Sassetta's Madonna della Neve. An Image of Patronage

Israëls, M.

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There has been some confusion as to the way in which Sassetta’s contract refers to Turino and Ludovica’s altar. In this chapter we shall investigate all the descriptions of the altar in order to establish with certainty which altar was intended. We shall study the repercussions of the altar’s location and of its previous history on Ludovica’s project. We shall find that an image of great civic importance, the Opera Madonna, preceded the Madonna della Neve on its altar and left its trace on Sassetta’s image.

The descriptions of the altar prior to its completion in the Turino-Ludovica documentation presented here all refer to the altar as being near the Porta del Perdono. From document A.II it appears that it was close to Francesco Tolomei’s chapel which in turn was next to the chapel of the Crucifix, both of which locations are known (fig. 2 nrs. 13, 14).

The 1430 contract has been really confusing in this matter, since it is the only time that the titulus of the very same altar near the Porta del Perdono is recorded as San Bonifazio: ‘altare cappelle Sancti Bonifatii, que cappella est prope portam ecclesie maioris prefate, que vocatur et dicitur la porta del Perdono’.93 Now, there was also an altar of San Bonifazio in the cathedral in the third bay at the right-hand side of the nave (fig. 2 nr. 18), which obviously could not have been intended. Both altars were moreover referred to as Santa Maria delle Grazie. It led to confusion of the patrons of both altars in the literature, especially when Pope Hennessy supposed that an endowment of the chapel of San Bonifazio by Antonio di Bartolomeo Benassai of 1475 was related to the altar next to the Porta del Perdono, whereas in fact the chapel in the south aisle of the nave was the beneficiary.94 However, it is worthwhile to expose the roots of the confusion, because it will enable us to understand the earlier history of Ludovica and Turino’s altar.

Several Bonifaces were venerated in the Sienese cathedral. In the Kalendarium of the cathedral composed around 1140 appear no less than three Popes Boniface.95 In the calendar which accompanies the Ordo Officiorum of the Sienese cathedral of 1215, two feasts, of Bonifatii martiris and Bonifatii episcopi et confessoris are celebrated on 5th June and 4th September respectively.96 The name day of Saint Boniface 1, 4th September, was also the cele-

93 In Appendix 1, doc. A.II, it is once referred to as the altar of Sant’Ivo, for reasons that are unclear, other than that it may have been another face of the altar. See note 42.
94 POPE HENNESSY 1939, p. 31. For Benassai’s actual patronage see e.g. AAS, Santé Visite 18, fol. 18r, for the year 1489: ‘cappellam Sancte Marie Gratiarum vocabulo Sancti Bonifatii. Cappellanos Buonsignorem Salimbenis de Benassais, instituit Antonius LISINI & IACOMETTI 1931, tomo xv, parte VI (pp. 13, 25, 31).
95 25th May (Boniface IV), 4th September (Boniface I) and 25th October (Boniface I [?]); ARGENZIANO 2000, pp. 3-26 (15, 18, 19); LISINI & IACOMETTI 1931, tomo xv, parte VI (p. 13, 25, 31).
96 ARGENZIANO 2000, pp. 119-146 (120, 136); VAN DER PLOEG 1993, pp. 153, 156 (148-149 on the veneration for Saint Boniface.
bration of the glorious memory of the Sienese victory over the Florentines at Monteaperti in 1260, as recorded in a later addition to the Ordo.

Two paintings were associated with this event. Firstly, the Madonna now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo (henceforth the Opera Madonna) ascribed to the Maestro della Madonna di Tressa and datable to around 1230 (fig. 3). Tradition has it that Buonaguida Lucari dedicated the city to the Virgin before this image and that he begged the Virgin for her assistance the day before the battle. It is probably that this image originally adorned the high altar of the cathedral. It is now sawn down along its sides, but it was in all likelihood an antependium that eventually migrated to the top of the altar.97 The other image associated with the victory of Monteaperti is the gabled dossal associated with Guido da Siena, of which a fragment remains (fig. 4). This votive altarpiece had been made to render Mary grace once the battle had been won, and we shall refer to it as the Madonna del Voto.98 This Madonna del Voto was put over an altar in the third bay of the southern aisle, known as the chapel of Santa Maria delle Grazie, much enlarged in the middle of the fifteenth century.99 The Commune had provided in its new Statutes of 1262 to have this special chapel in the cathedral dedicated to the victorious Virgin of Monteaperti, as discovered by Kempers.100 This discovery invalidates the
persistent hypothesis that the Madonna del Voto, datable to circa 1280, would have been intended for the high altar, in substitution of the Opera Madonna.\footnote{As f.e. in NORMAN 1999, pp. 29-33; KAWSKY 1995, pp. 139-45; VAN OS 1998, pp. 16-20.}

Only when Duccio's Maestà was installed on the high altar in 1311 was the venerable image of the Opera Madonna removed.\footnote{BELTING 1990, p. 437, adds yet another step to the sequence of images that passed on from one to the next an association with the Monteaperti-vow, by claiming that the Opera Madonna was preceded by a three-dimensional sculpture of the Virgin on the main altar, which was the actual recipient of the vow.}

Leaving aside the question of the location of the early Madonnas in Siena Cathedral, of direct relevance to our story is the fact that in Sassetta's day, they were associated with the Virgin's protection of the Sienese at Monteaperti. The Opera Madonna had found shelter on an altar in between the Porta del Perdono and the wall of the bell tower. Such a location, next to the entrance of a church, was often given to images which had built up a tradition of great veneration.\footnote{Compare the famous example of the chapel built around the venerated fresco of the Annunciation in Santissima Annunziata in Florence.}

This move gave the Porta del Perdono altar its dedication to the Madonna delle Grazie. In the fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century inventories, it was known as the altar of ‘Sancta Maria da la porta’ or as the altar of ‘Santa Maria delle Grazie’.\footnote{Inventory of the cathedral of 15th March 1389: AOMS, 864 (num. Mosc. 1489), fol. 12r (mentioning only ‘Una tavaglia e uno davanzale staccati e uno candelicre.’); inventory of the cathedral dated 14th December 1420: AOMS, 865 (num. Mosc. 1492), fol. 14v (insert 1, fol. xivv), and ass, Opera Metropolitana 28, fol. xivv: ‘Uno altare di Santa Maria de le Grazie chon tavola, ferì, tenda, grado, chandelieri’. In the latter inventory the chapel in the third bay of the south aisle is described: ‘Uno altare e tavola di Santo Bonifazio ferì e tende e chandelieri e grado e banchi da lato’ AOMS, 864 (num. Mosc. 1489), fol. 15r (insert 1, fol. xvi). See also Appendix I, docs. A, II, III, V and VI.}

\footnote{See previous note. In the first preserved inventory of 1389, the altar in the side-aisle of the nave is called ‘L'altare de Ie Grazie’; AOMS, 864 (num. Mosc. 1489), fol. 12r, though it is later sometimes solely referred to as the altar of San Bonifazio as in the 1420, 1423, 1429, 1435, 1439, 1446 inventories; by both titles as in the 1440, 1450, 1453 inventories, and only with its dedication to the Virgin from 1467 onwards; GARRISON 1960-62 I, pp. 5-6.}

\footnote{VENTURA 1442-43, fols. 57-v; KAWSKY 1995, pp. 144-145; KEMPERS 1994, pp. 113-116; GARRISON 1960-62 1, pp. 10-11; IDEM 1960-62 II, pp. 41-44. Whereas Ventura did succeed in distinguishing between the function of the two images in the story, he got mixed up with the altars. Ventura pertains that the Madonna del Voto was moved from the high altar to the altar of San Bonifazio near the Campanile, whereas the Opera Madonna would have been the first high altarpiece, in his time hung against the Campanile wall, without an altar of its own. The subsequent shift of the Opera Madonna, due to the arrival of Sassetta's altarpiece, was probably the reason for Ventura's confusion about the location of the two Madonnas in his day, actually giving the two subsequent positions of the Opera Madonna only. The manuscript is richly illustrated with informative drawings, for reproductions of which see S. Raveggi, 'La vittoria di Monteaperti', in BARZANTI, CATONI & DE GREGORIO 1995, pp. 79-94.}

\footnote{EXH. CAT. ALTERNBURG 2001, esp. pp. 111-115 (B. John). An extensively documented article by Monika Butzk, refuting the above argument that the Madonna del Voto was conceived for the high altar, is anticipated in Prospettiva.}

\footnote{Compare the famous example of the chapel built around the venerated fresco of the Annunciation in Santissima Annunziata in Florence.}

101 As f.e. in NORMAN 1999, pp. 29-33; KAWSKY 1995, pp. 139-45; VAN OS 1998, pp. 18-20; GARRISON 1960-62 I, and most recently, entangling the evidence for the two Madonnas even more, EXH. CAT. ALTERNBURG 2001, esp. pp. 111-115 (B. John). An extensively documented article by Monika Butzck, refuting the above argument that the Madonna del Voto was conceived for the high altar, is anticipated in Prospettiva.}

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were also both referred to as chapels of San Bonifazio, whose feast was celebrated on the same day as the festive commemoration of the intervention of the Virgin in the battle of Monteaperti. It was indeed common practice that altars would have different denominations, voces, each of which could then be given separately to different patrons.

So, when Ser Leonardo suggested to Turino, on his deathbed, that he should adopt the altar of Santa Maria delle Grazie next to the Porta del Perdono, in front of which Turino would be buried, he was suggesting an altar which was already adorned by a worshipped image loaded with civic associations. In the 1423 inventory, made up a few months after Turino's death, the altar and its early thirteenth-century image of the Virgin is described in some detail, and it seems that it had been neglected, lacking a curtain. When Sassetta's altarpiece was installed at the beginning of 1433, the older image was removed, but found shelter in the immediate proximity of its previous altar, where Ventura saw it, attached against the Campanile wall, without an altar of its own.

Following the description of the newly decorated altar of Santa Maria della Neve, the inventory of 1435 continues 'e rincontra al detto altare sì è la tavola antica di Nostra Donna che stava prima al detto altare' (Appendix 1, doc. B.1) (fig. 3). In the inventory of 1439 a later hand scribbled down in the margin of the Opera Madonna entry that it had been removed to the church of Sant'Ansano in Castelvecchio (Appendix 1, doc. B.11). In the next inventory, of 1446, the Opera Madonna has altogether disappeared from the cathedral and the image figures in the inventory of the recently constructed church of Sant'Ansano in Castelvecchio, where it was put over the high altar: 'Una tavola antica con la predella con figura di Nostra Donna di mezzo rilievo e più figure di più santi.' By this time a salient 'transference of veneration' had occurred, in which the religious and civic importance of the two images seems to have coalesced into the later Madonna del Voto, as is observed by Kawsky.

Yet, in the sentence inscribed around Mary's halo on Sassetta's Madonna delle Neve, we may well find a reminder of the wonder-working Opera Madonna which had for some time preceded it on the altar: 'Ś. CONFIDLS I.N. ME. SEN. ERIS. GRATIA PLENA.' ('If you trust me, Siena, you will be full of grace') (plate 11), as the Virgin had demonstrated so memorably at Monteaperti.

107 A point made by Kempers 1994, p. 115. The altar next to the Porta del Perdono was, after its rededication to the Virgin of the Snow, usually only referred to by that title, with some exceptions, as i.e. 'Bonifatius ad altare Nive Virginis' (12th May 1447), AAS, Sante Visite 15, fol. 5v.

108 In the sixteenth century the altar of San Bonifazio of the Madonna del Voto counted no less than 8 cappelle or tituli with different patronal rights and related chaplains; AAS, Sante Visite 24, fols. 5v-6r; AAS, Sante Visite 25, fol. 6r (both 11th May 1584).

109 AAS, Opera Metropolitana 29, fol. 18v: 'L'altare di Santa Maria de le Gratie a lato a la porta del Perdono con una tavola antica a la figura di Nostra Donna con predelle da piei e ferro di tende senza tenda'; the situation (as well as the description) remained unaltered in June 1439: AOMS, 867 (num. Mosc. 1462), fol. 7or (insert 2, fol. 18r).

110 Ventura 1442-43, fol. 5v: 'la Madonna che stava all'altare maggiore di Duomo la dove fu fatta tale donazione, era una tavola pur piccola e molto antica con figura di Nostra Donna di mezzo taglio, cioè mezzo rilievo e così le figure di torno, la quale sta attachata al campanile drento in duomo allato alla porta del Perdono senza altare'; see also Garrison 1966-62 II, p. 43.

111 AOMS, 867 (num. Mosc. 1492), fol. 29or (insert 6, fol. xi1r); published by Garrison 1966-62 I, p. 6. For the Opera Madonna in the church of Sant'Ansano in Castelvecchio, see note 133 below and Kirchen 1985, vol. 1.1, pp. 330, 334, 336.

112 Kawsky 1965, pp. 139-170, esp. 144.