Ian Boxall, “In Search of John’s Island: Patmos in Botticelli and Burgkmair,” *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 3, no. 1 (2013): 25–39.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives 3.0 License.

Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception is an independent, open-access academic journal dedicated to the promotion and dissemination of innovative research in reception history, broadly conceived, within and across religious traditions.

www.relegere.org
ISSN 1179–7231

Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception 3, no. 1 (2013): 25–39

Ian Boxall

In Search of John's Island

Patmos in Botticelli and Burgkmair

During the Renaissance, there existed in Western Europe a widespread tension between hope and doubt with regard to the viability of human society that manifested itself in an increasing interest in the book of Revelation and its visual interpretation. This article explores two portrayals of the scene of John at Patmos, one reflecting a closed, even forbidding perspective, the other offering a decidedly more optimistic view. These different styles reflect the political and religious context in which the artists were working and show a clear contrast between fears of a cosmic collapse and the hope generated by an Eden-like territory portrayed in images related to the discoveries in the New World.

Robin Barnes's assessment of the turn of the 1500s is that it presented in a particularly acute form that polarity between anxious foreboding and hope for the world's future which had been present in Western eschatological thinking throughout the Middle Ages:

Ian Boxall is Associate Professor of New Testament, Catholic University of America.

> By the decades around 1500, as Renaissance learning blossomed on a European scale, a newly pronounced and pervasive awareness of time's passage—both in the experience of the individual and in history—was everywhere in evidence.[1]

Given this intense combination of anguish and optimism, which according to Marjorie Reeves was often found side by side in the same people,[2] it is not surprising that the New Testament book of Revelation held particular fascination and interest. Commentaries, popular sermons, and political treatises are vital sources for exploring the rich and diverse tradition of apocalyptic interpretation; however, the reception history of the Apocalypse in this turbulent period should not neglect the work of visual artists, particularly in Western Christendom. Yet, whereas earlier Western painters and illuminators (e.g., Giotto, Donatello, the illustrators of the Anglo-Norman Apocalypses) had tended to focus on the rich panoply of apocalyptic scenes seen by John, with the island of Patmos as a rather conventional backdrop for what John saw in heaven, artists from around 1500 tended to prioritise the location and character of John's underlying visionary experience, and what that might mean for this critical period in human history.[3]

This shift is exemplified by two very unusual interpretations of the Patmos event, painted in different parts of Europe a decade or so either side of the crucial year 1500. For all their differences, Sandro Botticelli in the Florence of 1490 and Hans Burgkmair the Elder in the imperial city of Augsburg in the early years of the sixteenth century are each responding to the same possibilities offered by the gaps and ambiguities of the biblical text, and their visual interpretations of Patmos well illustrate their interpretative strategies and apocalyptic concerns.

The raw material for both artists is provided by John's tantalisingly brief statement regarding the terrestrial setting for his celestial revelations in the

[1] Robin Barnes, "Images of Hope and Despair: Western Apocalypticism: ca. 1500–1800," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism. Volume 2: Apocalypticism in Western History and Culture*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 2000), 144. See also Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969).

[2] Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future: A Medieval Study in Historical Thinking*, rev. ed. (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 84.

[3] George Galavaris, "Patmos in Renaissance and Post-Renaissance European Painting," in *Διεθνὲς Συμπόσιο. Πρακτικά. Ἱ. Μονὴ Ἁγ. Ἰωάννου τοῦ Θεολόγου. 900 χρόνια ἱστορικῆς μαρτυρίας (1088–1988). Πάτμος, 22–24 Σεπτεμβρίου 1988* (Athens: Hetaireia Vyzantinōn kai metavyzantinōn meleton, 1989), 254.

opening chapter of the Apocalypse: "I, John, … was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev 1:9). A host of unanswered questions emerges from this one verse, inviting speculation and clarification as to the nature, setting, and purpose of John's sojourn on the island. Critical commentators readily note the range of possibilities within the phrase "on account of" (the preposition *δια* followed by the accusative in the Greek). Was John banished to Patmos as a consequence of preaching the gospel, as the dominant tradition of both East and West would have it (e.g., Tertullian, *Praescr.* 36.3; Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 16.6; Victorinus, *In Apocalypsin* 10.3; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.18.6-19; Jerome, *Jov.* 1.26; Jerome, *Comm. Matt.* 3.20; Pseudo-Ignatius, *Ad Tars.* 3; *Acts John* 12–14; *Virtutes Johannis* 2; *Acts John Pro.*; Primasius, *Comm. in Apoc.* on Rev 1:9; Cassiodorus, *Complexiones in Apocalypsin* 3 on Rev 1:9; Andreas of Caesarea, *Comm. in Apoc.* on Rev 1:9; Bede, *Expositio Apocalypseos* on Rev 1:9)? Alternatively, was his exile self-imposed, as a means of escaping persecution elsewhere? Was he impelled by the divine Word to seek out Patmos as a place of retreat, perhaps to receive revelation? Or did he travel there to embark on some missionary activity? As critical commentaries regularly note, the preposition is always used with the accusative elsewhere in Revelation to convey result rather than purpose (Rev 2:3; 4:11; 6:9; 7:15; 12:11, 12; 13:14; 17:7; 18:8, 10, 15; 20:4).[4] This would tend to favour the first two options, although not quite ruling out the third. Yet the vast majority of

[4] E.g., Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of John: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indices* (London: Macmillan, 1909), 12; Robert Henry Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920), 22; Wilfrid J. Harrington, *The Apocalypse of St John: A Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969), 78; M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 81–82; Gerhard Krodel, *Revelation*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 93; Jürgen Roloff, *The Revelation of John: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 32; Frederick James Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon: the Revelation to John*, The New Testament in Context (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 86; Mitchell Glenn Reddish, *Revelation*, Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 39; Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, trans. Wendy Pradels (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 127; Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 2005), 51; Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Continuum, 2006), 39; Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 42; James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 72. Outside Revelation, the preposition can also be used to express purpose: e.g., BAG 180.

commentators and artists, including Botticelli and Burgkmair, would have been familiar not with the Greek text but with the *propter* of the Vulgate translation, which retains the full range of possibilities.[5]

Study of the reception history of Rev 1:9 during this period reveals the range of other questions raised by interpreters. Some (e.g., Richard of St Victor, whose commentary in the *Glossa ordinaria* was hugely influential on generations of late-medieval readers)[6] explored the character of the revelation received on Patmos. In what sense did John "see," and is this seeing in any way akin to the creative inspiration of the artist? This particular question is sharpened by the significant number of artistic representations of John on Patmos, many by artists who shared the name of the seer, and some of which are thought to be self-portraits by the artist.[7] Other interpreters showed interest in the physical appearance of Patmos, and its geographical location. Although archaeological and inscriptional evidence (the latter attesting to its thriving cult of Artemis and the presence of a gymnasium and various associations) reveals first century Patmos to have been a populated island, rich in its own cultural heritage,[8] and Eastern Christianity eased John's sojourn there with the presence of a companion Prochorus and a fledgling Christian community (most notably in the fifth-century *Acts of John by Prochorus*),[9] the Western imagination tended to envisage a barren and rocky place of isolation and solitude (e.g., the depictions in the Anglo-Norman Apocalypses, or Hieronymus Bosch's *St John on Patmos*). Moreover, while some attempted to locate Patmos on a terrestrial map (the popular *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, for example, knew that it was close to Ephesus),[10] others (e.g., the illustrators

[5] John T. White and Joseph Esmond Riddle, *A Latin-English Dictionary*, 7th ed. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1880), 1572–73; D. R. Howlett, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources: Fascicule XII. Pos-Pro* (London: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2009), 2520.

[6] Richard of St Victor, *In Apocalypsim Johannis Libri Septem* (PL 196:686).

[7] Among them those of Jean Duvet, Hans Memling, and Diego Velázquez.

[8] See Victor Guérin, *Description de l'île de Patmos et de l'île de Samos* (Paris: Auguste Durand, 1856); Bernard Haussoulier, "Les îles milésiennes: Léros, Lepsia, Patmos, les Korsiae," *Revue de philologie* 26, no. 1 (1902): 125–43; Henri Dominique Saffrey, "Relire l'Apocalypse à Patmos," *Revue Biblique*, no. 82 (1975): 385–417; Ian Boxall, *Patmos in the Reception History of the Apocalypse*, Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 232–34.

[9] For the text, see Theodor Zahn, *Acta Joannis unter Benutzung von C. v. Tischendorf's Nachlaß* (Erlangen: Verlag von Andreas Deichert, 1880).

[10] C. W. R. D. Moseley, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (London: Penguin, 2005). Other medieval travel writers who locate Patmos close to Ephesus include Saewulf and Ludolph of Suchem: Saewulf, *Pilgrimage of Saewulf to Jerusalem and the Holy Land*, trans. William Robert

of the thirteenth-century *Douce Apocalypse*) imagined it as a mythical island, akin to the Fortunate Islands or the earthly Paradise, or even existing in that liminal place between earth and heaven.

Botticelli's Patmos

Our first example is the work of the Florentine artist Alessandro (Sandro) Botticelli (c. 1445–1510). This highly original interpretation of Patmos is found in a predella scene to Botticelli's San Marco altarpiece, now in the Uffizi, depicting the *Coronation of the Virgin*.[11] According to Vasari's Life of Botticelli,[12] this altarpiece was commissioned, probably in 1488, by the Guild of Goldsmiths, for their guild chapel of St Eligius in the Dominican Church of San Marco in Florence. It seems to have been completed at some point in 1490.[13]

The main panel of Botticelli's *Coronation* is divided between the golden celestial realm, where Mary is crowned by God the Father, surrounded by the cherubim and seraphim, and the lower terrestrial realm. Apocalyptic hints are present already in the circle of dancing angels, anticipating the more explicitly apocalyptic *Mystic Nativity* of 1500. This latter painting, ostensibly depicting a nativity scene based on Luke's Gospel, is headed by a Greek inscription in which Botticelli explicitly links the picture to the trials of Italy, and especially the city of Florence, at this crucial half-millennium, interpreted according to the eleventh and twelfth chapters of the book of Revelation.[14] It is possible that the initial inspiration for the angels in Botticelli's 1490 altarpiece came from Fra Angelico's *Coronation*, already on display in the Church of San Marco when Botticelli was engaged in his work.[15]

Brownlow, Library of the Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society 4 (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1896), 3; Ludolph von Suchem, *Ludolph von Suchem's Description of the Holy Land*, trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1895), 29.

[11] http://www.wga.hu/html_m/b/botticel/8smarco/10smarco.html.

[12] Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Bull, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1987), 225. Vasari (224) tells us that Botticelli had originally been apprenticed as a goldsmith.

[13] For dating, see Herbert Horne, *Botticelli: Painter of Florence* (1908; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 168–69.

[14] See e.g., Rab Hatfield, "Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity*, Savonarola and the Millennium," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 58 (1995): 89–114; Natasha F. H. O'Hear, *Contrasting Images of the Book of Revelation in Late Medieval and Early Modern Art: A Case Study in Visual Exegesis*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chap. 4.

[15] Leopold D. Ettlinger and Helen S. Ettlinger, *Botticelli* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976), 74.

But our interest in this altarpiece lies elsewhere, in its two depictions of St John. The first of these is located in the main panel itself. John is one of four saints standing on the earth in the lower half of the picture. His three companions are Saints Augustine, Jerome and Eligius. Augustine and Jerome are both present because they were believed to have written about the Assumption of the Virgin (in treatises now believed to be of Carolingian origin, the pseudo-Augustinian *De Assumptione Beatae Virginis Mariae*, and the *Cogitis me* which was transmitted as Jerome's Epistle 9),[16] the event which the *Coronation* presupposes.[17] St Eligius is the patron saint of the goldsmiths, and the saint to whom the chapel was dedicated. It might be thought sufficient to justify the presence of St John the Evangelist by the fact that he was patron saint of the Guild of Silk Merchants, under which the goldsmiths' guild was subsumed.[18] However, Botticelli is clearly linking John's own book of the Apocalypse—in particular Revelation 12, describing the heavenly woman clothed with the sun and crowned with twelve stars—to the Coronation of Our Lady taking place in the upper part of his altarpiece. John stands in a state of visionary ecstasy, his left hand pointing to what he sees, offering to the viewer in his right hand an open book with a blank page on which he is yet to write.

The second depiction of John is located on the predella of the San Marco altarpiece (http://www.wga.hu/html_m/b/botticel/8smarco/21predel.html). This is comprised of five panels, each featuring one of the characters from the main panel. Besides St John on Patmos on the far left, we have St Augustine in his study, the Annunciation as the central scene, the penitent St Jerome, and the Miracle of St Eligius. In the John panel, Botticelli has depicted Patmos as a small, remote, and uninspiring island, on which John sits with his back to a rocky outcrop, hunched and almost elongated. This is a highly individual interpretation of Patmos, as is clear from comparison with surviving Florentine antecedents which might have served as appropriate models for Botticelli. These include Giotto's fresco in Santa Croce (1320) and Donatello's painted stucco in the Church of San Lorenzo (produced between 1428 and 1443). Both Giotto and Donatello reflect the interest of ear-

[16] E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 152.

[17] Caterina Caneva, *Botticelli: Catalogo completo dei dipinti* (Florence: Cantini, 1990), 102: "nei quali si affrontava il mistero dell'assunzione di Maria." These texts are now shown to have been wrongly attributed.

[18] Barbara Deimling, *Sandro Botticelli 1444/45–1510* (New York: Taschen, 2004), 69.

lier Western artists (reflected in the Anglo-Norman Apocalypses, the *Flemish Apocalypse*, and the Naples Apocalypse cycles linked to Robert of Anjou) in Patmos as the vantage point from which John's apocalyptic visions may be viewed. John sits, or reclines, on the island, apparently asleep. In the sky above him, to the right, is the woman clothed with the sun, pursued by the dragon of Revelation 12; on the left sits the Son of Man of Revelation 14, wielding the sickle with which he will harvest the earth.[19]

A third example, which might have had some influence on Botticelli, is that of Paolo Uccello, painted in 1435–40 for an altarpiece for the Church of San Bartolomeo in Quarate, south-east of Florence. Like Botticelli, Uccello shows no interest in the heavenly visions, and presents Patmos as a harsh rocky island (albeit studded with trees). His John, however, kneels serenely in a posture of prayer, as if anticipating his inaugural vision "on the Lord's day."

Even by comparison to Uccello's John, two things are striking about Botticelli's interpretation. The first is the figure of John, contorted and elongated, intensely engaged in the act of writing. Its juxtaposition to the main panel suggests that he is in the act of recording the assumption and coronation of the Virgin which he has just witnessed (i.e., the contents of Revelation 12). He is detached even from his barren surroundings, apparently engaged in an inspired act of automatic writing. Botticelli's depiction betrays, in the words of the art historian Lionello Venturi, "a tremor of anxiety, of anguish and new aspirations."[20] We have a very definite move towards the more religious style adopted by Botticelli in the 1490s.

Botticelli and Savonarola

Where might this sense of anguish and foreboding, together with a promise of new possibilities, have come from? One immediate possibility is the preaching of the fiery Dominican Girolamo Savonarola.[21] Although it is often

[19] These are two examples of a "synchronic" interpretation, in which several visions from the Apocalypse are presented together as overlapping, rather than chronologically sequential, events (a more famous example, from Northern Europe, is Hans Memling's *St John on Patmos* in his Bruges altarpiece of 1479). On this see Christopher Rowland, "Imagining the Apocalypse," *New Testament Studies* 51, no. 3 (2005): 307–8.

[20] Lionello Venturi, *Botticelli* (London: Phaidon Press, 1961), 14.

[21] E.g., Alessandro Cecchi, *Botticelli* (Milan: Federico Motta, 2005). On Savonarola and Botticelli generally, see James Hankins, "From the New Athens to the New Jerusalem: Florence between Lorenzo de' Medici and Savonarola," in *Botticelli's Witness: Changing Style in a*

claimed that Botticelli only came under Savonarola's influence later in the decade, the latter returned to Florence in May of 1490, at the primary instigation of Lorenzo de' Medici ("the Magnificent").[22] This was the year in which Botticelli's altarpiece was completed. More specifically, on Sunday 1st August that year, Savonarola began preaching a series of public sermons on the Apocalypse in San Marco, the very church for which Botticelli's altarpiece had been commissioned.[23] In his slightly later *Compendio di rivelazioni*, Savonarola recalled the subject-matter of these *lezioni* on the Apocalypse:[24]

> *Et per totum eundem annum Florentino populo praedicans, tria continue proposui: primum, renovationem Ecclesiae his temporibus futuram; secundum, grande flagellum universae Italiae ante talem renovationem Deum illaturum esse; tertium, haec duo cito futura.*
>
> Preaching throughout that whole year to the people of Florence, I continually proposed three things: first, that there would be a renewal of the Church in these times; second, that God would bring a great scourge against the whole of Italy before this renewal; third, that these two things would happen speedily.[25]

The same sentiments are reflected in a letter written by Savonarola to Fra Domenico Buonvicini, sent from Florence on March 10, 1491: "*Ego saepissime denuntio renovationem Ecclesiae et tribulationes futuras, non absolute sed semper cum fundamento Scripturarum.*"[26] In both we find the same combination of woe (*grande flagellum, tribulationes futuras*) and expectation (*renovatio*) noted by Marjorie Reeves as a frequent feature of the Renaissance

Changing Florence, ed. Laurence B. Kanter, Hilliard T. Goldfarb, and James Hankins (Boston: Trustees of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1997), 13–20.

[22] On Savonarola's return to Florence, see Lauro Martines, *Scourge and Fire: Savonarola and Renaissance Florence* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), 19–33.

[23] These sermons continued at least until Epiphany of the following year.

[24] In this text, Savonarola dates his return to the year 1489 (MCCCCLXXXIX): Girolamo Savonarola, *Compendio di rivelazioni testo volgare e latino e Dialogus de veritate prophetica*, ed. Angela Crucitti, Edizione nazionale delle opere di Girolamo Savonarola (Rome: Angelo Berlardetti, 1974), 134. However, this must be an error, given that August 1 fell on a Sunday not in that year but in 1490: see Roberto Ridolfi, *Studi Savonaroliani* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1935), 66.

[25] Savonarola, *Compendio di rivelazioni*, 134–35. See also Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Girolamo Savonarola*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959), 32.

[26] Roberto Ridolfi, ed., *Le lettere di Girolamo Savonarola* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1933), 15. This comment indicates the preacher's intention to stress the future troubles of the church, using a foundation in biblical texts as his intellectual resource.

(and reflected also in the thought of the Florentine Platonists). Nevertheless, the emphasis in these earlier years of Savonarola's preaching is firmly on the woe.[27]

A second puzzling feature of Botticelli's painting is the stratified layers of rocks behind John, on the supporting platform of which the seer sits as he writes.[28] Rita de Angelis has proposed that the harsh lines of this and other paintings, a reflection of Botticelli's religious anxiety inspired in part by Savonarola, are meant to highlight the folly and emptiness of worldly attractions.[29] But I want to make a more specific, although not necessarily mutually exclusive, proposal. On closer inspection, the rocks on the top of the pile to the left of the panel take on the shape of petrified books. John has his back to them, yet leans against them, and is sitting on their base, as if to show some dependence upon them.

Their significance could be construed in one of two ways. The first possibility is that the rocks symbolize the books of the Old Testament, especially the prophets, which are now being reworked and superseded by the new revelation John furiously records in his own book. If so, this would not be a unique interpretation in Revelation's reception history. A more positive example of this can be found in thirteenth-century stained glass windows at Chartres Cathedral, where the four evangelists are depicted standing on the shoulders of Old Testament prophets, with John appropriately carried by Ezekiel. Closer perhaps to Botticelli, though much later, is Diego Velázquez's 1618 *St John the Evangelist on the Island of Patmos*, in London's National Gallery. Two rather tattered books, well-thumbed but apparently now discarded, lie at John's feet as he writes afresh in the book on his lap.[30]

Yet this may be too radical an interpretation of the petrified library. Alternatively, the books may represent the "new learning" of humanism, already being challenged by Savonarola's urgent apocalyptic preaching ringing in Botticelli's ears. Diarmaid MacCulloch has suggested that a better description might be the "old learning," given the Renaissance rediscovery of

[27] Reeves, *Influence of Prophecy*, 83–95.

[28] Some have posited the influence of Leonardo da Vinci in this, especially his *St Jerome*, *Madonna in the Grotto* and *The Resurrection*: Wilhelm von Bode, *Sandro Botticelli*, trans. F. Renfield and F. L. Rudston Brown (London: Methuen, 1925), 95.

[29] Rita de Angelis, *Botticelli: The Complete Paintings*, trans. Jane Carroll (London: Granada, 1980), 7.

[30] This is one interpretation offered by Rowland, "Imagining the Apocalypse," 307; see also Judith L. Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ*, Blackwell Bible Commentary (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 47–48.

classical texts.[31] Although we are not yet at the "Bonfire of the Vanities," Botticelli's rocks may already be contrasting the freshness of John's apocalyptic message with the fossilised character of the newly discovered writings.

Hans Burgkmair the Elder

If late fifteenth-century Florence could produce the harsh rock-face of Botticelli's Patmos, a very different interpretation of the Apocalypse was offered by his younger German contemporary. Hans Burgkmair the Elder was born in the imperial city of Augsburg in 1473, and spent most of his life there until his death in 1531, serving as court artist to the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (1493–1519). A pupil of Schongauer, he was one of a number of sixteenth-century German artists who produced Apocalypse cycles, influenced by the Dürer-Cranach cycle.[32] Burgkmair's set of twenty-one woodcuts was used in several editions of Luther's New Testament, published in Augsburg towards the beginning of this period, between 1523 and 1524.[33]

However, earlier than his woodcut cycle, Burgkmair produced a highly novel interpretation of *St John the Evangelist in Patmos*, the central panel of a triptych altarpiece with St Nicholas and St Erasmus on the side panels (http://www.wga.hu/html/b/burgkmai/patmos.html). Dated variously to 1508 and 1518, it is now housed in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. In contrast to the harsh simplicity of Botticelli's Patmos, with its dark hint of foreboding, Burgkmair seems to be prioritising a more optimistic pattern of Apocalypse exegesis (exemplified already in the medieval Latin commentary of Berengaudus[34] and the van Eyck altarpiece in Ghent).[35] This interpretative tradition highlights the promises inherent in the Apocalypse rather than its visions of doom: the millennial reign of Christ, the new heavens and the

[31] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490–1700* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 77.

[32] Frances Carey, *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

[33] Others included Hans Schäufelein, Hans Holbein the Younger and Sebald Beham. For twelve examples of Burgkmair's Apocalypse woodcuts, see ibid., 148–53; see also Kenneth A. Strand, *Woodcuts to the Apocalypse in Dürer's Time* (Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1968), 37–72.

[34] Berengaudus, *Expositio in Apocalypsin* (PL 17:763–970).

[35] For the optimistic focus of Berengaudus's commentary, and its possible influence on the van Eyck altarpiece in Ghent, see Derk Visser, *Apocalypse as Utopian Expectation (800–1500): The Apocalypse Commentary of Berengaudus of Ferrières and the Relationship between Exegesis, Liturgy and Iconography* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

new earth, and the arrival of the new Jerusalem, which is also the restored Eden, containing at its centre the river and tree of life which characterised the first paradise.

Burgkmair's scene is a familiar one in German art of the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries, as revealed by a comparison with Albrecht Dürer's woodcut of John devouring the book (illustrating Revelation 10) and Hans Baldung Grien's painting of ca. 1515. John, a young man (in Burgkmair and Baldung Grien wearing a red or pink cloak), is seated on Patmos slightly right of centre, gazing at a heavenly vision in the top left. To the extreme right, the robust trunk of a vertical tree connects earth and heaven.

But in Burgkmair's version, the familiar scene has been dramatically transformed into an exotic tropical island, almost jungle-like. John sits not simply under the one tree of revelation; he is shaded by palm trees, ripe with fruit, bent though they are by the wind, which seems to symbolize the intensity of the heavenly vision. The foliage of Patmos is green and lush. There are colourful exotic birds, including a South American macaw, reptiles, and a frog alongside the standard Johannine eagle. Burgkmair has given us an Eden-like island, an earthly paradise. Peter Mason has identified the tree on the far right as the legendary dragon tree, native to the Azores, Madeira, the Canary Islands, and the Cape Verde Islands, which is found in a number of depictions of the Garden of Eden from the fifteenth century onwards.[36] Indeed, there are striking similarities between this painting, and a woodcut by Burgkmair himself depicting Adam and Eve in Paradise.

For Burgkmair, then, Patmos has become John's Eden, the terrestrial place—far removed from the "ordinary world" of Burgkmair's Augsburg—in which paradise is regained. As George Galavaris puts it, in his essay on Patmos in Renaissance and Post-Renaissance European Painting:

> In the painting by Burckmaier, Patmos is seen as one of the first days of the Creation, as a paradise, a world fallen under the spell of the heaven's opening into the kingdom of God. This is a landscape in every part of which the presence of God is manifested, i.e., a pantheistic landscape. Patmos is the link between the earthly and the heavenly, the place of Jacob's ladder. It em-

[36] Peter Mason, "A Dragon Tree in the Garden of Eden: A Case Study of the Mobility of Objects and Their Images in Early Modern Europe," *Journal of the History of Collections* 18, no. 2 (2006): 179.

> bodies the first days of the Creation and, through the vision, the last days of the world.[37]

If Burgkmair has set up an Eden-Patmos typology, then might we take this further by including the figure of John himself? Certainly this would not be without foundation in a German context. Jeffrey Hamburger has drawn our attention to German sources which compare John the Evangelist to Adam, building on the *In principio* parallelism linking John's Gospel with the opening of Genesis (Jn 1:1; Gen. 1:1). One such example is a sermon attributed to the Dominican Johannes von Offringen (d. 1375), contrasting Adam, created in the image of God and therefore resembling God in the neo-Platonic sense of an image reflecting its ideal form, with John, who "achieves perfect union with the Godhead precisely because his flawless virginity makes him (along with the Virgin Mary) exceptional."[38]

Burgkmair and the New World

Nor should we exclude the wider political context of Burgkmair's painting in attempting to understand its unique portrayal of John's island. It was painted in the wake of Columbus's exploration in the new world, which itself provoked intense eschatological speculation. Columbus had begun to compile a *Book of Prophecies* in 1500–1501, with the assistance of Gaspar Gorricio, a Carthusian monk of Seville.[39] In the words of a recent editor, its purpose was "to locate within the historical schema of the salvation of the human race the discovery of the Indies, presented as the first step towards the liberation of Jerusalem and the Holy Land from Muslim domination, and to assign a prominent role in these events to Christopher Columbus."[40] His was an optimistic brand of apocalypticism which envisaged a crucial role for Spain in a dawning millennial age.[41] Among the many texts compiled by Columbus and Gorricio in support of this aim were biblical passages such as Isa. 24:15, which prophesied the conversion of the islands. Coupled with these

[37] Galavaris, "Patmos," 255.

[38] Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *St John the Evangelist: The Deified Evangelist in Medieval Art and Theology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 36.

[39] See Roberto Rusconi, ed., *The Book of Prophecies, Edited by Christopher Columbus*, Repertorium Columbianum 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[40] Ibid., 5.

[41] Bernard McGinn, "Apocalypticism and Church Reform: 1100—1500," in McGinn, *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, 102.

were classical texts, in particular a prophecy from book 7 of Seneca's *Medea*, which envisages the discovery of new worlds, beyond the limits of Ultima Thule or Tille, the island (normally located beyond Britain) on the very edge of the known world.[42]

I am not necessarily proposing that Burgkmair had read Columbus's work, which remained initially in manuscript form. Indeed, the primary influence for his Patmos altarpiece seems to have come from expeditions, not to the West, but to the East. Evidence for this is provided in a series of woodcuts by Burgkmair which survives in a book published in 1618, in their present form illustrating the "Voyages" of Giovanni Botero.[43] The woodcuts were originally produced by Burgkmair in 1508, one of the possible dates for the production of his *St John the Evangelist on Patmos*. They are linked to a journey made to the East by one Balthasar Springer, a German merchant of Vils, in the wake of the voyages of the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama.[44] Like Columbus's Spanish-backed expedition, the Portuguese seafaring exploits were also fired by Christian optimism, in this case aided by the myth of the distant Christian kingdom of "Prester John."[45] A sermon preached in Rome in 1507 by the Augustinian Egidio of Viterbo was to celebrate the Portuguese achievements in Asia as "the fulfilment of the Golden Age."[46] The expedition in which Springer participated, organised by the Portuguese in 1505, ventured as far as Cochin/Gutzin in southern India. Burgkmair was not part of that voyage, but probably based his woodcuts on the work of an unknown artist accompanying Springer.

In the 1618 collection, two woodcuts, both entitled "In Allago," stand out for their similarities with Burgkmair's *St John the Evangelist on Patmos*. Allago is probably Algoa Bay near Port Elizabeth in South Africa, although the narrative also seems to connect it with Sofala hundreds of miles north.

[42] Rusconi, *Book of Prophecies*, 290–91.

[43] Walter Oakeshott, *Some Woodcuts by Hans Burgkmair, Printed as an Appendix to the Fourth Part of Le Relationi Universali di Giovanni Botero, 1618* (Oxford: Roxburghe Club, 1960), especially 15 (fig. 11), 16, and 43.

[44] Ibid., 4–5.

[45] MacCulloch, *Reformation*, 65–66. On Prester John, see e.g., L. N. Gumilev, *Searches for an Imaginary Kingdom: The Legend of the Kingdom of Prester John*, trans. R. E. F. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[46] MacCulloch, *Reformation*, 66. For other similar examples see Frances M. Rogers, *The Quest for Eastern Christians: Travels and Rumor in the Age of Discovery*, Minneapolis (University of Minnesota Press, 1962). There is a good example of a 1514 sermon by Diego Pacheco which is full of eschatological optimism for papal rule.

The lush, exotic trees of the first woodcut strongly echo the environment of Burgkmair's Patmos. The second depicts two standing figures, described by Oakeshott as "a renaissance Adam and Eve."[47] In addition, Oakeshott's edition includes a plate signed with Burgkmair's initials (Plate V), apparently produced for the Triumph of his patron Maximilian. The exotic birds in this plate, and the foliage being carried by the natives, provide another strong echo of Burgkmair's Eden-like Patmos.

Both Spanish and Portuguese expeditions exemplify the intense eschatological speculation and optimism circulating at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Besides Columbus's *Book of Prophecies*, this is also reflected in the writings of his fellow explorer Amerigo Vespucci. In a letter to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, Vespucci uses suitably apocalyptic language to describe his discoveries in the "new world": "We found such a multitude of people in those regions that no one could count their number (as one reads in the book of the Apocalypse)."[48] Burgkmair taps into this with his interpretation of John's Patmos vision prophesying a "new heaven and new earth" (Rev 21:1), the discovery of his island anticipating and finding its fulfilment in the new world emerging in Burgkmair's own day.

Conclusion

These two near-contemporary paintings—both significantly on altarpieces, and therefore visible at Mass where, like John's Patmos, the boundary between heaven and earth was crossed—represent quite different re-readings of John's opening vision, inspired by different traditions of Apocalypse exegesis, and the result of the different questions posed to the biblical text by the artists. Sandro Botticelli reflects that tradition which prioritises the visions of cosmic collapse and woe, even if he places it within the wider perspective of heavenly vision represented by the Coronation of the Virgin. He seems particularly interested in the nature of John's vision, emphasizing John's character as anguished inspired prophet. His Patmos has been effectively removed from the terrestrial map, a symbol of the anguish and foreboding of his own fifteenth-century Florentine context. He invites the viewer to see again what John saw, in order to interpret their own critical context.

[47] Oakeshott, *Woodcuts by Hans Burgkmair*, 7, 43, and 16; for the woodcut, see 15 (fig. 11).

[48] Luciano Formisano, ed., *Letters from a New World: Amerigo Vespucci's Discovery of America* (New York: Marsilio, 1992), 48, quoting Rev 7:9.

By contrast, Hans Burgkmair breathes a more optimistic air, exploiting the fact that it was on Patmos that John received his vision of Paradise restored. Burgkmair too relates this to the dramatic changes and eschatological expectations of his own day. John on Patmos is Adam, inhabiting a world fallen "under the spell of" the kingdom which breaks in as heaven is opened to him. Both Burgkmair and Botticelli well illustrate the capacity of John's Apocalypse, with its gaps, ambiguities, and polyvalent imagery, to speak in fresh and challenging ways to new historical and social contexts.