

**The “Egg” of the *Pala Montefeltro* by Piero della Francesca  
and its symbolic meaning**

Sebastian Bock

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Probably the best-known “egg” in the whole of European art history is the ovoid object depicted in Piero della Francesca’s Montefeltro Altarpiece in the Pinacoteca Brera, Milano (fig. 1). This object, which is shown suspended from the apse by a chain, has formed the subject of so many analyses of Piero’s painting that Shearman’s 1968 observation, that virtually a whole special branch of art history has grown up around the exclusive study of this “egg”,<sup>1</sup> appears truly justified. The often passionately argued debate has continued for decades, without reaching a conclusion. At the center of the argument is the identification of the egg-shaped object, which is variously taken to represent a pearl,<sup>2</sup> an ostrich egg,<sup>3</sup> a hen’s egg,<sup>4</sup> the egg of Leda<sup>5</sup> as described by Pausanias, or an (unspecific)

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<sup>1</sup> John Shearman, “The logic and realism of Piero della Francesca,” in *Festschrift Ulrich Middeldorf*, ed. Antje Kosegarten and Peter Tigler (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968): 180-86, esp. 180.

<sup>2</sup> Constantin Marinesco, “Echos byzantins dans l’œuvre de Piero della Francesca,” *Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France* 1952: 38-41, 192-203; Berthe Widmer, “Eine Geschichte des Physiologus auf dem Madonnenbild der Brera,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 15 (1963): 312-30; Anna Maria Maetzke, *Introduzione ai capolavori di Piero della Francesca* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 1998), 266-67. Finbarr Barry Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus: Studies on the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture. Islamic History and Civilization: Studies and Texts*, vol. 33, ed. Wadad Kadi (Leiden, Boston, Cologne: Brill, 2001), 42-43.

<sup>3</sup> See Felix Witting, *Piero dei Franceschi* (Strasbourg: Heitz, 1898), 136; August Schmarsow, *Abhandlungen der philologisch-historischen Klasse der Königlich Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften* 29 (1913): 119; Millard Meiss, “A Documented Altarpiece by Piero della Francesca,” *Art Bulletin* 23 (1941): 53–70; idem, “Ovum Struthionis, Symbol and Allusion in Piero della Francesca’s Montefeltro Altarpiece,” in *Studies in Art and Literature for Belle da Costa Green*, ed. Dorothy Miner (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1954), 92–101; idem, “Addendum Ovologicum,” *Art Bulletin* 36 (1954): 221-22 (the two latter articles are reprinted, partly revised, in Meiss, 105-129; this is the edition that is cited in the following); idem and Theodore G. Jones, “Once Again Piero della Francesca’s Montefeltro Altarpiece,” *Art Bulletin* 48 (1966): 203-6, esp. 203, n. 5; Philip Hendy, *Piero della Francesca and the Early Renaissance* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 148; Shearman (as in n. 1), 184, n. 7; Marilyn Lavin Aronberg, “Piero della Francesca’s Montefeltro Altarpiece: A Pledge of Fidelity,” *Art Bulletin* 51 (1969): 367-71, esp. 371 n. 34; Joan Barclay Lloyd, *African Animals in Renaissance Literature and Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 69; Ragusa, 435-43; Richard Ettinghausen, *From Byzantium to Sasanian Iran and the Islamic World* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 34; Millard Meiss, “Not an Ostrich Egg?,” *Art Bulletin* 57/1 (1975): 116; Vilmos Tátrai, *Piero della Francesca* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1981), cat. no. 25; Alessandro Angelini, *Piero della Francesca* (Florence: Scala, 1985), 70; Carlo Bertelli, *Piero della Francesca: Leben und Werk des Meisters der Frührenaissance* (Köln: DuMont, 1992), 134; Francesco P. di Teodoro, *La Sacra Conversazione di Piero della Francesca* (Milan: TEA 1996), 69-70; Anchise Tempestini, *Giovanni Bellini* (Munich: Hirmer, 1998), 170-171, cat. no. 106.

<sup>4</sup> David W. Brisson, “Piero della Francesca’s Egg Again,” *Art Bulletin* 62/2 (1980): 284–86.

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert, 202–16; idem, “Letters to the Editor,” *Art Bulletin* 35 (1953): 329-30; idem, “The Egg Reopened Again,” *Art Bulletin* 56/2 (1974): 252–258; according to Birgit Laskowski, *Piero della Francesca 1416/1417-1492* (Cologne: Könemann, 1998), 85, the egg is a “komplexes Symbol der unbefleckten Empfängnis” as well as standing for the egg of Leda, a “Vorläuferfigur von Maria”.



fig. 1 *Pala Montefeltro*; Piero della Francesca; Urbino (?), circa 1472/1474 (?); Milano, Pinacoteca di Brera

egg<sup>6</sup> in general.<sup>7</sup> Much disputed is also the question of the meaning that should be attributed to each of these identifications, and the consequences this might have with regard to the interpretation of the painting.

In connection with the present author's comprehensive study of occidental ostrich eggs from the mediaeval period until modern times,<sup>8</sup> it seems expedient to also discuss the issue of Piero's egg in a wider context. Of particular interest is the clarification of those circumstances that led to an interpretation of the phenomenon as an ostrich egg in the first place. The following is thus not intended as an examination of the question in its full breadth, but concentrates on those aspects that are of relevance for such an interpretation and considers methodological issues in particular.

We know that the suspended ovoid object in Piero's painting does not represent a unique case, but can be viewed in a wider context. The earliest known pictorial evidence for an ostrich egg mounted in metal and hanging from the ceiling is the upper fresco of the tomb of Antonio dei Fissiraga (after 1327) in San Francesco (fig 2).<sup>9</sup> The figures present in the scene characterize the architectural setting of this fresco as an apparently religious building - note in particular the donor with the model church. This suggests that the object represented here might well be one of those ostrich eggs the use of which had been explained only a few decades earlier by Giulielmus Durantis (1237-1296) in his *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*,<sup>10</sup> probably with reference to a late version of the Greek *Physiologus*:<sup>11</sup>

“In nonnullis ecclesiis ova structionum et hujusmodi, que admirationem inducunt et que raro uidentur, consueuerunt suspendi, ut per hoc populus ad ecclesiam trahatur et magis afficiatur. Rursus aiunt quidam quod structio tanquam auis obliuiosa dereliquit in

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<sup>6</sup> See Fert Sangiorgi, “Ipotesi sulla collazione originaria della Pala di Brera”, *Commentari* 24 (1973): 211-16, esp. 213-215; Ronald Lightbown, *Viaggio in un capolavoro di Piero della Francesca: La Pala Montefeltro in Brera* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1992), 26-27.

<sup>7</sup> See also Laurence Homolka, “Piero's Egg,” *Art Bulletin* 64/1 (1982): 138-40. For a summary of the then state of discussion, albeit not always precise, see Eugenio Battisti, *Piero della Francesca*, Nuova edizione riveduta e aggiornata (Milan: Electa, 1992), vol. 2, n. 450, p. 396-97.

<sup>8</sup> Sebastian Bock, *Ova struthionum. Die Straußeneiobjekte in den Schatz-, Silber- und Kunstkammern Europas* (Freiburg i.Br., 2003) (forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> See Pietro Toesca, *La Pittura e la miniature nella Lombardia dai più antichi monumenti alla metà del quattrocento* (Milan: Hoepli, 1912), p. 181-183, fig. 129-30, pl. VIII; idem, *Storia dell'Arte italiana, II: Trecento* (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1951), 758, fig. 638; Stella Matalon and Franco Mazzini, *Affreschi del Trecento e Quattrocento in Lombardia* (Milan: Edizioni del Milione, 1958), 31ff., fig. 8, pl. 16; Ragusa, 436-37, fig. 2,4; George Galavaris, “Some Aspects of Symbolic Use of Lights in the Eastern Church: Candles, Lamps and Ostrich Eggs,” in *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, Essays Presented to Sir Steven Runciman, 4 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 69-78, esp. 77; Maria Grossi, *Antonio Fissiraga Signore di Lodi (1253 c.a.-1327)*, Quaderni di Studi Lodigiani, 3 (Lodi: Archivio Storico Lodigiano, 1985), pl. III; Marco Bussagli, *Piero della Francesca* (Florence: Giunti, 1992), 43-50, esp. 43-44; Lightbown 1992 (as in n. 6), 26-27; Battisti (as in n. 7), 397.

<sup>10</sup> *Guillelmi Doranti Rationale Divinorum Officiorum. Corpvs Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis*, vol. CXL (Turnholt: Brepol Editores Pontificii, 1995), 49. Cf. also Ragusa, 437-38; Gilbert, 253-54.

<sup>11</sup> Francesco Sbordone, ed., *Physiologus* (Mediolani: Soc. 'Dante Alighieri', 1936), 323: “Γεννα δε ωα και ουδε πυρωνει αυτα ως εθος, αλλ' εξ εναντις καθησας επιβλέπει αυτα τοις οφθαλμοις και πυρουνται και τεκνογονουν δια της θερμότητος του οφθαλαμου ει δε παραβλέψει, ου τεκνογονει. // Δια τουτο κρεμαζονται εν τη Εκκλησια τα ωά, τύπος εις ημας. Ισταμένων ομων εις προσευχήν, εχωμεν το ομμα εις τον Θεον του εξαλειφθηναι ημας τας ανομιαις” (“It lays eggs yet it does not warm them according to custom, but, on the contrary, it sits down and gazes at them with its eyes. Through the eyes' heat they are warmed and born - but when it overlooks them, they are not born. For this reason, the eggs are suspended in Church, as an example to us. While we stand together in prayer we fix our eyes on God, who has wiped out our sins”). See also A. Raes S.J., “A propos des oeufs d'autruche”, *L'Orient Syrien* 3 (1958): 483f.

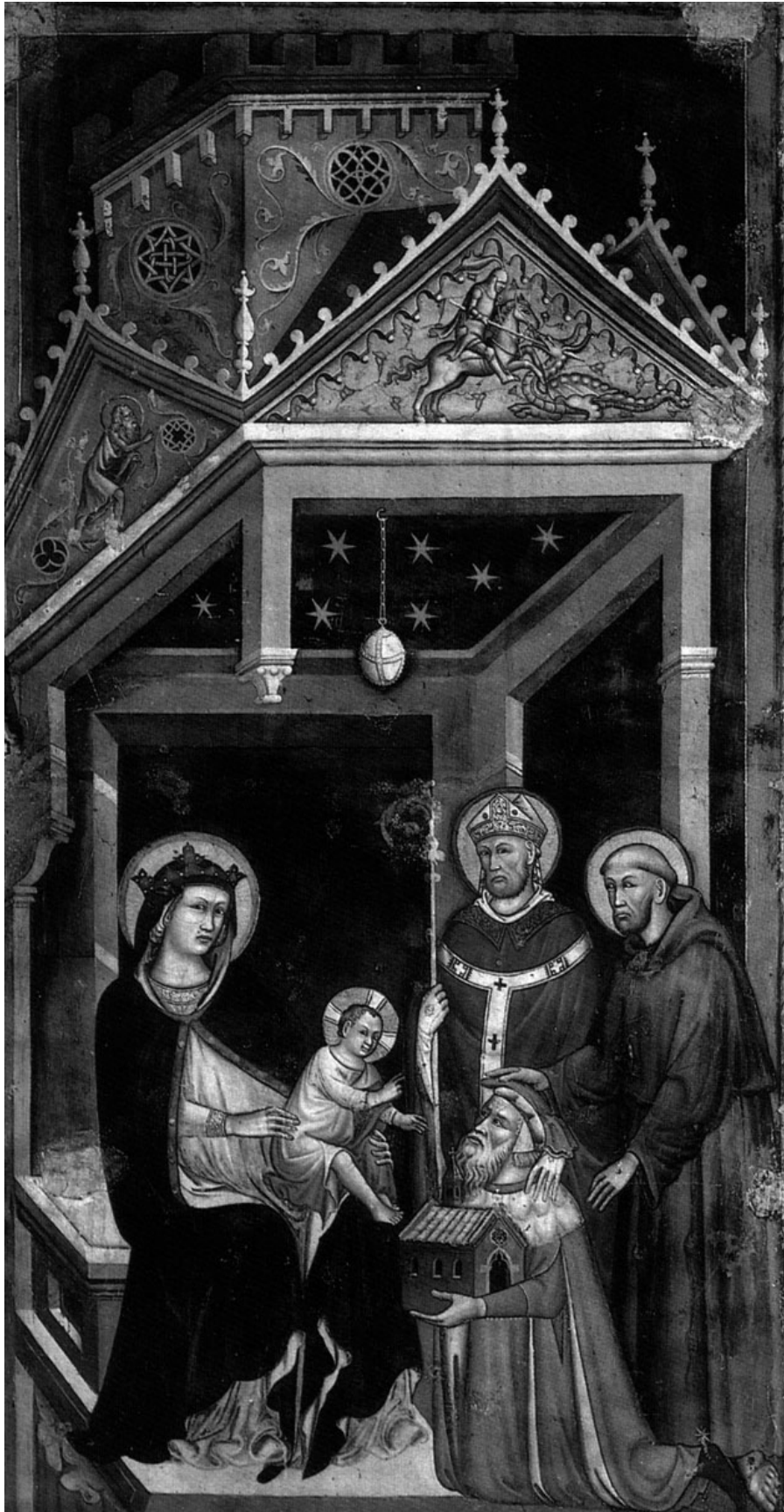


fig. 2 Upper fresco at the tomb of Antonio dei Fissiraga in San Francesco in Lodi;  
after 1327

sabulo oua sua, demum quedam stella uisa recordatur et redit ad illa et aspectu suo fouet ea. Oua ergo in ecclesiis suspenduntur ad notandum quod homo propter peccatam a Deo derelictus, si tandem diuino lumine illustratus recordatus, delictorum suorum penituerit et ad ipsum redierit, per aspectum misericordie illius fouetur, per quem etiam modo dicitur in Luca quod respexit Deus Petrum postquam negauit Christum. Suspenduntur etiam ut in illis unusquisque contempletur quod homo facile Deum obliuiscitur nisi per stellam, id est per Spiritus sancti gratiam influentem, illustratus ad eum redire per bona opera recordetur".

(In some churches, ostrich eggs and other such things that cause admiration and that are rarely seen, used to be suspended, so that thereby people will be drawn to church and be all the more affected. Again, some say that the ostrich, as a forgetful bird, forgets its eggs in the sand and only when it sees a certain star is reminded and returns to them and warms them with its gaze. Eggs are thus hung in churches to signify that man, forsaken by God on account of his sins, - when he at last, illuminated by the light of God, remembers, regrets his sins and returns to Him - is warmed by His merciful gaze. It is in this same way, as is written in Luke, that the Lord looked back at Peter after he had denied Christ. They [the eggs] are thus suspended in churches so that each and everyone contemplates that man easily forgets god unless he is illuminated by a star, that is, by the influence of the grace of the Holy Spirit, and remembers to return to Him through good works.)

Ragusa, who was the first to make the connection between the example in Lodi and the Durantis passage, considered this entirely plausible also from a contextual point of view: "This is indeed a suitable thought in relation to the burial monument of a man who led an eventful life, running the gamut from betrayal for the sake of political expediency to acts of bravery and of charity to the church".<sup>12</sup> The possible link with the meaning of the vault's starry sky, which might constitute an analogy for the egg to the symbolism of the "ostrich-egg-lamps" in, e.g., Coptic churches, has already been pointed out by Galavaris.<sup>13</sup> Since the wall painting is part of a sepulchral decoration, Ragusa<sup>14</sup> takes the ostrich egg to be not just a symbol of the birth of Christ, but also an allegory for his death and resurrection. The latter interpretation seemed to Gilbert "reasonably implied"<sup>15</sup> and has also been adopted by Bussagli<sup>16</sup> and Lightbown.<sup>17</sup> To this end, Ragusa - while conceding that "any egg can be used in connection with the Resurrection" - refers to "a tradition for the actual use of ostrich eggs at the foot of the holy cross and at the Holy Sepulchre".<sup>18</sup> The factual basis of this unreferenced, sweeping statement is left unclear. If, with respect to the cross, she is thinking of the *Cristo de los huevos* in the Cathedral of Burgos,<sup>19</sup> it must be pointed out that in this unique instance the egg shells are attached to the bottom of the cross itself, rather than hung from the ceiling. And in case her mention of the continued use of egg shells today at the Holy Sepulchre refers to those pieces found mostly in connection with lamps, this can hardly be used as an argument for an interpretation as a symbol of resurrection (see further discussion on this point below).

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<sup>12</sup> Ragusa, 439.

<sup>13</sup> Galavaris (as in n. 9), 78; compare, however, Ragusa, 438.

<sup>14</sup> Ragusa, 438.

<sup>15</sup> Gilbert, 257.

<sup>16</sup> Bussagli (as in n. 9), 43-44.

<sup>17</sup> (as in n. 6).

<sup>18</sup> Ragusa, 438-39 with n. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Louis Charbonneau-Lassay, *La mystérieuse emblématique de Jésus-Christ: Le Bestiaire du Christ*, 2nd ed. (Milan: Arché, 1975), 671, fig. III, p. 672.

A second example from the fourteenth century is the silver reliquary made between 1377 and 1383 by Francesco da Milano (attested from 1359 to 1340) for Elizabeth, Queen of Hungary and Croatia, kept in St. Siméon, Zadar (on the Dalmatian coast) (fig. 3).<sup>20</sup> The representation on the reverse shows Queen Elizabeth with her three daughters presenting the reliquary shrine to St. Siméon. Above the scene an ostrich egg with horizontal and vertical mounting is suspended from the center of the arch. This might function as a merely symbolic indication of the scene's location in a sacral or altar space. Alternatively, it might mark a memorial or the place of a burial (cf. Lodi).<sup>21</sup> However, it could equally well be one of the objects referred to by Durantis.



fig. 3 Silver reliquary for Queen Elisabeth; Francesco da Milano; 1377/1383; Zadar, S. Siméon

<sup>20</sup> Ivo Petricioli, *Der Schrein des Hl. Simeon in Zadar* (Zagreb: Vereinigte Verleger, 1983), 20, fig. 19.

<sup>21</sup> The question nevertheless remains why ostrich eggs were suspended in the area of the altar or above tombs. Cf. also Joško Belamarić, "Ovum struthionis: simbol i aluzija na anžuvinskoj škrinji sv. Šimuna u Zadru i na pali Piera della Francesce za Federica da Montefeltra", *Prilozi povijesti umjetnosti u Dalmaciji* 32 (1992): 321-50. Belamarić attempts to draw a parallel, via Elizabeth's wish for a son as heir to the throne, to Meiss's untenable thesis, according to which the 'miraculous' birth of a son that Federico da Montefeltro longed for was reflected in the egg of the Pala as a "symbol of supernatural birth" (Meiss, 116). But this fails already on account of the completely different iconography (apart from the egg) of the two representations. Furthermore, the comparison overlooks the fact that Elisabeth's wish was never fulfilled. Why the egg, thus in a sense demoted, should nevertheless function as a kind of personal symbol of hope remains incomprehensible. Neither the representation itself nor the passage by Durantis offer any clues to such an end.

Significantly later than the above-mentioned examples is a panel painting attributed to Ercole de' Roberti in the Collezioni Comunali at Bologna.<sup>22</sup> It depicts St. Hieronymus and features an ostrich egg without setting (?) hanging from a vault. Also later are the side wings of a triptych attributed to Galeazzo Rivella called della Barba (active around 1524/1538) in the Pinacoteca of Cremona (fig. 4), which show two mounted ostrich-egg-like objects suspended above the saints' heads.<sup>23</sup> From the contexts of the representations it is not clear which purpose the objects depicted might have served. At least we cannot exclude the possibility that they are to be equated with the examples mentioned by Durantis.



fig. 4 Side wing of a triptych attributed to Galeazzo Rivella called della Barba (active around 1524/1538); Cremona, Pinacoteca

<sup>22</sup> Mario Salmi, *Ercole de' Roberti* (Milan: Silvana, 1960), fig. 35; Gilbert, 257.

<sup>23</sup> Alfredo Puerari, *La Pinacoteca di Cremona* (Florence: Sansoni, 1951), 81, no. 121f., fig. 100f.; Gilbert 1952 (as in n. 5), 209f., n. 30.



An ostrich egg in the Württembergisches Landesmuseum Stuttgart (fig. 5)<sup>24</sup> - mounted by the Strasbourg goldsmith Bartel Birtsch in 1562 - is similar to the examples in the painting at Cremona. It is unclear whether it was originally suspended from a ceiling or beam, or in a lockable shrine (*armarium*), as is the case with the examples in Maastricht.<sup>25</sup>

Among the extant mounted ostrich eggs intended for suspension, this is the specimen that is closest to the hanging ostrich eggs in Near Eastern mosques. Yet even though it belongs to a different context of use (*ex voto*, pious offering for a successful pilgrimage?), it is at least evidence that similar set pieces were (still) used for suspension in the mid-sixteenth century.



fig. 5 Mounted ostrich egg; Bartel Birtsch, Strasbourg, 1562;  
Stuttgart, Württembergisches Landesmuseum

<sup>24</sup> It carries the inscription: ANO DOMINI 1562 HATT DIISSES STROVSSSEN AIG GEBROCHT VON IHERVSSALEM - IACOB WURMSER DER ELTER VND GESCHENCK DER ERWIRDIGEN FRAWE - AMELLEIGEN V. OBERKIRCH EPTISSEN ZU SANNT IOHAN BEII ZAWERENN EZ; in the centre of the metal band a plaque is affixed with the coat of arms of Jakob Wurmser, Knight of the Holy Sepulchre in Strasbourg († 1593), of the monastery of St. Johann bei Zabern and of Agnes of Oberkirch, abbess of St. Odilienberg/Alsace. See Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe, ed., *Die Renaissance im deutschen Südwesten*, exh. cat., Heidelberger Schloß 21. Juni bis 19. Oktober 1986, vol. 2 (Karlsruhe: Engelhardt & Bauer, 1986), 639 no. L 42, with fig.

<sup>25</sup> On this, see Franz Bock and M. A.H. Willemsen, *Die mittelalterlichen Kunst- und Reliquienschatze zu Maastricht, aufbewahrt in den ehemaligen Stiftskirchen des h. Servatius und Unserer Lieben Frau daselbst ...* (Köln, Neuss: Schwann, 1872), 119f. with fig.; idem, *Antiquités sacrées conservées dans les anciennes Collégiales de S. Servais et de Notre-Dame à Maastricht* (Maastricht: Russel, 1873), 193f. fig. 48; Joseph Braun, *Die Reliquiare des christlichen Kultes und ihre Entwicklung* (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1940), 229; Ragusa, 436f., fig. 1; Gilbert, 257; Henk van Os, *The Way to Heaven: Relic Veneration in the Middle Ages* (Baarn: De Prom, 2000), 117 no. 137, with fig.

An ostrich-egg-like object without setting, hanging from the ceiling, is represented in the fresco painted by Luca Signorelli around 1500 in the upper window of the Capella di S. Brizio in the cathedral of Orvieto (fig. 6).<sup>26</sup> This example is depicted in an illusionistic manner of painting, so that the egg appears to hang from a round stone slab in the apex as if seen from below. The side walls are decorated with images of two lute-playing angels as well as the saints Brizio and Costanzo, and the walls adjacent to the window show the Last Judgement, with Christ as judge above in the lunette and the saved and damned souls on the wall panels to the sides. Again, the possibility cannot be excluded that this piece had the functions set out by Durantis. With regard to context, it has also been suggested that it may have served as a symbol of resurrection.<sup>27</sup>



fig. 6 Fresco in the upper window of the Capella di S. Brizio in the Cathedral of Orvieto; Luca Signorelli, around 1500

A further example is the painting depicting the vision of Francesco Antonio Ottoboni, prior of S. Antonio di Castello in Venice, a work of the early sixteenth century (after 1511) by a painter from the circle of Vittore Carpaccio, now in the Accademia (fig. 7).<sup>28</sup> At the left of the picture, at the bottom edge of the gallery, a row of votive offerings is depicted in white. Among these are three human legs as well as at least seven ostrich-egg-like objects (all similar in size to the five eggs of the lower of the two ostrich-egg-lamps in the same

<sup>26</sup> Meiss, 114, fig. 102; Giusi Testa, *La capella nova o di San Brizio nel Duomo di Orvieto* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1998), fig. on p. 171.

<sup>27</sup> Gilbert, 255.

<sup>28</sup> Augusto Gentili, *Le storie di Carpaccio: Venezia, i Turchi, gli Ebrei* (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), 100-102 ; Giovanna Nepi Scirè, *Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia* (Milan: Electa, 1998), 193, no. 13 with fig.; Vittorio Sgarbi, *Carpaccio* (Munich: Hirmer, 1999), 226f., no. 42, with fig. Alessandro Chioetto, ed., *Rinascimento: capolavori dei musei italiani. Tokyo - Roma 2001* (Milan: Skira, 2001), 148f., no. II.35 with fig. Good illustration (detail) in Adalgisa Lugli, *Naturalia et Mirabilia: Les cabinets de curiosités en Europe* (Paris: Biro, 1998), 49 no. 8.



fig. 7 Vision of Francesco Antonio Ottoboni, prior of S. Antonio di Castello in Venice; circle of Vittore Carpaccio, after 1511; Venice, Accademia

painting<sup>29</sup>). One larger egg also belongs to the group; it appears to be mounted with two narrow, dark horizontal bands and one (?) vertical band (the manner of painting as well as the painting's state of preservation allow no firm conclusions to be drawn, even when autopsied under good lighting). As far as I can see, there are no reasons why these should not also be eggshells of the kind the uses of which are explained by Durantis - unless they are mere votive offerings (*ex votos*).

The Europe-wide distribution of suspended ostrich-eggs in religious spaces is demonstrated moreover by those pieces - albeit of uncertain function - which hung above the altar of St. Mary in the cathedral of Plock in 1142<sup>30</sup> and functioned as reliquiaries above the altar of St. John in the Baptistery of Florence in 1388,<sup>31</sup> the main altar with Duccio's *Maesta* in the Dome of Siena,<sup>32</sup> as well as the "ante altare" in the funeral chapel of King Sigismund I. in the castle church of Cracow in 1548.<sup>33</sup> The latter eggs are mentioned again in 1638, in a source that has been taken to suggest that they were suspended (from iron projections) underneath the entablature's sill, directly above the altar recess. Likewise, the former Cathedral of Goslar (demolished in 1819) is said to have possessed an ostrich-egg suspended from a chain.<sup>34</sup> Further examples that could be cited include, for instance, the eggshells mentioned by Belon in 1555 "que nous voyons pendus par les eglises",<sup>35</sup> which are also referred to by other authors of the sixteenth century, as Sebastian Münster, Geronimo Cardano or Conrad Gesner.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>29</sup> For this type of lamp, cf. a very similar type in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem: Alexander Kariotoglou, *Jerusalem: Mother of churches; dwelling-place of God* (Alimos: Miletos, 1997), fig. without. page no.

<sup>30</sup> "... Has [i.e. reliquiis] predictus venerabilis Alexander episcopus devotissime amplexatus in ovum strutionis deaurato honorifice recondidit et, ne cui deinceps movendi eas facultas daretur, anuli sui sigillo extrinsecus diligenter munivit. Postea vero ante altare Beate Marie idem ovum in catena ferrea laqueari picto affigi precepit ...". "... These [i.e. the relics] the above-mentioned, venerable and highly esteemed Alexander had devotedly kept in a gilded ostrich egg, with all due honor, and so that henceforth nobody should have the opportunity of removing them, he had secured it diligently on the outside with the seal of his ring. Indeed, he then ordered this egg to be affixed by an iron chain to the panelled ceiling in front of the altar of the Blessed Mary ...)", cited after: Zofia Kozłowska-Budkowa, "Płockie zapiski o cudach z r 1148," *Kwartalnik Historyczny* 44 (1930): 341-48, esp. 346; Lech Kalinowski, "Najstarsze inwentarze skarbcza katedry krakowskiej jako źródło do dziejów sztuki w Polsce," in *Cultus et Cognitio: Studia z dziejów średniowiecznej kultury*, ed. Stefan Kuczynski (Warsaw: Państw. Wydaw. Naukowe, 1976), 404.

<sup>31</sup> "Ova di struzzolo pendenti sopra l'altare di S. Giovanni si rassettino e pulischino," see Karl Frey, ed., *Le Vite de' piu eccellenti pittori scultori e Architettori: Scritte da M. Giorgio Vasari*, vol. 1 (Munich: Müller, 1911), 338.

<sup>32</sup> Meiss, 111.

<sup>33</sup> "3 ferris ad sacellum regium factis pro appendendis ovis strutii et imagine Veronica"; they are attested once more in 1638: "Imago Crucifixi pendent ante altare et duo ova strutionum compacta," see Andrzej Fischinger, "Strusie jaja w Kalicy Zygmuntowskiej," *Symbolae historiae artium. Studia z historii sztuki Lechowi Kalinowskiemu dedykowane* (1986): 403-6.

<sup>34</sup> Heinrich Otte, *Handbuch der kirchlichen Kunst-Archäologie des deutschen Mittelalters*, vol. 1., ed. Ernst Wernick, 5th ed. (Leipzig: Weigel, 1883), 213, without further details or supporting evidence.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Belon du Mans, *L'Histoire de la Nature des Oyseaux: Facsimilé de l'édition de 1555, avec introduction et notes par Philippe Glardon* (Paris: Droz, 1997), 233 : "Grande partie des œufs que nous voyons pendus par les eglises, sont œufs de Crocodile: & toutesfois pensons qu'ils sont œufs d'Autruche".

<sup>36</sup> See Sebastian Münster, *Cosmographia: Beschreibung aller Lender* (Basel, 1548), fol. dcccvii ("Von den Straussen"): "Er legt vil eyer/ vnd die seind groß/ wie man sie dann hin vnd haer in Teutschland in der Kirchen auffgehenckt ..."; Geronimo Cardano, *Hieronimi Cardani Medici Mediolanensis De*

The most important argument in favor of an identification of the ovoid object on Piero's painting as an ostrich egg - in addition to its egg-shape and white, smooth surface - is thus the fact that it is suspended in an architectural setting; the same applies also to the objects in the above-mentioned pictorial documents. Such a function is as yet attested only for ostrich eggs: they were suspended in occidental churches, sometimes in connection with the altar, from the mediaeval period onwards. Consequently, for Bertelli the "ostrich egg" hanging from the apse is marking out the represented space as a religious space, since in an otherwise undefined architectural setting it is "das einzige Element... welches auf einen Altar beziehungsweise auf die liturgische Bestimmung des Raums verweist".<sup>37</sup>

The representation of the object as proportionately increased in size<sup>38</sup> presents a problem, as it implies an actually significantly larger size than would be expected for an ostrich egg (and even more so for a hen's egg). Whether the reason for this is to be sought in the painter's incorrect perspective, which he accepted for the sake of immediate recognizability as an extraordinarily large egg by the observer, is disputed and impossible to prove. The same goes for the assumption that this could be a differently proportioned imitation of an ostrich egg in marble, as found in Giovanni Bellini's *Sacra Conversazione* of 1505 in San Zaccaria, Venice (fig. 8), or some other material.

Beyond these difficulties in factual understanding, the supposed meaning of the representation also gives rise to discussion. There are only two literary sources as yet known to us that give information about the function or significance of ostrich eggs (or eggs in general) suspended in an architectural setting: the comments in the Greek version of the *Physiologus*, and the passage by Durantis, which contains two explanations. With over forty editions, the latter work was still a best-seller in the fifteenth century.<sup>39</sup> If one further compares our case with the above-mentioned pictorial evidence, we find that, with regard to the fresco in Orvieto of around 1500, there is a resemblance only concerning the suspension of the - similarly unmounted - eggshell from the ceiling architecture of a church interior. This can not be said to apply in the same way to the only slightly later painting in the Academia. The closest resemblance to the Brera painting is found in the Lodi fresco of the early fourteenth century, which features a mounted egg shell fastened to a ceiling beam. Here, further iconographical analogies include the Madonna, the subsidiary figures, and the figure of the donor.<sup>40</sup> The available evidence suggests that the *Pala Montefeltro* was, in all likelihood, also destined for a sepulchral context, and Gilbert<sup>41</sup> suggests that here, too, a symbolic meaning as a sign of resurrection could apply - always presupposing a secure identification as an ostrich egg. Such an

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*Subtilitate Libri XXI* (Nuremberg: Petreius, 1550), 241: "... oua [strutionis] caput infantis magnitudine referunt rotunda, cū sensescunt ebur effingunt. Suspendi solent in tēplis, diu enim manent, quod durissima sint, humor'que exempto quasi ossea redduntur"; Conrad Gesner, *Vogelbuch, darin die Art/Natur und Eigenschafft aller vögeln sambt irer waren Conrafactur/ anzeigt wirt ...* (Zurich, 1557), p. CCXXXVII [under 'Straußenvogel']: "Diese eyer in mitten abeinander zerschnitten/ gebend gute trinckgeschirr. Man pflegt sy in die Kirchen aufzehenken dann sy mögen lange zeyt wären/ darumb daß sy hart sind/ und daß sy/ wenn die feuchte darauß kommen/ gantz beinin werdend, saget Cardanus ..".

<sup>37</sup> Bertelli (as in n. 3); cf. *ibid.*, 148, n. 16.

<sup>38</sup> Meiss, 106: "eight and a half inches or even more"; Shearman (as in n. 1), 181: "between nine and ten inches"; Warman Welliver, "The symbolic architecture of Domenico Veneziano and Piero della Francesca," *Art Quarterly* 36, 1/2 (1973): 1-30, esp. 19: "as large as her [Mary's] head"; Gilbert, 253: "eleven inches long"; "as big as a football".

<sup>39</sup> Gilbert, 253.

<sup>40</sup> Ragusa, 435; Gilbert, 257.

<sup>41</sup> Gilbert, 256.



fig. 8 Sacra Conversazione; Giovanni Bellini, 1505, Venice, S. Zaccaria

interpretation was likewise championed in 1992 by Bussagli<sup>42</sup> and Lightbown<sup>43</sup> as well as in 1998 by Calvesi<sup>44</sup>; Lightbown held the view that “Il significato dell’uovo, in ogni caso, non dipende dalla sua specie precisa”.

With regard to the hanging, ostrich-egg-like objects found in connection with hanging lamps as represented mostly on large-scale altarpieces in the north Italian region in the second half of the fifteenth and the early sixteenth century,<sup>45</sup> a similarity of meaning can only be assumed under the condition that the object on the Montefeltro Altarpiece has the same significance as the ovoids of the lamps.<sup>46</sup> This would imply - against Meiss’s<sup>47</sup> interpretation - a function as a warning or admonitory example for the pious, thus coinciding with Durantis’s second explanation (assuming that the topos “ostrich-egg” lamp is more than a mere orientalism).

If Piero had, however, intended a different symbolic meaning, this can not be deduced from any of the other contexts in which ostrich eggs (or their imitations) - notably hanging ones - are, attested in the occident, as far as they are known today.<sup>48</sup> In other words: if it should be the case that the ovoid object of the Montefeltro Altarpiece is an ostrich egg (or imitation thereof) with a meaning that differs from those given by Durantis, Piero must have either based himself on a symbolic meaning of the suspended ostrich egg that was common knowledge throughout central Europe but is now lost, or he must have intended an entirely new interpretation that should, however, have been intelligible to all.

In this context, the decisive weak points in the argumentation of Meiss are twofold: first, no evidence is brought forward for the contention that (real) ostrich eggs in those days actually were symbols of virginity, since the possible reference to the polemic *Defensorium Inviolatae Virginis Mariae*, authored by the Dominican Franciscus de Retza

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<sup>42</sup> Bussagli 1992 (as in n. 9).

<sup>43</sup> Lightbown 1992 (as in n. 6), 26f.

<sup>44</sup> Maurizio Calvesi, *Piero della Francesca* (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 164.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, the paintings mentioned in Meiss, 113f. For a complete list of all examples, see the study referred to in n. 8, above.

<sup>46</sup> The hanging ostrich eggshells (or their imitations) in images of the Virgin Mary are meanwhile taken to be symbols of virginity; see, for example, Meiss, 115; *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* (Freiburg, Basel, Vienna: Herder, 1978), vol. 1 col. 589, vol. 4 col. 218; Tempestini (as in n. 3). This is, however, contradicted not only by the fact that such ostrich eggs above lamps are not confined to representations of the Sacra Conversazione, but also by the fact that they are typologically part of the lamp, which precludes an independent interpretation of the two objects that are joined so as to virtually form a single unit. This type of lamp was widespread in the East and apparently always served as a warning or admonition for the pious. If one takes into consideration the painters’ task to depict a vessel that was intended to illuminate the main protagonist from above and that could serve as a symbol of the Light of God, it appears that their intention in these representations - similar to many other contemporary representations of the Virgin or Saints - does not necessarily have to have been a particular interpretation of the actual object. In this sense, the particular variant of a lamp with ostrich egg could thus be a mere fashionable orientalism. This is further supported by the motif’s narrow confinement with regard to time and place, to the paintings of the Veneto region. We know that Venice at the time entertained close relationships with the East, which continued even after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and that it was in Venice (Murano) in particular that glass lamps for mosques, of the kind represented in the paintings, were produced on a large scale for export to the Orient. In this context, see also the - in my view - unconvincing interpretation attempts by Hans Albert Peters, *Giovanni Bellini oder Antonello da Messina?: Zur Entstehung der sogenannten Sacra Conversazione in Venedig* (Bonn: Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1981), 28, and Ronald Lightbown, *Mantegna* (Oxford: Phaidon/Christies, 1986), 70. For a more extensive treatment of the whole problem, see the study referred to in n. 8, above.

<sup>47</sup> 1954a (as in n. 3), 95.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. in this sense Gilbert, 254ff.

around 1400, does not suffice to this end.<sup>49</sup> Second, this (postulated) significance cannot be transferred justifiedly onto hanging ostrich eggs, which, according to the only attested sources, belonged to a different context.

By the same token, the approach that takes the example of Lodi and of the *Pala* as symbols of the resurrection of Christ suffers from a serious weakness. This attempt at interpretation presupposes that in the fourteenth as well as in the fifteenth centuries (real) ostrich eggs or (real) eggs of other species of birds (Lightbown 1992) which had this symbolic significance were suspended in church interiors. At least with regard to Lodi, these would have existed virtually alongside those mediaeval examples hanging in sacred spaces and explained by Durantis in two completely different ways. Until now, the only locally specific instances of ostrich eggs known to have been used as symbols of resurrection<sup>50</sup> are those documented from 1467 for the Cathedral of Angers, where they were not usually hung inside the church,<sup>51</sup> as well as those examples, already mentioned above, that were placed at the foot of the *Cristo de los huevos* in the Cathedral of Burgos. As regards eggs of other species of bird (probably hens in particular), their use at Easter and as symbols of resurrection is attested since the Middle Ages,<sup>52</sup> but there are no hints at a practice of suspending them by chains from the ceilings of churches or secular buildings.

All further interpretations brought forth so far, be it as the “egg of Leda” or as the symbol of creation and the four elements,<sup>53</sup> all contain the same dilemma at heart. They all presume conditions, whose historical authenticity - or at least high degree of likelihood - is not sufficiently corroborated.

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Gilbert, esp. 256.

<sup>50</sup> This interpretation has already been put forward by several different authors, who, however, based themselves only on the example in Angers: Didron, Adolphe Napoléon. “Drame liturgique,” *Annales archéologiques* 11 (1851): 259; l’Abbé Vincelot, *Les noms des oiseaux*. (Angers : Lachèse, 1867), 47f.; X. Barbier de Montault, *Traité d’iconographie chrétienne*, vol. 2 (Paris: Vivés, 1890), 98; Joseph Sauer, *Symbolik des Kirchengebäudes und seiner Ausstattung in der Auffassung des Mittelalters*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1924), 214. The most detailed such argument is that of William R. Lethaby, *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1892; reprint London: The Architectural Press Ltd, 1974), 257ff. In his long list of examples going back to antiquity, Lethaby, however, does not distinguish between ostrich and hen’s eggs, misinterprets examples hanging in churches and mosques in the Orient, and also has Angers as his only positive evidence. The remark in Charbonneau-Lassay (as in n. 19), 671, that already in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries ostrich eggs were hung in the cathedrals of France during Easter week, is unsupported by evidence. Also for the *depositio* of ostrich eggs in the Holy Sepulchre Charbonneau-Lassay does not provide any support. He merely mentions the custom in Angers, but cites the relevant eighteenth-century source incorrectly as being of the “XV<sup>e</sup> siècle”. Similarly, the interpretation by Fischinger (as in n. 33) cannot be derived from the findings in the castle chapel of Cracow.

<sup>51</sup> Didron (as in n. 50), 259; *Revue de l’art chrétien* 32 (1881): 318f.; Louis de Farcy, *Monographie de la Cathédrale d’Angers: Le mobilier* (Lille, Paris, Bruges: Desclée, De Brouwer et C<sup>ie</sup>, 1901), 233f. .

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli, ed., *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, vol. II (Berlin, Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1929/1930), col. 595-643; vol. VI (1934/1935), col. 1327-1333; Robert Wildhaber, “Zum Symbolgehalt und zur Ikonographie des Eies,” in *Zwischen Kunstgeschichte und Volkskunde: Festschrift für Wilhelm Fraenger*, ed. Reinhard Peesch (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1960), 77-84, esp. 82, with many imprecise and incorrect statements.

<sup>53</sup> Hendy (as in n. 3): “[...] the ostrich egg shell still beloved of Orthodox Greek churches, symbol of the creation and of the four elements”. Cf., however, Kenneth Clark, *Piero della Francesca* (Cologne: Phaidon, 1970), 231: “Es [das “Ei”] ist nicht nur ein christliches Symbol der vier Elemente, auf das in mittelalterlichen Schriften oft Bezug genommen wird [...], sondern auch in vielen östlichen Religionen ein Symbol der Schöpfung, weshalb in den Apsiden der Kirchen von Athiopien und anderen Gebieten des christlichen Ostens ein Straußenei aufgehängt wurde”.



Methodologically equally inadequate are those explanations which from a number of supposedly valid meanings pick the seemingly most appropriate,<sup>54</sup> or opinions which postulate a double significance.<sup>55</sup>

As long as scholarship does not succeed in finding pictorial or textual documents to underpin the contention that ostrich eggs hanging in western religious buildings, at least in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, had a universally accepted symbolic significance coinciding with one of above-mentioned previous interpretations, these will always, and on principle, remain contestable. Our present state of knowledge thus allows only one possible and correct conclusion: to refer back to the only historical sources known until now in which this phenomenon is explained.

The first (non-symbolic) explanation by Durantis, namely that ostrich eggs, and similar such rare things (*"et hujusmodi"*) arousing admiration, were hung inside religious buildings so as to draw people to church and to affect them all the more, is certainly not atypical from a western perspective and for the time of the author, who, incidentally, refers to the interpretation of this custom in the past tense. In Europe, ostrich eggs are likely to have been considered rare *exotica* until deep into the fourteenth century. Moreover, they were, in fact, not the only *mirabilia* to be admired in religious spaces. One only needs to think of the bones, elephant teeth, tortoise shells, "horns of unicorns" (narwhal teeth), whale ribs, sharks, crocodiles and legs of giants, which were displayed – partly suspended – in different European churches.<sup>56</sup> This aspect is supported by a French source of 1372: "On pent' es esglises les œufs de l'ostruce pour grant excellence, pour leur grandeur et pour ce que il en est peu en ce pays".<sup>57</sup> Also the remark by Niccolò da Poggibonsi in his *Libro d'oltramare* (1346-1350) can be interpreted in the same way: "And this bird [i.e. the ostrich at the court of the Duke Hugh Ibelin in Cyprus] lays eggs so big, that we hang them up through the churches [...]"<sup>58</sup> Whether such an interpretation of the eggshells was still current in the advanced fifteenth century is, however, highly doubtful

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<sup>54</sup> Tátrai (as in n. 3).

<sup>55</sup> di Teodoro (as in n. 3); Laskowski (as in n. 5).

<sup>56</sup> See the relevant examples in Ruth Keiser, ed., *Thomas Platter d.J.: Beschreibung der Reisen durch Frankreich, Spanien, England und die Niederlande 1595-1600* (Basel, Stuttgart: Birkhäuser, 1968), 525; Otte (as in n. 34), 213f.; (Falk) "Curiosa und Raritäten in den Kirchen," *Geschichtsblätter für die mittelrheinischen Bisthümer* 1 (1884): col. 76-78, esp. 76f.; Sauer (as in n. 50); Guido Schönberger, "Narwal-Einhorn: Studien über einen seltenen Werkstoff," *Städel-Jahrbuch* 9 (1935/1936): 167-247, esp. 202, 215; Julius von Schlosser, *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens*, 2nd ed. (Braunschweig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1978), 19ff., fig. 5, 6b, 7, n. 17, 19, p. 244; Adolf Reinle, *Die Ausstattung deutscher Kirchen im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), 298f., fig. 80; Costantino Del-Frate, *Santa Maria del Monte sopra Varese* (Chiavari: Civicchioni, 1933), 183f.; Guiseppa Papagno et al., *Santa Maria delle Grazie sei secoli mantovani di arte storia e devozione* (Mantua: Sometti, 1999), fig. on p. 4, p. 171f. with fig., p. 180f. with fig.

<sup>57</sup> Cited in Victor Gay, *Glossaire archéologique du Moyen âge et de la Renaissance, vol. II: H-Z* (Paris: Éditions Auguste Picard, 1928), 167.

<sup>58</sup> Niccolò da Poggibonsi, *A Voyage Beyond the Seas (1346-1350)*, Theophilus Bellowini and Eugene Hoade, transl., Publications of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, no. 2, part 2 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Press, 1945), 92. Cf. also the German 15th-century translation, enlarged probably solely on the basis of own experience: "[...] vnd ist der [Straußen]uogel der do gros ay legt die do wir in der kirchen auff hencken bey den altaren", cited after Clive D. M. Cossar, *The German Translation of Niccolò da Poggibonsi's Libro d'oltramare*, Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik 452 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1985), 131.

in view of the numerous ostriches that were imported and held in menageries, where they also produced eggs.<sup>59</sup>

On the other hand, the second, alternative (symbolic) reasoning provided by Durantis, as well as the comment in a late version of the Greek *Physiologus*, namely that the shells suspended in the churches were intended as admonitory examples to always direct one's soul towards God and not to forget Him, go back to an allegorical symbolical meaning of ostrich eggs that was probably current both in the West and the East, at least across the whole Christian Mediterranean. At least in the Coptic church, the custom of hanging ostrich eggs or their imitations in religious buildings (fig. 9) can be traced back to the thir-



fig. 9 Choir of the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea with three mounted ostrich eggs

<sup>59</sup> Gilbert, 253-254, advanced an interpretation according to which Durantis prefers his first to his second explanation (“giving it as a simple fact, while the second is what ‘some say’ [*aiunt quidem*]”), but neglects the possibility that these could easily have been two different uses that occurred independently of, yet parallel to, each other (in the North and South?). Nor can we exclude the possibility that already at the time of Durantis a certain overlapping of the two interpretations came about. See the study referred to in n. 8, above.

teenth century. This was apparently also a widespread practice among Armenian, Greek-Orthodox, Latin and Nestorian Christians, from Egypt to Palestine, to Eastern Europe, and - as attested here - probably also Western Europe. By the early thirteenth century at the latest, it was, moreover, common also in Islam (fig. 10). The eggs, often in the context of hanging lamps or lamp crowns (*polycandela*), always served as warning or admonitory examples. Their varying emblematic significance is almost always related to the ostrich's behavior towards its eggs, attested in post-classical natural-history tales with allegorical interpretations, which is interpreted as a symbol of man's relationship to God or to religious ideas.<sup>60</sup>



fig. 10 The Prophet Muhammad and Ali in a mosque, decorated with mosque lamps and decorated hanging ornaments (ostrich eggs); Siyer-i Nebi, cira 1595; Istanbul, Topkapi Saryi Müzesi Library (inv. no. H 1223, fol. 62a)

<sup>60</sup> On this, see Galavaris (as in n. 9), 74ff., as well as the more extensive treatment in the study cited above, n. 8. In addition, Lloyd (as in n. 3) considered this at least a possibility.

In contrast to the thesis advocating different symbolic meanings of ostrich eggs depending on the context,<sup>61</sup> the latter explanation has the advantage of allowing for a single meaning in all contexts, no matter how diverse. In the specific case of the Pala Montefeltro, the hanging ostrich egg functioning as a call to always heed God would thus not only constitute a pointed analogy in meaning to the pious congregation represented in the painting, which in its compositional alignment (and partly also through the figures' gestures, such as those of the two saints on the left and the donor in prayer) towards the sleeping Jesus child. Addressing all Christians through its symbolic content, it would also directly include the observer, thus in a sense enlarging the congregation. In this context, the fact that Piero here represents the ostrich egg as a mere shell, stripping it of all its traditional additions (metal mounting; being part of a lamp) could be explained by his intention of emphasizing to the utmost the symbol itself and its traditional meaning.

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<sup>61</sup> Meiss, 114f.