

False Religion and Hypocrisy in Signorelli's *Antichrist*

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This article discusses the iconography of Luca Signorelli's Sermon and Deeds of the Antichrist (c.1502–3) in the Cappella Nuova at the cathedral of Orvieto. A combined investigation of the Antichrist's subject matter, Signorelli's literary and visual sources, as well as his discarded drawings for the entire fresco decoration of the Cappella Nuova, brings fresh insights to the thematic intentions of the artist and his advisers. Signorelli's entire view of eschatology marked a renewed interest of Italian artists in the apocalyptic sublime. It also signified a revival of the medieval tradition of the Antichrist as the arch-hypocrite, and his reign as an apocalyptic age of hypocrisy. At the same time, the artist's treatment of the subject matter indicates an ambiguous stance toward religious hypocrisy characterized by a suppression of the anti-clerical and millenarian aspects of the Antichrist myth.

THE END OF THE WORLD BY LUCA SIGNORELLI

The closing decades of the fifteenth century were a period of general anxiety in Italy, marked by a revival of fatalistic worldviews and prophetic systems of belief.¹ The approaching of the chiliastic year 1500 also coincided with a deep and multi-faceted crisis that emerged following the French invasion of the Italian peninsula in 1494. In this turbulent period of unceasing conflict and recurrent epidemics, visual

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¹ For the socio-religious climate in Italy during the 1480s and 1490s, see André Chastel, 'L'Antéchrist à la Renaissance', in Enrico Castelli, ed., *L'Umanesimo e il demoniaco nell'arte. Atti del II Congresso Internazionale di Studi Umanistici Roma 1952* (Rome, 1953), 177–86; Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (New York, 1969), 430–40.

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culture and the decorative arts served as expressive vehicles of a pre-occupation with apocalyptic visions of the end of the world, millennial anticipations of a new age and a resurgence of medieval prophecies for the coming of Antichrist.²

The most significant Italian artwork dealing with these concerns was Luca Signorelli's fresco cycle (1499–1504) of the last judgement in the Cappella Nuova (today often known as the San Brizio Chapel) in Orvieto Cathedral, a milestone of visual eschatology and a crowning achievement of Renaissance art. Commissioned by the Opera del Duomo of Orvieto in April 1499, the Cappella Nuova frescoes depict the court of heaven in the vault, and episodes from the end of the world and the last judgement on the walls. Some of the ceiling compartments had already been painted in 1447 by the Dominican friar Fra Angelico (c.1395–1455), with images of biblical prophets and Christ sitting in judgement. The majority of the extant frescoes were executed by the Umbrian painter Luca Signorelli (c.1450–1523), who found the opportunity to demonstrate his expressive power and creative genius, predominantly in his masterful depictions of the anatomy of the human body.³ No artist before him had taken on the challenge of inventing such an immense variety of nude figures, an accomplishment of unprecedented scale and great influence on later artists, most notably the Old Testament ceiling frescoes (1508–12) and the *Last Judgement* (1535–41) by Michelangelo (1475–1564) in the Sistine Chapel.⁴

Signorelli's ceiling paintings in the Cappella Nuova represent angels, apostles, church fathers, Patriarchs, virgins and martyrs, a

² The apocalyptic culture of the day found expression in paintings such as Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), *Mystic Nativity* (c.1500–1); on which, see Rab Hatfield, 'Botticelli's "Mystic Nativity", Savonarola and the Millenium', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 58 (1995), 88–114. One of the most famous eschatological artworks created north of the Alps was Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), *Apocalypse* (1498), a widely diffused series of fifteen woodcuts based on the Book of Revelation.

³ For Signorelli's mastery of the nude, see Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Paola Barocchi and Rosanna Bettarini, 6 vols (Florence, 1966–87), 3: 633 and 640. For his creative genius and inventiveness, exalted by fellow artists and patrons, see Tom Henry, 'Luca de ingegno et spirito pelegrino', in Davide Gasparotto and Serena Magnani, eds, *Matteo di Giovanni e la pala d'altare nel senese e nell'aretino 1450–1500. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Sansepolcro, 9–10 Ottobre 1998* (Sansepolcro, 2002), 175–83.

⁴ On the influence of this work on Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, see Vasari, *Le Vite*, 3: 637.

scheme that had already been devised by Fra Angelico half a century earlier.⁵ The major wall frescoes depict the *Sermon and Deeds of the Antichrist*, the *Signs of the End of the World*, the *Resurrection of the Dead*, the *Crowning of the Elect*, the *Elect Being Called to Paradise*, the *Damned Being Plunged into Hell*, and the *Torments of the Damned*; monumental subjects that complemented the effect of liturgical ceremonies by arousing feelings of awe and terror in the congregation.⁶ This profoundly symbolic cycle of eschatology was not invented by Signorelli alone. According to the minutes of the Opera's board meeting of 25 November 1499, a proposal by Gian Ludovico Benincasa that the decoration in the chapel should be 'advised orally by the venerable masters in theology of this city ... provided that it may not depart from the theme of the Last Judgement' found unanimous approval.⁷ The identity of Signorelli's advisers remains a subject of speculation, but they most likely belonged to the predominant religious order in Orvieto, the Dominicans.⁸

⁵ Fra Angelico had left drawings of the last judgement for the remaining compartments of the south vault. It is generally agreed that the completion of the vault by Signorelli followed his design: see Edwin Hall and Horst Uhr, 'Patrons and Painter in Quest of an Iconographic Program: The Case of the Signorelli Frescoes in Orvieto', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 55 (1992), 35–56, at 39; Jonathan B. Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist: Luca Signorelli's Orvieto Frescoes* (Princeton, NJ, 1995), 16–7. For the importance of Fra Angelico's role in the formation of the chapel's iconographic programme, see Creighton Gilbert, *How Fra Angelico and Signorelli Saw the End of the World* (University Park, PA, 2003), 23–59.

⁶ For the liturgical function and meaning of Signorelli's frescoes in the ritualistic space of the Cappella Nuova, see Sara Nair James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto: Liturgy, Poetry and a Vision of the End-time* (Burlington, VT, 2003).

⁷ The document was first published by Luigi Fumi, *Il Duomo di Orvieto e i suoi restauri* (Rome, 1891), 408 (doc. 158). This report seems to refer to the decoration of the second half of the chapel's ceiling and probably also its walls. For a transcription of this document, see the *Italian Renaissance Document Site*, online at: <<https://irds-project.org/doc/516/441/>>, accessed 15 October 2023. For the translation of the original text used here, see Hall and Uhr, 'The Signorelli Frescoes in Orvieto', 40 n. 19.

⁸ On possible candidates for the role of Signorelli's iconographic adviser, see Tom Henry, *The Life and Art of Luca Signorelli* (New Haven, CT, 2012), 197–8. For a convincing case that the esteemed theologians of Orvieto ('venerabiles magistros sacre pagine huius Civitatis') who reportedly advised Signorelli were largely Dominicans, see James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico*, 48–51, 137–46; Alison Wright, 'Authority and Vision: The Painter's Position in the Cappella Nova at Orvieto', *Renaissance Studies* 21 (2007), 20–43, at 31–2. For the predominance of the Dominican Order in Orvieto and the representation of Dominican friars in Signorelli's *Antichrist*, including the painter Fra Angelico, see Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, 14–6, 18, 56–7.

A different individual must have collaborated with Signorelli on the iconography of the chapel's lower walls. These areas were decorated with naturalistic busts of six celebrated poets, including Dante and Virgil, framed by grotesque ornamental motifs.⁹ Their portraits are surrounded by monochrome roundels with underworld episodes from the works of these authors, such as *Purgatorio* and the *Aeneid*, representing mythological voyages made to Hades by Hercules, Orpheus, Aeneas and Dante. Situated at eye level and intended for close examination, these classical episodes demonstrate a wide imaginative scope and literary power, which in turn indicates the involvement of a learned iconographic adviser.¹⁰

THE INNOVATION OF THE *ANTICHRIST*

The narrative sequence of the Orvieto cycle begins on the north side of the chapel's eastern wall with the *Sermon and Deeds of the Antichrist* (Figure 1), one of the most provocative topics in the history of the Christian faith. The protagonist is the arch-deceiver and false prophet of the medieval tradition, the Antichrist,¹¹ a long-haired man who superficially resembles Christ both in his looks and actions. The central story in the right foreground presents the greatest of hypocrites seducing his audience through preaching. Immediately behind him

⁹ The identity of the other authors remains a subject of speculation. For an iconographic examination of the author portraits and the illustrations of the surrounding *tondi*, see Stanley Meltzoff, *Botticelli, Signorelli and Savonarola: 'Theologia Poetica' and Painting from Boccaccio to Poliziano* (Florence, 1987), 316–41; Rose Marie San Juan, 'The Illustrious Poets in Signorelli's Frescoes for the Cappella Nuova of Orvieto Cathedral', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 52 (1989), 71–84; Dugald McLellan, 'Luca Signorelli's Last Judgement Fresco Cycle at Orvieto: An Interpretation of the Fears and Hopes of the Commune and People of Orvieto at a Time of Reckoning' (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1992), 313–57; Gilbert, *Fra Angelico and Signorelli*, 91–116.

¹⁰ On the question of Signorelli's adviser for the socle decorations with classical episodes and portraits of their authors, see Dugald McLellan, *Antonio Mancinelli ad Orvieto. Maestro comunale, pubblico intellettuale e interprete delle Muse* (Rome, 2014), 33, 61–3.

¹¹ As André Chastel noted, the myth of the Antichrist, rather formless in Christian Scripture, became clearer in the Middle Ages: see Chastel, 'L'Apocalypse en 1500. La fresque de l'Antéchrist à la chapelle Saint-Brice d'Orvieto', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 14 (Mélanges Augustin Renaudet) (1952), 124–40, at 125. For the New Testament's references to false Christs, false prophets and false apostles, see Mark 13: 22; Matt. 7: 15–20; 24: 23–4; 2 Cor. 11: 13–15; 1 John 4: 1; Rev. 19: 20; 20: 10. For specific references to an 'Antichrist', see 1 John 2: 18–22; 4: 3; and 2 John 1: 7.



Figure 1. Luca Signorelli, *Sermon and Deeds of the Antichrist*, c.1502–4, fresco, San Brizio Chapel, Orvieto Cathedral, Orvieto. Image in the Public Domain on Wikimedia Commons, online at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luca_Signorelli_-_Sermon_and_Deeds_of_the_Antichrist_-_WGA21202.jpg>, accessed 21 December 2022.

stands the devil himself, a symbolically left-handed demon,¹² who is literally manipulating the actions of the Antichrist and whispers evil instructions to his ear. The people attending the sermon, one of which is Dante Alighieri, are of different ages, time periods and social classes.¹³ Some of these figures are portraits of famous men of

¹² The Latin word *sinister* originally meant 'left', as it still does, but it soon came to be associated with bad omens and the power of evil, a superstition deriving from ancient Greek methods of north-facing divination, that identified 'east' with 'right' and 'west' with 'left'. It is noteworthy that Signorelli painted the *Elect* on the right-hand side of Christ, that is on the east wall, and the *Damned* on the left-hand side of Christ, on the west wall. The arrangement was apparently anticipated by Fra Angelico's ceiling representation of Christ the Judge.

¹³ With the sole exception of Dante's likeness, the identification of several of these figures with historical personalities such as Alexander the Great, Christopher Columbus and Cesare Borgia has proved problematic: see Tom Henry, 'Review of "The Renaissance

Signorelli's time,¹⁴ an indication of a narrative that is both urgently contemporary and timeless, but also a stern reminder that the Antichrist's preaching could deceive even the most excellent individuals.

In the composition's background, Signorelli depicted a variety of smaller groups representing the actions of the Antichrist and their disastrous consequences: he conducts false miracles in imitation of Christ, such as the pseudo-healing of a sick man (or perhaps the pseudo-resurrection of a dead man) who is seen rising from his bed; with the pretense of justice, he orders the beheading of two virtuous old men, namely the two witnesses of the last days who would be murdered by the beast (Revelation 11: 3–14);¹⁵ his distribution of seductive bribes and gifts spreads corruption and greed, a condition personified by the stereotypical figure of a Jewish moneylender surrounded by avaricious men and women;¹⁶ his hypocritical preaching captivates learned audiences and causes confusion among theologians and churchmen; his wrathful intentions cause outbreaks of violence, especially against those who refuse to worship him; finally, he has ordered the construction of a centrally planned church – conceived by Signorelli in the High Renaissance style – dedicated to his false religion and guarded by violent soldiers, a spectacular, yet structurally disturbing, temple in Jerusalem that creates a purposeful effect of asymmetry.¹⁷ The dramatic ending of the story takes place in the

Antichrist: Luca Signorelli's Orvieto Frescoes" by Jonathan B. Riess', *The Burlington Magazine* 137 (1995), 755–6.

¹⁴ Vasari, *Le Vite*, 3: 637.

¹⁵ Early Christian writers and medieval exegetes identified the two witnesses with the prophets Enoch and Elias. Medieval tradition held that these two prophets would be executed by order of the Antichrist. For the interpretation of Signorelli's scene as the beheading of Enoch and Elias, first made in the eighteenth century, see Hall and Uhr, 'The Signorelli Frescoes in Orvieto', 47 and 47 n. 55.

¹⁶ The prominent foreground figure of a Jewish moneylender or merchant reflects the anti-Judaic rhetoric in fifteenth-century Orvieto, as well as the traditional conception of the Antichrist's Jewish origin or his cooperation with Jews: see Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, 52, 115–21; Ingrid D. Rowland, 'When the Antichrist came to Orvieto', *The New York Review*, 7 May 2010; Debra Higgs Strickland, 'Antichrist and the Jews in Medieval Art and Protestant Propaganda', *Studies in Iconography* 32 (2011), 1–50.

¹⁷ Most theologians of the late fifteenth century, including Girolamo Savonarola, believed that the Antichrist would appear in Jerusalem and persecute the faithful: see Hatfield, 'Savonarola and the Millennium', 103. Emerson and Herzman saw Signorelli's architectural reference as symbolic of the old expectation that the Antichrist

upper lefthand section of the composition: at the peak of his pride, the Antichrist has attempted a pseudo-Ascension into heaven from the Mount of Olives. There, he is confronted by the Archangel Michael who smites him to the ground along with his crushed followers.

CONTEXT, SOURCES AND MEANING

The *Antichrist* has generally been praised as the most singular innovation in the Cappella Nuova, and sometimes also as the central story of the entire cycle.¹⁸ Signorelli's sense of pride in this masterpiece is testified by his inclusion of a full-body self-portrait in the far lefthand corner of the picture. More than an authorship signature, the imposing figure of the dignified, black-clothed painter stands next to the dying and dead bodies of the victims of violence and murdered martyrs. His gaze is fixed directly on the viewer, acting as both an Albertian narrator and a contemporary prophet who visualized the end times with tremendous vividness.¹⁹ The man who stands beside him, dressed as a Dominican monk, is most probably Fra Angelico, the friar who had painted the chapel's vault half a century earlier. By looking and pointing outside the pictorial frame toward the chapel's altar, Fra Angelico leads the spectator's gaze toward the centre of devotion. The faithful presence and testimony of the two artists

would take possession of the Temple of Jerusalem, proclaiming himself to be God: see Richard Kenneth Emmerson and Ronald B. Herzman, 'Antichrist, Simon Magus, and Dante's "Inferno" XIX', *Traditio* 36 (1980), 373–98, at 374. Most authors believe that Signorelli's building is the Temple of Solomon, but some have plausibly noted that this is in fact a temple constructed by the Antichrist: see Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, 167 n. 38.

¹⁸ See Chastel, 'L'Apocalypse en 1500', 124–40; Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, 23–65. However, compare also Kanter who pointed to stylistic and physical evidence suggesting that Signorelli's *Antichrist* was not an integral part of the chapel's decoration, but rather an afterthought or a result of programme modification around 1502–3: Laurence Kanter, 'Review of "The Renaissance Antichrist: Luca Signorelli's Orvieto Frescoes" by Jonathan B. Riess', *Renaissance Quarterly* 50 (1997), 1260–1, at 1260.

¹⁹ According to the fifteenth-century art theorist Leon Battista Alberti, painters should consider adding to their compositions a mediating figure which introduces the painting's story and explains its meaning to the audience: see Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, transl. Cecil Grayson (London, 1991), book 2, 42. Countless pictorial narratives of the Italian Renaissance were based upon this crucial agent, whose telling expression, gaze or gesture was meant to engage the spectator and lead the eye toward the composition's important parts.

thus creates a meaningful contrast with the false doctrines of the Antichrist.²⁰

Signorelli's subject derived largely from the medieval iconography of the Antichrist and the traditional understanding of his life as an outward imitation of Christ's life.²¹ It is therefore all the more surprising that the Orvieto Antichrist was an entirely novel subject with no iconographic precedents or successors in the visual art of Italy.²² Its general meaning can be contextualized within a climate of socio-economic hardship, public health crisis and revived eschatology in late fifteenth-century Orvieto. In addition to its civic history of heresy and strife,²³ the fortress town had been under siege by French troops, who bombarded it in 1497. Its population had also been severely affected by the first known epidemic of syphilis,²⁴ which appeared in Naples in 1495 and spread almost immediately throughout Europe. The completion of a 1,500-year period after the Saviour's birth was further marked by terrifying signs, such as a sublime celestial event witnessed in Gubbio on 29 September 1499 and interpreted by the Orvietan notary and chronicler Tommaso di Silvestro as a monstrous omen and a cause for despair.²⁵

²⁰ The double portrait of Signorelli and Fra Angelico has been seen as a symbolic parallelism to the two witnesses of the Apocalypse (Rev. 11: 3–14), but also as enacting the roles of Dante and Virgil in the *Divina Commedia*: see Dugald McLellan, *Signorelli's Orvieto Frescoes: A Guide to the Cappella Nuova* (Orvieto, 1998), 25; James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico*, 69; Wright, 'Authority and Vision', 34–5.

²¹ Richard Kenneth Emmerson, *Antichrist in the Middle Ages: A Study of Medieval Apocalypticism, Art, and Literature* (Seattle, WA, 1981), 125, 225.

²² Chastel, 'L'Apocalypse en 1500', 126. For European imagery of the Antichrist in illustrated manuscripts and block-books of medieval and Renaissance apocalypticism, see John Barnes, 'Transformations of the Renaissance Iconography of Antichrist', 2 vols (PhD thesis, Birmingham City University, 2008), 2: plates 1–30.

²³ For a connection between the town's legacy of heresy and the iconographic programme of the Cappella Nuova, see Dugald McLellan, 'Tra culto e ruolo civico. Una lettura degli affreschi di Luca Signorelli nel Duomo di Orvieto', *Bollettino dell'Istituto Storico Artistico Orvietano* 50–7 (1994–2001), 347–73.

²⁴ McLellan notes that, in the summer of 1496 alone, 600 people died in Orvieto because of the plague: see Dugald McLellan, 'The Cappella Nuova at Orvieto before Signorelli: Perugino and the Opera del Duomo. A Question of Commitment', *Studi di Storia dell'Arte* 7 (1996), 307–32, at 312 n. 79. The Orvietan notary Tommaso di Silvestro described the severe symptoms of the 'French disease', which he contracted in 1496 and then again in 1498: see Tommaso di Silvestro, 'Diario, 1482–1514', in Luigi Fumi, ed., *Ephemerides Urbevetanae; Rerum Italicarum Scriptores 15/5*, 2 vols (Castello, 1902–20), 2: 1–531, at 88.

²⁵ Di Silvestro, 'Diario', 126. For a translation and discussion of the diarist's entry (7 November 1499), see Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, 9–15.

A subject that has not yet been fully resolved concerns the literary and visual sources used by Signorelli. A common proposal refers to the *Golden Legend* (c.1265), a highly influential late medieval book of hagiographies compiled by the Dominican archbishop, Jacobus de Voragine, which described the disastrous acts of the Antichrist, ending with his annihilation by the Archangel Michael in a manner similar to Signorelli's visual narrative.²⁶ Other scholars have drawn attention to the *Liber chronicarum*,²⁷ a famous illustrated encyclopedic text by the German humanist Hartmann Schedel with accounts of world history, including the reign of the Antichrist and the end of the world. Published in Nuremberg in Latin and German editions in 1493, the chronicle enjoyed wide distribution across Europe, and it is highly likely that Signorelli or some local theologian in Orvieto was aware of its content. The similarities between the Orvieto fresco and the chronicle are indeed compelling: the latter's story of the Antichrist (fol. 262^v), illustrated by Michael Wohlgemut (Figure 2), represents the exalted protagonist in the act of preaching, while the bestial devil behind him is whispering instructions to his ear, a unique pictorial motif repeated by Signorelli a few years later. Furthermore, the chronicle's Antichrist is defeated by the Archangel Michael in an aerial battle which produces a rain of fire and brimstone, another invention that was strikingly similar to the Orvieto scene.

An alternative interpretation was offered by André Chastel, who saw Signorelli's *Antichrist* as a veiled condemnation of the short-lived puritanical regime of Florence (1494–8) under the 'demonic' influence of the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98).²⁸ The key text for comprehending Signorelli's fresco, Chastel argued, is a letter by the humanist Marsilio Ficino addressed to the Roman Curia, with an introduction entitled: 'Apology of Marsilio Ficino on Behalf of the Many Florentines Deceived by the Antichrist, Girolamo of Ferrara,

²⁶ See Giusi Testa, Raffaele Davanzo and Luciano Marchetti, *La Cappella Nova o di San Brizio* (Viterbo, 1997), 22–3; McLellan, *Signorelli's Orvieto Frescoes*, 33; Gilbert, *Fra Angelico and Signorelli*, 130–2.

²⁷ See Pietro Scarpellini, *Luca Signorelli* (Florence, 1964), 41, 133; Emmerson and Herzman, 'Antichrist, Simon Magus, and Dante's "Inferno" XIX', 378; Antonio Paolucci, *Luca Signorelli* (Florence, 1990), 44; and especially Hall and Uhr, 'The Signorelli Frescoes in Orvieto', 46–51.

²⁸ Chastel, 'L'Apocalypse en 1500', 124–40. For a cautious support of Chastel's intriguing hypothesis, see Emmerson and Herzman, 'Antichrist, Simon Magus, and Dante's "Inferno" XIX', 376. For a full endorsement of it, see Meltzoff, *Botticelli, Signorelli and Savonarola*, 287–356.



Figure 2. Michael Wohlgemut, 'Sermon of the Antichrist', in Hartmann Schedel, *Liber chronicarum* (Nuremberg, 1493), fol. 262^v, woodcut, Cambridge University Library, Inc.0.A.7.2[888]. Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

the Greatest of Hypocrites, to the College of the Cardinals'.²⁹ The date of this letter, the authenticity of which is now widely accepted, falls between Savonarola's execution in May 1498 and Ficino's death in early October 1499. Its apologetic content identified the recently-executed Dominican with the long-anticipated Antichrist as a pseudo-prophet whose diabolic enterprise had deceived even the most virtuous Florentines with the power of his hypocrisy.³⁰

The hypothesis that Signorelli was aware of Ficino's letter is apparently purely speculative. One might still argue that the artist was personally motivated to denounce the fraudulent attitude of Savonarola. Both men had enjoyed the patronal support of the Medici family in Florence during the late 1480s. However, whereas Signorelli had reportedly risked his own life for Medici causes,³¹ Savonarola would eventually turn against them. It could be further assumed that the posthumous demonization of Savonarola might have been particularly important to the religious authorities of Orvieto, a town with close ties to the papacy. Savonarola's accusations of clerical corruption and papal hypocrisy had led to his excommunication by Pope Alexander VI (r. 1492–1503) in May 1497. It is therefore not entirely implausible that Signorelli's patrons, ever faithful to Rome, decided to denounce the friar.³² Nonetheless, the problematic aspects

²⁹ 'Apologia Marsilij Ficini pro multis florentinis ab antichristo Hieronimo Ferrariense, hypocritar[um] summo deceptis: ad collegiu[m] Cardinalium': Dallas, Bridwell Library, MS 34; published by Luigi Passerini, 'Apologia de Marsilio Ficino contro Savonarola,' *Giornale storico degli archivi toscani che si pubblica dalla soprintendenza generale agli archivi toscani* 3 (1859), 113–5; and Paul Oscar Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum*, 2 vols (Florence, 1937), 1: cxli; 2: 76–9. For the English translation of the letter's introduction used here, see Jeremy Bentham, ed., *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola* (New Haven, CT, 2006), 355–9.

³⁰ Chastel suggests, interestingly, that Signorelli's otherwise inexplicable placing of Dante among the listeners of the Antichrist may have alluded to the city of Florence and its *letterati* who had been seduced by Savonarola's sermons: see Chastel, 'L'Apocalypse en 1500', 129.

³¹ For a discussion of Signorelli's claim, in an exchange with Michelangelo in 1513, that he 'almost had his head cut off for love of the house of Medici', see Henry, *Luca Signorelli*, 80 n. 83. A document dated 25 September 1512 reports that Signorelli was sent as an ambassador from Cortona to Florence to congratulate the Medici on their return: see the *Italian Renaissance Document Site*, online at: <<https://irds-project.org/doc/691/765/>>, accessed 3 October 2023. For two of Signorelli's paintings commissioned by the Medici family around 1490, see Vasari, *Le Vite*, 3: 636.

³² For counter-arguments to Chastel's hypothesis that Alexander VI retained his hostility to Savonarola, even after the friar's death, see Romeo de Maio, 'Savonarola, Alessandro VI, e il mito dell'Anticristo', *Rivista storica italiana* 82 (1970), 533–59.

of Chastel's hypothesis are many and can only be summarized here in brief. Signorelli's Antichrist neither resembles the known likeness of Savonarola,³³ nor is he dressed in contemporary clerical clothing. More importantly, the notorious case of Savonarola would not only have been a sensitive issue for the primarily Dominican theologians who were consulted on the subject matter of the Cappella Nuova,³⁴ but would also have been irrelevant to the local concerns of the town's politico-ecclesiastical authorities.³⁵

THE MEDIEVAL ANTICHRIST AS THE ARCH-HYPOCRITE

Notwithstanding the general dismissal of Chastel's interpretation, his unintended association of Signorelli's preaching Antichrist with the intellectual perversion of hypocrisy (and its successful effect in current society) deserves exploration. The vivid theatricality of Signorelli's scene was plausibly related by Jonathan Riess to the theatrical tradition of the Antichrist myth, arguing that the painter may have seen or read a mystery play about the Antichrist and the end of the world. We know, for example, of a play about Antichrist that was staged in the cathedral of Orvieto in 1508, although there is no evidence that a similar drama had been staged in the town before the execution of Signorelli's fresco around 1503.³⁶

Riess also saw a similarity between the surviving stage directions of the medieval German drama *Ludus de Antichristo* ('The Play about the Antichrist') and Signorelli's composition, namely in the spatial relation of the spectators to the Temple of Jerusalem.³⁷ Surviving in a single manuscript from the Benedictine monastery of Tegernsee in Bavaria (c.1160),³⁸ the *Ludus de Antichristo* is the earliest

³³ As noted by Hall and Uhr, 'The Signorelli Frescoes in Orvieto', 54 n. 57.

³⁴ See n. 8 above.

³⁵ Most Signorelli scholars have now rejected Chastel's argument, mainly because it overlooked the Orvietan context of Signorelli's commission for the sake of Florentine politics and interests: see Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, 135–8; Hall and Uhr, *Signorelli Frescoes in Orvieto*, 53–4.

³⁶ See Robert Vischer, *Luca Signorelli und die italienische Renaissance* (Leipzig, 1879), 183; Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, 75–81. This mystery play was probably inspired by Signorelli's fresco, rather than the reverse: see *ibid.* 75. Its content was outlined by the Orvietan diarist, Tommaso di Silvestro, in 1508: see Di Silvestro, *Diario*, 372.

³⁷ Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, 78.

³⁸ Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, *Codex latinus monacensis*, 19411.

and the most impressive of the known medieval Antichrist plays. Its protagonist is described as accompanied by 'Hypocrisy' on the right, and 'Heresy' on the left, both escorted by choruses. The false humility of the former enables the Antichrist to win the favour and support of the laity, while the latter helps him to demolish the teaching of the clergy. In a dramatic climax, the Antichrist approaches the throne of the king of Jerusalem, sings to the hypocrites that he was born within the church, and then reveals his true intentions. The hypocrites lay down their outer garments before their master; they depose the king of Jerusalem – who had been deceived by their good appearances – and crown the Antichrist.³⁹

With its demonstration of hypocrisy as an apocalyptic sign of the last days and a key feature of the Antichrist, the *Ludus de Antichristo* essentially revived the long-forgotten Gregorian image of the Antichrist as the absolute master of hypocrisy (*omnium hypocritarum caput*) and the head of an 'ecclesiastic' body of hypocrites (*Moralia* 25.16.34).⁴⁰ The sixth-century portrayal of the Antichrist by Saint Gregory as an exemplar of hypocrisy appears not to be found in the religious thought of fifteenth-century Italy, but some aspects of it would have survived in the theatrical tradition of the Antichrist, not least because of the intrinsic relationship of the theatrical medium to the very notion of hypocrisy.⁴¹ It is surely difficult to tell whether Signorelli or his advisers were aware either of the *Ludus de Antichristo* or of the Gregorian portrayal of the Antichrist as the arch-hypocrite. Yet their iconographic emphasis on theatrical notions of oratorical performance and deception makes it plausible to assume that the reign of the Orvieto Antichrist was conceived as an apocalyptic age of hypocrisy.

³⁹ For an English translation of the play, see Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1979), 119–21. The most recent publication on the topic, including a Latin edition with a new English verse translation, is Kyle A. Thomas and Carol Symes, *The Play about the Antichrist (Ludus de Antichristo)* (Kalamazoo, MI, 2023).

⁴⁰ Frederic Amory, 'Whited Sepulchres: The Semantic History of Hypocrisy to the High Middle Ages', *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 53 (1986), 5–39, at 11, 33–7. For the Antichrist as the master of hypocrisy in Gregory, see Catherine Cubitt's article in this volume.

⁴¹ The original meaning of the Greek word 'hypocrites' (ὑποκριτής) was stage player or actor. The word's literal etymology ('an interpreter from underneath') probably referred to the actor's role-play under a large figurative mask.

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF HYPOCRISY

Regardless of humanistic worldviews and millenarian trends, references to clerical hypocrisy in the art of Signorelli's time are scarce. Essentially, they are confined to illustrations of the *Divina Commedia*, such as Sandro Botticelli's graphic representation of monk-like hypocrites (*Inferno*, Canto XVIII), bowed down by the weight of their leaden cloaks.⁴² Even a prominent critic of ecclesiastical hypocrisy such as Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) was seemingly uninterested or perhaps reluctant to use his art to criticize the church. In one of his polemical writings, Leonardo epitomized the timelessness of clerical hypocrisy with the aphorism: 'Pharisees – that is to say, friars';⁴³ while in another, he compared the clergymen who criticized painters for working on feast days to the Pharisees who had rebuked Jesus and his disciples for healing people and gathering food on the Sabbath.⁴⁴ These anti-clerical sentiments are not visible in Leonardo's artistic production, apart perhaps from his portrait of Judas in the *Last Supper* fresco (c.1495–8), which was allegedly based on the likeness of an importunate prior of Santa Maria della Grazie (Milan).⁴⁵

The rarity of visual references to hypocrisy is surprising, given the rich iconographic tradition found in Italy and other regions during

⁴² Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett, inv. Botticelli, *Inferno* 23; for a reproduction, see online at: <<https://id.smb.museum/object/943079>>, accessed 28 September 2023.

⁴³ 'Farisei: frati santi vol dire': see Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. Jean Paul Richter, 2 vols (New York, 2015), 2: 302 (no. 1209).

⁴⁴ 'Of those who blame him who designs on feast days and investigates the works of God. Among the number of fools there is a certain sect, called hypocrites, who continually endeavour to deceive themselves and others, but others more than themselves. Yet in truth they deceive themselves more than they do others. And they blame painters who, on feast days, study such things as pertain to the true understanding of all the forms of nature's works, and solicitously contrive to acquire an understanding of those forms so far as is possible. But let such censors be still, for this is the way to understand the Creator of so many admirable things, and this is the way to love such a great Inventor. In truth, great love is born of great knowledge of the thing that is loved, and if you do not know it, you can love it little or not at all'. See Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting: Codex Urbinas Latinus 1270*, transl. and annotated by Amos Philip McMahon, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ, 1956), 1: 53 (no. 80).

⁴⁵ See Vasari, *Le Vite*, 4: 26. A physiognomic study of five caricature heads by a follower of Leonardo (after 1490), now in Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia (inv. 227), was based on a drawing by the master. It could be conjectured that two of these heads might mock ecclesiastical vices.

the fourteenth and early fifteenth century.⁴⁶ Two common examples are the French type of a nun with a rosary faking the acts of devotional reading and prayer (*Papelardie*);⁴⁷ and the animal allegory of a fox in priest's garb preaching to a flock of geese, a warning against the rhetorical brilliance of hypocritical preachers seducing naïve flocks.⁴⁸ The Italian tradition of that period relied heavily on Dante's *Inferno*,⁴⁹ particularly on the placement of hypocritical clergymen amongst the fraudulent of the second lowest circle of hell (Canto XXIII).⁵⁰ The depiction of hypocrites in large wall paintings often came with a satire on their sanctimonious religiosity, including invented scenes from the last judgement, narrating the unsuccessful attempts of hypocrite friars to secretly put themselves amongst the good.⁵¹ It therefore seems that Signorelli's eschatology signified the reignited interest of Italian artists in the visualization of nearly every aspect of the apocalyptic sublime: the medieval iconography of the Antichrist, the cruelty of his hypocritical regime leading the world to its end, the satirical horrors of the final judgement and hellish visions of the afterlife.

⁴⁶ Satire of church and state in fifteenth-century Italian frescoes representing hell, including the satire of clerical hypocrisy, was much reduced compared with that found in the fourteenth century: see Eugene Paul Nassar, 'The Iconography of Hell: From the Baptistery Mosaic to the Michelangelo Fresco', *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 111 (1993), 53–105, at 97. Criticism of religious hypocrisy in the visual arts of the fourteenth century was largely inspired by its criticism in the literary arts, most notably in Dante's *Inferno* (Canto XXIII) and Boccaccio's *Decameron* (I.6).

⁴⁷ This type, found in numerous French illuminated manuscripts, originated from the *Roman de la rose* (mid-thirteenth century).

⁴⁸ Deriving from the famous late medieval cycle of Reynard the Fox, this allegory became particularly popular in England where it was utilized by the church to resource propaganda against the preaching of the Lollards, a proto-Protestant movement of the mid-fourteenth century: see Janet Rebold Benton, *Holy Terrors: Gargoyles on Medieval Buildings* (New York, 1997), 83.

⁴⁹ See Nassar, *The Iconography of Hell*, 75, 86, 97. One of the most famous late medieval artists who illustrated the *Divina Commedia* was Andrea Orcagna (c.1308–68), whom Vasari described as an ardent student of Dante: see Vasari, *Le Vite*, 2: 218 ('nell'altra faccia fece l'Inferno, con le bolge, cerchi et altre cose descritte da Dante, del quale fu Andrea studiosissimo').

⁵⁰ The named hypocrites of *Inferno* are the Jewish high priest Caiaphas who condemned Jesus (John 18), and Catalano de' Malavolti and Loderingo degli Andalò, prominent members of a medieval religious group that was sarcastically called the 'Jolly Friars' due to their luxurious lifestyle.

⁵¹ See Vasari, *Le Vite*, 2: 221: 'E poco di sopra, cioè nel mezzo, è un frate ipocrito, che uscito d'una sepoltura si vuole furtivamente mettere fra i buoni, mentre un Angelo lo scuopre e lo spigne [fra i dannati]'.

MILLENNARIAN ASPECTS OF THE ANTICHRIST MYTH

A question that is worth asking is whether Signorelli's portrayal of the Antichrist as a preaching hypocrite came with a subtle criticism of clerical hypocrisy. His revival of the Antichrist tradition arguably emphasized the ever-looming danger of false teachers and heretics in a manner that was not devoid of ambiguity. It has been suggested, for example, that the story's warning signs of doomsday do not refer to contemporary ideas of millenarian theology and church reform.⁵² However, the imposing temple of Signorelli's fresco alludes to the unholy church of the Antichrist, a concept used by millenarian theorists from as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁵³ The contradictions of Signorelli's message are even more visible in his treatment of eschatological prophecy and preaching. Even a critic of Chastel's hypothesis such as Riess stressed that the *Antichrist* functioned as a condemnation of uncontrolled apocalyptic exhortation of contemporary doomsday preachers, who prophesied that the current church was in its last days, and whose false miracles and lies had been emboldened by the greatly influential sermons of Savonarola.⁵⁴ Some reasonable questions are, therefore: how could a religious narrative persuade audiences of the closeness of the end of the world by outrightly denouncing all those who prophesied about it; and how could the artist negotiate the anti-clerical connotations of the Antichrist myth?

The entire notion of an Antichrist presented serious threats to the Church, which was one reason why accounts of Antichrist had been traditionally relegated to the sphere of the legendary and non-orthodox.⁵⁵ The unpopularity of the story amongst ecclesiastical patrons of art in Italy was apparently owed to its malefic and provocative aspects, but

⁵² To quote Jonathan Riess, 'the *Antichrist* can be regarded as a counter-blast on the part of ecclesiastical authorities against those reformers and apocalyptic preachers who in the last years of the fifteenth and in the first years of the sixteenth centuries were finding the Church a chief fount of earthly corruption': Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, 6. For millenarian worldviews and the problem of church reform in Renaissance Italy, see Sharon Leftley, 'The Millennium in Renaissance Italy: A Persecuted Belief?', *Renaissance Studies* 13 (1999), 117–29.

⁵³ See Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, rev. and exp. edn (New York, 1970), 84–5.

⁵⁴ Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, 135–6. Action against doomsday preachers was taken by Pope Leo X (r. 1513–21) in 1516 through a decree of the Fifth Lateran Council (*Supernae majestatis praesidio*) which forbade unauthorized and unreviewed prophecies and preachments.

⁵⁵ Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, 7.

perhaps also to its anti-clerical allusions. The appearance of the Antichrist, even on a fictional or symbolic level, presupposed a time of major crisis and discord for both church and state. The prophesied pseudo-Christ of the New Testament would be 'disguising themselves as apostles of Christ' (2 Corinthians 11: 13), having the appearance and attitude, not of a bestial demon, but of a seeming saint, a Christ-like man who 'takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God' (2 Thessalonians 2: 4).⁵⁶ The Antichrist would inevitably appear within the Church, in the form of heresy, as a wolf in sheep's clothing, which explains, for example, why the *Liber chronicarum*, which, as discussed above, was the most likely source for Signorelli's fresco, depicted the Antichrist in contemporary clerical clothing (a choice not followed by Signorelli).

An answer to the question of whether or not Signorelli's narrative came with millenarian hints could be found in the assembly of debating friars of different orders, who are seen standing right behind the Antichrist and the devil. For some commentators, these learned clergymen stand as the sole pillar of faith and resistance against the evil one and his heresy,⁵⁷ whereas others have read them as disputing, and confused by, or converted to, his false teachings.⁵⁸ Apart from a white-clothed friar who is pointing toward the heavens, the rest of the group engages in futile disputes or consults the scriptures. These signs may well indicate confusion and discord within the Church of God, typical symptoms of the age of the Antichrist. However, this particular assembly may have been invented by Signorelli at a later stage in the design, in order to replace an initial group of debating demons who are inspecting a book, as has been recently proposed.⁵⁹ The latter construct has survived in a magnificent black-chalk drawing by Signorelli (c.1500–3), now in the Morgan Library and Museum

⁵⁶ Translation of both passages is taken from the ESV.

⁵⁷ See Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, 55–6; Wright, 'Authority and Vision', 31. A similar explanation is that these men are experts on the Antichrist, calculating the end of the world, warning for its signs and consulting the scriptures: see Raffaele Davanzo, *La Capella di San Brizio in Orvieto. Visita ai contenuti pittorici, storici e letterari* (Foligno, 2021), 86.

⁵⁸ See Hall and Uhr, 'The Signorelli Frescoes in Orvieto', 49; McLellan, *Signorelli's Orvieto Frescoes*, 36; Rhoda Eitel-Porter, Catalogue entry for Signorelli's 'Four Demons Inspecting a Book', in eadem and John Marciari, eds, *Italian Renaissance Drawings at the Morgan Library and Museum* (New York, 2019), 131–3 (no. 23).

⁵⁹ See Eitel-Porter, 'Four Demons Inspecting a Book', 131–3 (no. 23).

(Figure 5),⁶⁰ the enigmatic purpose of which deserves elaboration. Indeed, the entire graphic production of Signorelli for the Cappella Nuova frescoes requires close study in the attempt to shed light on the artist's original intentions for the *Antichrist*.

INVENTION AND DESIGN – THE INFLUENCES OF DANTE

The *Antichrist*'s novelty differentiates it from every other narrative in the Cappella Nuova, apart perhaps from the equally innovative *End of the World*. Despite being the first episode in chronological order of the events of the Apocalypse, technical and stylistic evidence show that the *Antichrist* was executed in the later stages of decoration (c.1503),⁶¹ possibly after thematic modifications. The surviving contracts for the overall commission clarify that the iconography was developed with theological advisers within the specific context of the last judgement;⁶² unusually restrictive terms which suggest that Signorelli may have sought leeway for originality from the outset of his project. His artistic profile and previous experience with complex iconographies reveal, indeed, a highly inventive draftsman and painter who would not have unquestionably complied with iconographic prescriptions.⁶³ The ambitious nature of his project would have inspired him to try out novel ideas and explore different solutions, at least on drawing paper. Besides, for such large-scale narrative paintings there was plenty of creative space for all the agents involved (patrons, advisers and artist), although the degree of dialogue and flexibility allowed by the commissioners is not easy to assess.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ See *ibid.* See also New York, Morgan Library and Museum, inv. 1965.15, black chalk on paper, 35.5 x 28.4 cm; for a reproduction, see online at: <<https://www.themorgan.org/drawings/item/142689>>, accessed 22 February 2023.

⁶¹ Kanter, 'Review of "The Renaissance Antichrist"', 1260.

⁶² See nn. 7 and 8 above. Compare also Hall and Uhr, 'The Signorelli Frescoes in Orvieto', 39–47.

⁶³ One of the Orvieto contracts (27 April 1500) referred to Signorelli as 'ingenioso pictori magistro Luce Egidii de Cortonio': see the *Italian Renaissance Document Site*, online at: <<https://irds-project.org/doc/518/446/>>, accessed 15 February 2023. In his eulogy of the greatest painters of his time, Giovanni Santi (c.1440–94), a court painter in Urbino and the father of Raphael (1483–1520), praised Signorelli as an extraordinarily inventive talent and an unusual intellect: see Henry, 'Luca de ingegno', 175–6. For the artist's creative talents and literary interests, see *ibid.* 175–83.

⁶⁴ For a discussion of the artist's level of initiative and participation in the formation of the iconographic programme, see Henry, *Luca Signorelli*, 197–8.

Signorelli's primary model of inspiration was the *Divina Commedia*.⁶⁵ His study of Dante's masterpiece is attested by the eleven episodes from *Purgatorio* (Cantos I–XI) painted on the chapel's lower walls; by the depiction of the damned entering hell (*Antinferno*, Canto III) on the altar wall;⁶⁶ as well as by the two portraits of Dante in the socle area and in the *Antichrist*. Signorelli's entire view of eschatology was heavily inspired by Dante: both produced a universal yet deeply personal vision of the contemporary world and the eternal afterlife. It has even been suggested that the aims and methods of the two artists are so analogous that 'a knowledge of the *Commedia* helps one to understand Signorelli's frescoes better ... [and] an understanding of the frescoes can also help us to understand the *Commedia*, even though the painter worked a century and a half after the poet'.⁶⁷

A crucial aspect of Dante's worldview was the sharp distinction between true faith and institutional religion, for which reason the simoniac popes of his time, along with countless sinful cardinals and bishops, were condemned to the eternal punishments of hell. While this anti-clerical aspect of the *Commedia* is not observed in Signorelli's frescoes, a study of his extant drawings indicates that some of his boldest ideas remained unexecuted, perhaps owing to his patrons' disapproval. Among his surviving studies on paper, about ten have been related to the last judgement cycle, none of which is a compositional drawing.⁶⁸ Of these, only two correspond clearly to executed figures, namely the avaricious moneylender in

⁶⁵ See Adolfo Venturi, *Luca Signorelli interprete di Dante* (Florence, 1922); Leopold Dussler, *Signorelli, des Meisters Gemälde* (Stuttgart, 1927), xxxii–xxxvii; Scarpellini, *Luca Signorelli*, 40–5; Enzo Carli, *Il Duomo di Orvieto* (Rome, 1965), 106–11; Corrado Gizzi, ed., *Signorelli e Dante* (Milan, 1991); James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico*, 91–105, 141–4; Silvia Maddalo, 'Poesia in Figura. Dante e Luca Signorelli', in Gaetano Platania, ed., "*Pot Purri*". *Studi in onore di Silvana Ferreri* (Viterbo, 2016), 337–52.

⁶⁶ Signorelli's pictorial source for the *Damned Being Plunged into Hell* may have been the illustration of the same canto by Nardo di Cione (active c.1343–66 in Florence) in the Strozzi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence: see Nassar, 'The Iconography of Hell', 75.

⁶⁷ Emmerson and Herzman, 'Antichrist, Simon Magus, and Dante's "Inferno" XIX', 373.

⁶⁸ For studies of Signorelli's last judgement drawings, see Andrew Martindale, 'Luca Signorelli and the Drawings Connected with the Orvieto Frescoes', *The Burlington Magazine* 103 (1961), 216–20; McLellan, 'Signorelli's Last Judgement', 194–228; Claire van Cleave, 'I disegni preparatori', in Giusi Testa, ed., *La Cappella Nova o di San Brizio nel Duomo di Orvieto* (Milan, 1996), 241–51.

the foreground of the *Antichrist*,⁶⁹ and a demon throttling a nude man in the *Torments of the Damned*.⁷⁰ A couple of studies are seemingly related to the monochrome roundels, and most of the others represent helpless nude men and women who are being captured, carried or beaten by demons. Judging from the content of these stories, including their fictive illumination from the left side, they were intended for the *Torments of the Damned*.⁷¹ The absence of drawings connected to the actual paintings is due not only to an accident of survival, but also to the experimental character of a design process that was remarkably fluid and lengthy. As an absolute master in the anatomical design of the human body, Signorelli would have prepared hundreds of drawings, trying out and eventually discarding numerous ideas before reaching successful solutions for the vigorous body postures and actions of his figures.

DISCARDED NOVELTIES

One of the most captivating drawings relating to the Orvieto cycle represents a scene from Dante's *Inferno* (Cantos XXXII.124–39; XXXIII.1–90): in the second region of the lowest circle of hell – the icy Antenora – Dante and Virgil encounter two wicked men in the circle of traitors: Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri (Figure 3).⁷² Ugolino, the less evil of these two men is narrating his

⁶⁹ Paris, Louvre Museum, Département des arts graphiques, inv. 1796, black and red chalk, heightened with white, pricked for transfer to square paper, 46.5 x 25.5 cm; for a reproduction, see online at: <<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl020002502>>, accessed 15 February 2023.

⁷⁰ London, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, inv. 1895,0915.601, brush drawing in brown ink, over black chalk, 35.7 x 23.3 cm; for a reproduction, see online at: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1895-0915-601>, accessed 14 November 2023. This drawing is a faithful copy after a Signorelli drawing for the *Torments of the Damned*.

⁷¹ The locations of the drawings are: British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, inv. 1946,0713.10 (see online at: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1946-0713-10>, accessed 22 February 2023); Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, inv. 1246 E (see online at: <<https://euploos.uffizi.it/scheda-catalogo.php?invn=1246+E>>, accessed 15 February 2023); and Louvre Museum, Département des arts graphiques, inv. 1801r (see online at: <<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl020002507>>, accessed 22 February 2023).

⁷² British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, inv. 1885,0509.41, black chalk, 31.2 x 25.6 cm; for a reproduction, see online at: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1885-0509-41>, accessed 15 February 2023. For a discussion of



Figure 3. Luca Signorelli, *The Encounter of Dante and Virgil with Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri*, c.1500–3, drawing, black chalk on paper, 31.2 x 25.6 cm, British Museum, London, Department of Prints and Drawings, inv. 1885,0509.41. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum, London.

betrayal by the archbishop of Pisa, who had him and his innocent children imprisoned and starved to death. While narrating, Ugolino is holding down Ruggieri by the neck and is about to

this drawing, see Arthur E. Popham and Philip Pouncey, *Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum: The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, 2 vols (London, 1950), 1: 149–50.

continue gnawing his already deformed skull. The latter, whose hands are tied behind his back, is silently enduring the horrific punishment of being cannibalized, one of the most disturbing scenes in the entire *Inferno*.⁷³ The particular subject and circular format of this composition leave no doubt that it was intended for the decoration of the Cappella Nuova's lower walls with monochrome roundels. Its infernal subject and fictive illumination from the left side further indicate that it was intended for the socle zone beneath the *Torments of the Damned* (Figure 4).⁷⁴ For reasons which are not clear, the scene was discarded. A possible justification for this decision is that the infernal punishment of a highly placed cleric may have been judged by Signorelli's advisers or patrons as an inappropriate image for worshippers.⁷⁵ An entire series from *Inferno* may actually have been planned at an early stage, but later abandoned due to its controversial character.⁷⁶ Two possible relics of this hypothetical programme have been traced to below the altar wall's *Antinferno*: the partial figure of an avaricious sinner lying on the ground and biting his hand, revealed during the restoration of the altar wall's pictures in the mid-1990s, may have been inspired by the *Inferno*'s region of Cain; and a rectangular episode with the scourging of women and the flaying of men by demons might be a variation on two different stories from the *Inferno*, the punishment of lust (Canto XVIII) and politico-ecclesiastical discord (Canto XXVIII), respectively.⁷⁷

⁷³ Ugolino, who is the more sympathetic sinner, appeals to Dante for judging which of the two is the greatest offender. The narrator is not moved since the count had been involved in the remorseless slaying of Gano degli Scornigiani: see *Purgatorio*, Canto VI.18.

⁷⁴ The possibility that this episode was originally painted in the socle zone of the altar wall, but was either destroyed or concealed by the insertion of a late Baroque altar created by Bernardino Cametti (c.1712–15) is unlikely, because the drawn scene is illuminated from the left side. All monochromes in the altar wall, as well as the monochrome episodes from *Purgatorio*, are lit from the right, therefore the *Inferno* drawing almost certainly belonged to a set of unexecuted stories that were planned to be placed beneath the *Torments of the Damned*.

⁷⁵ An alternative proposal by Dugald McLellan is that given the history of internecine strife in Orvieto, an episode highlighting the evil of treachery against one's own country or faction may have been a subject too sensitive for Signorelli's patrons: see McLellan, 'Signorelli's Last Judgement', 211 n. 71.

⁷⁶ See Laurence Kanter, 'The Late Works of Luca Signorelli and His Followers, 1498–1559' (PhD thesis, New York University, 1989), 39–40; McLellan, 'Signorelli's Last Judgement', 210–11.

⁷⁷ See Meltzoff, *Signorelli and Savonarola*, 334–6; for a reproduction, see Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, figure 60.



Figure 4. Luca Signorelli, *Torments of the Damned*, c.1500–3, fresco, San Brizio Chapel, Orvieto Cathedral, Orvieto. Image in the Public Domain on Wikimedia Commons, online at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luca_Signorelli_-_The_Damned_-_WGA21220.jpg>, accessed 21 December 2022.

Another discarded invention, and one of the most impressive drawings of Signorelli's entire graphic oeuvre, is the previously mentioned study of four bat-winged demons acting as learned scholars (Figure 5).⁷⁸ The demon with the largest horns on the right is holding up an open book in the manner of prophesying or preaching a heretical doctrine. The other three are viewing the book's content, and one of them, the farthest, makes use of pince-nez spectacles, an ingenious mocking of false erudition, or false prophecy and heresy. Art historians have generally agreed that this drawing was intended for

⁷⁸ See n. 60 above.



Figure 5. Luca Signorelli, *Four Demons Inspecting a Book*, c.1500–3, drawing, black chalk on paper, 35.5 x 28.4 cm, The Morgan Library and Museum, New York, inv. 1965.15. Photographic credit: The Morgan Library and Museum, New York.

the Orvieto cycle; however, no consensus has been reached about its purpose and meaning.

A close investigation of the chapel's paintings shows that the western frescoes receive fictive light from the left, and the eastern frescoes from the right: their notional sources of illumination were therefore the southern windows behind and above the altar. This pattern of painted light had a double function: it reflected the direction of real sunlight coming inside the chapel, but it also symbolized the spiritual light of divine grace radiating, as it were, from the altar. Given

that the Morgan drawing is lit from the right, it must have been associated either with the *Antichrist*, the *Signs of the End of the World*, the *Crowning of the Elect* or the monochrome roundels in the dados. The *Crowning* can be safely excluded on thematic grounds, while the idea for an abandoned monochrome is highly unlikely because of the drawing's ambitious scale and content.⁷⁹ The attitudes and postures of the four demons resemble some of the prophesying figures in the right foreground of the *Signs of the End of the World* (Figure 6) as some authors have already proposed;⁸⁰ although the former's pseudo-scholarly subject has little to do with the latter's scenes of physical disaster and chaos.

On balance, the Morgan study seems to fit in better with the *Sermon and Deeds of the Antichrist* in its early stages of design, due to their common emphasis on hypocritical preaching, devilish sophistry, and what the *Golden Legend* described as 'the Antichrist's false explanation of the Scriptures'.⁸¹ In any event, the crucial question is why an invention of such skill and wit was eventually abandoned? To assume that Signorelli merely experimented with this idea without intending to use it would unconvincingly relegate a sheet that demonstrates all the artist's virtues at once into a purposeless study. In fact, the mastery of its black-chalk technique, the volume of its figures, and the specificity of its narrative, point to a carefully planned thought that was meant to convey a certain message related to the pretensions of devilish heretics and false prophets. A possible explanation for its omission is that the scene came under scrutiny by Signorelli's advisers who eventually disapproved of it. The sarcastic conception of demons acting as learned scholars (or theologians) could have been perceived as reminiscent of millenarian accounts and satires of demonic clergymen acting as the devil's instruments. The revival of the millenarian movement during the last decades of

⁷⁹ McLellan rightly noted that the Morgan drawing cannot have been intended for the socle zone, since it lacks both the violent action of the roundel episodes and the figures of Dante and Virgil. However, the author's connection of the study to the *Torments of the Damned* overlooked the latter's fictive illumination from the left side: see McLellan, 'Signorelli's Last Judgement', 215 n. 81.

⁸⁰ See Cara D. Denison and Helen B. Mules, eds, *European Drawings 1375–1825* (New York, 1981), no. 4; Van Cleave, 'I disegni preparatori', 249–50.

⁸¹ It is perhaps worth noting that the opening scene of the previously mentioned play about Antichrist in Orvieto (1508) involved twelve naked devils – an antithesis to the twelve apostles – entering to worship the Antichrist: see Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist*, 76. See n. 36 above.



Figure 6. Luca Signorelli, *Signs of the End of the World*, c.1502–4, fresco, San Brizio Chapel, Orvieto Cathedral, Orvieto. Image in the Public Domain on Wikimedia Commons, online at: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Luca_signorelli,_cappella_di_san_brizio,_apocalisse_01.jpg>, accessed 21 December 2022.

the fifteenth century had come with the revived conception of corrupt clergy as a demonic, bestial fraternity that belonged to the hordes of the Antichrist.⁸² The Orvietan authorities, ever faithful to the papacy,

⁸² For the millenarian movement in Savonarola's Florence, see Donald Weinstein, 'Savonarola, Florence, and the Millenarian Tradition', *ChH* 27 (1958), 291–305. The demonization of the clergy was a commonplace in millenarian thought. To quote Norman Cohn: 'Martin Luther was not (as is often supposed) the first to hit upon the idea that the Antichrist who sets up his throne in the Temple can be no other than the Pope at Rome and that the Church of Rome is therefore the Church of Satan. Amongst the eschatologically minded in the later Middle Ages the idea was already a commonplace. Even such a champion of the Church as St Bernard could come to believe, in his tense expectation of the final drama, that many of the clergy belonged to the hosts of Antichrist ... every millenarian movement was in fact almost compelled by the situation in which it found itself to see the clergy as a demonic fraternity ... the clergy as the Beast of the Apocalypse: what image could be more convincing to enthusiastic millenarians in whose eyes the life of the clergy was indeed nothing but bestiality, the *vita animalis*, an existence utterly given over to the World and the Flesh?' See Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 80–4.

may have exerted tight control over Signorelli's most ambiguous inventions.⁸³ Hence, instead of the four naked demons, the less controversial group of disputing theologians with books was eventually depicted right behind the devil, in order to express the confusion in ecclesiastic circles caused by the discourses of the Antichrist.

In conclusion, the available evidence regarding the execution of the Cappella Nuova cycle points toward a prolonged process of design characterized by stimulating oral discussions and programme modifications. The commission of such an artistically promising, yet controversial, project resulted in astonishing novelties, but perhaps also in abandonments of potentially offensive ideas. The idea that Signorelli's cycle of the last judgement may have initially included millenarian hints cannot be argued with certainty, not least because it would project post-Reformation views on to an artist of the late Quattrocento. Yet the discarding of Signorelli's controversial inventions, the overall absence of episodes from the *Inferno*, as well as the suppression of anti-clerical aspects of both the *Commedia* of Dante and the Antichrist myth, indicate a politically correct iconographic approach and reassurance to contemporary viewers that the church and its clergy could not be blamed for the socio-political decay and hypocrisy of the last days.

⁸³ Some of the harshest critics of bold artistic inventions in the Italian Renaissance were Observant Dominicans: see Alexander Nagel, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* (Chicago, IL, 2011), 23 and 290 n. 35.