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Augustus through the Ages

Receptions, Readings and Appropriations
of the Historical Figure of the First Roman Emperor



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The Iconography of Emperor Augustus with the Tiburtine Sibyl in the Low Countries. An Overview

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Abstract

The iconography representing the Tiburtine Sybil accompanied by Augustus was invented in Italy and became widespread in Western tradition, evolving from a group of twelve Sibyls to an alone standing iconography. Most of the time this representation is connected to the birth of Christ and features a kneeling Augustus with a standing sibyl next to, or behind him. This iconography became probably known in the Low Countries since 1400 in parallel with the diffusion of the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus da Voragine and the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*. As the legend was also popular at court and with high-ranked men and women, it is not surprising that such iconography was associated with power and recognition. This article focuses on the depiction of the 'Emperor and the Tiburtine Sibyl' in the Low Countries and gives a general overview of its use, from its origin to the representation of independent figures, focusing specifically on its function and the idea of authority.

1. *Introduction*

In the Antwerp cathedral of Our Lady a fifteenth century painting is preserved (Fig. 1), made by an anonymous Brussels painter in the style of Rogier van der Weyden.¹ Two scenes of Saint Joseph's life are depicted and when the Antwerp restorer A. Maillard took a closer look at this remarkable painting in 1858, he discovered another depiction on the back.² Most likely a black paint layer was added, at an unknown point in time, to hide its bad condition. But thanks to this nineteenth century restoration, it is now certain that this panel originally belonged to an altarpiece in which the back was visible on a daily basis when it was closed.

* I would like to thank Bart Fransen, Katrien Houbey, Jim Moeglein o.s.c., Myra van Looy and Eric Stuy for their help and comments on this article.

¹ GRIETEN / BUNGENEERS (1996), p. 373-375; REYNIERS (2014); ID. (2015).

² GÉNARD (1859), p. 10-11. According to Janssen, the restorer was asked by an art connoisseur to pay attention to the reverse. JANSEN (1979), p. 44.



Fig. 1. Follower of Rogier van der Weyden, *Scenes from the Life of Saint Joseph & Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl (reverse)*, 1450-1475. Antwerp, Our Lady Cathedral, inv. no. 924. © Bruno Vandermeulen – KU Leuven.



Fig. 2. Anonymous painter, *Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl*, end of 15th century. Antwerp, Reynderstraat 18. Photo Author.

When the damaged scene was discovered, there were difficulties with its identification. In the nineteenth century it was believed to be a representation of Saint Ursula with a kneeling donor.³ Jules Destrée (1930) was not able to identify the depiction.⁴ In the 1940s, it were Adolf Janssen and Charles Van Herck who identified the scene as the kneeling Emperor Augustus with the Tiburtine Sibyl, by comparing with it the fifteenth century wall painting in the *Reynderstraat* of Antwerp (Fig. 2).⁵

Although several remarkable studies exist about this iconography, some more context is needed to reveal the importance and role of the Emperor Augustus with the Tiburtine Sibyl iconography in the Low Countries.⁶ Furthermore, the function of the sibyl with the emperor will be discussed in a religious and profane context. And although Hans De Greeve tried to catalogue all the preserved

³ GÉNARD (1859), p. 10-11; ID. (1861), p. 29.

⁴ DESTREE (1930), p. 172.

⁵ JANSSEN / VAN HERCK (1949), p. 95. For the wall paintings, read VICOMTE DE CAIX DE SAINT AYMOUR (1902); BERGMANS / PERSOON (2002).

⁶ See for example Marsaux, Verdier, Blisniewski and Pascucci: MARS AUX (1906); VERDIER (1982); BLISNIEWSKI (2005); PASCUCI (2011).

examples in European collections and churches, his enumeration for Belgium is fragmentary.⁷ His list will be enriched with several new examples in the attachment.

This study will try to understand the function and use of this iconography in the Low Countries, and therefore also contribute to the study of the Antwerp panel.

2. *The Sibyls in a Broader Context*

Since the Ancient time the sibyls take an important place as predictors of the coming of Christ. The word sibyl has a Greek origin and is the English term for Σίβυλλα, meaning prophetess.⁸ It was believed that they were women from the pre-Christian period who gave advice to others. They also had the opportunity to do some prophecies. In the ancient period only women had the feasibility to prophesy and to communicate with the godheads and during this period these oracles received their own names. First there only was one sibyl, called the *Sibylla*. Aristotle didn't describe the *Sibylla* as a person but he rather used this term to enclose several oracles. Afterwards Heraclides Ponticus identified some of them and Varro was the first author to mention ten sibyls, named after their place of origin: the Persian, Libyan, Delphic, Cimmerian, Erythraean, Samian, Cumaean, Hellespontine, Phrygian and the Tiburtine. In 325 the Christian Emperor Constantine, and afterwards Augustine, connected their predictions to the coming of Christ.⁹

Many classical authors paid attention to the prophetesses and the appreciation of these women was increased during the Middle Ages. Virgil, Lactantius, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas were responsible for a contribution to the impact and the role of the sibyls in the society. Step by step the sibyls became more equivalent to the twelve Old Testament prophets, caused by similar ability to prophesy scenes from the life of Christ. Therefore, the number of the predicting women changed at an unknown moment from ten to twelve. The oldest description of these twelve is stated in a mystery play of 1350 where the two new women were named as the European and the Agrippine Sibyl.¹⁰ Although it wasn't always possible for the common people to read the texts about the oracles, they knew these women by the circulation of prints, psalters and book blocks, like the *Biblia Pauperum*.

The sibyls were popular in all sections of the population, over centuries and in and outside the Low Countries. Hand in hand with the visual examples the

⁷ DE GREEVE (2011), p. 60-61.

⁸ DE CLERCQ (1978-1979), p. 105.

⁹ DE GREEVE (2011), p. 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

sibyls also appeared in songs and plays, such as Orlandus Lassus' *Prophetiae Sibyllarum* and in a play of Shakespeare.¹¹

3. *The Representation of the Sibyls*

The representation of the prophetesses evolved at the beginning from one to ten. The oldest known depictions of these ten sibyls exist in an eleventh century manuscript from the abbey of Monte Cassino, illuminated in the third chapter of Hrabanus Maurus's *De uniuerso*.¹² And the oldest known depiction of twelve sibyls was painted in the Palazzo Orsini in Rome in the second quarter of the fifteenth century.¹³ Later on, some other examples were realized like in the cathedral of Siena (1482-1483) and the well-known sibyls on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome by Michelangelo (1508-1512).

For painters, illuminators and printers a source was needed to represent these women. The way of depicting was passed down by the text and illuminations in the *Oracula Sibyllina* (ca. 1465), the books of Filippo de Barbieri (1481) and the *editio princeps* of the Church Father Lactantius (1465).¹⁴ In the first mentioned source, each sitting oracle is placed next to her prediction, with a prophet and an evangelist underneath it. For example, the Erythraean Sibyl thrones on the left side and on the right side the *Annunciation* is depicted, with the prophet Isaiah and the Evangelist Luke underneath. Both men were printed with a banderol in their hand (Isaiah 9, 6 and Luke 2, 6) and are connected to the scene above them.¹⁵ One of the oldest known set of twelve isolated sibyls is printed in the *De Sibillis* of de Barbieri.

As mentioned above, many different sources existed on the prophetesses and each of them had her own traditions. This resulted in different attributes and acts for the oracles.¹⁶ For that reason, the Erythraean prophetess could be identified with a sword, a rose or a lily.¹⁷ It is remarkable to observe a conspicuous interest in the French and the Italian regions for these women, but they were depicted in a different way. In the case of de Barbieri's sibyls they don't have all attributes, in contrast with the French examples, as in the *Heures de Louis de Laval*.¹⁸ As an alternative, the single oracles had a banderole in the Italian sources, which made their identification easier.

¹¹ ALWES (2015), from p. 115 onwards; MALAY (2010).

¹² DE CLERCQ (1979), p. 7-9.

¹³ HELIN (1918); DE CLERCQ (1978-1979), p. 106-108; DE GREEVE (2011), p. 43, 64-65.

¹⁴ DE GREEVE (2011), p. 44.

¹⁵ HEITZ (1903), p. 22-23.

¹⁶ DE GREEVE (2011), p. 24, 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Between 1482, the moment the *editio princeps* of Lactantius and the works of de Barbieri were published, and circa 1550, the depiction of the sibyls flourished.¹⁹

In the Low Countries, the Ghent Altarpiece of the Van Eyck brothers is a well-known example with some depicted sibyls (Fig. 3). The Erythraean and the Cuman Sibyl are painted at the top of the altarpiece, together with prophets Zacharias and Micha, and are visible to the spectator when the altarpiece is closed. According to Griet Steyaert's new idea on the original display of the altarpiece, the sibyls had a more prominent place than the prophets when the worshipper stood in front of the polyptych.²⁰

Furthermore, a copy of the Palazzo Orsini depictions in Rome existed in the abbey of Saint Peter in Ghent but disappeared in time.²¹ And in Bruges Ambrosius Benson painted two sibyls, together with prophets in the first half of the sixteenth century (Antwerp, Royal Museum of Fine Arts), probably made after a lost prototype of Hugo van der Goes.²²

When the identification of portraits was forgotten, some of them were reused in series of sibyls. A painting of the duchess of Burgundy, Isabella of Portugal, painted in the workshop of Rogier van der Weyden (Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum), was changed to a depiction of the Persian Sibyl, by adding *Persica sibylla* in the left corner around 1600.²³ The *I^a* underneath the description refers to the first painting of this group of sibyls. The same recuperation appears for a painting by Hans Memling (Bruges, Sint-Janshospitaal), where the description *Sibylla Sambetha quae / et Persica, an(no) ante / Christ(um): nat(um): 2040* was added afterwards to the portrait of the woman.²⁴ In all likelihood the same can be said by the portrait of the so-called *Aloisia Sabanda as Sibylla Agrippina* (Washington, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections) of the Robert Campin group.²⁵

¹⁹ For a better understanding of the sibyls in art history (focus on Belgium, France and Italy), see DE CLERCQ (1978-1979); ID. (1979); ID. (1980); ID. (1981).

²⁰ STEYAERT (2015). Steyaert's idea is one of the many hypotheses on the original setting of the altarpiece, see DENEFFE / FRANSEN / HENDERIKS (2015).

²¹ DHANENS (2005).

²² DHANENS (1998), p. 92-95. Simon Bening also depicted this scene in a similar way. See also DE CLERCQ (1979), p. 50-52, who refers to the retable of Saluzzo in Brussels where a carved sibyl is present on the central part of the altarpiece.

²³ DE VOS (1999), p. 374-375; CAMPBELL / SZAFRAN (2004).

²⁴ It was probably added by painter Pieter Claeissens de Jonge. DE VOS (1994a), p. 168-169 (cat. no. 36). Lobelle-Caluwé proposed that the description underneath the portrait was added on the same time that Hans Memling finished his work. Memling might have worked together with a scribe, see LOBELLE-CALUWÉ (2009). De Vos also mentions the addition of a sibyl banderol to the portrait of Anne of Cleves in The Puskin State Museum of Fine Arts. DE VOS (1994a), p. 168; DE VOS (1994b), p. 86 (cat. no. 16).

²⁵ Châtelet connects this work from a stylistic point of view to Jacques Daret. He is not convinced that the description on the painting is original. Thürlemann believes that



Fig. 3. Hubert and Jan Van Eyck, Ghetaltarpiece: sibyls, 1432.
Ghent, Saint Bavo Cathedral. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels.

According to the panel painting production in the Low Countries, the twelve predicting women were also popular in block books and engravings, like the set of Lambertus Suavius (1520-1567), Lucas van Leyden (ca. 1530),²⁶ Frans Huys (ca. 1537), Philips Galle (1575) and Crispijn de Passe the Elder (ca. 1600 and 1615).

The Sassetti family commissioned important frescos for their chapel in the Santa Trinita church in Florence, which were painted by Domenico Ghirlandaio in 1482. The ceiling of this chapel is decorated with four sibyls and above, on the exterior wall of the chapel, the Tiburtine Sibyl is painted with Emperor Augustus (Fig. 4).²⁷ This iconography already existed longer in Italy, where it has its origin and it developed independently from the twelve prophetesses. It also became popular in the Low Countries during the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

4. *The Tiburtine Sibyl and Emperor Augustus*²⁸

Augustus is mentioned in the Bible (Luc. 2, 1) on the day of Christ's Birth and since the eleventh century he is painted as an emperor on his throne, like in the *Liber floridus* (ca. 1100, University library Ghent, fol. 138v).²⁹ During the Middle Ages he became famous in context of the prophesy of Jesus by the Tiburtine Sibyl. The origin of this legend goes back to the sixth century.³⁰ The Byzantine

this painting is rather a work of the sixteenth century. CHÂTELET (1996), p. 320 (inv. no. D6); THÜRLEMANN (2002), p. 298 (inv. no. II.7).

²⁶ Doen Pieterz., an important publisher in Amsterdam, commissioned Lucas van Leyden to make these sibyls. Lucas made twelve half-length oracles, together with the *Synagogue* and the *Ecclesia*. MÖLLER (2005), p. 185-188; VELDMAN (2011a); ID. (2011b).

²⁷ DE CLERCQ (1979), p. 17-18. The scene does not depict a Mary with Child in a halo but rather the letter IHS. This comes from Suetonius' *Life of Augustus*. BORSOOK / OFFERHAUS (1981), p. 31.

²⁸ Over the past years I have been trying to collect all the depictions with this iconography. At the moment a list exists of more than hundred different examples. This article will only focus on the highlights and the different iconographical representations from the Low Countries. Unfortunately four interesting examples cannot be discussed in this study, so they will only be mentioned here: a drawing by Jan Gossart in the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett (ALSTEENS [2014], cat. no. 91), a drawing in the Graphische Sammlung of the Städel Museum in Frankfurt am Main (MESSLING [2012], cat. no. 69), a painting in a private collection, made by an artist in the circle of Cornelis Engebrechtsz. (Sotheby's London, July 10, 2008, lot no. 114) and finally a tapestry of Pieter van Edingen in the Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial in Madrid.

²⁹ BOLTEN (1937), col. 1268. The *Liber floridus* was composed by canon Lambertus of the Our Lady church in Saint-Omer. DEROLEZ (2015), p. 122-124; 137-139.

³⁰ For a better understanding of the legend and its iconographic evolution, it was useful to read MARSAX (1906); BOLTEN (1937); RÉAU (1956), p. 412-424; AURENHAMMER (1959), p. 272-275; KIRSCHBAUM (1994), p. 225-227; ERASMO (2015), p. 118-119.



Fig. 4. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl*, 1482. Florence, Santa Trinita, Sassetti chapel. © Sailko.

chronicler John Malalas (ca. 491-578) wrote about two persons to explain the origin of the history of the Santa Maria in Aracoeli in Rome, where the church was built after the vision.³¹ The Souda encyclopedia in the tenth century and the Greek historian Georgius Cedrenus in the eleventh century evoke the figure of a propheticess. In the twelfth century, Godfrey of Viterbo (ca. 1120-ca. 1196) speaks in his *Speculum regum* of a sibyl. In the description of the *Mirabilia urbis Romae* and the *Graphia aureae urbis Romae*, mid-twelfth century manuscripts with the descriptions of the sights of Rome, the Tiburtine Sibyl is mentioned.³²

The Tiburtine pythoness, also known as the *Albunea*, was the only sibyl from the group of twelve whose iconography evolved in an independent way. The legend starts with the Roman Senate rewarding Emperor Augustus. Three men visited Augustus to announce him the news, but he wanted to know if there would be a greater ruler than himself. So he consulted the oracle on the day of Christ's Birth. The sibyl pointed her hand to heaven and spoke out the words

³¹ KNAUER (1970), p. 333; VERDIER (1982), p. 95.

³² GRAF (1882-1883), p. 312-320; ALLART (2008), p. 137; DE GREEVE (2011), p. 51.

Haec est ara coeli (“This is the altar of heaven”).³³ At that moment Mary with her Child appeared in the sky. The prophetess had revealed that Jesus Christ would be greater than Augustus, so the emperor knelt and rendered Him homage. The oldest known depiction of this legend was painted in 1285 in the apse of the Santa Maria in Aracoeli church in Rome, made by Pietro Cavallini.³⁴ It was destroyed in the sixteenth century, but thanks to Giorgio Vasari’s description it is still possible to visualize the original fresco.³⁵ It showed the kneeling emperor, accompanied by the sibyl. He looked up to the center of the fresco, where Mary and her Child were painted in a mandorla.³⁶

Jacobus da Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* and the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* made this theme popular in the Low Countries.³⁷ The common people also knew this representation by the mystery plays, such as the *Mystère d’Octavien et de Sibylle Tiburtine*.³⁸

For many years it was believed that the legend was depicted for the first time in the Low Countries by the Limbourg brothers. In the beginning of the fifteenth century they illuminated the *Belles Heures de Jean de Berry* (New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art) and the *Très Riches Heures de Jean de Berry* (Turin, Museo Civico). Recently Dückers drew the attention to an older example with the same iconography in a manuscript of the Italian illuminator who worked for Jean Duc de Berry as well.³⁹ The illuminator probably introduced the Italian iconography in the Low Countries in a breviary of 1400 (Fig. 5), nowadays in the Royal Library of Brussels (Ms. 11060-61, p. 83). The emperor appears in a small initial across the folio with the big miniature of the angels before the shepherds (p. 82). Thanks to this depiction the Limbourg brothers had probably known this theme and used it in their elaboration of the manuscripts. But both depictions differ from each other. The Limbourg Brothers

³³ De Greeve mentions two quotes of the Tiburtine Sybil. The second is: *Haec est ara primogeniti Filii Dei* (“This is the altar of the first-born Son of God”). See DE GREEVE (2011), p. 51.

³⁴ VERDIER (1982), p. 103.

³⁵ It was destroyed during the renovation of the church in 1564. RÉAU (1956), p. 422-423; LOMBARDO / PASSERELLI (2003), p. 16-22.

³⁶ VAYER (1963); VERDIER (1982), p. 106-111. De Greeve mentions the altar in stone of the Santa Maria in Aracoeli as the oldest example in art history (first quarter of the 12th century), but by the absence of the Tiburtine Sibyl the legend is incomplete. See DE GREEVE (2011), p. 52-53.

³⁷ According to Kramer, the impact of the *Speculum* on the arts was limited. She nuances Mâle’s description on the influence of the *Speculum* in art history. MÂLE (1931); KRAMER (2013), from page 157 onwards.

³⁸ See the article of J. KOOPMANS in this volume. Cf. MÂLE (1931), p. 255. Thanks to a documented joyous entry of Margaret of York in Douai (19 November 1470), it is certain that this iconography was known by the common people, because it was one of the several scenes that were shown during the entry. See LECUPPRE-DESJARDIN (2004), p. 287-291.

³⁹ DÜCKERS (2005), p. 75.



Fig. 5. Italian illuminator, *Heures de Bruxelles: Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl*, ca. 1400. Brussels, Royal Library, ms. 11060-61, p. 83. © KBR, Brussels.

depicted Mary on a half moon, an iconography that originates from the Apocalypse (12, 1).⁴⁰ The texts next to the two miniatures describe what the emperor said when he saw Mary and Jesus in heaven.⁴¹

The Groeningemuseum in Bruges preserves a triptych which is identified as a copy of the *Van Maelbeke* painting that was made by Jan Van Eyck (ca. 1380-1441) for the Saint Martin's church in Ypres.⁴² When the preserved altarpiece is closed, Emperor Augustus with the sibyl is visible. Although scholars⁴³ assumed that this triptych forms the copy of the oldest – and now lost – example of this iconography on panel from the Low Countries, the wings probably

⁴⁰ *And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet.* See HUSBAND (2008), p. 110.

⁴¹ *O unspotted and eternally blessed, O unique and incomparable virgin, Mother of God, O Mary, the most pleasing temple of God and sanctuary of the Holy Spirit, gate of the kingdom of heaven, through whom the whole earth lives following God. From thee, the Son of God, the true, almighty God, made his most sacred mother, taking from thee his most sacred flesh, through whom the world which had been lost was saved. By whose precious blood...* See HUSBAND (2008), p. 110.

⁴² Anonymous master, *Van Maelbeke triptych (copy after Jan Van Eyck)*, 181 × 172 cm (17th century), inv. no. 2007.GRO0001.I-0003.I.

⁴³ For example Mund & Goetghebeur and Allart: MUND / GOETGHEBEUR (2003), p. 296; ALLART (2008), p. 137.

did not belong to the original panel by Van Eyck. They were most likely added later to the central panel with donor Maelbeke.⁴⁴

The legend of the emperor is without doubt associated with the Bladelin altarpiece (Fig. 6) of Rogier van der Weyden (Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie).⁴⁵ The left inner shutter shows the kneeling emperor and the right inner shutter the three kings. Both scenes refer to the nativity, which is painted on the central panel. Van der Weyden's left wing is painted in the way it was written in Jacobus da Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, which took place at noon in a room of the royal palace.⁴⁶ This depiction was copied several times and still exists in many paintings and a drawing.⁴⁷ Master E.S., a German print-maker and active between 1450 and 1470, made a print of the legend in 1466, which was probably based on the panel of van der Weyden.⁴⁸

In several paintings and miniatures, the emperor and the sibyl are accompanied by three spectators. They are the three courtiers who visited Augustus.⁴⁹ Although they are briefly mentioned in the sources about the legend, Mâle had identified these men with the help of the French mystery plays from Rouen.⁵⁰ They are mentioned in the *Mystère de l'Incarnation* and the *Mystère d'Octavien et de la Sibylle* as the seneschal, the provost and the high constable. In other cases two women or more also are part of the legend, as it is painted by the Master of the Magdalen legend (Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts) and the Master of the Tiburtine Sibyl (Frankfurt am Main, Städel Museum). It is not clear who they are, but they might also derive from the theatre and mystery plays of that time.⁵¹

The first depictions of the Vision kept strictly to the minimum, which only consisted of the emperor, the sibyl and the Mary with her Child in a mandorla. Hélène Mund and Nicole Goetghebeur have noticed an evolution in this

⁴⁴ I would like to thank Susan Jones for the interesting discussion in the Groeningemuseum on this triptych. JONES (1995), p. 89; ID. (2006); BORCHERT (2010b).

⁴⁵ DE VOS (1999), p. 242-248.

⁴⁶ ROZE / SAVON (1967), p. 70; DE VOS (1999), p. 242-248.

⁴⁷ For instance: workshop of Rogier van der Weyden, *Annunciation polyptych*, ca. 1460. Oil on panel, 151.8 × 274.3 × 49.5 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, inv. no. 49.109. Another work is preserved in Berlin (KEMPERDICK [2009], p. 344-348) and a third in a private collection. But the wings of the latter triptych probably do not belong to the original central panel (BORCHERT [2007], p. 55-67). A drawing is added in the study of Sonkes, see SONKES (1969), p. 49-51.

⁴⁸ JACOBOWITZ (1976), p. 2-3; HÖFLER (2007), p. 106; BORCHERT (2010a).

⁴⁹ They were mentioned as courtiers in ROUSSEAU (1951), p. 276; De Vos and Rothstein described these figures as senators: DE VOS (1999), p. 224; ROTHSTEIN (2001), p. 38.

⁵⁰ MÂLE (1931), p. 255.

⁵¹ The same idea is proposed by Fransen and Syfer d'Olene: FRANSEN / SYFER D'OLNE (2006), p. 127-143.



Fig. 6. Rogier van der Weyden, *Bladelin triptych*, 1445-1450.
 Berlin, Staatliche Museum zu Berlin. Gemäldegalerie, inv. no. 535.
 © KIK-IRPA, Brussels.

iconography.⁵² They argued that it was enriched around 1445/50 by Rogier van der Weyden for his *Bladelin* altarpiece (Fig. 6). The scene is placed in a room, and the sitting Virgin with her Child appears before the window. Afterwards, around 1477, the theme changed into open air, with a figuration on the inner court of the emperor's palace, as illustrated by the Master of the Tiburtine Sibyl (Frankfurt am Main, Städel Museum).⁵³ In the first quarter of the sixteenth century the iconography finally evolved, in a painting of the Master of the Magdalen legend (Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts), to a depiction in a landscape.⁵⁴ Several other examples could take the edge off Mund's and Goetghebeur's arguments. For example, Master E.S. represented the legend in two different ways. His oldest depiction of the emperor was printed in a landscape and he engraved this iconography before 1455.⁵⁵ The representation in

⁵² MUND / GOETGHEBEUR (2003), p. 296-297.

⁵³ SANDER (1993), p. 67-86; PÉRIER-D'ETEREN (2005), p. 189-192.

⁵⁴ MUND / GOETGHEBEUR (2003), p. 297; FRANSEN / SYFER D'OLNE (2006).

⁵⁵ HÖFLER (2007), p. 296-297 (cat. no. 131-133).

the landscape also existed earlier in the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*⁵⁶ and the example by an anonymous follower of Rogier van der Weyden, which is mentioned as case-study in the introduction, was painted between 1450 and 1475 (Fig. 1).

During the following decades the iconography evolved in its own way. In several cases, such as the stained glass windows of the cathedral of Auch (France), the Tiburtine Sibyl is changed into the Libyan prophetess. This representation originates from the *Oracula Sybillina* where the Libyan Sibyl sits next to the Vision of Augustus, Isaiah and Saint John the Evangelist.⁵⁷ And in El Salvador in Ubeda (Spain), the Tiburtine Sibyl is converted into the Cumean Sibyl. The legend of the emperor was a well-known theme and remained popular on the European continent until the eighteenth century.⁵⁸

5. Function

The legend of the emperor is in many cases connected to the Birth of Christ.⁵⁹ In the *Speculum Humanae Saluationis* the representation of the emperor with the sibyl forms a typological prefiguration to Christ's Birth.⁶⁰ It appears together with the *Dream of the cupbearer of the pharaoh* (Gen. 40, 9-11) and the *Flowering rod of Aaron* (Num. 17, 16-23), like in the manuscript of Jean le Tavernier, nowadays in the University Library of Glasgow.⁶¹ Jan Mostaert also painted this combination on a pillar behind his *Adoration of the Magi* (1515-1520), nowadays in the Rijksmuseum of Amsterdam.⁶²

In many prayer books, book of hours and graduals, the legend is depicted after the Annunciation scene. In the illuminated manuscript by Nicolas Spierinc (The British Museum, Harley Ms. 2943) the recto side of folio 18 consists of the kneeling emperor with the sibyl behind him.⁶³ The scene follows the

⁵⁶ Kammerer noticed a difference in the *Specula* between the legend of Augustus with a German origin and those from the Southern Netherlands. In the latter the emperor kneels and the sibyl stands next to (or behind) the emperor and vice versa. KAMMERER (1974).

⁵⁷ HEITZ (1903), p. 21; DE GREEVE (2011), p. 58-60.

⁵⁸ AURENHAMMER (1959), p. 275; KIRSCHBAUM (1994), p. 227. From the seventeenth century a drawing by Peter Paul Rubens is preserved (Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. RF702) and an eighteenth-century depiction is preserved in the Sèvres' Cité de la céramique where it is depicted on a board (inv. no. MNC).

⁵⁹ In the *Compendium historiae uniuersalis*, ca. 1450 (The Hague, MMW, Ms. 10 A 21, folio 68r) the legend of the *Aracoeli* is exceptionally depicted with the Birth of Christ in one miniature.

⁶⁰ CARDON (1996), p. 176-177.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Jan MOSTAERT, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1515-1520. Oil on panel, 49 × 35 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. SK-671. FILEDT KOK (2008a).

⁶³ VAN DER HOEK (1989).

Annunciation on folio 17 verso and underneath the miniature sits Saint John on Patmos. The saint and the angel refer to a similar occurrence with an appearance of Mary in the sky (Book of Revelation 12, 1). The angel points with two fingers to the sky, to the crowned Mary in the initial. This connection between Augustus and Saint John was also popular for the execution of the panel paintings and the carved altarpieces. It is painted among other works of art by the Master of the Holy Blood in his *Adoration of Mary* triptych in Bruges⁶⁴ and carved out in Adriaen Wesel's altarpiece for the *Illustre Lieve Vrouw Broederschap* of 's Hertogenbosch in 1475.⁶⁵ The same central theme appears in the Aberdeen sculpture (King's College Chapel), deriving from the circle of Arnt Bildesnider. In this case, the apocalyptic virgin is surrounded by four scenes: the emperor with the sibyl, Moses with the burning bush, Ezechiel and the kneeling Gideon.⁶⁶ Jan Provost's painting for the Saint Donation church in Bruges exceptionally represents Mary above the emperor and the sibyl, accompanied by King David.⁶⁷

6. Authority and Power

In the Middle Ages a courtly culture existed with dukes and kings who took interest in antiquity and who compared themselves to important historical heroes, e.g. Charles the Bold (1433-1477) as Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great.⁶⁸ The same idea existed for the historical hero Augustus. The Vision of Augustus could be associated with power, caused by the fact that he was a powerful and great ruler. In the miniatures of the Limbourg brothers the emperor wears the duke's clothing, what suggests that Jean Duc de Berry saw himself as Augustus.⁶⁹ The same concept is present in the painting of Aertgen van Leyden in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp.⁷⁰ Henry of Nassau (1483-1538) is portrayed on the left inner shutter of the altarpiece and behind him stands the sibyl. He had been member of the Golden Fleece since 1505 and was one of the most powerful men of that time.⁷¹ This depiction as Emperor Augustus was also popular outside the Low Countries. For example, in France,

⁶⁴ The triptych is situated in St. Jacob's church. HENDRIKMAN (1998).

⁶⁵ HALSEMA-KUBES / LEMMENS / DE WERD (1980), p. 94; BOLTEN (1937), col. 1273. In the *Stadtpfarrkirche St. Nicolai* in Kalkar a similar example exists, above the sculpted altarpiece, made by Heinrich Douvermann. BLISNIEWSKI (2005), p. 23-24.

⁶⁶ JOPEK (2000).

⁶⁷ NIKULIN (1987), p. 100-107.

⁶⁸ FRANKE (2009). See also STROO (2002), p. 295-315.

⁶⁹ HARBISON (1985), p. 91.

⁷⁰ Inv. no. 977-979. BRUYN (1961), p. 142.

⁷¹ FILEDT KOK (2011), p. 329.

Charles IX (1550-1574) also wanted to be portrayed as this emperor⁷² and the same can be seen in Spain, where Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452-1516), was portrayed on the left folio, just before the Birth of Christ.⁷³

The predecessor of Henry of Nassau was Duke Engelbert II of Nassau (1451-1504) who is painted as a witness of the Vision in the eponymous work of the Master of the Tiburtine Sibyl in Frankfurt am Main.⁷⁴ He stands in the right corner of the painting, together with some members of the University of Leuven (Louvain).⁷⁵ The iconography was also popular in the circles of the high-ranking aristocrats. Jan Mostaert (1474-1552/3), who worked for a while in Mechelen at the court of Margaret of Austria (1480-1530), was commissioned to paint the aristocrats with the story of the emperor in the background.⁷⁶ A similar concept was considered for the painting in the Mayer van den Bergh Museum (Fig. 7), by an anonymous master.⁷⁷ On the reverse a skull was depicted, and it is connected to the missing portrait of a man or a woman, which formed the second wing of the diptych.⁷⁸

The British Library in London preserves one part of an original cartoon for the production of a window by an Antwerp mannerist. The drawing shows the Tiburtine Sibyl with several other women. Van den Brink suggested that this depiction was part of a larger composition which showed the vision of the emperor accompanied by donors.⁷⁹

⁷² It was painted by Antoine Caron and is nowadays preserved in the Musée du Louvre in Paris. In France there already existed an interest for the Roman Empire, a tradition that started with the last Valois kings. The city of Paris was rebuilt and reconstructed as an ancient city and its river, the Seine is compared with the Tiber. See YATES (1951); CAPODIECI (2008).

⁷³ The king is depicted in a missal-breviary (Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, Chigi C.VII.205, fol. 2v) which Ferdinand received as a gift of Giovanni Maria Poderico during his visit to Naples at the beginning of the sixteenth century. FREIBERG (2014), p. 83-84.

⁷⁴ SANDER (1993), p. 69; 74; PÉRIER-D'ETEREN (2005), p. 189-192.

⁷⁵ SNYDER (1960), p. 51; SANDER (1993), p. 73; 79-80.

⁷⁶ *Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* (1984), p. 204; FILEDT KOK (2008b). Two other works of this painter with the emperor and the sibyl in the background are preserved in Copenhagen (Statens Museum for Kunst) and Berlin (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Gemäldegalerie). The first one is a portrait of Jacob Jansz. van der Meer (ca. 1505), the second is a portrait of a woman (ca. 1530).

⁷⁷ MUND / GOETGHEBEUR (2003). In this context a similarity exists with the Marguerite of York's joyous entry in Douai, which happened on 19 November 1470. Two figures, the emperor and the sibyl, were part of the entry, where it also had to prove Marguerite's power and good rulership. LECUPPRE-DESIJARDIN (2004), p. 287-291.

⁷⁸ In the Upton House in Warwickshire (United Kingdom), another panel with the depiction of the emperor and the sibyl is preserved and is attributed to the Master of the Khanenko Adoration, of the circle of Hugo van der Goes. It also formed a diptych, where Augustus and the sibyl formed the right part of the display. MARTENS (1993).

⁷⁹ VAN DEN BRINK (2004-2005), p. 206-208.



Fig. 7. Anonymous Master, *Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl & Skull in a Stone Niche (reverse)*, end 15th century.

Antwerp, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, inv. no. 12. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels.

A last and almost unknown example of this iconography in function of power can be found in the parish church Saint John the Baptist in Siersdorf (Germany). The apse of this church is furnished in late-gothic style and in front of the sculpted, Antwerp altarpiece some works by the Master of Elsloo are present. He sculpted around 1520 the emperor, the Tiburtine Sibyl and Mary with Child that belonged to a rood screen. They were commissioned by the Teutonic order in Siersdorf, the commandry that was part of the bailiwick Alden Biesen (Belgian Limburg).⁸⁰

At the same time the legend was also popular in palaces. Most of the time they were decorated with tapestries. The Musée de Cluny in Paris preserves an example with the legend of the *Aracoeli* on it, which was fabricated in an Antwerp workshop around 1520.⁸¹ Most likely, it had an important and conspicuous place in a room of the palace.⁸²

Most of the time the focus of the iconography lies on the emperor. The series of virtuous women by the Liège master Lambert Lombard must be understood in context of high-ranking women.⁸³ It was made for the Cistercian abbey of

⁸⁰ THEILE (2010) (cat. no. 264); PEEZ (2013).

⁸¹ LEFÈVRE (1910), p. 198; JOUBERT (1987), p. 108-111.

⁸² Another one with the same iconography is preserved in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lille, a tapestry dating from the sixteenth century and probably woven in a Tournai workshop.

⁸³ DENHAENE (1990), p. 122-131.



Fig. 8. Lambert Lombard and workshop, *Series of Virtuous women: Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl*, 1541-1560. Stokrooie, Saint Amandus church. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels.

Herkenrode, the residence of several noble nuns since the twelfth century.⁸⁴ Each canvas presents a scene of a good woman, one of them the Tiburtine Sibyl with the emperor (Fig. 8), which could be interpreted as a visual link with Mary. This painting is nowadays preserved in the Saint Amandus church of Stokrooie.⁸⁵

7. Conclusion

The iconography of the Tiburtine Sibyl with Emperor Augustus had been invented in Italy and had a widespread interest in and around the Low Countries. Most of the time this iconography is connected to the Birth of Christ and

⁸⁴ CEULEMANS (1981), p. 299; OGER (2006); DENHAENE (2006).

⁸⁵ CEULEMANS (1981), p. 296-298. The Szépművészeti Múzeum in Budapest also preserves a drawing of this scene by the same artist.

it is characterized by a depiction of a kneeling Augustus with a sibyl standing next or behind him. The iconography was introduced in the Low Countries most likely by an Italian illuminator, around 1400 and evolved during the following decades. It was known by the common people and it was also popular at the court. The courtiers liked to compare themselves to the emperor, with the exception of the female series for the Cistercian nunnery of Herkenrode, focusing exceptionally on the sibyl. High-ranked men and women also wanted to be depicted with this theme, so it is obvious that the iconography was associated with power and recognition.

The moment that Mary with her Child appears in the sky is always depicted. In the Antwerp cathedral, the painting does not have those figures in the upper corner (Fig. 1). A study of the underdrawing and with radiography proves that these figures were originally sketched in the upper right corner, but were never painted.⁸⁶ Emperor Augustus and the two women on the left do not look up to the right upper corner of the painting, but higher up, out of the painting. The place of Mary and her Child on another panel in the right corner suggest that the original altarpiece consisted of a painted or sculpted retable with a T-shape, which was very popular at that time in Brussels.⁸⁷ In context of this iconographical study it moves forward that the other wing of the original altarpiece depicted the three kings. This combination appears regularly in the Rogier van der Weyden context. Both scenes refer to the Birth of Christ, which was probably depicted on the central panel when the altarpiece was opened.⁸⁸

Although this study gives a glimpse of the importance and the role of this iconography in (art) history, the study of this depiction still asks for more research. But it is clear that Emperor Augustus was famous as the good ruler in the Low Countries during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period.

Attachment

In 2003 a list with the iconography of Emperor Augustus with the sibyl of Tibur in context of the Flemish Primitives was collected by Mund and Goetghebeur.⁸⁹ De Greeve published his catalogue with works of the emperor and the Tiburtine Sibyl in several countries in 2011.⁹⁰ The latter list with Belgian examples is fragmentary and therefore a new, expanded version is added below. It only brings together sculptures, tapestries and paintings on panel and canvas. The

⁸⁶ REYNIERS (2015), p. 83.

⁸⁷ PÉRIER-D'ETEREN (2000), p. 41.

⁸⁸ It was believed that it originally belonged to a Saint Joseph altarpiece. Thanks to several small details on the painting this idea must be abandoned. The representations above the scene with the flowering rod of Saint Joseph refer to Saint Mary's life. See REYNIERS (2015).

⁸⁹ MUND / GOETGHEBEUR (2003), p. 299-300.

⁹⁰ DE GREEVE (2011), p. 60-61.

mentioned manuscripts and drawings were the only examples that are known by the author.

Aarschot

CHURCH OF OUR LADY

- Jan Borchmans, *Choir stalls: Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl* (misericorde), wood, unknown dimensions (1515).⁹¹

Antwerp

THE MAYER VAN DEN BERGH MUSEUM

- Anonymous master, *Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl & Skull in a Stone Niche (reverse)*, oil on panel, 34.5 × 27.5 cm (end 15th century), inv. no. 12 (Fig. 7).⁹²

OUR LADY CATHEDRAL

- Follower of Rogier van der Weyden, *Scenes from the Life of Saint Joseph & Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl (reverse)*, oil on panel, 128 × 104 cm (1460-1475), inv. no. 924 (Fig. 1).⁹³

PATRICIAN 'DE WITTE AREND'

- Anonymous painter, *Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl*, wall painting, unknown dimensions (1480-1500) (Fig. 2).⁹⁴

ROYAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

- International School (Cologne?), *Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl*, oil on panel, 17 × 26 cm (beginning of the 15th century), inv. no. 5143.⁹⁵
- Aertgen van Leyden, *Triptych of Count Henry III of Nassau*, oil on panel, 66 × 219 cm (16th century), inv. no. 977-979.⁹⁶
- Jan Mostaert, *Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl*, oil on panel, 66 × 100 cm (16th century), inv. no. 557.⁹⁷

Bruges

GROENINGEMUSEUM

- Anonymous master, *Van Maelbeke triptych (copy after Jan Van Eyck)*, 181 × 172 cm (17th century), inv. no. 2007.GRO0001.I-0003.I.⁹⁸

⁹¹ CUMPS (1978), p. 200-202; THEUNISSEN (2011), p. 126 and 131.

⁹² MUND / GOETGHEBEUR (2003), p. 289-301.

⁹³ GRIETEN / BUNGENEERS (1996), p. 373-375; REYNIERS (2014); ID. (2015).

⁹⁴ VICOMTE DE CAIX DE SAINT AYMOUR (1902), p. 10-11; BERGMANS / PERSOON (2002), p. 95-96.

⁹⁵ This painting entered the museum in 1997. VANDENBROECK (2014), p. 16 and 18.

⁹⁶ BRUYN (1961), p. 142; *Catalogus schilderkunst oude meesters* (1988), p. 226-227; FILEDT KOK (2011), p. 329.

⁹⁷ *Catalogus schilderkunst oude meesters* (1988), p. 261.

⁹⁸ BORCHERT (2010b), with an expanded bibliography on page 523.

- Follower of Lucas van Leyden, *Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl*, ink on paper, 186 × 178 mm (16th-17th century), inv. no. 0000.GRO4002.III.

CHURCH OF SAINT JACOB

- Master of the Holy Blood, *Tree of Jesse (left wing: Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl)*, oil on panel, 96 × 53 cm (1500-1525).⁹⁹

Brussels

ROYAL LIBRARY, MANUSCRIPT CABINET

- Anonymous miniaturist, *Vision of Augustus* (beginning of 15th century), ms. 11060-61, p. 83 (Fig. 5).
- Anonymous miniaturist, *Speculum humanae salvationis* (1450), ms. 531-539, fol. 395r.
- Antoine de la Sale and an anonymous illuminator, *Traité de morale d'Antoine de la Sale* (1461), ms. 9287-9289, fol. 23. [This depiction is, to my knowledge, unique: on the left the sibyl brings the emperor outside the palace. On the right the emperor kneels on the court pavement.]

ROYAL LIBRARY, PRINT ROOM

- J. N. Vincentio after F. Mazzuoli, *Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl* (16th century), inv. no. S.III 25275.
- Antoine de Trente after F. Mazzuoli, *Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl* (16th century), inv. no. S.II 117600.
- Antoine de Trente after F. Mazzuoli, *Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl* (16th century), inv. no. S.III 25274.

ROYAL MUSEUMS OF ART AND HISTORY

- Brussels workshop, *Glorification of Christ (detail: Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl)*, tapestry, 370 × 468 cm (ca. 1500), inv. no. 3647.¹⁰⁰

ROYAL MUSEUMS OF FINE ARTS

- Workshop of the Master of the Magdalene legend, *Emperor Augustus with the Tiburtine Sibyl*, oil on panel, 113 × 82.3 cm (ca. 1530), inv. no. 8619.¹⁰¹
- Jan Mostaert, *Portrait of Abel of Coulster*, oil on panel, 89.5 × 56 cm (16th century), inv. no. 2935.¹⁰²
- Jan Mostaert, *Portrait of Albrecht Adriaensz. Van Adrichem with Saint Peter*, oil on panel, 79.7 × 37.7 cm (16th century), inv. no. 2583.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ HENDRIKMAN (1998).

¹⁰⁰ CRICK-KUNTZIGER (1956), p. 24-25 (cat. no. 8). Similar tapestries are preserved in New York, Saragossa and Washington. For the contextual study on the tapestry in New York, see SALVATORE CAVALLO (1993), p. 377-412.

¹⁰¹ FRANSEN / SYFER D'OLNE (2006).

¹⁰² *Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* (1984), p. 204.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 204; FILEDT KOK (2008b).

- Brussels workshop, *Crucifixion retable (left wing: Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl)*, oil on paint and polychromed sculptures, 154 × 95.5 × 21.5 cm (1510-1520), inv. no. 8774.¹⁰⁴ [The wings were added later to the altarpiece.]

Liège

MUSÉE DE L'ART WALLON

- Antwerp master (?), *Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl*, oil on panel, 69.5 × 40 cm (beginning of the 16th century?), inv. no. LPD 98.¹⁰⁵

CABINET DES ESTAMPES ET DES DESSINS DE LA VILLE DE LIÈGE

- Anonymous artist, *Arenberg album: Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl*, ink on paper, 18.8 × 15.3 cm (1540), inv. no. N553.

Middelburg

CHURCH OF SAINT PETER AND SAINT PAULUS

- Jan Ricx?, *Copy after the Bladelin triptych of Rogier van der Weyden*, oil on canvas, 107 × 190.5 cm (17th century).¹⁰⁶

Stokrooie (formely Kuringen, Abbey of Herkenrode)

SAINT AMANDUS CHURCH

- Lambert Lombard and workshop, *Series of Virtuous women: Emperor Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl*, oil on canvas, 139 × 169 cm (1541-1560) (Fig. 8).¹⁰⁷

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¹⁰⁵ ALLART (2008), p. 135-138.

¹⁰⁶ DHANENS (1981), p. 46; DE VOS (1999), p. 244-245.

¹⁰⁷ CEULEMANS (1981); OGER (2006); DENHAENE (2006).

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