

St Michael and All Angels 29th September

Ch 11 of the Book of Daniel outlines a chaotic situation, with power struggles between kings until 21 *In his place shall arise a contemptible person on whom royal majesty had not been conferred; he shall come in without warning and obtain the kingdom through intrigue.* There follows more destruction and violence until

Daniel 12:1 *"At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. 2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.*

Revelation 12

7 *And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.*

Michael is therefore understood to be the Archangel, leader of the armies of God.

מִיכָאֵל

Mikha'el • literally means "Who is like God?" – a rhetorical question demanding the answer "no-one".

It is in this warrior role that the angel is most usually represented, one of the most famous versions being that of Raphael (also the name of an angel) which was commented on by Michelangelo (named, of course, for St Michael).



Bringing together two Biblical passages, and an iconography going back 1000 years in Egyptian art, Michael came to be envisaged as "the weigher of souls".

Proverbs 16

2 All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but the LORD weigheth the spirits..... 11 A just weight and balance are the LORD'S: all the weights of the bag are his work.

Matthew 16

27 For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.(KJV)

Typically medieval churches represented the Last Judgement over the entry (West) door to confront the worshipper as they entered.

An outstanding example is the tympanum (section of the arch over the door) sculptured by Gislebertus of Autun around 1130, with the Devil tugging on one scale, while Michael tenderly cradles the other.



The Flemish artist Rogier van der Weyden painted a Last Judgement around 1445-50, representing this weighing.



Around 200 a writer known as "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite" wrote a book "On the Celestial Hierarchy" which became the handbook for an elaboration of the "orders" of angels – nine in all.

Seraphim (literally "burning ones") are described by Isaiah in Ch 6 as fiery, six winged beings. Genesis 3.24 describes how

24 *(The Lord God) drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.*

The traditional iconography of cherubim draws on Ezekiel, especially Ch 24

12 *Their entire body, their rims, their spokes, their wings, and the wheels—the wheels of the four of them—were full of eyes all around. 13 As for the wheels, they were called in my hearing "the wheelwork." 14 Each one had four faces: the first face was that of the cherub, the second face was that of a human being, the third that of a lion, and the fourth that of an eagle.*

Images of these extraordinary – and terrifying – beings are a far cry from the pretty angels favoured in more recent images.

The upper sections of the Dome of the Baptistery in Florence (below) show ranks of angels, with cherubim and seraphim flanking the figure of Christ.



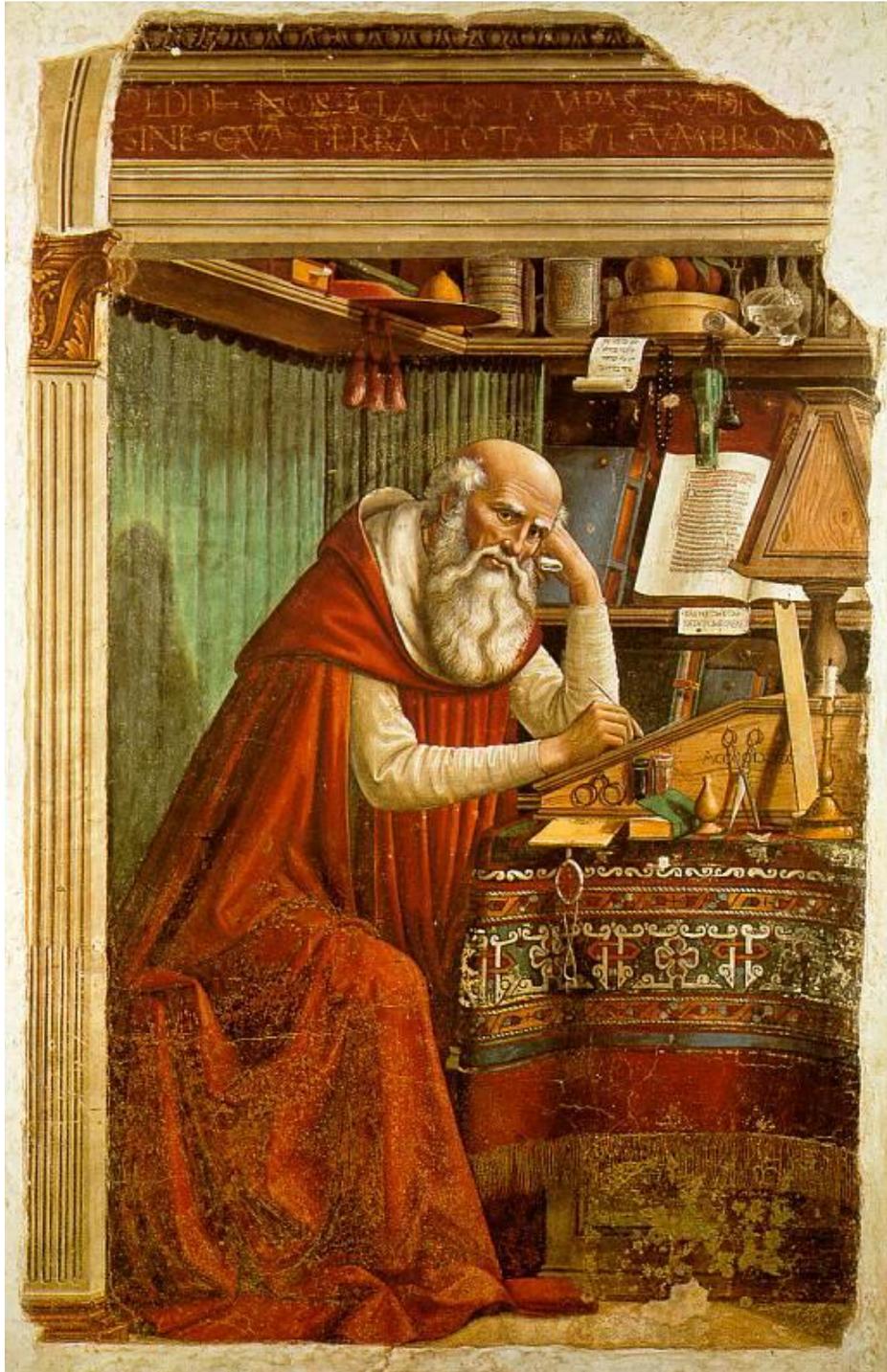
Fresco, Meteora, 16th c



St Jerome (c 347- 420) 30th September

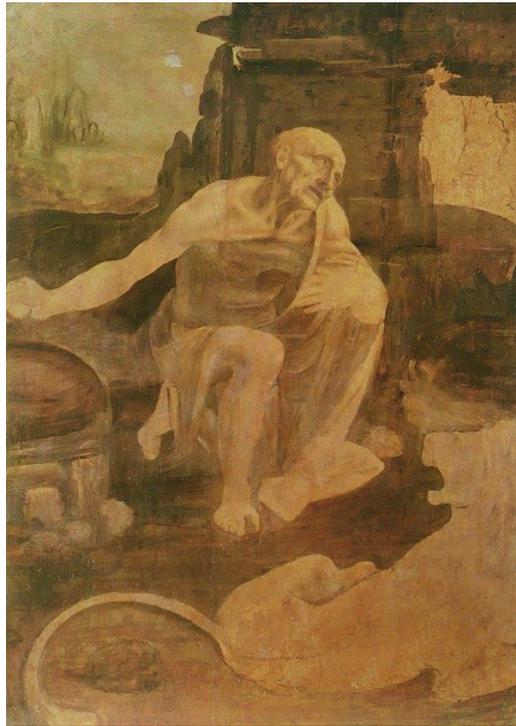
Jerome's complicated life included initial classical study in Rome, conversion to Christianity, followed by travel to Antioch. He learnt Greek and Hebrew and between 382 and 405 he worked on the first full translation of the Bible into Latin, the version now known as the Vulgate. He was supported by women from wealthy Roman families to whom he acted as a spiritual advisor. This and his combative personality attracted opposition, and in 388 he moved permanently to a cave near Bethlehem, pursuing an ascetic lifestyle and writing voluminously – commentaries, historical and theological works and letters.

Accordingly he is represented in art as both a scholar – one of the four Doctors of the Church and an ascetic.



Ghirlandaio – St Jerome in His Study c 1480

In sharp contrast to Ghirlandaió's comfortably ensconced writer is Leonardo da Vinci's St Jerome, also around 1480, which uses a traditional motif of the emaciated saint beating himself with a stone in penance.



Also very popular were images which drew on his reputed extraction of a thorn from the paw of a lion, which then became a fixture in his study – in Antonella da Messina's wonderful painting (c 1475), which repays a long look, the lion is lurking in the rear corridor.

