MEDIEVAL ENGLISH ALABASTER SCULPTURES: TRADE AND DIFFUSION IN THE ITALIAN PENINSULA

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UDC: 7.075(410.1:450)04/14
736.2:033
Preliminary communication
Manuscript received: 23. 01. 2016.
Revised manuscript accepted: 17. 03. 2016.
DOI: 10.1484/J.HAM.5.111359

In 1382 Cosmato Gentili, Pope Urban VI's representative in England, got an export license for three large alabaster carvings to be shipped to Rome from the city port of Southampton. This is the first evidence which attests the trade of English alabaster sculptures in Italy. Although only a few similar documents survive, the spread of these works of art in Italy is proved by the great amount of existing pieces. Indeed, with more than 40 carvings held in Italy, the Peninsula should be considered among the biggest purchasers of alabasters in Europe. Through a careful investigation of the carvings kept in different Italian regions this essay aims to trace the diffusion of these artworks in the Peninsula. Some unpublished or neglected carvings are here discussed for the first time, and some scattered panels are here recomposed together as part in origin of the same altarpiece.

Keywords: English alabasters; Alabasters in Italy; Santa Croce in Jerusalemme; San Francisco della Vigna; Santa Caterina de' Sacchi; Museo Diocesano di Arte Sacra, Treviso; Museo Diocesano, Vicenza; Pinacoteca del Seminario Vescovile, Ravigo; Museo d'Arte Antica del Castello Sforzesco; Museo Civico di Palazzo Schifanoia; Museo del Teatro della Cattedrale, Savona; Tommaso degli Obizzi.

On 10 September 1550 the English ambassador in France, Sir John Mason, wrote to the Privy Council from Poissy, saying that 'Three or four ships have lately arrived from England laden with images, which have been sold at Paris, Rouen, and other places, and being eagerly purchased'.

The ambassador had thus attended one of the most known cases of mass export of artworks in Europe, which took place after the Reformation that banned sacred images from British churches. Among the destroyed and scattered works, there were many alabaster altarpieces, specifically mentioned in the Act of January of 1550 against the 'superstitious books and images' that ordered the destruction of 'any images of stone, timber, alabaster, or earth, graven, carved or painted'.

Several sculptures entered the European art market. Among the many carvings that reached the Italian peninsula was the 'marble flemish panel with many figures, of four arm's-length wide,' which Brother Fabiano, guardian of the church of San Benedetto at Settimo, near Pisa, bought for eight ecus from an English merchant who took it to Italy. The polyptych – that despite the reference to the Flanders is clearly an English artwork – is now reused as an altar-frontal, and is placed on the church's main altar. Typological and stylistic evidence suggests that the artwork dates back to the mid-fifteenth century, thus implying that the altarpiece was originally exhibited in an English church, from which it was evidently removed after the Reformation. Two other sculptures shared that same fate: the Virgin and Child and the Trinity brought...
to Liguria in 1531 by a local nobleman, Pietro Giulio Cristiani, who gave them as a gift to the church of San Giovanni Battista in Varese Ligure, his home town, in order to save them from the destruction they would have faced in England. Yet, it would be an oversimplification, devoid of any historical basis, to think that all the alabasters now kept in Italy arrived there only after the despoliation of English churches that occurred during the Reformation, although it did play a decisive role in the widespread dissemination of these artworks in Europe and Italy. While it is reasonable to think that the now isolated panels, derived from bigger altarpieces, are indeed the result of the marketing exercise that took place after the Reformation, archival records and the artworks themselves tell a different story, that has only been hinted at thus far, and that shows Italy as a purchaser of alabaster carvings from dates much earlier than those of the Reformation. In doing so, the Peninsula took advantage of its many ports and the commercial vocation of many of its cities and people. The flow of goods took place in two directions, that is to say both by Italian buyers in England and by English merchants active in the Mediterranean as well.

The pieces kept in Italy have almost been neglected thus far. Yet, their analysis constitutes an essential step to deepening the phenomenon of the diffusion and reception of English alabasters in Europe, as well as of matters connected to the wider historical and cultural context. Indeed, thanks to the diverse—and often prestigious—patrons that commissioned these artworks, and the different arrangements in which they were displayed in the sacred space, the study of the carvings held in Italy can bring a new perspective on our knowledge of functions, typologies, and spatial arrangements of these artworks. The frequent reference of the sources, often aware of the material used to carve the altarpieces, testifies on the one hand to the interests that these artworks could spark in the viewers, and on the other provides a vital historical background.

If some of the alabaster artworks mentioned in archival records, such as the 'Imaginem beate Marie cum eius filio Ihesu Christo de alaubastro' bequeathed by Battagli da Rimini on 16 August 1345 to the Franciscans of Venice to be placed in a chapel within their church, and now lost; the 'Beata Vergine col Figlio in braccio di Alabastro' bequeathed by...
by Brother Fallione da Vazzola in 1347 to the church of San Nicolò in Treviso, now also lost; as is the alabaster Crucifixion gifted by Giovanni Trevisan to the church of Santa Maria della Misericordia in Venice, might have been carved in France, where alabaster was also abundantly used, we can be sure that other alabaster artworks that reached Italy from an early date were produced in England instead, in the area between Nottingham, Burton-on-Trent, Leicester and Newark where the majority of quarries used to be.

Among the English alabasters that arrived very early in Italy there are the sculptures which were shipped to Rome in 1382. In that year Cosmato Gentili, Pope Urban VI’s representative in England, got an export license for three large alabaster sculptures to be shipped from the city port of Southampton. We are informed by the documents that these sculptures represented the Virgin and Child, St. Peter and St. Paul, plus a smaller image of the Trinity. Two of them, St. Peter and St. Paul,” may be those formerly in the church of Santa Croce in Jerusalem in Rome, now on display at the Museo della Basilica (fig. 1). Their style is indeed consistent with carvings done around 1380, as a comparison with the sculptures found in 1779 under the chancel floor of the church of St. Peter in Flawford and now kept at the Castle Museum in Nottingham, demonstrate.

The original setting of the sculptures in Rome is still a matter of discussion. However, in 1894 during the recovery of some fragments of the old ciborium of the Basilica, completed in 1140 and broken up in the eighteenth century, the superintendent stated that the ‘two exquisite statues of St. Peter and Paul, that Passalacqua placed on both sides of the subterranean altar in front of that entitled to St. Helen’ belonged originally to the ciborium. We do not know how the sculptures were fixed to it, and which part of the ciborium they adorned. The figures of St. Peter and Paul were surely functional to visually represent the papal authority, and perfectly lend themselves to be displayed in one of the most prestigious churches of Rome, traditionally thought to have been founded by St. Helen and site of papal annual processions. The symbolic meaning must have been particularly relished by Urban VI, an active proponent and promoter of the return of the apostolical seat from Avignon to Rome.

Fig. 1: St. Paul; Rome, Museo della Basilica di Santa Croce in Gerusalemme
The pope also started an integral renovation of the church of Santa Croce in 1370, entrusting its management to the Carthusians. This interest he shared with Cosmato Gentili, who was created presbyter cardinal of the church of Santa Croce on 18 December 1389, and who was later elected pope with the name of Innocent VII. In England, where Cosmato was sent to admonish Canterbury and York, he was in touch with the highest hierarchies of the reign, and with the King himself. We shall remember, therefore, that during those years alabaster was very popular at the English court, and that in 1367 King Edward III commissioned Peter the Mason of Nottingham the execution of an alabaster altarpiece to be placed in the chapel of St. George at Windsor, now lost.

A sculpture in Venice is very similar to the carvings in Rome, both from a compositional and from a stylistic point of view. It is the Bishop Saint, usually identified as Louis of Toulouse, set in a niche high on the left wall of the presbytery of the church of San Francesco della Vigna, close to the door that leads to the sacristy and the convent (fig. 2). The story of this sculpture is unknown. We know for sure that it was already in the church, and precisely in its current position, in 1754. Indeed, in that year Johannes Grevembroch saw, described, and drew it (fig. 3). According to Grevembroch, the sculpture might have decorated originally the cover of a funerary monument, or have constituted the furnishing of an altar devoted to St. Louis of Toulouse which used to be placed in the Gothic church, the ancient church enlarged from 1534.

A faulty interpretation of Grevembroch’s words, together with a mistaken reading of ancient sources, which mention a sepulchre with the remains of Louis King of Sicily in the vestibule of the ancient church, has led Wolters to hypothesise that a funerary monument of St. Louis of Toulouse did exist in the church and that Grevembroch implied that the alabaster sculpture was used indeed to cover that tomb. However,
Grevembroch did not refer to that sepulchre, which was not mentioned by previous sources either. On the contrary, he mentioned a generic tomb, which was no longer in existence. Yet, the sculpture seems to have been conceived as a standing figure from the beginning, therefore it was probably destined for the decoration of an altar. One cannot exclude that it was a pillar picture, that is to say a devotional image not attached to an altar but to a pillar or a column instead, a use that is testified for some alabaster carvings. From an iconographic point of view, it should be remarked that the habit in which the bishop saint is dressed is not the Franciscan coarse woolen cloth usually worn by Louis of Toulouse, and we shall thus speculate that the identity of the saint is another. His conventional symbols are not sufficient to identify him: the opulent mitre and the crosier (now fragmentary, but originally decorated with a cross, still visible in Grevembroch’s drawing), are indeed too generic to enable an identification.

The good quality of the carving, embellished by a rich polychromy and gilding, may imply that the sculpture was commissioned -or bought- by a wealthy and distinguished patron. Additionally, the prestigious position of the sculpture, placed in an elevated niche near the door that leads to the sacristy and the convent, a location that ensured great visibility and daily attention by the friars who passed near it while entering the cloister, seems to go in that same direction. In line with the sculpture, and above it, there is a showy crest that seems to create some sort of a complement to the sculpture, to the point that I would not exclude that there was a link between them. After all, the church and the convent were beneficed by the wealthiest families in town, many of which had their tombs and funerary chapels there. We can imagine that one of these families ordered the English sculpture, taking advantage of the commercial and financial relations that many Venetians had with the North. After the renovation of the church in the sixteenth century, the sculpture might have been relocated within the new church, a practice that is testified for other artworks that have been moved from the older building into the new one.

The fact that Venice and the Venetians were early buyers of English alabasters is testified by other sculptures both in the city and in the mainland. A polyptych now on display at the Galleria Franchetti alla Ca’ d’Oro in Venice (fig. 4) testifies to the purchase of magnificent artworks from England. It is an alabaster polyptych with closing wings that shows scenes from the Life of St. Catherine flanked by the saints Zita and Dorothy. It still preserves its original carpentry, enriched with inscriptions in Gothic characters that identify the subjects represented above. From a stylistic and typological point of view, the polyptych can be compared to artworks such as the Swansea Altarpiece in the Victoria and Albert Museum (1450 c.), and

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31 The archival research I have conducted thus far failed to provide information on the possible original arrangement of the sculpture. The situation is made much more complicated because of the destruction of the original church, replaced by a new one in the 16th century. The archival records are held in ASVe, San Francesco della Vigna. A transcription of some documents is provided in Memorie del convento, op. cit. (n. 27).

32 That is the case of the sculpture of St. Anne in the church of Daventry, before which Edward IV knelt on Palm Sunday 1471. The detailed chronicle records ‘in a pillar of the church, directly above the place where [the] Kyng kneyd, and devowetly honoryd the Roode, was a lytle ymage of Seint Anne, made of alleblaster, standynge fixed to the piller cords...’ From an iconographic point of view, it should be remarked that the habit in which the bishop saint is dressed is not the Franciscan coarse woolen cloth usually worn by Louis of Toulouse, and we shall thus speculate that the identity of the saint is another. His conventional symbols are not sufficient to identify him: the opulent mitre and the crosier (now fragmentary, but originally decorated with a cross, still visible in Grevembroch’s drawing), are indeed too generic to enable an identification.

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the fragmentary polyptych of St. Catherine in the church of St. Mary at Fontarabia (1430–1450 ca.)\textsuperscript{39}.

The triptych entered the museum after the Napoleonic suppressions. Before that, it formed part of the furnishing of the Augustinian female church of Santa Caterina de’ Sacchi in Venice. The numerous re-fittings of the church, only rarely documented with precision, and the several restorations, prevent the reconstruction of the original setting of the triptych. In 1581, Sansovino saw it on the altar of the Angel Raphael, in the right nave of the church, where it was used as a predella\textsuperscript{40}. The altar was funded and endowed by Zuan Antonio Nasi, who mentioned it in his testament of 1567\textsuperscript{41}, where he also asked for a tomb to be completed and placed in front of his altar for himself and his family members\textsuperscript{42}.

However, it is unclear whether that was the original location of the triptych or not, and the situation is much more complicated than it might appear to be. Indeed, Zuan Antonio Nasi took pains to bequest a legacy to decorate the altar with marble colonettes and a font for holy water, and to provide it with stairs. He also bequeathed the altar a painting that depicted the Supper at Emmaus, which hung in his bedroom at the time of his will\textsuperscript{43}. In his testament, thus, there is no mention of the alabaster triptych, while later sources, starting from Ridolfi (1648)\textsuperscript{44}, assured that the altar was decorated with the painting of Tobias and the Angel by Titian, now kept at the Gallerie dell’Accademia in Venice, which is however adorned with the Bembo coat of arms, and that must have been placed there at a later time\textsuperscript{45}. After all, the iconography of the alabaster triptych is not consistent with the dedication of the altar. Furthermore, if we consider the fact that the alabaster was carved a century before Sansovino saw it on that altar, the suspicion that it was a later setting is supported.

In my opinion, we shall thus reflect on the circumstance that a scuola piccola, a confraternity, dedicated to St. Catherine existed within the church. Founded in 1337, it had its site in a two-floor building near the convent. Not only did the confraternity own an altar on the second floor of the Scuola, but also that of St. Catherine in the left nave of the church\textsuperscript{46}, together with two richly decorated funerary monuments for the brothers and sisters on the counter-façade of the church\textsuperscript{47}. Furthermore, the inventories of the goods that belonged to the confraternity, written from 1399, mentioned several altar furnishings and decorations -both movable and unmovable- embellished with the representation of the Alexandrine saint, placed inside the church and also in the locations reserved for the members, which seem to have fostered a sort of monopoly on the image of the saint\textsuperscript{48}. I wonder therefore, if the alabaster polyptych might have originally been linked to the confraternity rather than to Zuan Antonio Nasi. One may wonder if the alabaster triptych can be identified with the large altarpiece of St. Catherine placed on the upper hall of the Scuola, where there was an altar on which a chaplain celebrated mass and new brothers and sisters swore observance to the rules\textsuperscript{49}. If so, it might have been dismantled and moved in a later time, perhaps after 1489, when the first Scuola was demoted to a storage facility while a new, larger, building was erected next to and in front of the church. After all, because of their emotional character, capable of raising in the beholder a strong affective and empathetic reaction, thanks to the symbolic use of colour and to the numerous realistic details\textsuperscript{50}, alabaster polyptychs were much appreciated by confraternities. In this respect, we shall consider the polyptych with the Passion of Christ now at the Museo Nazionale del Molise di Castello Pandone, which came from the church of the Santissima Annunziata in Venafro\textsuperscript{51}. It was originally placed on the altar of the
collection of Tommaso degli Obizzi in his castle, called Catao, near Padua, and is now held in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Wien. It consists of two standing figures of saints Margaret and Apollonia, and four reliefs showing the Legend of St. Catherine. Although the carvings are now separated, and the original frame got lost, yet it is evident that the compositional arrangement of this triptych was very similar to the Ca’ d’Oro alabaster, also in terms of the dimensions. The ideal recomposition of the polyptych lacks the central panel, which must have been bigger than the lateral ones, and that might have shown the Martyrdom of Catherine, as the Venetian triptych. We lack any evidence to reconstruct the history of the polyptych and its original location. However, as we know that during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, Italian collectors as well as Tommaso degli Obizzi, used to buy artworks available in the local market, we might hypothesize that the alabaster altarpiece came from a church in the territory of Padua.

Other alabaster artworks exist in the Veneto, proving the fundamental role played by the port of Venice in the marketing of these sculptures. Again in Venice, in the Pinacoteca Manfrediniana del Seminario Patriarcale, is held a relief that shows Christ’s flagellation (fig. 5), that dates back to the first half of the fifteenth century. It likely comes from the Venetian church of Santa Lucia, destroyed between 1860 and 1861. The Flagellation is set against a rocky landscape; the lower ground is painted green, with small clusters of white dots surrounding one red dot, representing flowers. The upper background is gilded, the surface being decorated with applied dots of gesso—now detached—stuck on to the alabaster. These details, together with the battlemented top and the three-sided chamfered base, can be compared to artworks that date back to the beginning of the fifteenth century, such as the Passion altarpiece of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. From a stylistic and iconographic point of view, the carving can be related to two sculptures now kept at the Museo Diocesano di Arte Sacra in Treviso (figs. 6–7), formerly in the sacristy of the local Cathedral. The carvings show the Deposition and the Resurrection of Christ. Their dimensions are consistent with those of the relief in Venice, and also the treatment of the background and the shape of the slab are very similar. Again, strictly alike is the way in which the faces are done, delicate

![Fig. 5: Christ's Flagellation; Venice, Pinacoteca Manfrediniana del Seminario Patriarcale](image)

Cross, founded by the Flagellants and then brought out by a confraternity close to the Battuti. With its details that show Christ’s sufferings, the dramatic use of colours—pitch black for the faces of the executioners, bright white for the faces of Christ and Mary, recurrent sharp red in the carvings—the polyptych perfectly responded to the devotional needs and ideals of the confraternities.

A polyptych very similar to the Ca’ d’Oro one, both in terms of iconography and typology, formed part of the

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54 The panels now in Wien measure 40 x 26 cm, while the standing saints on the sides cm 40 x 13. Thus the altarpiece should have measured approximately 60 (considering that the central panel must have been higher than the later ones, and that a carved frame must have been placed above it) x 250 cm.


56 On this polyptych: F. CHEETHAM, op. cit. (n. 4), p. 68.


58 The Flagellation of Venice measures 38 x 25 cm, the Deposition and Resurrection of Treviso 40 x 27 cm and 41 x 28 respectively.
and soft, and the hair (figs. 8-11). We may thus be tempted to think that the carvings belonged to the same altarpiece and that, once it had been divided in pieces, the panels took different market directions. Alternatively, we shall hypothesize the existence of two altarpieces of the same subject, i.e. the Passion of Christ, carved by the same workshop around the same years, and both destined to the Veneto.

In the doubt that remains, considering the absence of any specific evidence, it might be worth remembering that a similar fate occurred to other alabaster altarpieces in Italy and elsewhere. Indeed, the independent character of the panels that compose these altarpieces, both from a structural as well as from a narrative point of view, has often made them attractive as free-standing compositions. Among these, there is the ‘retable of alabaster with many figures’ that an inventory written in 1644 mentions on the altar dedicated to the Virgin in the Abbey Church of Novalesa58. Archival records attest that the chapel was founded in the second half of the fifteenth century by the mandatory Abbot Giorgio Provana59, who most likely provided the altar with all the required furnishings and wanted the chapel to be decorated with a painted cycle devoted to the Virgin Mary, done by Antoine de Lonhy60. The alabaster altarpiece must have integrated itself visually and iconographically within the paintings, since it also represents scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary. The altarpiece was removed and scattered after the Napoleonic suppressions. In 1875, one of its panels was published: the Coronation of the Virgin, now kept at the Museo di Palazzo Madama in Turin61, in those days in the private collection of Felice Chiapusso in Susa62. It was Felice Chiapusso himself who confirmed that the panel was given as a gift some forty years before by the monks of the Novalesa.

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to a certain D. Gattiglio, parish priest of Ferrera, who later gave it to the Chiapusso family. A drawing of a Crucifixion was published together with the Coronation of the Virgin of Turin. The panel, which belonged to the same altarpiece, had been found within the ruins of a house destroyed by fire, located near the Novalesa abbey. That same carving, which got lost shortly after$^{63}$, is also visible in a photo taken at the end of the nineteenth century. In the same circumstance, two other fragments were mentioned, originally part of an Adoration of the Magi, kept in a private collection$^{64}$. I think also that the Assumption of the Virgin now on display at the Museo di Susa$^{65}$ was part of the same altarpiece, since its style, dimensions, and format are consistent with those of the aforementioned pieces, as is its provenance from the same territory.

$^{63}$ I have recently been able to trace the carving in a private collection. I will discuss it in detail in an essay devoted to the Novalesa altarpiece, entitled Intercultural exchange between England and Italy: Alabaster Sculpture in Unexpected Quarters, in Artistic Exchange in Unexpected Quarters: Art, Travel and Geography during the Renaissance, ed. by J.W. Anderson, Turnhout, in press.

$^{64}$ Photos of the fragments are published in A. GUERRINI, op. cit. (n. 60), p. 170, figs. 14-15.

$^{65}$ G. GENTILE, Immagini e apparati per il culto e la memoria nell’antica chiesa abbaziale, in Novalesa. Nuove luci dall’abbazia, ed. by M. G. Cerri, Milan, 2004, pp. 73-89: 82-83.
I would not exclude the possibility that also the pieces now at the Museo Diocesano in Vicenza\textsuperscript{66} and at the Pinacoteca del Seminario Vescovile in Rovigo\textsuperscript{67} belonged originally to the same altarpiece, as their similar style, typology, dimensions\textsuperscript{68} and iconography, plus their common provenance from the Veneto, seem to suggest. The pieces in Vicenza show the \textit{Last Supper}, the \textit{Ascension of Christ} and the \textit{Pentecost}; the panel in Rovigo represents \textit{Christ descent into Limbo}. From a stylistic point of view, the similarities between the faces are particularly remarkable (figs. 12-15): see the way in which the beards are carved, with curls in pairs along the chin and the jaw; and the hair, created by the superposition of several locks shapely arranged around the visages. The style is consistent with other carvings done at the beginning of the fifteenth century, such as \textit{St. John the Baptist} in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London\textsuperscript{69}, which implies an equivalence with the dating.

\textsuperscript{68} All the pieces are now damaged, thus their dimensions are now slightly smaller than they used to be. The carvings in Vicenza measure 44 x 30 cm (\textit{Last Supper}), 44 x 31 cm (\textit{Ascension}), and 46 x 32 cm (\textit{Pentecost}); the panel in Rovigo measures 42 x 32 cm.
\textsuperscript{69} F. CHEETHAM, \textit{op. cit.} (n. 4), p. 113, n. 42.
The Descent into Limbo of Rovigo belonged to the private collection of the Earl Camillo Silvestri (1645–1719), who during his lifetime had founded an outright museum transferred to the city after his death. The main part of the artworks he collected came from the territory of Padua, Adria and Este. The reliefs now in Vicenza were part of the rich donation that the Abbot Earl Ottavio Muttoni bequeathed to his diocese in 1873. The member of a very wealthy family, Muttoni possessed an art collection he increased constantly with new acquisitions, often from the territory of Vicenza where he was very active. Therefore, we might hypothesize that an alabaster altarpiece devoted to the Passion of Christ existed in a church between Padua and Vicenza. It might have been removed from its original location and the panels scattered at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Similarly plausible is the provenance from the same altarpiece of some panels now kept in different collections in Milan, and in particular the Betrayal of Christ in the Museo d’Ars Antica del Castello Sforzesco (fig. 16) and the Deposition in the Pinacoteca di Brera. These pieces are very damaged and fragmentary, and they have also completely lost their original polychromy. Thus, the analysis of their style is disrupted by the difficulties caused by their poor state of preservation. Yet, it is still possible to note the similarities in the treatment of the draperies: they are rigid, angular and pointy, built on the alternation of pronounced reliefs and deep wrinkles, that completely hide the anatomy of the bodies below them. More in particular, there is an identical detail in both the carvings, which is the way in which the sleeves of Judas and Joseph of Arimathea’s dresses are arranged on the arms, creating a deep hollow at the centre, elevated where there is the limb and where the drape relapses down. Again, it is also possible to note many similarities in the way that faces, hair and beards are carved. These details are consistent with artworks carved in the first half of the fifteenth century, such as The Crucifixion and the Entry into Jerusalem of the Victoria and Albert Museum. The Betrayal of Christ boasts a prestigious pedigree. Indeed, it comes from the now demolished Rocchetta Viscontea in Porta Romana in Milan, part of the Visconti palace, where it was likely set on the altar of the family’s private chapel. It was evidently part of an altarpiece devoted to the Passion of Christ. In 1793, when the Austrians destroyed the Rocchetta, the altarpiece was removed and scattered in pieces to be sold separately. The frequent relations between Milan and England, strengthened further thanks to the weddings between members of the Visconti family and the English Royal House and nobility, provide an historical context for the existence of well established cultural and artistic relationships.

The diffusion of that kind of artwork in the context of Italian courts provides us with sufficient evidence of the high

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20 B. GAMBA, Galleria dei Letterati ed Artisti Illustri delle Provincie Veneziane nel secolo Decimottavo, Venice, 1824, 2 vols., II; E. ZERBINATI, Il museo rodigino dei Silvestri in una raccolta di disegni inerenti del Settecento, Rovigo, 1981. The alabaster panel is among the artworks listed and drawn in the Museum Silvestrium Rhodiginum delineatum et illustratum, a manuscript of drawings that belongs to the Biblioteca Silvestriana, the private library of the Silvestri, now kept at the Accademia dei Concordi: Museum Silvestrium Rhodiginum delineatum et illustratum, Biblioteca Silvestriana presso l’Accademia dei Concordi di Rovigo, ms. 229, 18th century, p. 100, n. 162.


23 Almanacco Ecclesiastico della Diocesi vicentina per l’anno 1842, Vicenza, 1842, p. 7.


value they were granted within that period. In addition to the polyptych in Milan, we shall also mention the one now kept at the Museo Civico di Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara (fig. 17), a huge altarpiece that consists of seven panels devoted to the Passion of Christ77. Before entering the museum, the polyptych used to be in the sacristy of the church of Sant’Andrea also in Ferrara78. According to a local tradition, however, it was originally ‘the altarpiece of the domestic altar of the Estensi marquis, rulers of Ferrara’79, which is to say that it was the altarpiece of the palatine chapel of the Este family, inside their castle in the city centre of Ferrara. The alabaster polyptych might have been given as a gift by one of the British ambassadors who were invited to Ferrara during the reign of Borso d’Este (1413–1471)80. The style of the carvings is indeed consistent with other works done around the mid-fifteenth century. The relocation of the polyptych in the church of Sant’Andrea might have taken place along with the construction of the new palatine chapel, begun in 1590. The destination of the altarpiece to the church of Sant’Andrea testifies to the high value it was granted. Indeed, the Augustinian church was one of the most important sacred buildings in Ferrara, and the Este were particularly keen in enriching it with frequent and abundant bequests81.

Also the triptych with scenes of the Passion of Christ now on display at the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples appears to have a noble lineage. Until 1799 it was in the sacristy of the church of San Giovanni a Carbonara. According to the canon Celano, the alabaster polyptych belonged to King Ladislao, buried inside that church82, who ‘took it wherever he goes, even in battlefields, to put it on the altars when he wanted a mass to be celebrated’83. However, Ladislao died in 1414, a date that is not consistent with the style of the altarpiece, to be set around 1450. Furthermore, the triptych can never have been a portable liturgical object, considering its dimensions and weight84. The connection between the triptych and Ladislao might have been suggested by the fact that it was Ladislao who promoted the enlargement of the church of San Giovanni a Carbonara, where the alabaster altarpiece might have arrived after Ladislao’s death, thanks to the frequent trade between Naples and other European ports.

The prestige of this artwork can explain another presence in Campania, the triptych of the Museo della Collegiata di Santa Maria a Mare Don Clemente Confoalne, formerly in the church of Santa Maria at Maiori85. Consistent with the dedication of the church, the triptych shows episodes from the Life of Mary in four panels. The central panel shows Christ’s resurrection, while St. Margaret and St. James are standing to the sides. The carpentry is the original one and is still enriched with the inscriptions in Gothic characters and with the iron hinges used to close the lateral wings86. The altarpiece can be set around the mid-fifteenth century, which is to say more or less the same chronology of the

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79 Ibidem.
83 C. CELANO, Notitie del bello, dell’antico e del curioso della città di Napoli per i signori forastieri date dal canonico Carlo Celano napoletano, divise in dieci giornate, Naples, 1692.
86 The inscriptions read: S(ancta) Margareta, Salutatio S(anct)e Marie, Nativitas D(omini)ni N(ost)rI, Resurrectio D(omini)ni N(ost)rI, Assumptio S(anct)e Marie, S(ancta) Jacob(us).
Naples triptych. The pastoral visits of 1576, 1608 and 1639, described it as a 'portable marble altarpiece' kept in the chapel of St. Vincent, from where it was likely moved to be placed on the main altar during specific ceremonies of the liturgical year\(^7\). In 1671, again in a pastoral visit, it is described as a 'painted altar-frontal in seven panels'; at that point, it was held in the sacristy\(^8\). It was still in that same position in 1853, when Luigi Staibano saw and described it\(^9\), while in 1865 it was stored behind the main altar\(^10\).

We do not know when the altarpiece reached the Amalfi coast and the church of Maiori. The relationships and trades between Campania and Northern Europe were facilitated by the region’s access to the sea. Indeed, the geographical distribution of the alabaster artworks in the Italian peninsula is not accidental at all. On the contrary, it is consistently massed along the coastal strips or in areas near important commercial port terminals. In this respect, and in addition to the aforementioned artworks kept in Venice and in the Campania region, we shall also think of the numerous carvings held in Liguria and Trieste. I am here thinking of the sculptures of the Museo del Tesoro della Cattedrale in Savona, with a Trinity and the Apostles Mathias, James the Great and Peter (fig. 18). They are recorded in the Cathedral by the mid-nineteenth century, when they were placed in the sacristy\(^11\). They might have been originally destined to the ancient cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, destroyed by the army of Genoa in 1542, when they might have been moved to the new location\(^12\). As an alternative, according to some scholars, the carvings might have been held originally in the church of San Francesco, where they might have formed part of the furnishings of the chapel of the Cerrato, a noble family that traded all over Europe and also in England\(^13\).

I would not exclude that the Male head (fig. 19) now in the depot of the Museo d’Arte Antica del Castello Sforzesco...
in Milan, whose provenance is unknown, belongs to the same complex. The carving is 12 cm high, a dimension that corresponds precisely to that of the heads of the Apostles in Savona, whose full-length is approximately 40 cm high. The sculpture entered the Museum between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. If we credit this hypothesis, we might think that it was separated from the other carvings and entered the art market because, being it fragmentary, it was not of interest for the canons as a liturgical furnishing. After all, even the sculptures in Savona were probably separated one from the others for a certain period, a circumstance that is consistent with the hypothesis of a different and independent sequence of events. Indeed, Torteroli in 1847 saw in the sacristy of the Cathedral of Savona only ‘Three fine sculptures’; he also specified that they represented ‘The Trinity and two Apostles’. At that time, therefore, one of the Apostles that now form the group was kept elsewhere in the church. With prophetic intuition Torteroli also added that ‘I wish the Opera won’t let them there, unstable and subject to be broken’.

The stylistic interpretation of the Male head now in Milan is far from being effortless, due to its poor state of preservation. Yet, the quality of the carving seems to be similar to the statues in Savona, with particular respect to the thinned shape of the faces, with the prominent eyes, and the thick beards with wavy strands. All these artworks must be considered early products of the school of Nottingham, to be set at the end of the Trecento or at the beginning of the Quattrocento. From a typological and functional point of view, these carvings are of the greatest interest. Indeed, it is the only set of a so called ‘Apostles’ Creed Altarpiece’ that still preserves its central figure, the Trinity, and that could thus enable understanding of what the original structure of this kind of altarpiece might have looked like, and how it was arranged on the altar, an investigation that in this particular case would take advantage of the known provenance of the artwork from Savona.

Another four panels are kept in Liguria, in the Museo di Sant’Agostino in Genoa. They are a carving with Mary of Mercy, and then a Trinity that must have been flanked by two other panels with Saints and Prophets with Patriarchs. The latter three might have composed an altarpiece of the Tè Deum type, meant to show the Trinitarian dogma through the integrity between the Ancient and the New Law. Three carvings now at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London also come from Genoa. They were given as a gift to the museum in 1946 by W. L. Hildburgh. They represent three scenes of the Life of St. John the Baptist. Although their original provenance is not documented, according to some scholars they might have formed part of the liturgical furnishing of the Cathedral of Genoa, where some important relics of John the Baptist were kept, being highly venerated.

The Museo Civico di Storia e Arte of Trieste keeps two different series of alabasters, that represent Scenes of the Life of Christ and of the Life of St. Catherine respectively. To the latter another independent panel has thus far been mistakenly connected. It shows the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (fig. 20), erroneously interpreted as a depiction of St. Catherine in Glory. A comparison with other artworks that show the same episode, with the Virgin crowned by the Trinity, the angels that are raising the mandorla, St. Thomas who is receiving the Virgin’s belt, leaves no doubt on the identification. We shall thus suppose that a third altarpiece did exist in Trieste, and that it represented the Joys of the Virgin.

The first group appears to be an early product, created at the very beginning of the Quattrocento or maybe already at the end of the Trecento, as the essentiality of the composition, extremely elegant, and the squared shape of the
panels demonstrate. The episodes are set against ideal rooms where a drapery is open, allowing the viewer to see what is happening inside the houses. Small cylinders are placed on both sides of the upper frame and seem to simulate an accessible battlement. These carvings were donated to the municipality in 1807 by Giuseppe Nigris, city chancellor. Carlo Kunz, who published them in the first catalogue of the museum, stated that they came from a suppressed church of Trieste, without providing any further details.

The second group, with Scenes of the life of St. Catherine, belongs to a later period, as is demonstrated by the drapery, angled and rigid, and superabundant, that can be compared to artworks as the Martyrdom of St. Catherine of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Finally, the panel with the Assumption of the Virgin, with its dresses abundantly hanging down on the ground with soft folds, shows to have been done at the beginning of the Quattrocento.

Referring to the three panels with the Life of St. Catherine (mistakenly interpreted as the Life of St. Barbara) and the one with the Assumption of Mary, Kunz stated that ‘According to an accredited tradition, they were linked to an altar that belonged to the confraternity of the bombers, in the suppressed church of the Madonna del Mare’. However, the confraternity of the bombers did not have its site in the church of the Madonna del Mare, but in that of Santi Sebastiano e Rocco instead, where an altar devoted to St. Barbara—patron saint of the brotherhood—used to be and was managed by the confraternity. We might hypothesize that the confraternity was happy with the iconography of the altarpiece because of the episode of the Burning of the philosophers. Furthermore, Catherine and Barbara shared a similar faith, and one might wonder if Kunz followed a local tradition that also erroneously identified St. Barbara as the protagonist of the episodes represented in the alabaster altarpiece. As an alternative, it is possible that St. Barbara was depicted as a standing figure at one of the sides of the altarpiece.

As for the information on the provenance from the church of the Madonna del Mare, this might well be referred to the polyptych of which only the Assumption of Mary survives. The church, suppressed in 1784, had three naves and three altars, the main one devoted to the Virgin. In 1655 the building was seriously damaged by a fire. Refurbished and re-consecrated in 1658, the main altar was equipped with a new painted altarpiece, while ‘Above the entrance door of the church a stone low relief with the image of the Blessed Mary was placed’, probably saved from the fire. This relief might be identified with the alabaster panel, which might have formed part of the original furnishing of the church damaged by the fire in 1655.

Many other alabaster carvings exist and surely existed in the Italian peninsula, testifying to the high value that such artworks were credited with. The many ports Italy was provided with surely played an important role in the diffusion of English alabasters. A story that is yet to be narrated, but whose potentialities in terms of knowledge in respect to European trades, liturgical practices, artistic taste, interactions between different cultural contexts, appear to be very promising.

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n. 100 C. KUNZ, Il Museo Civico di Antichità di Trieste, Trieste, 1879, p. 98.
n. 104 V. SCUSSA, op. cit. (n. 102), p. 128.
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