Envisioning Christ on the Cross: Ireland and the Early Medieval West

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The Volto Santo's legendary and physical image

Michele Bacci

In the last decades, art historians have frequently laid emphasis on the 'cultic' role played by images in the religious experience of the Middle Ages, although no special efforts have been made to provide the ambiguous term 'cult' with a more circumstantial meaning. Actually, this word can be safely used as a generic expression to hint at both individual and collective forms of religious expression, including liturgical rites, devotional acts and mystical experiences, as well as private, domestic and votive practices. The way in which images are involved in such religious manifestations may vary according to different factors: they can prove to be simply instrumental to the performance of ritual and pious acts, or play a much more decisive role as visual foci of a well consolidated cultic phenomenon, being invested with relic-like, documentary or miraculous qualities. The latter case was much less widespread than the former and, as some scholars have remarked, was much more an outcome of the early Modern era, rather than a hallmark of medieval spirituality.1

Yet, medieval religious literature was indeed responsible for working out many legendary motifs that described Christian images as vehicles of God's intervention in the human dimension: widely disseminated by both devotional and liturgical texts and eventually used as theological and didactic arguments, such stories happened in the course of time to be associated with material images and used as rhetorical tools to shape the latter's 'personality' in universally recognizable and powerful terms. This encounter caused a most crucial shift of status, by virtue of which an ordinary image was gradually credited with possessing supernatural qualities, resulting from its identification with the mythical protagonist of a renowned miracle. Such a process usually proves to be very difficult to illustrate, as we are often no more able to recognize the whole range of connotations between the ideal archetype and its material counterpart: one can wonder, for example, if and to what extent the transformation of an image into a cult-object implied a more or less thorough reshaping of its material appearance, and if and to what extent the latter could be expected to visualize its mythical counterpart, for example by adopting compositional, iconographic and stylistic features that conveyed an idea of ancientness and exotic otherness. In the present essay, I would like to analyse such dynamics by offering a different look at the Volto Santo in Lucca. This very odd object is especially interesting because of its controversial perception as both cross and image, holy face and whole body, three-dimensional statue and icon, piece of furnishings and cultic object, true-to-life portrait and disappointing artwork at the same time. In order to decide how to interpret such contradictory features, it proves necessary to explore the Volto Santo's long-lasting cultic prehistory, starting from the age of the iconoclastic controversies.

On 11 March 843, the basilica Theodora put an end to the long-lasting iconoclastic controversy by celebrating a solemn procession with icons through the streets of Constantinople. Such an event was perceived by the Byzantine church as the final victory over heresy and as the beginning of a new Christian era: this implied, as Marie-France Azépée has pointed out, a thorough rethinking of collective identity, which was achieved by means of an increased emphasis on the concept of tradition, intended as an allegedly uninterrupted transmission and observance of the images that had been established in the apostolic past and could be repeated without alteration in the extra-temporal dimension of the liturgy.2 Icons ceased to be either mere manifestations of devotional piety or subjects of legendary fiction and started to be perceived as material symbols of orthodox self-awareness. Gradually, during the late ninth and tenth century, these images began to play the role of protagonist in the annual commemoration of the Triumph of Orthodoxy over iconoclasm, a commemoration that was celebrated on the first Sunday of Lent. Starting on the evening of Saturday's ann dyvov (that is, 'of the cakes'), a feast commemorating a famous miracle of St Theodore Tiron, this celebration was meaningfully superimposed on the earlier commemoration of Moses and Aaron, probably in order to assert that image worship, prohibited by God's words on Mount Sinai, was now made possible and even necessary by the

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1 Reference to the scholarly trend inaugurated by Hans Belting's famous book Bild und Kult: eine Geschichte des Bildes vom Altertum zur Kunst (Munich, 1990) is here implied.
2 See, especially, the papers gathered in E. Thies and G. Wolf (eds.), The miraculous image in the Middle Ages and Renaissance (Rome, 2004).
in the annual celebrations: the Beirut image itself, which was said to display a crucifixion, had been preserved since 975 in the Chalke chapel in the Great Palace in Constantinople, whereas the Mandylion and Keramidion were included in the treasure of the Pharoas chapel, and the icon of St Mary the Egyptian was displayed on the main entrance of the naves (nave) of the Hagia Sophia.7

This association with local tradition was probably deliberate and aimed partly at pleasing the audience of Lenten sermons, and partly at emphasizing that God’s miraculous intervention by means of holy images was by no means restricted to ancient and geographically alien icons. Such a process was already fully accomplished by the late eleventh century, when sermons including up to five stories set in Constantinople itself started to circulate: these included an episode of injury to the famous Hodegetria icon, the image in the Hagia Sophia, and the icons of Maria Rhomaia and Christ Antiphonites, which were said to have been committed by Patriarch Germanos to the waves of the Bosphorus at the start of iconoclasm. By such means, the space-time dimension of legends happened to overlap with the believers’ everyday environment, that is, with the cult-places, streets and squares that, on the occasion of the Feast of Orthodoxy, were enlivened by long processions led by the very effigies that were evoked in sermons, as is shown by a late icon (c.1400) in the British Museum, where the palladium of Constantinople, the Hodegetria, plays the role of protagonist.8

In approximately the same period, the church in Rome (which had been a stronghold of the iconoclastic party) seems to have developed a special liturgical celebration, known as the Pastic maginis Domini or Festum Salvatoris,9 in analogy with the Feast of Orthodoxy. It consisted of the commemoration of the Beirut miracle, which already by the tenth century had been fixed on 9 November in Catalan and Italian calendars.10 The story, known from Anastasius the Librarian’s translation of the Acts of the Council of Nicaea, dating from c.873,11 circulated in at least four different variants including important additions: one told that, in order to commemorate the miraculous event, the bishop of Beirut had solemnly converted the local synogogue into a church dedicated to the Saviour and had

7 On these narratives and the sacred objects associated with them, see Ernst von Dobschütz, ‘Giallaia naia 297’, Byzantinische Zeitschrift, 17 (1905), 134–67 at 134–6; Bacci, ‘Quel bello miracolo’, pp 13–16.
instituted an annual feast on 9 November. Another one stated that the image was an authentic portrait of Christ painted by the pharisee Nicodemus in the night following Christ's crucifixion and that many ampullae filled with the holy blood shed from its surface had been disseminated throughout the Christian world on the initiative of the bishop of Beirut. The feast of the Pasticcio imaginis was widespread in several areas of Europe at least until it started being substituted by the feast of the dedication of the Lateran basilica from the twelfth century onwards. By means of the latter, the Roman curia attempted to transpose into a Roman setting the basic motifs of the ancient Eastern legend, and especially the final conversion of the Beirut synagogue into a church dedicated to the Holy Saviour; in the view of Lateran canons, it was important to assert that the 'Batilica Salvatoris' in Rome had been the first one to bear such a venerable dedication. Yet, before this process of 'Romanization' was enacted, the feast of 9 November had constituted a specifically Western way of celebrating victory over the iconoclastic heresy, focused on the most widespread Byzantine liturgical readings on images, and imbued with a strong Christological meaning.

In my view, the choice of 9 November instead of the first Sunday of Lent was aimed at maintaining the original association with the feast of St Theodore Tiron, which was not movable in Roman tradition, but fixed on the aforementioned date. The Roman church felt that it had preserved the memory of the dedication of the Beirut synagogue as a consequence of its long-lasting Petrine association with the patriarchate of Antioch, within whose jurisdiction the Lebanese town fell; given that the story described nothing more than a re-enactment of the crucifixion, it worked out a specific Office modelled on those used for the Invention (3 May) and the Exaltation of the Cross (14 September). Yet, the connection with the Byzantine Feast of Orthodoxy is best revealed by a number of paschal readings pertaining to the most important Roman churches, where a selection of miracles performed by images is included among the lessons for the Festum Salvatoris. The paschal composition by canon Bibianus for the Lateran basilica in the late eleventh century includes a short sermon on the Dedicatio ecclesiae lateranensis, followed by five Byzantine stories: the stabbed image of the Hagia Sophia, the achropeptia of Lydda and Gethsemane, the Edess Mandylion and, last but not least, the Beirut image itself. Moreover, the use of several lessons is confirmed by the expression

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Miracula de imagine Domini, which occurs in a number of lectionaries, and by the association of the Beirut legend with the story of the Hagia Sophia icon, and the legend of the Lucca Volto Santo in several later manuscripts. The unique combination of readings in the late twelfth-century passion from Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, which includes only stories within a purely Roman setting (such as the Veronica, the Lateran achropeptia, and the Arcus Pietatis), can be considered to represent a clear attempt at thorough Romanization of the feast. Yet, notwithstanding all efforts on the part of the Lateran canons, the 'Batilica Salvatoris' continued to be regarded as owing its dedication to the special worship of the Beirut image. An ampulla of holy blood was kept among the basilica's most precious relics and such authors as Jacobus of Varagine and at least some of the manuscripts of Guillelmus Durandus' Rationale divinorum officiorum had no doubts in identifying it with one of the ampullae filled by the bishop of Beirut; moreover, when the regular canons of Berg Cathedral in Norway received a holy thorn of Christ's cross on 9 November 1214, they discovered in their books that the date corresponded, in Roman usage, to the commemoration of the translation of the blood ampulla from Beirut to the Lateran basilica and of its subsequent dedication to the Holy Saviour. By the late twelfth century, an image of Christ located in the Lateran Patriarchium at the entrance to the chapel of St Sylvester started playing the role of cultic substitute of the Beirut image: a number of later sources state that it had shed blood, later preserved in the ampulla, after being struck with a stone by a Jew during the feast of the dedication of the Lateran basilica on 9 November. Unfortunately, there is no documentary evidence from which to ascertain whether this image was purposefully created to play this role or whether it was an older artwork previously used as a visual focus in the Pasticcio imaginis feast. Yet, it is interesting to observe that some extant texts, while witnessing that it displayed Christ on the cross, describe it as either 'the Lord's face' (vultus dominici) or 'a painted image of the Lord's majesty' (dominici maiestatis depictam imaginem).
Much the same semantic ambiguity characterizes the complex history of the Holy Face of Lucca (pl. 13), the legendary and cultic physiognomy of which, as several authors have pointed out, is closely related to the tradition concerning the Beirit image. Its origins are still most controversial: first witnessed in the mid-eleventh century, its renown was already so widespread in the early twelfth century as to be invoked by English kings and worshipped by pilgrims from several parts of Europe. Its cult emerged in the peculiar context of the cathedral church of San Martino (previously dedicated to the Holy Saviour), which was then ruled by the same regular canons established in the Lateran basilica; it is a well-known fact that, in the wake of the Gregorian Reform (especially under Bishop Rangerius in the second half of the eleventh century), many efforts were made to imitate in Lucca the usages and traditions of the Roman church. In a way, the cult of the cross was especially enhanced in this period: the offices of the Invention and Exaltation were most solemnly performed and, as we learn from a document dating from c.1070, two altars connected with the worship of the cross faced each other, as in Roman basilicas, in the middle of the nave: one was located 'before the old cross' and one 'ante medium', before the Holy Face, which had been built in honour of several saints, including Cornelius and Cyprian. The very fact that the latter's feast fell on 14 September, the day of the Exaltation, indirectly corroborates the identification of the cultus, already in this early phase, with a figurative cross or crucifix.18


Liturical manuscripts from either Lucca or the Tuscan churches taking inspiration from Lucchese usages demonstrate that the Piazzu imaginari was one of the major feasts of the liturgical year.19 By the thirteenth century, if not earlier, its office was performed in front of the Volto Santo itself and included lessons from the Beirit narrative.20 The close connection with the latter is pointed out, in any case, by the many analogies and direct references to it which can be detected in the so-called Lebomian legend, the story of the Volto Santo most probably composed in the early twelfth century:21 explicit hints are represented by the attribution to Nicodemus and the mention of an ampulla of holy blood among the relics associated with the image. The identification of the original Volto with the present-day monumental wooden crucifix has often been disputed in the scholarly debate, on both historical and artistic grounds.22 Some have wondered why a three-dimensional image should have been labelled as 'holy face' – an expression that would have been more appropriate in connection with such images as the Edessa Mandylion or the Veronica in the Vatican basilica.23 Yet, contemporary documents witness that the word mufis, often employed to indicate holy portraits such as those painted by St Luke, could indeed be used as synecdoche to indicate crucifixes; in more general terms, it conveyed the idea of the image as true-to-life reproduction of Christ's physical appearance and height that was asserted in the Piazzu imaginari story.24

19 A. R. Clason, Le chanoinesse de la Cathédrale de Lucca (Livre de Prières et de Messe, thuc. c.1274), 23. 20 A. P. Clason, Le chanoinesse de la Cathédrale de Lucca (Livre de Prières et de Messe, thuc. c.1274), 23. 21 A. P. Clason, Le chanoinesse de la Cathédrale de Lucca (Livre de Prières et de Messe, thuc. c.1274), 23. 22 A. P. Clason, Le chanoinesse de la Cathédrale de Lucca (Livre de Prières et de Messe, thuc. c.1274), 23. 23 A. P. Clason, Le chanoinesse de la Cathédrale de Lucca (Livre de Prières et de Messe, thuc. c.1274), 23. 24 A. P. Clason, Le chanoinesse de la Cathédrale de Lucca (Livre de Prières et de Messe, thuc. c.1274), 23.
By the end of the twelfth century, when the Lebasantian legend was enriched with an appendix devoted to its most famous miracles, the role of the Volto Santo as an authentic portrait was further emphasized by alleging that Niconodemus had sculpted it by exactly reproducing the size, breadth and height of Christ’s body as imprinted on his funerary shroud. In my view, such a reference might be explained as a strategy to rationalize the conceptual hiatus between monumental cross and holy face implied by the Volto Santo, by connecting it with the only extant achreiposioton displaying Christ’s whole body; the latter was the holy shroud first described as being in the church of Blachernae at Constantinople by the Crusader Robert de Clari in 1204; it is possibly (yet not necessarily) identical with the sindone later worshipped in Lirai, Châmbery and Turin. This Byzantine relic was publicly exhibited on Fridays and reproduced on liturgical textiles employed in Easter rituals.

According to Chiara Frugoni’s view, it may well be that a kind of achreiposioton or holy imprint on a textile was worshipped in Lucca before being substituted by a monumental crucifix; yet, the specific context of the Saviour cult, in its close connection with the story of the injured icon of Beirut, makes this unlikely. In reproducing both the Saviour’s appearance and height (as stated by the Lebasantian legend), a monumental crucifix could efficaciously convey the idea of a true-to-life portrait that had suffered the same outrages and tortures inflicted on Christ better than any other kind of image. And in many respects it constituted a truthful, almost sacramental, replica of his body. Moreover, both Eastern and Western believers were accustomed to attribute to a cross-shaped object the role of documenting the real dimensions of the Saviour’s body; such was the famous cross mensuralis, a tall golden cross that was worshipped in the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and was frequently indicated as a unit of measurement in the medieval West.

The idea of an original Volto Santo as distinct from the one presently worshipped in Lucca was born out of the stylistic reading proposed by such scholars as Gera de Francovich and others, who connected it with the art trends inaugurated by Benedetto Antelami and accordingly dated the crucifix to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Subsequently, scholars have made many efforts to reconstruct the Lucchese prototype: in the 1990s, the radiocarbon dating of the wood of the Volto Santo in Borgo Sansepolcro to the eighth century seemed to offer an extraordinary solution, which was, however, viewed with much suspicion, given that formal solutions displayed by the image seemed more compatible with a twelfth-century dating. Most recently, it has been proposed that the Lucchese image presents affinities with German wooden sculptures of the last decades of the eleventh or the early twelfth century.

Be this as it may, it seems clear that the use of a wooden crucifix as a visual focus in the special worship of the Saviour in Lucca (first clearly implied by the term volto ligno employed by an author writing in c.1173), was nothing more than the final outcome of a calcific process rooted in the Roman-oriented liturgical usages of the regular canons and in the celebration of an unconfessional feast honouring an image instead of a holy person. More difficult to ascertain is whether the Volto Santo’s iconographical features must be explained against the same background. On the whole, they seem to rely on very archaic models, such as the outward appearance of the face, with its long bifurcate beard and hair falling down onto the shoulders, and the long-sleeved tunic, closed with a belt that is usually interpreted as hinting at the second coming of Christ according to Revelation 11:3, where the Son of Man is described as ‘dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest’. Did the Volto Santo contribute to the spread of such an iconography or did it simply adopt an already widespread type?

The second hypothesis seems to be the more likely one. Only a few of the crucifixes represented in a long-sleeved tunic can be clearly recognized as copies of the Lucchese archetype, such as the one in Bocca di Magra itself connected with the cult of the blood shed by the Beirut image, the cross in Roccia Soraggio (at some time worshipped in a church whose main feast fell on 9 November), and

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36 Relatio Lombini dianae, i, p. 128; Michaud, 6, Lucca, Biblioteca Statale, MS Tacci-Tognetti, fo. 129v.
37 Irina Shulina, Relikvii v sravnitel’noïistoricheskom ikonografi (Moscow, 2003), pp. 113–32.
41 See the essays cited in n. 34. For a detailed analysis of Antelami’s Deposition at Parma, see Parker, this volume.
other crucifixes preserved in Tuscany. Other examples, such as the Sondalo crucifix with its distinctive chiton-like tunic, or even the famous crucifix of Inveram in Brunswick Cathedral, which was described by Erwin Panofsky and Reinhold Hausherr as closely connected to the Velo Santo on stylistic and compositional grounds, can hardly be considered to replicate directly the Lucchese archetypc, given that no evidence is available concerning their relationship to the cultic phenomena and liturgical practices connected to the latter. Moreover, the hypothesis about the early worship of a direct copy of the Holy Cross of Lucca in Bury St. Edmunds, England, as proposed by Diana Webby, is only conjectural.

In Ireland, where the Beirut legend was well known and the long-sleeved tunic had often been employed in the representation of the crucifixion, the worship of a monumental crucifix of this type seems to have developed in the twelfth century, before the Anglo-Norman conquest in 1171. According to Gerald of Wales (d. 1223), there was in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, 'a most miraculous cross, displaying the crucified Jesus face' (crux quandam virtutissima, valde piaferiora crucifixus). As in a number of like stories, it was considered to be especially efficacious in protecting economic transactions. The miniature accompanying the text in the London manuscript of the Topographia Hibernica (pl. 26) represents it as a monumental crucifix with long-sleeved tunic; its wide folds and the lack of a prominent belt seem to rule out any direct hint at the Velo Santo.

In the same way, specific reproductions of the Lucchese cult-phenomenon are completely unknown in twelfth-century Catalonia, where a large number of crucifrices with long-sleeved tunic (locally known as majestats) were carved. On the contrary, the Pia imaginis feast was well rooted in that area and associated with the liturgical life of the regular canons, whose connections with Rome, as for instance in Santa Maria in Besalú, have been frequently pointed out. In at least Santa de Bocca Sognig, pp. 29-34. 47 Clara Barachini and Mari Teresa Filleri, L'immagine del Velo Santo nell'arte sacra' in Barachini and Filleri (eds), Il Velo Santo: Storia e culto, pp. 95-100. 48 Erwin Panofsky, 'Das Benediktinerkloster und das 'Velo Santo' in Lucca in 'Festschriften für Adolf Goldschmidt (Leipzig, 1953), pp. 37-44. 49 Hausherr, 'Das Inveramkreuz'. On the representations of the Velo Santo in manuscripts, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, 'Les images d'une image: La figurazione del Velo Santo de Lucca dans les manuscrits illuminés du Moyen Âge' in Herbert L. Weis and Gerhard Wolf (eds), The Holy Face and the paradox of representation (Bochum, 1998), pp. 205-27. 49 Diana Webby, 'The Holy Face of Lucca', Anglo-Norman Studies, 9 (1988), 217-22. See also Audrey Scalzo Tillet, 'The Velo Santo in the British Isles' in Ferrari and Meyer (eds), Il Velo Santo in Europa, pp. 499-515. 50 Mullins discusses the Pia imaginis in an Irish context in her essay in this volume; for further discussion of Gerald of Wales' account of the Christ Church crucifix, see Ní Childeágh, this volume. 51 Gerald of Wales, Topographia Hibernica, ii, 44-66, ed. James P. O'Donnell (London, 1879), 187-90. 52 London, BL, MS Royal 15 VII, f.138-v. 53 Mari Teresa, Les majestats catalans (Barcelona, 1966), R. Bustardets, Les talles romàniques del Sant Crist a Catalunya (Barcelona, 1978); Jordi Camps, 'L'excepció en furs' in Manuel Canutí and Jordi Camps (eds), El Barroc i les colleccions del MNAC (Barcelona, 2008), pp. 116-63 at pp.145-58. For further discussion of the majestats iconography, see Camps, this volume.

one case, that of the majestat in Beogar, we know that even in the present day its feast is solemnly celebrated on 9 November. Such circumstances even led Marcel Durliat to suggest that all majestats were indeed visual interpretations of the legendary Beirut icon and were originally connected with altars dedicated to the Pia imaginis. Yet, even this latter hypothesis risks being misleading. The main difficulty in establishing a direct connection between the Velo Santo/Majestat types and the Beirut image lies in the fact that the few extant representations explicitly hinting at it simply display it as a standard crucifix with peripteros. Such characteristics are shown by a fifteenth-century wooden statue in Valencia Cathedral, which at least in the eighteenth century was reputed to be the original Beirut image; and by the earlier and later narrative cycles, such as the miniature in the twelfth-century Stuttgart Pasional, the Berardenga Antependium (dating from 1215; pl. 16), a French miniature of the fourteenth century, and the late fifteenth-century carved reliquary in Felanitx, Mallorca. It seems clear that such images basically aimed at representing the profaned object in the most standard and conventional way; therefore, it proves more useful to postulate that the cult of the majestats and the Velo Santo echoed some traits of the legendary Beirut image and that the latter's widespread renown, made possible by its liturgical commemoration, corroborated the idea of an archetypal crucifix, whose generic appearance was occasionally manifested by adopting old-fashioned features taken after eastern Mediterranean models.

One such feature was represented by facial hair, with its distinctive bifurcate shape. By the eleventh century, the representation of Christ as a long-bearded and long-haired man was not especially popular in the West, where a clean-shaven face was still often preferred. According to Ildarone of Seville and other authors, a beard and all other superfluous down had to be avoided, as they manifested male viciousness. Yet, replicas of the archetypal portraits of Christ contradicted this...
view showing the Saviour with a long, bifurcate beard and flowing hair; such a
detail, which is constantly repeated in the copies of the Edessa Mandylion, was
also appropriated, from the thirteenth century onwards, by devotional replicas of
the Roman Veronica.49 They both relied on physiognomic types that had been
established in the Syro-Palestinian area in the proto-Byzantine period and aimed
originally at characterizing Christ as a Nazarene – that is, a man consecrated to
God according to the Book of Numbers (chapter 6), whose hair and beard should
have never been touched by any razor.50 Latin translations of Byzantine literary
portraits of the holy personages happened to stress again such a connection: in the
Letter of Leontius, possibly dating from the thirteenth century but relying on much
erlier texts, it was clearly stated that Christ had long hair and bifurcate beard
according to the standard Nazarene look.51

The long-sleeved tunic was another means to attribute a deliberately archaic
appearance to the image of the Saviour.52 By the eleventh century, this feature,
without the knotted belt, was relatively widespread in the arts of northern Europe:
it was commonplace in Ottonian book illumination, as is revealed by the famous
miniatures in the Vita Codex and the Gospels of Henry II, and had been preceded
by a number of earlier representations, many of them being detectable in Insular
and more specifically Irish art, such as the Durham Gospels, the Athlone Plaque
and the incised stone on the Isle of Man.53 The occurrence of such solutions on
small metalwork objects, such as pectoral crosses from tenth-century
Scandinavia,54 may hint at compositional and morphological connections with
Byzantine and Near Eastern eucubula, which were frequently embellished by
incised images of the crucified with long garments rendered in a linearly simplified
way. The clothing solution displayed by such objects as a small reliquary cross
from the eleventh century in a private collection in Germany,55 for example, could
be easily misjudged as a long-sleeved tunic, even if its closest model was probably
the sleeveless Abrahim widespread in proto-Byzantine iconography, especially
in the Syro-Palestinian area (notable examples are the miniature of the crucifixion
in the Rabbula Gospels, the crucifixion icon on Mount Sinai, and the early eighth-
century mural painting in Santa Maria Antiqua in Byzantine-ruled Rome).56
Pectoral crosses undoubtedly played a role in disseminating such an icono-
graphy and one can wonder, with Reinhold Hausher, if the long-sleeved tunic was
anything more than a Western misunderstanding of the Byzantine Abrahim. Yet,
the latter is sometimes rendered in a peculiar way, with portions of the garment
extended over Christ’s arms, as in a cross in the Benaki Museum in Athens,57 or
looking much like an authentic long-sleeved robe, as in a sixth-century gold
pendant in the British Museum in London,58 another pectoral cross in the

48 Run and Byzanz: Archäologische Kunstheraus in Bayern, ed. Ludwig Wiener and Girola
51 See the bibliography survey by Nee, ‘On the image’, pp. 144–5. Detailed discussion
of the depiction of Christ in these and related Insular works is offered by N.G. Ormrod and
Mountfort, this volume.
52 For a similar example unearthed in Norwood, see V.K. Petrukhin and T.A.
Poukhina, ‘Novye dannye o postroenie khristianit’stva Drevnerusskogo gorodstva’ (Leonid Belyaev
(ed.), Archeologicheskie otkryt’ia v oblast’i arkeologii i khudozhestvennyi realism khristianstva,
khristianstva i islama (Moscow, 2009), pp. 157–68 at pp. 163–4 and fig. 9.
Byzantine Museum in Athens, and, even more clearly, in a sixth-century Egyptian encolpion now in the Dumbarton Oaks collection in Washington. Some hitherto neglected artworks point out that such variants were by no means unknown in the arts of the Eastern Christians.

A marble altar screen dating from the seventh or eighth century from the Georgian church of Tskhida, now in the Shalwa Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts in Tbilisi, shows Christ clad in a tunic that covers at least his shoulders, as it is possible to recognize even in its present precarious state (fig. 11.1). In the same museum, the sixth-century stone pillar from Satskhenisi...
(fig. 11.2) is carved with Gospel scenes including a crucifixion with Christ accompanied by the two thieves: whereas the latter are shown naked, Jesus is clearly wearing a long tunic, with a large band – looking much like a priestly ἁμαρτιαστήριον – starting at each side of the neck and crossing the middle of his body. A narrow transversal strip, being still visible to the left on the lower portion of the body, can be viewed as a remnant of a now vanished belt.\(^7\)

An enigmatic silver bowl (fig. 11.3) preserved in the village of Ushguli in the remote region of Upper Svaneti displays still another version of the rebated Christ in the crucifixion scene, the tunic is rendered in a strongly geometrical way, with flowing hems on the back and one uninterrupted band hanging, like a necklace, over the chest. Such an unusual solution may be interpreted as the outcome of a late artist’s misunderstanding of an already old-fashioned formula: even if this controversial item (displaying a combination of Gospel scenes and figures of holy horsemen) has been described as a sixth-century Georgian work,\(^7\) such details as the use of niello, the Arabic inscription in the Nativity scene and the fully developed iconography of the equestrian saints make much more plausible that it was executed in Syria some time in the ninth or tenth century. The use of archaising models is hinted at all the more by the representation of the adult Christ within a hexagonal font in the baptism scene (here represented twice), according to a solution rooted in Syriac artistic tradition.\(^7\)

The presence of Syrian metalwork in such a remote location as Ushguli is a self-evident witness to the strong connections between Georgia and the Christian communities of the Syro-Palestinian area. That the theme of the long-sleeved tunic variously embellished with strips and bands originated in Syria and was disseminated from there is confirmed by its use in a ninth- or tenth-century paten now preserved in the Hermitage (fig. 11.4). Though found in the region of Perm, in the Urals, it is made of a silver alloy that can be connected with the area of Semirechie, in present-day Kyrgyzstan, where Nestorian communities were active in the Middle Ages. As such, it displays what can be considered to be a specifically Syrian iconography, representing Christ in the facial type with short beard and curling hair that was connected with the Syro-Palestinian area. He and the two thieves are clad in a long-sleeved garment, with a band crossing over their chest. Such a scheme probably proved to be instrumental in conveying the Nestorian concept of Christ as both ‘impassible and passible’, suffering in the flesh yet being beyond suffering in the nature of his Godhead; anyway, its general meaning was not bound to any specific theological tradition and could work equally well as a visual tool to hint at Christ’s ‘body of Resurrection’ as prefigured by his sacramental body.\(^7\)

At the same time, the iconographic formula of the Crucified wearing a long tunic found its way also to Western Europe, and a carved stone from pre-Conquest England – found in Thornton Steward, Yorkshire\(^7\) – indicates that even the variant with crossing bands was occasionally employed. The inclusion of a belt instead of crossing bands eventually succeeded in conveying analogous messages.

\(^7\) Kitty Machabelli, *Early medieval Georgian stone crosses* (Tbilisi, 2008), p. 123 and pl. 34.


and in associating it more strictly with the Apocalyptic prophecy: incidentally, in some pilgrims' tokens from the fourteenth century and a fifteenth-century miniature reproducing the Volto Santo, the belted tunica seems to be combined with overlapping bands.80 In general terms, the use of the tunica manicae and its many variants in connection with crucifixes that displayed Christ in both his historical and parousiac dimension aimed at providing a consistent number of worshipped images with a specifically 'exotic' and old-fashioned appearance, connected with Eastern Christian or even Islamic art. 'Oriental' was eventually emphasized by such means as the use of a definitely 'Oriental' ornamental repertory, like the rundels in the Ballo Majestat, which have been recently connected with decorations used in the Islamic lands of Central Asia.81 The widespread liturgical worship of the Passio imaginis disseminated from Rome throughout Europe may have encouraged believers to associate it with concrete images and to use the latter as visual focus during the celebrations. In such a context, a deliberately archaic appearance, such as that displayed by the Lucca Volto Santo, the crucifix of Innerwed, the Dublin cross and the Catalan majestats, would have been perceived as both a specific way to evoke the legendary Syrian icon of Christ stabbed in Beirut, and a more conventional tool to convey the alleged portrait-like authenticity and miraculousness of an old image of the crucified Saviour.

Yet, in the specific case of the Volto Santo, there is one more detail which deserves to be emphasized in this respect: not unlike many of the oldest monumental crosses of Ireland (of the Clonmacnoise and Osory groups), it makes use of a peculiar type of cross, which appears to be intersected by a circled crossing, or ring. Such a solution was peculiar enough to be reproduced and emphasized in the first official image of the famous cult-object in the illuminated manuscript made for the local confraternity of the Volto Santo in the early fourteenth century,82 and was constantly included in almost all of the representations of its miracles during the late Middle Ages.83 Probably this element contributed to enhance the perception of the Holy Face of Lucca as an old-fashioned and exotic artefact, as was so frequently (and often inversely) pointed out by many authors in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.84 By then, nobody would have been able to understand its meaning, which was rooted in the iconographic conventions of early Christianity.85 With its circular shape, looking like the wreaths of victory widespread in early Christian iconography, it was instrumental in evoking Christ's triumph over death: its occurrence in a number of Coptic and Syriac artworks of the sixth/seventh century (as well as in later examples from Nubia) makes plausible the suggestion that it originated in the Near East, and more specifically in the visual manifestations of the cross-worship that were worked out in its major cult-centre, Mount Golgotha in the holy city of Jerusalem.

80 Il Volto di Cristo, pp 273–5, entries nos VI.8, VI.10, VI.11.
82 Lucca, Archivio anonimo, MS TiscTognetti, fo. 26, Il volto di Cristo, p. 272, entry no. VI.5.
84 Matthew G. Shoad, 'Image, envy, power: art and communal life in the age of Giotto' (PhD, University of Chicago, 2003), pp 73–99.
85 Martin Werner, 'On the origin of the form of the Irish high cross', Gesta, 29 (1990), 98–110.