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DU SAINT DOMINICAIN  
AU DOCTEUR COMMUN:  
THOMAS D'AQUIN  
ET SES REPRÉSENTATIONS  
(XIV<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> SIÈCLE)

SOUS LA DIRECTION DE  
ÉMILIE ROFFIDAL ET CLAIRE ROUSSEAU

PRÉFACE DU FR. GERARD FRANCISCO TIMONER III OP



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PICTORIAL REPRESENTATIONS  
OF THOMAS AQUINAS'S DEAD BODY  
AND ITS RELOCATIONS IN LATE MEDIEVAL ITALY

BY  
MARIKA RÄSÄNEN

*Introduction*

This article focuses on the pictorial representations of Thomas Aquinas's (1224/5-1274) dead body and its relocations in late medieval Italy. It analyses images from one church, Santa Maria in Piano in Loreto Aprutino and contextualizes these in the broader medieval pictorial and textual tradition concerning the posthumous story of Thomas's body. In the pages that follow, I will consider how these pictorial remnants communicated their own autonomous messages on the one hand while on the other intertwining with possible oral and textual traditions.<sup>1</sup> This approach opens up a view to the narrative traditions (both pictorial and textual) of handling Thomas's remains and to ways in which these remains were used for political aims locally in their pictorial representations.<sup>2</sup> The images of Santa Maria in Piano have unique features, the

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<sup>1</sup> In looking for the pictorial representations of Thomas Aquinas's translation I have consulted various printed catalogues of saints' lives, such as George KAFTAL, see n. 5, and *Biblioteca sanctorum*, as well as visited in situ in numerous Italian churches. The collection of copied documents and inventories at the Archivio Generale dell'Ordine dei Predicatori in Rome (AGOP XIV Libri) offers important sources to understand already lost materiality in Dominican churches, including paintings. The most important written sources to the translations are the canonization hearings and legends: *Processus canonizationis S. Thomae, Neapoli*, in *Fontes Vitae S. Thomae Aquinatis*, fasc. IV, ed. by Marie Hyacinthe LAURENT OP (Documents inédits publiés par la "Revue thomiste"), Saint Maximin (Var) [1911], pp. 265-407; *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino de Guillaume de Tocco*, ed. by Claire LE BRUN-GOUANVIC, Toronto 1996; *Historia translationis*, in *AASS Martii*, t. I, Antwerp, 1668, cols. 725-732; edited also by Célestin DOUAIS, *Les reliques de Saint Thomas d'Aquin. Textes originaux*, Paris 1903, pp. 82-116.

<sup>2</sup> On visual hagiography and its political aims see especially *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, Renate BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI - Tímea SZELL (eds.), Ithaca 1991; Barbara Fay ABOU-EL-HAJ, *The Medieval Cult of Saints: Formations and Transformations*, New York 1994. On visual politics of saints in Dominican context, see the studies of Daniel

analysis of which diversifies the significance of Thomas Aquinas's body and its transportations as well as the cult of his relics in late medieval communities.

Thomas Aquinas died in the Cistercian monastery of Fossanova in Southern Italy. Immediately after the death, the body was buried but it did not rest in the same place for long: in the years when Thomas's remains were at the monastery (1274-ca.1350), the monks organized several relocations of the body within the spaces of Fossanova. These acts had a firm effect on the success of Thomas's cult: his body and tomb became the object of intense veneration of people near and far.<sup>3</sup> The most famous translation of the body, however, was executed by the friars with the permission of Pope Urban V, from southern Italy to Toulouse in France in 1368-1369 after which the specific feast of translation was set to be celebrated annually on 28 January.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, although the history of Thomas's relics points to their importance, only a few images depicting them or their translocations sur-

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RUSO, and especially his *Corps saints et iconographie dans les milieux dominicains de l'église Sante-Marie-Nouvelle à Florence (XIII<sup>e</sup> et XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, in *Expériences religieuses et chemins de perfection dans l'Occident médiéval: Études offertes à André Vauchez par ses élèves*, éd. par Dominique Rigaux - Daniel Russo - Catherine Vincent, Paris 2012, pp. 55-79; Denise ZARU, *Art and Observance in Renaissance Venice: The Dominicans and their Artists (1391-ca. 1545)*, Roma 2014.

<sup>3</sup> On Thomas's cult in Fossanova, see Pietro FEDELE, *Fra i monaci di Fossanova che videro morir s. Tommaso*, in *San Tommaso d'Aquino O.P.: Miscellanea storico-artistica*, Roma 1924, pp. 187-194; Arturo BIANCHINI, *L'Abbazia di Fossanova e san Tommaso d'Aquino*, Casamari 1974; and more recently especially Marika RÄSÄNEN, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics as Focus for Conflict and Cult in Late Middle Ages: The Restless Corpse*, Amsterdam 2017; EAD., *St Thomas Aquinas' relics and lay devotion in the fourteenth century southern Italy*, in *Poverty and Devotion in Mendicant Cultures 1200-1450*, ed. by Constant J. MEWS - Anna WELCH (Church, Faith and Culture in the Medieval West), New York 2016, pp. 128-148; EAD., *Rituals and Spaces of Devotion in Cistercian Everyday Religion*, in *A Companion to Medieval Miracle Collections*, ed. by Sari KATAJALA-PELTOMAA - Jenni KUULIALA - Iona MCCLEERY (Brill's Reading Medieval Sources, 5), Leiden 2021, pp. 144-163.

<sup>4</sup> On key-sources, see note 1. Étienne DELARUELLE, *La translation des reliques de Saint Thomas d'Aquin à Toulouse (1369) et la politique universitaire d'Urban V*, in *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique*, 56 (1955), pp. 129-146; Constant J. MEWS, *The Historia translationis sacri corporis Thome Aquinatis of Raymundus Hugonis: An Eyewitness Account and its Significance*, in *Relics, Identity, and Memory in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Marika RÄSÄNEN - Gritje HARTMANN - Earl J. RICHARDS (Europa Sacra, 21), Turnhout 2016, pp. 185-204; Earl J. RICHARDS, *Ceremonies of Power: The Arrival of Thomas Aquinas' Relics in Toulouse and Paris in the Context of the Hundred Years War*, in *Relics, Identity, and Memory*, pp. 229-252; Hilka-Liisa VUORI - Marika RÄSÄNEN - Seppo HEIKKINEN, *The Medieval Offices of Thomas Aquinas* (DocMus Research Publications series, 14), Helsinki 2019; Constant J. MEWS - Marika RÄSÄNEN, *The Translation of The Holy Body of Thomas Aquinas from Fossanova to Toulouse: The Original Narrative by Raymundus Hugonis*, in *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, n.s., 6 (2021), pp. 5-64.

vive from the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> The images in Loreto Aprutino (Abruzzo) are the sole known examples of Thomas's life-cycle in mural paintings. The realization of the cycle in a chapel of the church of Santa Maria in Piano, most likely between 1410 and 1428, can be credited to a branch of the Aquino family, Thomas's distant relatives.<sup>6</sup> In chronological order, the first recognizable scene of the cycle is a depiction of Thomas's entry into the Dominican Order (c. 1244). The last one is a scene in which Thomas's dead body is entombed or, as I will argue, hidden by the monks of Fossanova.<sup>7</sup> I will concentrate on three final images of the life-cycle,

<sup>5</sup> In his catalogues on Italian medieval art, George Kaftal gives only two references to images depicting Thomas's death; one is the fresco of Santa Maria del Piano, analysed here, and another is a panel from an altarpiece of Bartolomeo and Angelo degli Erri, nowadays in Brno, Moravska Gallerie, see George KAFTAL, *Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting*, Florence 1952; ID., *Iconography of the Saints in Central and South Italian Schools of Painting*, Florence 1965, cols. 1088-1095; ID., *Iconography of the Saints in the Painting of North East Italy*, Florence 1978, cols. 973-984; ID., *Iconography of the Saints in the Painting of North West Italy*, Florence 1985. The most extensive depiction of Thomas's life cycle is an illustrated *Life* by Otto VAN VEEN, *Vie de St Thomas d'Aquin* from the year 1610. Aliénor CAMBOURNAC in her important *L'Iconographie de Saint Thomas d'Aquin après le Concile de Trente (1567-1700)* (Mémoire Dominicaine, 9), Paris 2009, esp. p. 31, regards the situation of surviving life cycles in a more positive light, stating that there are several fresco cycles representing Thomas Aquinas's life from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Unfortunately, she then gives just one example which is the cycle in Santa Maria del Piano. However, Filippino Lippi's fresco-cycle in Santa Maria sopra Minerva from the 1490s self-evidently belongs to that group. See also Pierre-Marie AUZAS, *Une Représentation Française Inédite de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, in *Bulletin de La Société de l'histoire de l'art Français*, (1974), pp. 35-42.

<sup>6</sup> At that time the lord of Loreto Aprutino was Francesco II d'Aquino; he or/and his wife Giovannella Del Borgo were probable commissioners of the paintings. See Enzo CARLI, *Per la pittura del Quattrocento in Abruzzo*, in *Rivista dell'Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte*, 9 (1942), pp. 164-211; Silvia DELL'ORSO, *Considerazioni intorno agli affreschi della chiesa di Santa Maria in Piano a Loreto Aprutino*, in *Bollettino d'Arte*, ser. VI, 73 (1988), n. 49, pp. 63-82; Cristiana PASQUALETTI, *Per la pittura tardogotica ai confini settentrionali del Regno di Napoli: sulle tracce del 'Maestro del Giudizio di Loreto Aprutino'. I*, in *Prospettiva: rivista di storia dell'arte antica e moderna*, n. 109 (2003), pp. 2-26; EAD., *Per la pittura tardogotica ai confini settentrionali del Regno di Napoli: sulle tracce del 'Maestro del Giudizio di Loreto Aprutino'. II*, *ibid.*, n. 117-118 (2005), pp. 63-99; Elio MARIGHETTO, *Santa Maria in Piano: Visione dell'oltretomba. Loreto Aprutino, Pescara*, Sambuceto di S. Giovanni Teatino 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Originally the cycle seems to have contained fifteen paintings, the size around 1,70 x 1,60 m with short explanations in gothic letters. As some paintings are badly damaged, just six survive in their entirety. The mural paintings in the edge of the left-hand wall are badly damaged, and the original beginning of Thomas's pictorial *Vita* is merely a guess. According to his hagiographies, an important beginning was an episode in which a hermit predicted Thomas's birth to his mother. The prophecy is depicted in the aforementioned Erri panel and sometimes in miniatures of liturgical manuscripts. On the narrative in hagiography, see Marika RÄSÄNEN, *Family vs. Order: Saint Thomas Aquinas' Dominican Habit in the Narrative Tradition of the Order*, in *Identity and Alterity in Hagiography and*

representing Thomas's posthumous life (death and funeral, soul ascending to heaven, and hiding the body) and, more specifically, the physical body.

Studies on the iconography of Thomas Aquinas have a long history dating back to the mid nineteenth-century if not earlier. Scholars have concentrated on the most recognized Italian artists, including Fra Angelico, Benozzo Gozzoli, Filippino Lippi, and Simone Martini, and their interpretations of Thomas. "Minor" representations such as the life-cycle in Santa Maria in Piano have rarely been noticed. Nonetheless, research exists and its value is undeniable, although surprisingly little attention has been given to the exceptionality of certain details.<sup>8</sup>

### *The death of the saint*

At the prominent position in the lowest register of the central wall of the Aquino chapel in Santa Maria in Piano a spectator sees two images: first, Thomas's funeral and, next to it, a depiction of how Thomas's soul ascends to heaven. The life-cycle is organized chronologically as a comic strip in three walls from left, to central and right, and in three registers from the upmost one to the central and the lowest level. Two motifs, the funeral and ascending soul, are not necessarily meant to emphasize chronological order but more likely simultaneity as narrated in hagiographical texts.<sup>9</sup>

If we take a closer look at the images and connect them to the abundant textual tradition of the same events, we can see how Thomas's dead body, lying on the funeral bed, is foregrounded at the centre of a visitor's gaze (Fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> Thomas is clothed in a white habit, the head is covered by a hood and surrounded by a halo. The face and hands are visible, having a slightly green tone of the skin. There is an open book on Thomas's lap, hands partly crossed over it.<sup>11</sup> At the centre of the image,

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*Cult of Saints*, ed. by Ana MARINKOVIĆ - Trpimir VEDRIŠ (Bibliotheca Hagiographica. Series Colloquia, 1), Zagreb 2010, pp. 201-218.

<sup>8</sup> For the key-studies, see n. 6 above. Besides the general questions regarding the life-cycle, important thematic approach is in the article of Jérôme BASCHET - Jean-Claude BONNE, *La chair de l'esprit. À propos d'une image insolite de Thomas d'Aquin*, in *L'ogre historien: autour de Jacques Le Goff*, ed. by Jacques REVEL - Jean-Claude SCHMITT, Paris 1998, pp. 193-221. Remarks on the frescos of the church of Santa Maria in Piano can be found in studies of the medieval art of Abruzzo, for example Mario MORETTI, *Architettura medioevale in Abruzzo (dal VI al XVI secolo)*, Roma 1971, pp. 432-437.

<sup>9</sup> *Ystoria*, cap. LX, pp. 200-201.

<sup>10</sup> I thank Lorenzo Leombroni for taking the pictures of the frescoes.

<sup>11</sup> MARIGHETTO, *Santa Maria in Piano*, p. 50. He claims that the open book gives a

behind the bedside, are a cardinal and a bishop, presumably of Terracina, who appears to be reading the funeral mass from a book.<sup>12</sup> He is assisted by another priest holding a candle, seemingly to provide light to enable the main celebrant to read (or sing). To the left of the assisting priest are two Cistercian monks holding similar candles. One is talking and gesturing to the other who looks quite surprised with wide-open eyes. He raises up his candle, evidently wishing to illuminate the surrounding space and to see better. His gaze and free hand are directed to Thomas's body before him. The first monk explains something concerning the deceased and the second reacts to it.<sup>13</sup>

In the corner opposite from these two Cistercian monks, we can see two others, who have seemingly arrived at the place in a hurry and full



Fig. 1 – The funeral of Thomas Aquinas. Santa Maria in Piano (Italy).

passage from the Sacred Scripture, written in old Syriac characters and giving a quotation from Rev 14:13, referring to the funerals of blessed. See also PASQUALETTI, *Per la pittura*, I, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> The presence of the bishop of Terracina, Franciscus, is mentioned by a Cistercian monk Petrus de castro Montis Sancti-Iohannis, see *Processus*, cap. LI, 336.

<sup>13</sup> On emotions in medieval visual arts and on their interpretation, see Katherine M. BOIVIN, *The Visual Arts*, in *A Cultural History of the Emotions*, ed. by Juanita FEROS RUYSS - Clare MONAGLE, (The Cultural Histories Series), vol. 2, London 2019, pp. 83-99.

of enthusiasm. Their haste is emphasized by being depicted as entering from the forefront corner and stepping barely inside the frames of the image. They are gesturing strongly with their left hands, indicating some speech act.<sup>14</sup> One, closer to the cardinal and the bishop, holds a walking stick in his right hand. Evidently, he is the formerly blind sub-prior of Fossanova, Giovanni de Ferentino, who had his sight restored as Thomas's first post-mortem miracle some moments before, when the monks were preparing Thomas's body for the funeral.<sup>15</sup> Presumably, the other monk is Petrus de Castro Montis Sancti Iohannis who had accompanied the sub-prior Iohannes in washing Thomas's body.<sup>16</sup> He is recognizable from a small pail, with a washing cloth hanging over its edge.<sup>17</sup>

Other monks are efficiently depicted just by pale tonsures in horizon-line and framing people partly out from the image. They include both the Cistercian monks and some Dominican friars.<sup>18</sup> Between the celebrating priests, peeks a bearded man in green hat and vestments, perhaps a self-portrait of the artist.<sup>19</sup> Above the crowd of men rise three women, wearing the habits of Dominican nuns (or Penitent women), although written sources make no mention of nuns being present at Thomas's funeral. Before hypothesizing as to the identity of these women, their grief evident in their facial expression and hand-wringing, I will present the painting adjacent to the funeral theme: Thomas's ascending soul (Fig. 2).

This scene depicts a rocky landscape with six human-like characters, two groups of buildings, one in a valley, the other on the mountain, both encircled by walls. In the upmost edge of the composition is a big red sun or a comet from which emerges a torso of Christ who is taking a naked child-like figure in his arms. The naked person is Thomas, or better, his soul, tonsured and with halo. Saints Peter and Paul are standing on the rocks and lifting Thomas into Christ's lap. At a lower level of the scene, on the ground, are two Dominican friars, one significantly bigger than the other. The first looking at the sky is Paulus de Aquila

<sup>14</sup> BOIVIN, *The Visual Arts*, p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> *Ystoria*, cap. 61, p. 201.

<sup>16</sup> *Processus*, cap. LI, pp. 335-336. The washing episode is only given in Petrus's canonization testimony and it is not repeated in later legends such as William of Tocco's *Ystoria*.

<sup>17</sup> Megan CASSIDY-WELCH, *Monastic Spaces and Their Meanings: Thirteenth-century English Cistercian Monasteries* (Medieval Church Studies, 1), Turnhout 2001, pp. 226-232.

<sup>18</sup> According to the written sources, Thomas Aquinas took his last breath and died surrounded by the Cistercian monks, some Dominican friars, local dignitaries, and representatives of his relatives. *Processus*, cap. LI, p. 336, see also *Ystoria*, cap. 62, pp. 201-202.

<sup>19</sup> MARIGHETTO, *Santa Maria in Piano*, p. 50.



Fig. 2 – Thomas's ascending soul. Santa Maria in Piano (Italy).

(and the second presumably his companion), a friar from the Neapolitan convent who is said to have had a vision of Thomas teaching a class when Saint Paul arrived to fetch him.<sup>20</sup> The vision announces Thomas's death, expressed in the Aquino chapel in a particular way: a naked child-like figure embodies Thomas's last breath and the transit of the soul to heaven.<sup>21</sup>

The painting is often called the "Vision of Friar Paul", but here I prefer the name "The ascending soul", as the image is a fusion of several narrative episodes. Jérôme Baschet and Jean-Claude Bonne have noted two episodes in the scene, both emerging from William of Tocco's *Ystoria*: a narration of the three descending stars and the vision of Paulus de Aquila.<sup>22</sup> This fusion of the episodes, as Baschet and Bonne claim, results in a new and in a certain sense, independent and unique theme from a literary tradition.<sup>23</sup> One cannot oppose this view. In fact, the painting

<sup>20</sup> *Ystoria*, cap. LX, p. 200.

<sup>21</sup> This motif is studied profoundly by BASCHET - BONNE, *La chair de l'esprit*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ystoria*, cap. LIX and LX, pp. 199-200. On the vision of three stars and Paulus de Aquila, see RÄSÄNEN, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, pp. 52-59.

<sup>23</sup> BASCHET - BONNE, *La chair de l'esprit*.

appears to fuse at least one further element from the narrative tradition, one not discussed by Baschet and Bonne yet offering an additional layer to the uniqueness to the image.

This theme is the nudity of Thomas's soul. Baschet and Bonne emphasized the exceptionality of Thomas's nude soul but did not attempt to discover a potential literary source. Nevertheless, the idea for representing Thomas naked most likely derives from the same sources as the other themes, i.e. from the canonization hearings and William's *Ystoria*.<sup>24</sup> These recollect how Raynaldus, Thomas's socius, had given a sermon in which he emphasized Thomas's purity and virginity saying that when Thomas died he was still as pure as a five-year old child. After the canonization, this metaphor was widely diffused as part of the liturgical readings for Thomas's feast day on March 7.<sup>25</sup> On these grounds, I suggest that the fresco representing Thomas's soul naked was a reference to this sermon and to Thomas's pureness. Thomas's soul is smaller than Saints Peter and Paul, not only to indicate hierarchical order, as Baschet and Bonne suggested, but to emphasize in pictorial form Thomas's immaculate, child-like impeccability.

The overall death scene which included both the death-bed theme, and/or the funeral, and the last breath, were common and rather fixed depictions in visual and textual hagiographical tradition in the Middle Ages. In Thomas's case in Santa Maria in Piano the visual typology to centuries old models is quite easy to recognize: the nearest examples derived from the Dominican hagiographical tradition.<sup>26</sup> For example, a famous altar panel *St Dominic with Scenes from his Life* by Francesco Traini presents in its two panels St Dominic's funeral and the ascending soul. On the face of the funeral scene, St Dominic and St Thomas resemble each other, and are like funeral depictions of medieval saints.<sup>27</sup> However, while the intention is the same – to show the continuation of

<sup>24</sup> RÄSÄNEN, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, pp. 56-62.

<sup>25</sup> "Ego confessionem generalem istius sancti viri audivi de quo testifcor quia ita inveni eum purum sicut puerum V annorum quia nunquam sue carnis sentiit corruptelam", *Processus*, cap. XLIX, p. 332. In the readings of *Dies natalis*, the citation is given like this: "Ego sancti istius frequenter et nunc confessionem eius generalem audivi, et cum sic semper purum inveni sicut puerum quinque annorum, quia numquam sue carnis sensit contagium nec habuit alicuius criminis mortali in voluntate consensusum", see RÄSÄNEN, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, p. 271. See also *Ystoria*, cap. LXIII, p. 203.

<sup>26</sup> Similar typology – old visual motifs manipulated to diffuse contemporary religious and political messages – is discussed by Magdalena CARRASCO, *Sanctity and Experience in Pictorial Hagiography: Two Illustrated Lives of Saints from Romanesque France*, in *Images of Sainthood*, pp. 33-66.

<sup>27</sup> Every pictorial and literal hagiographical topos opens in a unique way in every context, see on the case specific reading of Traini panels in their original context in Pisa,

the saint's life in heaven - the pictorial representations of the ascending soul in the Traini panel and the mural painting in Santa Maria in Piano differ visibly. In St. Dominic's case, the soul looks like the living Dominic, clothed in black and white, but is of much smaller size. This iconography became common in altar panels and miniatures of manuscripts, and it followed closely the written tradition.<sup>28</sup>

Another peculiarity of the two themes discussed above, is the presence of three Dominican-like women in the funeral scene, a detail not derived directly from any surviving textual tradition. Their presence in the right upper corner of the funeral depiction in Santa Maria in Piano, although at the background, is very visible. While William describes how Thomas's niece Francesca, the wife of Annibaldus of Ceccano and countess of those lands, and other women joined the mourners at the gate of the monastery, she was not personally present at the funeral, as no woman was allowed to enter the monastery.<sup>29</sup> According to William, however, Francesca asked that the funeral procession of Thomas's corpse would deviate via the gate of the monastery behind which she stood so that she could say her farewells to her uncle. When the women saw the body, they began the funeral lamentation, the gestures of which are also recognizable depicted in the painting.<sup>30</sup>

To my knowledge, the only other painting representing Thomas's dead-bed is from the so-called Erri panel. Although its motif differs slightly to that in Santa Maria in Piano (Thomas is represented on a sumptuous death-bed in a large chamber), the main difference, clearly evident when one compares the two paintings, is with regard to the attendees: in the Erri panel, Thomas's niece, Francesca, is alone, in lay vestments and quite inconspicuous in the background of the painting.<sup>31</sup> The most obvious difference affecting the selected compositions of two paintings is their original context. In the case of the former, created for the Aquino chapel, three women were included primarily for a lay audience,

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Joanna CANNON, *Religious Poverty, Visual Riches: Art in the Dominican Churches of Central Italy in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, New Haven [Conn.] et al. 2013, pp. 261-275.

<sup>28</sup> On this iconographical tradition, see *ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>29</sup> CASSIDY-WELCH, *Monastic Spaces*, p. 229.

<sup>30</sup> *Ystoria* cap. LXII, pp. 201-202. In the canonization testimonies, no woman is mentioned in Fossanova, although the monk Petrus reported that before coming to Fossanova, Thomas stayed at his niece, Francesca, the wife of the count Annibaldus de Ceccano. *Processus*, cap. L, pp. 333-334.

<sup>31</sup> Bartolomeo and Angelo degli Erri's panel representing the death of Saint Thomas Aquinas is nowadays in Brno, Moravska Gallerie. KAFTAL, *Iconography of the Saints in the Painting of North East*; Maria Cristina CHIUSA, *Sul dossale di San Pietro Martire. Un'ipotesi di lettura*, in *Bollettino d'Arte*, n. 56-57 (1989), pp. 109-134.

and also for the Aquino family who commissioned the work whereas, in the case of the Erri panel, the original location was the Dominican church in Modena and presumably the commissioners were the local friars.<sup>32</sup>

In all likelihood, in Santa Maria in Piano, the three women in Dominican habits are a remnant of the presence of Francesca and other women at the funeral. At the same time, however, they can be interpreted as an emblem of the three women at Jesus's tomb in the Gospel.<sup>33</sup> In their dual role, the women both represent the Aquino clan, the painting's commissioners and the persistence of memory of the family's famous ancestor.<sup>34</sup> That they are in Dominican habits serves to indicate the close connection between Thomas's family and the Dominicans for the custody of some relics of Thomas and the advancement of his canonization.<sup>35</sup> As with the Aquino descendants, the women could be interpreted as a part of the biblical history for the medieval audience.

The presence of the women in the funerary scene must also be interpreted in connection with Thomas's nude baby-soul. The depiction of the saint's death and ascending soul is referred to as his rebirth, *dies natalis*, into eternal life. Thomas's nudity, a mark of purity and virginity, and his reaching the lap of Christ may not be so extraordinary if we connect it typographically to the images of the Christ-child, nude on the lap of his mother, the Virgin Mary. The allegory was part of the message which the commissioners of the paintings wanted to express, namely the lineage between the Aquino women, reputed as chaste, virtuous, almost virginal mothers of their children.<sup>36</sup> The mural paintings of the Aquino chapel also recall the marriage of Francesco d'Aquino and Giovannella Del Borgo and connecting the family to their ancestor, Saint Thomas, as well as allegorizing virginity and virtuous marital chastity. Giovannella's special role in commissioning the paintings is evident – the Del Borgo coat of arms appositely decorates the Aquino chapel.<sup>37</sup>

The extraordinary decision to introduce three religious women and nude baby-like Thomas-soul to the life cycle of Santa Maria in Piano can be interpreted in the light of the chapel's patronage and the viewers'

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-10.

<sup>34</sup> On women in conserving family memory for a younger generation: Patrick GEARY, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium*, Princeton 1994, pp. 51-73.

<sup>35</sup> RÄSÄNEN, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, pp. 168-172.

<sup>36</sup> A description of Thomas's devout family, *Ystoria*, cap. XXXVII, pp. 165-166.

<sup>37</sup> DELL'ORSO, *Considerazioni*; PASQUALETTI, *Per la pittura, II*. Thomas was regarded as a saint specialized to protect chastity see miracle accounts for example in *Processus*, cap. XLVI, p. 325; Bologna, Archivio storico della provincia San Domenico in Italia, *MS Serie VII 10160* (manoscritto di Cividale), f. 124r.



one from the shoulders and other from the ankles. The one holding up the shoulders is either remarkably old or troubled by the situation: his face has red curved lines on his brow, below and on the corners of his eyes, even on his chin. There are two other men at the back of the chapel, standing on some sort of a large platform and apparently opening a heavy stone lid with an iron bar. Here, it is clear that one of them is old: his quite long hair and beard are grey and thin, around his mouth there are lines. The other is young, his beard is barely growing. The faces of both men give a messy impression, bolstered by their torn tunics so short that their naked legs are showing. The most peculiar impression – indeed horrifying – is Thomas’s appearance. He is wearing the same funeral vestments as in the previous image and the skin of his face and hands is visible but the earlier light green is replaced by a stronger, more noticeable, ghostly green.

The way in which Thomas has been depicted here is the most exceptional – for Thomas or for any person considered a saint. An iconographical representation of a saint with no post-mortem glory in his or her remains would be unusual; even more unusual is the fact that, in the Aquino Chapel, Thomas’s life-cycle ends with this scene. Glorious, even festive endings, both pictorial and written, were a late medieval norm as for example in the above-discussed Traini panel on Saint Dominic’s life which ended with the funeral and the manifestation of Dominic’s sainthood by the taking of his soul to heaven. Sometimes, the final image depicts a saint’s tomb where people are gathered to venerate the saint and to pray for his or her intercession for their troubles.<sup>38</sup>

Since the titulus which once explained the fresco in the Aquino chapel is now unreadable, we cannot know how contemporaries explained this iconographical representation. An indecipherable titulus along with strange details in the composition can explain evident difficulties in giving a title to this fresco: some scholars have called it “Funeral” and others “Translation”.<sup>39</sup>

Carrying Thomas’s body on the bier, lifting it, and an open tomb in the background are all elements signifying the continuation of the depiction of a funeral, from the solemn rite to the actual entombment.

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<sup>38</sup> A good example of this kind of pictorial theme from the Dominican context is a depiction from Saint Peter Martyr’s tomb at the similar altar piece painted for the Dominican church of Modena which is shortly discussed above as so-called Erri panel on Thomas’s life-cycle. The altar piece representing Peter Martyr’s tomb is lodged at the National gallery of Parma. See CHIUSA, *Sul dossale*.

<sup>39</sup> See DELL’ORSO, *Considerazioni*, p. 66; KAFTAL, *Iconography of the Saints in Central and South Italian*, col. 1093; MARIGHETTO, *Santa Maria in Piano*, p. 47.

However, this kind of motif is highly unusual in the iconographical tradition of the lives of the saints. Rather, it can be seen to resemble the entombment of Christ in which his heavy, lifeless body is lifted by his disciples and friends. Nevertheless, the question remains; why this unusual emphasis on Thomas's lifeless body in all its ghostliness?

It is true that a saint's translation is a common theme in both medieval art and texts. These translations may have occurred years, decades or even centuries after the saint's death. No matter how long the body had been buried, it was normally perceived as uncorrupt and sweetly smelling, testifying sanctity. In Thomas's case, there were at least two solemn translations and one exhumation of Thomas's body organized in Fossanova (in 1274 and circa 1281/1282, and 1288). In each of these cases, the body was reported to have been intact, beautiful, and sweet-smelling.<sup>40</sup> Yet, in the mural painting in the Aquino chapel, there is no sign of solemnity or public rite, and the green, ghostly body in no way hints at sainthood.

Apart from the painting in Santa Maria in Piano, no other iconographical evidence of Thomas's transportations survives from the Middle Ages. As a result, it is unfeasible to make comparisons. There are, however, written records of paintings no longer in existence. In the Dominican convent of Viterbo, a key location in regard to negotiations over Thomas's relics and their being transported from Italy to France, these records depicted Thomas's translation from Priverno and Fondi to Toulouse.<sup>41</sup> The relic's escort also halted its journey in Viterbo, where Thomas's corpse stayed in great honor for one day and one night, in the church of the local Dominican community, Santa Maria in Gradi.<sup>42</sup> A Dominican text, from the beginning of the eighteenth century and based on older documents, briefly describes the state this church was in that time, recording the already-poor condition of the painting in 1615 and noting that only the saint's head remains visible. The writer adds that, at that time, there was an altar dedicated to Saint Thomas, complete with "a very old painting also representing the translation" and an inscription

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<sup>40</sup> See for example *Processus*, caps VIII, pp. 278-279; XX, pp. 291-292 and LII, pp. 336-338.

<sup>41</sup> DOUAIS, *Les reliques*, pp. 66, 80-81, 102-103. See also MEWS - RÄSÄNEN, *The Translation*.

<sup>42</sup> The information derives from the chronicle of Giovanni Nanni da Viterbo, OP. (1437-1502) written in 1490s, in the Vatican city, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, *Vat. lat. 6263*, ff. 346r-371v, here f. 369r. The information is contained as well as in the chronicle of Giacinto dei Nobili (1616-1618 ca.), Roma, Arch. Provincia Romana, *MFIVII*, p. 45. See also Emilio PANELLA, *Cronaca antica di Santa Maria in Gradi di Viterbo: Perduta o mai esistita*, in *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, 65 (1995), pp. 185-233.

which honored the sejour of Thomas's body at that place.<sup>43</sup> Although the information on the iconographical execution is remarkably vague, it is reasonable to link these Viterbese images with the transportations of the relics of other saints, examples being Saint Dominic and Saint Peter Martyr in altar panels and miniatures of the manuscripts. These observations make it very unlikely that the painting in Santa Maria in Piano represents the solemn translation.<sup>44</sup>

How then should we interpret the troubled faces and untidy, ill-suited appearance of the men in the last image of the cycle in Santa Maria in Piano? I suggest that the mural painting represents several layers of the visual typography and malicious intents: a composition seems to use the tradition of depicting the history of Christ in a quite explicitly way. The dramatic image of relocation may perhaps be a statement on recent events, namely the semi-secretly done translation of Thomas's relics from Italy, taken away from the lands close to Thomas's family in the frontier area of the Papal State and the kingdom of Naples. The surface layer of the painting, however, appears to represent occurrences on the first night after Thomas's death and entombment when the monks of Fossanova hid the body. According to the monks themselves, who testified at the canonization hearings in Naples in 1319, they secretly removed the body from the first tomb and concealed it in the chapel of Saint Stephen in the same monastery. They said that the prior of the monastery did this out of fear that the Cistercian community would lose the precious body.<sup>45</sup> So, it is perhaps fear that is reflected in the red lines on the face of the prior in the painting.

Two further, partly complementary, explanations for the iconography as a scene of the hiding of Thomas's body can be given. Firstly, the painting reflects William of Tocco's Dominican interpretation which stresses elements of dishonesty among the Cistercians. In relocating and hiding the body from the people, they misled Thomas's devotees with an empty tomb and hindered the veneration which Thomas deserved.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, as the mural painting was executed in the Aquino chapel, we cannot overlook Ptolemy of Lucca's highly interesting, short note for the year 1274 in his first recension of the *Annales*. This states that Thomas's

<sup>43</sup> Rome, AGOP, *XIV Liber C*, I, f. 85r.

<sup>44</sup> See the depictions of Saint Dominic's translation for example in such manuscripts as Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, *Lat. 10484*, f. 218v and Melbourne, State Library of Victoria, Poissy antiphonal, f. 266v. Translation of the body in the altar panel of Saint Peter Martyr's life, in CHIUSA, *Sul dossale*. The translation of Thomas's body to Toulouse is represented in VAN VEEN, *Vie de St Thomas*.

<sup>45</sup> *Processus*, caps. VIII, p. 278; X, pp. 281-282; XV, p. 287.

<sup>46</sup> *Ystoria*, cap. LXVI, p. 325.

niece Francesca, prevented the Dominican brothers from taking Thomas's body from Fossanova and that she hid the body with the help of the Cistercian monks.<sup>47</sup> Although the last mural painting of the cycle does not contain any woman, the funeral scene did, as we have discussed, and the family's role in this "hiding project" is conveyed here through the nun-figures rather than by explicitly including Francesca.

I am suggesting that the striking appearance of Thomas's body, green and pallid at the same time, has multiple meanings related to the history and politics of the Aquino family and to their wishes to be patrons of Thomas's relics. Thomas's greenness in the last painting of the mural cycle is naturally noted by earlier scholars. For example, Silvia Dell'Orso has convincingly analyzed it as testifying pictorially to accusations that Thomas was poisoned, by order of Charles of Anjou (1226-1285), King of Naples from 1266 to 1285, while in Maenza and that he died shortly afterwards in Fossanova. Thomas's niece Francesca, together with her husband and other members of the family, is said to have circulated a rumour about the king as a murderer in reaction to the family's expulsion from their lands in the kingdom's frontier area.<sup>48</sup> The lay tradition seems to have kept this rumour alive for a long time.<sup>49</sup>

Such brutality in depicting the body of a saint, as in the painting of Santa Maria in Piano, is astonishing. It is as if all the malignity in the background – not least the injustices experienced by the Aquino family who lost their rights to certain lands and to Thomas's body – becomes physical in Thomas's body. The family, and Francesca in particular, had tried to retain some patronage over the memory and remains of their famous relative. To have Thomas's physical presence, in his bodily relics, near the Aquino lands and the border of the Kingdom of Naples and the Papal States was important not only to Thomas's relatives but also to the local people.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the fact that these people lost their saint by the papal decision in 1368, and that the body was removed from the area in secret, may have contributed to elements in the painting in Santa Maria in Piano.

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<sup>47</sup> "*Voluerunt autem fratres eius corpus transferre, sed domina non permisit pro dilectione et devotione, quam ad ipsum gerebat; sicque fecit occultari per monachos, quod usque ad ista tempora habere non potuit*". Ptolemy of Lucca, *Annales* (recensio A & B), in *S. Thomae Aquinatis vitae fontes praecipuae*, ed. by Angelico FERRUA, Alba 1968, pp. 371-373. The text is dated in years 1303-1305.

<sup>48</sup> DELL'ORSO, *Considerazioni*.

<sup>49</sup> RÄSÄNEN, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>50</sup> On local lay veneration, see DOUAIS, *Les reliques*, pp. 82-94; RÄSÄNEN, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, pp. 135-202.

*Conclusion*

Overall, the paintings of Santa Maria in Piano provide exceptional iconographical evidence which may contain layers of information, re-clothed with topical issues, and not found in the literary tradition of the saint. Thus they conserve the richness of the medieval memory of the saint. The Aquino family's burning political message helps to explain the exceptionality of the mural paintings: they contain several motifs not common elsewhere. The most peculiar of these is the representation of Thomas's body as green, resembling more a typical corrupted body than one emitting a saintly odor. In this way, the painting seems to suggest that the body was not handled in the correct way. An allusion to Thomas's possible murder would have referred to his martyrdom and further to similar experiences suffered by the Aquino family when they were in disfavour with the Angevin kings. Visually, the themes in the three images discussed here are related to the common pictorial tradition of the lives of saints and Christ. They present the death of a man's child and the birth of God's saint and, in so doing, they represent typologically the death and resurrection of Christ.

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Thomas d'Aquin bénéficia d'une fortune critique sans précédent et sa réputation franchit les frontières des milieux intellectuels pour devenir un modèle de vie offert aux adultes comme aux écoliers. Avec cet ouvrage sont mis en lumière les vecteurs de diffusion de l'estime qui lui était portée et les témoignages de sa popularité. La grande plasticité de la figure de l'Aquinate reste fascinante : convoquée pour soutenir l'enseignement de l'Église catholique romaine et répondre aux crises doctrinales, elle fut aussi mobilisée pour nourrir un rapport plus intime et personnel avec le sacré. Les différentes contributions de ce volume, balayant sept siècles de représentations, témoignent du fait que l'exaltation picturale de saint Thomas d'Aquin se veut une voie visuelle qui toujours recentre sur le Christ sans jamais épuiser la question initiale et fondamentale du Docteur commun : « Qu'est-ce que Dieu ? ».

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