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Agnolo Gaddi: issues of patronage and narrative in the selection of the True Cross Cycle at Santa Croce, Florence

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ABSTRACT

Agnolo Gaddi’s Legend of the True Cross fresco cycle in the sanctuary of Santa Croce, Florence, represents an unusual artistic program. Initiated by the Franciscans around 1388, Gaddi’s is the earliest monumental True Cross program; it set the standard for similar works into the sixteenth century.

The objective of this thesis is to shed light on this unusual narrative sequence and the reasons for the selection of the True Cross legend as its subject matter. The unique choice for the narrative program provokes several questions: Why was it chosen? What purpose did it serve? What truths did it attempt to convey? What stories did it imitate? This thesis attempts to answer these questions by tracing the motives of the Alberti family of patrons who commissioned the cycle and of the Franciscan monks who lived adjacent to and worshipped in the church. Attention is paid to which version of the True Cross story is used, which scenes are depicted, and which scenes are left out and why.

This thesis investigates the influences of contemporary Florentine politics, the alliances between the Alberti and the Franciscan friars of Santa Croce, and the symbiotic relationship that existed between the church and state. Topics addressed include the Franciscan agenda, with its mimetic desire to imitate Christ’s crucifixion, and emphasis on the mendicant lifestyle. The Franciscans and their possession of a relic of the True Cross as a motive for the selection of the artistic program and its narrative contents receive attention.
Finally, comparisons are drawn between Gaddi’s True Cross frescoes and other works containing similar narratives, such as the Stavelot Triptych and Piero della Francesco’s mural cycle of the True Cross in San Francesco in Arezzo. An analysis of these works serves as the basis for a discussion of the choices that were made in the Santa Croce cycle.
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

The high altar chapel, the Cappella Maggiore, of the Church of Santa Croce in Florence contains a series of frescoes that tell the story of the Legend of the True Cross. The legend was based on apocryphal tales that developed during the Middle Ages. The illustrations trace the story of the cross used for Christ’s crucifixion from Seth planting the seed on Adam’s grave, to the seventh-century story in which the cross plays a part in the victory of Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor, over Chosroes, the Persian king, who had stolen the cross in Jerusalem. The frescoes were placed in a location of significance, the choir of the church, thus emphasizing their importance. They are a unique series of eight frescoes painted by the artist Agnolo Gaddi. Gaddi came from a long line of artists: his grandfather was the mosaicist Gaddo di Zanobi, and his father was the artist Taddeo Gaddi, one of the foremost pupils of Giotto di Bondone. The work of both Taddeo Gaddi and Giotto also adorns the walls of Santa Croce.¹

Agnolo Gaddi and the Early Italian Renaissance

Agnolo Gaddi is known for his ability to fuse the techniques of Giotto with newer compositional and expressive devices of other artists who painted in the middle of the fourteenth century. Gaddi’s pictorial style was influential in that he was able to blend elements of the entire Trecento tradition. It has also been suggested that Gaddi may

¹ Bruce Cole, Agnolo Gaddi (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 4. Agnolo Gaddi came from a very respected family of Florentine artists. His brother Giovanni was also an artist. Agnolo worked in both Rome and Venice. Agnolo’s birthdate is not recorded, but other documentary evidence suggests that he may have been born around 1350.
deserve some credit for bringing the International Gothic style to the city of Florence, and for combining that technique with the local traditions of that city, as Gaddi combines all those elements in his monumental work of the Legend of the True Cross cycle in Santa Croce. Gaddi's cycle is the earliest and most complete representation of the Legend of the True Cross. It was begun around 1388 and completed around 1393, although no documents record the exact date of its creation.

Bruce Cole's catalog and study of Gaddi's work in Santa Croce places the artist at the forefront of the Early Italian Renaissance. Gaddi's work shows evidence of his transition away from the rigidity of the mid-fourteenth century. He is believed to be instrumental in ushering in innovations that would lead to the advances of the Renaissance. The basic design, but not each individual brushstroke, of the fresco series has been attributed to Agnolo Gaddi. Stylistic differences are almost completely absent from the entire program. Although he had many assistants, or garzoni, Gaddi was known for keeping a close watch over his workshop and all his commissions.

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2 Miklos Boskovits, "Some Early Works of Agnolo Gaddi," *Burlington Magazine*, 110, no. 781 (April 1968): 209-211. He dates the Legend of the True Cross frescoes to the latter half of the 1380s. Boskovits analyzes other works of Agnolo Gaddi such as his *Coronation of the Virgin* in London’s National Gallery. Boskovits cites an example from the scene showing the Queen of Sheba adoring the wood of the Holy Cross. He believes the profile portrait of the Court Lady shows influence of the International Gothic Style. Gaddi was employed mostly in Florence, but also worked at the Vatican Palace and in northern Italy.

3 Cole, *Agnolo Gaddi*, 21. By comparing Gaddi’s choir frescoes with those in the Castellani Chapel, scholars have traditionally considered the True Cross frescoes to be earlier work, but Cole believes the Castellani frescoes predate Gaddi’s.

4 Ibid., 3.

5 Ibid., 26.
The Alberti Family Patrons

The commissioning of the choir cycle is attributed to the Alberti, a wealthy and influential Florentine banking family who were highly involved in the patronage of art. On September 24, 1377, Niccolaio di Jacopo of the Alberti family in his official will and testament ordered the completion of a burial place at Santa Croce. The program of paintings began at the same time the Alberti family's coat of arms was added to the front of the chancel. It was created to inspire the Franciscan friars in their efforts to carry out the mission begun by St. Francis. Upon its completion around 1393, the apse decoration became the center of daily worship for the Franciscan friars.

The Location of Gaddi’s True Cross Frescoes

The location of the frescoes is significant due to the fact that Santa Croce is one of the most prominent churches in Florence and the motherhouse of the Franciscan order in Florence; it is the second major church of the Franciscans, after San Francesco in Assisi. Santa Croce is known as “the Jewel of the Franciscans”. The church, located on the eastern side of the city of Florence, was begun around 1294 or 1295; it was the third structure built on the site.

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8 Nancy M. Thompson, “The Franciscans and the True Cross: Decoration of the Cappella Maggiore of Santa Croce in Florence,” *Gesta* 43, no.1 (2004): 61. Thompson says questions concerning the meaning of the program to its viewers have never been significantly addressed in the scholarly literature on the Cappella Maggiore.
The site, when first chosen, was located in marshlands outside the city walls. It was rebuilt on a grandiose scale and richly decorated after a great fire had destroyed the original church.\footnote{Ibid., 61. During the thirteenth century it was not uncommon to see the Franciscans rebuild churches such as Santa Croce. The transept of the new church was completed around 1310. It was not long after that the friars began to decorate the high altar chapel.} The Gaddi paintings are located on the two single bay walls that face each other flanking the altar (Fig. 1a). Santa Croce possesses a relic of the True Cross, and the church was dedicated to the Holy Cross. The monumental cycle illustrates stories recalled on the two annual feast days celebrating the relic of Christ’s crucifixion. The scenes on the right wall (Fig. 1c) depict the Finding of the True Cross, the feast which is celebrated on May 3. The scenes on the left wall (Fig. 1b) depict the Exaltation of the Cross, the feast which is celebrated on September 14. The church was dedicated on May 3, 1310.

The Choice of Narrative for Santa Croce

The inspiration for the mural cycle in the apse derived from the dedication of the church to the True Cross and from the celebration of Santa Croce’s most sacred relic, a splinter of the True Cross, which was housed in a reliquary built by the Venetian goldsmith
Figure 1a The chancel at Santa Croce
Bertucci in 1258. The relic was obtained from Louis IX of France, who dedicated a monumental stained glass window program in the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris that contained scenes of both of Helena and Heraclius. The Sainte-Chapelle relic is considered the parent of Santa Croce's.

Santa Croce is notable for its many family chapels. Many important works of art grace the walls of the chapels. Two famous examples are Giotto’s Franciscan cycle in the Bardi Chapel, which tells Francis’s life story, and murals Giotto painted for the Peruzzi family chapel. Not to be overlooked is Cimabue’s Crucifix, even though it was badly damaged and almost destroyed in a 1966 flood. Santa Croce is the burial place of many noteworthy Italians such as Michelangelo, Machiavelli, and Galileo; thus it is known as the Temple of Italian Glories.

The True Cross emphasized the Franciscans’ role as imitators of Christ. The friars were called to act as custodians of the cross. The cross symbolized the Franciscans’ desire to suffer as Christ had suffered. As a form of mimesis or imitation, the True Cross narratives inspired the friars of Santa Croce to choose Christ’s sacrifice as a model for their own. Ultimately, the friars took part in the discovery of the True Cross by imitation.

The commissioning of artworks was a complicated arrangement that extended beyond a single patron or an individual artist. My focus will attempt to connect the True

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10 Baert, A Heritage of Holy Wood, 351. The Sainte-Chapelle was built in 1226 by Louis IX (1226-1270) to house the relics of the Passion, a piece of the Crown of Thorns and a fragment of the True Cross. The relics were a gift brought from Constantinople to Louis by Baldwin II de Courtenay, the Latin emperor of Constantinople. The relics were the inspiration for the iconography of the stained glass window. Louis’s choice of narrative placed him, like Helena and Heraclius before him, as a guardian of the relic of the cross.

11 Ibid., 368.
Cross cycle in Santa Croce to other True Cross cycles from the same period, including the cycle by Piero della Francesco in San Francesco in Arezzo and the Stavelot Triptych, a twelfth-century reliquary made to hold a relic of the True Cross brought back from Constantinople in 1154 by Wibald, Abbot of Stavelot. By analyzing and comparing these works to Gaddi’s True Cross cycle, I will attempt to show the Franciscans’ agenda and investigate a connection between their agenda and the role of the Alberti family in Florentine politics.

The History of Scholarship

Scholarship on the True Cross frescoes has approached them from several different perspectives. Bruce Cole’s book *Agnolo Gaddi* examines the entire body of work attributed to the painter. He focuses on Gaddi’s particular style and compares it to that of his father, Taddeo Gaddi, which may be used as a guideline to determine if Agnolo was copying other narrative sequences, as well as styles.¹² A review of Cole’s work by Miklós Boskovits provides an in-depth analysis of the particular styles and chronological shift in Gaddi’s style from one work to the next, as originally written by Cole.¹³

William Cook’s *The Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy* examines the political and social situation regarding the resurgence of Franciscan power in the city-states. Cook asserts that the role of Christian leader and ruler was in the stages of being reconfirmed

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after the Middle Ages. He claims that the commissions for architecture and frescoes served as agents of propaganda, sending information to the public.¹⁴

Nancy Thompson’s “The Franciscans and the True Cross: The Decoration of the Cappella Maggiore of Santa Croce in Florence” traces the Franciscan agenda, focusing on what specific images were chosen to convey messages to the friars of Santa Croce. In addition, Thompson suggests motives behind the absence of Constantine from the cycle. She argues that because Constantine was well known as the instigator of Helena’s journey and the resulting discovery of the True Cross, his presence in the frescoes was not necessary.¹⁵

Issues of how narrative sequences develop and evolve are addressed using Gaddi’s True Cross frescoes as a primary example in Marilyn Aronberg Lavin’s book The Place of Narrative. Lavin asserts that Gaddi’s paintings were the first monumental works that follow the legend of the True Cross. She cites examples of smaller works that preceded Gaddi’s, such as manuscript illuminations that made some reference to the cross, but Lavin also believes Gaddi was largely responsible for giving pictorial form to many of these stories for the first time in art history. She also credits Gaddi’s work with influencing later True Cross frescoes, such as those of Piero della Francesca in Arezzo.¹⁶

*How the Holy Cross Was Found: From Event to Medieval Legend* by Stephan Borgehammar is another work that has shed light on the mystery behind the True Cross.

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¹⁵ Thompson, “The Franciscans and the True Cross”.
Borgehammar’s study investigates the early traditions behind the legend. He traces three major themes throughout his work. First he examines the legend of St. Helena, next he reflects on the object of the cross itself, the relic, and in the third part of his study he follows the finding of the True Cross, or the *Inventio Crucis*. Borgehammar examines Latin texts, manuscripts, and church history and writings to explain the development of the legend. Borgehammar takes much of his inspiration from and gives credit to the work of Jan Willem Drijvers, which also sheds light on the development of the True Cross narrative. Drijvers’ book, *Helena Augusta: the Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross*, attempts to distinguish fact from fiction in the development of the legend. The second half of his book investigates the fourth- and fifth-century development and functions of the legend.

The visual narrative of the history of the development of the True Cross in images is most fully developed in Barbara Baert’s *A Heritage of Holy Wood: The Legend of the True Cross in Text and Image*. Baert follows the progression that the True Cross narrative took from its earliest representations found in the ninth-century manuscript illuminations to the major True Cross cycles such as Gaddi’s in Santa Croce and Piero’s in Arezzo. Baert’s work is the most comprehensive catalog of images of the narratives of the True Cross.

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The most recent work that focuses on Gaddi’s Legend of the True Cross cycle in Santa Croce is Constanza Cipollaro’s *Agnolo Gaddi e la Leggenda di Santa Croce: La Cappella Maggiore e la sua decorazione pittorica*. In her work, Cipollaro looks at the relationship between the Alberti family and the Franciscan friars. She questions the contradiction created by the friars in their commissioning of such a grand basilica and their principle of poverty. Cipollaro also describes the unique relationship that existed between the Franciscan friars and the citizens of Florence.20

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CHAPTER TWO:

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE TRUE CROSS CYCLE AND THE LEGENDA AUREA

The Iconography of the Cycle at Santa Croce

The iconography of the True Cross cycle is often complex and unfamiliar to viewers in the twenty-first century. Throughout the Middle Ages, the True Cross theme was used to explain and endorse crusades and other wars of faith. The legend contains several versions of the origin of the True Cross. Gaddi’s version of the legend in the Santa Croce frescoes comes from the *Legenda Aurea*, or *The Golden Legend* narrative of the *Lives of the Saints* by the Dominican Jacobus de Voragine (ca. 1229-98). He was the archbishop of Genoa in the thirteenth century. His account traces the origin of the True Cross from the Old Testament story of Seth planting a seed on the grave of Adam to the seventh-century episode of Heraclius returning the cross to Jerusalem.

Voragine’s Golden Legend contained the most comprehensive version of the Legend of the True Cross. Gaddi likely chose it for that reason. Voragine assembled the stories of the saints. He arranged them according to the Church’s liturgical calendar. The Legend’s foundation was based on scriptural texts, stories of miracles, and generations of oral

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22, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), Vol. 2. The Golden Legend was originally written in Latin. It traces the origins of the cross on which Jesus was crucified. Voragine says that the wood came from a tree that was planted on Adam’s grave. The story continues as King Solomon buried the wood after Queen Sheba recognized the wood for its importance to the future of his people. The cross is used to crucify Jesus and then later hidden away for over three hundred years until St. Helena finds it and returns it to the people of Jerusalem. The cross is again stolen in the seventh century by the Persian emperor Chosroes and recovered by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius.
retelling. According to Drijvers, the legend is often difficult to trace because of the way in which it spreads. Legends are almost always based on a historical event, but the facts may be covered up by fantastical elements used to assign new meanings to the events.23

Gaddi separated the events into two narrative sequences from the Golden Legend and organized them according to the Feast days of the church. The True Cross narrative was not a common subject for works of art in the fourteenth century. Many of the scenes in this cycle had never before been given visual form.

The cycle is composed of eight mostly rectangular panels, each about seven meters wide and four meters high. Each separate register contains one to three scenes from the legend; the episodes are narrated in great detail, with some scenes overlapping. The four scenes to the right of the altar (Fig. 1c) are connected to the Feast of the Invention of the Cross. The scenes include: The Death of Adam (Fig. 2), Adoration and Burial of the Wood (Fig. 3), Retrieval of the Wood at the Probatic Pool, and Fabrication of the Cross (Fig. 4), and The Discovery and Testing of the True Cross (Fig. 5). The four scenes on the altar’s left (Fig. 1b) refer to the events connected to the Exaltation of the Cross. The scenes include St. Helena Returning the Cross to the Jerusalem (Fig. 7), Theft of the Cross (Fig. 8), Chosroes Adored, Dream of Heraclius, Battle of Heraclius and Son of Chosroes (Fig. 9), Execution of Chosroes, Heraclius Tries to Enter Jerusalem, and Exaltation of the Cross (Fig. 10). The landscape and architectural elements serve only as dividers for the narrative. The decorative beauty of Gaddi’s paintings resembles the work of a tapestry.

23 Drijvers, Helena Augusta, 5.
Figure 1b. Left chancel wall

Figure 1c. Right chancel wall
Gaddi’s True Cross frescoes became the Franciscan model and a point of authority for the story that would continue to be used well into the sixteenth century. Artists such as Masolino adapted Gaddi’s model and used it as a formula in the creation of other True Cross narratives.\(^{24}\) Bruce Cole explains that during the last two decades of the Trecento Agnolo Gaddi was the leading artist in Florence. Gaddi was considered a progressive painter. In Cole’s opinion Gaddi greatly influenced the generation of artists who came after him. It is not surprising Masolino was influenced in the creation of his own True Cross cycle by Gaddi’s Santa Croce cycle.\(^{25}\)

**Scenes from the Invention of the Cross**

The Invention scenes begin with the *Death of Adam* lunette (Fig. 2). The lunette includes two narratives: Seth receiving the branch from heaven and the burial of Adam. The panel includes the oversized figure of Seth, Adam’s son, kneeling and haloed in a heavenly setting, taking the magical branch, or symbol of knowledge of the branch in the form of a scroll, from the archangel Michael, who rises above the mountaintop.\(^{26}\) Seth rests on a winding road leading back into a deep landscape containing an earthly city scene, possibly Jerusalem. Below the landscape we see the burial of Adam. Adam and Seth are both proportionately smaller in comparison to Seth in the scene above; the body of Adam

\(^{24}\) Bruce Cole, "Masolino’s True Cross Cycle in Santa Stefano, Empoli," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, no. 13 (October 1968): 289-300. Cole uses Agnolo Gaddi’s True Cross cycle as a key to uncover Masolino’s lost frescoes. Masolino reduced Gaddi’s eight narrative panels to six. According to Cole, Masolino’s kneeling queen Sheba and her retinue, the large horses, and the bridge, all follow the same formula as the Santa Croce frescoes. Yet, Masolino’s is not an exact copy of Gaddi; his work reflects the generational change that focused on the central drama of a scene rather than the need to include every detail.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 298.

\(^{26}\) Baert, *A Heritage of Holy Wood*, 353. This is a symbolic link between Seth and the Tree of Jesse. In some representations there is an actual tree sprouting from Adam’s navel.
lies unburied in a shallow grave. Seth, plants the branch or seed from the tree of knowledge over the grave of Adam, from which the tree blossoms, while onlookers gather around the burial site.

Figure 2. Death of Adam

Below the Adam scene, the story continues with the Adoration and Burial of the Wood (Fig. 3), showing King Solomon burying the wood after hearing of the prophecy made by the Queen of Sheba, who recognized its miraculous powers. The narrative contains two separate stories. To the left, the Queen of Sheba, recognizable by her crown, pauses on her way to meet King Solomon. Sheba recognizes the importance of the wood and its
relationship to God’s covenant and kneels in prayer before the wood of the cross that has been used to build a bridge over the Kendron River. The queen prophesies that the wood will cause the downfall of the Jewish kingdom. The two scenes are separated by the stream, but are connected by the wood. On the right, the cross is being buried by a group of men under the orders of Solomon who, after hearing Sheba’s story, fears for the future of his people. Again included by Gaddi are the deep landscape and a domed city scene in the background, perhaps an allusion to the Temple of Jerusalem or Constantine’s Church of the Holy Sepulchre.27

Figure 3. Adoration and Burial of the Wood

The third fresco shows the making of the cross thousands of years after Adam’s death. In *Retrieval of the Wood at the Probatic Pool,* and *Fabrication of the Cross* (Fig. 4), the two stories share the same time frame. This is the scene set in Jerusalem, in which the Jews extract the wood from the pond and fashion the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. The wood appears to be floating to the surface of the pool; men are using ropes to drag the wood from the pool. The male figure pointing to the wood is thought to be Caiaphas, the Roman-appointed Jewish high priest who is said to have organized the plot to kill Jesus. He is identifiable by the horns on his forehead. In the background, sickbeds illustrate the healing power associated with the *Piscina Probatica.* On the right-hand side of the panels carpenters are building the cross. According to the Golden Legend, the cross was made of four different types of wood: palm, cedar, cypress, and olive.  

The invention story continues three hundred years later in the fourth century as St. Helena, mother of the Roman emperor Constantine, searches Jerusalem for the True Cross on which Jesus was crucified. The legend came from historical details, religious literature

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28 Ibid., 355. In the *Legenda Aurea* Jacobus de Voragine describes the types of wood in the verse: *Ligna cruces palma, cedrus, cypressus, oliva.*
of the Middle Ages, and the stories of the lives of the saints. The Discovery and Testing of the True Cross (Fig. 5) again contains two separate narratives spread across the same space and time frame. The two scenes are read from right to left, an exception to the order in the other panels. The two scenes are unified in the center by the figure of St. Helena, who subsequently discovers the cross with the help of a Jew named Judas on the right, and then

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29 Mary-Catherine Bodden, The Old English Finding of the True Cross (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer St. Edmundsbury Press, 1987), 24-25. There are four main groups of legends that center around the Holy Cross. Sources for those legends range from Ambrose’s finding of the Holy Cross in De Obitu Theodosii, to a fifth-century poem by the name of Elena, and Eusebius’s Historia ecclesiastica. Episodes from other legends and the lives of the saints were combined; separate tales were linked together and condensed into one legend.
successfully excavates, identifies, and proves the authenticity of the cross through a test of its miraculous powers on the left side of the scene. The cross is held over a dead man who is resurrected when the “true cross” is waved above him. Two other crosses are visible below. As the cross is raised out of its pit, Helena and other onlookers kneel at the foot of the cross in prayer. The two uplifted crosses create a triangle that unifies the figures in the center of the picture.\(^{30}\) The story of Helena’s trip to Jerusalem was first written down in the fourth century. She finds the cross by digging at Calvary.\(^{31}\)

Figure 5. The Discovery and Testing of the True Cross

\(^{30}\) Cole, *Agnolo Gaddi*, 23. The triangle formed by the uplifted crosses serves as a turning point between the two scenes.

\(^{31}\) Borghammar, *How the Holy Cross Was Found*, 8. Helena’s Finding of the Cross was first written down by St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, in 395.
The background scene of *The Discovery and Testing of the True Cross* (Fig. 6) appears to depart from the legend established in at the end of the fourth century and beginning of the fifth century of St. Helena’s discovery of the True Cross.\(^{32}\) It is a scene from the Life of St. Francis. Francis can be seen in the background landscape and town scene. It is the background scene that is of greatest importance to the Franciscan connection discussed in Chapter Three. There is a river and a well. Two monks can be seen performing simple, everyday tasks: one appears to be fishing and another draws water from the well. Looming above, a lion rests in a cave.

Figure 6. Detail from *The Discovery and Testing of the True Cross*

\(^{32}\) Bodden, *The Old English Finding of the True Cross*, 26. There are multiple accounts of the miracle of Helena’s finding of the True Cross. The legend varies. In some accounts the cross is waved over the dead body of a woman and in other versions the cross contains the healing power to resurrect a dead man.
Scenes from the Exaltation of the Cross

On the left side the four frescoes are connected to the September 14 Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. The Exaltation scenes include stories that focus on the elevation or praising of the cross. They begin with the left lunette, St. Helena Returning the Cross to Jerusalem (Fig. 7). Like the Adam lunette, the scenes are shaped to fit inside the lunette. St. Helena is pictured in a pointed hat holding her attribute, the True Cross, and presenting it to the people of Jerusalem. A group of kneeling dignitaries awaits her at the city gate. The ceremonial conveying of the cross into Jerusalem is rarely depicted. In the background, the landscape recedes into the symbolic city of Jerusalem on the right.

Figure 7. St. Helena Returning the Cross to Jerusalem

The other three scenes of the Exaltation of the cross tell the story of the seventh-century battle between the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius and the Persian King Chosroes. The first scene containing the story of Chosroes and Heraclius is *The Flight of Chosroes* (Fig. 8). The paintings follow Chosroes’ arrival in Jerusalem, his capturing and pillaging of the city, and his removal of the cross. Chosroes carries off part of the cross as plunder. The city of Jerusalem is pictured in the background. A group of horse riders burst out of the city gate. The central figure holds a wrapped package, the stolen piece of the cross.

![The Flight of Chosroes](image)

**Figure 8. The Flight of Chosroes**

The panel depicting *Chosroes Worshipped by His Subjects, The Dream of Heraclius, and The Defeat of the Son of Chosroes* (Fig. 9) contains three separate parts of the story. To
the left Chosroes is exalted by the people in a basilica of gold and silver with the cross; he has chosen to be worshipped as a god. Chosroes holds a scepter, and men kneel before him. In the center, Heraclius has a dream wherein he receives a vision from an angel above the tent holding a wooden cross before battle that signifies his devotion to God; he is pictured reclining in his tent, leaning on his elbow, and gazing up at the vision; above the tent floats the cross and an angel. And on the far right is the climax in which Heraclius administers the final blow to defeat Chosroes’ son in single combat on the bridge over the Danube.34

![Image](image.png)

Fig. 9. Chosroes Worshipped by His Subjects, The Dream of Heraclius, and The Defeat of the Son of Chosroes

___34 Ibid., 369. Heraclius’ vision is not contained in the Legenda Aurea; it is a topos from a crusader genre. It is likely an analogy to Constantine’s vision. Thus Heraclius becomes the new Constantine.___
The final scene contains *The Beheading of Chosroes, The Angel Appearing to Heraclius, and the Entry of Heraclius into Jerusalem* (Fig. 10). The beheading of Chosroes for denouncing the Christian faith takes place on the left-hand side, in front of his palace and a group of men. The tiny bridge in the foreground alludes to the battle at the Danube. In the top center, Heraclius, Emperor of the Byzantines, arrives in splendor on horseback with the rescued relic of the cross at the gates of Jerusalem. An angel appears to Heraclius and reminds him of his need for humility. The city gate is walled up against him. The stones crumble away when Heraclius humbly strips himself of jewels. He is still crowned, but he is barefoot and wears only a simple white shirt. It is only then that he carries the cross upright to the gate and enters Jerusalem to celebrate the Exaltation of the cross. The entire story, taken from the Golden Legend, shows the mystical power of the holy wood to persevere throughout the entire span of human history.
Figure 10. *The Beheading of Chosroes, The Angel Appearing to Heraclius, and the Entry of Heraclius into Jerusalem*
CHAPTER THREE:

THE STIGMATA: MIMESIS AND THE ROLE OF THE FRANCISCANS
IN THE CHOICE OF THE TRUE CROSS CYCLE

St. Francis and the Cross

The theme of the True Cross was almost certainly chosen by the Franciscan friars. The selection of Agnolo Gaddi as the artist may also have been that of the friars. The Franciscans selected the True Cross Legend to connect St. Francis’s story with that of the martyrdom of Christ, creating a parallel between the stigmatization of St. Francis, the crucifixion of Christ, and St. Francis’s role as Alter Christus, or the second Christ. In his biography of St. Francis from ca. 1260, commissioned by the Franciscans, St. Bonaventure not only tells the life story of the saint, but also makes an effort to make a doctrinal point that St. Francis was another Christ. He declares that St. Francis was “raised with Christ and exalted to a heavenly throne among the angels.” St. Francis was considered the heart of the cross. The Franciscans had a key role in the city. Franciscans also speculated about the possible future resurrection of St. Francis. They believed that through mimesis or imitation of the life, suffering, and death of Christ they could achieve the greatest connection.

The stigmata, or wounds of Christ, that Francis received are deeply rooted in medieval mystical writings and Christian mysticism. St. Francis and his followers were dedicated to Christ’s passion and suffering. In 1224, two years before his death the saint

36 Lawrence S. Cunningham, St. Francis of Assisi (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 86.
had a miraculous vision on a retreat to Mount La Verna, a place given to the friars for their seclusion and fasting. One morning, near the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, St. Francis had a vision. During that vision, a six-winged seraph or angel, who appeared to be crucified, came to Francis. The vision allegedly filled St. Francis with both joy and pain, and because of his dedication it left him with the imprint of the wounds of Christ’s passion on his hands, feet, and his side.38 Francis’s biographer St. Bonaventure preached that the stigmata symbolized a sign of God’s penance and Christ’s approval. They were given to Francis so that he might serve as the model of penitence for those who came after him and give faith to believers.39

The Franciscan Agenda

The Franciscans were known for their renunciation of worldly goods. Franciscans sought to imitate the crucified Christ by exposing themselves to suffering and perhaps death in foreign lands.40 Franciscan missionaries believed suffering was the source of inspiration needed for the conversion of Christians. They wanted to identify themselves with the apostles of the primitive church, continuing the mission Christ gave them. Christ’s apostles left Palestine after preaching among the Hebrews. Members of the Franciscan order believed they were the new apostles and that through their preaching and

38 Cunningham, St. Francis of Assisi, 97. St. Bonaventure wrote about the life of St. Francis throughout his literary career. Giotto used his writings as a source of inspiration for his Bardi chapel cycles in Santa Croce.
39 William Cook, The Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy, 50.
martyrdom they could convert the Greeks, Saracens, Tartars, and Jews to their faith in the tradition of Christ’s apostles.41

In their attempt to imitate Christ’s life and death, the Franciscans chose to take mendicant orders, begging for alms. The Franciscans believed that by taking mendicant orders they would be offered special intercession at the Last Judgment.42 Their goal was to reform and correct the isolation created by medieval monasticism, while reinforcing orthodoxy and loyalty to the church. Franciscans emphasized a compassionate theology that focused on simplicity, piety, a connection to the common people and personal faith. They were powerful ambassadors to the laity. And their beliefs were rooted in mysticism.

Francis himself belonged to the tradition of Christian mysticism.43 Christian mysticism reached a high point in the Middle Ages. Christian mysticism’s purpose is the creation of a union with Christ. It refers to the theology and development of mystical practices and theory within Christianity. When compared to other mystics St. Francis left few writings. It is through the writings of his biographer St. Bonaventure that we know that Francis believed his imitation of Christ and devotion to Christ-like behavior, such as poverty, would lead him to that mystical union.

The legend of the True Cross was a story deeply rooted in mysticism. The idea that the wood from the cross upon which Christ was crucified could be traced all the way back to Adam and Seth is evidence of that connection. Magic and miracles were associated with the wood: healing waters came from the wood that had been buried there. The Franciscan

41 Ibid., 467.
43 Cunningham, St. Francis of Assisi, 40, for more information on Christian mysticism.
order had undergone turbulent upheaval and reform by the early fourteenth century. The Franciscans may have been attempting to assert ecclesiastic control in the face of rival splinter groups in the order, such as the Spirituals and the Fraticelli, who had separate agendas from that of traditional Franciscans. Another reason the choice of the subject of the True Cross was ideal for the Franciscans of Santa Croce was because the Holy Land sites had been placed under the authority of the Franciscans earlier in the century.

The Franciscan Way of Life

Traditional longing for and glorification of martyrdom by the Franciscans was a recurrent theme of the order. Francis himself had tried for martyrdom three times. Francis's followers were encouraged to give their life in this world because a life greater than this one awaited them, an eternal life with God. The mimetic nature of Francis's story in connection to Christ made the True Cross legend an ideal choice of subject matter for Gaddi's frescoes. The Franciscans believed that through martyrdom, constancy of faith, and patient suffering they could attract pagan people to Christ. As St. Francis imitated Christ through his suffering, followers would be called to God by their reflection on the stories of the Legend of the True Cross. The friars worshipped daily in the choir at Santa Croce. Their worship took place in a private space directly in front of the altar, set apart from the rest of the congregation by a large rood screen. Other than the friars, only men of

44 Burke, "The Martyrdom of the Franciscans," 465. The Spirituals and the Fraticelli were two groups that could trace their origins from St. Francis and the Franciscans. In the early Trecento they questioned the Catholic Church on the issue of apostolic poverty. This caused a split within the order.
noble families who owned chapels could go behind the screen. The design of the program was most certainly chosen as an inspiration for the friars, because the friars would be the principal viewers.

A glimpse into the way of life traditionally elected by the Franciscans was illustrated in the background of panel four, *The Discovery and Testing of the True Cross* (Fig. 5). The background scene of the hermits reflects the connection between the Franciscans and their devotion to the mendicant lifestyle. The Franciscans by taking those vows committed to a life that followed that of Jesus. By choosing to relinquish ownership of property both individually and collectively and depending directly on the charity of the people, the Franciscans could devote their time and energy to religious work. The iconography represented by the hermits in the background of panel four reflects the Franciscan belief that imitating Jesus was the purest way of living. The background scene reflects a movement that spread across Tuscany in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The movement, begun by the Franciscans, was an attempt to imitate the aesthetic lifestyle of Christ. The Franciscans’ focus on the ascetic life entailing meditation and mortification was designed to bring the faithful closer to God.

Franciscan vows assigned the renunciation of worldly goods to the trust of the papacy. This was an attempt to keep the Franciscans free of corrupting influences. Renouncing material possessions would have been very important, since the Franciscans served at the time as guardians of Florence’s communal elections for public office and the

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sacks that contained the names of those eligible. The Franciscan friars established solid ties with the citizens of Florence.

The theme of the True Cross was the ideal choice for the Franciscans who believed that through mimesis they could achieve a greater connection to Christ. St. Francis sought to imitate the way of life, suffering, and death of Christ, and the Franciscans believed themselves to be the new apostles as Francis was the new Christ. The mimetic nature of both St. Francis and the Franciscans made the cross the ideal symbol to represent their commitment to Christ. By choosing the True Cross theme at Santa Croce they were celebrating their devotion to the liturgy surrounding Christ’s suffering and death on the cross and St. Francis’ miraculous vision and gift of the stigmata.

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51 Costanza Cipollaro, *Agnolo Gaddi e la Leggenda di Santa Croce*, 278.
CHAPTER FOUR:

THE ALBERTI FAMILY: POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND ART PATRONAGE

The Alberti Family of Florence

It is almost certain that the Franciscan friars themselves chose the cycle of the True Cross as the program for the decoration of the chapel, but which scenes to include from the legend may have been more closely connected to the motives of the Alberti family. As benefactors they would undoubtedly have played a role in the approval of the themes.\(^{52}\) The Alberti family that commissioned the frescoes was a major supporter of the reconstruction and decoration of the city of Florence, thus asserting its members’ power and wealth. The Alberti had a cluster of family firms that acquired vast wealth from their involvement in papal banking; their wealth is known to have contributed significantly to the curia’s finances.\(^{53}\) They were heavily involved in the divisive factional politics in Florence.\(^{54}\) These connections reveal the importance of the patron, and in what manner patronage is closely linked with personal desire for political power.

Fourteenth-Century Florence

The fourteenth century saw a shift in political power in the city of Florence. Government by committee was the method of the day in order to prevent either

\(^{52}\) Lavin, *The Place of Narrative Mural Decoration in Italian Churches*, 99.


dictatorship or revolution. Formally a republic, by 1382 Florence became an oligarchy. The wealthy ruling families gained power through a number of social, political, and economic events. Beginning in 1346, Florence had experienced crop failures, starvation, and rioting of the lower classes. Possibly the single most devastating event took place in the spring of 1348, when Florence was visited by the Black Death, also known as the Great Death, a form of the bubonic plague. In just five months between 60,000 and 100,000 people died within the city walls of Florence. This was approximately three-fifths of the city's population. Under these circumstances the city was ripe for political change. Another situation that triggered political change in the city was the uprising known as the Ciompi revolts, which began in 1378. The revolts took place when Florentine woolworkers began to demand membership into the city's guilds. They were put down by 1382, when merchant bankers took full command of the city. This changed the political structure from a republic to an oligarchy, whereby a handful of wealthy families wholly ruled Florence.55

Art Patronage: the Visual Proof of Alliances

From the 1380s to the 1430s, the elitist political regime that controlled Florentine politics allowed the power to be concentrated in the hands of a few influential families. That power derived from the ability of a family to control its neighborhood. That influence included not only political power but also authority within the churches and city squares. Connections and alliances were established between the powerful families and their

neighbors. Patronage was a concrete method of securing and proving those connections.⁵⁶ Gaddi was also well connected to the ruling oligarchy of Florence. Like all activities of the city-state, a bureaucracy that controlled Florentine politics determined the choice of commissions.

Art patronage became visual proof of alliances. The Alberti crest was carved on the piers of Santa Croce, and the family is mentioned in early records pertaining to the high altar chapel. The Alberti coat of arms above the altar stood as a symbol of the family’s visual reach.⁵⁷ The patronage of such an important and prominent work as the frescoes may have been an attempt to reassert the family’s power and political dominance after their return in 1387 from a two-year exile which had been a penalty for their political views.⁵⁸ They had been charged with endangering the current regime; more likely they were the only family capable of upsetting a consensus within the Florentine government.⁵⁹

The inclusion of triumphal scenes of Heraclius in the fresco cycle demonstrated a desire by the Alberti patrons to emphasize the family’s ecclesiastical ties in fourteenth-century Florence as well as assert their power and wealth. Heraclius’ physical triumph symbolizes the Alberti assertion of power. For the Alberti family, the inclusion of the story of Heraclius would have been extremely personal. Gaddi is thought to have begun the project in 1388,

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⁵⁷ Roger Crum and John T. Paoletti, Renaissance Florence: a Social History (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), 72. Dominant families such as the Alberti would also assert their visual reach by placing symbols such as their coat of arms throughout the Florentine neighborhoods they presided over in an attempt to extend their command of the urban spaces.
⁵⁸ Ibid., 169.
the same year as Benedetto di Nerozzo degli Alberti, the paterfamilias, along with his wife and nephew, died of the plague. Benedetto’s story can be connected to that of Heraclius. Benedetto contracted the plague on the island of Rhodes as he returned from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Benedetto embarked on that pilgrimage after being exiled from Florence by his political rivals. The symbol of the True Cross stood as a memorial to the political restoration of the Alberti family after its banishment and loss. It was a sign to Florentines that the Alberti family was back.

The history of the Alberti family plays a large part in the commissioning of the Gaddi frescoes. In the late fourteenth century, themes of patronage often included honor, profit, political conservatism, and piety. The nature of a powerful family by Florentine standards was to gain allies to assure political support during times of turmoil. Elite Florentine families were motivated to protect lesser neighbors and friends in order to garner the group’s support against their political rivals. The amount of support a family could achieve was a true test of power in the eyes of the Florentine people. By commissioning the large-scale frescoes of Santa Croce, the Alberti family was both showing off their impressive wealth and power and displaying their alliance to Florence’s Franciscan brotherhood.

Families in fourteenth-century Florence operated much like corporations; they controlled politics and civil administrations. In the same sense, offenses made by one family member would dishonor the entire group. Rivalries were commonplace, and what

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60 Nelson and Zeckhauser, The Patron’s Payoffs, 144.
61 McLean, The Art of Network, 63.
illustrated a Florentine family’s prominence above all else was not only its great wealth and high political position but also its ability to prove loyalty and connections exceeding those of its rivals.\textsuperscript{64} The Santa Croce frescoes would have been affirmative evidence of that support. The Alberti family palazzo and tower and the Franciscan church were located in close proximity to one another, making the two factions likely allies.\textsuperscript{65} One essential element controlling Florentine patronage in the fourteenth century was the ability to present an honorable family lineage. McLean notes, “Florentines wanted to know that their friends were true friends and would deal with each other honorably.”\textsuperscript{66}

It is difficult to determine the Alberti family’s direct motive in commissioning Santa Croce’s True Cross frescoes because very few published sources on the patronage of the Alberti family exist. It can be said with certainty, however, that the huge Alberti family coat of arms that flanked the high altar chapel would have been a symbol to the other elite families of Florence that the Alberti family had made significant contributions to the Franciscan church. By placing the coat of arms on the high altar chapel, the Alberti family was securing its place on the east side of Florence. Even though records do not seem to exist to prove the entire relationship between the family and the friars, it is obvious the family spent lavishly on their patronage of the Franciscan church. A granting of patronage to an important location such as the decoration of the high altar chancel was an unprecedented action and not to be granted lightly. The redecoration project at Santa Croce boldly asserted the dominance of the Alberti family as the unrivaled patrons of this

\textsuperscript{64} Najemy, \textit{A History of Florence}, 25.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 8-9.
\textsuperscript{66} McLean, \textit{The Art of Network}, 64.
quarter of Early Renaissance Florence, and the fresco cycle of the True Cross further emphasized the family’s prominence throughout the city.67

At the end of the fourteenth century, the Alberti family had acquired wealth, power, and popularity that surpassed that of any other Florentine family.68 This made them a threat to the other elite Florentine families and upset the balance of power sustaining the oligarchy. This imbalance set the Alberti family apart. It made the other Florentine families fear that because of their enormous means, the Alberti family would eventually destroy the consensus that existed in the present government. The other families thought the Alberti would attempt to take control Florence. Fear of one-man or one-family rule in Florence created the foundation that the other ruling elite families of Florence used to justify the banishment of the Alberti.69 The Alberti family, by commissioning the True Cross frescoes, was buttressing the support of its friends and neighbors, the Franciscans, who were the guardians of communal elections of Florence. The Franciscans needed the Alberti as much as the Alberti needed the Franciscans. The Alberti family and the Franciscan friars had a symbiotic relationship that used art to aid them in the achievement of their respective goals.70 The Alberti family’s political and ecclesiastical connections were forever changing and evolving. Five members of the Alberti family were again exiled by the oligarchy in 1393, the same year the True Cross cycle was completed.71

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69 Ibid., 187.
70 Nelson, *The Patron’s Payoffs*, 140.
Florence and the Popes in Avignon

The Alberti family, the Franciscans, and Florence itself in the fourteenth century were closely linked with France, the church, and the popes in Avignon. Florentine allegiance to France began in the early Middle Ages; it continued for most of the fourteenth century. The Avignon papacy lasted from 1305 to 1378, during which time Florence’s republican regime kept close diplomatic relations with Avignon. Throughout the fourteenth century the Florentines were papal supporters; they enjoyed in return the support of both the Angevins and the papacy. This group of Florentines consisted of the wealthy families that guarded the military and economic interests of both the pope and the Angevins.

The fourteenth century was a period when wealthy ruling families of Florence served as bankers to the Angevins and the papacy. Commissions such as Gaddi’s fresco cycle in Santa Croce served as tangible proof of those exclusive relationships. The Alberti family, along with many other Florentines, welcomed the union with France. In 1386, two years before the Santa Croce frescoes were begun, the Alberti family held a parade in honor of the Angevin king, Charles of Durazzo. It has been proposed that the inclusion of chivalric elements in the fresco program may have been directly related to the Florentines’

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72 William Cook. *The Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy*, 271. The French monarchy and the Angevin kingdom played decisive roles in shaping and executing Florentine policy. As a result the commissions of Santa Croce were used to promote the agenda of the papacy and the Angevins.
celebration and support of the French. In the final panel, *The Beheading of Chosroes, The Angel Appearing to Heraclius, and the Entry of Heraclius into Jerusalem* (Fig. 10) Heraclius leads a parade-like procession. Like a triumphant knight, he is mounted and in full regalia. Heraclius is celebrated for bravery, honor, and heroism on his way to return the stolen Cross to Jerusalem. A parade is being held for Heraclius in the same way one was held in honor of the Angevin king, Charles of Durazzo.

The connection between Florence and France can be traced back to the age of Charlemagne. Charlemagne, the king of the Franks and Holy Roman Emperor, visited Florence and “brought it back from chaos”. In the fourteenth century, the link between Florence and France was reaffirmed by Florence’s support of the French king Charles V (1364-1380). Charles believed himself to be the heir to the legacy of Charlemagne. The Florentines had hoped Charles would help them rebuild their economy in the second half of the fourteenth century. Florence had suffered much throughout the middle of the fourteenth century as a result of famine, plague, and social unrest. The Florentines were looking for a way out of their economic problems, and they hoped France would be the answer.

Not only were the ruling families of Florence interconnected with the papacy and Angevin court, but the church was as well. The Angevin court was filled with Franciscan

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73 Lavin, *The Place of Narrative Mural Decoration in Italian Churches*, 110. Florentines celebrated their political support of the French with proclamations, bonfires, and expensive parades.
74 Ibid., 110. Charlemagne made the journey to Florence after his coronation by Pope Leo in Rome in 800. In the fourteenth century the retelling of stories of Charlemagne’s legacy of rebuilding the walls and churches of Florence, after its destruction by the Fiesolani in the early Middle Ages, was designed to connect Charles V of France with Charlemagne.
tutors, advisors, and confessors; and the Alberti family was known for its financial support of the papacy. The Franciscans, ironically, while professing to remain true to their mendicant vows, were closely linked to the great bankers and a court known for its lavish spending, whose king was famous for his worldly splendor. Avignon was rapidly becoming one of the world’s most cosmopolitan cities in the 1300s. It was largely to the benefit of the Alberti family, the Franciscans, and the city of Florence to work toward mutual diplomacy with the French court.

The Great Schism

The political climate changed drastically in 1378, when two men simultaneously claimed the papacy, in Rome and Avignon. The Great Schism, as the situation has come to be known, had advantages for the Florentine commune. Florence was historically willing to disobey Rome when it was politically advantageous to do so, and this papal contest was politically desirable. The Great Schism created a weakened papacy sympathetic to Florentine wishes; the Florentines were in no rush to end the schism. Florence, ever preoccupied with attempts to defend itself from foreign invaders, did not wish for a united papacy. It could have served as a threat to Florence militarily and economically, and could have represented a threat to Florence’s religious autonomy.

The True Cross frescoes at Santa Croce created a connection between art, politics, and religion. The large-scale commission was used to promote the agenda of the papacy and

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75 Tintori and Borsook, Giotto, The Peruzzi Chapel, 7.
76 George Holmes, Art and Politics in Renaissance Italy, British Academy Lectures (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 19.
77 Ibid., 20.
the Angevins in Florence. The Alberti and the Franciscans, through the images in the True Cross cycle, were giving visual proof of their support of both France and the Avignon papacy. A commission such as the True Cross fresco cycle served as a visual symbol of the link that existed between the French, the Florentines, and the Franciscans. Its monumental scale, prominent placement, and chivalric symbolism all contributed to form a declaration of their unity.
CHAPTER SIX: COMPARISONS WITH OTHER TRUE CROSS CYCLES

Gaddi’s Legend of the True Cross in Santa Croce is considered to be the first monumental cycle containing pictorial representations of True Cross stories and the first version ever to give visual form to the parts of the stories that include Heraclius. Gaddi’s cycle is one of a limited number of examples of this story, but there are other examples of the Legend of the True Cross that can be studied. By looking at other examples of works that contain narratives of the True Cross, I will attempt to explain why Gaddi chose to leave out the Constantine narrative when creating his True Cross cycle in Santa Croce. The image of Constantine had different roles in the Eastern tradition and in the Western tradition. The image of Constantine in the East was that of a saint, a hero, and a righteous Christian ruler. In the West he was given a more humble status. I will cite examples to prove that Gaddi was following a Western artistic tradition by not including the Constantinian narrative.

True Cross Narratives before Gaddi’s in Santa Croce

Prior to the Santa Croce frescoes, the only representations of the True Cross narrative that existed were small in scale and limited mostly to the story of Helena and Constantine. One example is the Wessobrunner Gebetbuch, a ninth-century German prayerbook that contains illustrative scenes that accompany narrative accounts of the True Cross legend. Located today in the Munich Staatsbibliothek, (Clm.22053), the manuscript is illustrated
with episodes of the story of Constantine and Helena; it ends with Helena’s Entry into Jerusalem with the Cross. It contains eighteen line drawings.

The Wessobrunner Gebetbuch contains one of the earliest known illustrations of The Vision of Constantine (Fig. 11) in the Western artistic tradition. The prayerbook’s Vision of Constantine established the tradition for the image in the West. In the Western image of the Vision of Constantine, Constantine is pictured as a humbly dressed man, with his head resting on a pillow, and covered by a blanket. The emperor is sometimes pictured with a crown but never a halo. As in most Western depictions of the vision an angel is present in the prayerbook image. Other True Cross scenes in the Wessobrunner Gebetbuch include Helena Interrogating the Jews and The Testing of the True Cross. In the Vision of Constantine (Fig. 11) from the German prayerbook, following in the Western artistic tradition Constantine is not given any of the attributes of a king or a saint.

The True Cross was also represented in the Byzantine or Eastern tradition of art. The late ninth century Homilies of Gregory Nazianzus contained images of the True Cross legend. Located today in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, (grec.510, fol. 440), it is a single-page illustration that includes the narratives of the Vision of Constantine, Constantine’s Defeat of Maxentius, Helena Interrogating the Jews, and The Cross Being Excavated (Fig. 12). The figures of Constantine and Helena are both represented by symbols of royalty and saintliness.

It is the depiction of Constantine in the Homilies that is of importance to the understanding of the Eastern tradition. Constantine, like Helena, was made a saint in the Byzantine church. In the Eastern tradition Constantine is usually pictured sleeping. The image of Constantine in the East is crowned, haloed, and dressed in full imperial regalia. No angel is pictured in this narrative. Voelkle says this description follows the account of Eusebius.79 The representation of Constantine in the East was that of a righteous Christian ruler. Constantine is both a king and a saint in the Eastern tradition.

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79 Ibid., 13. Eusebius is the fourth-century biographer of a Life of Constantine.
Figure 12. Homilies of Gregory Nazianzus, *Vision of Constantine, Constantine’s Defeat of Maxentius, Helena Interrogating the Jews*, and *The Cross Being Excavated*
Another example of an earlier work that may shed light on the study of Gaddi’s fresco cycle in Santa Croce is the Stavelot Triptych (Fig. 13), one of the masterpieces of Romanesque art. It is located in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. The Stavelot Triptych is a twelfth-century medieval reliquary of the Holy Cross created by Mosan artists around 1156 in present-day Belgium. It is a winged shrine containing pieces of the True Cross.80 Considered to be among the finest preserved works of Mosan arts, the triptych was designed with engraved copper gilt, stenciled silver gilt, precious stones, and cloisonné enamels.81 The reliquary was commissioned by the cleric Abbot Wibald of Stavelot in 1154 during his trip to Constantinople. The triptych has been the focus of debate, as historians have sought to answer the questions of why and for whom it was commissioned.

The triptych contains six enamel medallions that illustrate the True Cross Legend. The six scenes are separated into two panels. The story of Constantine and Helena is its primary focus. The images on the left tell the story of Constantine: The Dream of Constantine, The

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80 Joyce Brodsky, "The Stavelot Triptych: Notes on a Mosan Work," Gesta 11, no. 1 (1972): 19. It is believed the triptych was made to hold a piece of the True Cross and a nail from the crucifixion brought back by the Abbot of Stavelot from his trip to Constantinople.
81 Voelkle, The Stavelot Triptych, 9.
Defeat of Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, and the Baptism of Constantine. The three panels on the right focus on events in life of St. Helena: Helena’s Interrogation of the Jews, The Finding of the Three Crosses, and The Determination of the True Cross.

Lavin suggested that the figure of Constantine served as a symbol of the revival of a Medieval Christian warrior. She says that in the Stavelot Triptych Constantine is transformed from a fourth-century classical emperor into “the supreme medieval Christian knight whose victory over the barbarian enemy promulgates imperial participation in the
crusades against Islam.”

Constantine was a topos of the righteous crusader. In the East Constantine was thought to be the instigator of Helena’s journey and discovery of the True Cross, although in the Stavelot Triptych his role as king is played down following the Western tradition. In this triptych Constantine is not given the attributes of a king. This may have been intended to diminish Constantine’s part in the story and to elevate the role of Helena. Helena is a saint in both the Eastern and Western churches. Helena is pictured with both a crown and a halo. Constantine’s story is one of the two major themes in the triptych, but a distinction is made between his role and the role of Helena as a saint and Christian hero. This may provide further explanation as to why the story of Constantine was not illustrated anywhere in the Gaddi frescoes. The Stavelot Triptych includes the story of Constantine, but clearly makes a distinction between the roles of Constantine and Helena in the Finding of the True Cross. Helena is the hero of Gaddi’s frescoes.

Explanations of why Constantine was not included in Gaddi’s True Cross cycle may be both liturgical and political. In the West Constantine was never made a saint. In the East both Constantine and Helena appear as saints in the eighth-century liturgical calendar known as the Menology of Constantinople. The exclusion of the emperor from Gaddi’s frescoes of the True Cross may be because Constantine, though considered a saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church, was never canonized by the Western Church, unlike his mother, Helena. Although Byzantine artistic traditions heavily influenced the West, Byzantine liturgy would be in conflict with the Western church’s liturgy. The frescoes in Santa Croce were intended as teaching tools for the Franciscans. They served an agenda, and that

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82 Lavin, *The Place of Narrative Mural Decoration in Italian Churches*, 105.
84 Ibid., 13.
agenda did not include the religious role of the emperor Constantine in the East. The West was receptive to Byzantine artistic influences, but not when those influences conflicted with its own liturgy. Gaddi’s images were specifically created to celebrate the liturgical feast days of the Invention and the Exaltation of the Cross. It was not necessary to include Constantine to illustrate either of those narratives. Helena, however, was a saint in the Western church, and she could fulfill the role of the Christian hero. A large-scale monumental narrative cycle of the True Cross in a Western church would not need to include the emperor Constantine.

**Gaddi’s Influence on Later True Cross Narratives**

Gaddi’s frescoes became the authority to which all True Cross images in the centuries following adhered. Another monumental cycle was painted in the Church of San Francesco in Volterra in 1410. The Volterra frescoes (Fig. 14) are located in the chapel known as the Cappella della Croce. The cycle is signed and dated by Cenni di Francesco di Ser Cenni. The Volterra frescoes are generally accepted to be heavily dependent on the work of Gaddi; they are considered slightly inferior replicas of the ones at Santa Croce.\(^85\)

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\(^85\) Lavin, *The Place of Narrative Mural Decoration in Italian Churches*, 115. According to Lavin, “however, in the matter of disposition, the Volterra frescoes are among the most imaginative cycles of the early fifteenth century.” Composition and choice of scenes are very similar to Gaddi’s.
In 1424, Masolino da Panicale similarly sought to emulate Gaddi’s work in his paintings for the Chapel of the Cross in the Augustinian Church of Santo Stefano in Empoli. Sadly, the Masolino frescoes were lost in 1892 when the walls of the chapel were whitewashed. The fact that Masolino’s paintings were inspired by the work of Gaddi was confirmed in 1943 when the *sinopie*, or underdrawings, were discovered. Examinations of the *sinopie* proved the close connection between the work of Gaddi and Masolino.
More widely known and studied than any works concerning the Legend of the True Cross is the fresco cycle of Piero della Francesca in the church of San Francesco in Arezzo (Fig. 15) painted between 1452 and 1466. Like Gaddi’s frescoes in Santa Croce, the friars of San Francesco most likely chose the narrative program. Piero was certainly familiar with the work of Gaddi. Many similarities between the two cycles can be observed, but it may be more pertinent to uncover the differences in order to address the issues of patronage and meaning. Foremost among those differences is the fact that unlike Gaddi’s frescoes, Piero’s cycle includes a narrative of Constantine: *Constantine’s Dream* and the *Battle of Constantine and Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge*. There are also fewer scenes in Gaddi’s cycle containing Helena as compared to that of Piero. Excluding Constantine, Gaddi’s cycle represents a fairly general overview of the entire Golden Legend. Overall, more detail and emphasis was placed on the Exaltation of the Cross, and the story of Heraclius and Chosroes in the work of Gaddi.

Figure 15. Piero della Francesca, True Cross cycle images from San Francesco in Arezzo, *Constantine’s Dream* and *The Victory of Constantine in the Battle with Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge*
Prior to Piero’s True Cross cycle, *The Victory of Constantine in the Battle with Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge* had never before been represented on a monumental scale in art. The subject of Constantine had a long history in Eastern and Western small-scale art. The story of Constantine was told in detail in the Golden Legend. Constantine was well known for being the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity and for issuing the Edict of Milan in 313, which brought religious tolerance to the whole of the Roman Empire. Yet Constantine remains a controversial figure in the West. His role as founder of Constantinople, the Eastern capital, and the founder of the Byzantine imperial dynasty and the Eastern church may explain why Gaddi, the Franciscans, or possibly the Alberti family chose to leave the part of the story that involves him out. In the Western hierarchy, the Western liturgy, and for the festival aspect of the cycle Constantine’s presence was not necessary.\(^86\)

Yet, fifty years after Gaddi’s True Cross cycle in Florence leaves out the story of Constantine, the story of Constantine becomes the narrative focus of Piero’s True Cross cycle in Arezzo. Lavin believes the inclusion of the Constantine battle scene in Piero’s cycle is directly related to the fall of Constantinople to the invading Turks in 1453.\(^87\) She says that with the downfall of Byzantium, Italy felt a great threat to its security and to the security of the entire West. The large-scale battle scene became a cry for the renewal of the crusades for protection against a possible invasion by the Turks. And once again Constantine stood to symbolize the righteous Christian crusader. The Franciscans who

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\(^{86}\) Ibid., 110-11. Constantine’s role was already established in the Bardi chapel of Santa Croce making it unnecessary to include him in the True Cross cycle. He was pictured in story of the life of San Silvestro, in which, Constantine uses his authority to give Rome to the Roman pontiff.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 180.
chose the narrative program were especially concerned by the threat of invasion from the Turks. They had been given the role of protectors of many of the holy sites in Jerusalem. The Cross was identifiable as the most prominent symbol to illustrate crusade propaganda, and its legend would be recognizable as a visual image of the Franciscan's support of that agenda. Maetzke says that Piero's compositions of balance and symmetry elevate the Franciscan mission to “preach the crusade” into a heroic myth of Christianity's foundation.  

Gaddi’s narrative of the Legend of the True Cross in Santa Croce was the first large-scale representation of the True Cross story. It borrowed from artistic traditions found in narrative images such as those from manuscript illuminations and reliquaries. By leaving out the story of Constantine in his True Cross narrative, Gaddi was emphasizing the role of Helena and following the Western artistic tradition which did not give importance to the role of Constantine in the True Cross story. In relation to other True Cross frescoes the choice of images largely depended upon the time and place in which each cycle was created. Constantine’s role in the West was seen differently from his role in the East. Gaddi’s fresco cycle served as a model for True Cross frescoes centuries after it was completed.  

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CONCLUSION

The commissioning of art is a complex organism fraught with agendas. The images in Agnolo Gaddi's True Cross fresco cycle in the choir at Santa Croce, Florence, was specifically chosen to convey a message. Commissions for architecture and frescoes served as propaganda and agents for relaying information to the public. Art, religion, and politics were tightly connected. In the fourteenth century, the papacy was well past the prime of its secular rule, and religious orders and political families were attempting to assert their dominance and control over the minds of the people. The role of Agnolo Gaddi, the motivation of the Franciscan order, and the Alberti family's political posturing all played a part in the commissioning of this cycle.

Gaddi's True Cross narrative was not a common theme in the fourteenth century nor is it easily recognizable today. Its complex iconography was derived from the Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine. Chosen to celebrate the relic of the cross owned by the Franciscan friars, the True Cross story made an ideal selection for the decoration of the choir chapel at Santa Croce.

The Franciscans choose the subject matter and likely the artist as well. Their choice of narrative reaffirmed their connection to the suffering and death of Christ on the cross. St. Francis as the Alter Christus had been given the stimata unifying him with Christ's martyrdom. The Franciscans believed that Francis was the new Christ, and they were the new apostles. The Franciscans chose the story of the True Cross to symbolize their devotion to the ascetic lifestyle and emphasize their desire for martyrdom. Through the mimetic process of the celebration of Christ's suffering and martyrdom, the Franciscans
believed they could inspire the devotion of the friars and encourage their charge to convert others to Christianity. Gaddi’s True Cross cycle in Santa Croce was meant to lead by imitation.

The connection to the Alberti family and their position in Florentine society and politics was a major influence on the choice of narratives at Santa Croce. The vast wealth of the Alberti family, obtained from papal banking, gave them the means to support such a large-scale artistic commission. The inclusion of chivalric imagery served to remind the people of Florence of the family’s wealth, power, and political dominance in Florence in fourteenth century. The Alberti family by commissioning the True Cross frescoes in Santa Croce were creating visual proof of their alliances with the Franciscan church and establishing political dominance over their neighborhood in Florence. The Santa Croce frescoes also served as a visual symbol of the unity of Florence, the Franciscans, and the Alberti family to France and the popes in Avignon.

The True Cross frescoes at Santa Croce stand as a microcosm revealing the complicated relationship between the church, the state, and art in Florence at the end of the fourteenth century. The interconnected relationship between those groups is evident when analyzing the meanings behind Gaddi’s frescoes. It blended traditions of representing the images surrounding stories of the Invention of the True Cross and the Exaltation of the True Cross that had only been represented before on a small-scale. In addition to the influence the frescoes had on the inspiration of the friars, the work of Agnolo Gaddi in his True Cross cycle was the first of its kind. It served as a bridge between the art of the Middle Ages and that of the Renaissance and as a model for all True Cross narratives for centuries to come.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

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