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## SHAPING THE SACRED

PAINTED CROSSES AND SHRINES IN THIRTEENTH-CENTURY PISA



Scholars have often remarked that Medieval painted crosses were highly imbued with liturgical, and mainly eucharistic, meanings, mostly as a consequence of their location over either altars or rood screens. It is self-evident that a cross hanging from the *tramezzo*, as shown in the famous scene of the *Presepe di Greccio* in Assisi, had to play a role as a visual focus for the lay people attending Mass in the nave, especially when the doors and windows of the barrier were closed in order to prevent non-clerics from seeing the Eucharistic Miracle; in such a context, the iconographic types of the alive and dead Christ were complementary, since the first one emphasized the Redemption and the rescuing of humanity from sin, whereas the other one pointed out that believers had to remember that Jesus's death was the essential condition for their soul's sake and that, because of that, no chance was left to sinners delaying their repentance.<sup>1</sup>

Less investigated is the role played by painted crosses in the shaping of the aura of sacredness connected with a pilgrimage site or a renowned shrine. In such contexts both iconographic and compositional features could be altered in order to emphasize the special phenomena of public worship taking place in the churches or chapels they were included in. As well as other works of art, such figurative objects could manage to evoke the feeling of God's special connection with an actual holy place in different ways: for example, they could either display a selection of subjects pointing to legends and devotional practices connected with that shrine, or be invested with an individual and autonomous cultic value, e. g. when they were credited with miraculous powers.

My focus here will be on Pisa, since this town proves to have preserved the largest amount of twelfth- and thirteenth-century painted crosses in the world, and it is only natural that most scholars dealing with the morphological and iconographical development of such figurative objects have dealt mainly with Pisan materials. On the occasion of the recent exhibition *Cimabue a Pisa* it was possible to admire many works of art which can be considered as products of the same artistic and cultural context and share many iconographical, compositional, and stylistic features.<sup>2</sup> Oddly

enough, the exhibition focussed almost exclusively on the evaluation of authorship as revealed by stylistic qualities, and only sporadic remarks were made about the meaning and structure of the items. For sure, one of the most important achievements was represented by a group of mid-thirteenth-century painted crosses attributed to a not better known 'Michele di Baldovino'.<sup>3</sup> Such has been the interpretation of a fragmentary inscription painted on the lower edge of a cross preserved in the Cleveland Museum of Art, a work of art deserving to be further investigated because of its iconographical and compositional peculiarities.<sup>4</sup>

It has been noticed that Christ stares at the beholder and is pretty alive, according to a compositional scheme that has been traditionally considered to be an archaizing feature after Giunta Pisano's introduction of the dead and suffering crucifix into Pisan painting; even the large *tabellone* including six Evangelical scenes seems to imitate an earlier type of image, which had been dismissed by Giunta in his famous works for Assisi, Pisa and Bologna.<sup>5</sup> Such a solution was probably meant for a category of beholders who preferred a more traditional genre of painted crosses, even if we ignore their actual motivations. No doubt, however, that this huge and elegant work of art is made unique by its attempt at visualizing a special connection with a local cultic phenomenon, as was first pointed out by James Stubblebine.<sup>6</sup> There is a compositional device which seems to be borrowed from late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century paintings such as the cross n° 432 in the Uffizi Gallery<sup>7</sup> and the very important Pisan cross displaying both Western and Byzantine features, usually known as the 'croce n° 20' in the National Museum in Pisa:<sup>8</sup> here, each end of the horizontal arm of the cross is painted with full-standing mourning figures, i. e. the Virgin and Saint John the Evangelist on the left, and the two Marys on the right; of course, such a solution aimed at

<sup>3</sup> BURRESI/CALECA 2005, esp. pp.79–82.

<sup>4</sup> Lorenzo Carletti, entry no. 40, in *Cimabue a Pisa* 2005, p.174f. (with earlier bibliography).

<sup>5</sup> For a synthesis on such topics cf. Anne Derbes' introduction to her book *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy. Narrative Painting, Franciscan Ideologies, and the Levant*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1996, pp.1–11.

<sup>6</sup> STUBBLEBINE 1987.

<sup>7</sup> BOSKOVITS 1993, pp.246–59.

<sup>8</sup> Lorenzo Carletti, entry no. 7, in *Cimabue a Pisa* 2005, pp.109–13 (with earlier bibliography).

<sup>1</sup> See especially BELTING 1990, p. 450, and FRUGONI 2001, pp.345–93.

<sup>2</sup> *Cimabue a Pisa* 2005.



1. Painted cross, attributed to "Michele di Baldovino". Cleveland (Ohio), The Cleveland Museum of Art (after Cimabue a Pisa 2005)

emphasizing the meaning of the cross as a Passion image and it was not by chance associated with the representations of six to eight Evangelical scenes on the *tabellone*, the part of the cross previously used to display the mourners.

In the Cleveland cross (fig. 1) the two Marys are substituted by two personages being unconnected with the Passion cycle: we recognize the apostle James the Elder introducing the blessed Bona of Pisa to the vision of Christ's face. The blessed Bona is a curious figure of lay mystic (ca. 1150–1207), whose renown was connected with a series of ecstatic experiences allowing her to have a direct conversation with Christ and several holy figures; she was especially devoted to Saint James, in whose honour she had founded a monastery and xenodochion in the town neighbourhoods, known as *San Iacopo de Podio*. Held by the Benedictine congregation of Santa Maria di Pulsano, and conceived as a *dépendance* of the monastery of San Michele in *Orticaria*, where Bona had spent most of her childhood, this place was promoted as a most holy shrine and a pilgrimage goal, granting visitors the same indulgences associated to the apostle's tomb in Santiago de Compostela, as is declared by an inscription on the exterior walls of the church; such a renown was enhanced by the worship of a relic, that of Saint James the Less, which had been brought there after the sack of Constantinople in 1204.<sup>9</sup>

It was here that, according to one of the versions of the *Vita*, Bona had dared ask Christ himself to provide her with an acheiropoietic image of his face. According to her customary behaviour, she was talking with Christ within the church of San Iacopo when she manifested her desire to receive an *ychonia* displaying the real features of the Saviour's physiognomy. Such an icon, as soon as it was received by the blessed woman, was installed in the sacred space and offered to the people's worship; most naturally, it soon proved to be an extraordinary object, imbued with miraculous qualities. Most of all, by means of it, Christ enabled Bona to see the Holy Trinity's likeness. While looking at the icon, Bona felt that its surface was turning into a kind of swollen flesh, whose shining brightness could not be borne by any human eye; the trinitarian truth was so revealed by means of such sensations as rotundity, brightness and warmth.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, the old furnishings of San Iacopo de Podio are now dispersed, but an engraving included in an appendix to the 1688 Bollandist edition of Bona's life provides us with



2. Holy Face, Engraving. *Acta Sanctorum*, Life of St. Bona (late seventeenth century) (after *Acta Sanctorum Maii*, Tomus VII)

a reproduction of the holy icon handed down by Christ to the holy woman; according to the Bollandists, who had been informed by some representatives of the Pisan clergy, it was then located in the monstrance of a side-altar on the southern wall, entitled to Bona herself, and happened to be encircled within a patchwork of different painted panels displaying a sequence of saints and some of Bona's most famous miracles.<sup>11</sup> The holy face was actually a Byzantinizing bust-length image of Christ, which, as far as we can judge from the *Acta sanctorum* print (reproducing its state in the late seventeenth century), made efforts to illustrate the trinitarian truth revealed to Bona through the image itself: Christ was given an elderly appearance, and a triangular sceptre was displayed as held on his left hand (fig. 2). From the iconographical point of view, this would have been a quite odd solution, being completely unprecedented in the art of both Byzantium and the Medieval West; but we can imagine that it must have been a panel made after a Byzantine model looking as an austere and dignified bust-length image of the

<sup>9</sup> On Bona, see most recently ZACCAGNINI 2004 (including a commented edition of Bona's *Vitae*, pp. 111–210); on San Iacopo de Podio, see PANARELLI 1992. The inscription on the exterior wall reads: "In questa chiesa di Sancto Iacopo è scripto essere tanta indulgentia/dodici di de l'anno quanta è andare a S(an)c(t)o/Iacopo di Galicia".

<sup>10</sup> *Vita sancte Bone virginis* [c. 1250], chap. XXVI, ed. ZACCAGNINI 2004, pp. 132f.

<sup>11</sup> HENSCHENIUS 1688, p. 859.

Pantokrator, holding a scroll which was sometimes later (maybe during a restoration) mistaken for a sceptre.

It is important to emphasize, however, that icon-like images of Christ were rare in the religious iconography of thirteenth-century Italy, and that even less frequently they happened to become the focal point of a worship phenomenon. The Son of God's standard image was by then the crucifix, and bust-length representations of the Saviour proved to be something connected with Byzantine tradition, even if they were less popular than icons of the Virgin and Child; they were used as central elements of the *Deisis* image, and were eventually included in the centre of some earlier dossals, before being substituted by the standard image of the Madonna.<sup>12</sup> Individual images were less customary, and probably reminded believers of such famous holy portraits as the *Mandyliion*, the *Veronica* or the Lateran *Acheropita*; not unlike such legendary images, the icon handed down to Bona was supposed to be an image "not made by human hands", displaying the true features of Christ's face.<sup>13</sup>

It is unlikely that the association of the blessed Bona with such a prestigious icon may have been ignored by anybody willing to promote her cult in town, as were the painter, donors, and *concepteurs* of the Cleveland cross. Its iconographical devices point to an original location within the church of San Iacopo de Podio itself, since James – the church's titular saint – is given a prominent position to the right of Christ; as such, the original composition aims at illustrating and emphasizing a connection with a special place, made holy by both Bona's ecstatic experiences and its role as a pilgrimage site reputed to be as sacred as the apostle's sepulchre in Galicia, and said to have been founded by the holy woman at Saint James's request. The cross was painted in just the same years when the anonymous author of the later version of Bona's life was writing his text, i. e. in the 1250s: this may mean that they both aimed at enhancing the importance of San Iacopo in the town's religious life. We have sufficient documentation to witness that their efforts proved successful, since in the following decades the church became a major goal for pilgrims, and the road leading to it was populated by a great deal of hermits, anchorites and other pious people who lived of the alms left there by passers-by.<sup>14</sup>

The unprecedented solution adopted in the Cleveland cross was undoubtedly meant for such beholders as local

pilgrims who made a rather long stroll outside the town to visit what they reputed to be an extraordinary and exceptional place, being the site of the famous theophanies and revelations connected with Bona's ecstatic experiences. In a sense, it is one of such experiences which was visualized to their eyes: they could see their fellow-citizen and nearly contemporary holy woman included in a privileged position within the cross, while the apostle James was introducing her to the vision of Christ's face, staring at the beholders in the same way he was reputed to do with the blessed woman, and replicating the wide-open and austere eyes of the acheiropoietic icon worshipped in the same church. Moreover, its shape evoked also that of another precious relic associated to Bona's deeds: just two days before her death, that holy woman had asked to mould her *cingulum ferreum* into an iron cross, which had been blessed by Christ's blood dropping from heaven.<sup>15</sup>

The substitution of mourners with other holy figures is less rare than one is inclined to think. According to Angelo Tartuferi, the original shape of the cross once preserved in the monastery church of San Salvatore in Fucecchio consisted of an horizontal arm ending in two panels which displayed, instead of the Virgin and Saint John represented on the *tabellone* according to the compositional tradition established in the twelfth-century Lucchese crosses, two couples of saints, a holy deacon and a woman dressed in red (possibly Stephen and Mary Magdalene), and two elderly figures who might be interpreted as Anne and Joachim.<sup>16</sup> This reconstruction, however, has been made only on the base of stylistic features, and we still lack any historical analysis of the liturgical context the cross was made for: the ancient intitulation of the monastery church to both the Virgin and the Saviour would justify the insertion of Mary's parents, but we have no more clues for the identification of the other two saints, whose presence should be connected with the liturgical and cultic traditions of the abbey – being a major goal for pilgrims stopping there on their journey from Northern Europe to Rome.

Another interesting variant of such a compositional solution is provided by the still uninvestigated "Miraculous Face" worshipped in the church of Santi Ippolito e Cassiano in Riglione, to the south of Pisa.<sup>17</sup> Even if this painting (fig. 3) is thought to date from the second half of the thir-

<sup>12</sup> For Tuscan examples of Byzantine-type *Deiseis* see the Pisan dossale from the church of San Silvestro (Cimabue a Pisa 2005, p. 202f., entry no. 56) and that by Meliore in the Uffizi Gallery (TARTUFERI 1990, p. 85f.).

<sup>13</sup> An abundant bibliography has been recently devoted to acheiropoietic images: see especially BELTING 1990, pp. 233–52; KESSLER/WOLF 1998; Volto di Cristo 2000; *Mandyliion* 2004; EVSEVA/LIDOV/ČUGREEVA 2005.

<sup>14</sup> *Vita sancte Bone virginis*, chap. XVI, ed. ZACCAGNINI 2004, p. 125f. Cf. *ivi*, pp. 39–43; PANARELLI 1992, *passim*; HERLIHY 1990, p. 133; CECCARELLI LEMUT 1995; BACCI 2000, pp. 29–33.

<sup>15</sup> *Vita sancte Bone*, chap. XVII, ed. ZACCAGNINI 2004, p. 126f.

<sup>16</sup> TARTUFERI 1990, p. 13; Lorenzo Carletti, entry no. 15, in Cimabue a Pisa 2005, p. 126f.

<sup>17</sup> Lorenzo Carletti (entry no. 46, in Cimabue a Pisa 2005, p. 187) considers this cross to be made by the same hand as the Cleveland Cross.



3. "Miraculous Face". Riglione (Pisa), Santi Ippolito e Cassiano (photo Michele Bacci)



4. Icon. Mount Sinai, Saint Catherine Monastery (photo Michele Bacci)

teenth century, it proves to imitate an earlier type displaying the two mourners on the *tabellone*; at both ends of the horizontal arm, however, are represented two bowing figures which are not included in the usual iconographic repertory of painted crosses. Any interpretation is made difficult by the bad preservation of the painted surface, especially on the left side, but there is enough evidence to say that they are two monastic saints: this is indicated by the black habit of the personage to the left, and by the very unusual attire of

the figure to the right, which proves to be an elderly man, barely nude but covered by his extremely long beard and hair. Such characteristics enable us to understand that he was meant to represent either Macarius or Onuphrius, according to an iconographic type borrowed from Byzantium – that of the ‘hairy anchorite’ – which seems to have been directly associated with these ancient hermits in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century paintings: a case in point is a fourteenth-century icon preserved in the collection of





5. Icon, Detail of fig. 4. with Saints Macarius and Onuphrius. Mount Sinai, Saint Catherine Monastery (photo Michele Bacci)

Saint Catherine Monastery on Mount Sinai, where the full-hair attire is attributed to Macarius, whereas Onuphrius is represented according to a more traditional type representing him nude, covered only by strategically located branches of trees (figs. 4, 5);<sup>18</sup> in other contexts, such as the early thirteenth-century murals in Mileševa, Onuphrius is displayed as a kind of “wild man”, whose body is completely covered by his beard and hair.<sup>19</sup>

Both of the Egyptian anchorites enjoyed a widespread renown in late Medieval Tuscany, and especially in the area of Pisa which was dotted with hermitages; Pisa itself had a small oratory entitled to Saint Onuphrius,<sup>20</sup> and one should not forget that it was there that the Dominican friar Domenico Cavalca wrote his Italian translation of the *Life of the Holy Fathers*, which was a source of inspiration for the frescoed cycle, executed within the Camposanto in the 1330s, displaying scenes of the Holy Fathers.<sup>21</sup> Of course religious fashion by itself cannot explain why these two saints were included within the iconographical structure of a painted cross, and I think that it must be understood as a way to illustrate the special intitulation of the building originally housing the image, probably the oratory of Saint Onuphrius itself or maybe some cave chapel officiated by hermits on the Pisan Mountain.

One of the most odd crosses of the thirteenth century is that still housed in the Pisan church of San Pietro in Vinculis, best known as San Pierino, which is supposed to date from about 1250 and is usually attributed to Enrico di Tedice or his brother Ugolino because of its stylistic features pointing to affinities with the cross preserved in San Martino’s and originally bearing the artist’s signature. This would make sense even from an historical point of view, since some documents witness that Enrico and his brother Ugolino were members of Archbishop Federico Visconti’s court, whose most important residence was established in San Pierino since the very beginnings of his episcopal rule, in 1253.<sup>22</sup>

Archbishop Visconti was one of the leading figures of the Roman curia in the mid-thirteenth century, and played an important role as promoter of the historical and apostolic role of his bishopric. Known as the author of a huge collection of sermons, he was responsible for the promotion of Pisa’s role as the place of Saint Peter’s first landing into the Italian peninsula, and he is reputed to have influenced or even conceived the iconographic programme of Nicola

<sup>18</sup> SOTIRIOU 1956–58, vol. I, pp.155–57.

<sup>19</sup> KASTER 1976.

<sup>20</sup> TOLAINI 1992, p.181, note 33.

<sup>21</sup> On the cycle and its iconographic meaning see FRUGONI 1988; BOLZONI 1996.

<sup>22</sup> On Visconti, see especially BÉRIOU 2001. On his relations with artists, see ANGIOLA 1977.

Pisano's pulpit for the town baptistry. Most of all, he made several efforts to enhance San Pierino's role as one of the most holy cult-places in town.<sup>23</sup>

Actually, the church was supposed to be a really sacred place, attempting at evoking the sacredness of the Roman building which shared its intitulation to Saint Peter *ad vincula*. San Pierino was actually a quite solemn church, first witnessed in the eighth century as Saint Peter "at the Seven Pines" and gradually rebuilt in the Romanesque style during the last decades of the eleventh century, when the house of the regular canons holding it since 1072 was attached to its structure.<sup>24</sup> It originally appeared as a two-storeyed building, consisting of a lower open loggia and an upper church whose interior was embellished with a Cosmatesque pavement and a cycle of mid-thirteenth-century frescoes displaying Evangelical scenes, starting from the counterfaçade and continuing on the northern and southern walls of the nave.<sup>25</sup> On the eastern wall, approximately behind the original location of the main altar, is included a flat niche decorated with a frescoed image of Saint Peter rescued from his imprisonment by an angel, which was meant as an illustration of the church intitulation.<sup>26</sup> It is a curious structure, playing a role more frequently associated with painted panels.

The huge (280×215 cm) and iconographically odd cross (fig. 6)<sup>27</sup> possibly hanged from a now disappeared rood screen in the upper church. It was probably a major focus for worshippers, as many details seem to suggest. Scholars were always struck by this odd composition which displays a cross set within a wider cross-shaped frame; it proves to be a kind of "image within an image" not unlike those Byzantine icons where emphasis was given to their central element by means of a widely decorated frame: an early fourteenth-century icon of Saint Nicholas on Mount Sinai is a case in point, since it includes a central *Vita-icon* composed of the bust-length portrait and a selection of scenes from his life (possibly a replica of the more famous twelfth-century image in the same collection) which is set within a figurative frame displaying a large selection of holy personages worshipped in the monastery. Such a compositional solution clearly aimed at enhancing and emphasizing the authoritative nature of the holy image represented in the centre.<sup>28</sup>

Composite icons were even more widespread and their compositional structure probably inspired the author of the above-mentioned icon of Saint Nicholas. Just to quote an example from the same collection, we can take into account a twelfth-century ivory icon of Saint Nicholas (fig. 7) set within an arch-shaped panel painted with a Deisis and several saints and dating from the Palaeologan era (ca. 1320–30).<sup>29</sup> In this case, authors attributed to holy icons a compositional formula previously used for icon-shaped reliquaries, especially staurothekai and containers of Passion relics, where the holy object was actually set and displayed within a silver or golden icon with decorated borders; a very strong point of contact was probably represented by those reliquaries which housed relic-icons such as the Holy Mandylion, whose replica in Genoa is actually set within a silver frame decorated with scenes of the Abgar legend.<sup>30</sup>

By such means, the compositional solution of the framed icon aimed at emphasizing the sacredness and devotional value of the image housed within it and its use in the San Pierino cross is by itself a hint at a cultic phenomenon originally connected to it. Such a view is corroborated by the results of a recent restoration, which has revealed that an earlier cross was actually set within it and that the shape of the overpainted inner cross corresponds exactly with its outer borders, as visitors to the Pisan exhibition could easily appreciate. Moreover, X-rays analysis has indicated that this earlier cross has an ovoidal cavity set under Christ's feet, and this cannot be understood but as a repository for relics.<sup>31</sup>

We are usually inclined to think that the use as 'speaking reliquaries' was a prerogative of three-dimensional images, but there are also many instances where painted panels were used in the same way. A case in point is Berlinghiero's cross in the National Museum of Villa Guinigi in Lucca, which presents a small cavity on its back, which was originally used as a repository for holy objects, just in the same way as that carved on the shoulders of the *Volto Santo* in Lucca Cathedral.<sup>32</sup> As with statues, however, this image does not include any compositional or iconographical clues enabling beholders to understand that a sacred object was actually included in it; by sure, the image was made sacred by the relic, but nothing witnesses the appreciation of such a relic by the cross worshippers and beholders.

<sup>23</sup> ANGIOLA 1977, p. 2f.; BÉRIOU 2001, p. 114f.

<sup>24</sup> On the early history of San Pietro in Vincoli see PERA 1938; GARZELLA 1990, p. 113f.; REDDI 1991, p. 350f.; TOLAINI 1992, pp. 16, 31, 62, 103; PALIAGA/RENZONI 1999, pp. 69–71.

<sup>25</sup> Chiara Bozzoli, entries nos. 62–65, in BURRESI/CALECA 2003, p. 209f.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 210 (with datation to the eleventh century).

<sup>27</sup> Lorenzo Carletti, entry no. 41, in Cimabue a Pisa 2005, p. 178f.

<sup>28</sup> See supra, note 18.

<sup>29</sup> Annemarie Weyl Carr, entry no. II.10, in San Nicola 2006, p. 210 (with earlier bibliography). On composite icons, see VOCOTOPoulos 2000.

<sup>30</sup> On such phenomena see, most recently, PEERS 2004, esp. chap. 5, pp. 101–31, and WOLF 2004, esp. pp. 11–16.

<sup>31</sup> Lorenzo Carletti, entry no. 41, in Cimabue a Pisa 2005, p. 178f.

<sup>32</sup> Villa Guinigi 1968, pp. 137–39 (entry no. 226). On the iconographic and compositional devices of this cross see SANDBERG-VAVALÀ 1929, pp. 541–48.



6. Painted Cross. Pisa, San Pietro in Vinculis (San Pierino) (photo Michele Bacci)



7. *Saint Nicolas, Ivory-icon., Mount Sinai, Saint Catherine Monastery (photo Michele Bacci)*

What matters here, however, is not only the sacralization of the image by means of an inserted object, but also the special setting of an old image within such a later and pretty original figurative frame, since this meant that the cross itself was believed to be a miraculous object of worship. The San Pierino solution was intended for similar purposes, but its structure was a very original one, inglobing and in some way giving a new emphatic shape to the older image; the latter was hidden inside the new one, and the sophisticated visual rhetorics of the composition became more crucial and important than the sacralization of the earlier image by means of a relic, which was then completely made inaccessible to worshippers so that there are some grounds to imagine that its existence was just forgotten. It is the cross-frame itself to construct the image's efficaciousness: it bears emphasis to the central image by replicating and mirroring its shape, but at the same time the dynamic, even if elusive, relation of inside and outside, as is exemplified by the mourner's suspended position next to the horizontal arm of the inner cross and by the representation of Peter's denial close to the base, manages to give expression to the paradoxical meaning of the Crucifixion as the death of an immortal being who contains the world and at the same



8. *Nielloed Encolpion. Vicopisano (Pisa) (photo Michele Bacci)*

time is contained within its creation. The frame proves in this way to be much more than a barrier marking the border between beholders and the object to contemplate, since its function seems to be that of an intermediary space closing and disclosing the viewer's access to the central image.

Such an odd compositional solution seems to be linked with that used in Byzantine processional crosses and even more in cross-frame staurothekai and enkolpia. Such works, often thought to be worn by believers, revealed their holy content by replicating its archetypal shape two times, i. e. by means of both their cross-shaped frame and the crucifixion scene displayed at the centre. An early ninth-century nielloed encolpion (fig. 8) is preserved in the Pieve of Vicopisano, an ecclesiastical building which was directly connected with the canons of Pisa cathedral and had been ruled by Visconti from 1230 to his accession to the archiepiscopal throne; there are also some clues enabling us to suppose that this most precious reliquary, including an



9. Painted Antependium from San Salvatore alla Berardenga. Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale (photo Soprintendenza ai Beni Artistici, Siena)

important fragment of the True Cross, had been gifted by Visconti himself, who was by then an influent collaborator of Innocent IV, since it might have been only one item of a set of Byzantine silver objects sharing the same stylistical features which were originally owned by the Pope, such as the *Fieschi-Morgan* staurotheke now preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.<sup>33</sup>

Be this as it may, the nielloed Crucifixion revealing the reliquary's holy content, its shape being echoed by that of the cross frame, may be regarded as a compositional formula providing an actual model for the San Pierino cross; actually, such a solution aimed, in both cases, at involving beholders in the contemplation of a sacred object inserted in the surface centre. This matter of fact indicates that a very special religious and devotional meaning was attached to the older cross, which could not be a simple consequence of the common practice of inserting relics within holy images;

here it is the cross-shaped image itself to be proposed to beholders as an object deserving respect and worship.

A key to understand this *unicum* may be found in the special veneration associated, within San Pierino's, to a very special relic, that of the Beirut icon's miraculous blood. According to a legend falsely attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria and first recorded in the Acts of the seventh Ecumenical Council of 787, an icon of Christ (later thought to be the work of Nichodemus) had started bleeding after an attack on the part of the Jews living in Berytus, who had decided to torture it with the same torments once inflicted on Christ's body. Such a story was one of the first tellings attributing a strong Eucharistic meaning to the Saviour's image, meant as a virtual substitute of his body; the blood shed by the icon's surface was to be intended, according to some theologians (including Thomas Aquinas) as the only possible blood relics of Christ, since they insisted that all parts of His body had been actually involved in the Resurrection, so that it would have been blasphemous to believe that any corporeal relic of His was extant on earth. The Latin versions of the legend went so far as to say that the Berytus synagogue, converted into a church meant to house the mirac-

<sup>33</sup> BACCI 2004. The few rare instances of Eastern painted crosses, such as the thirteenth-century one preserved in the village of Chazhashi near Ushguli in Svaneti, display a similar cross-frame composition which is probably to be interpreted as a low-cost version of a monumental cross-frame metalwork. Cf. KENIA-ALADASHVILI 2000, fig.18.

ulous icon and blood, was the first to be consecrated to Christ himself.

As I have pointed out elsewhere,<sup>34</sup> since the tenth century this legend happened to spread through the Latin West by virtue of its involvement in the shaping of a liturgical usage best witnessed by Catalan and Italian passionaries, that of the *Passio imaginis Salvatoris* or, simply, *Festum Salvatoris*, yearly commemorated on November 9. Such a feast, allegedly instituted by the Bishop of Beirut immediately after the miracle, was reputed to be a major one, since it was usually attributed nine lessons based on the Latin translation of Pseudo-Athanasius's text. As such, it was observed by many cathedrals and abbeys, and, since it was commonly employed as the *communis dies* of all churches entitled to the Saviour, it happened to be the major feast of the Lateran church before it was transformed (with a process starting in the twelfth century) in a purely Roman solemnity by the creation of a legend concerning the miraculous apparition of Christ's face in the church apse at the moment of its dedication by Pope Sylvester. Ampullae of the holy blood from Beirut were also widespread: one was supposed to be inserted in the Lucca *Volto Santo*, and others were worshipped in Luni, Venice, Bruges, and Oviedo, even if it was commonplace that the most important was kept in the relic collection of the Lateran *ecclesia Salvatoris*.

The painted antependium now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena, painted in 1215 and originally located in the abbey church of San Salvatore alla Berardenga, displays the best preserved iconographic cycle of the Beirut legend, where the injured image is explicitly represented as a monumental painted cross, including a *tabellone* and rectangle-shaped ends (fig. 9); it is self-evident that such was the shape that thirteenth-century believers attributed to this holy image, despite the fact that, according to some Byzantine sources, the miracle-working icon had been a narrative image displaying the Crucifixion scene.<sup>35</sup> The legendary features of the famous Beirut image had been frequently replicated by Byzantine icons which were said to have shed blood when they were stabbed with a knife: such icons as the bleeding image of Christ in Saint Sophia in Constantinople were highly appreciated by Latin pilgrims and they actually stimulated the spreading of analogous cultic phenomena and pious stories in the West, where they were always associated, however, with cross-shaped, instead of quadrangular, panels.<sup>36</sup>

A very good instance of this process is to be found in Lucca, where the *Volto Santo* itself, a three-dimensional

wooden statue, was indebted to the legendary archetype of the Beirut image.<sup>37</sup> The twelfth-century cross of Santa Giulia, now in San Martino, Lucca, started to be worshipped as a miracle-working image at the end of the thirteenth century, when the local people said that it had shed blood after being struck to the right eye by a stone thrown by a dice-player who had lost his money. Worshippers were granted a rich indulgence, and the cross was given a special location within the church. According to some fourteenth-century documents, it was held over a wide rood screen, and at its feet was set a bowl where the miraculous blood was collected and distributed to visitors. In the 1360s a merchant named Davino Brunetti made a rich legacy which was to be used to frame the cross within a "sumptuous tabernacle": this structure is described in the document as made of wood and being decorated in gold on his outer edges and with a deep blue background, filled with stars, in the centre. One can imagine that this was a kind of small *cielo*, or baldachin, intended for housing the holy cross.<sup>38</sup>

A cross-frame image not unlike the San Pierino cross, the "Crocifisso del Capitello" in San Marco, Venice, was called to play the role of a stabbed and bleeding icon directly replicating customs associated with the holy places of Constantinople. Included in a ciborium made of marble elements transferred from the Byzantine capital, this image was at the centre of a cultic phenomenon which was directly linked with its Eastern models, since, at least in some sources dating from the Modern era, it was said to be a Greek panel captured by the Venetians during the Fourth crusade. Most meaningfully, this image contributed to shape San Marco's role as a holy place replicating the authoritative nature of the famous relic collections of the *Polis*, and it is meaningful that its worship started in a place whose treasury housed a very important ampulla of the Beirut blood.<sup>39</sup>

A like case of coexistence of both a Beirut ampulla and a bleeding image is witnessed within the Lateran church. If the blood relic was said to be preserved in the main altar together with many other holy objects, an image of Christ, located over the entrance to the Chapel of Saint Sylvester, was reputed to have shed blood when a Roman Jew had struck it with a stone; this image is mentioned in the twelfth-century *Ordines Romani* as an object involved in the ceremony of the Supreme Pontiff's consecration, whereas it is referred to as "the Saviour's holy face" in Gervasius of Tilbury's *Otia imperialia* and as a 'Maestà' in a late fourteenth-century Florentine source. Both expressions are too laconic to allow us to identify its actual shape and iconography, but it is worth considering that

<sup>34</sup> BACCI 1998; BACCI 2002.

<sup>35</sup> BACCI 1998, *passim*; ARGENZIANO 2000, pp. 147–70.

<sup>36</sup> In general on bleeding icons see SANSTERRE 1999.

<sup>37</sup> On such connections, see BACCI 2005.

<sup>38</sup> See BACCI 1998.

<sup>39</sup> BRENK 1999.

they don't prevent us from identifying it with a painted cross, since they were frequently applied to like objects (the *Volto Santo* and the Catalan *Majestats* providing the best witness of this assumption).<sup>40</sup>

The replication of such stories and cult-phenomena within the Lateran basilica as well as in other churches where the Saviour was specially worshipped can be understood as a consequence of a step-by-step process of Romanization of liturgical and devotional usages both within and outside the Papal town. Since the twelfth century the Apostolic see had deliberately aimed at reinterpreting the ancient *festum Salvatoris* as a specifically Roman custom and consequently managed to obliterate its historical connections with the Christian East, which were not only manifested by the origins of the legend in Beirut, but also by its affinities with a consuetude of the Greek church, that of the recital of miracle-stories involving famous icons on the occasion of the Feast of Orthodoxy, which coincided with the common day of church dedications (τῶν ἐγκαινίων τὴν ἡμέραν) and fell on the first Sundays of Lent, i. e. on the day after the feast of Saint Theodore Tiron, or Saturday of the *kolyvoi* miracle. It is worth considering that Saint Theodore was associated in Roman calendars to a fixed date, that of November 8, i. e. the vigil of the *festum Salvatoris*, and that two important Roman passionaries, including one made for the Lateran in the mid-twelfth century, prescribed several lessons concerning miracles of famous images preserved in town to be read on November 9. In the same way, the pub-

lic worship of a bleeding image in the Lateran church can be interpreted as a further attempt at creating local alternatives to the much renowned miracle-working icons of the Christian East.<sup>41</sup>

Let's come back to the huge San Pierino cross. The documentation at our disposal reflects a situation not unlike that in Rome, Venice, and Lucca. Actually, the church housed an outstanding relic of the Beirut holy blood, as was clearly stated by a devotional inscription on a leaden plate, witnessing that a relic *de sanguine ycone quam fecit Nichodemus* had been put there by Archbishop Pietro Moriconi on November 19, 1118;<sup>42</sup> this holy liquid was probably the same contained in the ampulla filled with blood *de yconie Domini* which had been brought from Rome to Pisa by Pope Gelasius II less than two months earlier, on September 26, when he had solemnly consecrated the town cathedral by inserting this and other relics within the main altar.<sup>43</sup>

By such means, the leading town of Pisa had obtained a most precious relic associated with the fame of the Lateran church, and it can be argued that, as in Rome, Venice and Lucca, a painted cross started being venerated in San Pierino's as a blessed image echoing the Beirut legend. It is reasonable, even if conjectural, to imagine that such characteristics were already attributed to the earlier painted cross during the twelfth century, whereas in ca. 1250 the San Pierino clergy, and maybe Federico Visconti himself, thought to give a new emphasis to that holy object by including it into a cross-frame image imitating the shape of an old reliquary cross.

<sup>40</sup> BACCI 2002, p. 38.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 31–39.

<sup>42</sup> BANTI 1990, esp. p. 303f.

<sup>43</sup> SCALIA 1992, esp. p. 12.

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