Visual Reconciliations of Concordia as Ancient Egypt Enters the Vatican

J. Brianne Sharpe

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VISUAL RECONCILIATIONS OF CONCORDIA AS ANCIENT EGYPT ENTERS THE VATICAN

by

J. BRIANNE SHARPE

Under the Direction of John R. Decker, PhD

ABSTRACT

The papacies of Julius II and Leo X witnessed the continuing efforts of philosophers struggling toward the concept of *prisca theologia*, or "ancient theology," as well as its implications for *concordia*, or the search for a reconciliation between non-Christian, pagan wisdom and the orthodox beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church. This thesis will explore the Vatican's relationship with some ancient Egyptian and Egyptianizing artifacts and motifs acquired under Popes Julius II and Leo X and the use of these objects in terms of the conceptual formulation of the *prisca theologia* and *concordia*. Specifically, I am interested in how these popes used material culture to further understand and propagate complex theological concepts. Beyond simply acquiring such objects, their physical positioning and arrangement within
specific spaces and in proximity to other objects make possible nuanced dialogs between the objects themselves, the spaces they occupy, and their intended viewership.

INDEX WORDS: Prisca theologia, Concordia, Pope Leo X, Pope Julius II, Egypt, Hermeticism
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J. BRIANNE SHARPE

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by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Paula Sims, who instilled in me the greatest gifts and tools that I can have in this life: confidence and freedom in my own voice and expectations of more. Even if you “went too far” with me, let it be comforting to both of us knowing that my life will be better by having my own voice and with the unbounded expectations we have for what is ahead of me.
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And to my best friend, my Little Tiny, Lauren Browning: Words cannot express how thankful I am to have taken this journey with you and how excited I am knowing that our real journey has just begun.

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INTRODUCTION

During the late Quattrocento and early Cinquecento, Italian humanists scoured antique sources in an effort to understand more fully religion, the fine arts, philosophy, astronomy, and so on. These ancient sources included Egyptian and other pagan texts, as well as ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and Egyptianizing hieroglyphs from Graeco-Roman Egypt. Intellectuals and religious figures alike worked to reconcile these Egyptian sources with the concept of *prisca theologia*, or the "ancient theology" of pre-Judeo-Christian revelations that came before Abraham, Moses, and those who followed. The *prisca theologia* carried implications in the search for *concordia*, or the search for a reconciliation between non-Christian, pagan wisdom and what the Roman Catholic Church deemed orthodox Christianity. Scholars and theologians saw this blending as a necessary step in understanding divine truth. The papacies of Julius II (r. 1503-1513) and Leo X (r. 1513-1521) facilitated the efforts of humanists and theologians continuing with this exploratory tradition. The popes acquired Egyptian and Egyptianizing artifacts and commissioned works with such motifs for the Vatican, the seat of Western Christianity. Scholarship regarding Julius II and Leo X already addresses and explores the political and social benefits and motives of these acquisitions. In my thesis, I will explore the Vatican's relationship with ancient Egyptian and Egyptianizing artifacts and motifs, in particular

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the so-called Vatican Obelisk and Dying Cleopatra, as well as some of the imagery in the Vatican Palace. Specifically, I will explore the use of these objects and ideas in terms of the conceptual formulation of the *prisca theologia* and *concordia*. I am interested in exploring how Pope Julius II and Pope Leo X used material culture to further understand and propagate these complex theological concepts. Beyond simply acquiring such objects, their physical positioning and arrangement within specific spaces and in proximity to other objects (pagan and Christian alike) make possible nuanced dialogues between the objects themselves, the spaces they occupy, and their intended audiences/viewership.
2 EGYPT ENTERS THE VATICAN

Upon taking up the papal crown, Julius II commenced with grand renovation projects for the Vatican Palace, Saint Peter’s Basilica, and the city of Rome. Among these projects was a reconsideration of a project that was initially proposed by Pope Nicholas V (r. 1447-1455): the moving of what is now known as the Vatican Obelisk to stand in front of Saint Peter’s Basilica (Figure 1). The obelisk’s origins are believed to date to the reign of Cleopatra VII (70-30 BCE) when it was erected as a tribute to Julius Caesar in Alexandria. After several successive appropriations and re-appropriations by Roman emperors—which included the monolithic (83 feet) object’s relocation to Rome—the obelisk came to stand at what is now the site venerated for the presumed burial of Saint Peter himself. As scholars have observed, the obelisk likely survived intact because it came to represent a marker for where the saint was martyred and, more importantly, as an object believed to be contemporary with and in proximity to the saint’s crucifixion.

Julius assigned the project of moving the obelisk to the architect Donato Bramante (1444-1514). Bramante, however, appears to have been reluctant to take on the task of moving the weighty and very large object, and as a result he proposed moving the tomb of Saint Peter, which would change the position of the basilica’s facade and axis to accommodate the position of the obelisk. Moving the tomb from the crossing of the basilica—its sacred and venerated position—would be paramount to sacrilege. Giles of Viterbo (1472-1532) commented on the dispute between Bramante and Julius regarding the so-called Vatican Obelisk and the suggested moving of Saint Peter's tomb. Giles informs us that Julius rejected Bramante's proposal because of its

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3 Curran, et. al., Obelisk: A History, 36.
4 Curran, The Egyptian Renaissance, 168.
sacrilegious implications. Brian Curran describes Bramante's proposal as "sycophantic," suggesting that the architect intended the reorientation of Saint Peter's Basilica with what was understood to be the obelisk of Julius Caesar in order to flatter Julius II's suspected goal of positioning himself as the second Julius Caesar. Curran argues that Julius II "could be receptive to Egyptianizing allusions only when they suited his own taste and agenda." This claim nuances E. H. Gombrich’s assertion that Julius II had an aversion to anything related to Egypt because it reminded him of his rival, Pope Alexander VI (r. 1431-1503), who seemingly favored Egyptianizing motifs.

In his 1951 article “Hypnerotomachiana,” Gombrich set the general tone for much of the subsequent scholarship regarding Julius's relationship with Egyptian and Egyptianizing artifacts and motifs. This, along with the common understandings of Julius's political and propagandistic motivations, seem to have stopped short of the exploration of a likely layering of motivations on Julius II's part when it came to acquiring or commissioning objects and public projects. Taken together, Curran’s and Gombrich’s assertions present a conflicted picture that suggest that Julius

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5 Curran, The Egyptian Renaissance, 168; O’Malley, Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform, 125.
6 Curran, The Egyptian Renaissance, 168; E. H. Gombrich, “Hypnerotomachiana,” Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 14, no. 1/2 (1951): 119-125. The political advantages for Julius II to project himself as the next Julius Caesar has been widely explored. Scholars have identified what appears to have been several of Julius's strategies for positioning himself as the next Caesar of Rome, including his choice of the name Julius. Similar observations have been made about Alexander VI’s and Leo X’s efforts towards establishing images of themselves as the new Alexander the Great and Augustus, respectively. For more information about the political strategies of these popes, see: Hans Henrik Brummer, The Statue Court in the Vatican Belvedere (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1970), 226; Curran, The Egyptian Renaissance, 109, 166-177, 189-190, 195-196, 214-215; Curran, et. al., Obelisk: A History, 94; James Hankins, “The Popes and Humanism,” in Rome Reborn: The Vatican Library & Renaissance Culture, ed. Anthony Grafton (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1993), 67; George L. Hersey, High Renaissance Art in St. Peter’s and the Vatican (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 47, 132; O’Malley, Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform, 127, 182.
7 Curran, The Egyptian Renaissance, 171.
both rejected the possibility of being associated with Alexander VI by way of the obelisk and, simultaneously, wanted to project himself as the new Julius Caesar by using the obelisk publicly as part of his renovation plans. While a conflicted set of motivations is certainly possible, it is also possible that Julius rejected Bramante's proposal as a result of the underlying religious implications of moving the tomb of an apostle for the sake of aesthetics as well as the engineering difficulties involved in such a change. The project of moving the Vatican Obelisk to its current position was not completed under Julius II, but his interest in its positioning and physical proximity to the seat of Christianity—i.e., moving it to stand in front of Saint Peter’s Basilica—is documented. Although Julius II’s plans for the obelisk were not realized during his papacy, the marker and the cultural, political, and philosophical associations it carried appear to have influenced further acquisitions. Specifically, the pontiff brought into his collection a statue of what was believed to be Cleopatra VII for the so-called Statue Court of the Belvedere, which I will discuss below.

One of Julius’s completed projects for renovating the Vatican Palace was the enclosure of the Statue Court of the Belvedere. When Pope Innocent VIII (r. 1484-1492) had the Villa Belvedere built in the late 1480s, it functioned as a private retreat with space between it and the Apostolic Palace, or the regular papal residences in the palace. Soon after rising to the papal throne, Julius II commissioned Bramante to enclose the space between the Villa Belvedere to the north and the Apostolic Palace to the south, next to Saint Peter’s Basilica, so as to connect the

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two detached spaces of the Vatican complex, creating the *Cortile del Belvedere.*

Innocent VIII’s villa was not built to align with the angles of the palace to the south of it. Because of this, Bramante had to remodel the villa so that the south façade aligned with the corridors of the *Cortile del Belvedere* to create right angles. Further renovations of the *Villa Belvedere* lead to the transformation of the old villa garden into the Statue Court of the Belvedere (what is today known as the Octagonal Court due to further renovations in 1771-1773 that altered its interior shape to that of an octagon).

Within the Statue Court of the Belvedere, Julius had installed several ancient sculptures, including the famous *Apollo Belvedere*, the *Laocoön Group*, and what was then believed to be a sculpture of a dying Cleopatra VII (Figure 2). Details regarding the original discovery site and date of the so-called Dying Cleopatra are unknown. Julius acquired the statue by 1512 and had it moved to the Statue Court of the Belvedere, where it was installed as the focal piece of a fountain. The sculpture is now more accurately believed to be a representation of a nymph, or else Ariadne, but in the early sixteenth century (and long after) un-contextualized details—such as the snake wrapped around her left arm (now known to be an arm bracelet), as well as her collapsing pose and closed eyes—led to the belief that the figure represented was Cleopatra, dying after being bitten by the asp.

According to Curran, Julius’s acquisition and placement of an ancient sculpture of what was believed to be of the famous Egyptian queen in the Statue Court

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of the Belvedere is yet more proof that the pontiff was receptive to the use of Egyptianizing motifs when they helped build Julius’s political image. Curran, citing Hans Henrik Brummer, claims that the presence of the Egyptian queen, whose affair with Julius Caesar was famous even then, benefited Julius by helping make a visual link between the pope and Julius Caesar.

Elisabeth B. MacDougall and Brummer contextualize the sculpture’s inclusion in the Statue Court of the Belvedere by situating it within common contemporary tastes. The so-called Dying Cleopatra had been positioned atop an ancient sarcophagus and converted into a fountain. Brummer explains that the architectural state of the Statue Court of the Belvedere before 1550 (or before significant architectural changes and additions started to be made)—with its orange trees, fountains, and statuary—must be understood to have functioned as a viridarium, or pleasure-garden characteristic of ancient and contemporary villas, where there tended to be an emphasis on fountains and vegetation and was ideal for contemplation and leisure. A drawing by Francisco de Hollanda makes clear the link to a pleasure garden by altering the original appearance of the sarcophagus and including an inscription that ends with “IN HORTIS PONTIFICVM [in the garden of the pope].” The presence of the so-called Dying Cleopatra in a classical viridarium implies, perhaps, an attempt at merging various aspects of the ancient world in a particular location thereby submitting classical culture to the pope’s contemplation, investigation, and (re)combination. The recontextualization of such assemblages may be seen as symptomatic of the intellectual reconciliations demanded by both prisca theologia and concordia.

16 Francisco de Hollanda, the so-called Cleopatra, the Escorial sketchbook, fol. 8 v., 1539-1540.
The focus on merging old and new was evident in Bramante’s design for the space, which harmoniously combined ancient (both material and literary) and contemporary architectural elements. Such combinations, Brummer notes, were not unusual as establishing an authoritative continuation between ancient and contemporary practices can be seen in the early sixteenth century among humanists, religious figures, and artists and architects alike. Phyllis Pray Bober accounts for early modern Italian efforts to establish exactly what was “exemplary Antiquity” by way of reconciling apparent “discrepancies between ancient theory and antique practice” (i.e., the Greek masters’ architectural theory and what contemporary Italians were seeing excavated in Rome). Efforts were continually made towards reconciliation as new sources of ancient provenance were unearthed and compared to authoritative literary sources. Gardens like Julius II’s were a means of emulating the models of pagan antiquity while, at the same time, reconciling it with the sixteenth-century present. Brummer explains that the Statue Court of the Belvedere was likely “conceived as a continuation of ancient villa culture.” The Statue Court, therefore, existed as a contemporary sixteenth-century space that successfully reached to the authoritative past both architecturally and functionally.

Such claims to authority, and the ability to combine the past with the present, was important in the context of the Statue Court as a potential site for engaging in investigations related to *prisca theologia* and *concordia*. Brummer offers the analogy between Pliny’s descriptions of villas and contemporary descriptions of the Statue Court of the Belvedere “as an

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indication that the court was also part of the original programme as a secluded spot for pleasure and contemplation.”\textsuperscript{21} The Statue Court acted as a \textit{viridarium}, and even a \textit{locus amoenus}.\textsuperscript{22} Dora Thornton, in her account of early modern Italian \textit{studioli} (or, studies), explains that within the context of a villa, the study and the garden were closely linked in terms of scholarly considerations and meditation as the villa was the place where such practices came together as “continuous with the rest of one’s existence.”\textsuperscript{23} She explains that Petrarch (1304-1374), in his \textit{The Solitary Life}, viewed the villa as offering “the ideal of creative leisure and literary-minded solitude”\textsuperscript{24} and “solitude and meditation as necessary conditions for a Christian existence.”\textsuperscript{25} A letter written by Cardinal Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) in 1505 tells us that he and Petrarch similarly saw the villa as the ideal place for a life dedicated to solitary contemplation and an ideal place for study in general.\textsuperscript{26}

In this sense, we can draw parallels between the \textit{viridarium} environment of the Statue Court of the Belvedere and Thornton’s description of the Italian \textit{studiolo}. The villa garden, like the study, functioned as a designated space of solitude and contemplation without the distraction of ordinary, day-to-day responsibilities. Thornton explains such early modern spaces in terms of deliberately being a continuation of their classical models. She states,

\begin{quote}
this need for psychological space was […] prompted by an increased awareness of history […] which heightened the importance of classical and Christian models of behavior and the concern to integrate these into contemporary life. The study [or, garden] had a critical role to play in the process of distilling moral virtues from classical and
\end{quote}

\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{21} Brummer, \textit{The Statue Court in the Vatican Belvedere}, 218; For more on Pliny and the study as a place for contemplation, see Thornton, \textit{The Scholar in His Study}, 9, 31, 106-113.
\item\textsuperscript{22} Brummer, \textit{The Statue Court in the Vatican Belvedere}, 42, 219.
\item\textsuperscript{23} Thornton, \textit{The Scholar in His Study}, 30.
\item\textsuperscript{24} Thornton, \textit{The Scholar in His Study}, 30.
\item\textsuperscript{25} Thornton, \textit{The Scholar in His Study}, 9.
\item\textsuperscript{26} Thornton, \textit{The Scholar in His Study}, 30.
\end{enumerate}
Christian tradition, in that it provided a physical framework for reading, mediation or prayer.27

The Statue Court of the Belvedere, as a *viridarium*, can be understood to have functioned in a similar way.

The so-called Dying Cleopatra, as well as the ancient personifications of the Tiber and the Nile, which were included in the sculptural assembly of the Statue Court in 1512 and 1513, respectively, increased the associations possible while contemplating antiquity in the garden. Once again, these ancient elements within the contemporary space can be seen as efforts toward a reconciliation and established continuation between the authoritative past and the informed present. Brummer explains that the physical presence of the sculptures, as well as the process of excavating the ancient sculptures and moving them into a space within the Vatican, “undoubtedly enhanced the retrospective atmosphere” of the Statue Court and other spaces where ancient references were present.28

In this context, the Statue Court of the Belvedere was created and functioned within this wider cultural context of gardens and spaces that were conceived of *all’antica* so as to establish a continuation between Julius II, his court, and the antique Roman world. Julius’s papal acquisitions and decorative choices—including Egyptianizing subjects such as the so-called Dying Cleopatra—cannot, therefore, be reduced to having been dictated by a rivalry with Alexander VI, as proposed by Gombrich, or simply as a desire to be seen as the new Julius Caesar as proposed by Curran. Rather, his choices were largely informed by the cultural atmosphere in which they were made, as well as their potential political significations. The Statue Court of the Belvedere as *ambiente all’antica* did not overshadow the potential political

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implications of the popes’ chosen subjects for the goal of bringing together of past and present but rather functioned simultaneously as an additional layer of meaning.

Leo X continued the merger of antiquity and modernity during his papacy. He commissioned the installation of an Egyptian subject in the Statue Court of the Belvedere. In 1513, Leo moved the ancient marble personification of the Nile from the Iseum Campense (the ruins of the ancient temple of Isis in the area of the Campus Martius, near the Pantheon and S. Maria sopra Minerva) and positioned across from its companion, a personification of the Tiber (Figure 3). Though the sculpture of the Nile is Roman, the subject is intentionally and definitively Egyptian. The *Iseum Campense* in Rome is a product of the spread of Egyptian religious elements throughout the Roman Empire after Rome’s acquisition of Egypt under Augustus in 30 BCE. As was the case with the Greek’s cultural assimilation within Egypt under the Ptolemaic reign after the Alexander the Great conquered the region by 332 BCE, the cults of Serapis and Isis became popular with the Romans, spreading beyond the Egyptian territory and into the Italian peninsula and elsewhere in the area of the Mediterranean. Within the *Iseum Campense*, the Nile and the Tiber were together likely understood to represent the

29 The Tiber was excavated in the ruins of the *Iseum Campense* in January 1512 and transported to the Vatican shortly after under the pontificate of Julius II. Brummer reports that 1512 documents from Pico and Andrea Fulvio describe seeing the Tiber in the Statue Court of the Belvedere. The Nile was also found in the ruins of the Iseum Campense, but in 1513 under the pontificate of Leo X. Brummer, *The Statue Court in the Vatican Belvedere*, 35, 191-192, Appendix II no. 1, Appendix II no. 1; Curran, *The Egyptian Renaissance*, 131, 191; Brian Curran, “De Sacrarum Litterarum Aegyptiorum Interpretatione.’ Reticence and Hubris in Hieroglyphic Studies of the Renaissance: Pierio Valeriano and Annius of Viterbo,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 43/44 (1998/1999): 155n58.


bringing together of their respective lands with Rome’s acquisition of Egypt.\textsuperscript{33} Such political associations would likely have appealed to Leo in the sense that Rome, as the reigning capital of Christianity, held diocese around the world and sought expansion.

The Nile’s appeal can be understood through Evangelista Maddalena de’ Capodiferro's (d. ca. 1527) poem about the so-called Dying Cleopatra. Brummer explains that in lines 17-21 and 24-25 Capodiferro describes Julius II as having “symbolically conducted the waters of the Nile to the Belvedere by having installed a sculpture representing the Queen as part of a fountain.”\textsuperscript{34} We can understand the placement of the Nile in the Statue Court of the Belvedere in not only those same terms, but more literally as the statue represented those very waters of Egypt. I believe that it is also important to note the use of “conducted” instead of “conquered” as it carries implications of Egypt nourishing and supporting Rome rather than purely an understanding of Rome having defeated Egypt. As we will see below, philosophers and religious figures alike were working to demonstrate \textit{concordia} between ancient philosophy (or, \textit{prisca theologia}) from Egypt and Christian doctrine. In this sense, these examples of the arrangement of visual culture within a Christian space can be understood as participating in what we will see to have been a larger conceptual atmosphere in which philosophers, theologians, collectors, and artists alike strove for a conception of the universe and the world in which they existed that reconciled perhaps seemingly incongruous ideas.

We cannot forget that the Statue Court of the Belvedere was largely a private space for the pope and others associated with the Church. Visitors were allowed, and the representation of Rome’s dominion over its territories (ancient and contemporary) was likely not lost on the

\textsuperscript{33} Curran, \textit{The Egyptian Renaissance}, 7; Brummer, \textit{The Statue Court in the Vatican Belvedere}, 204.
\textsuperscript{34} Brummer, \textit{The Statue Court in the Vatican Belvedere}, 222.
viewers of statuary like the personification of the Nile. The Statue Court, however, was not a secular location primed for purely non-religious political propaganda. As part of the Vatican complex, the Statue Court functioned as a space within this sphere of papal and religious conduct/performance.

The Statue Court of the Belvedere, as it existed and functioned in the early sixteenth century, was a *viridarium* that recalled the gardens of ancient villas. It was not designated for official Vatican business or religious ceremonies. Contemporary descriptions of the Statue Court and its contents (including those by figures instrumental in scholarly and intellectual productions regarding *prisca theologia*, who will be discussed below) reveal that visitors to the Statue Court enjoyed the garden space for various activities including solitude and meditation, artistic practice, and socializing. However, with the building of Bramante’s corridors that created the *Cortile del Belvedere* and his remodeling of Innocent VIII’s *Villa Belvedere* (began ca. 1503), the transformation of the Statue Court of the Belvedere meant that it was no longer only part of a retreat that happened to be geographically near the Apostolic Palace and Saint Peter’s Basílica—it was now physically linked to and thus part of the official seat of Christianity. Therefore, in considering potential iconographic and propagandistic messages within, it cannot simply be understood to have functioned as a space of leisure wherein visitors only considered secular matters, various as they may have been. Efforts toward including the physical location of the Statue Court within the Vatican complex must factor into any potential readings of the objects it contained. Brummer describes the acquisition of the objects for the Statue Court of the Belvedere as being partly based “on concepts of papal authority circumscribed in terms of retrospective recognition patterns” wherein “[t]he historical dimension has here been reduced to a fixation

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which transformed the antiques to political abstractions.” I am proposing in this thesis that the physical location of the papally procured objects reasonably allows us to add to Brummer’s explanation and see the antiques as functioning as philosophical and theological abstractions.

Both Julius II and Leo X used decorative campaigns to introduce ancient heritage into the inner sanctum of the Vatican. The imagery of the Stanze in the Apostolic Palace is the most conceptually revealing for this study. The decoration of the Stanze began under Julius II with the Stanza della Segnatura. Here, the concept of reconciling ancient, pagan philosophy and Christian theology is already present. The interpictorial dialogues between “The School of Athens,” “Parnassus,” and “Disputation of the Holy Sacrament” display the efforts of Christian theologians and canonists (like Julius II) to incorporate ancient Greek thought into Christian belief. After Julius II died in 1513, the project of decorating the Stanze was continued under Leo X. We see in Leo’s decorative efforts several instances in which Egyptianizing motifs appear, including in the Stanze by Raphael and his workshop, specifically in the Stanza dell’Incendio (1514-1517). We also see Egyptianizing elements in Cardinal Bibbiena’s Logetta (c. 1516) (Figure 4) and in Leo’s own Loggia (1518-1519) (Figure 5). Within the Stanza dell’Incendio are three Egyptianizing painted telamons, or sculptural figures of men that serve as supportive columns (Figure 6). The figures stand in three of the four corners of the room, between the narrative paintings that fill the walls. The posture and stance of each statue is characteristic of pharaonic Egyptian figures: rigid and fully frontal, arms straight by their sides, and each with one foot slightly forward. The figures wear Egyptian-style kilts and nemes headdresses. The telamons appear as if they are architectural supports and stand on blocked column bases with pillows between their heads and the simulated stucco column capitals as if to relieve any

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36 Brummer, The Statue Court in the Vatican Belvedere, 226.
discomfort that may come from physically supporting such architectural weight. The wall paintings depict scenes from the lives of Popes Leo III and Leo IV in which Christianity emerges as victor against a pagan foe. One could imagine that the support provided by the telamons also represents the support ancient philosophy provides to a victorious Christianity by way of its ancient authority, albeit only when properly understood through condordia.

In Cardinal Bibbiena’a Logetta and Leo’s own Loggia are leonine and sphinx images. A pair of winged, standing sphinxes appear on a wall of the cardinal’s room. One is male, one is female, and each wears an ankh-shaped uraei. Between the two appears to be the face of a lion. While these two sphinxes may not appear as the straightforward or typical Egyptian type, the pair of sphinxes painted on a wall of Leo’s Loggia are undeniably so. Lions too, along with several other animals, also appear in the paintings—both as part of decorative imagery and within depictions of biblical narratives.

Like the Statue Court, the Stanze and loggetti decorated under Leo’s papacy become sites of fusion between antiquity and the present. Similarly, because the so-called Vatican Obelisk from Egypt was believed to have been in Rome at the very site and at the time of Saint Peter’s martyrdom and burial, it came to function, at least conceptually, as a relic that offered a physical link across time to the first pope’s holy martyrdom. In other words, its direct witnessing of such events offered further authority to the dogmatic narrative of the Church’s foundations. In this sense, Capodiferro’s poem about the so-called Dying Cleopatra offers yet another model for understanding the role Egyptianizing motifs played in propagating ideas about ancient Egypt’s nourishing and supportive role in establishing Christianity as a timeless authority in the early-sixteenth-century.
We can understand the placement of Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects and motifs in the Vatican complex as having a philosophical and theological basis, as I explore in this thesis. It is also possible that a collection of objects from the lands over which Rome had dominion has a potential political angle: physically owning their objects and displaying them visually represents this "holding" of the other diocese. This idea has been explored in art historical literature: the proposed political motivations of the Church's acquisition and re-appropriation of ancient works for the purposes of conquering paganism is certainly not original. I suggest, however, that even these political motivations can be viewed through the lens of fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century explorations of prisma theologia and concordia. I propose that the representation of these Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects and motifs, no matter the presence of a potentially non-spiritual motivation or conception, established a visual representation of the prisma theologia and that this representation at the seat of Christianity visually illustrates concordia. Such a reading of the appearance of these objects in the Vatican would require knowledge of complex concepts with complex histories, but the Vatican is and was a place for such esoteric understandings of the divine truth.

If one of the layered meanings of the Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects and motifs within Christian spaces is the visual representation of the Egyptian contribution to prisma theologia, as I propose here, their presence in the Vatican can be similarly understood as participating in the evocation of a metaphysical conception of world harmony and truth—a world where supreme wisdom of God and the universe, as brought by sources both “pagan” and non-pagan, sit in concord.

The collection and arrangement of these objects can be understood as having functioned as a mode of conceptualizing the universe and as a means of ordering ideas, and even
demonstrating power. We can draw parallels between Platonically inspired ideas about creation and existence in terms of a macrocosm-microcosm structure and common collecting practices contemporary to the philosophers and popes of this thesis, both in Rome and elsewhere in the Italian peninsula and surrounding areas.

Figure 1. Vatican Obelisk, Saint Peter’s Square, Rome. Author’s personal photo.
Figure 2. Dying Cleopatra/Sleeping Ariadne, previously located in the Statue Court of the Belvedere.

Figure 3. Nile, previously located in the Statue Court of the Belvedere.
Figure 4. Raphael and Giovanni da Udine, paired sphinxes, ca. 1516. Loggetta of Cardinal Bibbiena, Vatican Palace, Rome.

Figure 5. Raphael and Giovanni da Udine, grotesques with Egyptian sphinxes, 1518-19. Loggia of Leo X, Vatican Palace, Rome.
Figure 6. Raphael and Giulio Romano, Egyptianizing telamon, ca. 1517. Stanza dell’Incendio, Vatican Palace, Rome.
3 PRISCA THEOLOGIA AND CONCORDIA: AVENUES FOR UNDERSTANDING REPRESENTATIONS OF ANCIENT EGYPT IN THE VATICAN

3.1 Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Views of Ancient Theology and Hermeticism

The *prisca theologia* tradition was based on the alleged works of Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster, Orpheus, and philosophers such as Plato and Pythagoras. The central concept behind *prisca theologia* was that "God had not left his heathen children in total ignorance, but had revealed himself through" prophets, priest-kings, and philosophers.\(^37\) Philosophers working in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, largely in response to Georgios Gemistos Plethon (ca. 1356-1450), Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), and Giles of Viterbo (1472-1532), drew on these ancient works in their search for philosophical and theological *concordia*. Given the influence it exerted, it will be useful to first discuss Hermes Trismegistus and the *Corpus Hermeticum*, an Egyptian source, before exploring the state of the *concordia* in the early sixteenth century, during the pontificates of Julius II and Leo X.

From the time Alexander the Great claimed Egypt in 332 BCE, the country saw the melding of Egyptian, Greek, and, later, Roman cultures in varying degrees. One of the more important consequences of this complex cultural mixing was Hermeticism, of which the *Corpus Hermeticum* is a result.\(^38\) Though the canonical text likely dates to the Roman period (between the first and third centuries CE), the Hermetic tradition has its genesis in the Greek period with the syncretic blending of the Egyptian god Thoth and the Greek god Hermes, which produced Hermes Trismegistus (or, "Thrice Greatest Hermes"). Both gods may be understood as gods of


transitions—of souls and of knowledge—and this was maintained in Hermes Trismegistus. Hermeticism can be understood, in the most general terms, as part of an esoteric tradition that considers the relationship and distinction between the body and the soul within a metaphysical conception of the universe and does so in such a way that parallels similar Platonic and Christian considerations (to be further explained below).

Early modern humanists and theologians focused on the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus because his work recognized a single all-knowing god or being (a singular truth). As a result, his metaphysical conceptions exerted a great deal of influence on those in search of the *prisca theologia* and *concordia*. The only Hermetic text known in the West through the Middle Ages was the Latin Asclepius. Later, Plethon, an official of what was left of the Byzantine Empire, became the fountainhead of what Joscelyn Godwin characterizes as the "Golden Thread" in Florence and elsewhere in Italy. Though Godwin’s study tends to take on a problematically cynical contemporary bias at times, wherein retrospective historical knowledge functions to discredit the influence of Christian tradition in the twenty-first century, the metaphor of the thread is useful for understanding the goals of the philosophers and humanists discussed here: that is, a common knowledge (i.e., a single thread) can be traced back to its historical origins by following its path as it was woven through time and space.

Hermeticism can be understood as being similar to the esoteric considerations of Platonism and Christianity. The Platonist Iamblichus (c. 250-c. 325), whom Ficino translated in

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41 Though the purpose of Godwin’s book opens avenues for him to make largely subjective commentary, he does provide helpful outlines of some of the complicated abstract concepts early modern scholars and theologians were wrestling with at this time.
1479, is credited as the first to adopt Hermeticism in Platonic philosophy. Subsequently, the Church Fathers, Lactanius and Augustine, as well as the Church Doctor Thomas Aquinas, all recognized Hermeticism as part of the *prisca theologia*. The driving force behind the study of these “ancient theologies” was the effort to delineate a concord between philosophy and theology—mainly, Platonic philosophy and Christianity. Augustine and Aquinas both discussed philosophy as the “handmaiden of theology.” For them, the philosopher was someone who worked to reveal truth—in this case the truth of concord. In this vein, the efforts of philosophers were largely synthetic, pulling together multiple elements in such a way that they together formed a functioning whole. *Concordia*, or the whole in this case, functioned as metaphysical and esoteric evidence of the nature of humanity’s existence and relationship to God. In revealing such a truth in the history of human wisdom, the philosophers are actively healing society around them by revealing more and more of the singular holy truth of God and the soul’s relationship to him.

3.2 *Prisca Theologia* and *Concordia* in Europe

While in Italy for the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-39), Plethon met with Florentine humanists and shared his work on the *prisca theologia*, which comments on, among others, Zoroaster, Orpheus, and Plato. Plethon is largely thought responsible for influencing what many scholars have interpreted to be Cosimo de' Medici’s (1389-1464) founding of a “Platonic Academy” overseen by Marsilio Ficino near Florence. Scholars, however, disagree about the exact philosophical underpinnings of this “Academy.” As this Florentine circle of scholars is

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largely credited with the heaviest influence on the proliferation of these ideas throughout Italy and the surrounding areas, it is worth exploring the debate. Plethon’s level of association with Cosimo was believed to have been one of direct contact and exchange of Platonic ideas. Ficino’s characterization of the interaction between Plethon and Cosimo in the preface to his translation of Plotinus (1492) seems to indicate, as James Hankins explains, that Cosimo either directly or indirectly acquired a copy of Plethon’s Platonic codex in Greek and likely copied it (or had it copied) during Plethon’s time at the Council of Ferrara-Florence, which Cosimo then gave to Ficino to translate into Latin.\footnote{James Hankins, “Cosimo de’ Medici and the ‘Platonic Academy,’” \textit{Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes} 53 (1990): 159.}

In Hankins’s subsequent work, he questions what actually constituted the “Platonic Academy” associated with Cosimo’s, and later Lorenzo de Medici’s (1449-1492), patronage of Ficino. He distinguishes Ficino’s Medici patrons as just that, patrons. They were otherwise not involved with the forming and exchange of ideas that happened among Ficino, his students, and his associates.\footnote{Hankins, “Cosimo de’ Medici and the ‘Platonic Academy,’” 144-162; James Hankins, “The Myth of the Platonic Academy of Florence,” \textit{Renaissance Quarterly} 44, no. 3 (1991): 429-475.} Rather than being a driving force, then, Cosimo is important as the link between Plethon’s Platonic codex and Ficino.

Hankins, and later Robert Black, however, relies on Benedetto Colucci’s \textit{Declamationes} (1473/1474) as evidence that we should doubt the Platonic focus of Ficino’s “Academy” and why we should not take Ficino’s use of the word “Academy” at face value. In their efforts to shed light on a more likely reality of the conditions under which Ficino taught and studied in
groups, both Hankins and Black conclude that Ficino taught rhetoric to a group of youths and led a “small study group” for which there is no evidence of Platonic study from Colucci.47

Arthur Field, in his response to Hankins, broadens the scope of examination and accounts for why the terminology “Platonic Academy” is appropriate by focusing on how Ficino likely used the term “Academy.” He refers to Paul Oskar Kristeller’s 1961 explanation: “The Platonic Academy of Florence was not, as historians formerly thought, an organized institution like the academies of the sixteenth century, but merely a circle around Ficino, with no common doctrine except that of Ficino […]. The name ‘Academy’ was merely adopted in imitation of Plato’s Academy.”48 Field demonstrates that, within this circle, in some instances Platonic ideas were being examined and that in other instances it is reasonable to assume such was taking place.49

Despite the debates regarding the conditions of the “Academy” associated with Ficino and the link between him, Cosimo de’ Medici, and Plethon’s Platonic sources, what is important for us here is the agreement that Ficino and his work was influential among, or at least made contact with, members of a far-reaching circle of students and associates. Such an understanding of Ficino’s “Academy” allows us to follow others’ claims about the influence that Cosimo’s acquisition of Platonic texts had on Ficino’s contemporaries and those who followed in that philosophical tradition. Black explains that with the advent of the printing press (ca. 1440), formal educational institutions were not the only means of disseminating philosophical ideas and


texts. Godwin cites Ficino’s “Academy” as "the center for the celebration, study, translation, and propagation of the 'perennial philosophy' (philosophia perennis), the wisdom common to Jews, Christians, and pagans." While Hankins and Black might find issue with Godwin’s level of emphasis regarding the centrality and popularity of the so-called “Academy,” each of these scholars and their colleagues account for a far-reaching circle of scholars surrounding Ficino and his studies.

Kristeller reminds us that the philosophers who made contact with Ficino had their own ideas and interests. As a result, we must remember “that the Platonism of Ficino and his friends was a highly complex and unique system of thought that cannot be taken as a mere repetition of the thought of Plato and of the ancient Neoplatonists. The basic influence of these ancient sources must be supplemented by many ingredients of later origin and by the original interests and ideas of Ficino and [Giovanni] Pico [della Mirandola].” Some of the supplementary sources informing Ficino’s and Pico’s (1463-1494) ideas were late medieval forms of Platonism and Augustinianism, which included forays into *prisca theologia*. During his time working under Cosimo’s patronage, Ficino identified what were believed to be canonical scriptures for several of the ancient theologians and philosophers of the *prisca theologia* tradition (Zoroaster, Orpheus,

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50 Black offers up this observation despite having previously suggested that Ficino’s “Platonic Academy” cannot be understood (again, by way of his analysis of a single source, Colucci’s *Decelamationes*) to have been “a significant force in Florentine intellectual life or in the dissemination of Platonism” (Ibid., 25). I offer that Black, with his observation regarding the impact of printing, resolves his doubt about the potential degree of influence by Ficino and his “study group.” He explains that the consideration of such a technological innovation “can shed abundant light on philosophical developments, but can never tell the whole story,” explaining that Ficino formally taught for only one year (or less) at the University of Florence as evidence that despite the possibilities available with printing, the lack of formal support limited his access to such possibilities. What Black forgets, however, is that Ficino benefitted from Medici patronage for several years, including multiple generations of the Medici family. Black, “The Philosopher and Renaissance Culture,” 26-27.


Pythagoras, and Plato), and Florentine Platonists working in his tradition identified the Corpus Hermeticum with the priest-king Hermes Trismegistus.\textsuperscript{53}

Common in prisca theologia was the belief that Plato had knowledge about the Son of God and insight into the Trinity long before the Gospels were written. His work was celebrated for its positing of a singular truth in the universe, which, as stated previously, is the ancient tradition maintained by Hermeticism.\textsuperscript{54} Following Plethon, Ficino, and his associate Pico, understood Hermes Trismegistus as a carrier of the ancient theology within the prisca theologia tradition that ultimately culminated in Plato’s insights. Cosimo commissioned Ficino to translate works of Plato (published 1484) and the Corpus Hermeticum into Latin. Ficino’s translation of the Corpus Hermeticum in 1463 and his book Theologia Platonica de immortalitate animorum of 1482 can be seen as the beginning of Hermeticism’s most influential presence among the scholars and religious circles of early modern Italy.\textsuperscript{55}

Three of the main scholars working with these ideas as they relate to this thesis were Ficino, Pico, and Giles of Viterbo (largely active in Rome). Pico was a student of Ficino and a member of his circle in Florence, and Giles was a prominent humanist and religious figure during the early sixteenth century and close advisor to Pope Julius II.\textsuperscript{56} Giles likely met Ficino and Pico when visiting Florence in 1494 or 1495.\textsuperscript{57} At this time Ficino was a resident of Florence

\textsuperscript{53} Godwin, \textit{The Golden Thread}, 2-3; Celenza, “The Revival of Platonic Philosophy,” 72-96.
\textsuperscript{56} Kristeller, “The Platonic Academy of Florence,” 147-159.
\textsuperscript{57} O’Malley, \textit{Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform}, 49.
with long-established ties to the Medici.\footnote{Kristeller, “The Platonic Academy of Florence,” 147-159; Peter Serracino-Inglott, “Ficino the Priest,” in Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy, ed. Michael J. B. Allen, Valery Rees, and Martin Davies (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 9-10; Dennis F. Lackner, “The Camaldolese Academy: Ambrogio Traversari, Marsili Ficino and the Christian Platonic Tradition,” in Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy, ed. Michael J. B. Allen, Valery Rees, and Martin Davies (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 26; Christopher A. Celenza, “Late Antiquity and Florentine Platonism: The ‘Post-Platonian’ Ficino,” in Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy, ed. Michael J. B. Allen, Valery Rees, and Martin Davies (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 83; Francis Ames-Lewis, “Neoplatonism and the Visual Arts at the Time of Marsilio Ficino,” in Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy, ed. Michael J. B. Allen, Valery Rees, and Martin Davies (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 327-338; Arthur Field, “The Platonic Academy of Florence,” in Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy, ed. Michael J. B. Allen, Valery Rees, and Martin Davies (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 359-376.} Giles is known to have admired Ficino's Platonic studies and hypotheses, even, as John W. O'Malley notes, "signal[ing] his public adherence to the style of theology Ficino taught and promulgated" by discussing theology in terms of Platonic doctrine in his examination for the magisterium in theology in Rome despite criticism from Peripatetics (those of the Aristotelian school of philosophy).\footnote{O’Malley, Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform, 49-50; Field, “The Platonic Academy of Florence,” 359-376; O’Malley, Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform, 55.} Pico wanted to develop a theology whereby he could "interpret pagan myths in their proper philosophical and theological sense, showing that under different names and different fables a single religious truth was to be found."\footnote{O’Malley, Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform, 55.} Finding where \textit{prisca theologia} helped reveal this single truth was the goal of these philosophers in their search for \textit{concordia}. Direct connections can be made between Giles, Julius II, and Leo X. Among other interactions with both popes, Giles was elected prior general of the Augustinian order in 1507 under the patronage of Julius II, and Giles’s letters document that he and Julius remained in close contact. Giles also has a good relationship with Leo X, who made Giles a cardinal in 1517 and sent him on several diplomatic missions to various courts on the pope’s behalf. O’Malley points out that such central roles in the church would allow Giles high levels of influence, but, he
explains, Ficino was more widely known and was likely to have greater influence on mainstream thought as he did on Giles.\footnote{O’Malley, \textit{Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform}, 4-10.}

Ficino was a client of Pope Sixtus IV (r. 1471-1484), both before and after he became pope.\footnote{James Hankins, “The Popes and Humanism,” in \textit{Rome Reborn: The Vatican Library & Renaissance Culture}, ed. Anthony Grafton (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1993), 77.} Sixtus IV, previously Francesco della Rovere, was uncle to Julius II, so Ficino was at least connected to Julius’s family. Ficino’s and Pico’s patronage and employment by the Medici family included tutoring the young Giovanni de’Medici, the future Pope Leo X and son of Lorenzo de’Medici.\footnote{Curran, et. al., \textit{Obelisk: A History}, 93.}

Regarding the so-called “Academies” of both Florence and Rome of the late-fifteenth century and early-sixteenth century that dealt with such ideas, John F. D’Amico explains that “Despite their informality and lack of hierarchy, the humanist academies provided enough uniformity for those who attended to conceive of themselves as belonging to a particular group with certain general lines of orientation.”\footnote{D’Amico, \textit{Renaissance Humanism in Papal Rome}, 90.} In this sense and like the Florentine “Academy” discussed above, such a group also operated in Rome. Cardinal Johannes Basil Bessarion (1403-1472) is noted for being the center of what was essentially the Roman equivalent of Ficino’s Florentine “Platonic Academy,” sharing connections as well as making efforts toward finding concordism between Platonic philosophy and Christianity. Bessarion was a pupil of Plethon in Byzantium, and he attended the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438-1439 with Plethon’s same Platonic interests and with a goal of reconciliation between the Greek Orthodox Church and the Roman Church.\footnote{Curran, \textit{The Egyptian Renaissance}, 90-91.} Though he was instrumental in the rapprochement between the Greek and the Roman Churches, the schism eventually resurfaced, and Bessarion received the cardinalate after

\footnotetext[61]{O’Malley, \textit{Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform}, 4-10.}
\footnotetext[63]{Curran, et. al., \textit{Obelisk: A History}, 93.}
\footnotetext[64]{D’Amico, \textit{Renaissance Humanism in Papal Rome}, 90.}
\footnotetext[65]{Curran, \textit{The Egyptian Renaissance}, 90-91.}
breaking with the Greek Church and accepting Roman theological views and papal authority.\textsuperscript{66}

In Rome, a group of scholars formed around him and shared in the fifteenth-century rise in Christian Platonism as we saw with Ficino’s circle in Florence. Bessarion’s Roman “Academy” too viewed the ancient theology, or \textit{prisca theologia}, of Egypt, Babylon, and Greece, as the forbears of Plato’s insights into Christianity.\textsuperscript{67} With Bessarion, we see a Greek continuing Greek traditions, making efforts to advance Hellenic scholarship in Italy, and, at the same time, embracing the papal authority of the Roman Church and actively participating in a reconciliation of seemingly incongruous ideas—both across time and space.

This rise in Christian Platonism on the Italian peninsula in the fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries was not unique in time and place. Rather than what may initially appear to have been a Christian up-take in paganism, these Platonic scholars working with \textit{prisca theologia} were drawing on already legitimate forms of devotion and even mysticism rooted in Christianity as a means of normalizing these so-called pagan ideas so as to demonstrate that they contained similar metaphysical Christian understandings of the world. As already discussed above, Plethon and Bessarion brought with them such ideas from Byzantium to Italy, wherein figures such as Ficino, Giles, and their colleagues circulated these ideas throughout Italy. As will be discussed below, devotional practices of medieval mystics and theologians from Northern Europe such as Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) aided in ripening an atmosphere of theological and philosophical conception of the universe and the soul’s relationship to God wherein the metaphysical underpinnings of the \textit{prisca theologia} were more easily accepted.\textsuperscript{68} This is demonstrated by way

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{67} Hankins, “The Popes and Humanism,” 77.

\textsuperscript{68} Celenza, “The Revival of Platonic Philosophy,” 87; Kristeller 152.
\end{footnotesize}
of comparisons between the work of some of these scholars so as to contextualize and explain Christian dealings with metaphysical conceptions of the structure of the universe and how the arrangement of the objects discussed above might have aided in the understanding of such esoteric ideas by way of reflecting the proposed metaphysical structures and associations between truth and the soul.

3.3 *Prisca Theologia* and Christianity: Concord with Metaphysical Concepts

The search for knowledge (of the self and the world/cosmos) forms a common thread in certain strains of ancient philosophy as well as particular forms of Christian theology. A particularly fruitful overlap is made evident in the correlations between Plato’s sun and cave myth and the Christian directive for conversion. In this parallel, the cave is the world (or darkness), the sun is Christ, and the soul exists between the two. As the soul turns from the darkness of the cave and toward the sun, this “constitutes the soul’s conversion.”  

Scholars engaged in the search for *prisca theologia* and *concordia*, like Giles of Viterbo, made use of this formal similarity between Platonic ideas and Christian theology. O’Malley, in particular, notes the example of Plato’s cave when discussing Giles’s instructions to turn inward to the soul in order to access God.  

Giles not only made use of Platonic ideas but also incorporated the “purging” and “work” of the soul called upon in Hermeticism. The *locus classicus* for the Hermetic tradition is the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a series of teachings in the voice of Hermes Trismegistus, which was likely written by multiple writers. Giles, however, was not the only Christian thinker to take advantage of both Platonic and Hermetic ideas. We can clearly see a

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69 O’Malley, *Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform*, 51.
70 O’Malley, *Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform*, 51.
71 Until the later sixteenth century, when Isaac Casaubon (1559-1614) proved otherwise, it was believed the *Corpus Hermeticum* dated to much earlier in Egyptian antiquity; Casaubon demonstrated that the volume was actually the combination of several separately written texts. Celenza, “The Revival of Platonic Philosophy,” 92.
similar mixture in the theological works of authors like Meister Eckhart and Ficino. For these theologians, one must "purge one's soul of its unspiritual excrescences," in order to access the wisdom of the one truth (or one true god). To do so, the individual contemplates this one truth by turning inward to the soul, which is made in the likeness of and contains the imprint of the one truth (or, God).

Such work is done in terms of a common metaphysical conception of the universe and the soul’s relationship with God in terms of a microcosm-macrocosm structure. In Hermeticism, the earth (the realm of humans) exists as the center of a series of concentric spheres that make up the cosmos, each containing varying and specific energies as they are relative to the moon, planets, the sun, or stars contained within. As the soul is born into a body, it picks up some of these energies as it passes progressively from the outermost sphere, through each interior sphere, on its journey to earth. The soul, in its human body, thus contains parts of its origins from the superior heavenly spheres. Similarly, the medieval and early modern theologians and philosophers discussed here posit phenomena whereby an individual’s soul reflects what is essentially a divine imprint or a divine residue of its supreme source of creation—i.e., God.

The relationship between the soul and God exists within the structure of the universe. For example, we see in Hermeticism and in Ficino’s work the doctrine of correspondences, which posits a connection between everything in the universe to one degree or another. Godwin

72 Allen, Mysteriously Meant, 17, 31; Godwin, The Golden Thread, 13-17; O'Malley, Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform, 51-53.
75 Godwin, The Golden Thread, 12.
describes Hermetic esotericism by stating that, "The human being is thus a microcosm, containing in little the same energies as the macrocosm." In Giles of Viterbo's theology, we can understand the microcosm as the individual's soul and the macrocosm as God. The Hermetic soul is born into the world "full of potentials and tendencies that are delineated by its natal horoscope," which the soul refines during its earthly life so as to rejoin "the place of its origin" after bodily death. We can, therefore, note the correlation between the refining of the soul of Hermeticism (the previously described "purging") and Giles's call for Christians to turn inward in search for the truth of God.

These esoteric ideas made their way into contemporary visual culture of the time. A good example of this is the vault of the Sala di Galatea of the Villa Farnesina in Rome. Painted in 1511 by Baldassare Peruzzi for the Sienese banker Agostino Chigi, who served as Julius II’s treasurer. The frescoed ceiling depicts Chigi’s horoscope complete with signs of the zodiac, gods associated with the planets, and extra-zodiacal constellations. The individual and collective elements of the frescoes allow knowledgeable viewers to gather information about Chigi’s destiny determined by the cosmos at large, or the ultimate source of creation.

For those operating within hermetic circles of thought, the connections between parts of the universe was key to accessing the soul’s source of creation. In an effort to find such

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ontological truths, Hermetics might work not only to find such connections in the written word, but also among the very objects around them in the world. If the nature of metaphysics is abstraction, then a philosopher’s search for truth would require something more substantially tangible. I propose that the collection and arrangement of the objects and motifs discussed in this thesis functioned as visual reflections of such esoteric ideas and further aided in their conception.
4 **PRISCA THEOLOGIA, CONCORDIA, AND THE PAPAL CURIA**

Though we can make direct connections between Ficino, Pico, Giles, Julius II, and Leo X, it is telling to outline further connections among other figures and these ideas to demonstrate that they were, in fact, far-reaching, even beyond Florence, the Vatican, and the Italian peninsula. These connections can be complex and web-like, so I have organized them based on the three key scholars, Julius II and Leo X, and Cosimo and Lorenzo de’Medici, as these figures represent central hubs of scholarly production as it was associated with fellow scholars, papal patronage, and court patronage, respectively.

Ficino’s high stature was a result of his far-reaching circle of friends and associates both in Florence (his “Platonic Academy”) and elsewhere in Italy and Northern Europe. We know from a letter Ficino wrote to a German associate, Martin Prenninger, among other sources, that in addition to Pico, Ficino’s circle in Florence included Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494), Benedetto Colucci (1438-c. 1506), Cristoforo Landino (1424-1498), Francesco da Diacceto (1466-1522), and Lorenzo de’Medici, as well as other prominent scholars and Florentine figures. All of these scholars benefited from the patronage of at least one of four generations of Medici—Cosimo, Piero, Lorenzo, and/or Giovanni (the future Pope Leo X).80

The scholars in Ficino’s Florentine circle also made connections with scholars outside of Florence, including Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), Niccolò Niccoli (1364-1437), and Cardinal Bessarion. Though all of the scholars listed here dealt with other popular waves of philosophy at this time, they share common interests in Plato’s writings, and as such, Hankins describes both of

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the circles in Rome and Florence as “new schools of Christian Platonism.”\(^81\) The connections between scholars associated with these so-called schools of Platonism are complex and include: Agostino Nifo (ca. 1469-ca. 1539), Angelo Colocci (1467-1549), Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529), Cardinal Bibiena (1470-1520), Fra Urbano Bolzamio (1443-1524), Johann Goritz (ca. 1455-1527), John Colet (1467-1519), Paolo Giovio (1483-1552), Pierio Valeriano (1477-1558), Pietro Bembo, Pietro Crinito (1475-1507), the Medici, and Popes Julius II and Leo X. Colocci, Castiglione, Bembo, Valeriano, Goritz, and Raphael (1483-1520), who served both Julius II and Leo X, are documented as having gathered in the homes and gardens of Colocci and Goritz in Rome.\(^82\) These homes each contained collections of objects and texts that provided points of discussion for what has been described as “elite clubs” of humanists and literati. The “club” to which Colocci, Goritz, et. al. belonged is documented as having gathered to observe these collections and ancient ruins in the interest of gaining insight into the ancient wisdom they supposedly contained.\(^83\) Valeriano tells us that he began to study hieroglyphs during this time.\(^84\)

\(^{81}\) Hankins, “The Popes and Humanism,” 77.


\(^{84}\) Curran, “‘De Sacrarum Litterarum Aegyptiorum Interpretatione.’ Reticence and Hubris in Hieroglyphic Studies of the Renaissance: Pierio Valeriano and Annius of Viterbo,” 158.
This later led to his own translation of, and commentary on, the *Hieroglyphica* attributed to Horapollo (published in 1556), a chapter of which he dedicated to Giles of Viterbo.\(^{85}\)

My generalized account of the connections amongst Christian Platonists, and those directly addressing Hermeticism’s role in it, demonstrates that the concepts of *prisca theologia* and *concordia* were known to Julius II and Leo X as well as the various philosophers and thinkers associated with them. These ideas, however, were not limited to the Papal Curia or the Medici court. We see similarities within the theology of the German mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), who was influential on Ficino’s contemporary Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464). We also see such conceptions of a universal structure reflected in spatial arrangements not only inside the Vatican, as we have seen with the Statue Court of the Belvedere, but elsewhere in the intellectual atmosphere that facilitated the up-take of such ideas, even beyond purely religious aspects of daily life. In the following section, I will investigate the *studiolo* as yet another avenue by which scholars (or those with scholarly pretensions and aspirations) and theologians could investigate *prisca theologia* and *concordia*.

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\(^{85}\) The *Hieroglyphica* was not accurately and truly translated until the nineteenth century. However, many attempts, such as that of Valeriano, were made over hundreds of years. Much of this attempted “de-coding” of pictographs was based on previously falsified translations of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Curran, “‘De Sacrarum Litterarum Aegyptiorum Interpretatione.’ Reticence and Hubris in Hieroglyphic Studies of the Renaissance: Pierio Valeriano and Annius of Viterbo,” 139-182.
5 BEYOND THE PAPAL CURIA

Creating places where antiquity and modernity could meet and where one could contemplate ancient wisdom and Christian doctrine was not limited to the Vatican and its environs. Designating a space for reflection on the meaningful contents within it was the very nature of the Italian studiolo, or study. In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, studies were set apart from the rest of a home for use by a single individual. Typical studies would have in them collections of texts and objects—related to both the secular and the divine—and space for active and passive reflection on them. Dora Thornton explains that “[t]he study had a crucial role to play in the process of distilling moral virtue from classical and Christian tradition, in that it provided a physical framework for reading, meditation or prayer.” Thornton also contextualizes the phenomenon of the early modern Italian studies within a the rising emphasis on the individual, including a “conscious desire for self-improvement” In what Thornton characterizes as a “study-collection,” the study was a place where a person could go to consider the messages and values embodied within his collection as a means of refining his mind, his comportment, and his soul, as Petrarch, a leading humanist and Platonic thinker of early modern Italy, described in his book *On the Solitary Life.*

We can see reflections between such practices and the doctrine of correspondence, which is also seen in the work of Ficino, who, as we have seen, was greatly influential on the work of Giles of Viterbo. It would seem that Ficino shows yet further influence from Plato and his tradition as he is noted as having believed that sight and hearing are the two most spiritual senses for accessing the divine. Ficino is said to have surrounded himself with sensual triggers that

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86 Thornton, *The Scholar in His Study*, 4-10.
88 O’Malley, *Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform*, 113.
corresponded with the influence he was seeking so that they could aid him in the concentration needed for his inward searching.\textsuperscript{89} Godwin makes observations regarding the manifestation of this idea both exoterically and esoterically. Regarding the exoteric, she cites arts works and architecture produced during the time: "All unknowingly, Europeans were becoming Platonists: for while mainstream Christianity spurned natural beauty and erotic attraction, Plato's philosophy embraced them, as the first sprouting of the wings on which the soul would eventually rise to the knowledge of intellectual beauty." Godwin then identifies the educated humanists' studies of classical philosophy and the pagan past as it informed a Christian understanding of the world as the esoteric.\textsuperscript{90} To use Thornton’s phrasing, creating a space in which one attempted such a reconciled understanding of the world offered “a physical framework” to do so; therefore, the objects included in such a space were key to the reflection that was to take place there.\textsuperscript{91}

In the 1470s, Federico da Montefeltro (1422-1482), Duke of Urbino, who was associated with Ficino and Cristoforo Landino, and Federico’s son Guidobaldo (1472-1508), both had studies added to their palaces in Urbino and Gubbio, respectively.\textsuperscript{92} Scholars have considered the ways the various motifs within the respective studies inform each other and create complex programs that, according to arrangement and proximity, reflect common philosophical and theological ideas of the time. Both of Federico’s studies, which share some similar imagery, have been analyzed for the ways contemporary Platonic philosophy informed their decorative schemes, including that of Ficino, Landino, and Augustine. Though scholars debate the exact messages and propose varying iconographic readings of the studies’ decorations, they agree that the programs represent—by way of nuanced interactions of approximation—esoteric ideas and

\textsuperscript{89} Godwin, \textit{The Golden Thread}, 100.
\textsuperscript{90} Godwin, \textit{The Golden Thread}, 101-102.
\textsuperscript{91} Thornton, \textit{The Scholar in His Study}, 9.
\textsuperscript{92} Thornton, \textit{The Scholar in His Study}, 8.
concepts in rooms that served as a space where Federico could reflect upon its contents and that reflected who he was as a military leader, statesman, pious worshipper, and urban elite.\textsuperscript{93}

It is in this vein that the “clubs” and “Academies” of Florence, Rome, and elsewhere gathered together in spaces such as Colocci’s or Goritz’s garden or home—these spaces were, like the Vatican spaces we have discussed—filled with objects aimed at stimulating esoteric considerations of knowledge about a singular truth, handed down from God, wherein “pagan” and Christian sources sit in concord.

6 CONCLUSION

The Roman Church propagated the concept of the concordance between ancient philosophy and Christian theology via the collection of ancient objects and in doing so asserted that it was the proper inheritor of the *prisca theologia*. Not only did the Roman Church centralize disparate ideas from “paganism” in such a way that reflected politically advantageous assertions of authority as well as the esoteric ideas that further concretized the Church’s claims by way of its ancient authority, it also asserted its dogmatic authority by “appropriating” a Greek Orthodox figure like Bessarion, a person whose search for reconciliation and truth crossed a religious schism and settled itself on the opposing side. The Vatican, with its “pagan” objects, became a microcosm of God’s universal structure. It reflected conceptually and visually God’s own creation of the universe and the truth of how its parts exist in perfect concord. The Vatican Obelisk was seamlessly integrated into the architectural landscape of Saint Peter’s Basilica and Saint Peter’s Square, the Dying Cleopatra and the Nile were placed amongst the vegetation and other statuary in the simulation of an ancient garden villa, and the painted telamons of the *Stanza dell’Incendio* provided visual support for the scenes of Christian victory. Each visually demonstrates a continuity between the original insights God gave humanity about his truth and the inheritors of ancient theology. The Vatican, and the popes overseeing Christianity, then occupies the center of a truth that imparts the weight of dogmatic authority.

Outside the Vatican proper, Rome as the official seat of Christianity further evidenced such a microcosmic reflection of God’s universal structure. The collection of ancient Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects and motifs was highly popular beyond the Vatican and even beyond Rome. From the time the ancient Romans entered Egypt, Egyptian objects and ideas were carried across the Mediterranean and integrated into the landscape and culture of Rome and the Italian
peninsula. Like the Vatican Obelisk, many other obelisks were erected throughout the city of Rome in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—and several such instances were commissioned by the papacy.\textsuperscript{94} Additionally, many members of the papal curia and the philosophical and theological circles discussed here owned Egyptian objects. Pietro Bembo is the first documented owner of the so-called \textit{Mensa Isiaca} of Turin, an object that inspired efforts towards the decipherment of hieroglyphs for hundreds of years.\textsuperscript{95} Lorenzo de’ Medici’s collection of antiquities is said to have included the Ptolemaic sardonyx cameo cup that is commonly referred to as the \textit{Tazza Farnese}. The interior of the cup features a scene described as “The Fertility of Egypt,” in which Isis appears leaning on a sphinx wearing a \textit{nemes} headdress.\textsuperscript{96} Ancient pyramids and contemporary use of the motif appear throughout Italy.\textsuperscript{97} In Rome specifically, the pyramid of Caius Cestius, which was built into the Aurelian wall in the fourth century, was continually incorporated into the landscape of the city, and Agostino Chigi’s famous tomb in the Chigi Chapel of Santa Maria del Popolo features a pyramidal shape.\textsuperscript{98} Pope Alexander VI even commissioned Bernardino Pinturicchio to paint the walls and ceiling of the Sala dei Santi, part of the so-called Borgia Apartments in the Apostolic Palace, with images themed to emphasize his family’s ancient roots in Egypt by ways of the myth of the Apis bull.\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{94} Curran, et. al., \textit{Obelisk: A History}.
\textsuperscript{95} The bronze tabletop likely dates to the Roman period, and its “hieroglyphs” are ultimately meaningless as they are simulation of hieroglyphs instead of accurate use of hieroglyphic script. Curran, “‘De Sacrarum Litterarum Aegyptiorum Interpretatione.’ Reticence and Hubris in Hieroglyphic Studies of the Renaissance: Pierio Valeriano and Annius of Viterbo,” 144-145.
\textsuperscript{97} Curran, \textit{The Egyptian Renaissance}, 65-69.
\textsuperscript{98} Curran, \textit{The Egyptian Renaissance}, 5-6, 29-30, 209-212.
\textsuperscript{99} Curran, \textit{The Egyptian Renaissance}, 107-121.
Throughout Italy, and specifically Rome, ancient Egypt was being incorporated into day-to-day lives by way of visual culture. The incorporation of these objects and motifs into the lives of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Christians, and their physical positioning and arrangement within Christian spaces (such as the Vatican and the city of Rome) and in proximity to Christian objects, reflect the concord that exists in God’s truth of his universal structure and Rome’s inheritance of the authoritative past. At the Vatican, with its collection of ancient Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects and motifs under the reigns of Pope Julius II and Pope Leo X, we see the centralization of this microcosmic structure at the very location that defines the dogmatic authority of the Roman Church.
Alexander, Edward P. *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1996.


Duclow, Donald F. “‘Whose Image is This?’ in Eckhart’s Sermones.” Mystics Quarterly 15, no. 7 (1989): 29-40.


