

AN ALBERO (GENEALOGY) OF THE ICONOGRAPHY OF CARAVAGGIO'S *BEHEADING OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST* IN VALLETTA

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As the readers of this volume are well aware, for the past 30 years every significant book on Caravaggio has cited archival documents discovered by Monsignor Sandro Corradini. The publication in 1993 of his book *Caravaggio: Materiali per un processo*, signaled the beginning of a new phase in Caravaggio studies. The densely printed pages were packed with unexpected revelations about the artist, as well as several of the leading actors in his tumultuous life, of whom little had previously been known beyond their names. Two characters of particular interest were Ranuccio Tomassoni, a *giovane di molto garbo*¹, who died in their fatal sword-fight, and Fillide Melandroni, a courtesan friend of Caravaggio, who posed for his paintings of Judith, Mary of Bethany, St Catherine, and herself in a fine dress holding a flower. Corradini's transcriptions of the public testimonies by these people in the criminal records of the Tribunale del governatore di Roma, allowed historians for the first time to make their "identikits". The "block of documents" that he had found for Tomassoni and his litigious family, "can help us understand why the painter armed himself whenever he encountered Ranuccio"².

Although I have never had the pleasure to collaborate with Sandro Corradini in a publication, I am grateful that our researches have often coincided. My knowledge of Corradini's studies dates back to his *Caravaggio: Materiali per un processo*, which I first discovered on the New Acquisitions cart in the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence and soon afterwards bought my own copy³.

In the years that followed, Mons. Corradini continued to publish important doc-

¹ Giovanni Baglione, *Vite de' pittori, scultori, et architetti dal Pontificato di Gregorio XIII del 1572 fino a' tempi di Papa Urbano VIII nel 1642* (Rome: Andrea Fei, 1642), p. 138.

² "Il blocco di documenti sul Tomassoni... possono aiutare a capire sul perché si è armata la mano del pittore nei confronti di Ranuccio". Interview with Mons. Sandro Corradini, 27.04.2010, <http://www.arciconfraternitasanteligio.org/mons-sandro-corradini/>

³ The titlepage of my personal copy is inscribed, *Roma '95*.



1. Caravaggio, *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, 1608, Co cattedrale di San Giovanni, La Valletta, Malta

umentary discoveries, often with the co-authorship of Maurizio Marini (1942-2011). As an unscientific indication of his widespread influence, Corradini's studies are cited in thirty-nine footnotes in my Caravaggio monograph of 2001⁴. The 300th anniversary of Mattia Preti's death in 1699 and the 400th anniversary of his brother Gregorio Preti's birth in 1603 were accompanied by a steady stream of archival *studi pretiani*⁵.

In 1999 and 2003, Mons. Corradini published archival documents for Mattia and Gregorio, respectively, as I did for Mattia and Gregorio in 1998 and 2003, respectively⁶.

⁴ A line-by-line counting would raise this total even higher.

⁵ Archival research in Malta on both Caravaggio and Preti was immeasurably assisted for more than fifty years by Mons. John Azzopardi, who passed away this year on 19 February. An eminent scholar and museum curator, 'Dun Gwann' discovered innumerable significant documents for the history of art, ecclesiastical music and the Order of St John.

⁶ Sandro Corradini, "Appendice documentaria" in *Mattia Preti: Il Cavalier Calabrese*, Catanzaro, Convento di San Giovanni, 7 luglio – 31 ottobre 1999, (Electa Napoli), pp. 193-194; *idem*, "Documenti sul matrimonio e sulla morte del pittore Gregorio Preti", in Carlo Carlino, ed., *Gregorio Preti da Taverna a Roma 1603-1672*, Comunità montana della Presila Catanzarese (Irriti Editore, Rebbio Calabria), 2003. J. T. Spike, *Mattia Preti I documenti / The collected documents*, Banca di Credito Cooperativo della Sila Piccola, Taverna (Centro Di, Firenze), 1998; *idem*, con l'assistenza di Nicholas Spike, *Gregorio Preti I dipinti, i documenti*, Comune e Museo di Taverna (Centro Di, Firenze), 2003.



2. Veneto Cretese School, 16th century, *Beheading of the Baptist*, location unknown (cf. J.T. Spike, *Caravaggio*, 2nd ed., 2010, p. photo via Artnet.com)

The article that follows is offered in admiration and gratitude to Mons. Corradini for his innumerable important contributions to our knowledge of Caravaggio and his time.

Already seventy years ago, Roberto Longhi pointed out regarding Caravaggio's Lombard precedents that *la preistoria è sempre interminata*⁷.

For this and for other reasons, the attached *Albero* of the iconography of Caravaggio's, makes no claim as to completeness (fig. 1 - TAV. xxx)⁸. The *Beheading of St John the Baptist* (Matthew 14:1-12)⁹ first appeared in Christian art in the early Middle Ages. To chart its subsequent representations in both Orthodox icons and European art prior to 1608 would require an *Albero* of many, many branches. The selection offered here is limited to paintings, sculptures and prints that share at least two motifs found in Caravaggio's masterpiece. Fortunately, and despite the

⁷ Longhi R., *Introduzione* al catalogo della Mostra del Caravaggio e dei caravaggesti, Milano, aprile-giugno 1951, in *Studi caravaggeschi*, tomo I, p. 60 (Opere complete di Roberto Longhi, XI), Firenze 1999.

⁸ Cfr: aboutartonline.com, luglio 2021. English text: <https://www.aboutartonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/LAlbero-Beheading-JB-Caravaggio-JT-Spike-28May2021.pdf>. Italian text: <https://www.aboutartonline.com/gli-antecedenti-per-la-decollazione-di-malta-di-caravaggio-una-magistrale-ricostruzione-filologica-di-john-t-spike-with-original-english-text-in-pdf/>

⁹ Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato, St. John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta. The principal text is Matthew 14:1-12.



3. Masaccio, *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, 1426, pala di Pisa, Berlino

above-noted difficulty, not to mention the inaccessibility of research libraries in times of pandemic, this chronological survey has yielded many new observations, some of which I shall touch on in these few introductory pages.

The first two motifs for which precedents were searched were the barred prison window and the “fountain” of blood, a Eucharistic symbol, that spurts from the saint’s severed neck. Rather than rare, these two elements were soon observed to be indispensable *sine qua non*s in the iconography of this subject¹⁰. Other motifs from the Valletta *Beheading* were gradually added to the search criteria until, eventually, the motifs for which noteworthy precedents had been traced, comprised a list of twelve. Indeed, the number of precedents sufficed to demonstrate that the iconography of Caravaggio’s painting, including its symbolism of the arched portals¹¹, is remarkably traditional. The originality in Caravaggio’s *Beheading of St. John* resides in the artist’s innovative style – which combines his persuasive realism

¹⁰ D. Stone, “The Context of Caravaggio’s ‘Beheading of St John’ in Malta”, *Burlington Magazine*, March 1997, p. 165, fig. 12 makes this point regarding the barred window and notes that an engraving by Philippe Thomasson in the Statutes of the Order of St John (Rome, 1588), illustrated this motif to indicate a prison.

¹¹ For the origins of this symbolism in St. Augustine, see J. T. Spike, *Caravaggio*, 2nd rev. ed., New York: 2010, p. 212-213. For the precedents for this symbolism, see the *Albero*, p. TK.



4. Juan de Flanders, *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1496 ca., Musée d'art et d'histoire di Ginevra



5. 1240-1300 *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, mosaic in the dome of the the Battistero di San Giovanni, Firenze, Florentine painter unknown

and unmatched powers of expression.

Inside the narrow Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato in Valletta, the *Beheading* overwhelms the viewer with its extraordinarily vivid depiction of a gruesome execution in a dimly lit street. Caravaggio knew of course that in order to gain the approval of the Knights Hospitallers, he was perforce obliged to make their patron saint both easily identified and decisively prominent in his painting. He fulfilled these criteria by positioning the fallen Baptist front and center in the vast, dark canvas (cm 361x520), and draping across his body a scarlet cloak – a visually arresting symbol of his martyrdom. Less vibrant, but visible on the ground beneath his body is a sheepskin, another familiar attribute of St John the Baptist. Further investigation into the iconography as evidenced in the *Albero* reveals that Caravaggio constructed his composition with elements long regarded by artists and patrons as fundamental to the recognition of this biblical story.

To turn to a pertinent comparison, a of the *Beheading of St. John the Baptist* (fig. 2) was published ten years ago in connection with Caravaggio's altarpiece in



6. Albrecht Altdorfer, *Beheading of St. John the Baptist* 1512, woodcut, British Museum, London

Valletta (cf the comparison in the *Albero* p. TK)¹².

The relative rarity of this arrangement of the figures in a foreground frieze in front of a dark palace with arched portals and a barred window with two on-lookers, tends to support the suggestion that Caravaggio appears to have known a version of this icon, if not indeed this one¹³. The icon is also notable for its compact arrangement of only the four principal participants. As was his wont, Caravaggio also chose to suppress any ancillary figures. By adding a jailor who commands the *boia*, Caravaggio was able position the four witnesses to St John's death in symmetrical pairs of two women and two men whose postures unconsciously mirror the arched portal behind them.

The individuality and the expressiveness of Caravaggio's portrayals are such, that it comes as a surprise, perhaps, to find in the *Albero* that a similarly officious and merciless jailor had already been depicted by Masaccio as early as 1426 in the Pisa Altarpiece (fig. 3)¹⁴.

By the same token, the two prisoners who look through iron bars in both Caravaggio's Oratory altarpiece and in the Cretan school icon, ca. 1590, were preceded by larger groups of spectators in numerous earlier works and by a single lonely figure at a prison window in Juan de Flandes's impressive *Beheading of St John the Baptist* of c. 1496 (fig. 4).

The arched portals and barred window found in both Caravaggio and in the c. 1590 Cretan School icon are ancient attributes of the Baptist's imprisonment that have been on public view since 1240-1300 in the mosaics in the dome of

¹² J. T. Spike, *Caravaggio*, 2nd Revised Edition, New York: 2010, p. 244, fig. 3.

¹³ A later version of this icon is in the collection of the Onassjs Cultural Foundation in Athens.

¹⁴ Masaccio, *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1426, Berlin, Staatliche Museen.



7. Jan Sadeler after Marten de Vos, *Beheading of the Baptist*, engraving 1580-1590, British Muse

8. Marten de Vos, *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1574, Altarpiece in St Thomas, originally in Antwerp Cathedral, now in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts



the Baptistry of San Giovanni in Florence¹⁵ (fig. 5).

The symbolism of the arched portal was repeatedly employed in the woodcuts of Albrecht Altdorfer (Cf 1512 Regensburg (fig. 6) and other comparisons in the Albero¹⁶). For another example, the ‘fountain’ of blood, a Eucharistic symbol,

¹⁵ It is worth noting that in some early paintings, the Baptist’s prison takes the form of a tower in King Herod Antipas’s famous hilltop castle Machaerus, near Amman, which was described by Flavius Josephus (*Antiquitates Judaicae* XVIII, 5,2). Cf 1365-1370 Florence, 1380-1390 Florence and the later c. 1496 Hispano-Flemish (Juan de Flandes).

¹⁶ As this article goes to press, I have found at Academia.edu online a proposal of the arches in Altdorfer’s woodcuts as formal influences on Caravaggio’s painting: L. Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative: Dislocating the Storia in Early Modern Painting*, Chapter 5, p. 430, Belgium, 2011. One of these woodcuts (Fig. 219) was unknown to me, but is an excellent example of Altdorfer’s concern, followed by Caravaggio, to crown the martyrdom of St John the Baptist under an arched portal symbolic of Heaven. “He who has no tomb, has the sky for his vault” -- August-



9. Antonio Campi (Cremona 1523-1587),
Beheading of St John the Baptist, 1571, San
Paolo Converso, Milan

that spurts from the severed neck of St John is alarming to modern viewers, perhaps, but this unforgettable motif has served for centuries to define the sanctity of this beheading. The proximity of the flowing blood to the Oratory altar was clearly intentional by the painter. On the other hand, Caravaggio's signature in the spilled blood is, however, strikingly original to this artist and has no precise precedent¹⁷.

The continuity of Christian iconography through the centuries is analogous to the continuity of Christian dogma, which holds that tradition deepens the words and images of faith (*tradizione dia un più profondo significato alle parole e alle immagini... quando se ne servono per esprimere la fede*)¹⁸.

Although expressed as a witticism, Erwin Panofsky was serious in his explanation of the workings of iconography: "If the knife that enables us to identify

tine, *City of God*, I: 12 (quoting the Roman poet, Lucan *Pharsalia*). *caelo tegitur qui non habet urnam; Dal cielo è coperto chi non ha un'urna.*

¹⁷ However Caravaggio intended this signature, his self-identification with the martyr's blood in an altarpiece cannot reasonably be seen in as a gesture in parallel with the paintings by Titian and others of the dying Saint Peter Martyr writing in his own blood the first words of the Apostle's Creed, *Credo [in Deum Patrem omnipotentem]*. See D.M. Stone, "Signature Killer: Caravaggio and the Poetics of Blood," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (December 2012), pp. 572-593, for a variety of interpretations.

¹⁸ Commissione Teologica Internazionale, *L'Interpretazione dei Dogmi* (1990), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1989_interpretazione-dogmi_it.html.



10. Antonio Campi, *Empress Faustina visiting St Catherine of Alexandria in Prison*, 1583, Church of Sant'Angelo, Milan

a St. Bartholomew is not a knife but a corkscrew, the figure is not a St. Bartholomew”¹⁹.

Of course, every artist – even a post-Byzantine painter of icons – is susceptible to outside influences. In the course of compiling the *Albero*, there appeared in a search of prints of the British Museum collection online, an engraving of the *Beheading of St John the Baptist* by Jan Sadeler, c. 1580-1590 Antwerp (fig.7), after an invention by Marten de Vos, that may have inspired the Cretan School icon that we have cited as a probable source for Caravaggio's painting in Valletta. Indeed, there is no reason to rule out the possibility that Caravaggio knew also one of Sadeler's widely circulated engravings after De Vos. During the sixteenth century, Eastern Orthodox icons were deeply influenced – even transformed, some say – by the global diffusion of religious prints from the two principal publishing cities, Venice and Antwerp²⁰. Jan Sadeler (Brussels, 1550 - Venice, 1600) was trained in a family dynasty of engravers who were employed in cities from Munich to Rome. Sadeler often worked together with Marten De Vos (Antwerp 1532-1603), a gifted and prolific designer of religious prints. De Vos's remarkably proto-Caravaggesque painting of the *Beheading of St John the*

¹⁹ Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconography*, 1939, Oxford University Press, London and New York, p. 7.

²⁰ Cf. Bronwen Wilson, “Venice, print, and the early modern icon”, *Urban History*, 33, 1 (2006), printed by Cambridge University Press, pp. 39-64; Waldemar Deluga, “The Influence of Prints on Painting in Eastern Europe”, *Print Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (September 1993), (pp. 219-231), p. 229.



11. Andrea del Sarto, *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, 1523, grisaille. Chiosstro Scalzo (Florence, 152)

Baptist is included in the *Albero* as 1574 Antwerp (fig.8).

Now, by way of conclusion, here is a last example of the comparative iconography in the *Albero* of Caravaggio's *Beheading of St John the Baptist* can cast a fresh light on important questions. Very few pages of scholarship have been devoted to the pictorial precedents of this painting, for the understandable reason that, as is true of many topics Caravaggesque, the first suggestions in this *discussion* were succinctly voiced by Roberto Longhi almost a century ago and have retained their validity until the present day. In 1929, Longhi singled out two paintings by the Cremonese painter, Antonio Campi as important influences on Caravaggio's formation. Of Campi's *Decollazione del Battista* (San Paolo, Milan, fig.9), Longhi said that Caravaggio learned in it to "include some actors in the clothes of his own time in order to represent a contemporary scene of execution, as Caravaggio would do later in Malta."²¹ *introdurvi alcuni attori nei costumi dell'epoca reduce quel fatto a una scena contemporanea di esecuzione come poi farà il Caravaggio a Malta*. The other painting, Longhi declared, was "that astounding announcement by Antonio Campi of the impending solutions of Caravaggism." *l'annuncio più stupefacente delle prossime soluzioni caravaggesche, da parte di Antonio Campi, penso che rimarrà sempre il telone della Santa Caterina in carcere*²² (fig.10) In 1951, Longhi specifically underscored the importance of Campi's

²¹ R. Longhi, "Quesiti caravaggeschi, II: i precedenti," *Pinacotheca* 1 (March–June 1929), in *"Me pinxit" e quesiti caravaggeschi, 1928–1934* (Opere complete di Roberto Longhi, IV), Firenze 1968, p. 127.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

painting of *St Catherine in Prison*, writing: "...Caravaggio would remember it until the end, especially in his great painting in Malta."²³ *di cui, in ogni caso, il Caravaggio si ricorderà fino all'ultimo, persino nel gran dipinto di Malta.*"

Longhi made his point and these two paintings by Campi are generally cited as the prime influences on Caravaggio's *Beheading of the Baptist*.²⁴ Longhi's analysis was indisputable as regards the perspective that was most often taken by art historians in his time, i.e. the formation of Caravaggio's style. Campi's emphasis on naturalism in these two paintings; his bold theatricality of his chiaroscuro and dark backgrounds were indisputably inspirational for the young Caravaggio during his apprentice years in Milan. Two decades later, however, as he faced the challenge of painting the largest canvas for the most important patrons (given the circumstances) of his career, his recollections of these two outmoded would not have sufficed for the research necessary to plan his composition with care. Apart from the grilled window in St. Catherine's prison, however, the two paintings by Campi cannot reasonably be said to be the models for his composition. In the same year, 1951, a rival art historian, Bernard Berenson, offered a different opinion that attracted little attention. "'The Beheading of the Baptist' is almost as austere a composition as Andrea del Sarto's fresco of the same subject at the Scalzi in Florence."²⁵ *...composizione austera, quasi quanto il monocromo affresco di Andrea del Sarto agli Scalzi [Firenze] col medesimo soggetto.* Berenson had intuited but refrained from insisting on a direct influence – perhaps because he could not explain how Caravaggio might have seen it, and also perhaps because Berenson knew that his comparison would seem 'incongruous' to Caravaggio specialists. But he was right. In the context of the iconographical tradition, Sarto's *Beheading of St John the Baptist* in the Chiostrò dello Scalzo bears a significant resemblance to Caravaggio's symmetrical and austere composition. Sarto's grisaille fresco is listed as 1530 Sarto (fig.11) in the Albero alongside an excellent engraving, in reverse, datable to the 1550's, from which Caravaggio could have known the image without a journey to Florence. Comparison of Sarto's grisaille in the context of iconography leads to the observation of a close relationship as well with a Florentine painter of the next generation, Giorgio Vasari, whose altarpiece of the *Beheading of St John the Baptist* in the church of

²³ R. Longhi, *Introduzione* al catalogo della Mostra del Caravaggio e dei caravaggisti, Milano, aprile-giugno 1951, in *Studi caravaggeschi*, tomo I, p. 60 (Opere complete di Roberto Longhi, XI), Firenze 1999

²⁴ Some titles: W. Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, New York, 1955, p. 211; M. Marini, 1974, cat. 75; M. Cinotti, 1983, cat. 23; M. Gregori, *The Age of Caravaggio*, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1985, p. 54;

²⁵ B. Berenson, *Del Caravaggio delle sue incongruenze e della sua fama*. Electa Editrice, 1951; English edition, 1955, p. 40.

San Giovanni Decollato, Rome, is dated 1553.²⁶ No matter how little sympathy Caravaggio could have felt with Vasari's mannerist style, their respective altarpieces share so many elements that we must suspect that Vasari, like Sarto, could have been a useful resource – like a treatise – for the iconography. Caravaggio surely knew Vasari's altarpiece personally through its prominent location in an important Roman church associated with Florentine patrons. In retrospect, we can now see the Renaissance savor of Caravaggio's classicizing composition. As to the unlikelihood of Caravaggio finding inspiration from Florence, as opposed to Cremona, for an altarpiece destined for the Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato for the church of St John in Valletta, it is not unlikely at all. In recent years, scholars have established that Caravaggio was assisted in Malta by Francesco dell'Antella, a Florentine knight and avid art collector, who bought two paintings from him. During Caravaggio's time in Malta, dell'Antella served Grand Master Wignacourt as his Italian secretary.²⁷ That the aspirant knight Caravaggio would consult with this Florentine about the iconography of his proposed painting would seem more than likely.

The martyrdom of John the Baptist ensured his reward in Paradise. Loss of life exchanged for eternal life has been the universal prayer of warriors from time immemorial. The Knights of St John sought from Caravaggio a reading of this mighty theme that would be comforting to men who risked such deaths. The painter responded with a poignant meditation on death that contains a promise: «He that loses his life for my sake shall find it» (Matthew 10:39). The unconscious poses of the witnesses to his martyrdom, selected in universal pairs of young and old, male and female, evil and sympathetic, form a tableau vivant of perfect symmetry as they stand over the fallen prophet. The curved arc of their backs is repeated in the great portal behind them. An arch is a sacred shape, symbolic of the vault of heaven. St. Augustine wrote of the Christian martyrs, «He who has no tomb has the sky for his vault».

²⁶ An excellent engraving of Vasari's painting was made by G.B. de' Cavalieri in 1573.

²⁷ D. M. Stone, "In Praise of Caravaggio's Sleeping Cupid: New Documents for Francesco dell'Antella in Malta and Florence," *Melita Histórica* 12, no. 2 (1997): 165-77.



- Jan Sadeler after Marten de Vos, *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, engraving, 1580-1590 British Museum, London



- Cretan School painter, *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, (detail), location unknown. c. 1590 Post-Byzantine

Motifs shared with the Cretan School, icon, c. 1590

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
3. Arched portal with rustication
4. Windows with spectators
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome

Motifs shared with Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
3. Arched portal with rustication, n
4. Windows with spectators
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
8. Execution in front of the prison
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome

