

A Hidden Treasure: *The Volto Santo at Villa Buonvisi*

The Buonvisi were one of the leading Lucchese families from the 15th to the 18th century. They prospered in trade and banking in several Italian and European cities, and even in Constantinople. Antonio Buonvisi (1487-1558) became the richest foreign merchant in London, after he moved there in 1505. He was Henry VIII's banker and supported the king with huge loans. The king, in return, fostered his activity as merchant. Crosby Place, in Bishopgate Street, Chelsea, where Antonio lived, was the meeting place for leading humanists and scientists, among them Thomas More. Antonio became More's intimate friend and correspondent. Shortly before More was executed, he sent Antonio Buonvisi a well-known letter that, together with Antonio's voluntary exile from England in 1548, contributed to create the perhaps exaggerated image of the Buonvisi as strenuous supporters of the Pope. At the time of the Reformation, religious dissent in Lucca was stronger than in any other Italian city. Members of all of the major Lucchese families were involved in this, except for the Buonvisi, who came to be considered champions of Catholicism.

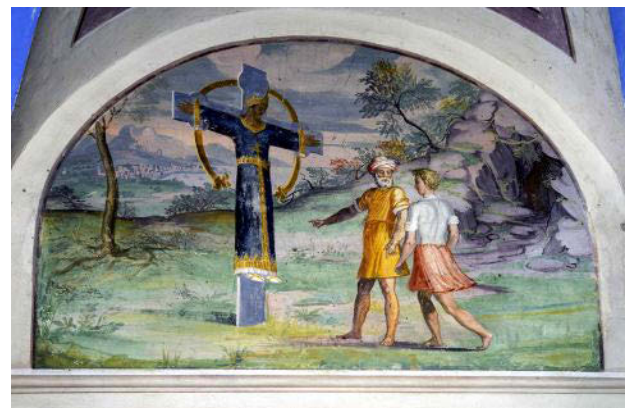
The only existing fresco depicting the complete cycle of the legend of the Holy Face (the wooden statue carved by Nicodemus in Palestine with the help of angels who carved Christ's face) is in the chapel at Villa Buonvisi in Monte San Quirico (one of the family residences). The Volto Santo, or Holy Face, is the wooden statue carved by Nicodemus in Palestine, with the help of angels for the details of Christ's face. According to art historian Stefano Martinelli (see *La leggenda in affresco in Luoghi della devozione*, Tipografia Tommasi, Lucca, 2013), the fresco is likely to have been commissioned around 1580 by Benedetto di Martino Buonvisi (1520-87), Antonio's nephew. This was the time when the last sparks of religious dissent had died out in Lucca, and the powerful family could openly reaffirm its having always fully embraced the Roman Catholic belief. Whether Benedetto did it for convenience or true belief we do not know, however, before dying, he wrote a letter to his children inviting them to cherish religion and follow the example of *messer Antonio Buonvisi*.

The fresco, attributed to Agostino Ghirlanda, represents all the main steps of the legend as narrated by Deacon Leboino. However, Martinelli explains, the author offers a very personal interpretation in that, for example, he lingers on the episode of Ysachaar which, though well known, had never been represented before (see picture 2: Nicodemus gives the statue to Ysachaar for safekeeping during the persecutions; picture 3: Ysachaar hides the crucifix in a cave). According to the legend, the crucifix was found by Bishop Gualfredo after a revealing dream. He then entrusted it to the seas in a boat that miraculously reached Luni, where the Bishop of Lucca, informed by an angel, fetched it.

The culminating scene in the fresco concerns the transportation of the Volto Santo to Lucca (see picture 1). Martinelli explains that the western side of the city is represented before the construction of the last circle of walls. Apparently, Benedetto Buonvisi is here portrayed as *Gonfaloniere* of Justice, with the long red dress, at the head of the nine city Elders. In his long political career, Benedetto was in fact appointed *Gonfaloniere* five times. The woman with the light blue dress in the lower right corner is presumably Caterina di Martino Bernardini, his second wife. They are both pointing at the Volto Santo and looking towards the observer.



1. panoramic view of the restoration



2. Nicodemo gives the Volto Santo to Ysachaar



3. Ysachaar hides the Volto Santo

Today, the Villa Buonvisi is divided into several privately owned apartments, with the chapel as a common property. Unfortunately, the frescoes are deteriorating and except for a recent emergency restoration carried out at the expense of the owners themselves, to prevent further and more serious damage, nothing has been done so far to preserve this incredible work of art. The good, and unofficial, news is that presently several people are working with the common objective of having this hidden treasure completely restored, so that in the near future it can be opened to the public. In recent years, the *Archivio Storico del Volto Santo* (archiviovoltosanto.org), in particular the art historians Ilaria Sabbatini and Stefano Martinelli, have played a fundamental role in highlighting the importance of the fresco, and drawing public attention to the problem.

– by Chiara Calabrese

The photos of the frescoes are courtesy of:
ARVO - Archivio Digitale del Volto Santo