Sassetta's Madonna della Neve. An Image of Patronage

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THE MAIN PANEL OF SASSETTA’S MADONNA DELLA NEVE

How did Sassetta realise the ideas of the late Turino, his widow Ludovica and their counsellor Casini, and how did he give shape to the snow legend? How did the pictorial representation itself respond to the exigencies of the location and the patrons? And how did the altarpiece fit in with the novel devotional taste and the resurgence of Marian chapels in the cathedral? We shall now take a look at Sassetta’s panels, to finally see how threads of the ingredients of its genesis come together.

The glory of the Virgin overshadows the importance of the theme of the snow legend in Sassetta’s main panel, unlike in Masolino’s version (plate xii). The altarpiece is essentially a sacra conversazione with the snow legend reserved for the predella. This was recognised in the 1435 cathedral inventory, where Sassetta’s altarpiece is described as ‘la tavola dipenta di Nostra Donna messa a oro et altri santi col miracolo della nieve’ (Appendix I, doc. b.1). The main panel is an early example of a unified composition on a unified surface with the Virgin enthroned, surrounded by saints who interact in a plausible pictorial space. The angels bearing platters full of snow, one of whom kneads a snowball, are the only references to the legend in the main panel (plate iii). Sassetta adds an allegorical interpretation to the Virgin of the Snow, seizing the novel feast as a new manner in which to glorify the Virgin, using the snow as a Marian attribute of purity and immaculateness. This shows that when the feast was introduced into the Civitas Virginis, mainly through Turino di Matteo and Antonio Casini, it was not only the foundation of the faraway Santa Maria Maggiore that was on the minds of the Sienese. The Virgin of the Snow was presented as yet another way to venerate the glorious patroness of Siena, fitting into the early fifteenth-century introduction of new Marian themes at other altars, such as the Pietà at the altar of the Crucifix and the Madonna of Humility on the altar of the Visitation. The sacra conversazione served the purpose of an intimate, personal tomb chapel. It is a representation of the Virgin sharing a space with intercessory saints who plead with her on behalf of the private patron and the devotee, and thus open up an imagined channel for a spiritual dialogue with and within the celestial court. This had occurred before in a simpler, sculptural form in Siena Cathedral on top of the tomb-monument of Riccardo Petroni by Tino da Camaino of 1318. Iconographic requirements, which literally asked for space to be opened up in order to provide a platform for the interaction of the represented figures as well as to give access to the devotee, thus also account for Sassetta’s early use of the unified composition...


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and for the scenographic trick of the curved baldachin, knitting together real and pictorial space, as discussed in chapter v.

In the contract, Ludovica had called for ‘unam tabulam [...] cum quinque figuris integris scilicet: Virginis Marie cum Christo Yhesu filio suo in brachis suis, Sancti Francisci seraphici, Sancti Petri, Sancti Pauli et Sancti Iohannis Baptistae cum Salvatore a capite Virginis Marie’. All these saints, the Salvator excepted, were eventually painted on the altarpiece. Mary is seated on a suggestively foreshortened throne covered by a cloth with a peacock’s feather pattern, and two angels hold a crown over her head in a delicate gesture. Unfortunately, the brocades of their dresses and the feathers of their wings have lost the intended effect due to the corrosion of the silver-leaf which extends over the entire surface of the wings and cloths underneath the glazes (plate II). It can still be seen, however, that the colour schemes of the angels were designed as positive and negative counterparts. The feathers of the wings of the angel to the left are arranged in four bands starting with blue followed by silver, whereas the wing of the right-hand angel is silver at the top. The patterns of their dresses are also reversed; silver on blue versus blue on silver. This reversal of the colour scheme for two symmetrical elements in a picture later recurs in the pattern of the curtains depicted to the sides of Fra Angelico’s San Marco altarpiece (1438–1440) and in the garments of the angels attending Piero della Francesca’s Madonna del Parto in Monterchi (circa 1455). Sassetta’s crowning angels are seen from below and their faces are foreshortened accordingly. The viewpoint is rather low in this altarpiece and the horizon runs through Christ’s lowest, left foot. Due to such stark foreshortenings in the painting, the impact of Mary, the Child, the angels and the two standing saints is majestic. The majesty of the Virgin is heightened by her crown, by which the angels present her as Queen of Heaven.

Two other angels at Mary’s sides proffer another attribute, the snow-platter (plates, 1–111). The much-damaged angel to the left holds the plate in front of his breast with two hands. The blissful smile on his face, exposing his teeth, corresponds to pictorial experiments being undertaken at the time. Domenico di Bartolo’s Madonna of Humility of 1433 is a case in point, as is Filippo Lippi’s fresco of The confirmation of the Carmelitan rule in the Carmine in Florence, possibly dating to the late 1420s. Pope Hennessy in fact traced all the threads to Filippo Lippi. Whereas the grimace or smile may correspond to Renaissance interests in convincing representation and variation of pose and expression foreshadowing Alberti’s advice, it is also a revival of older experiments. The device can be found in Gentile da Fabriano’s Adoration of the Magi and, for example, in the head of an angel on the inner side of the arch over Simone Martini’s 1340–43 Madonna of Humility fresco in the portal of Notre-Dame-des Doms in Avignon.383 Sassetta’s other angel in the Madonna della Neve has set down his platter on the throne of the Virgin and is pensively kneading a snowball in his hands. Sassetta was the first to fuse the

382 I owe this observation to Rembrandt Duits.
383 POPE HENNESSY 1939, p. 33. For the dating of the Lippi fresco, see most recently RUDA 1993, p. 52. For Simone Martini’s angel-head, see VAN OS 1969, taf. 8.
Roman legend and the Marian attribute into the poetic, playful form of a snowball (plate 111). Originally the snow must have been sparkling white, since Sassetta used silver-leaf to suggest its intensity.

Mary's purity is enhanced by the snow-bearing angels at her sides and, in her honour, her garments are painted with the most costly materials. Sassetta employed gold, silver and lapis lazuli, materials which the painter provided himself and which were specifically stipulated by the 1430 contract: 'cum illa quantitate auri et illis coloribus decentibus dictam tabulam, predellam et figuris'. Most of the surface of the main panel is in fact covered with metal leaf. The Virgin wears a dazzling blue velvet voided mantle with a pomegranate pattern. Sassetta glazed the natural ultramarine over silver, which would originally have shown through. The depth of the voided pattern is suggested by white and black contours following the fall of light. The Virgin's withdrawn pose, her slender left hand chastely clasping the mantle, brings to mind an Annunciate. On the knee of the meditative Virgin a vigorous Christ child is poised in counterbalance. The spatial experiment involving his protruding right leg, which hovers in mid-air, is counteracted by the white cloth, optically levelling the height of his legs. The Virgin's mantle develops in folds once it reaches the mat on the ground. Its red border flames into a sinuous, elegant circle around her feet. It is the movement of this border, continuing through the flanking angels into the wings and arms of the crowning angels, that forms an imaginary oval, mandorla-like shape around the Virgin, setting her off in majesty from the rest of the composition. The inscription in her halo reads: 'S.J.CONFIDIS.IN.ME.SENA.ERIS.GRATIA.PLENA.' This text reminds one not only of the general veneration for Mary in the city of the Virgin and in its cathedral in particular, but may allude more precisely to the illustrious battle of Montecaperti, which the Sienese had won through the intercession of the Virgin, as we have already seen. When Sassetta's altarpiece was installed, the dedication of its altar changed from 'Santa Maria delle Grazie' to 'Santa Maria della Neve'. Until 1446, the altarpiece was still flanked by the Opera Madonna which, according to legend, had been the direct recipient of the key of the city in 1261. The inscription of Mary's halo

384 VAN OS 1968, pp. 32-33 took two angels in the mandorla surrounding Masolino's Assumption of the Santa Maria Maggiore altarpiece as the first instances. However, as ROBERTS 1985, p. 205, points out, these golden balls should be seen as orbs, attributes of the Dominations of the angelic hierarchy. HUBACH 1990, p. 186 note 204, instead points to a precedent in the form of the personification of winter with a snowball in his hands by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (Sala della Pace, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena). This example of course belongs to the iconography of the seasons and totally lacks the Marian connotations of Sassetta's snowball.

385 Quotation from the contract of 25th March 1430 published by LAURENT 1935, p. 260; in the first lodo of 29th October 1432, Sassetta is to be paid 'pro suo labore, magisterio, auro et coloribus'; IDEM, p. 263.

386 HONEIGER 1980, p. 257, who however supposes it is glazed over gold; ultramarine glazes over silver occur in Sassetta's Borgo Sansepolcro altarpiece too; J. Plesters, 'A Technical Examination of Some Panels from Sassetta's Sansepolcro Altarpiece', in: WYLD & PLESTERS 1977, p. 12.


388 It is in fact a straw mat with a pattern in black and red probably from Spain or North Africa, though it is often mistaken for a tapestry. Sassetta used just such a mat for the floor of the central panel of the Madonna of Humility from the Cortona altarpiece, as discussed in THORNTON 1991, p. 63. The mat's rich texture must have appealed to the painter, while its division into rectangles invited a perspectival measurement of space.
may thus be a subtle reference to its venerated predecessor on this altar and to the miraculous events with which the latter was associated.

With the use of gestures and texts, Sassetta spun a network of relations not only between the Virgin and the saints kneeling and standing around her, but also between the protagonists of the painting and the faithful visiting the cathedral. Saint John the Baptist, identified as the greatest of all sons of women ‘MAIOR.INTER.NATOS.MULIERUM.JOHANNES.’, kneels in the foreground, looking out of the frame in the direction of the door and pointing to the Holy Child, thus immediately introducing those entering the Porta del Perdono to the Christ Child. A sacramental touch is added by the scroll the saint holds ‘ECCE.AGNUS DEI’. The Child on his mother’s lap also looks and gestures towards the devotee who has just entered the cathedral, presenting him or her with an inscription inviting them to come to Him ‘all ye that travail and I will refresh you’, the text of Mathew 2:28: ‘VENITE AD ME QUI LABORATIS ET HONERATI ESTIS ET EGO REIFICIAM VOS’. Following a diagonal, a third figure welcomes those entering the cathedral, pensively staring Saint Paul. In his mantle Sassetta repeats the red lake pigment of his diagonal counterpart, Saint John. Saint Paul rests his sword horizontally on his right wrist and left thumb at the same time holding up with his right hand a card identified as ‘AD ROMANOS SECUNDUM’, his letter that refers to the judgment of God. Around his head are the words: ‘VASELECTIONIS.SANCTUS.PAULUS.’. The other privileged apostle, Saint Peter, is to the left of the throne and is presented by the inscription in his halo as ‘PRINCEPS.APOSTOLORUM.SANCTUS.PETRUS.’. He looks at the Holy Child and holds the keys in one hand, and in the other a book in which are visible three pages with readable text. It is a passage from his first letter (1 Peter, 1, 24-26, 2, 1-3) discussing the vanity of all mortal things and urging the pursuit of salvation as ‘children newborn through the soul’s pure milk’.

Upon entering or leaving the cathedral through this important door, the visitor was confronted with Sassetta’s large celestial vision, which of course alluded to Duccio’s Maestà. Saints Peter, Paul and John the Baptist undoubtedly added to the general prestige of the image, yet one wonders whether they might have had a greater significance and whether Casini may have had a hand in suggesting them too. And in suggesting, as a matter of fact, all three figure on the Santa Maria Maggiore altarpiece as well. Saints Peter and Paul might have to be seen in the light of the association of the Porta del Perdono area with the consecration of the Sienese cathedral. Pope Alexander III had conceded a general indulgence every 27th November, the day of the Sagra, in analogy to the practice in the churches of Saint Peter and Saint Paul at Rome, which had allegedly been consecrated on the same day. The situation is more specific in the case of the fourth saint, Francis. In the 1430 commission

he was the only desired saint who received an epithet; ‘Sancti Francisci seraphici’. Of course, he occupied a special place in the religious life of the patrons, which centred round the confraternity of San Francesco and the Franciscan Third Order. Ludovica believed that Saint Francis, together with the Virgin, had cured Turino from his first serious illness. The figure of Saint Francis functions in the painting as a link between the Virgin, to whom he points, and the cathedral space, as he looks up from the lecture in his book and glances obliquely out of the frame. The pointing gesture made by Sassetta’s Saint Francis, with his thumb up, could not be more Sienese. It is a candid wink to Pietro Lorenzetti, who used it on various occasions, for instance in the figure of John the Baptist in the Carmine altarpiece as well as in the same saint on the polyptych of the Pieve in Arezzo, and even in the fresco in the transept of the lower church of San Francesco in Assisi in the figure of the Virgin indicating the Holy Child on her arm a lateral Saint Francis (known as the Madonna dell’Autostop or ‘Hitchhike Virgin’). In the Madonna della Neve, the light is parallel with Saint Francis’ orientation, striking at an acute angle from the top right through the entire painting. Sassetta’s imaginary source of light would thus have to be identified with a point on the Campanile wall that flanked the altarpiece, while the real light flooded in from the left of the altarpiece, from the Porta del Perdono and the window above it. Francis’ light-greenish habit balances Peter’s yellow one in the opposite corner. The inscription on Francis’ halo reads: ‘PATRIARCHA.PAUPERUM.FRANCISCHUS.’390 The Virgin, central to the efforts of all the gesturing saints surrounding her, is the only figure in the altarpiece looking directly at the faithful who knelt in front of the altar.

The six small, half-length saints in the spandrels of the arches of the baldachin-frame also look and gesture towards the Virgin. Even though they are high up and far from the beholder, Sassetta painted these saints with meticulous care, still glazing their garments over gold-leaf, just as he splendidly tooled architectural and floral decorations into the gold of the frame, an example of devoted craftsmanship. The saints are, from left to right, Catherine of Alexandria, Matthew, Bartholomew, Dominic and a female martyr saint, probably Agnes.391 Sassetta played with the shape of the spandrels: Saint Augustine’s crosier just disappears behind the painted niche, while Catherine’s wheel is tucked into the deepest corner of the spandrel. Only the insertion of Saint Dominic seems explicit, because his name day coincided with the Festum Nivis on 5th August.

The arms of Ludovica Bertini and Turino di Matteo figure in an unusually prominent place for a Sienese altarpiece, that is on the throne, in close vicinity to the Virgin.392 At the right is a shield with the Bertini arms, showing the black anvil on a yellow background.393 To the left, in a much-damaged area of

390 An identical inscription, a well-known poetic denomination of the saint, runs around the halo of Saint Francis in Glory of Sassetta’s Borgo Sansepolcro altarpiece; VAN OS 1990, p. 94.
391 POPE HENNESSY 1939, p. 53 note 68 suggested this female saint might be Lucy. In an analogy with Duccio’s Maesta, Agnes is here proposed as a more likely candidate.
393 Compare F. C. UGHELLI 1718, col. 567; Compendio istorico di sassi nobili per nascita ..., compiled in 1694–1697, BCS, ms. A.VI.54, fol. 78r.
the painting is a shield that, logically, must have shown Turino’s arms. On a dark field can be seen a central yellowish bar, possibly increasing in thickness towards the centre. In 1862, Brogi still thought he could discern a rose in the upper half. Turino had been knighted only two years before his death and, since he had no offspring, his coat of arms must have been used for a restricted period only. In an effort to find a complement to Sassetta’s now barely legible specimen, the ceiling of the Sala dei Conversari in the Museo dell’Opera del Duomo is of some help. The vaults are adorned with the coats of arms of all the operai up to modern times, accompanied by their names and the dates of their offices. These arms were re-painted between 1867 and 1880 by Giorgio Bandini and were based on older originals. ‘Turinus Mathei/Anno Domini M.ccccxx’ is accompanied by a coat of arms showing a field divided in two by a yellow bar (plate xvi). Above the bar is a blue field with a white rampant lion, and underneath is a red field with a six-pointed yellow star. Too little is left of the shield on the throne of Sassetta’s Madonna della Neve, but the arms of the Sala dei Conversari might aid our mental reconstruction of it. Turino, a self-made man, must have been particularly proud of his knighthood and as a widow of noble birth, Ludovica Bertini must have shared this pride. In 1426 she is already permitted to decorate the altar ‘cum armis supradiicti olim domini Turini ibidem apponendo et pingendo arma supradiicti olim domini Turini.’ (Appendix 1, doc. a.v). This might account for the unusually prominent place Sassetta gave to their heraldry on the throne of the Virgin.

THE PREDELLA

The predella of the Madonna della Neve offered the most eloquent place for the patrons to unfold their version of the snow legend and to present themselves. The 1430 contract asks for a ‘predellam cum quinque storiis Sancte Marie de Nive’. Previous authors have seen the fact that the final altarpiece counts seven predella-scenes as one of the major deviations from the original plan (plate 1). It has not yet been remarked that the change from five to seven scenes was actually made when the work was already in an advanced stage. The carpentry of the predella had been constructed to accommodate five scenes. In the upper and lower predella frame, refilled V-shaped indentations can be discerned where the originally applied wooden mouldings of circa

394 Brogi 1897, p. 124: ‘Nel mezzo della tavola principale vi sono due stemmi gentilizi, che poco si distinguono. In uno sembra sia una fascia accompagnata da una rosa posta in capo: nell’altro la figura di una ancundine.’

395 They must be based on much older originals, perhaps on a collection of arms unknown to us. The Sala dei Conversari was in use as a theatre in the nineteenth century and was then known as the Salonicino dell’Alfieri. When it was converted to the new Museo Cristiano, the vaults appear to have already been decorated with the arms of the operai. As part of the preparation for the opening of the Museo Cristiano in the building, the painter Giorgio Bandini was entrusted with the task of redecorating the ceilings. In 1879 he gives an estimate for the work ‘per pasporre/c ridipingere gli stemmi e le iscrizioni dei due solfetti del già salonicino’ and then writes an invoice for ‘I centoquattordici stemmi dei rettori dell’Opera Metropolitana di Siena, e le centotrentacinque iscrizioni relative al tempo dell’ufficio dei medesimi; per essere rinnovate nelle due sottitie del Museo Cristiano’; AOMS, 926 (num. Mosc. 1627) nr. 6, letters of 28th September 1879 and 17th January 1880. I am grateful to Susan Scott for drawing my attention to the coats of arms in the Sala dei Conversari.

396 F.C. van Os 1990, p. 169, who explains the deviation from the contract as a wish to present a continuous pictorial representation; Pope Hennessy 1939, p. 29.
3.8 centimetres wide divided the five scenes (plates v, viii, ix). In the damaged paint surface of the predella itself the original subdivision can also be seen. The predella with applied mouldings had already been entirely covered in linen. When the mouldings were removed, bare strips of wood remained without the linen covering the rest of the plank. These bare strips were gessoed and over-painted, but the extreme conditions to which the predella was exposed over more than 500 years caused the gesso and paint layers to detach in these areas particularly as, for example, right through the middle of the third scene, *The dream of the pope* and the sixth, *The construction* (plates vi, ix). The central scene of the original lay-out was wider than the others (the four lateral scenes were approximately 34 cm wide, the central one measured 57.5 cm). When the change occurred, no carpenter was called in to make new mouldings. Instead, Sassetta himself gilded little strips in between the scenes. This also meant that the available space could be used in the most profitable way to accommodate seven scenes.

One can only guess at the reason why the number of predella-scenes was increased during the work. It would have been an automatism to conceive of a predella of five scenes, corresponding to a main panel with five figures, as demanded by the contract. When Sassetta developed his unified composition in the main panel with its lack of even the least trace of a partition into five fields, this may have spoiled the initial plan for the predella. Or maybe the idea to sublimite references to Turino’s office as operaio through the inclusion of scenes with the construction and the dedication of the church crystallised only at a later stage. Enthusiasm about Casini’s detailed report of the snow-legend may have led the painter and his patrons to spin it out in full breadth.

The predella has been much damaged by humidity, being exposed to the winds near the Porta del Perdono and, from 1591 onwards, to the humidity and leaking roofs in its subsequent home in Chiusdino (see Appendix II. 3, 4). Pellicioli imaginatively completed the scenes, but the most recent restoration has removed his additions and the rather sad remains of the original can now be seen properly. The sequence is as follows: *Apparition of the Virgin to the patrician Johannes in his dream, Miraculous snowfall on Mount Esquiline, The vision of Pope Liberius in his dream, The patrician Johannes visits the pope, Pope Liberius humbly hews out the snow ground-plan, The construction of the church, The dedication of the church* (plates iv-x).

Sassetta’s representation of the snow legend has by far the most episodes compared to earlier and later cycles of the subject. Rusuti made four mosaic-panels in Rome, showing *The dream of the patrician, The dream of Pope Liberius, The patrician’s visit to the pope and The miraculous snowfall*, the latter combined in one scene with *The pope hewing out the ground-plan* (figs. 43-46). With this division of scenes, Rusuti put the accent on the collaboration between the ecclesiastical patriciate and the pontiff. This had, in fact, been a reflection of the relations behind the commission, of Pope Nicholas IV and the two Colonna cardinals who had joined forces to accomplish the embellishment of Santa Maria Maggiore.
In order to set off the singularity of Sassetta’s predella-cycle, we shall also take a short look at two Sienese painters and their patrons who followed Sassetta’s example. The city of the Virgin proved to have receptive soil for the introduction of this poetic Marian mystery. However, though Sassetta’s altarpiece struck a sympathetic chord, the snow-cycle was never echoed as elaborately again. In 1477 Matteo di Giovanni signed an altarpiece for a newly built church in Siena dedicated to Santa Maria della Neve (plate xiv). In a petition to the city council of 1470, Giovanni Cinughi explains his reasons for dedicating a church to the Virgin in Siena: ‘ed in questa, la quale si chiama Città
de la Vergine non c'è in nome suo se non la chiesa cattedrale. The church was probably instituted by testamentary bequest and Cinughi's heirs commissioned the altarpiece. Matteo di Giovanni obviously turned to Sassetta for inspiration. His main panel, just as Sassetta's, shows a sacra conversazione, where the snow plays a subordinate role as an attribute of the Virgin. His representation of the story, as well as smaller details such as the angels with the snowballs, are grafted from Sassetta (plates 1, III, XIV). Matteo di Giovanni contented his patron with three predella-scenes only, completely leaving out the early events, the visions and the visit (figs. 59, 60, 61). The miraculous snowfall, with the Virgin and angels hovering over a deserted Esquiline, is followed by the pope hewing out the contours of the church that has to be built and then by the dedication of the church. By selecting the scenes pertaining to the actual construction of the church according to the Virgin's wishes, Giovanni Cinughi thus presented himself as a Bauherr. Giovanni Cinughi is another ideal snow-patron. A patrician and an ecclesiastic, he was created bishop of Pienza and Montalcino by Pope Pius II on 30th September 1462. Under that guise, Cinughi witnessed Pope Pius II's transformation of Corsignano into Pienza and the construction of its Renaissance church. He had provided for the edification of the small church of Santa Maria della Neve in Siena. Cinughi used the legend of the foundation of Santa Maria Maggiore as a referential miracle for his own pious vision to dedicate a church to the

397 Quoted by HUBACH 1996, p. 188 note 212 (ASS, Consiglio Generale 233, fols. 139v-140r (23rd May and 5th June 1470)).
398 BURICCHI 1998, pp. 52-54 cat. nr. 16; HUBACH 1996, pp. 188-189; VAN OS 1990, pp. 184-189; PESCATORI 1988, p. 7; B. Santi, 'La pala di Matteo di Giovanni in Santa Maria delle Nevi a Siena', in IBIDEM, pp. 36-39; TRIMPI 1987, pp. 221-224 cat. nr. 73. Measures reported wrongly in the literature. Panel without the frame as measured by Ludwin Paardekooper: 268.6 x 179 cm, with framing elements circa 327 x 224 cm; see also PAARDEKOOPER 2002, appendice nr. 13 (panel 264 x 179 cm); IDEM 1993, p. 192.
Virgin’s glory, as stated in his petition of 1470. His intentions are reflected in the choice of predella-scenes.

In 1508 Girolamo di Benvenuto painted an altarpiece which presents us with the third Sienese example of a Madonna della Neve in the guise of a sacra conversazione on the main panel (fig. 62). In the predella, four scenes show the dream of the patrician, the dream of the pope, the snow-miracle and the pope hewing out the ground-plan, flanking a central scene with the Resurrection of Christ. The layout of all these snow-scenes is based on Sassetta’s example. Girolamo painted his altarpiece for the Sozzini family for their chapel immediately to the left of the main chapel in the church of San
Domenico. In the last scene with the pope reinforcing the snow-shape (present location unknown; before Detroit, Collection Graham), a man with portrait-like features holds the pope’s cape and looks out straight from the picture (fig. 63). It can be surmised that this is again a patron presenting himself, although we don’t know the background for his selection of scenes, which is quite similar to Rusuti’s cycle. It is possible that provost Niccolò Sozzini, present at the institution of Ludovica’s chapel of the Virgin of the Snow, had an early stake in the genesis of the San Domenico snow-chapel (Appendix 1, doc. A.v).

By choosing a comprehensive depiction of the legend, Ludovica, her counsellors and Sassetta could make a double point. On the one hand, they were able to emphasise Turino and Ludovica’s pious patronage and Turino’s position as operaio through the last three scenes. On the other hand they used the weight of four scenes to emphasise the importance of collaboration between the nobility and ecclesiastical authorities. This co-operation was exemplified in Turino’s function as the operaio, appointed by the Consiglio Generale, and standing midway between the civic supervision over the cathedral-works on one side, and the canons and the bishop on the other. The reformations in the office brought about during the tenure of Turino’s predecessor, discussed earlier, had been specifically aimed at increasing the influence of the Commune in the cathedral works. Turino could easily identify with Johannes ‘Patritius’, since he had just been knighted. During his short office, Turino had prepared the Council of Siena. We have seen that a Sienese priest, Ser Leonardo and two Sienese bishops, Antonio Casini and Carlo Bartoli, were involved in the genesis of the chapel of the Virgin of the Snow. This balancing presence of civic and ecclesiastical authorities in the commission is probably reflected in the first scenes of the predella, narrating in detail the joining of the secular and ecclesiastical domains around the mir-

399 SCHMIDT 1997, p. 217; HUBACH 1996, pp. 189-190; L. Bahr, in KIRCHEN 1992, vol. 2.2, pp. 753 nr. 42, 757-758 nr. 52 (her presumption that the chapel, which already belonged to the Sozzini family in the fourteenth century, was at that time already dedicated to the Madonna della Neve, is unfounded); TORRITI 1990, pp. 308-310.
400 See also SANTI 1987, pp. 498-507.
acle. Sassetta changed the sequence of the story as related by the literary accounts and by Rusuti’s mosaics. Instead of showing the miraculous snowfall after the two nocturnal visions and the meeting of pope and patrician, Sassetta inserted the snowfall on the Esquiline in between the two visions, as if compositionally stressing the amazing simultaneity of these identical visions. As a result, the Visit of Johannes to the pope now occupies the central panel of the predella and, by this position of honour, stresses the convergence of the secular and the ecclesiastical realms. Because of this exchange, the predella also achieves a somewhat more playful alternation of architectural and landscape scenes.

In an elaborate setting, recalling not only Pietro Lorenzetti’s Carmine predella, as Van Os has remarked, but also Sassetta’s own settings in the Arte della Lana predella, Johannes and his wife are asleep (plate iv). An apparition of the Virgin hovers over their bed, telling them in their dream that she will show them how to spend their heritage. In the second scene the Virgin appears in the sky and makes it snow, surrounded by angels, some of them throwing snowballs (plate v). Only the paint-layer of the upper part of this scene survives. Matteo di Giovanni and, later, Girolamo di Benvenuto painted more or less identical scenes with the same apparition of a foreshortened Mary in the midst of angels, again with snowballs in their hands (fig. 59). It is probable that Matteo and Girolamo also took the setting of Mount Esquiline from Sassetta. Through a curtain of snow, city walls are visible in the distance, while below the white ground-plan can be seen. Of the third scene, which would have shown the appearance of the Virgin to Pope Liberius in his sleep, summoning him to build a church in her honour on the Esquiline, only the top of an architectural setting with a loggia, balcony and a statue has survived (plate vi). The fourth and central scene is again placed in the setting of a palace (plate vii). Under a colonnade are seated various officials, although only a few survived the damage to the predella. Sassetta repeated this composition in Saint Francis in front of the pope in his Borgo Sansepolcro altarpiece. The composition is otherwise, once again, borrowed from the Lorenzetti, best exemplified in two scenes from Pietro’s Carmine altarpiece. The patrician Johannes kneels before the enthroned pope. The latter, upon hearing the news of the apparition of the Virgin to Johannes which corresponds to his own nocturnal vision, folds his hands in prayer and looks up to the sky. The architecture comprises a four-partite hall, sliced open for the viewer, with a vault ending in pendant little arches, on top of which are depicted three antiquicing putti bearing garlands. They recall Ambrogio Lorenzetti, who used the same motif on top of his temple in the Purification of the Virgin for the altar of San Crescenzio in Siena Cathedral (fig. 23).

The last three scenes are all set in a landscape, yet this is not a continuous landscape, similar to experiments by Masaccio and Uccello, as has been suggested. The very same landscape is actually repeated in the three scenes

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401 K. Christiansen, ‘Painting in Renaissance Siena’, in CHRISTIANSEN, KANTER & STREHLKE 1988, p. 8, who relates the presumed continuous horizon to Masaccio’s frescos in the Brancacci Chapel, where in two frescos converging in a corner, the hills con-
64. Sassetta. The legend of the wolf of Gubbio, 1437-1444. Part of the Borgo Sansepolcro altarpiece, tempera and gold on panel, 86.4 x 52.1 cm. National Gallery, London, inv. nr. 4762.
with a good sense of the unified narrative, indicating the same building site of
the church three times. From scene to scene, Sassetta repeats the hills and
their crowning castles, but varies the skies to indicate the passage of time. It
is a temporal spacing between the various stages of the genesis of the church.
The interest in a naturalistic landscape and sky is exemplified early in Siena,
in Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Allegory of Redemption and in his frescos in the Sala
della Pace.\footnote{Ghiberti 1447-1455 (1998), p. 88.} It would have been more marked in the lost fresco-cycle by
Ambrogio in the cloister of San Francesco in Siena, which is only known
through Ghiberti’s comments, when he praises the convincing representation
of a hailstorm in one of the frescos.\footnote{Ghiberti 1447-1455 (1998), p. 88.} Sassetta had experimented with skies
before, in the Temptation of Saint Anthony and The burning at the stake of the
heretic Nicolaus on the predella of his Arte della Lana altarpiece. The skies in
the Madonna della Neve predella, with their meteorological interest and their
lyrical observation of nature, form an accompaniment to the events below on
earth. A calm sky with harmoniously striped clouds accompanies the suspense
of the passage when the pope humbly starts to clear the ground-plan (plate
viii). The group of birds (possibly swallows) in the sky seems like a pagan
omen, inserted to stress the Christian miraculousness of the August snowfall.
Sassetta would use the same device to accompany the cortege of the Magi in
his small-scale Adoration and in another miracle scene with Saint Francis and
the wolf of Gubbio in his Borgo Sansepolcro altarpiece (fig. 64). The pact
between the saint and the ferocious animal he has just tamed is echoed here
in the sky by a flight of birds. To the left in the crowd of the Pope Liberius hewing
out the snow ground-plan of the church, three men look up towards the birds
in the sky. The man with the raised stick, about to hit a person clad in black
with his hand protectively in front of his head, adds to this atmosphere of
magic. It seems almost like Saint Peter at the betrayal of Christ dealing with
the incredulity of Malchus by cutting off the latter’s ear. In the following pre-
della-scene of The construction of the church, agitated wind-driven clouds
reflect the hustle and bustle of the many workers on the building site below
(plate ix). Finally, all is serene at the solemn dedication of the finished church
in the last scene (plate x).

Cardinal’s red is the predominant colour in Pope Liberius hewing out the
snow ground-plan of the church (plate viii), much more so than it had been in
Roman predecessors of the representation of this scene (plate xii, figs. 46, 57).
The pope hews out the ground-plan, once sparkling white due to the (now
tarnished) silver-leaf, in the middle of a court of cardinals who discuss this
act. At the far right of the scene stands a cardinal with a beret instead of a car-
dinal’s hat, pointing to the ground-plan and holding a cross. The cross inter-
rupts the horizontality of the clouds, the skyline and the isocephaly of the
crowd. It is tempting to identify this prominent cardinal with Antonio Casini,
cardinal of San Marcello. In Casini’s effigy by Jacopo della Quercia in the

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cardinal of San Marcello. In Casini’s effigy by Jacopo della Quercia in the
relief with the Virgin, to whom the cardinal is presented by his name-saint Anthony, a similar broad, round face on a sturdy neck characterises the cardinal, just as in Masolino’s *Foundation* and to some extent in Nicola di Ulisse’s miniature in Casini’s missal (plates viii, xii, xiii, fig. 40).\(^4\) Sassetta flanks the cross-bearing cardinal with a man and a woman, the patrician Johannes and his wife, in accordance with the legend. The man devoutly folds his hands, while his wife opens hers in amazement. The man has a grey cap over his head and the woman is dressed in a habit with a grey over-cape, a cap with a broad white border and a white tunic. In the first deep fold in her tunic from the right, a chord with knots might be hidden. A general habit for the Franciscan Third Order was styled only in 1447 and it consisted then of a tunic, a cappuccio and the traditional Franciscan chord. Until the eighteenth century the habit was grey (`cenerino`).\(^4\) The patrician’s wife might therefore be a portrait of Sassetta’s patron, donna Ludovica, the Franciscan tertiary, who mirrored herself in her legendary counterpart. She is addressed by the prominently placed cardinal, quite probably Antonio Casini, who was also her counsellor in real life. As witnesses to the foundation of the church, Sassetta thus seems to have represented the three people who constituted the driving forces behind the institution of the chapel of the Virgin of the Snow in the Sienese cathedral: Turino di Matteo, who instituted the chapel by testamentary wish, donna Ludovica, who boldly realised the project and Antonio Casini, who shaped the religious intentions of the patrons as well as the programme of the chapel, apart from being a source of information on the Roman snow legend as well as the hinge between Masaccio and Masolino’s work in Rome and Sassetta’s in Siena.

Ludovica’s late husband, Turino di Matteo, the operaio who was actually buried in front of this altarpiece, is the pivotal figure in the next episode. The representation of the construction of the church with its attention for daily detail is not common at all and seems to be Sassetta’s own invention (plate ix).\(^6\) The operaio, Turino, oversees the various activities, clad in an elegant dress with a *mazzocchio*-like hat. Two mules or horses bring new materials. A workman takes bricks from a large heap, while another brings them to the bricklayers in a basket on his shoulder. Two bricklayers place the bricks, with hammer and trowel, on two walls that are under construction. From behind the back wall a man emerges carrying mortar on a plank on his head and next to him a man sieves sand, in preparation for the mortar. In the foreground the operaio addresses a stonemason who is seated on the ground carving a capital on a low bench.

The predella culminates in a scene of the completed church, a brick building with a portico, and its dedication (plate x). The brick structure and the façade with mosaics suggests that Casini had informed Sassetta about the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore with its medieval loggia and about Rusuti’s

\(^4\) See Caroli 1979, p. 103 and fig. clv.


\(^6\) Van Os 1990, p. 179 mentions one earlier example, a miniature by Andrea da Bologna in a missal of Bertrand de Deux, adjusted version of *Idem* 1968, p. 32 and fig. 26.
decoration of the upper façade, although the layout precludes any direct knowledge of the Roman church. The pope with the patrician/ Turino at his side is about to enter the church, followed by a procession of cardinals. Whereas the pope and those closing the procession are focussed on the new church, the patrician and two cardinals look backwards at someone kneeling in the middle of the procession. Again, the paint is badly damaged, but those backward glances suggest a person of honour, like the cardinal of the procession cross of two scenes earlier, or maybe even the woman, donna Ludovica. Matteo di Giovanni represented the same unusual episode of the dedication in his Cinughi altarpiece more than forty years later, painting a frontal close-up of the portico of the church (fig. 61). The cardinal’s red seems a remnant picked up from Sassetta, but no longer with any specific meaning. The introduction of such a large amount of cardinals is a Sienese peculiarity. At the beginning it had a precise meaning and referred to a particular commission in which a Sienese cardinal had actually been intimately involved. Later occurrences of the snow-iconography in Siena, in the altarpieces by Matteo di Giovanni and Girolamo di Benvenuto, had no individual Roman source, but were derived directly from Sassetta. In Sassetta’s case, the cardinals referred to the ecclesiastics attending the original miracle, to the fifteenth-century situation at Santa Maria Maggiore itself, and to the counsellor of the Sienese patrons, Cardinal Antonio Casini.

The snow-legend as Casini would have recounted it to the munificent patrons Ludovica and Turino had intrinsic qualities and analogies with their own circumstances and convictions, as indicated above. Turino and Ludovica presented their personal patronage in the spirit of the divinely inspired act of Johannes Patritius and his wife, just as the archpriest and the canons at Santa Maria Maggiore stressed in their celebration of the Festum Nivis that they were acting in the tradition of the snow-miracle by embellishing their church. The Virgin of the Snow was a beautiful addition to the Marian programme as it developed in the fifteenth century in the Sienese cathedral. The foundation legend of the oldest church of western Christianity dedicated to the Virgin, moreover, seemed befitting of the Sienese cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta. In this respect, the symbolism of the direct physical context of Ludovica and Turino’s chapel is of importance. The location next to the Porta del Perdono guaranteed a psychological connection with the founding of the Sienese cathedral that seems to have been deliberately exploited by Sassetta and his patrons. The Porta del Perdono was known by that name since, traditionally, Pope Alexander III would have entered by that door on the day of the cathedral’s consecration. On that occasion he bestowed indulgencies upon those entering through the Porta del Perdono. Therefore, the Porta del Perdono, next to Sassetta’s altarpiece, was related to the consecration of the church.

407 UGURGIERI AZZOLINI post 1640-ante 1667, fol. 51v: ‘l’indulgenza che detto Papa Alessandro terzo pose alla porta di detto duomo, nominato perciò la portà del Perdono, e diceva che chiunque entrava per quella porta in duomo, e diceva uno Pater Noster et un Ave Maria, facendo il passo dell’armicella di detto papa, che c’ivi in terra di marmo giallo inserito nella soglia di detta porta, aquistava per ciascuna volta trenta giorni di perdono’, see also fol. 53r.
Ludovica and her counsellors may have grasped this association and used it to enforce their own presentation of themselves as patrons and constructors of a chapel.

In front of the Porta del Perdono in Siena Cathedral, an emphasis on the foundation and founders of churches in a masquerade of interwoven references would later be continued in a pavement panel. In April 1451, the Opera del Duomo expressed its shame at the filthy, neglected state of the area at the top of the stairs leading up to the Porta del Perdono. In August of that year the Opera, under the rectorate of Mariano Bargagli, commissioned Corso di Bastiano to place there a marble inlaid pavement. Following the use of the foundation of Santa Maria Maggiore as a metaphor for operaio Turino’s care for the Sienese cathedral, as seen in the first chapel upon entering the Porta del Perdono, the pavement panel represented the mythical consecration of Siena Cathedral by Pope Alexander III in 1179.\(^{408}\) The glass window above the Porta del Perdono with an unknown subject, made by Guasparre di Giovanni in 1434 for the Opera, may already have joined in this ‘programme’.\(^{409}\) In the sixteenth century the emphasis on the foundation of the cathedral in the decoration of the area around the Porta del Perdono was stressed again by Giugurta Tommasi (operaio 1590-1607). On 5th June 1591 he entrusted Filippo Cafaggi with the task of making a sculpture of the alleged founder of Siena Cathedral, Pope Alexander III. Tommasi intended to put the sculpture near the Porta del Perdono. He cleared the area and on 1st April 1591 he removed the altar of Santa Maria della Neve and sold Sassetta’s altarpiece (see Appendix 11.3). However, the statue seems to have been destined to go to the other side of the Porta del Perdono, where a niche can still be seen on the seventeenth-century ground-plan (figs. 9a, 9b).\(^{410}\) Around the same time, Tommasi commissioned Flaminio di Girolamo del Turco and Pietro di Benedetto da Prato to make a wall monument to Pope Alexander III, with a plaque containing a laudatory inscription. This monument was positioned on the outside of the Campanile on its southern wall, in between the Porta del Perdono and the archiepiscopal palace (fig. 28).\(^{411}\) Tommasi’s intentions to evoke once again the memory of the foundation of the cathedral are clear.

Donna Ludovica’s choice, to dedicate the altar of her late husband operaio Turino di Matteo next to the Porta del Perdono to the miracle of the Virgin of the Snow, can be seen as the first visual expression of a tradition of emphasizing the consecration and building of the cathedral in the decoration of this particular corner of the edifice.

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\(^{408}\) The panel was executed by Corso di Bastiano following a drawing by ‘Guasparre dipentore’. ARONOW 1985, pp. 176-181, 432-433 doc. nr. 89; MILANESI 1854, vol. 11, pp. 269-270 doc. nr. 189. The pavement panel was lost during the construction of the Chigi Chapel.

\(^{409}\) Payment dated 15th July 1434; MILANESI 1854, vol. 11, pp. 198-199 note to doc. nr. 135. See also LUSSINI 1939, vol. 11, p. 31 note 2. With the glass covering a surface of 9\(\frac{1}{4}\)\(\text{braccia}\) or circa 3.30 m\(^2\), the window was quite considerable.

\(^{410}\) The historian Tommasi wrote a treatise in which he tried to prove the story that Alexander III had indeed founded the cathedral in 1179. Due to conflicts with the bishop, the statue of Pope Alexander III would never be erected near the Porta del Perdono. Instead, a statue of Pope Paul V by Fulvio Signorini was put there in 1609; BUTZEK 1980, esp. pp. 18-22, 28, 53-54 doc. nrs. IV-X, and see note 114 above.

\(^{411}\) BUTZEK 1980, pp. 20-22, 54-55 doc. nrs. XI-XIII. The remnants of the monument with the inscription can now be found in the passage of the present lateral entrance.
Sassetta's predella attests to a meticulous knowledge of the snow legend in all its narrative detail. In the predella the painter has seized the opportunities it offered for an interpretation related to the modern actuality of a fifteenth-century Sienese couple. Through an identification with the mythic patrician Johannes and his wife, pushed so far as to include portraits, the social standing of the knighted Turino and his noble wife are underlined, as is their pious gesture. Turino was the first operaio to be granted a chapel and a burial-place of his own in the cathedral and the reasons for this privilege are reflected in a detailed pictorial account of his activities as operaio, again under the guise of the acts of Johannes 'Patritius'. Ludovica chose an allegorical commemoration of her late husband and herself. She did not opt for the usual manifestation of the patron through the representation of name-saints, nor did she add any commemorative inscriptions. Through the inclusion of both Turino's and Ludovica's arms (his in the place of honour, to the Virgin's right) and through the choice of the representation of a legend which reflected the ambitions of both husband and wife, containing both their portraits, Sassetta's altarpiece became an expression of a remarkable degree of equality between a late husband and his widow. This degree of equality may have been determined by Ludovica's noble descent in contrast with Turino's self made fortune. Turino's position as operaio, on the brink of the civic and the cathedral authorities, and Ludovica's position as widow in charge of the institution of a chapel, had made them dependent upon the ecclesiastical powers of their day, such as the canons, the bishop, the rector of the Spedale and, above all, diplomat-cardinal-bishop Antonio Casini. This close co-operation is presented in the predella as the co-operation between the pope and his cardinals on the one hand and the patrician couple on the other.