Horne (as in n. 1), p. 295. See also N. G. Wilson, 'Greek Inscriptions on Renaissance Paintings', *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica*, xxxv, 1992 (1994), pp. 232–41.

<sup>58</sup> E.g. by Ludolphus of Saxony (Landolfo di Sassonia, *Vita di Giesù Christo*, Venice 1570, fols 206r, 459r), as well as Savonarola himself: *Reverendi patris Fratris Hieronymi Savonarole sermones quadragesimales...*, BNCF MS Conventi Soppressi I.VII.25, fols 38r, 75v. See also *Scripta Hieronymi* (as in n. 50), ii, p. 440 (retranscribed in Horne, as in n. 1, p. 363). Cf., for Elijah, Malachi 4.5 and Luke 4.25. Joachim of Fiore thought that the other of the two prophets might be Moses rather than Enoch: *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, Venice 1527 and Frankfurt am Main 1964, fols 152[146]va–149va.

written 'at the time of the fulfilment of the eleventh of St John', is that these things have recently been accomplished in fact. Whom can he possibly have thought the two witnesses to have been, if not Savonarola and his collaborator, Fra Domenico da Pescia? They had indeed 'prophesied' for close to three and a half years from the terrible St Matthew's Day (21 September) of 1494 when (incorrect) news of the entry into Italy of Charles VIII of France and his army reached Florence—or for almost exactly three and a half years from the day on which the French entered the city, that is, 17 November 1494.<sup>59</sup> From their mouths had indeed issued 'fire' and 'thunderings', that is, according to the interpretations of these Apocalyptic words that were transcribed into a Bible for Savonarola's use, the preachings that would first cause them to be burned and then go forth after their deaths.<sup>60</sup> Their bodies indeed had not been buried but ascended in a cloud of smoke on 23 May 1498.

Antichrist is to be responsible for the deaths of the two witnesses, who are described as olive trees, before himself being slain on the Mount of Olives.<sup>61</sup> It was feared in Botticelli's day that Antichrist would come 1500 years after Christ. Strictly speaking, this belief meant that he was to appear publicly in 1530 (on the assumption that his life would mirror that of Christ, who appeared publicly to teach only when he reached the age of thirty), but it is clear from other great works of art, such as Dürer's *Apocalypse* cycle (1498) and Signorelli's frescoes of the *Last Things* in the Cathedral of Orvieto, that there was a widespread fear that the end might come in 1500.<sup>62</sup> Savonarola rejected the belief that Antichrist would come 1500 years after Christ in a sermon delivered in the autumn of 1491.<sup>63</sup> But his having raised the question publicly can only have fixed it more vividly in the minds of his listeners. Savonarola also admitted that Antichrist would probably come 'soon'.<sup>64</sup> According to the Book of Revelation, Antichrist is to be born in Babylon. If Botticelli was aware that when the John who wrote Revelation said 'Babylon', he usually meant 'Rome',<sup>65</sup> then for him Antichrist would have been Pope Alexander VI (even if the pope had not been born in Rome). Now it was frequently claimed during Botticelli's time that

<sup>59</sup> According to Savonarola these 'beginnings' were two of the three most decisive events in initiating his career as a 'prophet'. He describes the terrifying sermon he gave on St Matthew's Day most fully in the *Compendio* (as in n. 20, fol. 4<sup>r</sup>; ed. Crucitti pp. 10–11). His other debuts are perhaps best described in *Prediche... delle feste* (as in n. 32, sig. t7<sup>r-v</sup>; ed. Romano ii, pp. 325–6): 'You must remember that nine days from today [28(31?) Oct. 1496] it will be two years. How many tears were shed that morning at the sermon in this Santa Reparata! And you must remember how much we shouted in this pulpit. And then the same day, when the revolution had been made, you were freed by God from a great peril. And then another time, a Friday, when the King of France was here in your city, you know in what danger you were. And it reminds me, as my friars know and they can testify, that I said to them at table, "I'm afraid that today in this city there may be a great scourge". I told them all that they should pray until I returned, as I wanted to go to His Majesty the King. And so I went, and they remained prostrated in prayer in the choir until I returned. I went to him. When I got to the door, I was repulsed, and I was told, "They don't want you to enter in order that you don't obstruct them, because they want to put all the city to the sack". I don't know how things went. God did everything.'

<sup>60</sup> On the 'fire' see *Scripta Hieronymi* (as in n. 50), ii, p. 440; Horne (as in n. 1), p. 363. On the 'thunderings' see *Prediche... delle feste* (as in n. 32), sig. o1<sup>r</sup> (ed.

Romano ii, p. 91), where Savonarola also states that he himself is the 'hail' of chapter 11 and that the 'earthquake' has crushed all the great houses of Italy. See above, p. 97, and for the Bible n. 50.

<sup>61</sup> Revelation 11.4; *Scripta Hieronymi* (as in n. 50), i, p. 289 (commenting on Daniel 11).

<sup>62</sup> In 1288 Alexander of Roes had predicted that the end of the world would come in 1500, that is, after the six 'Days' of Creation; see M. Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism*, Oxford 1969, p. 313. It needs to be pointed out, however, that 1500 was not the great target year for predictions of the end of the world or the coming of Antichrist that one might imagine. During the late 15th and early 16th centuries there were a number of such years, of which one's impression is that the most important was 1484.

<sup>63</sup> *Sermones quadragesimales* (as in n. 58), fol. 74<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> *Predica di frate Hieronimo da Ferrara della renovazione della Chiesa facta in sancta Maria del Fiore in Firenze adi xiii di Gennaio Mccccxxxiii*, Florence (printer unknown) 1495, sig. a6<sup>v</sup>: 'vedevo per imaginatione una croce nera sopra la Babillonia Roma'; *Prediche sopra i Salmi*, ed. V. Romano, ii, Rome 1974, p. 52: 'la Babillonia Roma'. There does not appear to be any identification of Babylon with Rome in the annotations to the Bible of 1491 (*Scripta Hieronymi*, as in n. 50).



the two witnesses and/or Antichrist were coming soon. And in the invective of the age we often find enemies of all sorts being labelled as 'Antichrist'. For example, Savonarola was called the 'emanation of Antichrist' by no less a celebrity than Marsilio Ficino.<sup>66</sup> But to have said that both the two witnesses and Antichrist had come, and to have identified these figures in all earnest with known persons, as the Greek inscription to Botticelli's painting appears to do, is quite unheard of. Small wonder that in the perilous years for Savonarola's supporters at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Botticelli should have worded his inscription so elusively.<sup>67</sup>

In Revelation 12 we are already in the Third Woe, during which Satan is cast to earth for three and a half years. This is the period in which; according to his inscription, Botticelli thinks he is living.<sup>68</sup> As we have seen, much of the twelfth chapter concerns the Woman of the Apocalypse, who is to give birth to a man child and be persecuted by Satan. After the Third Woe, in chapter 20 (rather than, as Botticelli's inscription says, in chapter 12),<sup>69</sup> an angel is to come down, bind Satan with a great chain, and cast him into the bottomless pit. There are to follow a thousand years during which the resurrected martyrs and true believers will reign with Christ (Revelation 20.1–7).

In the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence is a Bible of 1491 with annotations long believed to have been made by Savonarola. It is now clear that they were made by Fra Domenico da Pescia, but there can be little doubt that they were meant for Savonarola's use.<sup>70</sup> The annotations to the Book of Revelation are particularly numerous, practically supplying a complete gloss.<sup>71</sup> They must be related to Savonarola's sermons on the Apocalypse, the texts of which unfortunately do not survive.<sup>72</sup> The annotation to chapter 20 begins: 'This treats of the damnation of the

<sup>66</sup> C. Vasoli, 'L'attesa della nuova era in ambienti e gruppi fiorentini del Quattrocento', in *L'attesa dell'età nuova nella spiritualità della fine del medioevo* (Convegni del Centro di Studi sulla spiritualità medievale, iii), Todi 1962, p. 388.

<sup>67</sup> For pointing out the danger to me I am grateful to Lorenzo Polizzotto.

<sup>68</sup> 'at the time of the fulfilment of the eleventh of St John, in the Second Woe of the Apocalypse; in the loosing of the devil for three and a half years.' It is difficult to know exactly to what historical time periods Botticelli's two three-and-a-half-year 'Woes' correspond. Lightbown (as in n. 1), i, p. 137, believes, I think correctly, that the 'Second Woe' begins with the invasion of Italy by Charles VIII of France. If so, it begins in the autumn of 1494 and ends in spring 1498—exactly when Savonarola and Domenico da Pescia were executed. Both Lightbown and Weinstein (as in n. 17, p. 335) believe that the 'Third Woe' begins with the invasion by Louis XII or the time when Cesare Borgia began to threaten Florence, that is, in the early autumn of 1499. If so, it should end in the early spring of 1503, and the 'half time' and 'time', that is, half year and year according to the use of the term in both Revelation and Daniel, would bring us to the early spring of 1501, which is close to the time when the picture was done. We do occasionally encounter periods of one and a half years in the 'prophetic' literature of the late Middle Ages, e.g. Giovanni Annio, *Tractatus de futuris Christianorum triumphis in Saracenis sive Glosa super Apocalypsim* ..., Louvain c. 1480, sigs b7<sup>v</sup>–b8<sup>r</sup>; and a 15th-century German manuscript studied by Fritz Saxl ('A Spiritual Encyclopaedia of the Later Middle Ages', this *Journal*, v, 1942, p. 85). Such periods were apparently required to

bring the three-and-a-half-year reign of Antichrist up to five years so that it could be fitted into the 1335 'days' (that is, for the medieval commentators, years) spoken about at the end of the Book of Daniel (12.12). But there are difficulties with this solution. As thus dated, the two 'Woes' are separated by about one and a half years. No such separation is either stated or implied by the Book of Revelation. Moreover, in the Bible a 'time' is never followed by a 'half time' but always by 'times' (that is, two years). In other words, a 'half time' comes only at the end of a three-and-a-half-year period. If we put the beginning of the 'Third Woe' at the time when the 'Second Woe' appears to end, that is, in the spring of 1498, that would bring the end of the 'Third Woe' to the autumn of 1501. It is possible also that either in addition to or instead of years, the 'times' of which the inscription speaks are periods of 1000 years. See below, p. 110.

<sup>69</sup> The error is understandable, as the wording in chapter 12 describing the casting out from heaven of Satan (12.9) is almost identical to that in chapter 20 describing his binding in a great chain on earth (20.2). Even Savonarola was quite confused on this point; see above, n. 43. It is entirely possible that Botticelli in effect copied Savonarola's error.

<sup>70</sup> *Biblia sacra* (as in n. 50); *Scripta Hieronymi* (as in n. 50), ii, p. 440. On the annotations see R. Ridolfi, 'La "Bibbia del Savonarola" della Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze', *Bibliofilia*, xli, 1939, pp. 3–18.

<sup>71</sup> *Scripta Hieronymi* (as in n. 50), ii, pp. 435–55. For bringing this transcription to my attention I am grateful to Rosaria d'Alfonso of the Manuscript Room of the BNCF.



Fig. 39—Sandro Botticelli, *Mystic Nativity*, detail

devil. But first it shows that he was bound in the First Coming of Christ.<sup>73</sup> According to the annotation the angel is Christ, and his coming down is Christ's Incarnation.<sup>74</sup> This interpretation of the binding of Satan was by no means new. Already St Augustine had explained that

The devil is bound...from the First Coming of Christ to the end of the world, which will be Christ's Second Coming... What the binding of the devil means is that he is not permitted to exert his whole power of temptation either by force or by guile to seduce men to his side...

Satan is bound even now and will continue to be until the end of our age, when he is to be unloosed.<sup>75</sup> Clearly, Botticelli's understanding is not that of St Augustine. His devil, represented as five small smitten demons at the very bottom of the picture (Fig. 39), is shown completely vanquished. According to the inscription, the binding of the devil takes place not before he is unloosed but afterwards ('then he shall be chained'). The Nativity with which this binding goes must therefore lie—at least in some mystical sense—in the future. Is Botticelli here misconstruing a relatively simple exegetical thought? Does he, mindful of the prophecy of the Apocalyptic Woman and the birth of her child, anticipate a new Nativity—a kind of First-Coming-and-a-Half? Or had he heard something of the sort from Savonarola? It seems that he had, for in the annotations in the Bible of 1491 to the second chapter of Matthew we find this amazing denunciation:

Wherefore the wolves and foxes that destroy and devour the lambs and chickens hate the coming of day. As they lie in beds with whores, they therefore cannot bear the light, and they deride the prophecy that says that Christ will be born in Florence—on the contrary, *has*

<sup>72</sup> According to Ridolfi (as in n. 4), pp. 21–2, the sermons survive in the form of Savonarola's notes for them in *Sermones quadragesimales* (as in n. 58), fols 53<sup>r</sup>–85<sup>r</sup>, and were delivered between 1 Aug. 1490 and perhaps 6 Jan. 1491. It needs to be noted, alas, that this book is a 16th- or 17th-century copy (though it does appear to be reasonably accurate) and that only the first 11 of the 44 sermons in question are on the Book of Revelation—to chapter 2. A few of the other sermons touch on aspects of Revelation. It also needs to be noted that the 11 sermons on Revelation are described in the past tense ('First I said...and then I noted...', etc.), whereas the rest are in the form of instructions ('First say...and then note...', etc.). There are, however, notes for a few sermons on parts of Revelation in Savonarola's

notes for his sermons on Genesis (San Marco codex, as in n. 4, fols 28<sup>r</sup>–38<sup>r</sup>). According to Ridolfi, *op. cit.*, pp. 31–2, these sermons were delivered during Lent in 1492. Another sermon on Revelation occurs among the *Quam bonus* sermons (no. 25; San Marco codex, fols 48<sup>r</sup>–51<sup>r</sup>; *Prediche... 'Quam bonus'*, as in n. 4, fols 162<sup>v</sup>–76<sup>v</sup>).

<sup>73</sup> *Scripta Hieronymi* (as in n. 50), ii, p. 450: 'Hic agit de damnatione dyaboli. Sed prius ostendit quod fuit ligatus in primo adventu Christi'.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *De civitate Dei*, xx.8.12–13; cited from E. Dotson, 'An Augustinian Interpretation of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling', *Art Bulletin*, lxi, 1979, p. 249.

been born—and the knowledgeable persons who have been summoned by them act the same way.

(Quare lupi et vulpes agnos et pullos devastantes et vorantes adventum diei detestantur. Sicut hi jacent in cubilibus cum scortis, ideo lumen non ferunt, et derident prophetiam quae dicit Florentiae nasciturum Christum—immo natum—et sapientes ab eis acciti idem agunt.)<sup>76</sup>

The prophecy that provoked the derision of the ‘wolves and foxes’ clearly was of Christ’s figurative birth. But exactly what was it? Possibly it was a statement Savonarola made during a sermon delivered on Christmas Day, 1494:

And just as I told you about the great glory that God will grant to this city, so he will grant you fullness and abundance of spirit. *Ecce spiritus Domini super terram copiose et abundanter. Et homo natus est in ea*, that is, Christ will be born in the hearts of many. *Et fundabit eam Altissimus*. The Lord will found his Church with his spirit.

(Et come io ti dissi della gloria che Dio darà grande a questa Città, così gli darà copia et abbondantia di spirito. *Ecce spiritus Domini super terram copiose et abundantis* [sic]. *Et homo natus est in ea*, cioè, Christo nascerà nel cuore di molti. *Et fundabit eam Altissimus*. Il Signore fonderà collo spirito la Chiesa sua.)<sup>77</sup>

As we have already seen, Savonarola afterwards claimed that Christ had actually entered Florence on Palm Sunday of 1496.<sup>78</sup> There are evident references in Botticelli’s painting to what happened on that memorable day.<sup>79</sup>

We cannot be sure that the passage just cited was the prophecy of Christ’s birth that caused such derision among Savonarola’s opponents. But we may be confident that whatever that prophecy was, it came from the great preacher’s mouth, and that some such notion is behind the scene at the bottom of the *Mystic Nativity*. In Botticelli’s picture the devil is shown as five spirit-sized demons. It was believed in the Middle Ages that Satan—who, being a fallen angel, is a spirit—can enter us only through one of our five senses and that the demons were driven from our bodies by Christ’s birth.<sup>80</sup> Savonarola clearly subscribed to such beliefs. In one sermon, commenting on John 4.17–18, he says:

*Non habeo virum*. Soul, you have had five husbands, that is, you have followed the five senses of the body. *Et hunc quem habes, non est tuus vir*: this one that you have is the devil, who is not your husband but the adulterer of the soul.

(*Non habeo virum*. Anima, tu hai hauto cinque mariti, cioè tu hai seguitati e cinque sensi del corpo. *Et hunc quem habes, non est tuus vir*. Questo che tu hai, [è] il diavolo, che non è tuo marito, ma adultero dell’anima.)<sup>81</sup>

In another sermon we read, ‘Behold, the devil begins at the five pipes’.<sup>82</sup>

The one demon in Botticelli’s picture that has not been transfixed by his own weapon seems to have fallen into a crevice. The idea possibly derived from another pronouncement by Savonarola:

Do not be afraid of those who want to do you harm, for they are in chains and cannot reach farther than God wishes them to. And soon God will see to it—I say soon!—soon they will go into a great hole and be ruined.

<sup>76</sup> *Scripta Hieronymi* (as in n. 50), i, p. 357.

<sup>77</sup> *Prediche... sopra Aggeo* (as in n. 18), fol. 167r; ed. Firpo p. 382. Savonarola’s text is Haggai 2, but the Latin phrases are not taken from it.

<sup>78</sup> See above, p. 96.

<sup>79</sup> See the discussion of the Palm Sunday procession, above p. 96.

<sup>80</sup> Ludolphus of Saxony, *Vita di Giesù Christo*, Venice 1570, fols 51v, 407v.

<sup>81</sup> *Prediche... sopra Amos...*, *Zaccaria* (as in n. 34), fol. 232v; ed. Ghiglieri i, p. 175.

<sup>82</sup> San Marco codex (as in n. 4), fol. 101r: ‘Ecce diabolus cepit a quinque fistulis.’

(Non havere paura di chi ti vuole far male, che sono in catena, et non possono estendersi più che Dio si voglia. Et presto provvederà Dio—io dico presto!—presto ne anderanno in una gran buca et ruineranno.)<sup>83</sup>

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There thus appear to be references in Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity* to two of Savonarola's allegories that were in print at the time the picture was painted, another that was printed only later on, and a number of the *frate's* further utterances (of which some may never have been printed at all). In no case, however, does Botticelli follow Savonarola literally. For example, he does not show Mercy, Truth, Righteousness and Peace and their reconciliation with mankind explicitly but only appears to hint at them through his manipulation of the angels. And we should scarcely have realised that Botticelli's wreath of angels is related to the crown of Mary in Savonarola's vision, were it not for the inscriptions they carry. To be sure, Botticelli had to be careful about what he was showing. In early 1501 anything too overtly Savonarolan could have landed either him or the picture's possible recipient in a great deal of trouble. But what we are looking at here does not seem to be simply a cryptic illustration of some of Savonarola's ideas. Rather, it appears to be a manipulation of those ideas, in which Savonarolan images are not only paraphrased but also interpreted in a way that the *frate* himself had never envisioned. Savonarola did not really think that the coming of Antichrist was imminent. In a sermon delivered in 1496 he flatly stated that he had not yet been born.<sup>84</sup> That statement puts the public coming of Antichrist at least thirty years in the future.<sup>85</sup> Because of what is stated in the Books of Daniel, Matthew and Revelation, Savonarola, like most of the other theologians of his era, believed that Antichrist would appear in Jerusalem, where he would persecute the faithful.<sup>86</sup> But in Savonarola's day there were no Christians worth speaking of in Jerusalem. That is one of the main reasons why he insisted that the Turks would soon convert.<sup>87</sup> In one instance he even maintained that it would be the converted Turks who would renew Jerusalem.<sup>88</sup>

The Greek inscription to Botticelli's painting adds an Apocalyptic dimension to it that is not Savonarolan. Savonarola did not identify himself and Fra Domenico da Pescia with the two witnesses of the eleventh chapter of Revelation. Rather, he thought of himself as the thunderings and hail that come at the end of that chapter, when we are already in the Third Woe. As far as we know, Savonarola never publicly discussed the Second Woe at all. Nor did he ever speak publicly of the binding of Satan or the reign of one thousand years that follows that binding—although he did mistakenly speak in his sermon for Assumption Day 1496 of the casting out of heaven of Satan as if it were his binding and the beginning of Christ's power on earth.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>83</sup> *Prediche... sopra Amos...*, Zaccaria (as in n. 34), fol. 73<sup>r-v</sup>; ed. Ghiglieri i, p. 190.

<sup>84</sup> *Prediche... delle feste* (as in n. 32), sig. c6<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>85</sup> See above, p. 99.

<sup>86</sup> Daniel 9.26–7; Matthew 24.15; Revelation 11.2, 7–8. His power is to last for three and a half years: Revelation 13.5.

<sup>87</sup> *Prediche... della Renovatione* (as in n. 65), sig. b3<sup>r</sup> (ed. Romano pp. 177–8); *Prediche... sopra Amos...*, Zaccaria (as in n. 34), fols 42<sup>v</sup>, 466<sup>v</sup>; *Prediche de fra Hieronymo sopra l'Exodo*, Venice (Cesare Arrivabene) 1520, fol. 102<sup>v</sup>. Also in a letter of Fra Giovanni da Pescia to certain Florentine friends, of around 1500, in *Opuscoli ascetici*,

BNCF MS Magl. XXXV.116, fol. 77<sup>v</sup>: 'Chi negerà mai se lo Apocalisis [sic] è vero, che Antjchristo habbia ha nascere nelle partj di Horjente et Jerusalem, et perseguitare li Christianj, e quali non vi sono, [e] che la Turchia non s'abbia a convertjre alla fede di Christo, la quale ha ha essere preparatjone allo havenjmento di Antjchrjsto?'

<sup>88</sup> San Marco codex (as in n. 4), fol. 60<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>89</sup> For the Assumption Day sermon see above, pp. 96–8. See also nn. 43 and 69.



Now, Botticelli painted the *Mystic Nativity* almost three years after Savonarola's death, at a time when, because of the persecutions to which his followers were being subjected, a number of the *frate's* ideas were being radicalised. In order to understand better the elements in Botticelli's picture that seem to go beyond Savonarola, we shall turn first to the thoughts and deeds of some of the earliest post-Savonarolans, and secondly to the binding of Satan and its consequence, the reign with Christ of the resurrected martyrs and true believers for a thousand years.

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We have already encountered the first of our post-Savonarolans, Girolamo Benivieni.<sup>90</sup> His *Commento*, published in 1500, is dedicated to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.<sup>91</sup> It contains a section with the texts of and comments on a number of songs that Benivieni composed during Savonarola's lifetime, to be sung or recited by the *frate's* followers. The ideas expressed are purely Savonarolan, but couched in the form of songs, and especially when one considers them outside the context of the specific occasions or ceremonies for which they were written, they strike one as being quite extreme:

Rise, oh new Jerusalem, and see,  
See thy glory; confess, adore  
Thy Queen and her beloved Son.  
In thee, city of God, that sittest now in weeping,  
Must so much joy and splendour yet be born.

(Surgi o Hierusalem novella, & vedi,  
Vedi la gloria tua, confessa, adora  
La tua Regina e 'l suo dilecto figlio,  
In te, città di Dio, che in pianto hor siedì,  
Tanto gaudio & splendor nascer de' ancora.)<sup>92</sup>

Here and elsewhere in Benivieni's songs we find the themes of Florence as the new Jerusalem, Florence as the elected city in which happiness already abounds or to which happiness has been promised, Florence as the centre of reform which the whole world will follow until there will be 'one sheepfold and one shepherd', and Florence as the city whose only king is Christ and whose only queen is Mary—all seemingly expressed as accepted truths rather than just poetic figures. Jesus is entreated to open his font and 'rain' his grace upon the city, and to 'exert thy power and come'.<sup>93</sup> In one of the songs, evidently written for Palm Sunday 1496,<sup>94</sup> he actually arrives:

Come, behold the Lord,  
King of every king, who cometh  
To see how his city is.  
(Venite, ecco el Signore,  
Re d'ogni Re: che viene  
A veder come stia la sua cittate.)<sup>95</sup>

Throughout the songs the mood is one of triumphant faith and expectation. The Lord *shall* grant mercy, and Florence *shall* be blessed.

<sup>90</sup> Above, p. 93. On several of the figures discussed below, see now L. Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation: The Savonarolan Movement in Florence 1494–1545*, Oxford 1994.

<sup>91</sup> *Commento di Hieronymo Benivieni* (as in n. 17), fol. 1r.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 112v (=113v).

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, fols 116v–17r.

<sup>94</sup> See above, p. 96.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 117v.

The second of the post-Savonarolans to be discussed here is Pietro Bernardo, better known as **Bernardino dei Fanciulli**.<sup>96</sup> Savonarola's remarkable boys' organisations were evidently under the supervision of Fra Domenico da Pescia, and Bernardino was one of his collaborators. This gifted if fanatical man continued to meet with the boys, and a number of devoted adults as well, after Savonarola's death. When the persecutions became too great, he and his followers moved first to the Mugello and then to the small Emilian town of Mirandola, where they lived for a couple of years under the protection of Count Giovanfrancesco Pico. When Pico lost his rule in 1502, Bernardino was taken prisoner, tried (he had allegedly committed sodomy with his boys), and executed. Many of the ideas expressed in his sermons are Savonarolan. But because of the 'simplicity' with which they are put, they come across with extraordinary force. In one of Bernardino's writings we read both that the Lord is coming soon and that he is already on earth.<sup>97</sup> In another he is entreated to 'come soon' and to 'come and rule with us'.<sup>98</sup> Savonarola had announced on one occasion that in the Florence of the future, men would converse with angels, on another that angels would live with men, and on yet another that the city was already being governed by angels.<sup>99</sup> Bernardino evidently took these words very seriously. He claimed to have met an angel in a vision and to have been taken by him to heaven.<sup>100</sup> Giovanfrancesco Pico believed that Bernardino conversed with his guardian angel.<sup>101</sup> With his group of followers Bernardino apparently established an angel cult. Like Savonarola, the group believed that angels carry our prayers to God, and hoped to ally with the angels in heaven.<sup>102</sup> One of the printed sermons ends with a set of invocations to various angels.<sup>103</sup> Bernardino pointed out to his followers that the name 'Christ' means 'the anointed one',<sup>104</sup> and is said to have anointed them on their temples. By 1499 his group had come to be known as the 'Unti' (the Anointed). According to Bartolomeo Cerretani the group believed in an imminent outpouring of the Holy Ghost.<sup>105</sup>

The third of our Savonarolans, **Giovanni Nesi**, published his *Oraculum de novo saeculo* in 1497.<sup>106</sup> As printed, the book is dedicated to Giovanfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, but in first draft the dedication was to Giorgio Benigno (also known as Dragišić, or Salvati),<sup>107</sup> whom we shall encounter again shortly.<sup>108</sup> Nesi's book begins with an obscure and elaborate vision involving numerous classical and mythological persons, things and places, and filled with the portents of great events to come. But Pico then explains to Nesi that what has been revealed in his vision concerns Savonarola and the future that the *frate* is helping to build in Florence.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>96</sup> On Bernardino see Weinstein (as in n. 17), pp. 324–33; Reeves (as in n. 62), p. 438; and C. Vasoli, 'L'influenza di Gioacchino da Fiore sul profetismo italiano della fine del Quattrocento e del primo Cinquecento', *Il profetismo gioachimita tra Quattrocento e Cinquecento* (Atti del III Congresso Internazionale di Studi Gioachimiti), ed. G. L. Podestà, San Giovanni in Fiore 1991, pp. 72–3.

<sup>97</sup> 'Epistola' (as in n. 32), sigs a1<sup>v</sup>, a4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>98</sup> 'Predica' (as in n. 32), sigs a7<sup>r</sup>, b6<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>99</sup> *Registro delle prediche del Reverendo Padre Frate Hieronymo da Ferrara facte nel Mccccxxxv*, BNCF MS Sav. 49, sigs a2<sup>r</sup>, a3<sup>r</sup>, a7<sup>r</sup>; and Weinstein (as in n. 17), p. 174. Most of these ideas were also expressed by Fra Luca Bettini, in his *Oracolo della renovatione della Chiesa secondo la dottrina del... Savonarola*; see M. Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, London 1976, p. 95.

<sup>100</sup> 'Petrus Bernardus de Florencja jnutilis et indignus servulus Ihesus Christi et omnium puerorum bone

voluntatis verjtatis amatoribus salutem in Domino, pacem, et Spiritus Sancti consolationem, etc.', 'In Monte Olympa [sic]', 30 Sep. 1500, in *Opuscoli ascetici*, BNCF MS Magl. XXXV.116, fols 67<sup>v</sup>–8<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>101</sup> 'Operetta dello Ill. S. Iohanfrancesco Pico della Mjrandola jn defensione della opera di Pietro Bernardo da Firenze', *ibid.*, fol. 110<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>102</sup> 'Predica' (as in n. 32), sig. c2<sup>r</sup>; 'Predica...facta a Spugnole' (as in n. 18), sig. d5<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, sigs f5<sup>v</sup>–f6<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. e4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>105</sup> Reeves (as in n. 62), p. 438.

<sup>106</sup> Florence (Lorenzo Morgiani). On this work see esp. Weinstein (as in n. 17), pp. 201–4.

<sup>107</sup> C. Vasoli, *Tra 'maestri', umanisti e teologi: Studi quattrocenteschi*, Florence 1991, p. 220.

<sup>108</sup> Below, p. 109 and p. 114 n. 177.

<sup>109</sup> *Oraculum*, sigs b3<sup>v</sup>–b4<sup>r</sup>.

The 'Ferrarese Socrates', as Nesi at one point calls him, is in perfect agreement with Plato.<sup>110</sup> The Christian 'Republic' he is founding is to play a special role in world events.<sup>111</sup> Soon, as Savonarola has prophesied, the Moslems will convert and the whole world will be 'one sheepfold'.<sup>112</sup> Mixing Old Testament prophecies and Vergil, Nesi seems to contrive to foresee a Messiah yet to come, and a kind of golden age of Christian renewal.<sup>113</sup> 'Put on the new man', Nesi urges us. 'Come to Florence, where Christ alone reigns.'<sup>114</sup>

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The Greek inscription on Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity* is written on a white band painted over the blue background at the top of the painting. It may therefore be an afterthought; but there is little doubt that it was placed there by Botticelli himself.<sup>115</sup> The point is of great importance. Without the inscription the painting is a marvelously 'naïve' and beautiful rendering of a mystical Christmas, which seems not to contradict the teachings of the Church. But with the inscription it becomes more radical. As we have seen, the Greek text states quite plainly that the birth of Christ, as shown in the painting, lies in the *future*—and implies that this birth will soon take place. The inscription also states that Satan 'shall be chained'. Now, the chaining or binding of Satan is nothing less than the beginning of the Millennium. By means of the Greek inscription, then, Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity* in effect announces the Millennium and implies that it is coming soon.

The Millennium is described in the first seven verses of Revelation chapter 20: An angel comes down from heaven, binds Satan for a thousand years with a great chain, and casts him into the bottomless pit. He sets a seal upon Satan so that he shall be unable to deceive the nations any more until the thousand years have been fulfilled. After that period he must be loosed for a short time. The souls of those who were martyred for their faith, and those who refused to follow Antichrist, live and reign with Christ for a thousand years, but the rest of the dead do not live again until the thousand years are finished. This is the first resurrection. On those that take part in the first resurrection, the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ and shall reign with him for a thousand years. When the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed from his prison.

The Biblical description of the Millennium was probably written under the influence of the numerous Jewish beliefs about the Messiah in circulation during the first century.<sup>116</sup> A couple of points require our consideration here. Although the description seems to imply that Christ will return to earth for a thousand years, it does not say so explicitly. It is thus possible to interpret the statement that those who are to live again through the First Resurrection, and reign with Christ for a thousand years, will do so only in the sense that they will be filled with his spirit. In the twenty-eighth chapter of Matthew, Jesus says, 'I am always with you, *even* unto the end of the world'. In a spiritual sense, then, Jesus always 'reigns' with those who truly believe in him. (He also says that his kingdom is not of this world.) The description in Revelation, furthermore, says only that the *souls* of the martyrs and true believers will live again through the First Resurrection. There is no explicit

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., sigs b5<sup>r</sup>, b7<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., sig. c5<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., sigs c2<sup>v</sup>–c3<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., sigs c7<sup>r</sup>–c8<sup>r</sup>. We also find the golden age identified with a great Christian renewal in the *Epistola Enoch* of Lodovico Lazzarelli, who actually calls himself

Enoch; on Lazzarelli see Weinstein (as in n. 17), pp. 200–1.

<sup>114</sup> *Oraculum*, sig. d2<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>115</sup> See Davies (as in n. 1), p. 103.

<sup>116</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia*, x, 1909, pp. 307–8; *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, v, 1912, pp. 379–80.

mention of their bodies. It is therefore possible to construe the words as meaning only that the souls of the martyrs and saints will ascend to heaven, to rule *there* with Christ for more than a thousand years, before the Second Resurrection occurs, at which time the bodies of all will arise from their graves.

The *Enciclopedia cattolica* describes millenarianism as an 'eschatological error'.<sup>117</sup> But many of the first Christians believed in it. Among those who accepted the Millennium in one form or another were Lactantius, Tertullian, St Irenaeus, St Ambrose, and even the young St Jerome.<sup>118</sup> The young St Augustine believed that after six periods lasting one thousand years each and corresponding to the six Days of Creation, the world would experience a thousand years of peace and abundance corresponding to the seventh Day or Sabbath, on which God rested.<sup>119</sup> But Augustine later changed his mind. The greatest obstacle to taking literally the things described in the first seven verses of Revelation chapter 20 is that in the Gospels Jesus does not mention the Millennium or any of the events connected with it. At best he says, in the passage in which he describes himself as the Good Shepherd, that 'there shall be one [sheep]fold, and one shepherd'.<sup>120</sup> That statement, as we have already seen, was to be taken by some during the later Middle Ages to mean that the whole world would convert to Christianity.<sup>121</sup> But there are simpler and less radical ways of understanding it. Augustine therefore reasoned that the biblical description of the Millennium is intended figuratively. The language of most of the Book of Revelation is symbolic anyway. As we have seen, Augustine identified the descent of the angel who binds Satan as the Advent of Christ and the thousand years during which Satan remains bound as the Christian Era.<sup>122</sup> His solution was almost immediately, and for a long time universally, accepted. In 431 millenarianism was formally condemned by the Council of Ephesus.<sup>123</sup>

According to Augustine's scheme, the Christian Era should have ended in the year 1000 and the world not long thereafter. But as the year 1000 came and went with no great upheavals, it became clear that a reappraisal would be necessary. There were two conservative solutions. The first was the rather stopgap (and illogical) measure of dating the beginning of the thousand years to the Resurrection of Jesus, thereby postponing the end of the Christian Era by thirty-three years. The second solution was to take the position that, in the symbolic language of the Book of Revelation, the phrase 'a thousand years' refers simply to a very long period of indeterminate length.<sup>124</sup> This solution was generally adopted by the Church during the later Middle Ages. At the end of the indeterminate period would come Antichrist and the other signs foretold by Jesus in the Gospels,<sup>125</sup> which would shortly be followed by the end of the world.

But a more radical solution was proposed already at the beginning of the thirteenth century by the Cistercian abbot Joachim of Fiore.<sup>126</sup> Through a complicated study of the 'concordances' (parallels) between the Old Testament and the New, Joachim believed he could show that along with the seven ages established by

<sup>117</sup> Vol. viii, 1952, p. 1008.

<sup>118</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia*, x, p. 309; *Enciclopedia cattolica*, viii, p. 1009; *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, v, p. 388; N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, London 1957, pp. 6–14.

<sup>119</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia*, x, p. 309; Cohn, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>120</sup> John 10.16.

<sup>121</sup> See above, pp. 104, 106.

<sup>122</sup> See above, p. 101.

<sup>123</sup> Cohn (as in n. 118), p. 14.

<sup>124</sup> Both solutions are discussed by Nicholas of Lyra, whose Bible glosses went through hundreds of printings: *Postilla super totam Bibliam*, Rome (Conrad Sweynheym and Arnold Pannartz) 1472, iv, fols 287<sup>v</sup>–8<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>125</sup> Matthew 24.3–25.46; Luke 21.5–36.

<sup>126</sup> On him see Reeves (as in n. 62); eadem (as in n. 99); D. C. West and S. Zimdars-Swartz, *Joachim of Fiore: A Study in Spiritual Perception and History*, Bloomington 1983.



Augustine, world history could be periodised into three 'states' corresponding to the Persons of the Trinity. Each 'state' lasts for forty-two generations (being the number of generations from Abraham to Christ according to St Matthew), but the second two overlap with their predecessors by fourteen generations. The last 'state', that is, the State of the Holy Ghost, is one of fulfilment, in which all men are to dwell in peace and contentment, as contemplatives (that is, one is tempted to say, as Cistercians). After the State of the Holy Ghost, which should begin in 1260, there will be a brief period of destruction and suffering and then the end of the world.

Joachim's third 'state' has often been equated in modern scholarship with the Millennium.<sup>127</sup> But to do so is quite erroneous. Joachim did not believe in the Millennium; his State of the Holy Ghost is intended as an alternative to it. The State of the Holy Ghost is to last in its pure form not for a thousand years but for twenty-eight generations, that is, if we apply the value of thirty years per generation that Joachim computed for the second 'state', for 840 years, or until 2100.<sup>128</sup> It will see the reign of not Christ but, obviously, the Holy Ghost. And dwelling in it there will be not martyrs and true believers, but contemplatives. In fact, Joachim explicitly rejected the Millennium. In his *Expositio in Apocalypsim* he approvingly cites Augustine's statement that to believe in a seventh age of one thousand years, in which Christ will reign with his resurrected saints, is contrary to the faith. What is meant by the first seven verses of Revelation chapter 20, he goes on, is that the souls of his saints will rule with Christ in heaven for a figurative thousand years, that is, for a long time.<sup>129</sup> Still, Joachim departs from Augustine in his interpretation of the descent of the angel who binds Satan. For him this descent signifies the coming down of not Christ at his birth but the Holy Ghost.<sup>130</sup>

According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Western Europe was 'free from the taint of millenarianism' during the later Middle Ages.<sup>131</sup> This statement is almost true but not quite. We do encounter a few millenarians, even if their millenarianism is rather timid and fragmentary. Three of them are post-Joachimists. Telesphorus of Cosenza and John of Roquetaillade both believed that a thousand years of peace and righteousness on earth were to follow the crowning of a French king as emperor by an angelic pope; Telesphorus speaks also of the binding of Satan.<sup>132</sup> Frederick of Brunswick taught that there were to be two more Comings of Christ. In the first he would help to defeat Antichrist, after which there was to be a partial resurrection of the martyrs and their assassins (!) and then a thousand-year reign of peace, governed by the 'law of charity and clemency'.<sup>133</sup>

But it is the central and northern Italian millenarians who most interest us here. In 1480 the Dominican Giovanni Annio of Viterbo published his predictions of things to come.<sup>134</sup> His analysis, which was based on astrological calculations as well

<sup>127</sup> By e.g. the *Enciclopedia cattolica*, viii, 1952, p. 1009; Cohn (as in n. 118), pp. 99–101; and several studies on late-Medieval 'Joachimism', 'prophecy', 'expectation' and so on.

<sup>128</sup> He was careful not to say so himself. For to presume that he could predict when the end was coming was to contradict Jesus, who in Matthew 24.36 says: 'But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven...' In correspondence with the 1260 'days' mentioned in Revelation 11.3 and 12.6, Joachim computed the duration of the second 'state', that is, the State of the Son or the Christian Era as we know it, at 1260 years. That is why he is said to have expected Antichrist to come in 1260 AD.

<sup>129</sup> *Expositio* (as in n. 58), fol. 212<sup>r</sup>a-b.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., fol. 211<sup>v</sup>a. Joachim might logically have gone on to interpret the 1000 years as the State of the Holy Ghost. But so great, it seems, was his fidelity to Augustine's teachings that he did not do so.

<sup>131</sup> Vol. x, 1909, p. 309.

<sup>132</sup> On Telesphorus see Reeves (as in n. 62), pp. 326–7; eadem (as in n. 99), p. 69; Rusconi (as in n. 16), pp. 175–7. On John of Roquetaillade see Cohn (as in n. 118), p. 96; and Reeves (as in n. 62), pp. 227–8. The angelic pope and the 'Last World Emperor' are both standard motifs of post-Joachimism.

<sup>133</sup> A. Patschovsky, 'Eresie escatologiche tardomedievali nel regno teutonico', *L'attesa della fine dei tempi nel Medioevo*, ed. O. Capitani and J. Miethke, Bologna 1990, p. 228.

as a careful reading of the Bible, led him to believe that the Turks would begin to decline in 1480,<sup>135</sup> and that shortly thereafter a 'Christian Monarchy', lasting for one thousand years, would arise and spread all the way to the Caspian mountains.<sup>136</sup> A good Dominican, Annio believed that this could not be a temporal monarchy of Christ and would therefore necessarily be a temporal monarchy of the Church.<sup>137</sup> For him the angel who descends to bind Satan (the Caleph of the Turks) was to be a prince instituted by the Church.<sup>138</sup>

In 1497 the Croatian Giorgio Benigno published his *Propheticae solutiones* with a Florentine (and Savonarolan) press.<sup>139</sup> The main purpose of this clearly opportunistic work is to demonstrate that Savonarola is a true prophet who, Benigno says, is turning the Church into a 'sheepfold'.<sup>140</sup> As he first realised while in England, he says, the times described in Revelation chapters 8 and 10 are now beginning; in those times will occur the deaths of the Sultan and the Turks.<sup>141</sup> In Constantinople he claims to have come across numerous statues of Charles VIII of France, placed there in the expectation that Charles soon would conquer that city.<sup>142</sup> Benigno sees the approach of the reign of one thousand years and the marriage of the Church to the Lamb.<sup>143</sup> It is not clear from his wording whether or not he expects that Christ himself is to return to reign for a thousand years on earth. Probably he is being deliberately evasive on this point. At the end of the book he declines to reply to a friend's request to know when the Millennium will begin and instead insists upon obedience to the pope.<sup>144</sup> A number of years later Benigno either 'edited' or else completely forged a work known as the *Apocalypsis nova*, a book supposedly dictated by an angel to the Portuguese monk Amadeus in the late fifteenth century. It was never printed.<sup>145</sup> This work claims to give 'open' explanations of all of the great mysteries that are 'hidden' in the Bible, meant for the use of a coming 'angelic shepherd' about whom we read from time to time.<sup>146</sup> There is also to be a 'great king'.<sup>147</sup> When the 'angelic shepherd' comes, Gabriel will come also,<sup>148</sup> and the Lamb will reign for a thousand years.<sup>149</sup>

Both Annio and Benigno were men of the Church. But the Florentine Francesco da Meleto, who produced two eschatological books, was simply a merchant.<sup>150</sup> The first of these works, the *Convivio*, was written in about 1508.<sup>151</sup> In it Francesco—using a methodology which is in some ways reminiscent of that of Joachim but evidently appalled the theologians of his day<sup>152</sup>—argues that the renewal of the Church and the conversion of the whole world to Christianity are imminent. He had supposedly been told by a rabbi in Constantinople that if the Messiah did not come in 1484, many Jews would convert.<sup>153</sup> He sets the date of their 'salvation' at 1517.<sup>154</sup> The time is coming, he says, when the mysteries will be clear to everyone.<sup>155</sup> And Christ will come soon to judge, so that his friends may inherit the earth and

<sup>134</sup> *Tractatus de... triumphis* (as in n. 68).

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. f6v.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, sigs d4v–d5r.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. d5r.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. b8v.

<sup>139</sup> The publisher was Lorenzo Morgiani. On Benigno see Weinstein (as in n. 17), pp. 242–4; and esp. C. Vasoli, *Profezia e ragione: Studi sulla cultura del Cinquecento e del Seicento*, Naples 1974, pp. 15–120; or idem (as in n. 107), pp. 212–47.

<sup>140</sup> *Propheticae solutiones*, sig. b6r.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. b6v.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. c6v.

<sup>145</sup> I used BNCf MS Magl. XXXIX.1. On this work see Vasoli's studies on Benigno (see n. 139).

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, fols 1r, 4v, 8r, 12v–13r, 32r–v, etc.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 193v.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 13r.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 269r.

<sup>150</sup> On Francesco see Vasoli (as in n. 66), pp. 411–25; Weinstein (as in n. 17), pp. 353–7; and Reeves (as in n. 62), pp. 437–8.

<sup>151</sup> *Convivio de' secreti della Scriptura Sancta* [n.p., n.d.].

<sup>152</sup> Vasoli (as in n. 66), pp. 429–30; Reeves (as in n. 62), p. 438.

<sup>153</sup> *Convivio*, sig. e1r.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. d5v.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. b5v.

there be 'one sheepfold'.<sup>156</sup> Apparently Francesco believed that there was to be an Intermediate Coming of Christ.

In his second book, the *Quadrivium*, written during the first years of the pontificate of Leo X,<sup>157</sup> the chronological analyses become quite strained. Reading it, one becomes quite aware of Francesco's lack of theological training. He even manages to put the coming down of the Heavenly Jerusalem before the end of the world and supposes that the Church will soon dwell in it.<sup>158</sup> The date for the renewal and great conversions is now revised to the decade between 1530 and 1540.<sup>159</sup> Of particular interest in the present context is the fact that in his considerable effort to show the importance of the year 1530, Francesco, commenting on the eleventh and twelfth chapters of Revelation, says that 'time' means 1000 years and 'half time' means 500 years.<sup>160</sup> Perhaps that is the meaning of the 'time' and 'half time' in the Greek inscription to the *Mystic Nativity* as well. In that case the words would inform us that Botticelli painted the picture in the 500th year after the 1000 years and thus, as the inscription says, in 1500.<sup>161</sup>

Finally, three examples of millenarianism from later in the sixteenth century are worth our attention. The first was the Venetian Silvestro Meuccio, the man responsible for the sole printed edition of Joachim's works, which appeared during the second and third decades. He believed that the defeat of Antichrist would be followed by an age in which Satan will be bound.<sup>162</sup> The second, the Florentine Francesco Pucci, wrote his *De regno Christi* towards the end of the century. Pucci awaited the conversion of the Jews and the infidels. According to him Christ was coming to earth to hold a great 'consistory' for the renewal of Christianity; he would retake Jerusalem and inaugurate a rule of peace and happiness. Even the 'millenarians' (among whom Pucci evidently did not count himself) were in error, he says, because they had been corrupted by earthly riches and Jewish influence.<sup>163</sup> Thirdly, among the nuns of the Convent of Santa Chiara in Reggio Emilia it was believed in 1559 that Enoch and Elijah were about to return from the Terrestrial Paradise with the body of the Madonna. This was to be consecrated, as was the body of the nuns' spiritual guide, Basilio Albrizio, which would then turn into that of the reincarnated Christ. The reigning pope would be replaced by an angelic pope (who would be a weaver from Reggio), and there would begin an era of one thousand years of blessedness with 'one sheepfold'.<sup>164</sup>

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In 1942 Fritz Saxl called Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity* 'one of the greatest documents of Joachimistic thought'.<sup>165</sup> Even if one defines as 'Joachimistic' everything pertaining to Joachim and all of his followers, it still does not seem possible to uphold this claim. In the painting we do not see the Holy Trinity. Joachim was not

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., sig. a1<sup>r-v</sup>.

<sup>157</sup> *Quadrivium temporum prophetarum* [Florence, n.d.].

<sup>158</sup> *Quadrivium*, sig. e1<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., sig. b2<sup>r</sup> and passim.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., sigs c3<sup>r</sup>-c4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>161</sup> For an alternative explanation see above, n. 68.

<sup>162</sup> Reeves (as in n. 62), pp. 432-3.

<sup>163</sup> On Pucci see D. Cantimori, *Eretici italiani del Cinquecento*, Florence 1939, pp. 370-91; on the *De regno Christi* ibid., pp. 378-80.

<sup>164</sup> A. Prosperi, 'Attese millenaristiche e scoperta del Nuovo Mondo', *Prophetismo gioachimita* (as in n. 96), p. 433.

<sup>165</sup> Saxl (as in n. 68), p. 84. Evidently picking up on Saxl's statement, Josephine Jungić has said that the

painting shows Joachim's third 'state' ('Joachimist Prophecies in Sebastiano del Piombo's Borgherini Chapel and Raphael's Transfiguration', *Prophetic Rome in the High Renaissance Period*, ed. M. Reeves, Oxford 1992, p. 331). From what follows it should be clear that this is not so. But in speaking about the second of Olivi's 'Three Advents', that is, Christ's coming in the spirit of evangelical reform, Jungić is perhaps not far from one of the main points of the picture. See also the interpretations proposed by Weinstein (as in n. 17), p. 335; and Reeves (as in n. 62), pp. 436-7; eadem (as in n. 99), pp. 92-3.

especially interested in either Mary or the angels. As we recall, he believed that the angel that would descend to bind Satan was the Holy Ghost.<sup>166</sup> But in the painting we see none of the images that were normally used to symbolise that divine Person, such as a dove, or fire. In Botticelli's painting, not the Holy Ghost but Christ is about to come. We do not see any contemplatives. Nor do we see any of the other images that Joachim liked to use when he discussed his third 'state', such as the eagle, the lily, the cythara, or the genealogical tree.<sup>167</sup> Joachim was fond of the numerical equation  $5 + 7 = 12$ , which to him expressed a mystical truth.<sup>168</sup> We do see a set of twelve in the painting in the wreath of angels. But the wreath is composed of not  $5 + 7$  but the perfectly normal  $3 \times 4$ . In order to explain how the third 'state' would come about in practice, the post-Joachimists invented the figures of the Angelic Pope and the 'Last World Emperor'.<sup>169</sup> Even Savonarola was somewhat influenced by these notions, which by his time were little more than clichés. But we see no references to either in Botticelli's painting. The post-Joachimists also liked to refer to the Everlasting Gospel mentioned in the Book of Revelation.<sup>170</sup> This book, they imagined, would make the divine mysteries understandable to all during the State of the Holy Ghost. We find the notion, by their time also just a cliché, expressed in both the *Apocalypsis nova* and the *Convivio* of Francesco da Meleto. We do see a book in the painting. It is being held by the central angel on the roof of the stable. But that book clearly is not the Everlasting Gospel; it simply contains the music that the angels are singing.

Hence the imagery of Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity*—to the extent that it is not simply Savonarolan—is not Joachimistic or post-Joachimistic. What then is it? In attempting to answer this question we need to keep in mind that Botticelli lived in an age of considerable insecurity. In writings such as the ones we have been considering, we witness the almost endless repetition of silly prognostications based, because of the age's need for 'authority', on others that had already turned out to be wrong. We encounter works touching upon eschatological matters written by laymen such as Girolamo Benivieni, Bernardino dei Fanciulli, Giovanni Nesi, and Francesco da Meleto. These men, like Botticelli himself, could form their own ideas about eschatology because they could now read the Bible in Italian and in print.<sup>171</sup> But lacking in theological training, they were unaware of the obstacles to believing certain things that the Bible seems to say. Many of their ideas about the future were naïve in the extreme. On top of this, the syntax of Botticelli's painting is symbolic. Symbols are ambiguous by definition, and in this case it seems clear that the artist wished to be especially secretive.

There is good reason to believe that there is a tropological dimension to the painting. The known Savonarolan sources on which the *Mystic Nativity* draws are all moral in intent, and the painting exhorts us to worship the Child truly and become reconciled with our brothers. Unlike most Italian pictures of the time, it is clearly structured into groups of significant numbers and combinations of white, green, and red. Significant numbers were the almost irresistible cue for late-medieval

<sup>166</sup> See above, p. 108.

<sup>167</sup> Reeves (as in n. 62), pp. 138, 200, 207, 383; eadem (as in n. 99), pp. 19, 21.

<sup>168</sup> Reeves (as in n. 62), pp. 25–6, 140.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., pp. 47, 304 and passim; eadem (as in n. 99), p. 14 and passim.

<sup>170</sup> Revelation 14.6. On the Everlasting Gospel or 'Eternal Evangel' of the post-Joachimists see esp. Reeves (as in n. 62), passim.

<sup>171</sup> The Italian translation, by Nicolò Malerbi, first appeared in print in 1481. On its printing history see E. Barbieri, 'La fortuna della "Biblia vulgarizata" di Nicolò Malerbi', *Aevum*, lxiii, 1989, pp. 419–500.



theologians to list a set of moral precepts, and Savonarola was no exception to this rule. White, green, and red usually symbolise Faith, Hope, and Charity respectively. That perhaps is what they do in Botticelli's painting also. But caution is necessary. For Savonarola Faith may be green and Hope sky blue,<sup>172</sup> whereas white, green, and red may stand for any number of other things.

To conclude, I shall propose three possible interpretations of the painting, taking them in ascending order of probability, before ending with an observation about its theme.

Firstly, the *Mystic Nativity* might be, along with the *Mystic Crucifixion* in the Fogg Art Museum (Fig. 40), a picture intended for the boys in the group of Bernardino dei Fanciulli or another Savonarolan association like it. This is suggested by the highly 'naïve' syntax of both paintings, the great stress on angels, and the fact that in both paintings the symbols of evil—five small and apparently self-destructed demons in the case of the *Mystic Nativity* and two small and seemingly unferocious animals in that of the *Mystic Crucifixion*—do not appear to be intended as frightening.<sup>173</sup> As a further slight but perhaps relevant indication, in the only volume of the 'collected works' of Bernardino dei Fanciulli, there are just two illustrations, one showing the Nativity and the other the Crucifixion.<sup>174</sup> Against the possibility that these two pictures were intended for children is of course the presence of the Greek inscription to the *Mystic Nativity*. But as we have seen, that inscription might have been added later;<sup>175</sup> if so, perhaps it was added with the purpose of 'redefining' the painting. In this connection we should note that Bernardino and his group were forced into exile in 1500—and according to the inscription it was 'at the end of the year 1500, in the troubles of Italy' that the *Mystic Nativity* was painted.

Secondly, the painting might be a cryptic representation of the Millennium—or rather those features of it in which Botticelli believed and which he thought to be in harmony with the predictions that Savonarola had made. During such a Millennium those Florentines who truly believed would reign with Christ their king. As we have seen, the Millennium begins with the binding of Satan. Accepted Catholic doctrine holds that it therefore begins, figuratively, with the birth of Christ. It is even possible that the word 'time' in the painting's Greek inscription means 'millennium', as in Francesco da Meleto's interpretation.<sup>176</sup> The mortals being embraced by angels and led by them to the manger would be the martyrs and saints who live again through the First Resurrection—or whomever else it was that Botticelli might have thought these Apocalyptic persons stood for. Their crowns of olive would be the crowns of martyrdom or righteousness. It at first strikes one as unlikely that Botticelli would have shown the Millennium in an age in which it was rarely mentioned. But of those persons who believed in the Millennium at the time, how many actually ventured to say so in print? If the *Mystic Nativity* does represent the Millennium in any real sense, firstly, the painting is in this respect unique as far as we know; secondly, it is thoroughly heretical. We recall that—if for the wrong reasons—Vasari believed Botticelli to have been a heretic.<sup>177</sup>

<sup>172</sup> *Scripta Hieronymi* (as in n. 50), ii, p. 452. He also connects green with Prudence (*ibid.*).

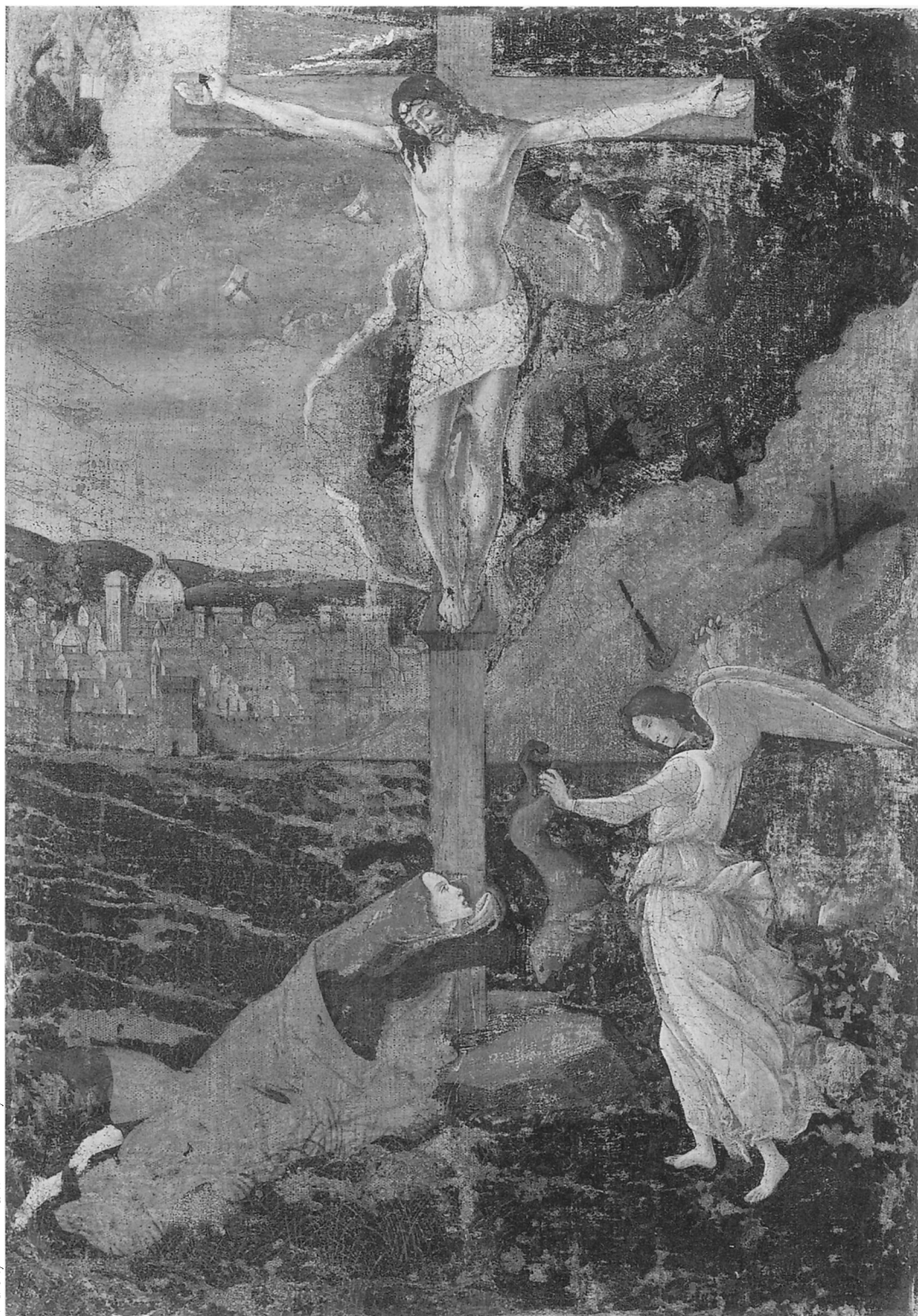
<sup>173</sup> One of the animals in the *Mystic Crucifixion* is being held and flayed by the angel at the right; the other, which is very hard to see in the reproduction, is escaping from underneath the robe of Mary Magdalen at the extreme left. In Savonarolan terms these animals ought to be, respectively, a fox and a wolf (see above, pp. 101–2). But it does not appear that this is what they are.

<sup>174</sup> *Prediche* (as in n. 18).

<sup>175</sup> Above, p. 106.

<sup>176</sup> See above, p. 110.

<sup>177</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori* (Florence 1550), ed. L. Bellosi and A. Rossi, Turin 1986, p. 476; and 1568 edn in *Le opere*, ed. G. Milanesi, Florence 1906 (1973), iii, pp. 314–15. It may be noted here that the Child in Botticelli's painting is defined as the Lamb of God by the inscriptions held



Courtesy of The Harvard University Art Museums

Fig. 40—Sandro Botticelli, *Mystic Crucifixion*, c. 1500.  
Cambridge, Mass., Fogg Museum of Art

The third possible interpretation is that the painting is a figuration of an 'Apocalyptic' birth of Christ, in which allusions to the reconciliation of the heavenly virtues with one another and with mankind, the 'crown' of Mary, and the Millennium (or the casting out of Satan) are elements of a complex and yet 'simple' allegory of the future in which Botticelli believed. That future would, through the intercession of Mary, see the 'birth' of Christ in the hearts of the Florentines. Through the mercy of divine Grace, the Florentines would be filled with charity and love towards one another and be reconciled with the angels and their God.<sup>178</sup> There would thus come to pass that peace and goodness which the devil cannot abide and which would cause his downfall: 'Now is come the power of Christ on earth; the dragon has lost'.<sup>179</sup>

Whatever it is that the *Mystic Nativity* shows, the chances are that it took great courage for Botticelli to paint it.

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The overriding theme of the *Mystic Nativity*, because of the large number of olive branches in it, appears to be peace. But we should do well to remember that in Botticelli's time the olive was usually a symbol of mercy.<sup>180</sup> In Savonarola's '1493' Christmas sermon it is Mercy, not Peace, who holds a branch of olive.<sup>181</sup> Moreover, wreaths of olive conveying thoughts of mercy and repentance had recently come into use in one of Florence's most important public rituals, the offering of little torches by pardoned offenders at the city's Baptistry.<sup>182</sup> These persons had formerly been led to the Baptistry in chains, but from 1493 at the latest each is described as being led, 'in the usual way, his head uncovered, with a crown [or garland] of olive, with a little torch in his hands...preceded by trumpets'.<sup>183</sup> Now, one of the conditions for receiving pardon at the time was that an offender make 'peace' with the offended party. Perhaps onlookers remembered this as the olive-wreathed offenders were marched past them. But surely what was uppermost in their thoughts was that these transgressors had come to repent what they had done and were now receiving mercy. Indeed, what Botticelli and many others who lived during his age probably hoped for more than anything else, was Mercy.

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by the angels in the foreground. We recall that Giorgio Benigno believed that the Church would be married to the Lamb (see above, p. 109); that in the *Apocalypsis nova* it is stated that the Lamb is to reign for 1000 years; and especially that in Savonarola's reading of Revelation 12, 'our brethren have won [on earth!] by the blood of the Lamb' (above, n. 43).

<sup>178</sup> It seems worth noting that the theme of mortals' being reconciled to angels is already illustrated on the side of the elect in an earlier representation of the Last Judgement: the curiously shaped panel by Fra Angelico now in the Museum of San Marco in Florence.

<sup>179</sup> See above, p. 97.

<sup>180</sup> See e.g. *Scripta Hieronymi* (as in n. 50), i, pp. 56, 58, 258, 419; ii, supplement, p. 111 (col. 34); also Ludolphus of Saxony (as in n. 58), fol. 297<sup>r</sup>. The Scriptural basis for this symbolism is principally Psalm 52(51).8: 'But I *am* like a green olive tree in the house of God: I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever'. It should also be noted that when the dove returned to Noah with the olive branch in its beak, it did so in sign of God's mercy; the sign of peace that God gave to Noah was the rainbow.

<sup>181</sup> See above, p. 90 (and on the date of the sermon n. 4). For Savonarola the olive may also be a symbol of Grace: see *Prediche... sopra Amos...*, *Zaccaria* (as in n. 34), fol. 238<sup>v</sup>; ed. Ghiglietti ii, p. 192.

<sup>182</sup> On St John's Day and at some other times. Texts of the government bills apparently required for such pardons are found most volumes of the *Provisioni* from the second half of the 15th century (see next note).

<sup>183</sup> Florence, Archivio di Stato, Consigli della Repubblica, *Provisioni*, Registri, 184, fol. 20<sup>v</sup>, 27 Mar. 1493 (also fols 21<sup>v</sup>, 23<sup>r</sup>, 24<sup>v</sup>): 'Quod offerri possit et debeat ad ecclesiam sancti Ioannis Baptiste in civitate Florentie et more solito duci, capite detecto, cum corona olivi, cum torculo in manibus, horis consuētis, tubis precedentibus, ad oblationem predictam. Et per hunc modum intelligatur esse et sit penitus liber et absolutus a dicta condemnatione.' See also *Provisioni*, Registri, 189, fols 3<sup>v</sup>–4<sup>v</sup>, 20 Feb. 1497/98: 'secondo il consueto colla grillanda dell'ulivo et col torchietto in mano'; and *ibid.*, 190, fol. 30<sup>r-v</sup>, 20 June 1499: 'con la grillanda dell'ulivo in capo'.