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SACRED SPACE IN THE LIGHT
OF THE MIRACULOUS IMAGE.
A CASE STUDY FROM SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ITALY

A way of using imposed systems constitutes the resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations. A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for manoeuvres of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference. That is where the opacity of a 'popular' culture could be said to manifest itself — a dark rock that resists all assimilation.

*Michel de Certeau*¹

The use of markers to signify sacred space is as old as history. Indeed, we may be in danger, in this conference, of creating a false problem — or at least, a *question mal posée*. For the makers of such markers, it has generally been the case that *all* space is — more or less — sacred. The sacred grove signifies that the whole of nature is enchanted; the patronal church invokes supernatural protection for the city in its entirety. It seems we were given a false lead by Durkheim, with his dualistic division of the world into 'the sacred' and 'the profane'. In fact, all of the case-studies presented in this conference exemplify the designation of particular signs as bearers of sacred meaning within a cosmological vision in which the sacred is assumed to be immanent. Nor, indeed, is this a uniquely Christian perspective. For every conception of space is informed by human culture: there is no such thing as objective space. In the very act of its conception in the mind, space is charged with cultural significance. We may not always select the word 'sa-

¹ *Michel de Certeau*. *The Practice of Everyday Life* // Trans. S. Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 18.

cred' to describe that cultural significance; yet the imposition of centres and boundaries to create meaningful spaces is a universal human activity, whatever terms are used to describe it.

That is the first point, and we feel it is an important one to bear in mind when we come to draw conclusions from our conference. But if it may be said that the sacred is everywhere, it is also true that God is in the detail. The existential human condition may be universal, but our task as historians is to explain how different circumstances have given rise to diverse cultural forms. And here we face a recurrent and difficult problem of evidence. For the sources have a tendency to present us, in any given instance, with a highly selective view of how space has been shaped and interpreted. Architecture and liturgy have a great deal to teach us, as this conference is abundantly showing. Yet we need constantly to remind ourselves that their clearly defined testimony tends always to privilege an élite perspective. All too rarely do the sources permit us to recover the angle of vision of the 'underground man'. And yet behind the invention of a procession to define the boundary and the centre, or behind the construction of a sanctuary, there arise in every case competing views about sequence, directions, costumes, building materials — and more fundamentally, about the ultimate significance of the enterprise². Even when the construction is completed, and the new cathedral casts its shadow across the square, there remain those whose memory of a different townscape — winding lanes hemmed in by low houses, a tiny chapel on a corner — causes them to pursue an eccentric and dissident path through the regular streets of the reconstructed city³.

This is what lends such particular interest to the origins of any shrine or ritual, where the sources permit us to study the process of inception in any detail. The case we present here is that of a small painting, a fresco of the Virgin and Child which in the seventeenth century became, as it has remained to the present day, one of the most celebrated wonder-working shrines of Italy (ill. 1). The miraculous image has much in common with other sacred objects which in various ways have been used to shape cultural space. However, in thinking about what makes the miraculous image

² The point is well made, for example, by the social anthropologist of religion, Paolo Apolito, in his two books about the origin and development of a cult of visions of the Madonna at Oliveto Citra in southern Italy. *Apolito P. 'Dice che hanno visto la Madonna'. Un caso di apparizioni in Campania.* Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990; *idem, Apparitions of the Madonna at Oliveto Citra* / Tr. W. A. Christian. University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1998. The possibility enjoyed by the anthropologist of living through the process under analysis is, of course, denied to the historian.

³ For the theoretical insight see: *de Certeau M. The Practice of Everyday Life* / Tr. S. Rendall. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984.

distinctive, we are particularly struck by its peculiar elusiveness in the face of attempts to colonise it for exclusive or authoritarian use. The fact that *any* image is potentially ‘miraculous’, indeed, goes far to explain the persistent unease with which such cults have been regarded by churchmen and secular authorities alike. The cult of the Madonna of the Garden of Chiavari came very close to being suppressed on several occasions before the strength of popular support eventually secured its survival, on the condition, however, that formal control of both image and site were handed over to the established powers of church and state. The picture is today the focal point of the cathedral of Chiavari, the heart of a diocese and a goal of international pilgrimage. We might therefore consider its role in defining sacred space at each of these levels: within the building, in the ceremonial calendar of the cathedral, and in the perspective of the devout visitor from farther afield. But, instead, we can recover a much more complex and dynamic sense of the ways in which sacred space is defined, if we return to the early years of the seventeenth century, when the painting itself was still to be found in the garden from which it takes its name, the Madonna dell’Orto⁴.

The site, in relation to the pre-existing topography of the town and its environs, was marginal (ill. 2: no. 10 indicates the site). This was true both in a physical sense — the garden lay outside the town walls, and exposed to the sea — and also socially — for the population of this suburban district was excluded from the privileges of the intramural townspeople. It was, moreover, a zone of poor craft-workers and humble dwellings: its very name, Rupinaro, referred to the ruination of this area during a Turkish raid, from which it never recovered⁵. In the town, the gardens towards the sea had a nefarious reputation: the known haunt of gamblers and other low-life characters, they were also said to be haunted by evil spirits⁶. Here, in a niche on one of the garden walls, around the year 1500, an image of the Virgin and Child was painted, flanked by representations of St Sebastian and St Roche (ill. 1: the flanking saints are painted on the narrow return

⁴ The chief secondary sources are: *Sanguineti L.* *Nostra Signora dell’Orto. Storia documentata del suo santuario in Chiavari e della diffusione del culto.* 2nd edn. Rapallo: Emiliani, 1955; and *Spiazzi R.* *Nostra Signora dell’Orto in Chiavari. Storia documentata della devozione e del santuario.* Rapallo: Emiliani, 1994.

⁵ On the topographical relationships see: *degli Esposti R.* *Chiavari: vicende del territorio, delle istituzioni e degli abitanti.* Rapallo: Rotary Club Tigullio, 1991, p. 24–30, 86–87.

⁶ *Busco A.* ‘Della Historia di Nostra Signora dell’Horto di Chiavari’ (1656, with additions, 1669). Chiavari, Biblioteca della Società Economica [BSE], MS. 3.Z.IV.23, p. 10, 22, 30; *Bacigalupo L.* ‘Breve compendio dell’istoria di Nostra Signora dell’Orto’ (late 17 c.). BSE, MS. 3.Z.IV.31, fol. 4 (‘il luogo ove le streghe facevano il giuoco della tregenda’); *Cella P.* *Istoria della Madonna di Chiavari.* Genoa: Giuseppe Pavoni, 1613, p. 29–30.

walls of the niche). Around the head of the Virgin was an inscription comprising the opening words of the *Ave Maria* and the phrase 'hortus conclusus'. The iconography of the Madonna in a garden, with its allusion to this biblical epithet of the Virgin, was familiar in late-medieval Italy; but in this case the words made a specially apt allusion to the physical location of the place. A hundred years later it was remembered that the picture had been commissioned by a woman of the district as an *ex voto*, a thank-offering for her family's survival of a plague epidemic (such as was recorded at Chiavari in 1493). The association of the lateral saints with plague makes this account plausible⁷. When plague struck the town again in 1528, the image attracted the devotions of thousands of anxious citizens who gathered outside the walls to pray in the garden. But this was the beginning of the controversy which was to dog the cult into the next century. For the location of the frescoed image, below the sea-walls and adjacent to the citadel of Chiavari, gave it a strategic significance which neither the local governors of the town nor their superiors in Genoa could ignore. The town of Chiavari had originally been constructed by the Genoese in the twelfth century as a bastion of the Republic on its eastern coastline⁸; and circumstances in the sixteenth century — the invasion of French and Habsburg armies, and the advance of Turkish power in the western Mediterranean — rendered it crucial, in the eyes of the Genoese senate, that this and other subject towns be kept under strict control. So, ostensibly on grounds of hygiene but with the additional motive of dispersing the crowds from this sensitive spot, the garden was forcibly closed to the public, and the authorities, in an attempt to appease popular sentiment, had a copy of the holy image painted on a different wall, farther off from the city's defences. This was regarded as, at best, a poor substitute, and it was said that the copy faded rapidly in the open air — whereas the original, although equally exposed to the elements, preserved its colours intact⁹.

The image seems to have reverted in the later sixteenth century to relative obscurity, apart from the occasional pious visitor, until in September 1609 and July 1610 the first prodigies were reported at the site. The historical context was again one of tension and anxiety, created this time by the threat of invasion by the army of Savoy, strengthened by French support, and additionally by internal political tensions which were destabilising the government of the Republic¹⁰. It was entirely characteristic of the socially

⁷ Cella, 'Istoria', p. 24; Garibaldi C. 'Memorie di Chiavari' (early 19 c.) // BSE, MS. 3.J.III.12, p. 313; Spiazzi, *Storia documentata*, p. 15–17.

⁸ Ragazzi F. and Corallo C. *Chiavari*. Genoa: Sagep Editrice, 1982, p. 20–36.

⁹ Cella, 'Istoria', p. 28–29.

¹⁰ Bitossi C. *Il governo dei magnifici: patriziato e politica fra Cinque e Seicento*. Genoa, 1990.

marginal character of the Madonna of the Garden at this time that the initial miracles or 'graces' attributed to it were reported by two inhabitants of the suburbs who were representative of the poorest class of the townspeople: a midwife and a boy who sold eggs (ill. 3). The archbishop of Genoa promptly had these and other witnesses called in for questioning: their *processo* records many details of the early stages of the cult¹¹. The captain of the district of Chiavari did not care for the crowds beginning to congregate once more in the garden¹², any more than did the archbishop's vicar wish to encourage such alarmingly spontaneous and untutored devotion amongst the ignorant poor. There was a move to block up the image in its niche; but this was postponed for fear of the growing crowds and again deferred when report of a third miracle — the cure of a peasant with a speech defect — intensified public interest and brought about a longer stay of execution for the nascent cult¹³. Even as anxiety about the future of the image mounted, it was clear that its enthusiasts had turned the garden in front of the image into a sacred space of rapidly increasing notoriety.

Without the sacramental engagement of a single priest, devotees of the picture had constructed a paraliturgy of processions, all-night vigils, hymns, prostration, self-flagellation and even exorcism before the Madonna (ill. 4)¹⁴. It had also become customary devoutly to touch the picture, either with the hand or with other objects, such as crowns, which were then used in further rites of healing. Oil from lamps burning in front of the image was distributed and used in the same way. As the image was now surrounded by *ex voto* offerings, soldiers were employed by the commune to guard it at night¹⁵. The lay population of Chiavari was by this time extensively involved in the management of all aspects of the cult, the women of the town playing a particular role in the care of visitors and sick pilgrims¹⁶. Support for the image was no longer confined to the poor and the weak. Indeed, the energetic promotion of the cult by members of the local aristocracy who had influence in the Genoese senate played a crucial part in its survival. The originally obscure image in its marginal location was being transformed by the actions and in the perspective of its devotees, into the focal point of a veritable 'hortus conclusus', a Paradise garden worthy to be a permanent dwelling-place for the Virgin Mary.

¹¹ 'Processo della verificazione dei miracoli della Madonna dell'Orto', Chiavari // BSE, MS. 3.Y.IV.27.

¹² The initial mockery of the cult by the captain and his wife is described by Pellegrino Robbio, 'Principii dell'Istoria della B.V. dell'Orto' (1663), BSE, MS. 3.Z.II.2, p. 14–18.

¹³ Busco. 'Della Historia', p. 33–42.

¹⁴ Cella. 'Istoria', p. 40–49; Busco. Della Historia, p. 77.

¹⁵ Busco. 'Della Historia', p. 62.

¹⁶ Busco. 'Della Historia', p. 66–67; Cella. 'Istoria', p. 41–47.

An inevitable cost of official approval of the cult, however, would be the marginalisation or suppression of elements of popular devotion with which the Counter-Reformation church hierarchy had little patience. A local man, Pellegrino Robbio, was hired from the beginning to record the fortunes of the image, and subsequently wrote a manuscript history which reads as a judicious celebration of the good and orthodox behaviour of the virtuous citizens of Chiavari¹⁷. For all the thousands of men and women who spent entire nights in the garden, Robbio wrote, no scandal ever spoiled the sanctity of the place. There survive, however, some detailed notes made on the spot in 1610 and 1611 which never found their way into the official accounts of Nostra Signora dell'Orto¹⁸. One of these sheets of notes is headed: 'Miracles and graces. These seven are those which the Bishop has approved. Do not let the others be examined'. The seven prodigies listed here are relatively undramatic cures of the lame, relief of women in the pains of childbirth, and the wonder of a crack in the fresco which was said to have closed itself up. Meanwhile, Pellegrino Robbio himself is named on another sheet as the compiler of a different list of graces datable to the same period. This document lists a number of marvels, each of which is marked in the margin with a cross: none, in fact, appears to have been cited in any of the representations made to the archbishop to request official sanction for the cult. A notable feature of this list, by contrast with the 'official' miracles of the shrine, is the number of people said to have been relieved by the Madonna dell'Orto from possession by evil spirits. The pattern of description of the prodigies in these cases was to observe that the bad spirits revealed themselves and fled from the afflicted person as soon as the individual came 'into the presence' or 'into the sight' of the Madonna of the Garden. Thus, Susanna, the daughter of Agostino Casareggio of Rovereto, was said to have arrived with 'spirits' inside her which 'revealed themselves in the presence of the most holy Virgin'; a young man of Rupinaro, Bartolomeo Fontanarossa, whom many had previously denied to be possessed at all, likewise found that such spirits 'disclosed themselves at the sight of the Madonna'; and Marco Gianone of Varese, immediately upon entering the garden, began to utter great shouts and blasphemies, which intensified as he came into 'the presence of the Virgin's image', at which point the voice — evidently that of a demonic spirit — was heard to say that 'it was burning, and could not bear to stay in the Madonna's presence'¹⁹. It is clear from such phrases in the miracle ac-

¹⁷ *Busco*. 'Della Historia', p. 33–37; *Robbio*. 'Principii', p. 20 and passim.

¹⁸ These manuscripts are in the private ownership of Zeffirino Zali, to whom we are extremely grateful for permission to consult and cite them.

¹⁹ 'Sozanna figlia del S. Agostino Cazareggio di Rovereto, discopertosi spiriti alla presenza della santissima Vergine'; 'Bartolomeo Fontanarossa giovane di Rupinaro discopertosi spiriti alla vista della santissima Madonna'; 'Marco Gianone di Varese nell'entrata dell'orto

counts that, in the perspective of the devotee of the Madonna dell'Orto, the sacred space in that extramural garden was defined by the 'presence' and the 'sight' of the image itself. But in the new Tridentine world, the claim that an image, in the absence of a priest or any ecclesiastical sanction, had exorcised demons was not likely to be received sympathetically by the archbishop; and it was a judicious decision to omit these accounts from the petitions for approval of the cult.

The archbishop's vicar, however, continued obdurate in his hostility to these activities in the garden, and it seemed that the final decision could well seal the fate of this popular devotion — as of so many others which have left little or no trace in the records. But early in 1612 two aristocrats of Chiavari were fortuitously elected to high office in Genoa and, as supporters of the Madonna, were able to use their influence to win round both the senate and the archbishop²⁰. Mass was now permitted to be said in the garden, which was for the first time officially consecrated. And the decision was rapidly taken to house the image in a proper church. At first the official assumption was that it should be transferred to an existing church in the town, and competitive bids were entered from the mother church of St John the Baptist and that of the Franciscans. But the public devotion was all focused on the garden, and in the end it was here that, in June 1612, the first stone was laid of the church which was to transform beyond recognition the setting of the humble fresco. The building project took twenty years, and called for all the efforts of the townspeople, both rich and poor²¹. But upon completion of the new basilica, on 8 September 1634 the masonry bearing the holy image was carefully detached from the wall and — with enormous difficulty — was carried through the streets of Chiavari, prior to its final installation over the high altar (ill. 5). Already, in 1628, the custody of the church and the image had been placed in the hands of the Order of Discalced Carmelites, and the authorities could consequently feel that the cult of the Madonna of the Garden had at last been brought effectively under official control. Nevertheless, in the transept of the new church, on the very site of the erstwhile garden of the Virgin, there was kept open a well from that garden, and pilgrims to the new sanctuary used to drink devoutly from this source, in recognition of the Madonna's continuing

ha fato grandissimi urli e rumori e deto molte parole brutte et all presentia della imagine della Santissima Vergine ne ha fatto molti altri dicendo che abbruggiava e non poteva stare a detta presentia'. There are among the manuscripts two versions of this text; some readings are clarified by comparison between them.

²⁰ Busco. 'Della Historia', p. 83–90.

²¹ E. g. Busco. 'Della Historia', p. 100–104: 'The people flocked every evening, in crowds, to carry stones and bricks, (together with) men and women of noble condition... Those walls were quickly built, by the combined efforts of both peasants and townspeople, the nobility and the poor'.

link with her original location in the garden, and her association there with nature and the support of life²².

So even within the reconstructed and sanitised setting of the sanctuary church, the Madonna dell'Orto continued to be venerated by devotees who remembered the original setting, and whose behaviour perpetuated a view of the sacred space which was slightly oblique to that of the image's Carmelite managers. But apart from the divergent spatial alignments of these different perspectives on the holy garden of Chiavari, there is a further distinction to be drawn in the conceptualisation of sacred space. From the point of view of the imposing basilica constructed to frame the image, the Madonna dell'Orto acted as a figure of authority and a focus of obedience, before which legitimate offices could be celebrated without fear of unorthodoxy. This was — and is — one kind of sacred space. But from another perspective, that of the pilgrim to the old fresco in the garden, the Madonna dell'Orto had a different spatial significance. For the intimate engagement with the picture, by devotees who kissed it, touched it with crowns and performed exorcisms in its presence was testimony to a perception that such an image was a place where the boundary of the cultured and socialised community was very thin. In this perspective, the encounter with the image yielded the possibility of dangerous but potentially creative engagement with an ulterior world in which a different order prevailed. This sacred space therefore had the power to transform the established order of things. That this was something more than an imagined fiction was vouched for by the mother who experienced relief from the pains of childbirth, by the psychological depressive who recovered her equanimity, by the feuding lords who made peace in the sight of the Madonna dell'Orto²³, and indeed by the startlingly varied social mixture of the powerful and the weak, male and female, who found themselves collaborating to promote the cult and to celebrate what came to be seen, over the years, as the certain protection offered by this image to the surrounding community of her devotees.

²² *Busco*. 'Della Historia', p. 9, 135.

²³ *Della Croce G.-T.* Istoria della miracolosa imagine di Nostra Signora dell'Orto. Genoa: Bernardo Tarigo, 1759, p. 140–142; *Spiazzi*. Storia documentata, p. 48–49.

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САКРАЛЬНОЕ ПРОСТРАНСТВО ЧУДОТВОРНОЙ ИКОНЫ НА ПРИМЕРЕ ИТАЛЬЯНСКОГО ОБРАЗА XVII ВЕКА

Мы начинаем с признания того факта, что использование сакральных маркеров для деления пространства в интересах определенных групп или как результат особого рода действий старо как мир. Но хотя ни феномен, ни даже его изучение не являются новшеством, мы, тем не менее, хотим рассмотреть некоторые примеры в сравнительном контексте и на этом основании провести разграничение моделей в рамках более широкой типологизации сакрального пространства.

Организирующим принципом этой конкретной дискуссии является то, что образ признан чудотворным. В христианской культуре подобные примеры широко распространены как в православной, так и в католической традициях (и, конечно, такие случаи известны и в других культурах, о которых здесь речь не пойдет). В попытке найти адекватные схемы внутри данного феномена, которые послужили бы потенциальной основой для дальнейших исследований, мы избираем в данном кратком исследовании антропологический подход.

Чудотворный образ имеет много общего с другими сакральными объектами, так или иначе используемыми для формирования культурного пространства. Однако, размышляя о том, что отличает чудотворный образ от остальных объектов, мы уделяем особое внимание его чрезвычайной неуловимости перед лицом многочисленных попыток использовать его для каких-либо эксклюзивных или авторитарных целей. Тот факт, что *любой* образ потенциально является «чудотворным», в значительной степени объясняет постоянное беспокойство и сомнения, которые вызывали подобные культы у церковных деятелей. И даже в том случае, когда такой образ, как это часто бывает, принесен в церковь под бдительным присмотром епископа, возможной «ценой» культа постоянно оставалась опасность его «ухода» в более мирское, массовое окружение в виде дешевых копий знаменитого прототипа, которым порой приписывалось не меньшее могущество.

В статье рассматриваются три способа формирования сакрального пространства с помощью чудотворного образа в Италии. Во-первых, культовый образ воспринимается и используется как воображаемый центр вселенной. Во-вторых, его размещение может служить маркером общественных границ для установления и защиты внутреннего пространства. В-третьих, такой образ играет роль тонкой, еле уловимой границы между мирами.

В качестве первого примера приводится ритуал, в котором Мадонна дель Монте из Генуи, скульптура XV в., хранившаяся с момента своего создания во францисканском монастыре высоко над городом, выносилась из церкви, чтобы «благословить» всю прибрежную территорию Генуэзской республики, — ее поднимали так, чтобы земной и морской ландшафты были обозримы «взглядом» образа.

Во втором случае уместно вспомнить о лигурийском городе Кьявари, который в начале Нового времени был окружен целой серией чудотворных живописных изображений Девы Марии, каждый из которых устанавливался в стратегической точке, на дороге, ведущей к городу. Легенды об их могуществе укрепляли репутацию образов как истинных защитников города от чумы и враждебных армий.

В третьем случае мы обращаемся к другому живописному изображению Девы Марии из Кьявари: фреске, созданной около 1500 г. и первоначально расположенной на внешней стене сада; в XVII в. по сторонам от нее были построены базилика и святилище для паломников, а с XIX в. еще и городской собор. Еще до того, как была осуществлена эта институционализация (при соответствующем контроле со стороны властей), были детально зафиксированы действия поклоняющихся образу на стене городского сада, которые свидетельствуют о восприятии священного образа как тонкой грани между повседневным миром и иным, опасным, но обладающим чрезвычайным могуществом, потусторонним миром. Целование образа, прикосновение к нему макушками, практика экзорцизма перед ним представляли собой типичные примеры поведения, вызванного восприятием такого образа как места, где граница культурного, социального сообщества была наиболее тонка, где открывалась возможность опасной, но потенциально созидательной встречи с невидимым миром хаоса.

Идеи и примеры статьи заимствованы из книги, над которой мы в данный момент работаем, ее приблизительное название: «Подвижный образ: пространство чудотворного образа в Италии и в Средиземноморье, 1500–2000».



1. The Madonna dell'Orto. Fresco, c. 1500. Chiavari Cathedral



3. Apparition of the Madonna dell'Orto to Sebastiano Descalzo (2 July 1610).
Painting, Chiavari Cathedral, early 18 c.



4. Flagellants and other pious devotees in the garden of the Madonna dell'Orto. Painting, Chiavari Cathedral, early 18 c.



5. The Madonna dell'Orto in marble frame of c. 1630