

The Piety's Theatre: mobile crucifixes in holy Friday's depositions

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Almost 40 years ago, Gesine and Johannes Taubert, catalogued in their essay on “Kruzifixe mit schwenkbaren Armen”, thirty-five crucifixes with mobile arms (four more by documentary way/plus they document four of them), scattered around central Europe and the regions of the centre of Italy.

All Italian crucifixes mentioned by the Tauberts are referred to the tuscan and the umbrian environment, but the Tauberts themselves are convinced that their catalogue “die gewiss nicht sämtliche noch erhaltenen Kruzifixe dieser Art beziffert”. In fact, in the following decades, in Italy many crucifixes with mobile arms have been discovered and/or restored. This news about crucifixes often appear in some local publication or exhibition catalogues without facing the most important question: the function of such simulacra, their meaning and their use.

The Tauberts tried instead to give answer to questions that instinctively arise when you face this kind of works of art: “Wo überall und aus welcher Zeit gab es solche Kruzifixe, und weshalb waren ihre Arme beweglich? Mit anderen Worten: Welche Funktion hatten diese merkwürdigen Bildwerke?”. When they stated “diese Kruzifixe mit beweglichen Armen ausgestatter wurden, um die Kreuzabnahme vollziehen zu können, so muss das ein am Karfreitag verbreiter Brauch gewesen sein”, they were referring to some studies that have just been published on holy Friday deposition, in particular the one by Solange Corbin. Miss Taubert did speak about crucifixes with mobile arms but just as subjects of the popular *depositio*, therefore unknown to clerical rites and not included in the official liturgical ceremonies. Both Brooks and Young, on the contrary, didn't know such crucifixes, therefore they find themselves in trouble when they had to interpret the medieval sources which seemed to allude to this kind of simulacra.

The conclusion reached by the Tauberts, unlike Corbin's, is that these crucifixes were used during the *depositio* ceremonies not only when managed by laymen (popular *depositiones*), but also by the clergy in the simpler and more rigorous liturgical *depositiones*.

Later-discovered simulacra and testimonies persuade us about two fundamental points: that the liturgy of the Christ's Passion, that is its representation, was modified in time becoming more realistic and narrative, we could say in a more dramatic way; and that, in the late Middle Ages, ‘mobile-armed’ crucifixes were functional to different forms of representation of Christ's Passion, Death and Deposition, performed by the clergy, the monks and the laymen.

Florence

In 1490, canons of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence decided to order “quidam crucifixes ligneus ita congegatus ut membra moveri videantur et serviat pro illum ostendendo populo in venere sancto quolibet anno”. The lost crucifix, by Andrea della Robbia, was already included in Tauberts' catalogue.

The Florence one is an important example of adorned liturgical deposition, according to Corbin's definition. Manuscript 21 of the Florence musical Archives, in S. Maria del Fiore, describes, among others, the ritual to be followed *In Processione veneris sancti*, which introduced to the *Depositio* ceremonial, that took place around the *feretrum*, “sul quale è forse un simulacro del Cristo schiodato e morto”. In the ritual, songs were distributed to the *cantores*, who acted as real characters: for example there were singers who represented the *mulieres*, those who played *Maria*, etc. Through this expedient, ceremonials were adorned

though still marked by “a severe simplicity”. This demonstrates “equilibrio sommo, bilanciato tra l’austerità e la fissità del gesto liturgico trasmesso da secoli e l’esigenza fattasi più urgente di visualizzare e rendere più comprensibile il mistero”.

Assisi

Among medieval Umbria towns, Assisi offers the best conditions to study citizens’ religion. A remarkable part of the local population were affiliated to the Disciplinati or Raccomandati di Maria or Franciscan Terziari confraternities, whose statutes have been preserved.

The Illuminati, the most ancient Umbrian laudario of a ruled confraternity, reports the statute, written in 1327, of the N.S. Jesus Christ Crucified confraternity of S. Stefano in Assisi; chapter VIII prescribes as follows for the Holy Friday: “In hora autem prime omnes induti vestibus vadant ad ecclesiam beati Francisci et beate Marie Angelorum lacrimosas laudes et cantus dolorosos et amara lamenta Virginis matris vidue, proprio orbatae filio, cum reverentia populo representent, magis ad lacrimas intendentes, quam ad verba vel voces”. The same indication appears in other Assisi confraternities, it is therefore possible to imagine that all the brothers gathered inside San Francesco Church or in the church parvis, took somehow part in the Passion ‘representation’.

The deposition scene is described in one of the Passion ‘laude’ included in the Illuminati. The composition, two voices, one of the Virgin and one of the devotees, start with Maria inviting her devotees to cry with her: “O discipogl della croce / venite a piangere cum maria” (an explanation specifies that they have to turn their eyes to the cross where Christ is nailed and achieve a rule). Maria then moans in front of her dead Son and the devotees describe Christ body covered with bruises and sores. Maria comments as Giuseppe d’Arimatea and Nicodemo unnailed Christ from the wooden cross and lay him down on her arms. The woman shed tears on her wounded son and she is unwilling to break away.

It is easy and suggestive to suppose that this ‘unnailed’ (‘scavigliato’) Christ which is laid in his mother’s lap be a mobile armed crucifix. There is no trace of this fourteenth-century crucifix, except that in 1500 a testamentary bequest, amounting to 30 florins *pro actatione et ornamento capelle s. Crucis*, was left to the benefit of a chapel of the Crucifix inside the basilica of san Francesco di Assisi. The chapel was located in the atrium at the entrance of the lower church on the left wall. In 1511 it changed its name to San Rocco, while the dedication to the Crucifix passed to the ancient San Giovanni Battista chapel, in the south part of the transept. The crucifix that is now exposed in santa Caterina chapel, just in front of the entrance of the lower church, comes from this chapel. It is a wooden painted crucifix, with mobile arms, of the end of the XV cent., made by Giovanni Teutonico who was commissioned many other crucifixes, with or without mobile arms, for churches belonging to Frati Minori of the Umbria region. According to Lunghi, in san Francesco there were no chapels that preserved the crucifix before 1500, the simulacrum with mobile arms, needed for holy Friday paraliturgy, could have been brought by civic confraternities or could be placed in san Rufino Cathedral. In this cathedral, in fact, many confraternities had their altars. Documents of the cathedral archives, for example, report that in 1503 a testamentary bequest was left “per una fune per la spera del crucifisso”, i.e. for the lamp burning before the crucifix itself. San Rufino cathedral holds, in fact, a late crucifix with mobile arms (for whose payment there is a document, dated 1561, received by polychrome painter Dono Doni) which is still used in Assisi for the holy Friday rites.

In fourteenth century laude collection (after 1381), always coming from S. Stefano confraternity in Assisi (code 36/4 of the Archivio Capitolare of Assisi), there is a clear testimony of the deposition from the cross. In fact, one of the laudes starts in this way: “*Ista laus dicitur in die veneris sancti propter scavigliationem domini nostri Iesus Christi*”. The word ‘unnauling’ (‘scavigliazione’) underlines the main subject of the

lauda, i.e. the unnailing of Jesus' dead body, a crucifix mobile-armed, made by Giuseppe d'Arimatea and Nicodemo, and his laying on the rock where his body was anointed, inside the sepulchre or in the Virgin's arms. The expenses ledger of santo Stefano confraternity reports that five coins were spent between May and June 1338 to buy the wood needed for a crucifix in Bettona; the same page reports the expenses for sculptor Pietruccio from Picziche, who carved it.

Perugia

In the laud book of Perugia confraternity, dated 1374, we can find the same lauda as 36/4 code (in this version the first verse is *Incipit Laus de Passione de Cruce*), in which, however, there are no explanations and rubrics contained in the Assisi version. This would suggest the Perugia performance was freer and more theatrical, while the Assisi one was more devotional: in fact laud in Assisi were mainly lyrical and narrative, and the theatrical mimesis was strictly controlled through exact explanations. As in Assisi, performances in Perugia probably used a mobile-armed crucifix.

A half-dramatic sermon, held by Roberto da Lecce in Perugia at Easter 1448, documents:

Adì 3 de marzo, in domeneca, predocò frate Ruberto in piazza dove ce fuoro circa quindece milia persone fra citadini e contadini: et li homini e le donne pigliavano el luoco alle 5 e alle 6 ore de notte; et teneva la predica circa 4 ore. Et fece la predica della santa pace, et poi mostrò alla gente uno crucifisso, de modo che fece piangere ogni persona cordialissimamente, et durò circa meza ora el piangere e 'l gridare Iesu misericordia [...]. Adì 29 de marzo, che fu el vienardi santo, recomenzò ditto frate Ruberto a predicare in piazza ogni dì, et al giovedì santo predicò della comunione, et invitò tutto el populo per lo vienardi santo; et nel fine della dicta predica della Passione fece quista representatione: cioè predicava in capo della piazza fuora dalla porta de San Lorenzo, dove era ordinato uno terrato dalla porta per fina al cantone verso casa de Cherubino de gli Armanne; et li quando se devè mostrare el Crucifisso, uscì fuora di S. Lorenzo Eliseo de Cristofano, barbiere de porta S. Agnolo, a guisa de Cristo nudo con la croce in spalla, con la corona de spine in testa, e le suoi carne parevano battute e flagellate como quando Cristo fa battuto; et li parechie armate lo menavano a crucifigere; et andarono giù verso la fonte intorno alle persone e per fina al remboco de gli Scudellare, e argiero su alla udiencia del Cambio, e argiero nella porta de S. Lorenzo, e intraro nel dicto terrato, et li a mezo al terrato glie se fece incontra una a guisa de la Vergene Maria vestita tutta de negro, piangendo e parlando cordogliosamente quillo che accadeva in simile misterio della passione de Iesu Cristo; et gionti che fuoro al pergolo de frate Ruberto, li stette un pezo con la croce in spalla, et sempre tutto el populo piangeva e gridando misericordia; e puoi puseno giù la dicta croce, e pusonce uno crucifisso che ce stava prima, e dirizaro su la dicta croce, et allora li stridi del populo fuoro assai maggiori; e ai piei della dicta croce la Nostra Donna comenzò el lamento insieme con S. Giovanni et Maria Madalena e Maria Salome, li quali disseno alcune stanzie del lamento della passione. E puoi venne Nicodemo e Ioseph ab Arimathia, e scavigliarono el corpo de Iesu Cristo, quale lo poseno in gremio della Nostra Donna, e puoi lo miseno nel monumento; et sempre tutto el populo piangendo ad alta voce. Et molti disseno che mai più fu fatta in Peroscia la più bella e la più devota de questa. Et in quella mane se fecero sei frate: uno fu dicto Eliseo, quale era uno stolto garzone [...]. Et in capo de 3 o 4 mese, el ditto Eliseo de Cristofano de P. S. Agnolo uscì de frataria, et retornò a l'arte delli barbieri, et è chiamato per nome Domenedio; et poi tolse moglie, et fu magior ribaldo che non era prima.

Once the holy Friday sermon is finished, fra' Roberto starts the Passion sacred representation. A half naked actor comes out from the cathedral with a cross on his shoulders, escorted by an armed squad, and goes down in the crowded square, then he goes up again on the church parvis. Here the grieved Virgin goes towards him, probably declaring some stanzas of the lauda. The two actors stop under the preacher's pulpit (built in 1439 and still present nowadays). At this point the actor who plays the role of Christ exits and a statue of a crucifix is hoisted on the cross. It is probably a crucifix with mobile arms 'unnailed' ('scavigliato') by Giuseppe d'Arimatea and Nicodemo, then laid on the afflicted mother's lap and into the sepulchre.

A mobile-armed crucifix, made by Agostino di Duccio around the middle of XV cent., and coming from the Franciscan convent of san Francesco al Prato in Perugia, is preserved in Bettona, in the san Crispolto church. Could it be the crucifix used for fra' Roberto's sermon?

Foligno

Thanks to the Mario Sensi's studies, we have a quite precise description of the holy Friday ceremonies in the XV-century Foligno. It gathered "un po' tutta la cittadinanza con le sue tre grandi manifestazioni di massa: la predica, la processione e la sacra rappresentazione [...] nettamente distanziate nel tempo e così suddivise: al mattino la predica [...], nel pomeriggio si teneva la processione e, dopo il tramonto, la sacra rappresentazione". The evening devotion was performed in the town hall square, before the Cathedral's southern entrance, and was supported by the san Feliciano confraternity, who would set the stage and provide for the scene costumes. The confraternity Oratory's sacristy contained a real store of theatre objects, "dalle parrucche, alle maschere, alle barbe; dalle ali da angelo, a quelle da demonio, agli scettri, alle corone regali".

The 1425 confraternity inventory describes "cose che ianno en una cassa da fare marie, in prima – quattro chiovi di ferro da schiavellatione – item dui angnuli de carta encollata con alette d'oro fino – item dui mammulitti de lingno bianchi et una crocitta dellu latrone – item duo idoli entagliati". It moreover reports "crocifisso de lingno che apre et chiude l'ochi" and "una crocie dove se chiava el salvatore". It is clearly a mobile-armed crucifix. The 1450 inventory reports the Virgin's black cloak "uno monte pinto con lu telaro del venardi santo" and "uno martello de legno da fare la schiavellatione". The 1453 one adds to the "crocifisso", clearly a mobile one, "dui latroni atti alla devozione della schiavellatione". Of the three devotions contained in the san Feliciano confraternity documents, the holy Friday one is called 'schiavellatione'.

In territory around Foligno, there are two mobile-armed crucifixes. The crucifix in the Cathedral sacristy, set in a chapel painted in Niccolò di Liberatore's workshop and coming from the Misericordia confraternity, probably has mobile arms. Another mobile-armed crucifix is set in Marano, near Foligno, inside a small temple that imitates the holy sepulchre of san Bartolomeo convent.

Bologna

483 manuscript of Vittorio Emanuele's fund of National Library in Rome includes texts on devotions and sacred representations. They have been gathered for the "Compagnia de Sancto Ieronimo, in loco dito da Santa Anna" of Bologna by "Thomas Leonis bononiensis", who signs as *scriptor* and dates the code to 1482. The *Pianto de nostra Donna*, one of the texts dedicated to the narration of the Christ's Passion and Death, is enriched with very interesting explanations that relate about the course of the devote action. From these explanations, we can gather the use of a mobile-armed crucifix. Once Jesus was dead, after "multi pianti e lacrime" and "grandissimo lamento de stridi e de battimenti de mani" by the Virgine and other bystanders,

Yoseph e Nicodemo se lievino suxo e ponano le scale a la croce, e Yoseph vada suxo per la scala e prima lighi il corpo de Christo a la croce a traverso con un panexello. Poi voltisi a la man dritta e con lo martello dia una botta ne la puncta del chiodo per mostrare de cavarlo. E subito che la Vergene Maria santa quella botta, con gran lamento dica ad alta voce, e Yoseph stia fermo ad ascoltarla [...]. Yoseph cavi fuera el chiodo de la man dritta e con giesti da cavarlo per forza. Poi voltisi a San Zohanne e dicali porgendoli il chiodo [...]. Yoseph cavi quello dela sinistra mano e dialo a San Zohanne senza dir altro. Poi Yoseph sostenga el corpo e Nicodemo cavi fuera el chiodo di piedi e dialo a san Zohanne. Po' mandino giuso il corpo e tucti lo sostengano. La Vergene Maria el prenda a traverso e ponase a sedere in megio con le spalle apozate a la croce e il viso volto verso il populo e tenga il corpo del figliol morto disteso in grembo a traverso. Le due Marie, ne stia una da un lato da la Vergene e l'altra dal altro lato, volte con lo viso come sta la Vergene. Yoseph e Nicodemo stiano verso il capo de Christo. La Magdalena stia ali piedi e san Zohanne dal lato de la Magdalena. Come sono acunci a li luochi suoi, tucti insieme piangano battandosi con le mani.

Como

A particular case is the one of the famous miraculous crucifix of the SS. Crocifisso Sanctuary in Como; it is a statue with mobile arms and a postiche hair, from the last decade of fourteenth century. According to the tradition, the high-venerated simulacrum came from Paris, in 1399, carried by crowds of pilgrims. After the

recent restorations, however, it was dated back to the last decades of fourteenth century. According to recent studies, it came from the surrounding of Florence.

The crucifix, originally used as reference image during pilgrimages – in spite of its mobile arms that suggest a theatrical use – kept its processional function also at the Annunciata Church in Como. It was exactly during the Holy Thursday procession that a miracle took place. The Como crucifix, was used as a normal static crucifix: ancient prints already show it carried on the cross as a processional crucifix. Furthermore, mobile-armed crucifixes weren't used as static crucifixes in churches during the year and were often laid in places inaccessible to the public. The Como crucifix, however, because of its miraculous power and its function of attracting devotion, was and is still now located on the Sanctuary main altar, beside angels holding the miracle chains and the statues of the Virgin and of San Giovanni.

There is therefore a same kind of simulacra for different para-liturgical and theatrical functions. Ancient documents report that the mobile-armed crucifix could represent the Christ's body during the liturgical ceremonies of the Holy Friday *depositio*, inside the churches, were included in richer and more dramatic devotion performances of the laymen, were placed in confraternities oratories or outdoor in municipal common spaces, and also used as homiletic instruments in half-dramatic sermons mostly by convent friars.

In particular, as for laymen ceremonies, the Holy Friday *depositio* will be enriched with the external procession aiming at bringing the Christ's dead body among the people, once more a statue (the deposed Christ with mobile arms and legs or the dead Christ simulacrum. Christ's Passion and Death won't just be introduced as performances and events to be only held on holy Friday it will be possible to observe, like pilgrims did, real reproductions of places and moments of the Passion, the Sacred mountains.

Devout actions in which mobile-armed crucifixes - as well as all the images and simulacra of dead but close-to-resurrection Christ - are protagonist together with the clergy, the preacher or the laymen, constitute the Piety's Theatre. The Piety's Theatre re-presents the pact of love established by God with man through his Son. Christ accepted to suffer pain and death for us, thus forming a new alliance and giving everybody a chance of salvation. Participating to Christ's Passion and Death in the various forms of the Piety's Theatre was and is an unforgettable event for the faithful, was and is suffering, death to sins, conversion and salvation.

However, salvation, eternal happiness to be near God can only exist if the *pietas*, the merciful love, the courageous and active charity of Christ become ours.