



## CENTRAL ITALIAN ‘TABERNACULA’: A SURVEY\*

### ESTUDIO DE LOS “TABERNACULA” DE LA ITALIA CENTRAL

Cristiana Pasqualetti  
*Università degli Studi dell’Aquila*  
cristiana.pasqualetti@univaq.it  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0676-6985>

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#### Abstract

This paper aims to provide an in-depth survey of grand-scale medieval Italian tabernacles and other types of closing altarpieces with all of their wings – or substantial parts thereof – still preserved (1200–1435). Most such altarpieces, enclosing a statue of the Virgin Mary or a Saint, come from the culturally homogeneous and generally conservative regions of the Central Apennines, in particular from Abruzzo. Structure, provenance, original location, function, patronage, iconography are only a few of the many questions raised by the surviving examples here discussed within a broader European frame. Notwithstanding the great variety and composite character of medieval altar furnishings, three major types of medieval Italian closing retables will be here described – according to Claude Lapaire’s formal classification (1969 and 1972): the tabernacle-altarpiece in the strict sense of the word, i.e. an open ciborium with the pedestal, rear wall, and canopy, equipped with carved or painted bi-fold wings; the polygonal tabernacle-altarpiece (‘le retable à tabernacle polygonal’); and the cupboard-altarpiece (‘le retable en forme d’armoire’). In Central Apennine regions all of these types coexisted throughout the fourteenth century at least, resisting the spread of Tuscan polyptychs.

#### Keywords

Tabernacle-altarpieces, polygonal tabernacle-altarpieces, cupboard-altarpieces, Medieval Italy, Central Apennine, Abruzzo, Umbria, sculpture, painting

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## Resumen

Este trabajo pretende ofrecer un estudio en profundidad de los retablos-tabernáculo medievales italianos de gran tamaño y de otro tipo de retablos cerraderos que aún conservan todos sus paneles o partes sustanciales de los mismos (1200-1435). La mayor parte de estos retablos, que albergaban una imagen de la Virgen María o de algún santo, proceden de las regiones culturalmente homogéneas y, por lo general, conservadoras de los Apeninos Centrales, en particular de los Abruzos. Estructura, procedencia, localización original, función, promoción, iconografía... son solo algunas de las muchas cuestiones que suscitan los ejemplos conservados, que aquí se planterán en un contexto europeo más amplio. A pesar de la gran variedad y del carácter compuesto del mobiliario de altar medieval, aquí se describirán tres tipos principales de retablos medievales italianos cerraderos, de acuerdo con la clasificación formal de Claude Lapaire (1969 y 1972): el retablo-tabernáculo en el sentido estricto de la expresión (esto es, un baldaquino abierto con pedestal, panel posterior y dosel que está dotado de alas abatibles talladas o pintadas); el retablo-tabernáculo poligonal (“le retable à tabernacle polygonal”); y el retablo en forma de armario (“le retable en forme d’armoire”). En las regiones de los Apeninos Centrales todos estos tipos coexistieron al menos a lo largo del siglo XIV, resistiendo frente a la difusión de los polípticos toscanos.

## Palabras clave

Retablo-tabernáculo, retablo-tabernáculo poligonal, retablo en forma de armario, Italia medieval, Apeninos Centrales, Abruzos, Umbría, escultura, pintura

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term ‘tabernacle-altarpiece’ usually refers to a combination of a wooden sculpture of a Madonna or Saint, an architecturally-structured receptacle, equipped with movable wings, and relief or painted figures and scenes. Precious pigments and metallic foils glazed to simulate brocade, freehand incision and punching of gilded surfaces often embellish the most ambitious examples; arising from the intersection of different materials and techniques, tabernacles are, thus, a highly eloquent example of the composite character of medieval art.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On tabernacles and closing altarpieces in general: Frinta, 1967; Lapaire, 1969; Lapaire, 1972; Krüger, 1992, pp. 17–24; Le Pogam/Viver-Peçlet, eds, 2009, pp. 54 and 60–62; Kroesen, 2014a, pp.

The description of the intermedial nature of these objects would be incomplete without mentioning the liturgical and paraliturgical function of closing altarpieces – the so-called *tabernacula* in medieval European and early modern sources.<sup>2</sup> But this is exactly the most elusive aspect of such artifacts. Written and visual documents are mostly silent on this matter, perhaps because ritual practices focused on this kind of objects were so common that there was no need to codify them.<sup>3</sup>

Since most tabernacles have been fragmented and dispersed, and almost all surviving sculptures removed from their original context, it is extremely difficult to establish where and how these complexes were once located. Not always intended for the main altar,<sup>4</sup> tabernacles and other closing altarpieces are supposed to have been constantly closed during Lent and opened on major feast days. The presence of wings also painted on the exterior suggests that the image-shrine was not considered a temporary liturgical and devotional object to be removed from the altar at the end of the feast, but a permanent element of the altar furnishings (Andersen, 2015).

Madonna and Saints tabernacles existed in all parts of Europe, but very few intact examples are still preserved, mostly concentrated in peripheral regions of the continent – Scandinavia, Castile and Central Apennine Italy.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. STUDIES

Italian medieval tabernacle-altarpieces or substantial parts of them are scarce today and often situated in a context very different from the original one. Only in

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23–26; Kroesen, 2014b, pp. 162–164. On the multimedial nature of tabernacles: Kroesen/Schmidt, 2009b, pp. 6–7.

<sup>2</sup> The 1360 inventory of the Papal treasure in Avignon mentions 'Tabernaculum beate Marie cum ymagine beate Marie et quibusdam ymaginibus de ligno': Hoberg, ed., 1944, p. 385. In 1416 the Apostolic Visitor Gillaren sees on the main altar of the parish church of La Salle (Valle d'Aosta, Italy) 'pulchra ymago Beatae Marie in presepio cum pluribus ymaginibus et tabernaculo clauso': Rossetti Brezzi, 2003, p. 41. See also below, fn. 41. The tabernacle-altarpiece must not to be confused with the Eucharistic 'tabernaculum'.

<sup>3</sup> On origin, typology, and liturgical-functional issues of the medieval altarpieces: Fuchß, 1999; Schmidt, 2006; De Marchi, 2009; *Les premiers retables*, 2009; Kroesen/Schmidt, eds, 2009a.

<sup>4</sup> On side-altars: Kroesen, 2010; Kroesen, 2014a; Kroesen, 2014b.

<sup>5</sup> On Scandinavian tabernacles-altarpieces: Tångeberg, 1989, 32–41, 130–135; Tångeberg 2009; Andersen, 2015. On Castilian tabernacles: Kroesen, 2009; Gutiérrez Baños, 2018. On Italian tabernacles see below, § 2.

extremely rare cases documents and sources mention the structure of these complex objects, which are presumed to have existed in a much larger number than the surviving examples. In most cases, the statue, once placed inside the architectural receptacle, is now separated from the wings, and displayed in churches or museums as an isolated piece of art.

Italian tabernacles as a part of this specific category of medieval altar furnishings appear first in a 1967 article by Mojmir Frinta, who discusses southern European examples from the thirteenth century to the end of the fifteenth century. The Czech scholar defines them as ‘wooden tabernacles with movable walls formed by panels painted on both sides, or provided with polychromed reliefs on their interior faces. Their principle is a combination of devotional sculpture with narrative painting disposed on hinged panels (Frinta, 1967, p. 104).

Italian image-shrines are more extensively discussed in 1969 article by Claude Lapaire, who defines tabernacles as ‘retables en bois consistant en un baldaquin qui abrite une statue et est muni de quatre à six volets pouvant l’envelopper entièrement’ (Lapaire, 1969, p. 69). The Swiss scholar’s article points out that the most ancient and complete ‘retable à baldaquin’ in Europe is the tabernacle of Alatri, in Southern Lazio. In a second 1972 article he describes the Madonna altarpiece of Fossa (L’Aquila) as the most ancient example of a polygonal tabernacle-altarpiece surviving in Europe (Lapaire, 1972, pp. 46–47).

A first systematic approach to form and function of Italian Madonna or Saint shrines comes from Klaus Krüger’s 1992 book on the first cult images of St Francis of Assisi in Italy, in which he includes a chapter specifically focused on tabernacle-altarpieces. In the appendix to this study, the German scholar provides a catalogue of 73 Italian Marian shrines, most of which with only the wooden statue and the rear wall – often gabled – preserved.

After Krüger’s study, though, research on Italian medieval tabernacles as a part of a specific genre of medieval altarpieces has remained scarce – apart from the recent methodological notes of Andrea De Marchi (2018) –,<sup>6</sup> while wooden sculptures of Madonnas and Saints as isolated artworks have been increasingly become the object of scholarly debate. Following suggestions from Italian schol-

<sup>6</sup> De Marchi, 2018, pp. 43 and 46, expresses skepticism about the origin of Franciscan hagiographical altarpieces from Marian tabernacles; he hypothesizes that Byzantine hagiographical icons of the thirteenth century on the one hand, monumental twelfth-century triptychs with closeable doors from Lazio on the other may have favored the rise of tabernacle-altarpieces.

ars Giovanni Previtali and Corrado Fratini (Previtali, 1965, 1966, 1970, 1976, 1984 and 1986; Fratini, 1998 and 1999), Alessandro Delpriori has recently provided a detailed survey of wooden Madonnas and Saints produced between the second half of thirteenth century and the fourteenth century in the territory of Spoleto (Umbria) and other parts of Central Apennine Italy – southern Marche and northern Abruzzi especially (Delpriori, 2015). He has gathered most of them in stylistically homogeneous groups, emphasizing how tabernacles with a Madonna or Saint statue enclosed and narrative scenes painted on hinged wings may have been produced in workshops able to provide both painting and sculpture.<sup>7</sup>

As a matter of fact, no Italian tabernacle has remained intact, except the Marian shrine from Alatri; substantial fragments of tabernacles from Aosta, Pale, and Fossa (the last two documented in their entirety only through photos) survive together with a few other examples discussed here or even presented for the first time.

In the following pages I will concentrate on early grand-scale tabernacles, most of which come from Abruzzo, a region on the northern boundaries of the Kingdom of Sicily. I will not only discuss 'tabernacles' *stricto sensu* (*retables à baldaquin* in French; *Baldachinaltäre* in German), but also lesser-known Italian examples of 'retables à tabernacle polygonal' and 'retables en forme d'armoire' – to use Lapaire's words. In fact, these three early types of receptacles (all with a single statue and a pair of bi-fold wings or doors) seem to have coexisted in fourteenth-century Central Apennine regions.

Especially by virtue of Previtali's studies, current Italian scholarship generally considers the adjective 'Umbrian' or 'Umbro-Abruzzese' applicable to the whole geographic area, with no distinctions of medieval and modern political boundaries (Previtali, 1976 and 1984, 1986). In fact, linguistic and cultural homogeneity is peculiar to those territories that lie 'at the left of the Tiber river' (Previtali, 1984), including the upper Tiber valley, Assisi, Spoleto, southern Marche, northern Abruzzo, and inland parts of Lazio. For a long time, this area resisted the spread of polyptychs, which were instead common in Umbria 'at the right of the Tiber river' (i.e. Perugia and Orvieto), a territory much more receptive to Tuscan models.

<sup>7</sup> In this regard, see also the catalogue entries of the 2018 exhibition in Montefalco, Spoleto, and Trevi: Garibaldi/Delpriori, eds, 2018, nos 32–33, 57 and 59.

## 3. MARIAN TABERNACLES WITH A PAIR OF BI-FOLD WINGS AND RELIEF SCENES

3.1. *The Madonna di Costantinopoli in Alatri (first half of the thirteenth century)*

So far, the altarpiece in the collegiate church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Alatri (southern Lazio) is the oldest European tabernacle with the Marian sculpture (c. 155 x 47 x 36 cm) and all four wings (c. 169 x 42 x 3 cm each) conserved (Fig. 1).<sup>8</sup> On stylistic grounds, the whole altarpiece has been dated to the first decades of thirteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Written sources do not predate the 1685 pastoral visit, which does not mention the artefact on the main altar of the church (Salvadori, 2016, p. 23). At that time the Madonna shrine was probably already placed inside the seventeenth-century chapel – the first in the left aisle – where it remains today. On the exterior of the wings is a late baroque decoration with monograms of the Virgin Mary, most likely painted over a previous decoration. In fact, the Madonna was ‘restaurata’ (restored) in 1745, as is legible in the inscription on the pedestal of the throne.<sup>10</sup>

As in many Scandinavian and Spanish tabernacles with figures in relief, the narrative scenes of the Alatri wings appear in niches (Andersen, 2015, p. 171); more precisely, in quadrangular compartments arranged in three lines on each panel. Only three of the six inscriptions still visible on the horizontal battens dividing the scenes are legible. The reliefs comprise not only eleven episodes of the *Infancy of Christ*, but also the *Baptism of Christ* on the top of the right side-wing and the *Dormitio Virginis* at the bottom of the same panel. The two scenes interrupt the chronological sequence of the gospel narration (vertical, from top to bottom, left to right) to introduce a second thematic sequence (horizontal, in three rows overlapped by reliefs, from left to right). The first row focuses on the action of the Holy Spirit, the second on the humanity of Jesus Christ, the third on his regality (Salvadori, 2016, 112–113). Exactly for this purpose, great emphasis is attributed to the *Journey and Adoration of the Magi*, which occupy the two lower consecutive panels of the left wing, as well as to the *Dream of the Magi*, on the right side-wing.

<sup>8</sup> Fogolari, 1903; Della Pergola, 1949; Salvadori, 2016. Curzi, 2014a, pp. 27–30, dates the Madonna of Alatri in the last two decades of the twelfth century.

<sup>9</sup> De Francovich, 1943, pp. 12–13; Della Pergola, 1949; Salvadori, 2016, pp. 127–128.

<sup>10</sup> Salvadori, 2016, p. 124, is of the opinion that the wings were originally fixed; they would have become movable only in the eighteenth century. Such a conclusion hardly fits to what is generally known about the history of conservation of this kind of artefacts.

The placement of *Adoration of the Magi* at the base of the left side-wing, in direct dialogue with the three-dimensional effigy of the Virgin and Child, will become customary throughout Europe (Lapaire, 1969, p. 181; Gutiérrez Baños, 2018, p. 60). Episodes from the apocryphal tradition of *Dormitio-Coronatio Virginis* appear in later Castilian Madonna-shrines of Castildegado, Yurre, and so-called Chiale.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2. Aosta tabernacle wings (second quarter of the fourteenth century)

The Madonna shrine of Alatri is the only surviving Italian tabernacle with relief scenes on the interior of the wings along with the Marian altarpiece from Santo Stefano in Aosta (Turin, Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, 139 x 175 cm), which, however, is much later than the Alatri retablo; on stylistic grounds, in fact, it is dated about mid-fourteenth century (Rossetti Brezzi, 2003) (Fig. 2).

All four panels of the wings must have been originally cusped, as can be inferred from the shape of their cut-off top. Similarly to the Alatri altarpiece, the evangelic episodes are placed in niches – two rows of double pointed arches, decorated with quatrefoils – and the adoring Magi are represented at the bottom of the left side-wing while offering their gifts directly to the lost three-dimensional effigy of the Virgin (Lapaire, 1969, p. 181).<sup>12</sup> Differently from the Alatri shrine, the Aosta wings include only scenes of the *Infancy of Christ*.

In the second decade of the sixteenth century the exterior of the Aosta wings was repainted with the figures of the Archangel Gabriel and Virgin Annunciate on the half-wings, a Saint Bishop on both side-wings; today only the Virgin and the Saint on the right wing panels are still visible (Rossetti Brezzi, 2003, p. 43). The repainting demonstrates that the panels still continued to function as the foldable wings of a tabernacle-altarpiece on the eve of the Lutheran Reformation.

<sup>11</sup> Gutiérrez Baños, 2018, pp. 58–64, discusses the unusual iconography of the aforesaid tabernacles with the *Annunciation* represented after the *Adoration of the Magi*.

<sup>12</sup> The small-scale Madonna-shrine in the Moravská Galerie of Brno (c. 49 cm in height), produced in the first half of the fourteenth century within the context of the Neapolitan Franciscan devotion (Lucherini, 2014), has a pair of bi-fold wings; images of saints and two episodes from Bonaventura's *Legenda Maior* (*St Francis receiving the Stigmata* and *St Francis Preaching to the Birds*) are painted inside trefoil niches. *St Francis Preaching to the Birds* occupies two upper consecutive panels of the left wing. In addition, the adoring Magi are painted one each inside the niches at the bottom of the same wing.

## 4. MADONNA OR SAINT TABERNACLES WITH PAINTED BI-FOLD-WINGS

4.1. *The Marian tabernacle of the Museo Diocesano in Foligno (1320–1330)*

The Aosta tabernacle remains wholly isolated in fourteenth-century Italy, because all closeable coeval tabernacles – surviving intact or in parts – are concentrated in Central Apennine regions.

The tabernacle of the Museo Diocesano in Foligno comes from the hermitage church of Santa Maria Giacobbe in the village of Pale di Foligno, Umbria (Fig. 14 Kroesen/Tångeberg, in this volume). The image shrine remained there until 1964, when it was transferred to the parish church of San Biagio. Unfortunately, on March 27<sup>th</sup> 1974, the wings were stolen; only six fragments thereof (35 x 22 cm each) have been retrieved (Garibaldi/Delpriori, eds, 2018, p. 336, no 57: entry by Veronica Picchiarelli), and just one photo taken before the theft shows the tabernacle in its entirety (Fig. 3).

The artefact consisted of a rear wall with a flat canopy, a plinth on which the wooden Madonna (147 x 44 cm) was placed, and a pair of bi-fold wings attached by hinges. The obsessively repeated couple of birds on the background of the three-dimensional Marian effigy as well as on the painted tablets with the *Annunciation* and the *Adoration of the Magi* is most probably a heraldic allusion to the donor of the altarpiece.

The interior of the wings had tempera figures on a gold background arranged in four tiers: on the left wing, from top to bottom, *St Peter the Apostle* and an Angel with a censer, the *Annunciation*, the *Nativity of Christ*, and the *Adoration of the Magi*; on the right wing, from top to bottom, *St Paul the Apostle* and an Angel with a censer, the *Arrest of Christ*, the *Flagellation*, and the *Crucifixion*. Each evangelical episode occupied both boards of the wing; therefore only one open position was probably expected, i.e. with the wings completely unfolded. Of course, also another position was possible, i.e. only with the front wings folded to the side; in this case, the focus would have been concentrated exclusively on the Marian statue.

The cycle of the Passion of Christ on the right wing suggests that the altar shrine may have been somehow involved in the Holy Week rites, in addition to the liturgical season of Christmas. The union of the Mother and the Son in the work of redemption of humanity is explicated through the painted panels emphasizing Christ's virginal conception on one side, and his death, on the other side. At the same time, the dogma is also summarized by the enthroned Marian effigy at the center of the complex. Outside Italy, the late thirteenth-



century Wildenstein retable from Castile-León (New York, The Cloisters) is the only early tabernacle-altarpiece to display episodes of the Passion (and Resurrection) of Christ, which significantly are painted on the exterior of the wings as a complement to the now-lost inner reliefs of the Infancy of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

On stylistic grounds, both the wooden Madonna and painted evangelical episodes have been convincingly attributed to the Umbran 'Cesi Master', also responsible for the St Christina tabernacle in the Museo Diocesano of Spoleto (Delpriori, 2015, pp. 133–134).

#### 4.2. *The St Christina tabernacle in the Museo Diocesano at Spoleto (c. 1330)*

The wooden statue of the martyr Christina of Bolsena, nailed to the back panel (127 x 44 x 22 cm) painted with quadrangles enclosing geometric and phytomorphic motifs (Fig. 4), was found in the cave church dedicated to the saint near the village of Caso, in Umbria (Fratini, 1999, pp. 44–47). In the 1712 pastoral visit of Carlo Giacinto Lascaris, bishop of Spoleto, the three-dimensional effigy is described as enclosed in a tabernacle shrine with scenes from the life of the saint (Fratini, 1999, p. 46). Five panels painted with episodes of the hagiographical legend, stylistically compatible with the polychrome surface of the statue, were recently retraced.<sup>14</sup> Each scene extends over a couple of boards; which allows us to conclude that the back panel must have once been equipped with a canopy and a pair of bi-fold wings, like the Marian tabernacle of Pale. It is also probably in this case, then, that only one open position was expected, i.e. with the wings completely unfolded.

#### 4.3. *The Pinacoteca Capitolina Wings (1376–1378)*

As in the case of the St Christina altarpiece, a crucial aid for reconstructing a dismembered tabernacle comes from a stylistic and iconographic analysis of the surviving fragments of the painted wings. Five of the six fourteenth-century tem-

<sup>13</sup> Frinta, 1967, pp. 111–112; Andersen, 2015, p. 172; Gutiérrez Baños, 2018, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> The inscriptions on two tempera panels, which once were a part of the left wing, bear the names of Urbanus, the father of Christina, and of the Saint herself, respectively: Delpriori, 2015, pp. 135–136.

pera panels in the Pinacoteca Capitolina, belonging to a pair of bi-fold wings were acquired in the 1930s from the Sterbini collection in Rome (Guarino, ed., 2006). The sixth panel with the *Adoration of the Magi* is in a private collection and known only through a photograph (Nimmo, 1975, fig. 6; Bologna, 1996, fig. 499).

Different from most surviving central Italian Marian tabernacles, the wings show episodes only from the infancy of Christ. On the left wing, from top to bottom, the *Annunciation* (59 x 52 cm), the *Nativity* (53 x 52 cm), and the *Adoration of Magi*; on the right, from top to bottom, the *Presentation of Jesus in the Temple* (59 x 52 cm), the *Flight into Egypt* (50 x 53 cm), and the *Massacre of the Innocents* (53 x 53 cm) (Fig. 5). The top of the half-wings is shaped like a right triangle so that the front of the tabernacle appeared gabled when closed.

A painted fragmentary inscription running through the reverse of the *Presentation of Christ in the Temple* and the *Flight into Egypt* bears the date 'an(n)o. D(omi)nj m.ccc.lxxv.i',<sup>15</sup> with some space enough for other two letters 'ii'. The evangelic scenes have been convincingly attributed to the anonymous 'Master of Campli' (Teramo, Abruzzo), who in the third quarter of fourteenth-century executed the mural paintings in the crypt of the collegiate church in Campli and the stone baldachin of a side-altar ciborium placed at the right of the counter-façade of the church of San Francesco in the same town.<sup>16</sup>

Campli lies on the east side of the Laga Mountains; on the opposite side, at Amatrice, the church of San Francesco hosted until the 2016 earthquake a vast fresco cycle painted by the same Master. The painter's activity was effectively confined to this territory at the northern boundaries of the Angevin Kingdom of Sicily, so the Capitolini wings may come from one of the altars of the aforementioned churches, two of which belong to Franciscans.

The stylistic similarities between the Capitolini tempera panels and the polychrome surface of the Madonnas and Saints carved and painted in the *atelier* of the 'Master of the Gualino St Catherine'<sup>17</sup> suggest the hypothesis that Capitolini wings may have enclosed one of the many three-dimensional Marian effigies by

<sup>15</sup> See the photo of the reverse of the *Nativity* panel in Nimmo, 1975, p. 13, fig. 3; Nimmo erroneously transcribes 'DM', instead of 'DNI' (*ibid.*, p. 15).

<sup>16</sup> Bologna, 1996; Tartuferi, 2000; Pasqualetti, 2003, pp. 2–6.

<sup>17</sup> Previtali (1965, 1966, 1970 and 1984) has repeatedly emphasized the interaction between wood carving, preparation coat, and painting in the effigies attributed to the 'Master of the Gualino St Catherine'.

the anonymous artist; for example, something similar to the *Madonna* from the Cathedral of Teramo.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4.4. *The St Eustace tabernacle from Campo di Giove (c. 1380)*

Abundant information is available on the image shrine from the parish church of Sant'Eustachio in Campo di Giove, a village in the vast province of L'Aquila, south of Sulmona. The couple of bi-fold wings of the altarpiece were stolen in 1902, then dismembered into panels as the sixteen painted scenes of the life of Eustace, the patron saint of Campo di Giove. Only the wooden statue remained in the original church; today, it is on deposit at the Episcopal Palace of Sulmona (Nicoletti, 2008 and 2014). Three of the sixteen tablets are in the Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo, L'Aquila;<sup>19</sup> all of the other scenes are currently in different private collections. On stylistic grounds, the tempera panels of the wings have been dated to c. 1380, and attributed to the same painter of the *Stories of St Francis of Assisi* depicted around 1394 on the walls of the chapel of the noble Celano family in the church of the Minorites in Castelvecchio Subequo, L'Aquila (Pasqualetti, 2008 and 2014).

According to the reports of Abruzzese art historians, the tabernacle was an aedicula-shaped shrine (c. 191 x 65 x 24 cm) crowned by a flat canopy (De Nino, 1902; Piccirilli, 1903). The top of the front and sides of the canopy were carved in the shape of trefoil arches. On the canopy, a triangular gable (h. 26 cm) painted with the Eternal Father was carved with ascending leaves. A 1890 black and white photo by Piccirilli shows only the wings (Piccirilli, 1903, p. 216) (Fig. 6). Each wing (side-wings: 33 cm in width; half-wings: 26 cm in width) had four tiers of four scenes; every scene was framed by a round arch, except for the upper scenes, which were taller and framed by trefoil pointed-arches. Differently from the hagiographical tabernacle from Caso, the scenes of the life of St Eustace did not extend over both panels of a wing, but each episode was limited by the width of the single panel. Antonio De Nino specified that the tabernacle was 'at left of the high altar, placed into a sixteenth-century altar' (Nicoletti, 2014, p. 76). Unfortunately, it remains unknown whether this was the original location of the tabernacle.

<sup>18</sup> At present the Marian effigy is preserved in the Episcopal Palace chapel of Teramo: Arpace, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> At present on display at the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Sacra della Marsica, Celano (L'Aquila).

4.5. *The tabernacle with the Infancy of Christ from Sant'Orante in Ortucchio (Avezzano) (1435)*

In 1876, the tabernacle enclosing a terracotta *Vesperbild* was mentioned for the first time by the historian Angelo Leosini, who was an inspector of the *Commissione Conservatrice* of L'Aquila (Nardecchia, 2006, pp. 105–106). Before 1892, the *aedicula* alone was transferred to the church of San Rocco in Ortucchio, then to the town hall (Nardecchia, 2006, pp. 108–109 and 129), while the sculpture remained in Sant'Orante until the 1915 Marsica earthquake, that reduced the fragile artefact to pieces (Nardecchia, 2006, p. 108, fn. 79). Instead, the *aedicula* was transported in 1916 to the Museo Civico of Sulmona, where it is still today. The artefact, which is only 115 x 75 x 40 cm, is probably the best-preserved grand-scale Italian tabernacle structure; it is also the only with both the date and signature of the author on the wings (Figs 7–9). In fact, on the exterior of the left half-wing there is a painted inscription: 'hoc opus pins[it] . johannes . pictor . d[e] . sulmona . anno . domini . millesimo . [cccc . xxx . v .]'.<sup>20</sup> The painter is one of the *petit-maitres* of the flourishing Abruzzese late-gothic art, whose *corpus* includes a second tabernacle unfortunately lost, but described by nineteenth-century local authors.<sup>21</sup>

The Ortucchio altarpiece has a rectangular base and a rear wall closed on three sides, equipped with a pair of bi-fold wings. The top of the half-wings is right-triangle shaped, so the front of the tabernacle appears gabled when closed. The front of the canopy is carved in the shape of a trefoil pointed arch; its top has non-original carved crenellations, probably as a substitute for a deteriorated crowning element (Molinari, 1987, p. 134). The sides of the canopy are carved into rounded arches with gables on the top (non-original on the right side) (*ibid.*). The interior of the back panel, which consists of two vertical boards, is painted with a *double-face* red and blue drape; the lateral walls of the *aedicula* are

<sup>20</sup> The complete date was read by De Nino, 1887, pp. 33–34.

<sup>21</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century the now-lost tabernacle was on the altar of the second chapel on the right aisle of the church. The chapel still had a medieval structure with mural paintings. The altar shrine enclosed a wooden statue of St John the Baptist, now in the Museo Civico of Sulmona. On the semi-octagonal base of the statue there was an inscription with the name '[Johanne] de Sulmona' and the year 'MCCCCXXXX' (both vanished). The *aedicula* was 168 cm in height, 54 cm in width (closed). The interior of the bi-fold wings was painted with four *Stories of St John the Baptist*. Immediately after the 1915 earthquake, the right wing with the *Herod's Banquet* and the *Decollation of the Baptist* was found among the debris of the church, but it never arrived at the Museo Civico in Sulmona: Nardecchia, 2006, pp. 106–108 and 129–135.

decorated with vegetal volutes; a starry blue sky is painted on the flat ceiling of the canopy. The folding wings are painted on both sides: the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Annunciate are depicted on the reverse of the half-wings; traces of geometric motifs are still visible on the exterior of the side-wings. The *Infancy of Christ* is painted on the interior of the wings: the *Nativity* on the left wing and the *Adoration of the Magi* on the right one. Since each scene extends over both panels of the wing, in this case the expected open position may have also been with the wings completely unfolded.

## 5. PENTAGONAL TABERNACLE-ALTARPIECES

In his 1969 and 1972 articles Claude Lapaire was the first to remark that the Madonna altarpiece from Fossa (L'Aquila) is the oldest surviving example of a polygonal tabernacle-altarpiece, an intermediate form between the 'retable à baldaquin', with four or six wings, and the 'retable en forme d'armoire', a cupboard-like altarpiece enclosing a statue (Lapaire, 1969, p. 180; Lapaire, 1972, pp. 46–49). The scholar considers the pentagonal tabernacle-altarpiece a kind of adaptation of the 'static' tabernacle-altarpiece to the fourteenth-century search for perspective and visual depth. The polygonal base, with an angle acute pointed towards the viewer, and the divergence of the side walls of the wide-open niche conform with the illusionistic painting of the Fossa tabernacle in order to evoke a three-dimensional space. This is a key issue, since to the best of my knowledge the Madonna of Fossa and the preceding tabernacle from Scurcola (L'Aquila) are the only surviving examples of this typology from fourteenth-century Italy. Might the polygonal tabernacle-altarpiece be considered a sort of response of the artists active in conservative Central Apennine territories to the difficult challenge represented by illusionistic painting of Giotto and Simone Martini in the Lower Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi?

### 5.1. *The Madonna tabernacle from the abbey church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Scurcola Marsicana (c. 1335)*

According to a legend passed on by local historians, the Marian tabernacle (Figs 10–11) was found in 1525 in the ruins of the cistercian abbey church, founded in 1274 by Charles I d'Anjou to commemorate his victory against Conradin of Swabia in the 1268 battle of Tagliacozzo (Febonio, 1678, p. 183; Corsignani, 1738, pp. 332–34). Corsignani specifies that at the moment of discovery the wooden sculp-

ture of the Blessed Virgin was enclosed in a walnut box decorated with Angevin lilies. The box was ‘fatta a forma di triangolo’ (triangle-shaped) and enclosed in a larger wooden chest. Both boxes and the Madonna statue were transferred into a newly founded church of the same name in the village of Scurcola, where the chests were recorded still in the eighteenth century.<sup>22</sup>

Separated from the tabernacle after the 1915 Marsica earthquake, the Madonna sculpture (c. 152 cm) has been returned to the high altar of the sixteenth-century church, where it still stands (Fig. 11). The borders of the mantle of the Virgin bear heraldic shields that I was recently able to connect with to the noble Abruzzese Mareri family.<sup>23</sup> This identification sheds new light on the patronage of the earliest examples of tabernacle-altarpieces, that almost always remains unknown.

The tabernacle ‘a forma di triangolo’ – not mentioned in the appendix to 1972 Lapaire’s article – is today preserved in the Museo d’Arte Sacra della Marsica in Celano (L’Aquila) (Fig. 10). The back panel has a tempera decoration with gilded fleurs-de-lis of France on a blue background. Decoration is absent in the area behind the seated Madonna. The original parts of the tabernacle are made of poplar wood; the rectangular molded base, horizontal battens on the reverse and molded top of the chest – except for the pentagonal ceiling therein – are late additions in walnut wood (Mezzoprete, 1987, pp. 138–140).

Also, the evangelical episodes depicted on the interior of the wings (173 x 43 x 2 cm each) are not the original paintings, dating back to the time of the discovery of the statue. Nevertheless, they correspond to the scenes painted on the wings of the Fossa tabernacle. The reading order is also the same. Thus, they may have replaced an identical subject either because of the original paintings’ poor condition or a change of taste.

The blue sky with stars and anthropomorphic sun painted on the pentagonal ceiling seems to have been painted in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Corsignani, 1738, p. 332: ‘E [...] finalmente trovarono la detta SS. Immagine, bella e intatta senza macola alcuna nella forma, che oggi si vede, come se mai fosse stata sotterrata, dentro una Cassa di noce, che stava dentro un’altra cassa più grande, quali casse presentemente ancora si ritrovano, e stanno dentro la detta Chiesa [*the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria*]’.

<sup>23</sup> Pasqualetti, 2020a.

<sup>24</sup> Immediately after the 1915 earthquake, the chest was sent to Tivoli (Rome) to be restored by Vincenzo Colleoni; a photo in the archives of the Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio dell’Abruzzo (SABAP-ABR) shows the post-seismic condition of the tabernacle: Pennazza, 2019, pp. 69 and 70, no 201.

However, the possibility that the iconography follows the original decoration somehow cannot be excluded.

Scholarship has grouped the *Madonna* of Scurcola together with other polychrome Marian effigies distributed throughout Umbria and Abruzzo under the conventional name, 'Master of the Madonna of Spoleto' (Previtali, 1976, 1984 and 1986). They were most probably produced in the same atelier, responsible for both sculpture and painting. Delpriori prefers to name this group of wooden Madonnas after the 'Master of Fossa' (Delpriori, 2015, pp. 256–262), based on the fact that the tempera panels of the Abruzzese tabernacle allow for conclusive comparisons between the painted scenes and the polychrome surface of the statue.

### 5.2. *The Madonna tabernacle from Santa Maria ad Cryptas in Fossa (1345–1350)*

The gorgeous artefact is the name-piece of a sophisticated and prolific anonymous painter, who was the most talented Spoletan popularizer of Giotto, Simone Martini, and Pietro Lorenzetti's models in the Lower Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi.<sup>25</sup>

The wooden receptacle of the *Madonna* di Fossa (225 x 71 x 50 cm; 155 cm the statue) consists of a back panel and two narrow, fixed, and divergent side panels (Fig. 12). The back panel is made of two vertical boards reinforced on the back by horizontal battens. Geometrical floral motifs alternating with intertwined patterns are painted on the rear side of the back panel.<sup>26</sup> The base and the flat ceiling of the shrine are both pentagonally shaped; the statue rests on a polygonal pedestal (Fig. 13). The lavish painting of the back panel creates the illusion of a three-dimensional throne plated with precious metal with a splendid red tapestry covering the backrest. At the top, an airy loggia made of silver intertwined pointed arches is open to the starry blue sky. God the Father Blessing is depicted on the ceiling, while episodes of the Infancy and Passion of Christ are painted on the interior of the wings ([2]15 x 50 cm: Serra, 1934, p. 147) – today mostly dispersed –, hinged to the side-panels of the shrine. On the left wing, from top to

<sup>25</sup> On the 'Master of Fossa' there is an abundant bibliography; for an updated review see: Delpriori, 2015, and the entries of the exhibition's catalogue Garibaldi/Delpriori, eds, 2018, pp. 252–253, no 25, and pp. 256–278, nos 27–34.

<sup>26</sup> See the report of Laboratorio di Restauro s.n.c at <http://www.labrestauro.it/lavori.php?a=2<10.31.2019>>.

bottom: *Annunciation*, *Adoration of the Magi*, and *Presentation in the Temple*. On the right wing, from bottom to top: *Arrest of Christ*, *Flagellation* and *Crucifixion*. When closed, the wings hid the statue and its pedestal, but not the base of the tabernacle.

Where was the altarpiece placed? In seventeenth-century pastoral visits, two altars dedicated to the Blessed Virgin are recorded: on the left (looking at the high altar), the altar *in cornu evangelii* equipped with an ‘*imaginem dicte Beate Marie Virginis*’; on the right, the altar *in cornu epistule*.<sup>27</sup> The wall to the left of the triumphal arch separating the nave from the sanctuary is wide and high enough to house the fourteenth-century tabernacle,<sup>28</sup> even when open – the present Renaissance *aedicula* most probably replaced a medieval altar. Almost-contemporary mural paintings illustrating episodes from the apocryphal tradition of *Mary’s Dormition and Assumption* on the left wall of the nave invite us to imagine that a Marian liturgy was specifically reserved to this side of the church. In addition, it is improbable that the view of the *Crucifixion* painted on the wall behind the high altar was obstructed by a huge Marian tabernacle. However, the painted decoration on the reverse of the rear wall of tabernacle seems to indicate that the chest was also visible from the back.

In the autumn of 1838 Heinrich W. Schulz saw the ‘Triptychon’ with the wooden effigy of the Virgin and Child in the apsis.<sup>29</sup> In 1889 Vincenzo Bindi specified that the tabernacle was placed on the high altar, and described the scenes painted on the interior of the wings.<sup>30</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century the tabernacle stood on a high wooden podium on the left side of the nave, ‘in close proximity’<sup>31</sup> to the first bay from the entrance. Having been transferred to the parish church of Santa Maria Assunta in Fossa,<sup>32</sup> the tabernacle was unfortunately deprived of its shutters in 1979 due to a theft. Only the panel with the

<sup>27</sup> L’Aquila, Archivio diocesano, *Vescovi e Arcivescovi, Visite pastorali*, vols. 1146 (De Angelis, 1670), fol. 4r, and 1171 (Della Zerda, 1683–1691), fols. 28r–v. On this topic: Pasqualetti, 2020b (forthcoming).

<sup>28</sup> However, a photo from the 1930s (Carli, 1998, p. 47, fig. 9) shows the Renaissance altar ‘in cornu evangelii’ housing the painted triptych with movable wings signed by Gentile da Rocca and dated 1283 (now in the Museo Nazionale d’Abruzzo, L’Aquila). On the relation between Italian painted tabernacle-triptychs and tabernacle-altarpieces: Krüger, 1992, pp. 25–30.

<sup>29</sup> Schulz, 1860, vol. 2, pp. 78–79.

<sup>30</sup> Bindi, 1889, p. 860: ‘Nella seconda parte, in cui la Chiesa resta divisa, si ammira sull’altare l’immagine della Vergine sedente col Bambino tra le braccia scolpita in legno, entro un tabernacolo’.

<sup>31</sup> Piccirilli, 1900, p. 46: ‘A ridosso di questa campata’.

<sup>32</sup> Costa, 1912, pp. 49–50; Serra, 1934, pp. 148–149.



*Presentation of Christ in the Temple* (65.5 x 47.5 cm) was recovered in Rome and acquired by the Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo together with the Marian *aedicula*.

5.3. *The tabernacle wings with episodes from the Life of St Catherine of Alexandria in the Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo (third quarter of the fourteenth century)*

The pair of tempera panels (173 x 33 cm each) from the convent of the Saint in L'Aquila may have also belonged to a polygonal tabernacle with a wooden effigy of the Christian martyr (Fig. 14). Six scenes from the life of the Saint are represented: on the left wing, from top to bottom: *St Catherine of Alexandria refuses to worship the idols*, the *Martyrdom of the philosophers converted by St Catherine*, and the *Scourging of St Catherine in prison*; on the right wing, from top to bottom: *St Catherine in prison converts the Roman Empress*, *St Catherine tortured on two spiked wheels*, and the *Martyrdom of St Catherine*. The Museo Nazionale of Abruzzo also contains a polychrome statue of St Catherine (h. 138 cm) from the collection of the noble Rivera family of L'Aquila (Moretti, 1968, p. 26); but a connection between these wings and the Rivera statue has neither been transmitted through written sources nor supported by stylistic evidence (Delpriori, in Nicosia, ed. 2009, p. 203).

5.4. *The St John the Baptist pentagonal tabernacle-altarpiece in Caporciano (1417)*

Surprisingly enough, the church of San Benedetto in Caporciano (L'Aquila) preserves an as yet unpublished pentagonal tabernacle-altarpiece with a statue of St John the Baptist (c. 74.5 x 25 cm) inside. It comes from the church of San Pietro in Valle in Caporciano, possibly a dependency of the abbey of Bominaco. On the right wing, the date of completion is still perfectly readable: 1417 (Figs 15–16). Along with the tabernacle from Ortucchio, this artefact is the smallest of all Italian altarpieces discussed here, just 120 cm in height (including the base), and one of the most complete. It has an ascending ceiling made of two pieces; the larger is pentagonal in shape, the smaller triangular. This recalls the late-thirteenth century altarpiece in the Museo del Bargello, Florence, maybe from Umbria, which has a similar ceiling (Lapaire, 1969, pp. 183–184, 188; Krüger, 1992, fig. 210). The absence of colonnettes calls into question whether the Florentine image-shrine was a tabernacle-altarpiece with a pair of bi-fold wings or a pentagonal tabernacle-altarpiece.

The pedestal of the Caporciano altarpiece – which seems to be original – is not pentagonally-shaped, although the statue's supporting surface shows lines traced to cut the base in this exact shape. The St Olaf tabernacle from Överenhörna (Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, end of fourteenth century) is a similar variant of the pentagonal model (Lapaire, 1972, pp. 56–57).

The exterior of the back panel – made of two boards – and side-panels have no traces of painting. The exterior of the wings (24 cm in width), instead, is decorated with floral volutes (Fig. 15), while the interior of the niche is ornamented with quatrefoil patterns. On the interior of the wings, traces of pigments are so scarce that it is impossible to determine if it was decorated with figurative paintings (Fig. 16). However, if this is not a serious misunderstanding, the Caporciano altarpiece is at least a very simplified version of the Fossa and Scurcola examples.

## 6. CUPBOARD-ALTARPIECES

In his 1972 article, Lapaire also mentions another type of closing altarpiece, the 'retable en forme d'armoire' (*Schreinaltar* in German), that consists of a wooden parallelepiped with two of doors that allow the faithful to see only the front of the enclosed statue. However, the grand-scale tabernacle in the Basilica of Santa Maria dell'Impruneta (Florence), c. 1350–1360, was designed for enshrining and carrying in procession to Florence a much venerated Marian icon believed to have been painted by Luke the Evangelist, instead of a statue (Caneva, ed., 2005, pp. 89–90).<sup>33</sup>

### 6.1. *The cupboard-altarpiece from Santa Lucia in Rocca di Cambio (c. 1350)*

The wooden statue of the virgin and martyr Lucy from the abbey church of Santa Lucia in Rocca di Cambio (L'Aquila) was once placed inside a wooden

<sup>33</sup> Attributed to a follower of Maso di Banco, the tabernacle is crowned by a cusped canopy carved in the shape of trefoil arch. The doors (147 x 33 cm) are painted on both sides: on the exterior, from top to bottom, left to right, the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Annunciate, St Zanobi and St Philip, St John the Baptist and St Christopher; on the interior, St Catherine of Alexandria and St Luke on the top, musician Angels at the bottom. The tabernacle is now in the Museo del Tesoro di Santa Maria dell'Impruneta, the Marian icon in a marble aedicule in the church. The first recorded procession of the icon was held in 1354: Caneva, ed., 2005, pp. 26–27.

cupboard with a cusped rear panel (h. 155 cm), as shown in an old postcard (before 1915), which also allows us to see the painted doors (151 x 24 cm) (Fig. 17) (Tropea, 2001, I, p. 305). The altarpiece remained in its original site until 1914, when it was transferred into the parish church of Santissima Annunziata in the village of Rocca di Cambio. After 1934, there is no longer any mention of the doors,<sup>34</sup> today in a private Florentine collection and, consequently, known only through photos (Todini, 1989, I, pp. 405–406) (Fig. 18). The statue of the Saint (h. 134 cm, including the base) is still in the parish church, placed inside a modern architectural frame, gilded and painted, in the right aisle of the building.

The altarpiece was not hagiographical, because the figures painted on the interior of the doors are not apparently related to the legend of St Lucy. Unfortunately, the exterior is not known. In the color photo published by Filippo Todini, the original position of the doors appears inverted. On the left door (originally the right one), from top to bottom, there is a Prophet, a saint bishop – probably Nicholas of Bari – and St Lawrence; on the right one (originally the left) a second Prophet, St Paul the Apostle and a female Saint martyr – probably Catherine of Alexandria (Fig. 18). On stylistic grounds, this artefact has been attributed to the fascinating Umbro-Abruzzese 'Master of the Silver Crucifix' (Todini, 1989, I, pp. 404–405; Delpriori, 2014, pp. 64–65).

Nothing is known about the original location of the altarpiece in the church of Santa Lucia; the very identity of the Saint is under discussion (Delpriori, 2014, pp. 64–65). I have only found one relatively recent, but interesting notice: a prohibition to carry the statue in processions issued in 1926 (Tropea, 2001, I, p. 305).

A preceding Italian example of this structure is a small-scale cupboard-altarpiece in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, from the collection of Prince Leon Ouroussoff, attributed to Taddeo Gaddi, early 1330s (Norlander Eliasson *et alii*, eds, 2015, no 126) (Fig. 19). It is only 58 cm in height; the three-dimensional Marian effigy once enclosed in the niche is missing. In the upper register of the left wing there is the *Announcement of the Virgin's death*, a subject frequently represented in Franciscan contexts. In fact, an intriguing synthesis of two different episodes from Bonaventura's *Legenda maior* is represented in the lower register of the left wing: St Francis is simultaneously depicted on the chariot of fire and stigmatized. Represented as an 'alter Christus', St Francis is significantly

<sup>34</sup> They are described in Serra, 1934.

flanked by the Precursor of Christ, St John the Baptist. On the right wing of the tabernacle-altarpiece there is the *Crucifixion* only. Four couples of saints are represented on both sides of the niche: on the upper register, from left to right, a bishop saint and St Louis of Toulouse, St Anthony of Padua and a male saint (St Ranieri of Pisa?); on the lower register, from left to right, St Elizabeth of Hungary and a princess saint (Agnes of Boemia?),<sup>35</sup> Catherine of Alexandria and Chiara of Assisi. As in a small-scale tabernacle-altarpiece now in Brno,<sup>36</sup> all Saints of the Minorite Order are represented, confirming a Franciscan devotion related to the Stockholm artefact.

### 6.2. *The St Peter cupboard-altarpiece in Caporciano*

A black and white image in the Zeri Photo Archive (c. 1920–c. 1950) shows a now-lost cupboard, identical in structure to the Rocca di Cambio altarpiece, placed in a late fifteenth-century wall niche in the above-mentioned church of San Pietro in Caporciano (L'Aquila).<sup>37</sup> The receptacle enclosed a fourteenth-century wooden statue of St Peter as Pope (since the 1960s in the church of San Benedetto in Caporciano),<sup>38</sup> possibly not designed for such a narrow shrine. The interior of the wings had painted figures arranged in two tiers: a blessing Angel (Gabriel) at the top of the left wing and an unidentified male Saint at the bottom (St Anthony the Abbot?); the Virgin Annunciate at the top of the right door and an unidentified saint at the bottom. The tabernacle might have hosted a statue of the Virgin and Child, instead of St Peter. A Max Hutzel's photo (c. 1960–c. 1990) shows the same cupboard-altarpiece deprived of the statue and doors.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> As is known, Agnes was venerated as a saint much before her beatification (1874) and canonization (1989).

<sup>36</sup> See above, fn. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Fondazione Federico Zeri, Catalogo Fototeca, Fondo Zeri – Scultura italiana, busta 010, fascicolo 6, SI\_010/6/27: <http://catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it/scheda/opera/81968/Anonimo%20ombro%20sec.%20XIV%2C%20San%20Pietro%2C%20Santi%20%28%3F%29%2C%20Annunciazione>.

<sup>38</sup> Even though the Zeri Fototeca catalogue entry mentions the Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo, the statue has never been in there.

<sup>39</sup> Getty Research Institute Photo Archive, Foto Arte Minore / Max Hutzel (accession number 86.P.8), <http://hdl.handle.net/10020/cat340573>. See also Krüger, p. 23.

6.3. *The St Pellegrino cupboard-altarpiece from Bominaco (third quarter of the fourteenth century)*

The 'nicchia' (niche) and statue of St Pellegrino from the oratory of the same name annexed to the Benedictine abbey church of Santa Maria Assunta in Bominaco was restored in 2007 (Sonnino, 2012; Tropea, 2012) (Fig. 20).<sup>40</sup> It is a cupboard-altarpiece with fixed side panels and a pair of doors. The rear wall and the left panel consist of a single board each, while the right panel consists of two boards. Both doors consist of a single board fitted to the parallelepiped niche with antique, although non-original, hinges. On the interior of the doors, removal of a modern floral overpainting revealed poor fourteenth-century fragments of saints: a blessing Angel (Gabriel) at the top of the left wing and Saint John the Baptist at the bottom; the Virgin Annunciate at the top of the right door and an unidentified saint with a blue mantle at the bottom. The exterior of the doors was repainted with an Angel in the upper part of each door and polychrome diamond shapes at the bottom. The back side of the rear wall has been repainted with geometrical and floral motifs on the lower part of the board, and the trigram of the Holy Name of Jesus at the top.

This extensive repainting demonstrates a continuity in the liturgical use of the artefact. In fact, in 1701 Clemente Righi, emissary of abbot Tommaso Ruffo di Bagnara, reported that the statue of the saint rested on the only altar in the oratory: 'Visitavit unicum altare in medio ipsius ecclesiae collocatum sub titulo Sancti Pellegrini, cuius imago existit super idem altare et est ex ligno, collocata in nicchia pariter lignea picta'.<sup>41</sup> A picture in the book of architect and art historian Ignazio Carlo Gavini, *Storia dell'architettura in Abruzzo* (1927–28, fig. 475) shows that at the beginning of twentieth century, the cupboard and statue inside were still in the same position. The altarpiece stood on a completely furnished altar and was protected with a large, suspended baldachin made of textile. All of these written and visual sources confirm that from the eighteenth century at least, closing altarpieces may have been on the high altar of small churches, especially if it was the only altar in the sacred space.

<sup>40</sup> At present the altarpiece is on deposit at the Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo (L'Aquila).

<sup>41</sup> Lucherini, 2016, p. 135. The medieval inscription on the base of the wooden statue of St Cesidius in the collegiate church of Trasacco (L'Aquila) refers to the three-dimensional effigy with the term 'imago'; the relics of SS. Cesidius and Rufinus were enshrined in the statue: Curzi, 2014b, p. 56.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In summary, grand-scale Italian medieval closing altarpieces can be reduced to three main types, from a formal and structural point of view.

1.- The tabernacle-altarpiece in the strictest sense of the word. The first Italian tabernacle-altarpieces include at least two main subtypes: 1.a with carved scenes (Alatri, Aosta); 1.b with painted scenes and figures. Subtype 1.b can be expressed in two further subtypes: 1.b.1 with the scenes confined to a single board of the bi-fold wing (Campo di Giove); 1.b.2 with evangelical or hagiographical episodes extending over both boards of the bi-fold wing (Pale di Foligno, Caso, Pinacoteca Capitolina, Ortucchio).

2.- The polygonal tabernacle, represented by the rarest and most elaborate Marian examples of Fossa and Scurcola. Precisely because of the sophisticated integration between painting, sculpture, and architecture, this type of tabernacle was easily destined for banalization and misunderstanding of illusionistic ambitions, as the St John the Baptist tabernacle in Caporciano demonstrates.

3.- The cupboard-altarpiece – the least ambitious of all three types. In the altarpiece of Rocca di Cambio and the now-lost St Peter altarpiece in Caporciano there is neither a deep interaction between architectural structure, sculpture, and painting, nor a combination of the iconic dimension with a narrative counterpart. The St Pellegrino of Bominaco altarpiece is an even more modest example of the same type. No grand-scale Marian altarpieces belonging to this typology seem to have survived.

With current knowledge, such a classification seems not to correspond to a substantial difference in function. However, tabernacles and other closing altarpieces of whatever form and structure were a phenomenon of *longue durée* in Central Apennine regions. In fifteenth-century Abruzzo, especially, they coexisted with polyptychs. Between 1476–1478, at the height of L'Aquila's economic and artistic flourishing, Silvestro di Giacomo – the best Renaissance sculptor in L'Aquila, in all likelihood trained in Florence – was still commissioned for two *tabernacula*.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> 'Magister Silvester Iacobi de Sulmona sponte promisit [...] facere et laborare ymaginem Beati Iacobi de relievo incarnatam ad similitudinem cum ymagine Sancti Iacobi de Porta de Paganica, cum tabernaculo storiato de storiis spectantibus et pertinentibus ad dictam ymaginem'; '[...] magister Silvester Iacobi de Sulmona civis aquilanus promisit laborare ymaginem sancti Sebastiani [...] cum tabernaculo, portis et suis historiis': Chini, 1929, pp. 47–48, nos 1–2.

The repainting of the interiors and/or exteriors of closing altarpieces (Scurcola, Bominaco, along with Alatri and Aosta) demonstrates that they continued to be objects of liturgy and devotion over the centuries in peripheral areas of the Peninsula.

Could the deep-rooted and widespread mystical and pauperistic tendencies of Central Italy from the thirteenth to fifteenth century – between eremitical experiences, Spiritual Franciscanism, Celestinian monastic revival, and Franciscan Observance – play a role in the preference given to this type of altarpiece? Unfortunately, reliable information about the provenance of most Marian sculptures is scarce (Krüger, 1992, pp. 219–230). As for the altarpieces or fragments thereof here examined, two of them come from an abbey church and a monastic oratory (Scurcola and Bominaco); the rest from collegiate churches, parish churches, and oratories. Only for the panels in the Pinacoteca Capitolina can a Franciscan origin not be excluded, though provenance from the collegiate church of Campli remains the most plausible, while the small-scale Marian tabernacles of Stockholm and Brno – from Tuscany and Naples respectively – are both related to the Franciscan devotion.<sup>43</sup>

From a chronological point of view, only one Marian tabernacle-altarpiece (Alatri) survives from the thirteenth century. From the fourteenth century onwards, different types of closing altarpieces with the statue of a Saint appear, even though they do not surpass Madonna shrines in number.

The donors of tabernacles and other closing altarpieces are typically unknown. Nevertheless, the example of Scurcola demonstrates – if proof were needed – that tabernacles are not always, or not exclusively, an expression of unpretentious laical devotion. An heraldic allusion might be also recognized in the tabernacle of Pale di Foligno.

The original location in the church of all these artefacts also remains mostly unknown. Only late documents sometimes mention them on side-altars or in side-chapels (Alatri, Campo di Giove, Ortucchio, maybe Fossa), apart from the altarpiece of San Pellegrino in Bominaco, which is a small oratory with only one altar.

Further research on written and visual sources on the one hand, on archaeological and architectural context on the other, may hopefully bring new data to light.

<sup>43</sup> See above 6.1.

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Fig. 1. Marian tabernacle-altarpiece, first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.  
Alatri (Frosinone, Italy), Santa Maria Maggiore [per concessione della Soprintendenza  
archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio per le province di Frosinone, Latina e Rieti – divieto  
di ulteriore riproduzione o duplicazione con qualsiasi mezzo].



Fig. 2. Aostan sculptor: *Infancy of Christ*, wings from a Marian tabernacle-altarpiece (Swiss pine, carved, gilded and painted, 139 x 175 x 4 cm), 1330-1340.

Torino (Italy), Palazzo Madama, Museo Civico d'Arte Antica,  
inv. 1044/L, from Santo Stefano in Aosta (Italy)

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Fig. 3. Master of Cesi: Marian tabernacle-altarpiece, 1320-1330.  
Pale di Foligno (Perugia, Italy), San Biagio  
(previously in Santa Maria Giacobbe in Pale di Foligno),  
before 1974 [from Delpriori, 2015, fig. V.62].



Fig. 4. Master of Cesi: St Christina tabernacle-altarpiece, *c.* 1330, scheme. Spoleto (Perugia, Italy), Museo Diocesano, from *Santa Cristina in Caso di Sant'Anatolia di Narco* (Perugia, Italy) [from Delpriori, 2015, p. 138, fig. V.71].





Fig. 5. Master of Campli: *Infancy of Christ*, wings from a Marian tabernacle-altarpiece, 1376-1378, scheme. Roma, Pinacoteca Capitolina (unknown provenance) [photos Antonello Idini, Roma; scheme Cristiana Pasqualetti].



Fig. 6. Master of Campo di Giove: *The Legend of St Eustace*,  
wings from a tabernacle-altarpiece, c. 1380.  
Campo di Giove (L'Aquila, Italy),  
Sant'Eustachio, before 1902  
[photo Pietro Piccirilli, family archive, Sulmona].



Fig. 7. Giovanni da Sulmona: Marian tabernacle-altarpiece, 1435, closed.  
Sulmona (L'Aquila, Italy),  
Museo Civico, from Sant'Orante in Ortucchio (L'Aquila, Italy)  
[photo Giovanni Lattanzi, Giulianova].



Fig. 8. Giovanni da Sulmona: Marian tabernacle-altarpiece, 1435, opened.  
Sulmona, Museo Civico, from Sant'Orante in Ortucchio  
[photo Giovanni Lattanzi, Giulianova].



Fig. 9. Giovanni da Sulmona: Marian tabernacle-altarpiece, 1435, side view.  
Sulmona, Museo Civico, from Sant'Orante in Ortucchio  
[photo Giovanni Lattanzi, Giulianova].



Fig. 10. Marian polygonal tabernacle-altarpiece, c. 1335  
 (on the wings, 16<sup>th</sup>-century paintings with the *Infancy and Passion of Christ*).  
 Celano (L'Aquila, Italy), Museo Nazionale d'Arte Sacra della Marsica,  
 from Santa Maria della Vittoria in Scurcola Marsicana  
 (L'Aquila, Italy; previously in the former abbey church of Santa Maria della Vittoria)  
 [photo Gino Di Paolo, Pescara].



Fig. 11. Master of Fossa: *Madonna and Child*,  
from a Marian polygonal tabernacle-altarpiece, c. 1335.  
Scurcola Marsicana, Santa Maria della Vittoria,  
(previously in the former abbey church of Santa Maria della Vittoria)  
[photo Alessandro Delpriori].



Fig. 12. Master of Fossa: Marian polygonal tabernacle-altarpiece, 1345-1350.  
 Fossa (L'Aquila, Italy), Santa Maria Assunta  
 (previously in Santa Maria *ad Cryptas* in Fossa), before 1979  
 [from Carli, 1998, p. 110, fig. 37].





Fig. 13. Master of Fossa: *Madonna and Child*,  
from a Marian polygonal tabernacle-altarpiece, 1345-1350.  
L'Aquila (Italy), Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo, from Santa Maria Assunta in Fossa  
(previously in Santa Maria *ad Cryptas* in Fossa)  
[photo Gino Di Paolo, Pescara].



**Fig. 14.** Abruzzese Follower of the Master of the Silver Crucifix:  
*Stories of St Catherine of Alexandria*, wings from a polygonal (?) tabernacle-altarpiece,  
 third quarter of 14<sup>th</sup> century.

L'Aquila (Italy), Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo,  
 from Santa Caterina d'Alessandria in L'Aquila  
 [photo Gino Di Paolo, Pescara].



Fig. 15. Abruzzese Master: St John the Baptist polygonal tabernacle-altarpiece, 1417, closed. Caporciano (L'Aquila, Italy), San Benedetto [photo Cristiana Pasqualetti].



Fig. 16. Abruzzese Master: St John the Baptist  
polygonal tabernacle-altarpiece, 1417, opened.  
Caporciano, San Benedetto  
[photo Cristiana Pasqualetti].



Fig. 17. Master of the Silver Crucifix: St Lucy cupboard-altarpiece, *c.* 1350.  
Rocca di Cambio (L'Aquila, Italy), Santa Lucia, before 1915  
[from Tropea, 2001, I, p. 302, fig. 388].



Fig. 18. Master of the Silver Crucifix: *Prophets and Saints*, c. 1350.  
Florentine private collection,  
from the cupboard-altarpiece of Santa Lucia in Rocca di Cambio  
[from Todini, 1986, I, plate XIII].



Fig. 19. Taddeo Gaddi: Shrine with the *Crucifixion, Saints and Angels*, early 1330s.  
Stockholm, Nationalmuseum (unknown provenance)  
[Photo: Erik Cornelius, Nationalmuseum (CC BY-SA)].



Fig. 20. Abruzzese Master: St Pellegrino cupboard-altarpiece, third quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo, from the oratory church of San Pellegrino in Bominaco (L'Aquila, Italy) [from Sonnino, 2012, p. 75, fig. 10].