The Judgement of the Commune: The Frescoes of the Magdalen Chapel in Florence

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Reviewed work(s):


Published by: Deutscher Kunstverlag GmbH Munchen Berlin

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1482941

Accessed: 21/02/2013 11:22

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The painted decoration of the Magdalen Chapel in the Bargello in Florence consists of an image of Hell occupying the entrance wall (fig. 1), a scene of Paradise opposite this on the east wall (fig. 2), and scenes from the lives of Mary Magdalen and John the Baptist on the lateral walls. What is striking about the program is the representation of separate, independent scenes of Heaven and Hell, especially in the absence of a Last Judgement scene.

The Magdalen Chapel, also known as the Cappella del Podestà, is located in the northeast corner on the first floor of a civic building in Florence, the former Palazzo del Podestà, now the Museo Nazionale del Bargello. The palace was the courthouse and the residence of the podestà, chief administrator of civil and penal justice. Litigants brought their cases to the great hall for judgement and it was in the Magdalen Chapel that those convicted of serious crimes received their last rites before execution.

Several Florentine chroniclers and biographers, from Villani to Vasari, attribute the frescoes of the chapel to Giotto. With few exceptions, these frescoes have been discussed in the art historical literature only within the context of Giotto’s œuvre, or in terms of the portrait of Dante which Giotto is supposed to have included in the scene of Paradise (fig. 3).

Without reference to Giotto, however, a reconsideration of the documentary evidence regarding the dating of the Magdalen Chapel frescoes will confirm the date assigned by Supino in 1920. This paper will also demonstrate that the civic function of the chapel is reflected in the decoration which was commissioned by the Florentine Commune and executed under the supervision of a confraternity. Furthermore, a...
review of the role of the Angevin monarchs in Florence, in particular their connection with the Palazzo del Podestà, will demonstrate an Angevin bias in the decorative program of the Magdalen Chapel.

A painted inscription on the left wall of the chapel, below the image of a saint identified as San Venanzio (fig. 4), patron saint of the podestà of Florence, Fidesmino de Varano, dates the work to Varano's podestà in 1331 and 13374. Based on this inscription and the report of a fire in the Palazzo del Podestà in 1331 (1332)5, several scholars have dated the present decoration of the Magdalen Chapel in the later 1330s6.

4 Hoc opus factum fuit tempore potestarie magnifici et potentis militis domini Fidesmini de Varano civis Camerinensis honorabilis potestatis... The rest has been lost but a partially effaced date is inscribed above in a painted plaque at the feet of the saint: ... DNI. M. CCC. XXX ... For the podestà of Varano see Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Provisioni, Reg. 28, f. 25 (31 dicembre 1337) and f. 68 (30 luglio 1337). As yet I have been unable to find evidence of Varano’s podestà of 1331 as reported in J. A. Crowe and G. B. Cavalcaselle, A History of Painting in Italy: Umbria, Florence and Siena from the 2nd to the 16th Century, D. Langton, ed., London 1903, II, 50.


6 See note 2. Also Baschet (as note 1), 355, 627.
2. Bargello, Magdalen Chapel, East wall, Paradise
Nearly identical entries which appear in the registers of the *Capitoli del Comune di Firenze* and the *Provvisioni del Comune di Firenze* in the Archivio di Stato serve, however, to establish that revenues collected by the Commune from fines imposed on illicit games, prohibited arms and curfew-breakers were assigned to the lay brothers of the Palazzo del Comune (as the Palazzo del Podestà was also known), in an amount up to 100 gold florins, to be spent on construction and works, including the pictures and the window oculi of the chapel. Both documents are dated 22 January 1321 (1322).

7 Appendix, i. Many thanks to Sabina Marinetti, Università di Roma Tor Vergata, for her help with the transcription.
10 Crowe and Cavalcaselle (as note 4), II, 50, attribute the original program to Giotto in 1301, and date the later addition of the figure of San Venanzio to c. 1331. Supino (as note 2), I, 236–237, considers the inscrip-
While an earlier record exists to indicate that fines collected in 1320 from prosecution of these same crimes were also allocated for works in the Palazzo del Podestà, the entries of 1321 (1322) are the first mention I have found of the chapel in the documents. These entries clearly present the probability that frescoes in the Magdalen Chapel were executed in, or shortly after, 1322 when the funding was made available. They also determine that while the operations were placed in the hands of the confraternity, the Commune paid for the work and undoubtedly would have retained control in deciding the program and the artist hired to execute it.

Further support of a date around 1322 for the decoration of the Magdalen Chapel is supplied by documents which suggest that the chapel was built as part of a campaign between 1316 and 1320. Records of consistent funding for works in the Palazzo del Podestà in these years give little reason to suspect any delay in the decoration of the chapel once the money had been allocated.

The discrepancy in date between the inscription and the documents has been explained by a number of hypotheses: 1) that the inscription refers only to the depiction of San Venanzio, added at a later date, 2) that the inscription refers to the decoration of the lateral walls which includes the stemma of Fidesmino de Varano in the borders of the narrative scenes (fig. 5), and which may have constituted a separate campaign subsequent to that of the end walls, and 3) that the inscription refers to a restoration of original frescoes after the fire of 1332. A fourth hypothesis is that the decoration of the chapel might have been delayed after its construction by more than

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11 Meiss reports that Tintori examined the intonaco and concluded that the lateral walls were painted after the end walls, but cites no reference, in Peter Brieger, Millard Meiss and Charles Singleton, Illuminated Manuscripts of the Divine Comedy, Princeton 1969, I, 40–41. For the arms of Fidesmino de Varano, see Previtali (as note 2), 349. For similar arms painted on the frame of a panel in the Louvre, and sculpted in stone in S. Francesco in Pisa (probably belonging to the Unghi family of Florence), see Julian Gardner, The Louvre Stigmatization and the Problem of the Narrative Altarpiece, in: Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, XLV, 1982, 217–247, esp. 220 and note 9.

12 This possibility was discarded by Supino (as note 2), I, 236–237, on the basis that the fire was concentrated in the western section of the palace and caused no major damage to the chapel, and, that if the frescoes had been damaged, Giotto would have been
ten years\textsuperscript{13}. Given the above evidence for construction between 1316 and 1320 and for a decorative campaign around 1322, and, given the additional testimony of Giovanni Villani that several building campaigns were undertaken by the Commune immediately after the termination of the signoria of Robert of Anjou in January 1331 (1332) to strengthen and beautify the city\textsuperscript{14}, I believe this last hypothesis to be the least tenable. The other three hypotheses still allow for the possibility of an original decoration of the chapel undertaken immediately after the allocation of funding in 1321 (1322).

In eliminating the question of attribution to Giotto from this discussion, I present here the documentary evidence, uncomplicated by considerations of style and attribution. Giotto may or may not have painted the frescoes, but some frescoes were, in all probability, executed shortly after January 1322. A later campaign under Fidesmino de Varano, probably in 1337 and comprising the lateral walls (or at least the decorative borders and the image of San Venanzio), either completed the program or painted over a previous decoration.

On the end walls, the opposition of separate scenes of Heaven and Hell is an unusual feature of the Magdalen Chapel's decoration. The apparent absence of a Last Judgement scene\textsuperscript{15} can be explained by the chapel's civic function as the Cappella del Podestà. From the fourteenth until the sixteenth century the chapel was the place of preparation for execution of those condemned to death by the Commune\textsuperscript{16}. Members of the Archconfraternity of S. Maria della Croce al Tempio attended to the physical and spiritual needs of the condemned throughout the night prior to execution by bringing a crucifix, spiritual books, lamps, wine, water, mattresses and cushions. Their primary mission was to hear the confessions of the guilty. At dawn they made preparations for mass and communion. Near the appointed hour, the Montanina, the funery bell of the Bargello, began its slow peal and the lay brothers surrounded the condemned person and assisted him in the procession to the gallows, holding him up if necessary and comforting him with words of mercy. The Magdalen Chapel was, therefore, a theatre of pathetic scenes and laments throughout the night and trembling at dawn\textsuperscript{17}.

Thus, for the condemned who entered the Magdalen Chapel, one form of judgement had already taken place. Not the judgement of God but the judgement of the tribunal of Florence. We are reminded of the testimonies of Ghiberti and Vasari that in the great hall of the Palazzo del Podestà Giotto painted the image of the Commune as a seated judge surmounted by balanced scales symbolizing just decisions\textsuperscript{18}. So having been judged, perhaps before Giotto’s very image of the Commune, and having entered the chapel for his last rites, the condemned now contemplated the fate of his soul in the afterlife. The asked to restore them along with other works he painted in the palace in 1334. For Giotto’s chronology see Previtali and D’Arcais (as note 2).

\textsuperscript{13} This has never been proposed since no one has connected the chronology of the building with the dating of the frescoes except the restorer, Rossi, who was perhaps unaware of the documentary evidence. Rossi’s restoration uncovered an exterior window in the entrance wall and traces of trestles of a wooden roof at the base of the same wall, indicating that the chapel was added on to an existing part of the building. He concluded that the chapel was not built until after the fire of 1332. Filippo Rossi, Relazione dei lavori eseguiti nella Cappella giottesca del Palazzo del Podestà, in: Rivista d’Arte, XIX, 1937, 390–398. The technical evidence requires further study. Rossi’s observations are consistent with other documentation but his conclusion is hasty and unfounded.

\textsuperscript{14} Villani (as note 5), V, Lib. IX, cap. CXXXV (11 gennaio 1321), 118.

\textsuperscript{15} The image of Christ above the window in the scene of Paradise (fig. 2) represents Christ in Glory, not Christ-Judge. It is not known what imagery existed in the large lacuna above Satan (fig. 1) but the possibility exists of a Last Judgement scene on the entrance wall. Lacking either visual or documentary evidence, however, I follow Offner’s opinion (as note 1), 50, that the entire wall may have represented Inferno in a manner similar to that in the Strozzi Chapel in S. Maria Novella in Florence (c. 1357).

\textsuperscript{16} For the use of the chapel and the function of the con-
alternatives were clearly painted on the chapel walls: Paradise or Inferno.

On the north wall of the chapel, adjacent to the scene of Paradise on the east wall, are two scenes from the life of John the Baptist: the Naming of the Baptist, and beneath it, the Feast of Herod. Scenes of the life of the Baptist, the most important patron saint of Florence and often an intercessor in Last Judgement scenes, is appropriate in the chapel of a Florentine civic building, and especially here in the company of eschatological scenes. The cycle of the life of Mary Magdalen, covering the south wall with seven scenes and extending to the north wall with one further scene\(^{19}\), also befits the function of the chapel. Mary Magdalen’s repentance of her sins, her subsequent penance, her contemplation and apostolate, and her devotion to Christ, all of which resulted in her salvation, set an example upon the walls for every sinner who entered for his last rites.

The cycle of the life of Mary Magdalen recalls Angevin involvement in the promotion of the cult of the Magdalen and suggests at least the possibility of Angevin interest in the decoration of the chapel. In 1279 relics of Mary Magdalen were discovered near Marseilles and accepted as authentic by Charles II of Anjou. A chapel was built on the site, liturgical processions were devised, associations with ancient Provençal legends were developed, and the cult soon spread in France and Italy\(^{20}\). This is not to suggest that a


17 Cappelli (as note 16), 52–53.


19 On the south (right) wall, reading left to right: (upper register) the Feast in the House of the Pharisee, the Resurrection of Lazarus, a window, the Maries at the Tomb, (lower register) the Noli me tangere, the Magdalen talking with the angels, the Communion of the Magdalen, and Bishop Maximinus blessing Mary Magdalen. On the north wall adjacent to the entrance in the lower register remains one scene of the Miracle of the Prince of Marseilles. Two other scenes are lost.
20 Victor Saxer, La culte de Marie Madeleine en occident, Paris 1959, 244–245.
cycle of the life of Mary Magdalen can only be associated with Angevin patronage. Her cult had been growing since the twelfth century and was often associated with the new Order of the Penitents of St Mary Magdalen who sheltered penitent prostitutes\(^2\). Nevertheless, as Gardner has pointed out, there is a strong connection between the Angevins and the spread of Magdalen iconography in south and central Italy. The Magdalen altar installed in the Lateran in 1297 was commissioned by cardinal Gerardo Bianchi, friend and councillor of Charles I and later co-regent of the Angevin kingdom during the imprisonment of the Aragonese of Charles II, who later served as pall-bearer at Bianchi's funeral\(^3\). The patron of the Chapel of the Magdalen in the lower church of San Francesco at Assisi, where there is a cycle of the saint's life also attributed to Giotto, was Teobaldo Pontano, bishop of Assisi, who had been formerly bishop of Castellamare di Stabia, an Angevin diocese\(^3\).

Angevin influence had been strong in Florence since Charles I of Anjou (1266–1285) had served as podestà for a thirteen year period, protecting the interests of the Guelf-Angevin-Papal alliance\(^4\). He established strong trade and banking links between Florence and the southern kingdom which continued under the subsequent reign of his son Charles II (1289–1309) and were consolidated under his grandson Robert (1309–1343)\(^5\).

Conceivably Charles I, or his vicar in Florence, was intended to reside in the Palazzo del Podestà, and to worship in the Magdalen Chapel, and it might have been with a royal resident in mind that expansion and embellishments were undertaken after the Guelph victory in 1266. A direct Angevin connection with the palace is recorded in 1296, when a door was opened in the south wall onto Via della Vigna Vecchia, and was "sormontata da stemmi"\(^6\). The stemmi, or coats of arms, consist of the keys of the Church above a row of shields representing the cross of the Popolo and the lily of the Commune flanking the arms of Charles II of Anjou in the centre (fig. 6). Angevin arms also surmount one of the windows on the north side of the palace.

Construction of the eastern part of the Bargello seems to have been undertaken during the signoria of Robert of Anjou (1313–1322). Documents of 1317 and 1319 report both on the construction and on the fact that the king's vicar was in residence in the palace\(^7\). Particularly interesting in the present context is Giovanni Villani's report that in 1316 Robert's vicar, the Count of Battifolle, oversaw the construction of a large part of the new palace\(^8\). This suggests that Robert's representative exercised considerable influence in the construction of the eastern addition to the Palazzo del Podestà, which includes the Magdalen Chapel, in spite of the fact that it was a Communal palace built with Communal funds and controlled, presumably, by Communal officials. Considering that the Angevin kings controlled the most important Florentine gov-

21 Ibid., 222–224.
23 Gardner (as note 22).
26 Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Provisioni, Reg. 6, f. 114v (10 settembre 1396).
27 Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Provisioni, Reg. 15, f. 77v/r (28 luglio 1317); Giovanni Gaye, Carteggio inedito d’artisti dei secoli XIV–XVI, Florence 1839–1840, I, Appendix II, 452 (8 luglio 1317), 458 (20 novembre 1319). See also below Appendix, 1, for Robert’s vicar in residence in 1322.
28 See Appendix, 2.
29 Robert’s contract gave him power over the office of
ernment offices and maintained strong connections with the Guelf party and the banking families of Florence, it is not surprising to find that their power clearly extended deeply into Florentine affairs and that they marked their influence in a civic building. In fact Charles of Calabria and his family resided in the Palazzo del Podestà which was made a dimora degnissima in his honour.

Robert’s signoria in Florence was terminated precisely at the point when the Magdalen Chapel funding was assigned, January 1321 (1322), and was followed by a four year period in which Florence operated without a foreign signoria. If Milanesi was correct in identifying the frontally posed figure to the right of the window in the Magdalen Chapel’s scene of Paradise as Robert of Anjou (fig. 3), then its appearance at the end of his signoria was probably intended to commemorate Robert’s contribution to Florentine military glory, his administration of Florentine civil justice, and probably too, his participation in the building of the Palazzo del Podestà, including the Magdalen Chapel. The procession of the blessed, at the head of which the purported figure of Robert appears, is reminiscent of the lengthy procession in the Paradise segment of the Last Judgement scene in the choir of the church of S. Maria Donnaregina in Naples, a church rebuilt and decorated by Robert’s mother, Maria of Hungary, and completed after her death. There, Heaven and Hell flank the Last Judgement scene.

the podestà. George Holmes, _Florence, Rome and the Origins of the Renaissance_, Oxford 1986, 192. The contract of 1 September 1326 for the Florentine signoria of Robert’s son, Charles of Calabria, stipulates that aavrà piena balia e potestà ... potrà nominare e revocare gli ufficiali del Comune.” Caggese (as note 25), II, 90.

30 A portrait of Robert (now lost) is reported on an exterior wall of the palace of the parte Guelfa in 1310. Julian Gardner, _Saint Louis of Toulouse, Robert of Anjou and Simone Martini_, in: _Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte_, XXXIX, 1976, 12–33, esp. 22. Moreover, Florentine Guelfs occupied key positions at the Angevin court. Bentivegna Buonsostegno of the Bardi company was a councillor and familiare of king Robert as well as a consul of the Arte di Calimala.

31 Caggese (as note 25), II, 89.

but, notably, are separated from Christ-Judge by two tall windows33.

The extent to which Robert of Anjou might have had a hand in determining the painted program of the Magdalen Chapel will probably never be clear to us. Nevertheless, the separation of Heaven and Hell and the choice of a cycle of the life of Mary Magdalen may well represent the dictates of the Angevin king through his direct or indirect intervention with those members of the Commune who made the decisions regarding the chapel.

It has been shown that the Angevin kings associated themselves with the image of the seated ruler, the monarch as judge in the tradition of Solomon, and that the numerous images of the enthroned Robert of Anjou are to be seen within this tradition34. Were we intended, therefore, in the absence (or presence) of an image of Judgement, to identify Robert, head of the supreme court of justice in the Angevin kingdom from 1307, controller of the office of podestà of Florence from 1313, and thus chief administrator of justice,35 with the Judgement of the Commune? However speculative this may be, it is clearly arguable that Robert’s ideas informed the decoration of both the end walls and lateral walls of the Magdalen Chapel, albeit perhaps in separate campaigns.

Jérôme Baschet is one of a very few authors to consider the Magdalen Chapel frescoes from a viewpoint removed from the attribution to Giotto. In his studies of the imagery of Inferno from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, Baschet considers the frescoes of the Campo Santo in Pisa, dated c. 1335, to be of crucial importance as the first example in monumental painting of the rupture of Inferno from its traditional placement within the Last Judgement scene36. In spite of the absence of a Last Judgement image in the Magdalen Chapel, he places the chapel decoration among a group of four Tuscan frescoes which follow the model of Pisa37, where the imagery has been connected with the writings of Dominican friars38.

The Florentine frescoes, however, were produced in a civic context entirely different from that of the Campo Santo. If one accepts that the chapel was decorated shortly after the allocation of funds for paintings in 1322, then the Magdalen Chapel images of Heaven and Hell predate the Triumph of Death cycle at Pisa. In which case, the first example of a separate, monumental scene of Hell occurs, not in a Dominican nor in a funerary context, but in a secular setting, in the chapel of a public building where civil judgements were pronounced, and possibly under the foreign influence of the Angevin signoria.

33 Thus Heaven and Hell, appearing beneath the row of apostles on either side of the windows, approach proportional equality with, and independence from, the Judgement of Christ. For illustrations see Rosa Anna Genovese: La chiesa trecentesca di Donnaregina, Naples 1993.
34 Gardner (as note 30), 23–24; Idem. (as note 25). The Angevin association with the image of Judgement supports the possibility that a Last Judgement scene might have appeared above the scene of Inferno on the west wall of the chapel. Such a possibility does not substantially alter the arguments in this paper.
35 Léonard (as note 24), 204.
37 Baschet (as note 1), 627, follows Offner’s opinion that there was no Last Judgement scene in the Magdalen Chapel. If there were a Last Judgement above, and therefore connected to, the scene of Inferno, the Magdalen Chapel would not qualify as a place where Inferno is separated from the Last Judgement. However, its enlargement and opposition to Paradise would still constitute an important phase in the development traced by Baschet.
Appendix


22 gennaio 1321 (1322): Item possint eisque liceat iam dicti priores et vexillifer providere et de pecunia communis ipsius exacta et exigenda et percepita et percipienda ex ludis vetitis et inventione armorum vetitorum et itu de notte post tertium sonum campane quam formam statunt dari et assignari et solvi facere per camerarium camere communis florentie fratribus religiosis pro ipso communi deputatis super constructione et laborerio pallatij communis florentie in quo moratur dominus vicarius regius usque in quantitate centum florenorum auri pro ipsis expendendis et convertendis per ipsos fratres religiosos in constructione et laborerio pallatij ac etiam in picturis capelle ipsius pallatij et in letti-rijs dischis fenestris et alijs quibuscumque magisterijs et laboreris opportunis in dicto pallatio.


1316: ... per lo detto conte di Battifolle vicario s’ordinò e cominciò e fece gran parte del palagio nuovo ove sta la podestà.

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