

THE FABULOUS LIFE OF A SAINT

by George Kaftal

All the information we have about St. Stephen the protomartyr comes from the Acts of the Apostles¹, his ordination as deacon, his preaching to the council and his stoning. This did not satisfy the appetite for the marvellous of the mediaeval scribes, who compiled a fabulous story beginning with his mother's pregnancy at an advanced age, and leading up to the narrative of the Acts. This story, which has a decisive flavour of folklore, has come down to us in four known MSS, which have inspired the Italian painters with at least six pictorial cycles between the late XIVth and the late XVth centuries.

These cycles are as follows:

- I. Tivoli, Oratorio di S. Stefano, school of Lazio, late XIVth cent. frescoes.²
- II. Lentate sul Seveso (north of Milan), Oratorio di S. Stefano, Lombard school, late XIVth cent. frescoes.³
- III. Martignacco (near Udine), S. Nicolò, local school influenced by Vitale da Bologna, frescoes.⁴
- IV. Frankfort, Städel Museum, Martino di Bartolomeo, panels.⁵
- V. Poggibonsi (near Siena), S. Lucchese, Tuscan school c. 1440, frescoes.⁶
- VI. Prato, Cathedral, Fra Filippo Lippi, frescoes.⁷

In order to simplify our narrative we shall use the letters A, B, C, D to designate respectively the MSS:

- A = Monte Cassino CXVII of the X-XIth cent.⁸
- B = Venice, St. Mark's Library VI, 51 of the XIV-XVth cent.⁹
- C = Florence, Laurentian Library Ashburnham 870 of the XIV-XVth cent.
- D = Venice, St. Mark's Library IX, 16, fol. 332-36, collection of legends written by Petrus Calo c. 1340.¹⁰

Another MS of the XVth cent. is to be seen in the Royal Library at Copenhagen Inc. Hafn. 2510.

¹ Acta VI, 5 - VIII, 3.

² *Baudouin de Gaiffier*, La nativité de Saint Etienne. A propos des fresques de Tivoli, in: Atti e Memorie della Società Tiburtina di Storia d'Arte, 41, 1968, pp. 105-112, tav. I.

³ *Stella Matalon*, Affreschi lombardi del Trecento (Cassa di Risparmio delle Provincie Lombarde), Milan, 1963, pp. 388-389, tavv. 182-183.

⁴ *Carlo Someda de Marco*, La chiesetta di S. Nicolò di Martignacco, in: Atti dell'Accademia di Scienze Lettere e Arti di Udine, Ser. VI, 14, 1954-57, pp. 139-149 (with 3 figs.).

⁵ *B. de Gaiffier*, Le diable voleur d'enfants, in: Homenatge a Antoni Rubió i Lluch. Miscel·lània d'Estudis literaris, històrics i lingüístics, vol. II, Barcelona, 1936, pp. 1-26 (pp. 3-4, figs. 1-5); reprinted in: *idem*, Etudes critiques d'hagiographie et d'iconologie, Bruxelles, 1967, pp. 169-193 (pp. 171-172, figs. 1-7).

⁶ *Kaftal*, Saints, I, cols. 953-954, figs. 1066, 1067. - *Miklós Boskovits*, Cennino Cennini - pittore non-conformista, in: Flor. Mitt., 17, 1973, pp. 201-222, figs. 4-6 (in this same issue).

⁷ *Van Marle*, X, pp. 444-447, fig. 268.

⁸ Published in: Bibliotheca Casinensis, tom. III, Florilegium Casinense 1877, pp. 36-38.

⁹ *B. de Gaiffier* (see note 5), pp. 13-16.

¹⁰ *Hystoriam apocrifam ex duabus excerptam hic ponere volui, lectori iudicium derelinquens*, says Calo before starting his tale. Out of two versions he has made one; the main lines are similar to the A, B, C versions, but he has enriched it by including incidents taken from a source hitherto undiscovered.

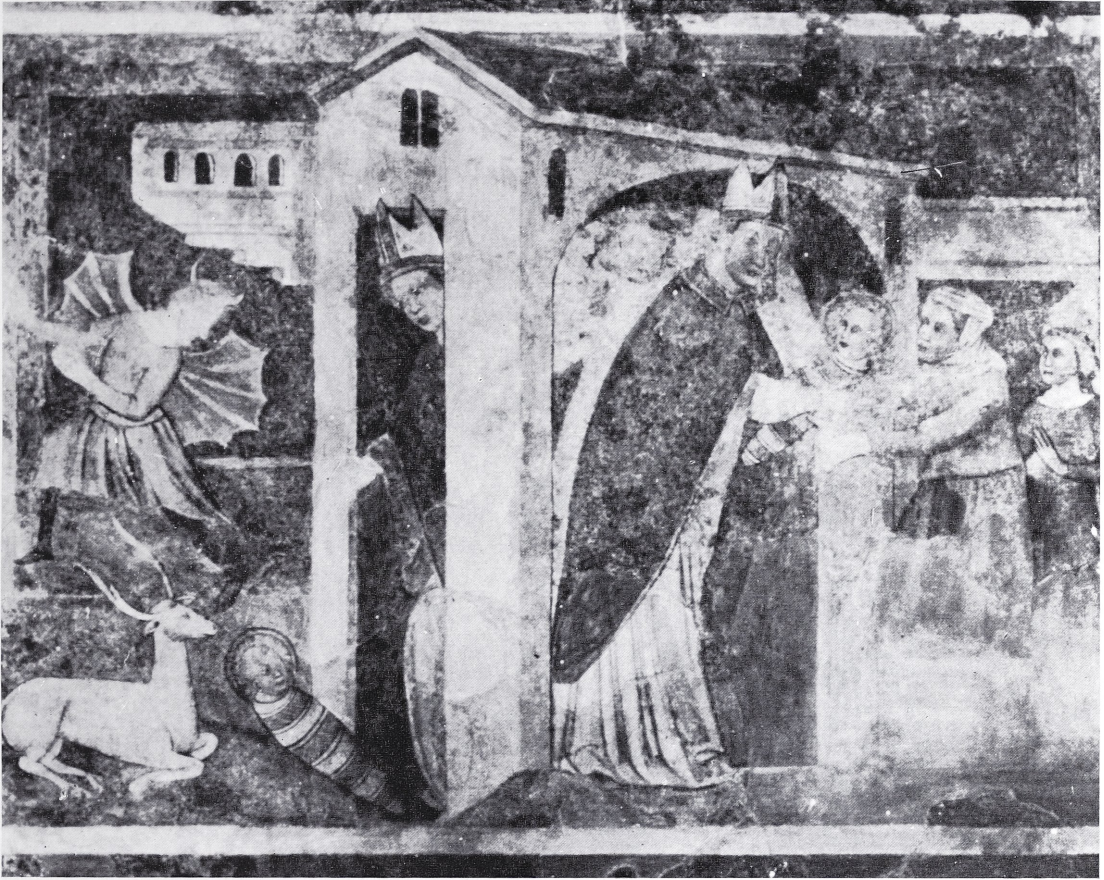


1 Martignacco (Udine), S. Nicolò, fresco from the legend of St. Stephen.

The MSS A and C do not pretend at any verisimilitude: thus Julian is called *episcopus* and the Saint seems to be born a christian. The author of MS B, similar as to the contents to A and C, shows more respect for history: *pontifex* replaces *episcopus* who hands the infant to a *nutrix hebraea*. Furthermore it is the only version in which Stephen is also called Nathaniel. After meeting Gamaliel he meets Philip and the incident as related in John I, 45-49 is interpolated here. The MS C not having yet been published, we shall give it in appendix.

The only cycle that follows Calo's version (D) is the cycle II. It is also the richest, none of the scenes having been destroyed, and most in a fair state of preservation.

1. The parents of Stephen are shown sitting on a bench, giving thanks to God, an angel having announced to them the birth of a son. — 2. The mother, still in her bed, is having a porringer handed to her by an old maid; in the cradle next to her bed is an infant devil, a changeling. — 3. Two saintly men see a devil flying with an infant in his arms. They are kneeling in prayer in the doorway of a church. They are praying that the devil should leave the infant



2 Martignacco, S. Nicolò, fresco from the legend of St. Stephen.

with them. — 4. Their prayer is being answered. — 5. Stephen, grown up, is being baptized by a deacon in the presence of the two old men. — 6. The two old men instruct him. — 7. He is being ordained deacon by a bishop, the two old men present. — 8. Having received a divine order to go and console his parents, he kneels, in a pilgrim's garb, and receives the blessing of the two old men. — 9. He arrives at his parents' house and asks for hospitality, without being recognized by them. — 10. He lifts the changeling from its cradle; the changeling, who during all these years had not grown, and had molested the household with its shrieks, at the order of Stephen vanishes into air. — 11. Having been delivered of the infernal presence, they ask Stephen where their son is? "Your son is in good health, and when your wine turns into blood, you will know that he has been done to death by Jews for his faith in Jesus Christ". — 12. He converts his family. — 13. And goes to Jerusalem. The following four scenes follow the Acts VI, 1-7, then the miracle of his raising to life a man being carried to his tomb (probably inspired by Acts VI, 8: *Stephanus.....faciebat prodigia*) and five scenes representing Acts VI, 9-VIII, 3. After that the accomplishment of his prophecy: his parents at table, his father holding a glass of wine turned into blood.

The cycles I, III, IV and V follow the versions of the MSS A, B, C, which differ but slightly. The parents are called here Antiochus and Perpetua (Calo calls the father Ruben), the incident of the doe is prominent as well as the burning of the changeling.



3 Martignacco, S. Nicolò, fresco from the legend of St. Stephen.

1. Stephen's parents kneel in prayer: an angel announces to them the birth of a son: I; V (see p. 207, Fig. 4, left half). — 2. Servants bring out food to the guests come for the birth of the infant: III (Fig. 1, left half). — 3. The birth of Stephen and his substitution by a changeling: I; III (Fig. 1, right half); IV; V (see pp. 207-208, Figs. 4 and 5, left half); VI. — 4. The devil puts the infant on board a ship: V (see p. 208, Fig. 5, right half). — 5. The infant is left in the woods and is suckled by a doe.¹¹ — 6. The bishop Julian having heard the wailing of a child, goes out and finds it suckled by a doe: I¹²; III (Fig. 2, left half); IV; V (see p. 209, Fig. 6). — 7. He takes the infant into his monastery and hands it over to a nurse: III (Fig. 2, right half). — 8. Grown up, Stephen (wearing a deacon's dalmatica) is being instructed by bishop Julian: I. — 9. An angel appears to him and orders him to go and preach in Cilicia:

¹¹ This is the only incident from the apocryphal legend represented on the predella of the Giovanni di Paolo polyptych in the church of S. Stefano in Siena. Cf. *F. Mason Perkins*, *Pitture senesi poco conosciute* (X), in: *La Diana*, 7, 1932, pp. 236-246 (p. 243 f., Pls. 15-18); *John Pope-Hennessy*, *Giovanni di Paolo 1403-1438*, London, 1937, pp. 76 and 107, note 45.

¹² Here the scene takes place indoors: the nurse holds the infant who is being suckled by the doe, bishop Julian present.

I; VI. — 10. Stephen is being blessed by bishop Julian before setting out: III (Fig. 3); IV (as a deacon). — 11. Idols fall at his bidding: I; IV. — 12. He goes to his parents' house and finds the changeling still in the cradle: IV. — 13. He throws the changeling into the fire: IV. 14. He raises to life a man being carried to his tomb: I.

The little church at Martignacco, dedicated to S. Nicolò, once upon a time was called S. Stefano. The five scenes that are still visible (Figs. 1-3), though partly faded, is all that remains of a cycle that probably decorated the greater part of the church. Little care has been taken of these frescoes, and it is questionable if the decay can be arrested.

APPENDIX

*Florence, Laurentian Library, Ashburnham MS 870**

DE NATIONE SANTI STEFANI

Temporibus itaque claudi cesaris erat quidam antiochus in civitate galilee viginiti, genere iudeorum, egregius et dives valde, cum usore sua perpetua, qui cum iam in quartadecimo et sexto anno pervenissent non haberent filium de mere iugiter ceperunt quer(e)re ad gloriam et laudem nominis sui, scilicet dei, filium habere mereretur. qui cum in ieiuniis et horationibus existentes ad spiritu sancto eis rev(ell)atum est quod filium conciperet et cum tempus pariedi deveniret, priusquam de utero ecrederetur, nomen eius ab angelo parentibus est assigniatum, dicens: Stefanus est nomen eius, de quo gaudebant parentes et exultabant, nec non tota familia de tanto excellenti pig(n)iore decorati. quod videns inimicus et hostis humane nature, comperiens invidia ductus nocte, in figura hominis, a(d) lectulum ubi puer quiescebat venit. quem tollens puer(um) et inde posuit idolum in lecto dimisit, puerumque in provincia troie supra mare deduxit apud quedam monasterium ubi erat quidam santissimi iuliani, et iustam portam dimisit, pannis involutum dimisitque ei et habiit. puer non diu iacens in terra in silentio noctis, vellocissime incepit frere. ad quem sanctus iulianus episschopus in lecto iacens et audiens, dixit ministris suis: fratres mei, ane vos fretis, an vox pueri est quam a(u)dio? qui dixerunt: vox pueri esse videtur, sed cavendum est, pater, ne hostis in lesione, sub voce pueri, decipiamini. episschopus itaque, gravi sopore sonni receptus, siluit. Videns itaque deus puerum suum assuffragico illius episschopi derelictum, recordatus est eius paransque nocte illa cerviam albam latentem eum et custodientem, cumque esset circa mediam noctem fera venit silvestrique beulluam que natura ei negaverat quomodo divina hac crementia pro custodia parvoli tribuit ante hostium dicti episschopi et crementissime cepit clamare. ad eius vocem exitatus sanctus episschopus, festinus ad hostium exiens, puerum a cervia custodiendum propiciens [*sic for* perspicie[n]s], nimio pavore percussus statim conversus ad dominum ait: domine deus eterne, qui asconditorum es conditor, tu qui scis omnia antequam fiant, digniare mihi famulo tuo secretum hoc revellare, si hoc ex te est loquatur, sin autem diabolica decettio abdatur, huic demergatur in profundum maris. eadem hora diserta est lingua cervie et de he(a) verba ei protulit, dicens: vere homo est, ne timeas, quem dominus tradidit tibi a(d) nutriendum. sanctus episschopus hoc audiens, gaudio magnio gavisus est valde. quem suscipiens, ait: gratias tibi ago, deus meus, qui digniatu es mihi famulo tuo filium sine corruptione tribuere. qui continuo tradidit eum a(d) nutriendum quoad usque ad licterarum s(t)udium pervenisset et usque a(d) sectimum annum in divina di(s)ciplina studuit. nempe post hec deus cor illius in omni scientia et intellectu scripturarum replevit cum spiritu timoris dei ita ut multa signia et miracula per eum ostenderet in populo. factus est autem ut angelus domini in somnio aparuit et dicens: surge et predica verbum dei cirenensi, alexandrie, cilicie et asie. qui protinil [*sic for* protinus] surgens, venit a(d) portam civitatis asie, in qua sex spiritus immundis [*sic !*] sedere: conspicien(te)s signum crucis inn eos facientes [*sic for* facie[n]s], dixesserunt. at ille gaudens intravit civitatem et hominibus hominibus verbum dei evangeli-zabat. mox a predicatione eius cirenensi et alexandrinorum, asiani et ciciliam convertit, et crediderunt in christum et batizavit eos. in terra ecce defuntus quidam, qui a(d) sepelliendum defferabatur, et turba civitatis cum eo frentes: q(u)os cum vidisset, beatus stefanus dicit eis: deponite hominem. cum autem deposuissent eum, expansis manibus oravit ad dominum, dicens: domine deus omnipotens, queso te ut animam istius defuncti a santis angelis iubeas reduci ad corpus, ut credant omnes, quia tu es deus bene-

* I thank Prof. Gino Corti for the revision of the transcription of this MS.

dictus in secula seculorum amen. Cunque oratio esset compreta, continuo surexit defuntus et cepit osculari pedes eius et dicere: vidite magistrum coram domino deo tuo, nunc oro ut istruas me discipulo esse christi, ut salvetur animam meam. Videntes populi mirabilia que fecit, crediderunt doctrine eius dicentes: quia profeta magnus hic est, quem dominus ostendit nobis. iterum ergo apparuit angelus domini, dicens ad eum: egredere hinc et vade in galileam et consolare domum patris tui, multum enim tempore assata et conturbata. qui mane surgens, ostendit coram sancto iuliano et impetrans benedictionem, significans se esse recessurum. qui audiens sanctus iulianus contristatus est nimis, noluit dimictere eum. at ille narans sibi angelicam visionem, statim benedixit ei sanctus iulianus et dimisit eum. qui continuo veniens a(d) mare, invenit quadam naviculam ad domino sibi paratam et intravit in ea et incepit navigare. cum autem venisset in civitatem suam et ductus a spiritu sancto intravit in domum patris sui, et tristes inveniens pater et mater: cur vos ita tristes estis? qui dixerunt: rogavimus dominum ut daret nobis filium et ipse dedit nobis filium tribulationis et scandalis. tunc conversus sanctus stefanus dicit diabolo: adiuro te per dominum yesum christum ut dicas cuius filius es. cui tremens dixit: sancte stefane, noli me intrinere et ego cunctos inimicos tuos consumo. tunc sanctus stefanus iuxit ignem deferrum, cumque delatu fuisset cepit demon stridere rugitus tauri ac omnium bestiarum voces emictere et continuo sanctus stefanus pro(i)ecit in ignem eu(m) et illum combuxit. et dixit patri et matri sue: ego sum filius vester, quem satan abstulit a vobis. letabantur pater et mater et parentes eius et sapientia eius viso miraculo. altera autem die veniens a(d) sinagogam, cepit predicare et aperire scripturas et solvere legem, afirans yesum esse filium et spiritum sanctum. a(d) cuius predicationem plusquam quinque milia virorum, exceptis parvulis et mulieribus, crediderunt in nomine domini yesu christi et batizati sunt, confitentes pariter yesum esse filium dei. Amen.

RIASSUNTO

Alle poche notizie su S. Stefano protomartire contenute negli Atti degli Apostoli gli agiografi medievali hanno aggiunto una serie favolosa di vicende e tali leggende, giunteci attraverso quattro manoscritti, sono state illustrate in almeno sei cicli pittorici, in Italia, tra il tardo Trecento e il tardo Quattrocento. Queste leggende sviluppano la vita del Santo iniziando dal momento in cui sua madre è incinta di lui. Il ciclo pittorico che più sviluppa tutta la leggenda è quello dipinto ad affresco nell'Oratorio di S. Stefano a Lentate sul Seveso, di scuola lombarda del tardo Trecento. Un ciclo interessante è quello che si trova a Martignacco (vicino Udine) nella chiesa di S. Nicolò, dipinto in affresco da un pittore locale influenzato da Vitale da Bologna; esso illustra i seguenti fatti della leggenda: Essendo nato il Santo i servitori portano rinfreschi ai visitatori venuti per complimentarsi (fig. 1, a sinistra); Il diavolo porta via il bambino e lo sostituisce con un piccolo diavolo (fig. 1, a destra); Il vescovo Giuliano trova il fanciullo lasciato dal diavolo e nutrito da una daina (fig. 2, a sinistra); Il vescovo consegna il fanciullo ad una bambinaia (fig. 2, a destra); Dopo molti anni ormai il fanciullo è divenuto un giovane al quale un angelo ha ordinato di andare a predicare in Cilicia, ed è benedetto dal vescovo Giuliano prima di partire (fig. 3).

Photo Credits: *Lux, Padova: Figs. 1-3.*