

Artist's reconstruction of the original frescoes behind the altar in the Theodotus chapel.

Photos by D. Crispino

## THE "CRUCIFIXION" OF SANTA MARIA ANTIQUA

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The Crucifixion fresco in Santa Maria Antigua is the earliest representation of the Golgotha scene still extant in Rome.

It is not the first time that cross and corpus appear in the Eternal City. The little sculpture compressed into the small horizontal panel at the top of St Sabina's huge Vth century door predates it by three centuries; but our purpose here is not to compare the two—in fact there are no points of comparison.

Nor is the Santa Maria Antigua Crucifixion the first of its type to appear in Rome. A similar one is known to have existed in the VIIth century "historical crypt" of the catacomb of St Valentinus.

What are the characteristics of this particular type? It is, first of all, a *loca sancta* tableau of Palestinian art, in which the drama is depicted against a background of the hills of Jerusalem; in the sky, the sun and the moon have dimmed their light. Like a condensed narrative, the successive events are simultaneously presented; the Virgin and the Beloved Disciple are there, Longinus has made his thrust and the soldier still holds up his sponge, his vase of sour wine on the ground. On the cross, the figure of Christ is bearded in the oriental tradition corroborated by the description of Irenaeus; and he is wearing a colobium, the sleeveless tunic decorated with the stripes designating his role as Teacher. The beard and the colobium are common features in catacomb paintings of the IIIrd and IVth centuries, the earliest of which is perhaps in the Aurelian Hypogeum, where the figure is shown seated and teaching.

The *loca sancta* composition is seen on a silver plate of VIth c. Syria, in which Christ on the cross wears a long robe, as on the Monza ampulae from Palestine, VIth c. On a VIIth c. Palestinian painting the same scene is present on the lid of a casket; the arrangement persists in the VIIIth c. crucifixion of St Catherine of Sinai, to mention but a few examples.

By the Xth c., the colobium had given way to the subligaculum.

A pilgrim of the VIth c. tells of a crucifix he saw in Gaza, and it might reasonably have been like the illumination by the Syrian Rabula, whose Gospel codex is dated 586; and the Santa Maria Antigua icon bears it a remarkable resemblance.

Remembering the influence of Rome's large Syrian colony and the incidence of oriental popes—eleven were elected between 640 and 742—we should not be surprised to find this oriental scheme on Tiber's shores.





Santa Maria Regina, on the Palimpsest Wall

But other factors were at work; the conquest of Palestine by the Arabs in the VIth c. drove many monks to Italy; those of Mar Saba near Jerusalem founded a new monastery on the Aventine.

Later, monks were the chief victims of the iconoclastic fury and, with ecclesiastics and ordinary citizens, they fled to Rome from Constantinople where the sacred objects, so avidly and proudly collected for 400 years, were now being ruthlessly smashed. The fugitives brought what they could of icons, relics, books ... and personal talents. The Santa Maria Antigua Crucifixion could very well have been painted by some of these expatriates.

The church of Santa Maria Antigua is located in the Roman Forum under the brow of the Palatine Hill, on Vicus Tuscus, just beyond the House of the Vestals and the Temple of Castor and Pollux. Originally, the structure was part of the rear of the Temple of the Divine Augustus. In the late 1st c. it was used as a ceremonial hall. But under the Christian emperors of Byzantium the hall became a guardroom at the foot of the ramp which led to the palace where the emperor's viceroy resided. The walls of the guardroom were decorated, over and over again, with Christian murals. There are still the fragmentary remains of a St Mary Queen of Heaven, a typically byzantine Virgin and Child, surrounded by typically byzantine angels. Dated 530, the fresco is on the so-called Palimpsest Wall.

Eventually the guardroom was converted into a church, dedicated to the Virgin. The year seems to be established by three coins buried under a column set up during the remodeling. Coins dated 567-578 were discovered by the archeologist Boni who, in 1900, excavated and identified the ancient church.

In fact, already in the VIIIth c. the church was called "the Old", Antigua, as we see by an inscription at the altar end of the left aisle, under a fresco of Theodotus, who is presenting a model of a church to Our Lady:

*Theodotus primocerus defensorum et dispensatore Sanctae Dei Genetricis semperque Virgo Marie qui appellatur antiqua*

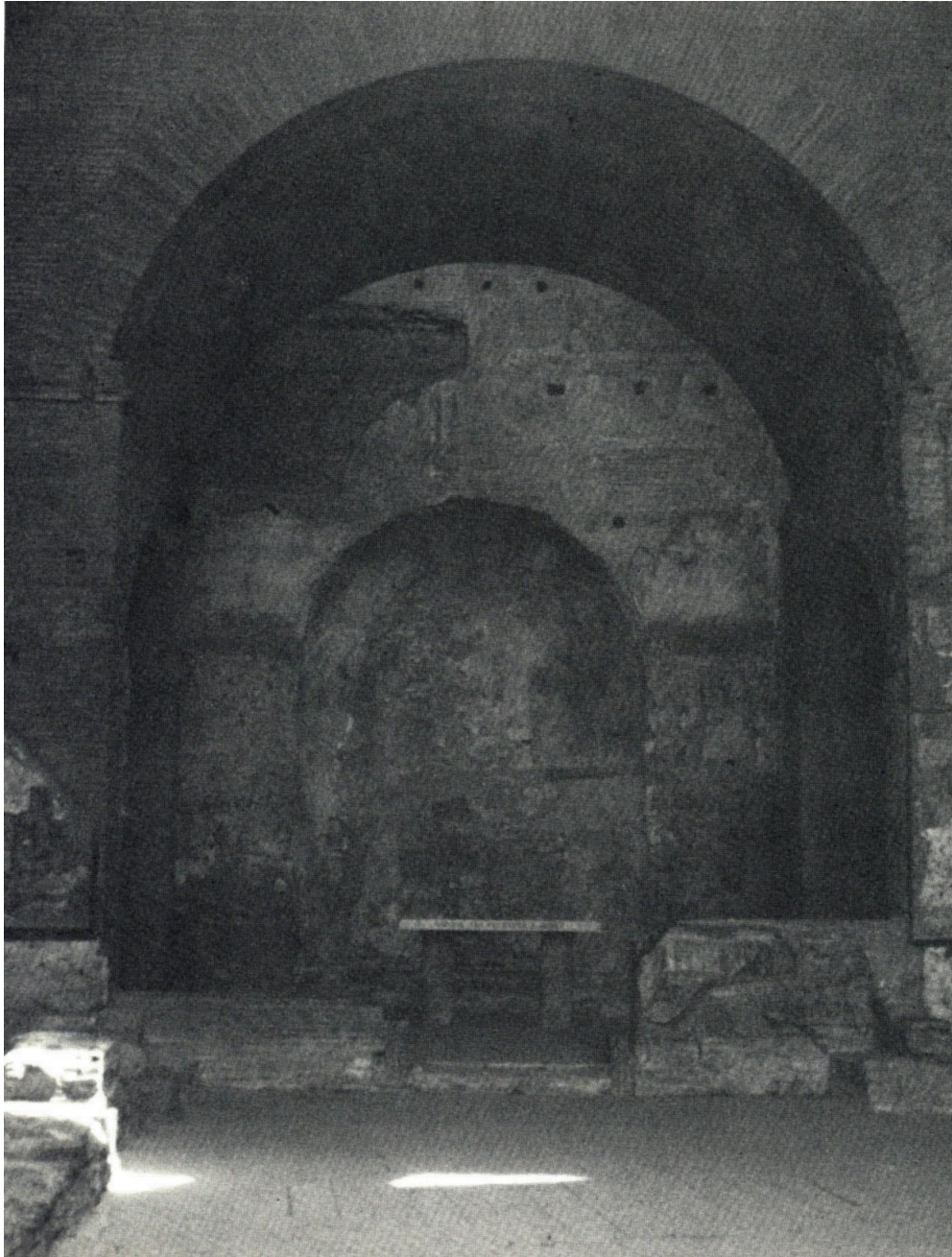
Theodotus, primocerus (chief priest) of the diaconate and a high-ranking papal administrator (741-752), was still living when his portrait was painted. Perhaps he founded or financed the chapel called after his name: the Theodotus chapel, where the Crucifixion (now restored) above the altar still commands a mystic awe.

In 847 a landslide buried the church, preserving it for later times.

It would seem that the known dates of the Theodotus chapel would determine the date of the Crucifixion. But such a simple solution is insufficient for art historians, and diverse opinions have been given.

Formerly, it was proposed that the icon was painted under the reign





Central nave of the church, and main apse

of Pope John VII, 705-707. John VII was born in Rossano (Calabria) of Greek parents. His father, Plato, was governor of the Palatine palaces, property of the byzantine emperors. It is said that John VII had a special delectation for this church, which certainly held memories of his childhood. He had the walls repainted with Biblical scenes and in the main apse a fresco of Christ, now barely visible, entitled "The Triumph of the Cross"—perhaps a figurative echo of Fortunatus Venantius' great hymn, *Vexilla Regis*. But it is quite unlikely that John VII commissioned the Crucifixion.

Gregory III has been mentioned; Syrian, pope, saint. Consecrated in March 731, he immediately turned his attention to the iconoclastic heresy.

During the reign of his predecessor, Gregory II, iconoclasm was launched by the emperor Leo III the Isaurian. In 726, the year the detestable campaign erupted, on Leo's orders soldiers destroyed a famous portrait of Christ, framed above the palace gate. A terrible riot ensued, for the populace considered the icon to be the guardian of the city. But Leo persisted, sealing his decision by the Edict of 730.

Gregory II had excommunicated the Isaurian; and in November of 731, Gregory III excommunicated all those who destroyed holy objects, and throughout the ten years of his papacy he encouraged the veneration of icons and relics. Antagonists to the end, both Gregory and Leo died in 741; the emperor in June, the pope in November.

A portrait of Gregory III, dated 741, appears on the wall of Santa Maria Antigua, but according to Krautheimer it was replaced while work was in progress with that of his successor, Zachary I (Dec. 741 -Mar. 752), whose likeness, with a rectangular nimbus, is in the chapel of SS Julitta and Quiricus, Syrian martyrs.

Like John VII, Zachary I was born in Calabria of Greek parents. On his accession to the papacy he sent envoys to the emperor, exhorting him to desist in the destruction of sacred images; but Constantine V Copronymus pursued even more ferociously the persecutions begun by his father.

St Paul I, a Roman (757-767), has also been named, but perhaps this conjecture flies too far from the field of probabilities.

While Gregory II occupied St Peter's Chair, in the cliffside monastery of Mar Saba overlooking the Cedron valley, a brilliant monk, St John of Damascus (b. 645, d. between 750-756) was writing his celebrated *Discourses Against the Iconoclasts*. From then on, the Damascene's entire life was devoted to the struggle against the heresies of his time, not only in writings but also in preaching. So eloquent his oratory that he was surnamed the "Golden Stream"; and so effective were his arguments that the Iconoclastic Synod of 754 condemned him with fourfold anathema. Today, whatever encyclopedia has space for but one brief comment about this great Syrian doctor, records that he fought iconoclasm.

In his writing, St John Damascene explains that "created things" are

rightly venerated, for through them God works our salvation. From the beginning of his book, the Father of Scholasticism had posed the very legitimate question of the authenticity of these "created things", and he goes on to tell by what means and on the strength of what testimonies one could be sure that these things were, indeed, authentic. He lists the "created things" which were known to his contemporaries: Mount Sinai, Nazareth, the cradle of Bethlehem, Holy Golgotha, the wood of the cross, the nails, etc., and the Burial Linens ...

And he declares that the Apostles had conserved the Burial Linens for the faithful of future generations.

As Mons. Savio remarks, if these "created things" were not existing at the time, there would have been no sense in St John's list and vain would have been his affirmation that these created things are venerated. And all St John's contemporaries could agree, without hesitation, that the funeral linens had been conserved, because it is inconceivable that the defender of images would set before his adversaries facts which were not universally admitted.

Naturally, sindonologists will be anxious to know if the Crucifixion of Santa Maria Antigua is in any way related to the Shroud. Let us not read on the figure of Christ a triumphant list of details identical to the Shroud image, as some commentators have done, even to the point of describing—with the best of intentions!—similarities which exist only in the eyes of that beholder.

One thing, however, is startling; one knee is quite deliberately lifted, though the feet are on the same level. A curious fact which does not seem to be present in the Sinai, Rabula, or any other earlier examples. True, it is the right knee, the same side as the lance wound; which does not correspond to the Shroud. But thinking from another angle, we realize that the left leg is shorter than the right—an anomaly consistent in byzantine representations, presumably in conformity to a mistaken interpretation of the "shorter" or "crippled" left leg on the Shroud's dorsal imprint. So one might explain the lifting of the right leg as an artist's attempt to respect the prevailing interpretation, showing the left leg shorter and at the same time retaining an aesthetic perspective which would not mar the figure's majesty.

It cannot be pretended that this Crucifixion is a "copy" from the Shroud. But it is a bold theological statement, and an artistic distillation of multiple influences: the iconographic tradition of several eastern localities and several centuries; a reminder of oriental papacies and a long and complex and agitated past; a challenging refutation of all the myriad heresies rampant in the east. It is also a masterful work of art, far surpassing all its peers for beauty of expression.

The figure of Christ is seen standing at ease, in the dignity of complete self-possession. His arms are extended in a gesture which can only mean, *See what I have done for love of you*; and the outspread

hands show that he has nothing more to give. This Christ is undeniably dead, for his side is lanced and covered with blood. The wound itself is full of blood, which, for modern pathologists as well as for the ancient observers, is a sign that Christ was already dead when the lance pierced his side; yet he lives, for his eyes are open. He gazes tenderly upon his Mother, source of the humanity he has just sacrificed. In sublime serenity, the Victim stands at the very point—the very crux—of his mysterious nature, Man and God; the eternal logos *in crucis*. And that is how he is seen on the Shroud.

The Crucifixion of Santa Maria Antigua is indeed, as Maria Delfina Fusina says, a "symphony". In antique mode, to be sure; but its leitmotif is in harmony with the full orchestration, a millenium later, of a stupendous photograph.

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