

***Per aurem intrat Christus in Mariam*. An iconographic approach to
the *conceptio per aurem* in Italian Trecento painting
from patristic and theological sources***
***Per aurem intrat Christus in Mariam*. Aproximación iconográfica a la
conceptio per aurem en la pintura italiana del Trecento
desde fuentes patrísticas y teológicas**

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Abstract: The mariological thesis of the *conceptio per aurem*, according to which the Virgin Mary would have conceived Jesus Christ through the ear at the instant of hearing the angel's heavenly message announcing her that she would be mother of the Son of God incarnate without losing her virginity, has received so far very few academic studies rigorously grounded in primary sources. In fact the references to this theory in the specialized literature are very scarce and, when a scholar evokes it, he almost always only alludes to it, without providing documentary evidence. However, as the nine Italian paintings discussed here reveal, this theory was illustrated by subtle visual metaphors in many medieval paintings, which were inspired by a strong literary tradition. In addition a pleiad of Church Fathers and medieval theologians testify, by explicit statements, that such a theory enjoyed remarkable acceptance among teachers of Christian thought. Based on many patristic and theological texts, this paper attempts two main purposes: firstly, to expose the various theoretical formulations proposed by these thinkers; then to try to highlight the dogmatic meanings that underlie this astonishing thesis.

Key words: Medieval Art, Iconography, Mariology, patristics, theology, Annunciation, Incarnation of Christ, Italian Trecento painting, *conceptio per aurem*.

Resumen: La tesis mariológica de la *conceptio per aurem*, según la cual la Virgen María habría concebido a Jesucristo por el oído en el momento de escuchar del ángel el mensaje celestial anunciándole que, sin perder su virginidad, sería madre del Hijo de Dios encarnado, ha merecido hasta ahora muy pocos estudios académicos rigurosamente fundados en fuentes primarias. De hecho, en la literatura especializada son muy escasas las referencias a tal teoría y, cuando algún estudioso la evoca, casi siempre se contenta con aludir a ella, sin aportar pruebas documentales. Sin embargo, tal como lo revelan las nueve pinturas italianas aquí analizadas, esa teoría fue ilustrada mediante sutiles metáforas visuales en muchas obras pictóricas medievales, las cuales se inspiraron en una sólida tradición literaria. Además una pléyade de Padres de la Iglesia y teólogos medievales testimonia, mediante afirmaciones explícitas, que semejante teoría gozó de notable aceptación entre los maestros del pensamiento cristiano. Basándose en numerosos textos patrísticos y teológicos, este artículo intenta dos objetivos esenciales: exponer, ante todo, las distintas formulaciones teóricas propuestas por esos pensadores; y además, tratar de poner en luz los significados dogmáticos que subyacen bajo esa sorprendente tesis.

Palabras clave: Arte medieval, iconografía, mariología, patrística, teología, Anunciación, encarnación de Cristo, pintura italiana del Trecento, *conceptio per aurem*.

Summary : 1. Toward a putting into perspective. 2. The representation of the *conceptio per aurem* in the Italian Trecento painting. 3. The doctrine of the *conceptio per aurem* in the patristic and theological tradition. 4. Conclusion. Sources and Bibliography

1. Toward a putting into perspective

In the complex system of mariology¹ the thesis of the *conceptio per aurem* had particular relevance for long centuries during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. According to this belief, the Virgin Mary have conceived to Jesus Christ by ear, or, to be more exact, after listening to and accept the divine proposal – transmitted to her by the archangel Gabriel— and become Mother of the incarnate Son of God without ceasing to be a virgin.²

However, despite its confirmed survival for more than a millennium –since at least the fourth century until the fifteenth—, it is amazing the finding that this Mariological theory has so far been avoided by almost all modern scholars, perhaps due to an inability to document it with hard evidence or perhaps for being completely unknown to them.³ It is symptomatic, in this regard, the fact that in their respective monographic articles of 1924 on the Annunciation, inserted in the monumental *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*,⁴ its directors Fernand Cabrol⁵ and Henri Leclercq⁶ ignored completely

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¹ On Mariology in general, you can see several specific voices in some classic dictionaries of Catholic doctrine, as *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique. Contenant l'exposé des doctrines de la théologie catholique, leurs preuves et leur histoire*, Paris, Letouzey et Ane, 1999-1950, 15 double volumes, 30 tomes (quoted shortly: DTC); Fernand Cabrol and Henri Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, Paris, Letouzey et Ané, 1924-1954, 12 vols. (quoted shortly: DACL); and *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, Città del Vaticano, Ente per l'Enciclopedia Cattolica e per il Libro Cattolico, 1948-1954, 12 vols.

² It has been repeated ad nauseam the error that the belief of the *conceptio per aurem* in Mary was initiated by the apocryphal *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* (datable toward the sixth century). However, as we will verify in the third part of this paper, since the middle of the fourth century, two centuries before the alleged drafting of this apocryphal, some Church Fathers, as St. Ephrem the Syrian and St. Zeno of Verona, expressed in an explicit way the idea of the conception through the ear at the Annunciation. The ecclesiastic authors who defended that thesis in the fifth and sixth centuries are even more numerous. For this reason, it does not look appropriate to continue affirming that *The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* is the original source of the topic we are studying.

³ Within the very plentiful literature on Marian iconography in general, see, for example, the following studies: Maurice Vloberg, *La Vierge et l'Enfant dans l'art français*, Paris, Arthaud, 1954 (1933), 323 p.; Manuel Trens, *Maria. Iconografía de la Virgen en el arte español*, Madrid, Plus Ultra, 1947, 715 p.; Timothy Verdon, *Maria nell'arte europea* (Didascalie a cura di Filippo Rosi), Milano, Electa, 2004, 227 p.; Marie-Louise Thérél, *Le triomphe de la Vierge-Église. Sources historiques, littéraires et iconographiques*, Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 1984, 374 p.; Gertrud Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*. Band 4,2, *Maria*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher VerlagHaus, 1980, 472 p.

⁴ DACL 1924-1954, 12 vols.

referring to the theme we are analyzing. Similar omission exhibits the analogous entry in *Encyclopedia Cattolica* of the Vatican.⁷

To tell the truth, the rigorously documented approaches to this belief are very meager in the specialized literature,⁸ to the extent that, when any scholar evokes it, almost always is satisfied to mention it in passing without analyzing it deeply and, above all, without providing documentary evidence.

For example, in the early date of 1914 the Welsh psychoanalyst Ernest Jones is one of the first to address the theme,⁹ in his article “The Madonna's conception through the ear. A contribution to the relation between aesthetics and religion”, originally published in the German magazine *Jahrbuch der Psychoanalyse*, 1914, Band VI, and reprinted nine years later as the Chapter VIII of the same author's book *Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis* (1923).¹⁰ In this text the author, based on a rich series of comparative references to anthropology and linguistics, tries to explain in the psychoanalytic key the —so called by him— medieval “legend” of *conceptio per aurem*. It is not our purpose to discuss here the theoretical and methodological premises, the intercultural comparisons, the interpretive projections and the conclusions inferred by Jones from his peculiar freudian presuppositions. On the contrary, we are interested in highlighting the serious errors in which he incurs by submitting as supposed sources of the belief being studied some brief and decontextualised quotations of a few Christian doctrine's masters.

For example, Jones attributes to St. Augustine of Hippo the phrase “*Deus per angelum loquebatur et Virgo per aurem impraegnebatur*”, that he quotes as extracted from a supposed *Sermo de Tempore*, xxii.¹¹ Copied, apparently by

⁵ Fernand Cabrol, “Annonciation (Fête de l’)”, *DACL*, 1924, Tome 1, 2e Partie, col. 2241-2255.

⁶ Henri Leclercq, “L’Annonciation dans l’art”, *DACL*, Tome 1, 2e Partie, Paris, Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1924, col. 2255-2267.

⁷ VV.AA., “Annunciazione”, *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, op. cit., 1948, vol. I, col. 1382-210.

⁸ Among several approaches focused on the figure of the Virgin Mary as a model of medieval European art and culture, one can highlight: Dominique Iogna-Prat, Éric Palazzo and Daniel Russo (eds.), *Marie. Le culte de la Vierge dans la société médiévale* (Préface de G. Duby), Paris, Bauchesne, 1996, 623 p.; Diana Norman, *Siena and the Virgin. Art and politics in a late medieval city state*, New Haven / London, Yale University Press, 1999, viii, 251 p.; Melissa R. Katz (ed.), *Divine mirrors. The Virgin Mary in the visual arts* (With essays by Melissa R. Katz and Robert A. Orsi), Oxford / New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, xxi, 297 p.

⁹ As far as we know, in 1909, five years before the text of Ernest Jones, Yrjo Hirn had referred to this Marian topic in his study *The Sacred Shrine: A Study of the Poetry and Art of the Catholic Church* 1909 (reprinted: Boston, Beacon Press, 1957) (to which we have not had access), of which Jones seems to have taken some data, as we shall see below.

¹⁰ Ernest Jones, “The Madonna's conception through the ear. A contribution to the relation between aesthetics and religion” (1914), printed in Ernest Jones, *Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis. Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis*, London/Vienna, The International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1923, Cap. VIII, 261-359.

¹¹ Jones 1914 (reprinted 1923), 264.

Jones of the already mentioned article written five years before by Yrjo Hirn¹² (without mentioning him), this alleged sentence of St. Augustine –which, as we will see later, will be repeated without critical rigor by numerous researchers¹³— is false. In fact, in any part of the immense doctrinal *corpus* of St. Augustine – neither in the nine volumes of *Latin Patrology* of J-P Migne,¹⁴ nor in the forty one volumes of the *Obras Completas de San Agustín*, edited by La Editorial Católica in bilingual critical edition¹⁵— we found no trace of that alleged *Sermo de Tempore*, XXII, or of that evocative phrase attributed to this Saint. In Migne, the only two opuscles of St. Augustine which vaguely resemble the cited by Hirn and Jones are the following: *Sermo XXII, De versu 3 Psalmi LXVII*,¹⁶ which deals with the humility and the vanity of the human being, penance and other moral themes; and *Sermo de tempore barbarico* (furthermore catalogued between the sermons of dubious authorship of this Saint),¹⁷ which deals on penance, patience and other ascetic and ethic topics. None of these two sermons of St. Augustine, or –as far as we know— any other text of the Bishop of Hippo includes the abovementioned sentence. That is why this alleged quotation of St. Augustine must be considered spurious. The doubt extends until the point to ask if you can found sometime any ecclesiastical writer –and who would be?— who would have been able to formulate so elusive phrase.

On the other hand, Ernest Jones is wrong when cites as of St. Agobard of Lyon the statement “*Descendit de coelis missus ab arce patris, introivit per aurem Virginis in regionem nostram indutus stola purpurea et exivit per auream portam lux et Deus universae fabricae mundi*”,¹⁸ a false attribution that will then be repeated uncritically by other researchers.¹⁹ However, in his *Liber de*

¹² The source of this quotation attributed incorrectly to St. Augustine seems to be Yrjo Hirn in the aforementioned article of 1909 (cf. Leo Steinberg, “‘How shall this be?’ Reflections on Filippo Lippi’s ‘Annunciation’ in London, Part I”, *Artibus et Historiae. An art anthology*, 16 (1987), 27, n° 18).

¹³ Among them one can quote (besides Ernest Jones) Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l’art chrétien*. Tome 2, *Iconographie de la Bible. Part II, Nouveau Testament*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1957, 190; Steinberg 1987, 27, n. 18; Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, 214, note 25; Barbara Baert, “The Annunciation Revisited. Essay on the Concept of Wind and the Senses in Late Medieval and Early Modern Visual Culture”, *Critica d’Arte* (without other information), p. 57-68. We will criticize later the texts of all these authors.

¹⁴ *Augustinus, Sanctus*. PL 32-40.

¹⁵ St. Augustine of Hippo, *Obras completas de San Agustín*, Madrid, La Editorial Católica, Col. Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1977-1995, 41 vols.

¹⁶ PL 38, 148-155.

¹⁷ PL 40, 699-708.

¹⁸ Jones 1914 (reprinted 1923), 264.

¹⁹ Among others, Steinberg 1967, and Baert 2014.

Correctioni Antiphonarii,²⁰ St. Agobard copies that phrase²¹ — which is precisely a verse from an antiphon included in a liturgical antiphonary in use by this epoch— to combat against it and refute it apodictically, as irrational and heretical in several aspects, a refutation which he sustains with the following arguments.

After specifying that this antiphonary's phrase does not precise who has descended from heaven,²² St. Agobard adds that the expression is wrong by speaking of “the citadel of the Father” (*ab Arce Patris*), for how it would be possible that exists in the spiritual heaven a material building that had been made by him, or, even less, that would be different from God the Father or that would identified with him and, if so, how could God the Father be a citadel for himself.²³

In a new step of his condemnation of that verse, St. Agobard stresses that, according to the Catholic doctrine, the Word of God was not introduced by the ear of the Virgin (*Nec per aurem Virginis Verbum Dei introisse*), because, being bodiless and omnipresent, neither he accesses to any particular place nor needs any corporeal coating, unless such verse has wanted to convince us that the Virgin conceived the Son of God by the sound of the angel's words.²⁴

St. Agobard also rejects this last “weak” interpretation of the matter, by insisting that the truth of the Christian doctrine in this area is condensed in the response of the archangel when Mary asked how she could be a mother without intercourse: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.”²⁵ The holy bishop of Lyon also stresses the inability to understand the womb of the Virgin as “our region” or condition (*regio nostra*), since she begat virginally the Only-begotten Son of God, while we are born not

²⁰ St. Agobard, *Liber de Correctione Antiphonarii*, VII-VIII. PL 104, 331-332.

²¹ By the way, Jones reads incorrectly this phrase, because where he transcribes inaccurately “*et Deus universae fabricae mundi*”, the original text of St. Agobard expresses: “*et decus universae fabricae mundi*”. (St. Agobard, *Liber de Correctione Antiphonarii*, VII-VIII. PL 104, 332). The emphasis on both sentences are our. As it can be seen, the transcription of Jones substantially alters the meaning of the original verse of the antiphon, since to confuse *decus* (decorum, ornamentation, beauty, splendour, honor) with *Deus* (God) is not just *peccata minuta*.

²² “Ubi primum, qui descenderit non designat.” (St. Agobard, *Liber de Correctione Antiphonarii*, VII-VIII. PL 104, 332).

²³ “Arcem vero Patris quid dixerit, ipse quoque penitus ignoravit. Nunquid est aliquod aedificium coeleste, aut percoeleste, quod factum sit ab eo, aut aliud aliquid quod non est ipsum quod Pater, aut est ipse Pater? Quod si est, quomodo sibi est arx?” (*Ibid.*).

²⁴ “Nec per aurem Virginis Verbum Dei introisse, catholicae aures ferunt: quia cum sit incorporeum, et totum ubique praesens, nec localiter accedit, nec aditu corporeo indiget. Nisi forte nobis persuadere voluit angelicorum sono verborum sacram Virginem Dei Filium concepisse.” (*Ibid.*).

²⁵ “Quod quantum a fidei veritate discordet, ex verbis ipsius angeli perspicuum est; qui ipsi Virgini interroganti: *Quomodo fiet istud, quia virum non cognosco*? Respondit: *Spiritus sanctus superveniet in te, et virtus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi.*” (*Ibid.*).

virginally, but from a corrupted flesh.²⁶

As if that were not enough, St. Agobard considers that the antiphon in question incurs in obvious blasphemies by affirming that the Son of God was introduced by the ear of the Virgin covered with a dress of purple (*quod eum stola indutum purpurea aurem dicit Virginis introiisse*), or with some other royal dress, or that he received the human nature not from the Virgin, but that he brought it already made from heaven, as if it were a dress of purple.²⁷

Finally, St. Agobard criticizes the vanity of the antiphon analyzed here for it dares to say that the light and the God of all the creation of the world emerged (was born) by the golden door (*Jam vero per auream portam eum exiisse, quanta vanitate proferre aussus est*). St. Agobard concludes underlining the need to think over the virginal birth of Christ not with empty words, but from the simple faith, since, according to the truth of the Gospels, he is not the light of all the beings of the world, but only of the rational creatures.²⁸

By the arguments put forward by the bishop of Lyon, the analyzed sentence, that Jones sets as original of St. Agobard, is evidently an affirmation completely alien to his thinking and, even worse, entirely reprehensible in his view, by its multiple errors and for clearly being blasphemous. It is also patent moreover that, based on what he perceived as Christian orthodoxy, St. Agobard, far from being a defender of the thesis of the *conceptio per aurem*, is a furious opponent of it.

In a new step of his erratic approximation to the Church sources, after citing as by St. Ephrem the Syrian the sentence “*Per novam Mariae aurem intravit atque infusa est vita*”,²⁹ Ernest Jones adds with appalling vagueness that “similar passages could be quoted from various other Fathers, such as St. Proclus, St. Ruffinus of Aquileia, etc.”, without specifying original quotations nor texts of these “various other [Church] Fathers”.

Even more surprising is that Jones confers on a couple of occasions³⁰—even with a textual quotation—to St. Zeno of Verona an alleged letter to the

²⁶ “Quomodo autem virginalis uterus regio nostra possit intelligi, cum et virgo illa unici Filii mater sit, et nos omnes non ex virginea sed ex corrupta carne nascamur, prorsus inveniri non potest.” (*Ibid.*).

²⁷ “Deinde quod eum stola indutum purpurea aurem dicit Virginis introiisse, sive humano more cultu regio indutum, sive humanam formam non ex Virgine suscepisse, sed de coelo Dei Verbum attulisse putaverit, eamque stolam purpuream appellarit, apertissimae blasphemiae est.” (*Ibid.*).

²⁸ “Jam vero per auream portam eum exiisse, quanta vanitate proferre aussus est: cum nativitas Christi ex Virgine non supervacuis verbis adumbrari, sed confessione simplici debeat declarari: qui non, ut ille ait, universae fabricae mundi, sed juxta veritatem evangelicam rationalis tantummodo creaturae lux est.” (*Ibid.*).

²⁹ Jones quotes it with the following entry: “St. Ephrem: *De Divers Sermonibus*. I, *Opp Syr*, Vol. III, p. 607”. Although, as we will see in the third part, we introduce several passages of St. Ephrem the Syrian in relation to the theme of the *conceptio per aurem*, we could not certify the accuracy of the quote provided by Jones, for not having had access to the books in Latin translation quoted by him.

³⁰ Jones 1914, 289, note 1, and 324, note 3.

Byzantine Empress Pulcheria, letter on which the British psychanalyst precises no documentary data.³¹ However, this is another huge mistake in the use of patristic “sources” by Jones, as the following two evidence will corroborate. First of all, among the writings of St. Zeno, gathered by J-P. Migne in Volume 11 of his *Patrologia Latina*, there is no *Epístola ad Pulcheriam Augustam*, and this for obvious reasons, as we shall see below. Secondly, in effect, St. Zeno (300-† ca. 372), who was bishop of Verona between 362 and 372, could not have written a letter to the empress Pulcheria (398/99-453), who reigned in Byzantium first as Augusta between 414 and 450, and then as Empress between 450 and 453: it is well in evidence that the St. Zeno –died almost three decades before the birth of Pulcheria, and more than forty years before she was designated Augusta— could not at any time be the author of that alleged *Epístola ad Pulcheriam Augustam*.

On the contrary, the Pope St. Leo I the Great (ca. 390-461), in addition to having lived almost at the same time that Pulcheria –with their respective dates of birth and death pretty near—, wrote numerous letters to this Byzantine Empress, published with the generic name “*Epístola ad Pulcheriam Augustam*” (with the corresponding Arabic numerals, to distinguish between them) in the monumental collection *Documenta Catholica Omnia*.³² For this reason, it is more likely that this alleged quotation, that Jones brings erroneously as of St. Zeno of Verona, can be attributed provisionally –in the absence of documentary substantiation— to the Pope St. Leo the Great. To tell the truth, the fact that Jones confuses the relatively discreet bishop of Verona, St. Zeno (fourth century), with the most prestigious and influential Pope St. Leo the Great (of the fifth century) is not neither *minutia excusable*.

At last, taking into account the unavoidable necessity of the patristic and theological sources to substantiate doctrinally the Christian iconography, the serious errors committed by Ernest Jones when using some texts of ecclesiastical authors, through which he tries to explain this belief on the *conceptio per aurem* at the Annunciation, discredit significantly the epistemological value of his very celebrated essay, it does not matter which eventual relevance it could have in other fields, such as psychoanalysis, anthropology or linguistics.

Forty-one years later (1955), Gary Anderson, in his book on Adam and Eve in the Jewish and Christian imaginary,³³ only mentions in passing the theme of the *conception by the ear*, when he summarizes briefly the known antithesis that the medieval theologians established between behaviors of Eve and Mary with their sense of hearing:³⁴ the first, when in disobedience to God heard the serpent-devil, thus producing sin and death; the second, when, by receiving with obedient

³¹ Jones quotes it this way: “St. Zeno, Epist. Ad Pulcheriam Augustam” (without specifying numbering of this epistle, and even less the patristic source in which this epistle would be edited).

³² *Documenta Catholica Omnia. Magisterium Paparum. Leo I, Magnus, Sanctus*.

³³ Gary A. Anderson, *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination*, Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press, 1955, 257 p.

³⁴ One of the first Christian thinkers in formulating this Eve / Mary antithesis regarding the behavior of their ears is St. Justin in the middle of the second century.

availability the divine word transmitted by the angel Gabriel, conceived the Savior Son of God.³⁵

A biennium after (1957), Louis Réau, in the chapter devoted in his prestigious work to the Annunciation,³⁶ says that, with regard to the understanding of Christ the medieval ecclesiastical writers were divided in two schools: some argued that he came in the womb of Mary through her ear (*conceptio per aurem*), while most of them proposed that the Virgin conceived Jesus in the normal way (*conceptio per uterum*).³⁷ Apart from this explicit wording, the author does not mention a single patristic or theological text to propose and defend this pregnancy by ear. Réau establishes a direct link –almost an identity— between the idea of the *conceptio per aurem* and the plastic representation of Christ as a tiny child (fetus) in the womb of Mary or projected toward her ear, both representations that quite exceptionally are manifested in some European late medieval paintings of the Annunciation. According to this French iconographer, such representation of Christ child, which he considers of Byzantine origin, spread throughout Europe from the fourteenth century,³⁸ before being –after the protests by some distinguished theologians— prohibited by the Council of Trent in the middle of the sixteenth century.³⁹

³⁵ Gary A. Anderson expresses it in these terms: “In fact, few Christian sources repeated the lowest form or this tradition [la judía], that Eve actually had sexual relations with serpent. Christian writers preferred to speak of Eve’s conception of *death* (not Cain) through her obedience to the snake’s word, or verbal suggestion. Through her ear, the organ of hearing, Eve conceived disease, decay, and death. Mary, on the other hand, knew an obedience of a different order. Her receptive ear to the word of the angel Gabriel resulted in the conception of the Son of God. This tradition of «conceiving through (obedient) hearing,» *conceptio per aurem*, transformed the point of emphasis from carnal knowledge to an act of reasoned understanding and willed obedience.” (Anderson 1955, 92).

³⁶ Réau 1957, 190s.

³⁷ “Par quelle voie s’était opérée l’Incarnation? Les théologiens se partageaient sur ce point en deux Écoles. Les uns soutenaient que le Christ, qui est le *Logos*, le *Verbe*, était entré par l’oreille de la Vierge en même temps que le message de l’ange annonciateur: *Virgo per aurem impregnatur (sic)*. C’est le thème de la *Conceptio per aurem*. [...] Mais la plupart croyaient que la conception s’était faite plus normalement par le canal utérin (*Conceptio per uterum*).” (Réau 1957, 190). It seems clear that this Latin sentence –transcribed incorrectly and without identification of the source— has been taken by Réau (without mentioning him either) from Yrjo Hirn or, more likely, Ernest Jones, as we explained in the preceding paragraphs.

³⁸ “Ce thème est sans doute d’origine byzantine: car on voit dans les icônes russes de l’Annonciation l’Enfant Jésus déjà dans le sein de la Vierge [...]. Il apparaît en Italie au début du XIV siècle, plus tardivement en France, en Flandre et en Allemagne.” (Réau 1957, 190s).

³⁹ “Dans le XV siècle des protestations se font déjà entendre contre ce sujet choquant. Il ne s’agit pas, il est vrai, de défendre le bon goût outragé ou la simple décence, mais l’orthodoxie en péril. L’archevêque de Florence, Saint Antonin, blâme les peintres qui représentent l’Enfant Jésus projeté tout formé dans le sein de la Vierge comme si son corps ne s’était pas nourri de la substance maternelle. Le Concile de Trente s’associe à cette condamnation et le fameux théologien Molanus de Louvain se fait son interprète en proscrivant du répertoire de l’art catholique les Annonciations où l’on voit “*corpusculum quoddam humanum descendens inter radios ad uterum Beatissimae Virginis*”, comme si, ajoute-t-il, le sein de la Vierge n’avait été

With a similar position, almost a decade later (1966) Gertrud Schiller, in her rigorous work on the Christian iconography,⁴⁰ studies largely the theme of the Annunciation.⁴¹ In discoursing there about the possible reasons why, in the images of this Marian episode, the presence of the Holy Spirit's dove is generalized since the eleventh century, the author suggests the thesis of the conception by the ear. The strange thing about the case, however, is that Schiller mentions this matter with the brief phrase "There was considerable insistence also upon *conceptio per aurem* (conception through the ear)",⁴² without even mentioning a single name of Church Father or theologian who defends it.

Four years later (1970), W. Kindler publishes the brief article "Representation of the 'conceptio per aurem' in the Christian culture area of the middle ages".⁴³ Despite not having been able to consult it, this writing looks from the outside – and we assume that our intuition would not be wrong – of little interest to the topic that we are studying from our epistemological approach: that is being suggested not only by its brief extension (just six pages), but also by its alleged purely physiological approach, given that the article was published in a journal of Otolaryngology.

Something more than three decades after (1987) Leo Steinberg published the essay "'How shall this be?' Reflections on Filippo Lippi's 'Annunciation' in London, Part I",⁴⁴ in which he seeks to interpret in a personal way that picture of the Italian painter, explaining the pregnancy of Mary not according to the idea of the *conceptio per aurem*, but, on the contrary, as a result of the gaze of God (the Holy Spirit), following similarly the current theory in the fifteenth century on the process of the vision. Our interest here is not to discuss this interpretation – as suggestive as it would be –, but rather to highlight the weaknesses of this scholar when he submits some quotations of ecclesiastical authors as doctrinal bases of the thesis of the *conception by the ear*.

And that is why, instead of querying for himself the primary sources, Steinberg merely copies a few Christian quotations from other authors (often, without specifying the respective theological sources), reiterating sometimes the inaccuracies and errors in which some of them incur, as we reviewed in the previous paragraphs. To mention some cases, Steinberg relapses in the already criticized inconsistencies of Yrjö Hirn and Ernest Jones (the spurious phrase "*Virgo per aurem impraegnebatur*", given as of St. Augustine),⁴⁵ and of the same

qu'un simple tuyau ou chalumeau (fistula) par où serait entré et sorti le corps du Christ formé dans le ciel." (Réau 1957, 191).

⁴⁰ Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian art. Vol. I, Christ's incarnation, childhood, baptism, temptation, transfiguration, works and miracles* (translated from the German by Janet Seligman), London, Lund Humphries, 1971 (1966), IX, 473 p.

⁴¹ Schiller 1971 (1966), 33-55.

⁴² Schiller 1971 (1966), 43.

⁴³ Kindler 1970, 696-702.

⁴⁴ Steinberg 1987, 25-44.

⁴⁵ Steinberg 1987, 27, n. 18,

Jones (the false quotation of St. Agobard).⁴⁶ For the rest, Steinberg persists in presenting in an indirect way the quotations of the Church sources, transcribing them from other contemporary historians, as seen in the following data: from Hirn he copies some phrases of St. Gaudentius and St. Bernard;⁴⁷ from Ernest Jones he reproduces some quotations of St. Zeno and St. Ephrem;⁴⁸ from Thomas Livius he picks up some sentences of St. Ambrose, St. Eleuterius, Esiquius, St. Fulgentius and St. Zeno;⁴⁹ from Samuel J. Eales he takes up a sentence of St. Thomas Aquinas,⁵⁰ and from Hans von Campenhausen he appropriates a saying of St. Irenaeus of Lyon.⁵¹

In this regard, when seeking to certify with epistemological rigor any hypothesis, it is unnecessary to draw attention to the enormous risk and the low academic value inherent in the fact of substituting, as does Steinberg, the direct consultation of the primary sources (if available) with the comfortable indirect use of secondary literature.

In 1991 the Polish coptologist Katarzyna Urbaniak-Walczak⁵² defended at the University of Münster (Westfalen) the doctoral thesis *Die "conceptio per aurem": Untersuchungen zum Marienbild in Ägypten unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Malereien in El-Bagawat*.⁵³ For not being included in the collections of any public library in Spain, we have not been able to consult this book, which would undoubtedly have enriched in considerable measure our approach. This conjecture is suggested both by its direct and specific addressing the issue under scrutiny –as, when studying the Mary's image in the Coptic art, it places special emphasis on the *conception through the ear*, judging by its title—and by its vast size, undoubted depth and academic rigor (as a doctoral thesis in Germany).

A triennium later (1994) Gail McMurray Gibson, in his book *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages*,⁵⁴ merely brings a simple reference to the *conceptio per aurem* in note 25 of its page 214, repeating in addition the already quoted error attributing to St. Augustine (without citing any source) the sentence "*et virgo per aurem impregnebatur*

⁴⁶ Steinberg 1987, 27, n. 19.

⁴⁷ Steinberg 1987, 27, n. 19, y 29, n. 24, respectively.

⁴⁸ Steinberg 1987, 27, n. 17.

⁴⁹ Steinberg 1987, 25, n. 1; 27, n. 18; 28, n. 22; 35, n. 34, y 35, n. 35, respectively.

⁵⁰ Steinberg 1987, 25, n. 2.

⁵¹ Steinberg 1987, 27, n. 13.

⁵² Prematurely died in 2003 at age 47, Katarzyna Urbaniak-Walczak was Curator of Coptic art in the National Museum in Warsaw.

⁵³ Katarzyna Urbaniak-Walczak, *Die "conceptio per aurem": Untersuchungen zum Marienbild in Ägypten unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Malereien in El-Bagawat*, Altenberge, Oros Verlag, Col. Arbeiten zum spätantiken und koptischen Ägypten, 2.), 1991.

⁵⁴ McMurray Gibson 1994.

(sic)",⁵⁵ established, as we saw, by Yrjo Hirn (1909) and later repeated by Ernest Jones (1914).

Two years later (1996) Julio I. González Montañés, in his article "*Parvulus Puer in Annuntiatione Virginis*. Un estudio sobre la iconografía de la Encarnación",⁵⁶ offers a similar slight allusion to the matter under analysis. In the footnote 8 of page 13 of his text, this author returns to the known topics on the supposed origin of this Marian thesis in the *Armenian Gospel of Childhood*, as well as the conflicting views of the medieval theologians who defend two doctrinal alternatives (the *conceptio per aurem* compared to the *conceptio per uterum*), and the parallelism between our theme and the antithesis Eve/Mary, established by some ecclesiastical writers.⁵⁷

In 2003 the work of Nicholas Conostas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: homilies 1-5, texts and translations* was published.⁵⁸ Although it is limited essentially to the doctrine of St. Proclus,⁵⁹ this

⁵⁵ "The actual phrase that the most revered of early Christian exegetes, Augustine, had used to describe the mysterious procreative faith that 'cometh from hearing' (cf. Romans 10 :17) was 'et virgo per aurem impregnabatur' ('the Virgin through the ear was impregnated'). Augustine's metaphor had by the ninth century come to be invoked as a physical *description* of the Conception mystery. Christ the Word (cf. John 1:1) had been miraculously conceived through the most appropriate orifice –the ear; by the late Middle Ages the doctrine of the *conceptio per aurem* (conception through the ear) was ubiquitous in Marian hymns and devotional poems." (McMurray Gibson 1994, 214, note 25).

⁵⁶ Julio I. González Montañés, "Parvulus Puer in Annuntiatione Virginis. Un estudio sobre la iconografía de la Encarnación", *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma*, Serie VII, *Historia del Arte*, 9 (1996), 11-45.

⁵⁷ González Montañés formulates it so: "En ocasiones [la paloma del Espíritu Santo] aparece situada sobre la cabeza de la Virgen, haciendo visibles las palabras del Evangelio «El Espíritu Santo vendrá sobre ti, y la virtud del altísimo te cubrirá con su sombra» (Lc. I, 35), aunque es más frecuente representarla descendiendo hacia la oreja de María en referencia a la doctrina de la *conceptio per aurem* planteada en los apócrifos (*Evangelio armenio de la infancia*, V, 9) y adoptada por buena parte de la tradición patristica desde el siglo IV. El Verbo habría penetrado en María a través de la oreja, al mismo tiempo que el mensaje del ángel. Esta doctrina, aunque minoritaria frente a los defensores de la *conceptio per uterum*, mantuvo su vigencia a lo largo de los siglos interpretada en un sentido no estrictamente material; en virtud de la fe (*conceptio per fidem*), la concepción tuvo lugar en el intelecto de María antes de tener físicamente a Jesús en su seno («aquel que é contigo na mente, seja contigo no ventre» dice la versión portuguesa de la *Vita Christi* de Ludolfo de Sajonia, cap. V, nº 166). Tal concepción «por la oreja» se vería además apoyada por la existencia de un antetipo en las palabras del Salmo 45, 11: «Oye, hija, y mira; inclina tu oído:/ olvida tu pueblo y la casa de tu padre», además de aparecer prefigurada por antítesis en el episodio de Eva y la Serpiente. Del mismo modo que el demonio, a través de la persuasión, hablando a la oreja de Eva, introdujo el pecado en el mundo, también a través de la oreja entró Jesús en María, la nueva Eva que borra el pecado de su antecesora (...). Son numerosos los textos en los que se hace referencia a la *conceptio per aurem* pero quizá los más conocidos sean los versos atribuidos a Santo Tomás Becket: *Gaude, Virgo, mater Christi / Quae per aurem concepisti!*" (González Montañés 1996, 13, note 8).

⁵⁸ Nicholas Conostas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: homilies 1-5, texts and translations*, Leiden, Brill, 2003, 450 p.

⁵⁹ See *infra*, in our third part, the analysis of the four quotations of St. Proclus we have found in our previous research.

comprehensive book, from which we have only been able to read some pages available on the internet, it seems to be –especially its Chapter 5: “‘The ear of the virginal body’: The poetics of sound in the school of Proclus” (p. 273-314)—indispensable at the time of studying comprehensively the Christian theory of the *conceptio per aurem* at the Annunciation. The reading of this book is for us, undoubtedly, a required task for the near future.

In recent date (2014) Barbara Baert has addressed our theme in an interesting paper, in which she proposes a new reading of the Annunciation from the senses,⁶⁰ on the basis of the close semantic relationship between wind/breath and spirit/life.⁶¹ Despite her suggestive approach, the author, having assumed from the cited article of Leo Steinberg the alleged quotations of St. Augustine and St. Agobard, as well as those of St. Ephrem the Syrian,⁶² falls on the same missteps already identified in that historian.

Finally, just a few months ago (end of 2014), Jacques Poucet, professor emeritus at the Université Catholique de Louvain, published electronically in a digital magazine of his university the comprehensive study *L'Évangile selon Jean d'Outremeuse (XIVe s.) Autour de la Naissance du Christ (Myreur, I, p. 307-347 passim). Commentaire*,⁶³ in which he deals with our topic in Chapter III. “L'Annonciation et la Virginité de Marie”, and especially in its part 9. “La « conception par l'oreille » (§ 8)” (p. 6-11). After relating this Christian belief with other legends from Eastern and Western religions and cultures, the author merely presents here –taking them from an article by François Remigereau⁶⁴— some quotes from St. Proclus of Constantinople, St. John Damascene, St. Ephrem the Syrian, Enodius, St. Venantius of Poitiers and St. Bonaventure.

At last, the preceding paragraphs constitute, in the current state of our research, the meager harvest of documentary references that, on the theory of the *conceptio per aurem*, we were able to collect between the experts in visual culture of Christianity, both in its doctrinal corpus as in its iconography.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Baert 2014.

⁶¹ “St. Zeno of Verona (300-371) asserted that Mary’s uterus swelled, but from words rather than semen. The invisibility and immateriality of the breath and of speech forms the etymological core of various words that subsequently came to express notions such as spirit, idea, mind. This association is apparent in Greek *psyche*, Hebrew *nephesh*, German *Geist* and English *ghost*, all of which originally meant ‘breath’. This explains the richness of the notion of *pneuma*, which means wind, breath as well as spirit. In sum, from the roaring wind to the impregnating breath, the foundation is laid for an entity, the Holy Ghost, who has the power to enter the human body.” (Baert 2014, 60).

⁶² Baert 2014, 66, note 2.

⁶³ Jacques Poucet, *L'Évangile selon Jean d'Outremeuse (XIVe s.) Autour de la Naissance du Christ (Myreur, I, p. 307-347 passim). Commentaire*, inserto en la revista digital *Folia Electronica Classica*, 28 (2014), s.p.

⁶⁴ François Remigereau, “Les enfants faits par l'oreille. Origine et fortune de l'expression”, dans *Mélanges 1945. 5. Études linguistiques*, Paris, 1947, p. 115-176.

⁶⁵ For an approach to Christian iconography in general, see mainly: Émile Mâle, *L'art religieux du XIIIe siècle en France. Étude sur les origines de l'iconographie du Moyen Âge et sur ses sources*

Despite this, contrasting with so inexplicable silences, gaps and omissions on the part of the scholars, we will try to confirm in the two subsequent sections of this paper the evident persistence of that Mariological idea during the Middle Ages in the artistic images and, in a special way, in the doctrinal texts. In the second section, the analysis of nine Italian Trecento paintings⁶⁶ will allow us to glimpse partly the incidence of this doctrinal formula on the European art.⁶⁷ Finally, in

d'inspiration, Paris, Armand Colin, Coll. Livre de poche. Serie Art, 1898 (reprinted 1968), 2 vols.; Bréhier 1918; Toscano 1960; Émile Mâle, *L'Art religieux, du XIIe siècle en France. Étude sur les origines de l'iconographie du Moyen Âge*, Paris, A. Colin, (1924) 19667, iv,463 p.; Émile Mâle, *L'art religieux du XIIIe siècle en France. Étude sur les origines de l'iconographie du Moyen Âge et sur ses sources d'inspiration*, Paris, Armand Colin, 19888, 768 p.; Réau 1957; Schiller 1980; André Grabar, *Les voies de la création en iconographie chrétienne. Antiquité et Moyen Âge*, Paris, Flammarion, Coll. Idées et recherches, 1979, 341 p..

⁶⁶ Among the numerous studies related to the Italian Trecento art, see: Louis Bréhier, *L'art chrétien. Son développement iconographique des origines à nos jours*, Paris, Renouard, 191812, 456 p.; Richard Offner, *Studies in Florentine painting. The fourteenth century*, New York, Junius Press, 1927 (reprinted 1972), v,149 p. + il., s.p.; Frederick Antal, *Florentine painting & its social background. The bourgeois Republic before Cosimo de' Medici's advent to power: XIV and early XV centuries*, New York, Icon editions / Harper & Row, s.a. (1948), 388 p.; Curt H. Weigelt, *Sienese painting of the Trecento*, New York, Hacker Art Books, 1974, 108 p.+ 120 lám.; Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death. The arts, religion and society in the mid-fourteenth century*, New York, Harper & Row, 1965, xii,195 p.; Robert Oertel, *Early Italian Painting to 1400*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1966, 376 p.; Richard Fremantle, *Florentine Gothic Painters. From Giotto to Masaccio. A guide to painting in and near Florence 1300 to 1450*, London, Martin Secker and Warburg, 1975, 665 p. + 40 pl.; Bruce Cole, *Giotto and Florentine painting 1280-1375*, New York, Icon Editions / Harper & Row, 1976, 209 p.; Alastair Smart, *The Dawn of Italian Painting 1250-1400*, Oxford, Phaidon, 1978, 152 p.; E. Borsook, *The mural painters of Tuscany. From Cimabue to Andrea del Sarto*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, lvii, 157 p.; Eve Borsook, *The mural painters of Tuscany. From Cimabue to Andrea del Sarto*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, lvii,157 p. + il., s.p.; Bruce Cole, *Sienese painting. From its origins to the fifteenth century*, New York, Icon Editions, Harper & Row, 1980, 243 p.; Edward Garrison, *Early Italian painting. Selected studies*, vol. I: *Panels and frescoes*; vol. II, *Manuscripts*, London, Pindar Press, 1984, 2 vols.; Paul Hills, *The light of early Italian painting*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1987, 160 p.; Hayden B.J. Maginnis, *Painting in the age of Giotto. A historical revaluation*, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, 217 p. + ill., s.p.; Victor M. Schmidt (ed.), *Italian panel painting of the Duecento and Trecento*, New Haven and London, National Gallery of Art, Washington, distributed by Yale University Press, 2002, 527 p.; Marco Pierini, *L'art à Sienne*, Paris, Hazan, 2001, 192 p.; Caterina Limentani Virdis and Mari Pietrogiovanna, *Retables. L'âge gothique et la Renaissance*, Paris, Citadelles & Mazenod, 2001, 419 p.; Hayden B.J. Maginnis, *The world of the early Sienese painter* (With a translation of the Sienese Breve dell'Arte dei Pittori, by Gabriele Erasmi), Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001, xxi, 310 p.+ ill., s.p.; Joachim Poeschke, *Fresques italiennes du temps de Giotto, 1280-1400*, Paris, Citadelles & Mazenod, 2003, 455 p.

⁶⁷ We could certainly extend the iconographic analysis to other pictorial Annunciations in Flanders, Spain, Germany or other European countries, which also illustrate the idea of the *conceptio per aurem*. However, for methodological “economy”, we restrict our attention to the relatively homogeneous area of Italian Trecento painting –clearly defined as general culture by specific doctrinal and artistic circumstances—, selecting in it the nine pictorial works that better enable us to demonstrate the direct and essential reflection of this peculiar Mariological hypothesis in the late medieval Italian art.

the third section we will expose numerous patristic and theological texts⁶⁸ —the source of inspiration for those artistic images— with the aim of elucidating the dogmatic meanings underlying under this singular theory.

2. The representation of the *conceptio per aurem* in the Italian Trecento painting

The decision to choose the Italian Trecento painting as paradigmatic core to display the inspiring influence that the Mariological thesis being studied exercised on the European medieval art reflects in essence the fact that the Italy of the fourteenth century is the one that best represents the extraordinary strength of the theological ideas and images relating to the *conceptio per aurem* in the Annunciation: a strength of ideas, due to the significant influence that the Church —not only the Papacy and the secular clergy, but, in particular, the religious orders— maintained on the Italian society of that epoch; a strength of images, because the Italian Trecento art —leader in Europe, and favored with a large pleiad of influential artists— consolidates widely the iconography of the *conception through the ear*, which later will reach heights of superlative quality during the subsequent Quattrocento. In fact, the nine pictorial Trecento works we analyze here testify in exemplary fashion —each in its own way and extent—, through a wide panoply of subtle visual analogies, the Marian iconography under scrutiny.



Fig. 1. Jacopo Torriti, *The Annunciation*, ca. 1296. Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore, Roma.

Almost ending the thirteenth century Jacopo Torriti concluded the monumental cycle in mosaic in the apse of the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore

⁶⁸ For the study of the theological and patristic sources of Mariology, the extensive collection of texts compiled in Greek and Latin by Sergio Álvarez Campos (*Corpus Marianum Patristicum*, Burgos, Aldecoa, 1970-1981, 7 vols) is very relevant. The more restricted study of José Antonio de Aldama (*María en la Patrística de los siglos I y II*, Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1970, 380 p.) is also interesting.

in Rome, whose iconographic program also includes *The Annunciation*, 1296 (Fig. 1).⁶⁹ In this mosaic of Torriti the angel, with large, colorful wings, blesses Mary, who, upright before a throne insert in an architectural structure –whose constructive elements (apse, vault, Cosmatesque decoration) resemble the shape of a temple—, listening with shyness the heavenly message that promises her the divine motherhood without losing her virginity. From the top of the scene God the Father, in the form of a bust haloed with a semicircular blue nimbus, looks with appreciation at the Virgin, while the Holy Spirit, represented in the form of a tiny dove, flies in the wake of the beam radiated by the Most High toward the right ear of Mary to fertilize her. The narrative and conceptual knot interwoven by the figures and the scenery of this mosaic is imbued with profound theological meanings. In fact, the likeness of the canopied throne to an ecclesiastic building could perhaps mean two doctrinal metaphors, in close relationship: first and foremost, as a metaphor that the Savior, already spawned since this very moment in the Mary's womb, will be born to build the Temple of the New Alliance (the Christian Church); and in addition as a metaphor of the Virgin herself, allegorically identified with the Church as an institution and as an assembly of Christian believers, according to the matching exegesis of many medieval thinkers.



Fig. 2. Duccio, *The Annunciation*, 1308-1311, former panel of *La Maestà* altarpiece of Siena Cathedral. National Gallery, London.

⁶⁹ Jacopo Torriti, *The Annunciation*, 1296, mosaic. Apse of the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore, Roma.

Duccio de Buoninsegna,⁷⁰ in his *Annunciation*, 1308-1311, of the National Gallery of London (Fig. 2),⁷¹ adopts –drawing on traditional Byzantine models– a quite simple compositional structure. Carrying in his left hand a long staff, Gabriel crosses striding the entrance of the Virgin, blessing her, while she, caught in upright posture, expresses her demure fear, tilting her head by throwing her body back and covering her torso with her right arm. Suggested only by means of the small blue arc of circle at the top of the panel, the Almighty emits the enriching ray –that carries the Paraclete as a tiny bird– toward the Mary’s right ear, in clear reference to her unpolluted *conception through the ear*. This clean engendering of the incarnate Son of God is also figured by the lilies which emerge from the vase, which visually and conceptually link both partners.



Fig. 3. Simone Martini, *The Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus*, 1333. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florencia.

Simone Martini, in his *Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus*, 1333 (Fig. 3), in the Uffizi in Florence,⁷² incorporates the traditional Gothic mode of

⁷⁰ On the work of Duccio, see, for example, Enzo Carli, *Duccio di Buoninsegna*, Milano, Aldo Martello, 1961, 33 p. + 63 p. lám.; James H. Stubblebine, *Duccio di Buoninsegna and his school. Vol. II. Plates*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, ca. 1979, xvi, 329 p.; Enrico Castelnuovo, *La pittura in Italia. Il Duecento e il Trecento*, Torino, Electa, 1985, 2 vols.; Enzo Carli, *Duccio*, Milano, Electa, 1999, 163 p.

⁷¹ Duccio de Buoninsegna, *The Annunciation*, 1308-1311, tempera and gold on wood, 43 x 44 cm, originally panel of the front *predella* of *La Maestà* altarpiece in the Siena Cathedral, now in the National Gallery of London.

⁷² Simone Martini (with the collaboration of Lippo Memmi), *The Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus*, 1333, tempera and gold on wood, 184 x 210 cm. altarpiece from the

narrating the scene on an abstract gold background, omitting any scenery, except the throne and the vase. Projected on that undefined background, the angel, with his head upwind with a crown of olive tree, is piling on his knees before the enthroned Virgin, offering her with his left hand an olive branch as a sign of peace, while he points upward with his right index for telling her who sends him as a messenger before her. For the rest, Simone Martini introduces here a new and original metaphorical way of visualizing the *conceptio per aurem*. In fact, and even eliminating the typical fertilizing breath/ray issued by the Almighty – Godhead appears in this painting only represented by the dove of the Holy Ghost, in a red mandorla of cherubim—, the artist makes evident this *conception through the ear* by means of the golden epigraphic inscription *Ave, gratia plena, Dominus tecum*: coming out of the mouth of the angel, such inscription reaches the right ear of Mary, who retracts herself with modest embarrassment on her throne, while holding open the book of prophecies/prayers.



Fig. 4. Bernardo Daddi, *The Annunciation*, ca. 1335. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Bernardo Daddi (ca. 1280-1348), in his *Annunciation*, ca. 1335, in the Musée du Louvre (Fig. 4),⁷³ depicts the archangel Gabriel –accompanied exceptionally by another angel— carrying a bouquet of lilies in his left hand, while at the same time points with gesture of blessing Mary for showing her the unique privilege of being “blessed among all women”, having been chosen as the Mother of God the Son made flesh. Head bowed and with her hands crossed on her chest, the Virgin receives the angelic message with humility and hesitation. From the upper-left corner, God the Father, haloed with resplendent light, points with his index to the *Madonna*, while sending toward her right ear –for fertilizing her through the word of his message— the divine ray with the dove of the Paraclete, the giver of life.

chapel of Sant'Ansano in the Siena Cathedral, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. The figures of both saints, in the side panels of the altarpiece, are attributed to Lippo Memmi.

⁷³ Bernardo Daddi, *The Annunciation*, c. 1335, tempera and gold on wood, 43 x 70 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Fig. 5. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Annunciation*, 1344. Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena.

Ambrogio Lorenzetti, in *The Annunciation*, 1344, panel originally located in the Consistory Hall of the Palazzo Pubblico di Siena,⁷⁴ and today in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in the same city (Fig. 5),⁷⁵ offers an inquiry quite original with regard to the conventions on this Marian topic, for having organized here a triologue. In fact, while the angel's initial congratulatory greeting, *Ave Maria, Gratia Plena, dominus te[cum]*, appears inscribed in golden letters around the enigmatic nimbus of the Virgin,⁷⁶ the angel –carrying now a palm (and not the classic bouquet of lilies or the Sienese olive branch) and pointing with his index upwards to indicate the divine origin of his embassy— explains to the maiden how, without renouncing her virginity, God will allow her to be the Mother of his divine Son. This is a reassuring guarantee that Gabriel transmits to her with the phrase *Non est impossibile apud Deum o[mn]e v[er]bum*,⁷⁷ which, coming out of his mouth, reaches almost the Mary's head. By completing this triple dialog, she, raising her face for looking to God the Father at the top, expresses her

⁷⁴ Information taken from Wikipedia. [http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciazione_\(Ambrogio_Lorenzetti\)](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciazione_(Ambrogio_Lorenzetti)) [Last access: 16/03/2014].

⁷⁵ Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Annunciation*, 1344, tempera and gold on wood, 127 x 120 cm. Panel from the Consistory Hall of the Palazzo Pubblico di Siena. Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena.

⁷⁶ This is the inscribed phrase, as can be seen in the details of this painting included in the images of the Wikimedia Commons:

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Annunciation_by_Ambrogio_Lorenzetti [Last access: 01/07/2015].

⁷⁷ What we said in the previous note 76 is still valid here.

satisfaction through the phrase *Ecce Ancilla Do[mi]ni*,⁷⁸ that flowing from her lips, is received directly by the Almighty. After this expression of obedience and assent by the Virgin, the Most High sends toward her right ear the white bird of the Paraclete to fertilize her in that same instant of her acceptance of the divine plan.



Fig. 6a. Lorenzo Veneziano, *Lion Polyptych*, 1359. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venecia.



Fig. 6b. Lorenzo Veneziano, *The Annunciation*, central panel of the *Lion Polyptych*, 1359. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.

Lorenzo Veneziano (act. 1356-1372 in Venice), in *The Annunciation* of the *Lion Polyptych*, 1357, in the Gallerie dell'Accademia of Venice (Figs. 6a and 6b),⁷⁹ boasts some originality in the treatment of the topic. In that Marian scene, the central motif of this complex altarpiece,⁸⁰ the artist adds some novelties to the predictable elements of the traditional model. Veneziano, in effect, adopts the conventional postures of the kneeling archangel pointing with his right hand upward while blessing the Virgin, who head bowed and with her hands crossed on her chest, sits, having at her side the donor Domenico Lion, prostrate on knees in tiny scale. Despite this, Lorenzo Veneziano enters here two relevant novelties:

⁷⁸ See the note 76.

⁷⁹ Lorenzo Veneziano, *The Annunciation of the Lion Polyptych*, 1357, tempera and gold on wood, 126 x 75 cm, the lower central pane; and 121 x 60 cm, each of the four lower side panels; 82 x 85 cm, the top-center pane, and 67 x 60 cm, each of the four upper side panels. Originally it was the altarpiece of the main altar of the church of St. Anthony Abbot in Venice; now it is preserved in the Gallerie dell'Accademia of the same city.

⁸⁰ In the lower sector, flanking the scene of the Annunciation, the left panels represent by pairs the saints Anthony Abbot and John the Baptist, and the Apostles Peter and Paul; the right panels shape the Saints John the Evangelist with Mary Magdalene, and St. Dominic de Guzman with St. Francis of Assisi. The top sector is completed with pairs of prophets, outflanking God the Father.

first and foremost, the gesture of God the Father sending or driving with both hands the Dove of the Holy Spirit from the vertical compositional axis, and not through the oblique direction usual in these cases. Even more important is the innovation that Mary, after receiving and accepting the heavenly message, suggested by the Paraclete's vertical flight toward her right ear, exhibits a notorious pregnancy in her prominent belly, as a sign of having already conceived by the grace of the Holy Spirit and by the virtue of the Most High who is covering her with his shadow.



Fig. 7. Lorenzo Veneziano, *Polyptych of The Annunciation with saints*, 1371. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.

Lorenzo Veneziano, in the central panel of the *Polyptych of the Annunciation with saints*,⁸¹ 1371, in the Gallerie dell'Accademia of Venice (Fig. 7),⁸² presents some variations on the substantial structure of the composition of his previous model in the *Polyptych Lion*. The poses of the Virgin and the archangel, with his staff or scepter, are almost identical to those in the above picture, as well as the apparent pregnancy of the Virgin and the vertical layout of God the Father in the act of sending with both hands the dove of the divine Spirit on the head of Mary, in the full axis of the composition. Lorenzo Veneziano introduces three significant innovations in this second version of the theme: first and foremost, the angel and the Virgin –sitting as a Queen in a luxurious throne— are based on a parterre full of flowers, to mean the biblical metaphor that refers to Mary as *hortus conclusus*; in addition, Mary keeps open on her lap –in a very significant shape and location— the sacred book, as to better visualize that the Son of God

⁸¹ The saints are Gregory the Great and John the Baptist in the left sector, and James the Greater and Stephen, in the right one.

⁸² Lorenzo Veneziano, *Polyptych of The Annunciation with saints*, 1371, tempera and gold on wood, 111 x 54 cm, the central panel; y 94 x 24 cm, each of the side panels. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.

incarnate who already throbs in her belly was on several occasions foretold in the prophetic texts of the Old Testament; thirdly, God the Son made flesh appears figured in the top, between God the Father and the Holy Spirit, as a tiny, naked infant, to visualize his conception in the Virgin's womb, a conception that becomes effective in the moment of her consent to the the Almighty's proposal. Through this triple situation of the three divine Persons –in particular, Christ under the figure of a fetus—on the head of Mary, Lorenzo Veneziano offers a new and persuasive version of the *conceptio per aurem*.



Fig. 8. Lippo Vanni, *The Annunciation*, ca. 1360-70. San Leonardo al Lago, Siena.

Constrained by the determinant dividing window that illuminates the chapel, Lippo Vanni, in *The Annunciation*, ca. 1360-70, painted in fresco in a lunette of the Sienese hermitage of San Leonardo al Lago (Fig. 8),⁸³ cleaves the scene in two architectural blocks. In the first of them, corresponding to the lobby of the residence of Mary, places the archangel in upright posture, deploying a flexible phylactery with the inevitable congratulatory greeting inscribed in it. In the second block, corresponding to the alcove of the Virgin, he represents her becoming abruptly standing in her prie-dieu/desktop, when being surprised by the sudden appearance of the heavenly messenger while meditating before the book that she keeps open on the table. These blocks symmetrically opposed – separate in physical hiatus by the insurmountable window— are, however, intimately gathered by Lippo Vanni as a single visual and narrative unit through the following resources: the sameness of architectural design in both sectors of the scenery, the triple pavement of identical tiles, the recessed paneled vault that covers the gallery toward the window, the dialogical relationship between the

⁸³ Lippo Vanni, *The Annunciation*, c. 1360-1370, fresco. Eremo di San Leonardo al Lago, Monteriggioni (Siena).

divine proposal (the inscription in the philactery) and the assent of the maiden (the locution that comes out of her mouth) and, above all, through the figure of God the Father who, in a circular “mandorla” or tondo, presides and controls the ensemble from the top of the lunette. This is where a new linking item becomes effective by the inclusion of the divine breath/ray of life which, issued by the Most High and carrying in its wake the dove of the Paraclete, penetrates the right ear of the Virgin. This means, once more, the effective conception of God the Son made flesh in the same instant in which her virginal mother is pronouncing her consent for the Almighty’s project with the humble replica *Ecce Ancilla Domini*, which looks inscribed emanating from her mouth.



Fig. 9. Taddeo di Bartolo, *Políptico de The Annunciation con los Santos Cosme y Damián, y Tránsito de la Virgen*, 1409), Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena.

Taddeo di Bartolo⁸⁴ (1362-1422), in his *Polyptych of the Annunciation, with Saints Cosmas and Damian, and Transit of the Virgin*, 1409, in the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena⁸⁵ (Fig. 9), offers a quite conventional compositional design. On knees, the angel points toward the heights (the power of the Most High) in offering an olive branch to the Virgin, who head bowed and with her right arm retracted with fear toward her chest, maintains open on her lap the book to symbolize the immediate conception/incarnation of the Messiah prophesied in

⁸⁴ On the work of Taddeo di Bartolo see G.E. Solberg, “Altarpiece types and regional adaptations in the work of Taddeo di Bartolo”. In Schmidt (ed.) 2002, 199-227.

⁸⁵ Taddeo di Bartolo, *Polyptych of The Annunciation with saints Cosma and Damian, and Transit of the Virgin*, 1409, tempera and gold on wood. Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena.

the Scriptures. Half-body, shining from his mandorla of cherubim at the top left of the painting, God the Father blesses Mary by sending to her the ray of life with the white bird of the divine Spirit. The novelty introduced here by Taddeo di Bartolo consists in the redundancy manifested by visualizing the *conceptio per aurem*. This, in effect, is meant by the double resource of making converge toward the Virgin's right ear both the ray of life carrying the Paraclete as well as the praising salutation *Ave gratia plena Dominus tecum*, which flows from the Gabriel's mouth. At last, this obvious visual pleonasm is clear evidence of the desire of this altarpiece's iconographic programmer to assume unequivocally – and with two complementary visual metaphors— the Mariological thesis under review.

3. The doctrine of the *conceptio per aurem* in the patristic and theological tradition

The iconography of the *conception through the ear*, which the nine Italian paintings here analyzed illustrate so clearly –as do also many other late medieval images of the Annunciation in other countries of Europe, such as Germany, Flanders and Spain—, could hardly be explained if not modeled on a solid doctrinal tradition that “legitimise” it with a seal of quasi-canonical guarantee. In this third section of the paper we will expose numerous quotations from some Church Fathers and medieval theologians who contributed in an unequivocal manner to establish and consolidate this peculiar Mariological theory.

Since the middle of the fourth century, St. Ephrem the Syrian (307-373) expresses repeatedly the notion of the *conceptio per aurem*. Thus, in a hymn on virginity he ensures bluntly that Mary, as a thirsty land, conceived the Lord by the ear (*concepit ex auditu*), a reason by which he praises her ears by having “drunk” the source (Jesus Christ) that gives drink to all over the world.⁸⁶ In another hymn in honor to the Church, the same holy hymnographer insists that “Mary made visible with her ear the invisible God, who came [to her ear] in the angel's voice, so that the fruit of her womb was the power of the Most High who came in to incarnate”.⁸⁷ And, in an exegesis on the Gospels, St. Ephrem contrasts the proceedings of Eve, “by whose hearing entered the death” –by accepting the demon's misleading word— and Mary, “by whose ear entered the life (*per aurem intravit vita*)”, i.e. the redemption of sin, produced by God the Son made flesh in her womb. For this reason, the holy Syrian concludes that the debt (the original sin) contracted by the man (Adam) through a tree –the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil— would be repayed in the future by another man (Christ) through

⁸⁶ “Maria, sitiens ager, in Nazareth Dominum nostrum concepit ex auditu. Tu quoque, mulier, aquam sitiens concepisti filium ex auditu. Beatae aures tuae, quae fontem suum biberunt, qui mundum potavit. Maria eum seminavit in praesepe; tu in auribus auditorum tuorum.” (St. Ephrem, *De Virginitate* 23. In Álvarez Campos 1970, vol. II, 505).

⁸⁷ “Aure detexit Maria invisibilem Deum, qui veniebat in angeli voce; et fructus uteri sui Virtus fuit quae ad incarnationem venit.” (St. Ephrem, *Hymni de Ecclesia* 35. In Álvarez Campos 1970, vol. II, 509).

another tree (the cross).⁸⁸

More or less by the same decades St. Zeno of Verona (ca. 300-371) sets with similar syllogisms the same contrast between Eve and Mary, to point out that, as the devil caused the death when violating Eve by sliding down her ear through persuasion, Christ entered incarnate in Mary through her ear –*per aurem intrat Christus in Mariam*–, with the aim of eliminating all defects present in the heart of the human beings.⁸⁹ In another dogmatic treatise St. Zeno expresses a similar idea, although with different analogy, in proclaiming that the exalted womb of Mary shines forth or provides light (*emicat*), not by a gift of marriage, but by the faith; by the Verb or Word of God, not by human semen.⁹⁰

In the first half of the fifth century St. Proclus (*ante* 390-446), Patriarch of Constantinople,⁹¹ reiterates with emphasis the thesis of the *conceptio per aurem*. So in his first sermon in praise to Mary, begins by pointing in lyrical concepts that she, “slave and Mother, Virgin and heaven, unique bridge of God toward men”, is the chosen instrument to weave the Incarnation, in which, for one ineffable reason, drew up the tunic of Christ.⁹² Taking full advantage of the vast potential of this evocative symbolic metaphor of textile manufacturing, he sets out then that the weaver of that coat (Jesus Christ) is the Holy Spirit, the spinning is the power of the Most High who covered her with his shadow, the wool with which it is weaved is the old fleece of Adam, the plot is the immaculate flesh of the Virgin, the loom is the immense grace of the pregnant woman (Mary), and finally the maker is the Word, who slips and penetrates through the ear (*artifex tandem, Verbum per auditum illabens*).⁹³ From similar premises St. Proclus asks rhetorically who has seen or heard that God dwells in a inviolated uterus, and that the one to whom the heavens had not been able to contain could lodge without

⁸⁸ “Quia per aurem Evae intraverat mors, per aurem Mariae intravit vita. Et quia debita per lignum contraxerat homo, etiam ille, quando venit, per lignum solvit ea.” (St. Ephrem, *Explanatio Evangelii concordantis*. 20, 32. In Álvarez Campos 1970, vol. II, 535).

⁸⁹ “Et quia suasionem per aurem irrepens diabolus, Evam vulnerans interemerat; per aurem intrat Christus in Mariam, universa cordis desecat vitia: vulnusque mulieris, dum de virgine nascitur, curat”. (St. Zeno, *Tractatus XIII. De circumcissione*, X, 19-20. PL 11, 352).

⁹⁰ “Etenim Deus Dei Filius, tempore constituto, dissimulata interim maiestate, ab aetherea sede profectus, in praedestinatae virginis templum sibimet castra metatur, quibus latenter infunditur in hominem gigniturus, ibidemque salvo quod erat meditatur esse, quod non erat. Mistus itaque humanae carni se fingit infantem. Mariae superbus emicat venter, non munere coniugali, sed fide, Verbo, non semine.” (St. Zeno, *Tractatus VIII. De Nativitate Domini* II. PL 11, 413).

⁹¹ On the theological doctrine of St. Proclus of Constantinople, see Constanas 2003.

⁹² “Maria, inquam, ancilla et mater, virgo, ac coelum, Dei ad homines unicus pons, horrendum incarnationis textorium jugum, in quo ineffabili quadam ratione unionis illius tunica confecta est”. (St. Proclus, *Oratio I. Laud. in sanct. Dei genitr. Mariam*. PG 65, 682).

⁹³ “cujus quidem textor exstitit Spiritus sanctus; nectrix, virtus obumbrans ex alto; lana, antiquum Adami vellus; trama, impolluta caro ex virgine; textorius radius, immensa gestantis gratia; artifex tandem, Verbum per auditum illabens.” (St. Proclus, *Oratio I. Laudatio in sanctissimam Dei genitricem Mariam*. PG 65, 682).

any problem in the strait womb of the Virgin.⁹⁴

And in another passage of the same sermon, St. Proclus is amazed at first at the mysterious miracle whereby the Emmanuel, for his condition of God, opened the doors of the human nature, becoming incarnate in the Virgin Mary's womb, without violating or breaking the closure of her virginity.⁹⁵ Pining down even more his reasoning, he proclaims without hesitation that God the Son exited by the Virgin's womb in the same way that entered into it through the ear (*ita ex utero est egressus, sicuti per aurem est ingressus*), and was born in the same manner with which he was conceived, as he entered in Mary without intercourse (*sine passione*) and exited from her without losing her virginity (*egressus est absque ulla corruptione*).⁹⁶

In another homily on the Christ's Incarnation, the same Patriarch of Constantinople, after wondering when the flesh (the human nature) joined substantially and immutably,⁹⁷ offers this suggestive answer: this miracle happened when the Virgin Mary put her uterus available to God, because the Word was introduced into her through the ear —*Verbum autem per aurem insiliit*—, while “the Holy Spirit was a living temple, the Most High lowered himself to the form of a servant and a uterus gestated preserving its virginity precisely for this mystery of a divine dispensation”.⁹⁸

And in a new paragraph of a similar preaching about the Incarnation, St. Proclus emphasizes the idea of *conceptio per aurem*, noting that, if daring to ask the Virgin Mary how she was made Mother of God, he would immediately give from her the following response: “An incorrupt angel, not a husband, dared short time ago to appear before me; and I heard a word (*verbum audivi*), and conceived the Word or Verb of God (*verbum concepi*), and delivered the divine Word to mankind (*verbum reddidi*)”.⁹⁹

In that same fifth century the monk Faust, bishop of Riez in Provence (Faustus Reiensis, ca. 405/10-ca. 490/95), ensures that, after Mary gave her consent with the “*Ecce Ancilla Domini: Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*”, the angel returned

⁹⁴ “Quis vidit, quis audivit, inhabitasse Deum in utero incircumscripse; ac eum quem coeli capere non poterant, nullis arctatum angustiis, ventrem Virginis comprehendisse?” (*Ibid.*).

⁹⁵ “O mysterium! Miracula video, et Divinitatem praedico: passiones cerno, nec humanitatem inficior. Ceterum Emmanuel, naturae quidem portas aperuit ut homo; virginitatis autem claustra non violavit neque perrupit, ut Deus”. (*Ibid.*, 691).

⁹⁶ “quin ita ex utero est egressus, sicuti per aurem est ingressus: ita natus, sicut conceptus. Ingressus est sine passione; egressus est absque ulla corruptione”. (*Ibid.*).

⁹⁷ “Quandonam vero caro secundum substantiam Deo immutabiliter unita est, praeterquam heri?” (St. Proclus, *Oratio III. De Incarnatione Domini nostri Iesu Christi*. PG 65, 707).

⁹⁸ “quando sancta quidem Virgo suum uterum commodavit: Verbum autem per aurem insiliit; ac Spiritus Sanctus vivum efformavit templum; Altissimus in servi se formam exinanivit; ac demum divinae istud dispensationis mysterium uterus virginalis portavit.” (*Ibid.*).

⁹⁹ “Si autem et ipsam Deiparam interrogare auderem quomodo facta sit mater sine coniugio, prorsus respondebit: « Angelus nuper incorruptus, non maritus, ausus est adstare; et verbum audivi, verbum concepi, verbum reddidi ».” (St. Proclus, *Homilia de Incarnatione Domini*. In Álvarez Campos 1976, vol. IV/1, 71).

to heaven with such verbal acceptance of the Virgin, and suddenly the ineffable power of the Most High penetrated in her womb.¹⁰⁰

Toward the end of the fifth century or beginning of sixth, the Syriac theologian and poet Jacob of Serugh (ca. 451-521), also expresses in several opportunities, under poetic formulas, the thesis of the *conceptio per aurem*.¹⁰¹ For example, in a sermon in verse on the Annunciation, he says—in key of ambivalent analogies—the difference in origin and nature between the incarnate Son of God and the Virgin, in exposing on this fertilizing heavenly announcement:

Outside of the [Mary's] ear is placed the [angel's] voice and the Word
[of God] advances with haste,
For it is known the place of the voice from where it arrives.
It does not exit from the [angel's] mind when the Word is sent,
Nor penetrates simultaneously in the ear when the Word appears.
Between the [angel's] mouth and the [Mary's] ear is his minister:
Wherever the Word comes in or returns she does not have access.¹⁰²

And in another versified homily in honor of the feast of the Mary's Visitation to her cousin Elizabeth, Jacob of Serugh develops a new poetic formulation of the thesis in study, noting:

[Christ] hides in the mind and without intercourse dwells in the
[Mary's] soul,
And the carnal union cannot obtain it [the Word].
And that is why the Verb chose for himself a virgin, alien to any
conjugal relationship,
To be born bodily of her;
And he issued a Voice [St. John the Baptist], conceived by

¹⁰⁰ “At illa inquit: « Ecce ancilla Domini sum: fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum (Le. 1, 38) ». Mox igitur angelus virginis accepto consensu coelestis regionis incolas repetivit; et ecce subito secretum virginis ineffabilis potentia penetravit.” (Faustus Reiensis, Sermo 2. In Álvarez Campos 1981, vol. VI, 106).

¹⁰¹ While this article was in the process of evaluation in *Ilu. Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones*, we published in another journal a comprehensive study exclusively focused on the doctrine of Jacob of Serugh on the *conceptio per aurem*: José María Salvador González, “La doctrina de Jacob de Sarug sobre la *conceptio per aurem* como posible fuente literaria en la iconografía medieval de La Anunciación”, *Mirabilia Ars*, 1 (2014), 96-130).

¹⁰² “Extra aurem vox consistit verbumque procurrat,
notus enim est vocis locus quo ea pervenit.
Non exit a mente cum illud mittitur,
nec simul penetrat auditum cum Verbum apparet.
Inter os auditumque suus est minister:
quocumque venit vel vadit Verbum illa non accedit.”
(Jacob of Serugh, *Homilia de Mariae visitatione*. In Álvarez Campos 1981, vol. V, 48).

convention,
To prepare the way and pave the path while he would be manifested
himself.¹⁰³

Soon after, the homilist of Serugh continues his metaphorical exegesis on the Jesus' incarnation by the Virgin's ear through these ingenious circumlocutions:

Also the voice that goes toward the ear precedes the Verb,
And it launches the Word in order to, entering [by the Mary's ear]
open the door.
The announcement of the Word leads the [angel's] Voice at the door
of the ears
for preceding him and preparing the ear by it [the angel's voice].
[The angel's voice] penetrates the air and paves the way for [the
Verb] can run;
And exactly when [the voice] arrives at the door of the ear and stops,
the Verb penetrates [by it].¹⁰⁴

And, in a letter addressed to a community of monks, Jacob of Serugh redefines through other analog figures the doctrine of the *conceptio per aurem*. In effect, after comparing the annunciator archangel Gabriel with a pearl that, hanging from the ears of the maidens, honors their ears, says that the Virgin is worthy to receive that pearl which is the divine Word, sent by God the Father as a pledge and savior of the world.¹⁰⁵ The Syriac poet even compares the precursor heavenly messenger with a door, putting in his mouth these expressive simile:

In the likeness of the door where the light manifests itself, I am hung
in the ears of the maidens to honor the ear that was the door of the
Divine Word who wanted to live in that girl [Mary]. In the likeness of
a doorman, I am placed at the door of the ears, to honor the ear

¹⁰³ "Absconditur in mente et sine copula habitat in anima,
nec potest ad illud coniunctio accedere.
Ideoque virginem, quae aliena erat a coniunctione,
sibi delegit Verbum, ut corporaliter ex ea nasceretur;
et misit Vocem, quae fuit per coniunctionem concepta,
ut ordinaret viam complanaretque semitam dum ipse se monstraret. (*Ibid.*).

¹⁰⁴ "Vox etiam ad auditum praecedit verbum,
et illum excutit ut verbo aperiat portam intranti.
Notitia Verbi Vocem ducit ad aurium portam
ut praecurrat illi et per eam praeparet auditum.
Findit aerem complanatque viam ut currat;
et vix pervenit ad ianuam auris quiescitque, penetrat Verbum." (*Ibid.*).

¹⁰⁵ "Ego margarita ab auribus suspensor, ut auditum honorem puellarum; quia sunt dignatae margaritam acipere, Verbum nimirum a Patre demissum ut pignus et salvatorem mundi." (Jacob of Serugh, *Epistula ad monachos Conventus Mar Bassus*, 15. In Álvarez Campos 1981, vol. V, 92).

inhabited by the Verb. [...] I ran toward the ear, and I opened the door before him.¹⁰⁶

Also toward the sixth century an anonymous hymnographer adheres to the defense of this belief, announcing that Christ “entered through the ear of Mary and dwelt in secret her uterus, and, after leaving it in his birth, he did not brake the virginal seals [the hymen], nor broke the seals of the sepulchre when exiting resurrected”.¹⁰⁷

Perhaps by the same decades Isaac of Antioch does not hesitate in subscribing also the thesis of the *conceptio per aurem*. In his *Third Sermon*, in fact, he argues that Christ has not lost his divine majesty when descending from the heavenly throne to the Virgin’s womb, nor lost his divinity to be clothed with human nature, with the additional clarification that he came without a body to Mary, and was not born of her only with the flesh or with one (human) nature, but that one (divine) nature entered into the Virgin, and two (divine and human) natures came out from her.¹⁰⁸ The Syrian thinker still insists in this duality of Jesus’ nature, when he concludes: “A unique divine nature entered to Mary, and two natures came out embodied in him. Without being still incarnate, entered by ear, and exited already incarnate”.¹⁰⁹

And in his *Sixth Canticle* Isaac of Antioch rivets these same concepts, in proclaiming that Jesus Christ “entered as divine spirit through the Virgin’s ear, and came out of her womb as human flesh”, since, as it is well known, the purely spiritual being became corporeal (incarnate), or in other words, the purely spiritual Being dropped without a body to Mary, and was born incarnate as man of her womb.¹¹⁰

At this point in our speech, it is necessary to clarify that until the sixth century the writers who argue the Mariological notion in study do explicitly mention the formula of the *conceptio per aurem* –although, in our view, without considering

¹⁰⁶ “Ego, similis portae in qua depingeretur lumen, in auribus suspensor puellarum; ut honorem aurem quae Verbi porta fuit in puella habitare volentis. Ianitoris instar sistor in auris ostio, ut aurem quam Verbum habitavit honorem. (...) Cucurri ad aurem, et ostium ante eum aperui.” (*Ibid.*).

¹⁰⁷ “Ingressus est per aurem et secreto uterum inhabitavit; e ventre porro exiens, non solvit sigilla virginalia, sicut nec solvit exeundo sigilla sepulcri.” (Anonimus hymnographer, *Hymnus 11*. In Álvarez Campos 1981, vol. V, 170).

¹⁰⁸ “Nulla erat contumelia maiestati eius quod de throno ad ventrem descendit, nec divinitatem perdidit cum humanitatem indueretur. Non in corpore venit ad Mariam, nec sola caro nata est; non una natura nata est, sed una intravit et duae egressae sunt.” (Isaac of Antiochia, *Sermo 3*. In Álvarez Campos 1981, vol. V, 183).

¹⁰⁹ “Intravit ad eam una de coelo, et egredi faciebat duas in carne illius. Non incarnatus intravit per aurem, et egredi faciebat incarnatum.” (*Ibid.*).

¹¹⁰ “Per aurem enim spiritus intravit, et ex ventre caro egressa est. Ecce notum et apertum est spiritualement illum corporeum factum esse. Corpus non secus adduxit, sed venit ut corporeus fieret. Spiritualis descendit ad Mariam, et homo de sinu eius ortus est.” (*Ibid.*, 184).

it as a true physical act¹¹¹—, while the subsequent theologians to that century formulate such a notion in a lax meaning of greater symbolic subtlety. As we will soon see, Christian authors after the sixth century refer to the Mary's ear at the Annunciation not as a reproductive channel through which the fertilizing breath/beam of God the Father/Holy Spirit, nor even less the own God the Son already incarnate, would pass materially and physiologically, but as the acoustic channel by which the Virgin received in immaterial form the message (the Word) of God the Father who proposed her the conception/incarnation of the Word (*Logos* or Verb) of God the Son in her womb without losing her virginity. For this reason, all these ecclesiastical writers since the sixth century onwards will emphasise the Word issued by the Most High, rather than in the Mary's ear as alleged reproductive duct.

This new exegetical perspective is assumed even by a writer still active in the preceding period: some anonymous known as the Pseudo-Augustine, datable between the fifth and sixth centuries. In a sermon on the Nativity of Jesus, this author ensures that Mary gave birth not as other women, since begat a son without ceasing to be a virgin, and deserved to gestate the divinity itself: such an exceptional phenomenon happened according to the promise contained in the angel's message, that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you", as a result of which her belly became the palace of the Holy Spirit.¹¹² According to the Pseudo-Augustine, Mary, after hearing the pact proposed by God and paying attention to his heavenly messenger, expressed her consent with that *Ecce Ancilla Domini; fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*, which earned her immediately to have God lodged in the house of her womb, to the point of fulfilling the ambiance of her uterus and being locked up all the infinite divine majesty within the narrow confines of a human body.¹¹³

Half a millennium later the Benedictine cardinal St. Peter Damian (1007-1072) expresses in his own way the theory that the conception/incarnation of Christ in the Virgin's womb was verified at the same instant in which she heard

¹¹¹ Despite the fact that these early Christian thinkers would at first seem to formulate their interpretations on the *conceptio per aurem* in the literal sense that the ear of the Virgin would have been the physical duct by which the "insemination" or impregnation of her womb by the God's power would have been verified, we believe that all of them interpret that prodigy according to the following metaphorical digression: the ear would be, in simple and natural way, the duct that allowed Mary to listen the heavenly message proposing the Word of God's virginal conception in her womb, and, after listening, helped her to verbalize her consent to the Almighty's proposal.

¹¹² "Non ita, Maria; non sic paries quomodo ceterae feminae. Tu ita filium generabis, ut nunquam amittas castitatem, quae ipsam portare mereberis deitatem. « Spiritus sanctus superveniet in te, et virtus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi (Lc. 1, 35) ». Quia venter tuus palatium factus est Spiritus Sancti." (Pseudo-Augustine, *In Natali Domini*, 2. In Álvarez Campos 1981, vol. VI, 269).

¹¹³ "Et illa, ubi coeleste audivit pactum, nuntio praebet auditum, et meruit illico intra cameram ventris habere hospitem Deum. « Ecce », inquit, « ancilla Domini; fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum (Lc. 1, 38) ». Repletur ambitus uteri; concluditur intra humani corporis metas tota maiestas." (*Ibid.*).

and accepted the promise of God that she would retain her virginity intact when conceiving and giving birth to the Son of God made man. So in a sermon on the Annunciation, after expressing that the archangel Gabriel received from the Lord a message containing “a greeting to Mary, the incarnation of the Redeemer, the fullness of grace and the greatness of the glory and the multitude of joy”,¹¹⁴ St. Peter Damian ensures aboveboard that the Virgin, after the archangel Gabriel spoke to her, “she felt God crept into her womb, as well as his infinite majesty enclosed in the short space of her virginal womb”.¹¹⁵

Almost a century later St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) also assumes – while using ingenious metaphors from his typical grandiloquence— some rhetoric figures of the *conceptio per aurem*. In his fourth sermon in honor of Mary, for example, he designs a convoluted fantasy to highlight the humble availability of the Virgin to accept –with the formula *Ecce Ancilla Domini, Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*¹¹⁶— the divine offer of becoming virginal Mother of God the Son. The abbot of Clairvaux begins by stating the analyzed thesis like that:

That was understood very well by that wise Virgin when, to the anticipated gift by a promise, she was able to join the merit of his prayer saying: *Let it be to me according to your word*. Let it be to me by the Verb according to your promise. Let it be flesh of my flesh according to your word, the Word that already existed in the beginning with God.¹¹⁷

According to the contrived libretto imagined by St. Bernard, Mary continues her assent to the offer of the Most High with this hyperbolic plea:

I beg you to be fulfilled in me the Word; but not declaimed, because it passes; but conceived, in order to stay. Coated, but not of air, but of flesh. Let it be in me thy word, not only because I can listen it in my ears, but touch it with my hands, contemplate it with my eyes and take it on my back. Do not let be in me the word written and mute, but incarnate and alive. Not drawn with characters without voice over dry parchments, but vitally printed in human form on my chaste entrails;

¹¹⁴ “Traditur epistola Gabrieli, in qua salutatio Virginis, incarnatio Redemptoris, modus redemptionis, plenitudo gratiae, gloriae magnitudo, multitudo laetitiae continetur.” (St. Peter Damian, *Sermo XI. De Annuntiatione Beatissimae Virginis Mariae* (XXV Mart.). PL 144, 558).

¹¹⁵ “Missus est ergo angelus Gabriel a Deo ad Virginem, quae, postquam ei locutus est, sensit Deum suis illapsus visceribus, majestatemque illius virginalis ventris brevitate conclusam,” (*Ibid.*).

¹¹⁶ Lc 1, 38. In *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam. Nova editio*, Madrid, La Editorial Católica, 200512, 1011.

¹¹⁷ “Hoc utique prudens Virgo intellexit, quando praevenienti se muneri gratuita promissionis, iunxit meritum suae orationis: *Fiat*, inquit, *mihi secundum verbum tuum*. Fiat mihi de Verbo secundum verbum tuum. Verbum, quod erat in principio apud Deum”. (St. Bernard, *In laudibus Virginis Matris. Homilia IV*, 11. En *Obras completas de San Bernardo*, 1984, 676).

not by the traits of a pen, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. In short, let it be done to me as was never made anyone before me and as no one will perform.¹¹⁸

Straight away, St. Bernard imagines the Virgin enouncing this imaginary request to ask the Lord for the physical particularity of her promised incarnate Word of God:

On many occasions and in many ways God spoke formerly to our fathers by the prophets. Scripture tells us that some heard the Word, others proclaimed it and others accomplished it; but I ask you to do in my womb according to your Word.¹¹⁹

And in a new circumlocution St. Bernard puts on the lips of Mary these solemn expressions, asking God that the conception/incarnation of the Divine Word promised to her through the archangel Gabriel become true in her virginal womb:

And I do not want that [the Word] be done in me as a declaimed proclamation, or as a figurative signal, nor as an imaginary dream, but breathing it in silence, as a personal incarnation possessed bodily in my bowels. Anyway, the Word, that neither was able to incarnate in himself nor he needed it, condescend to be flesh in me and for me too, according to your Word. Be it done, therefore, universally to all over the world, and particularly *be it done unto me according to thy word*.¹²⁰

A significant part of the multiple and concordant texts of the Church Fathers and medieval theologians who –with a strong affirmation or, more frequently, with a soft symbolic metaphor– subscribe to the theory of the *conceptio per aurem* is thus emphasized. As if that were not enough, alongside that canonical

¹¹⁸ “fiat caro de carne mea secundum verbum tuum. Fiat, obsecro, mihi Verbum, non prolatum quod transeat, sed conceptum ut maneat, carne videlicet indutum, non aere. Fiat mihi non tantum audibile auribus, sed et visibile oculis, palpabile manibus, gestabile humeris. Nec fiat mihi verbum scriptum et mutum, sed incarnatum et vivum, hoc est non mutis figuris, mortuis in pellibus exaratum, sed in forma humana meis castis visceribus vivaciter impressum, et hoc non mortui calami depictione, sed Spiritus Sancti operatione. Eo videlicet modo fiat mihi, quo nemini ante me factum est, nemini post me faciendum.” (*Ibid.*).

¹¹⁹ “Porro multifariam multisque modis olim Deus locutus est Patribus in Prophetis: et alii quidem in aure, aliis in ore, aliis etiam in manu factum esse verbum Domini memoratur; mihi autem oro, ut et in utero fiat iuxta verbum tuum.” (*Ibid.*, 678).

¹²⁰ “Nolo ut fiat mihi aut declamatorie praedicatum, aut figuraliter significatum, aut imaginatorie sommatum, sed silenter inspiratum, personaliter incarnatum, corporaliter invisceratum. Verbum igitur, quod in se nec poterat fieri, nec indigebat, dignetur in me, dignetur et mihi fieri secundum verbum tuum. Fiat quidem generaliter omni mundo, sed specialiter fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum.” (*Ibid.*).

patristic and theological tradition, some apocryphal writings also reflect the same thesis.¹²¹ Toward the sixth century the *Armenian Gospel of Childhood* manifests that way, when, describing the end of the long dialog engaged by Gabriel with Mary, expresses:

The angel said to her: “Oh holy and blessed Virgin! Listen to this word and keep well in your soul what I am going to tell you. This is not a work of man, and the event that I say will not be caused by him. It is God who will carry out in you. He has in his hands enough power to get rid of all the anguish of the proof”. Mary responds: “If it is as you say, the Lord has to descend to your servant and slave, let it be to me according to your word”. And the angel departed from her.¹²²

The apocryphal story continues in these terms:

Just the Virgin pronounced these words with entire humility, *the Word of God entered into her through the ear*,¹²³ and the intimate nature of her body, with all her senses, was sanctified and purified as the gold in the crucible. She was converted into a holy temple, immaculate, mansion of the divine Word. And at the same time the Virgin’s pregnancy began.¹²⁴

In turn, the fanciful *Vita Virginis* (apocryphal “biography” datable toward the seventh century) assumes the same idea, despite repeating almost verbatim the text of the Luke’s Gospel on the Annunciation. In recounting this event, this apocryphal asserts that the Virgin –when, after hearing from the angel the divine promise that she will retain her virginity when becoming mother, gave her consent with the *Ecce Ancilla Domini; Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*—, “conceived immediately by the ear (*Ceterum ipsa concepit ex auditu*)”, and later remained three months next to Joseph, being already pregnant the Son of the living God.¹²⁵

¹²¹ It is very likely that the two apocryphal texts mentioned below (the one toward the sixth century, the other of the following century) have assumed the thesis of the *conceptio per aurem* inspired directly in the canonical texts of some Church Fathers.

¹²² *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*, 8. In Aurelio de Santos Otero, *Los Evangelios Apócrifos (Colección de textos griegos y latinos, versión crítica, estudios introductorios y comentarios por Aurelio de Santos Otero)*, Salamanca, La Editorial Católica, Col. Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 148, 2006, 353-354.

¹²³ Emphasis of the author.

¹²⁴ *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*, 9. In Santos Otero 2006, 354.

¹²⁵ “Cui respondit angelus: « Spiritus Sanctus superveniet in te et virtus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi; ideoque et quod nascetur sanctum vocabitur Filius Dei (Lc, 1,35) ». Haec autem audiens Virgo ait: « Ecce ancilla Domini; fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum. Et discessit ab ea angelus (Lc. 1,38) ». Ceterum ipsa concepit ex auditu; et etiam menses tres apud Iosephum permansit, cum esset Filio viventis Dei gravida.” (*Vita Virginis*. In Álvarez Campos 1981, vol. V, 236s).

It is not, moreover, nothing insignificant in this respect the contribution –as sporadic and relative as it may seem— also offered by the liturgy. In this order of ideas, a hymn of the twelfth century,¹²⁶ which form part of the anonymous laudatory piece *Septem gaudia Mariae*,¹²⁷ proclaims in its first stanza:

*Gaude virgo, mater Christi,
quae per aurem concepisti
Gabriele nuntio:
gaude, quia Deo plena
peperisti sine poena
cum pudoris lilio*¹²⁸.

And in its following two stanzas, this Marian hymn expresses:

*Gaude, quia tui nati,
quem dolebas mortem pati,
fulget resurrectio:
gaude Christo ascendente
in coelum, qui te vidente
motu fertur proprio.*

*Gaude, quae post Christum scandis
et est honor tibi grandis
in coeli palatio,
ubi fructus ventris tui
per te detur nobis frui
in perenni gaudio.*¹²⁹

4. Conclusion

We could summarize the main findings of our research in these short paragraphs:

It is surprising, at first, the lack of interest of the scholars in documenting with rigorous precision and in interpreting fully through primary sources the aforesaid disseminated Mariological thesis of the *conceptio per aurem*,

¹²⁶ This anonymous liturgical hymn *Gaude virgo, Mater Christi* of the twelfth century has been attributed, without further documentary grounds, to St. Thomas Becket, and even to St. Bonaventure (who lived already in the thirteenth century).

¹²⁷ This Latin hymn was transcribed in its original version and put in parallel with its literal translation to old English in the manuscript *Glade us, maiden, moder milde*. Index no. 912. MS: Trinity College Cambridge 323 (B.14.39) fols. 28b-29a (c. 1250). Edition: B13 no. 22. <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/picofnts.htm> [Last acces: 05/07/2015].

¹²⁸ MS: Trinity College Cambridge 323 (B.14.39) fols. 28b-29a (c. 1250). Edition: B13 no. 22.

¹²⁹ MS: Trinity College Cambridge 323 (B.14.39) fols. 28b-29a (c. 1250). Edition: B13 no. 22.

according to which the incarnation of the Son of God would have been carried out in some way through the ear of Mary.

Despite so surprising disinterest or omission on the part of most experts, a thorough investigation reveals soon that such thesis had a huge influence on the Christian art and thought during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The topic is, indeed, illustrated with breadth and clarity in numerous artistic works of medieval Europe, among which we analyze here nine paradigmatic pictures of the Italian Trecento painting.

With regard to the literary sources, one can also document an abundant amount of passages of many Church Fathers and medieval theologians, who helped to form a solid doctrinal tradition on the topic under scrutiny.

Apart from the fact that among the Christian thinkers before and after the sixth century one can observe some differences of emphasis in their respective formulations –the first insisting on the entry of Jesus by the ear of Mary; the seconds emphasizing the Word issued by the Most High at the time of being heard by the Virgin—, it seems evident that both classes of authors interpret this thesis in a fully metaphorical and symbolic sense: the Mary’s ear would not be in this prodigious episode a reproductive channel by which the fertilizing breath/beam of God the Father/Holy Spirit, nor, even less, the divine Word incarnate in the form of an embryo or fetus, would have passed materially, but the acoustic channel by which the Virgin received and accepted in immaterial form the Word of God the Father proposing the conception/incarnation of te Word (Verb) of God the Son in her womb without losing her virginity.

In fact, the reasoning of the Church Fathers and the medieval theologians, who so metaphorically and symbolically defend the *conceptio per aurem*, could be interpreted that way: the Word, Logos or Verb of God becomes *flesh* (Incarnate Word) in the womb of Mary in the same instant in which –and only after that—, after penetrating by the Mary’s ear as *sound*, *voice* or *word* (Verb in *resounding breath*, Logos/*Pneuma*) issued by God, is *acquiesced* with unrestricted faith by the Virgin when concluding her dialog (*dia-Logos*) with the archangel Gabriel.

It is useful, finally, to point out that, despite its validity for almost a millennium, this peculiar idea of the *conceptio per aurem* ends up being prohibited in the middle of the sixteenth century by the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Such prohibition essentially reflected the possible risk that this symbolic metaphor was taken literally, in the sense that the ear of Mary was perceived as a kind of reproductive (“genital”) duct through which would the incarnate Son of God have entered physically in the form of an embryo or fetus.

* * *

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