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## **The Devotion of Saint Oronzo and the Urban Identity of the City of Lecce**

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# The Devotion of Saint Oronzo and the Urban Identity of the City of Lecce

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## Abstract

In 1656, a plague epidemic struck the kingdom of Naples. In Lecce, the escape from danger was attributed to the intercession of the proto-bishop Oronzo. The elevation of Saint Oronzo as protector of the city of Lecce by Bishop Luigi Pappacoda was a skilful move by the prelate to regain control of the sacred in a troubled time, characterised by the “war for relics” between the Theatines and the Jesuits and the echoes of the Masaniellian revolt. The cult of the saint coincided with the construction of the sacred Baroque city of Lecce. The result is a city in which urban space is perfectly marked by the presence of the sacred. The decision to focus on promoting a local saint, such as Oronzo, is in line with the dictates of the Council of Trent, which restored value to the bishops’ pastoral action, aiming at an extreme personalisation of the relationship between saint and believer. The aim of the contribution is, therefore, to highlight the link between the epidemic, Pappacoda’s action and the birth of Baroque Lecce, extending the range of research conducted so far mainly on the city of Lecce to the territory in order to create a true cartography of the sacred. In addition to a survey of the buildings scattered throughout the territory, the study will also analyse the iconography of the patron saint, often accompanied by a “synthetic” representation of the urban centre over which he exercises his protection.

**Keywords:** counter-reformation; Lecce; Saint Oronzo; Baroque; urban iconography

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## 1. Introduction

Historiography uses the expression ‘Barocco leccese’ (Baroque of Lecce) to describe an artistic phenomenon that began in Lecce in the 17th century and then spread throughout the province (Calvesi & Manieri Elia, 1971; Manieri Elia, 1989; Cazzato, 2003, 2016; Cazzato, Fagiolo 2013). The peculiarity of this civilisation is also the result of a long cultural isolation, which was confirmed by Bishop Luigi Pappacoda (1639-70), sent by Urban VIII to complete the work of Tridentineisation of the territory, which gave rise to an impressive religious fervour, the fuse of the ‘counter-reformist firework of Lecce Baroque’ (Manieri Elia, 1989, p. 19). The key element in the success of Pappacoda’s policy, which used the city as a means of propaganda and reinforced the role of sacred Lecce, was the decision to make the proto-bishop of Lecce, Oronzo, the new patron saint of the city (Pellegrino, Spedicato, 1990; Così, Spedicato, 1995).

The prelate took advantage of two occasions to revive his cult: the Masanellian uprisings of 1647 and, above all, the plague of 1656, which spread throughout the Kingdom, sparing the entire Terra d’Otranto. Oronzo, a “local” miracle-working saint who veiled the image of the bishop who revived his cult, in turn incorporated the symbolic heritage of the Tridentine figure par excellence,

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Carlo Borromeo.

On several occasions, historians analysing the period of the Counter-Reformation in Southern Italy have given the image of a “betrayed Tridentine”, made up of intrinsic contradictions: a late phenomenon, neither linear nor univocal, differentiated according to the dioceses (Spedicato, 1990, 1997). In reality, the provincialism of the various centres, often accompanied by the stigma of delay and resistance, is in line with the devotional character of the Counter-Reformation promoted immediately after the Council of Trent by Carlo Borromeo (Castelnuovo, Ginzburg, 1979; Fagiolo, Madonna 1985). The decision to make the Milanese bishop the symbol of Tridentine pastoralism is not only linked to his stubbornness and obstinate observance of the Council's dictates but, above all, to the importance assigned, in his writings, to the particular churches, or rather to each local church that ‘will come to serve the universal with the example of its actions’ (Borromeo, 1566, in San Carlo e il suo tempo, 1986, p. 208).

The *sapiens architectus* - as the Jesuit Achille Gagliardi defines him - is the promoter of a hierarchical vision of the Church, structured like one of his homilies, composed by following short and simple concepts, capable of branching out and permeating consciences. In this sense, it is possible to understand the fundamental role of custom and local tradition, aligned with the religious sensitivity of the masses thirsting for the miraculous (Sallmann, 1980, 1996). Borromeo's influence should be analysed bearing in mind the double role he assumed over the course of time: in the years immediately following the Council, Carlo displayed the strictest interpretation of Tridentine thought on the subject of sacred buildings (1577-87)<sup>1</sup>; a renewed face was then attributed to him throughout the 17th century, starting from his canonisation in 1610.

Maurizio Fagiolo, already in 1977, noted how the image of the heart was a recurring and almost obsessive theme, linked to the canonisation, ‘physically present in the relic [...], the symbol on all apparatus of the moral perfection of the Saint and of the human soul’ (Fagiolo, Carandini, 1977, I, p. 36). With the canonisation, the formal purity of his repertoire leaves room for a rich and varied symbolic and figurative heritage. In the *Ampla et diligente relatione de gli honori fatti al cuore di San Carlo* (1614), there is a detailed description of the numerous ephemeral apparatuses set up on the occasion of the feast for the transport of the relic to Rome in 1614 (Fattorio, 1614). Charles is portrayed as a man with a window in his chest ‘from which the heart was seen’, and the triumphal arches are full of emblems that recall the theme of the heart and the blood that flows from it: the winged heart, the heart ‘shot from above’, the heart as ‘the sun in the middle of the sky’ and many others. Until the end of the 17th century, emblematic literature also tended to spread this pugilistic symbolism throughout Europe.

## 2. The Devotion of Saint Oronzo

After his canonisation, the veneration of Charles Borromeo became strongly rooted in the Salento area. It is enough to recall the letter that Bishop Pappacoda addressed to the community of Lecce in 1656 on the occasion of the averted danger of the epidemic. The document highlights for the first time the link between Oronzo and the plague and, at the same time, the path chosen by Pappacoda, who made Borromeo his pastoral model, having put his own fiery spirituality into action during a pestilential event.

The plague sanctioned the promotion of Oronzo - together with Giusto and Fortunato - as the city's new patron saint for having preserved the entire Terra d'Otranto from contagion. Pappacoda, following the war for relics on the patron Irene that was taking place in Lecce between the Jesuits and the Theatines, carried on the process of affirming the cult of Oronzo according to a skilful direction.

The first objective was to define the Orontian Passio, a convincing religious tale that could present the proto-bishop as the perfect prototype of the counter-reformed saint: a humble personage who lived at the dawn of Christianity, became an evangelist, was invested with the office of bishop by Saint Paul and finally martyred. In this respect, Pappacoda simply dusts off the Orontian hagiography already written at the end of the 16th century by Jacopo Antonio Ferrari in his *Apologia paradossica della Città di Lecce* (1576-86), probably with the support of the then bishop Braccio Martelli (Palma, 1657; Ferrari, 1977)

In those years, Orontian Passio was fuelled by numerous writings aimed at dressing up Oronzo with the attributes of the community he was to represent without straying from the counter-reformed symbolism.



Figure 1. The heart is a recurring and almost obsessive theme linked to the canonisation of Charles Borromeo. The “rosy heart” refers to the new doctrine of faith “blossomed” from the words of the saint (Fattorio, 1614)



Figure 2. Statue of St Oronzo in the main square of Lecce. The saint is flanked by his ‘roses’, a symbol of Carolinian memory that recalls the flourishing of the new Counter-Reformation faith.

As early as the 16th century, Terra d’Otranto was seen as the kingdom of abundance, a territory “from which wheat and wine and oil and almonds and lemons and oranges and other fruits are extracted in great abundance”, enjoying the “benefit of the air”, located “under a benign sky” (Raccolta di varie notizie, 1675, p. 60; Scardino, 1607). Oronzo’s literature clings to this traditional image of a generous land and then depicts the saint as a heavenly farmer who cultivates “his glorious works with the iron of penitence, to then reap in the harvest ripe fruits of eternal glory”; fruits and flowers of holiness that Pappacoda does not fail to mention because in this Province “summa quies, summaque securitas florebat” (Pappacoda, 1658). The flowers that blossomed from Oronzo’s devotion are safe and refuge in a blessed place to which the inhabitants of the other provinces of the Kingdom could go to find shelter from disease. There could be no better

metaphor for a land that, unlike others, has its riches - from the rivers to the mountains, to the springs - hidden above all in its innards, earning it the name Conca d'Oro (Ferrari, 1977, pp. 532-533). Giovanni Maria da Palagiano recalls that Oronzio is the one who "has gold stamped on his name, to embellish all his deeds [...], to show us that his works are all made of gold" (Da Palagiano, 1660, p. 5).

Echoes of the symbolism of Charles Borromeo can be found in Orontian rich symbolic repertoire, such as the heart from which a spring of pure water flows or the rosy heart, the flower par excellence with which the city of Lecce is associated in a work published by Tommaso Angiulli in the year of the plague (Angiulli, 1656) (figs. 01-02).

### 3. The Birth of Sacred Lecce

The ousting, in 1656, of the patron Irene in favour of the new protector Oronzio was only the last act in the broad flowering of a new popular devotion, an expression of local needs that became more acute at a time of collective danger. The saint was a true advocate, chosen because he was able to bend the plans of providence in favour of his protectors (Sallmann, 1980, p. 200).

In Lecce, the change of iconographic register can be perceived through the analysis of a series of significant passages.

In the frontispiece of the *Breviarium Liciense* (1527), the city, enclosed within its medieval walls, is flanked by Saint Irene - who became patron saint after the plague of 1466 - who protects it by placing her hand on the crowned bell tower.

In the following century, the "square Lecce", a city fortress enclosed in the sixteenth-century ramparts, is kept on the palm of the saint (fig. 03). This is a synthetic representation, whose fortune is probably due to the image on the frontispiece of the *Lecce sacra* by Giulio Cesare Infantino (1634), in which the door of Charles V is emphasised, in a central and oversized position, according to a process that Fagiolo calls *reductio ad portam* (Cazzato, Fagiolo, 2013, p. 130).



Figure 3. Statue of St Irene with a model of the city in her hand. (Lecce, Church of St Irene, transept).

A turning point towards the very religious Lecce of the Pappacodian era is the bas-relief plaque on the large altar in the transept of the church of S. Irene, attributed to Cesare Penna (1652). The city is overlooked by a rainbow and clouds with a sun in between; beyond the walls with the Rudiae and S. Giusto gates (Porta Napoli), you can see the dome of Santa Croce, the Gesù, S. Irene (with its two-tier bell tower) and the 13th-century cathedral. The tile is to be understood as an emblem accompanied by the motto "Signum foederis inter te et Deum" and is mirrored



by another, a second emblem with a hilly landscape, a forest lashed by the wind and the motto “Non flantibus fluit” (fig. 04). Pappacoda had dampened the protests that arose following the Masanellian revolts of 1647; as Marcello Fagiolo recalls, “the allusion to the city that, literally, does not waver at the blowing of the winds appears transparent” (Cazzato, Fagiolo, 2013, pp. 91-92). The reference is to a passage from Genesis (6:11): if the bishop, a new Noah, is mirrored in Oronzo, Lecce is the “ship of faith”;; and the symbolism of the ship is also fully in tune with the copious iconographic heritage of Lecce in 1614, on the occasion of the translation of the relic to Rome (Fattorio, 1614).

By virtue of the saint’s miracles, from 1656, Lecce was described as the “head of the universe” and “envied by the first cities in the world” (Da Palagiano, 1660, pp. 26-28). Lecce is a city in which urban space coincides entirely with the dimension of the sacred, nourishing itself with new lifeblood also through Oronzo’s symbolism: thus, “the happy streets are in bloom” and devotional fervour is accompanied by a Baroque blaze of flowers and fruit which involve, together with the heart of the faithful, the eyes too, which “are torches of the Heart... Oculi sunt in amore duces” (Cazzato, Fagiolo, 2013, p. 108).



Figure 4. View of Lecce under the rainbow. Bas-relief in the transept of the church of St Irene, Lecce, c. 1652. (Photo: Bolognini).

It is indeed a devout and entirely Orontian city illustrated from a bird’s eye view by Cassiano de Silva in the volume by Abbot Pacichelli (1703). Lecce is regularised in the form of a rectangle, a “representation of appearance”, as Fagiolo writes “, and that is how the city itself wanted and could be perceived visually”(Cazzato, Fagiolo, 2013, p. 94).

Pacichelli’s view emphasises the poles of the new city, especially the Vescovado courtyard and Piazza dei Mercanti. From Porta Rudiae (rebuilt in 1703 with the statue of St. Oronzo giving his blessing on the crowning) starts the “oblique decumanus” that connects the two great urban voids, scenery of a series of interventions to which Giuseppe Zimbalo is no stranger: from the church of St. Teresa to the Cathedral, from that of St. Anna (1679) to that of St. Giovanni d’Aymo (1691).

The new Cathedral overlooks the Bishop’s courtyard. With the seventeenth-century arrangement, this space - which previously hosted both religious and civil functions - increasingly took on the character of an ecclesiastical court, and the new Cathedral (from 1659) displays on the façade facing the city a precious loggia of blessings with the new patron saint flying on the clouds inside an “openwork” triumphal arch (fig. 05). The bell tower topped by the saint’s weathervane, completed only in 1682, becomes a visual destination from the moment one crosses the Rudiae gate; it has been defined as a sort of Pantheon whose floors are dedicated to the patron saints of Lecce, immortalised in the epigraphs that mark the three orders: the Assumption, Saints Oronzo, Giusto, Fortunato and Saint Irene.

If Pappacoda’s intervention focuses mainly on the “ecclesiastical citadel”, the city of Lecce

dedicates to Saint Oronzo a votive column in the civic Piazza dei Mercanti; it was erected by Zimbalo in 1666 thanks to the donation, by the city of Brindisi, of the blocks of one of the terminal columns of the via Appia collapsed in 1528. The column was to be one of the main furnishing elements of the baroque city, and its presence was to have a significant influence on urban iconography, from Pacichelli himself to the view at the base of the bust of St. Oronzo in the Cathedral Treasury, by Lecce silversmith Domenico Gigante (1671), where the column appears completely oversized in the skyline of a city over which the blessing saint flies, chasing away the plague.



Figure 5. Statue of St. Oronzo in the “perforated” arch on the side facade of Lecce Cathedral (photo: Bolognini).

#### 4. The Urban Iconography of Saint Oronzo in the Province

Not only in Lecce but in the entire Terra d'Otranto, the only 'disease' spreading, starting in 1656, is devotional. St. Oronzo's protective mantle was spread over the province, where the patron saint was seen “with a great deal of spirit turning in the air, blessing the cities”. On the basis of this description, derived mainly from the visions of the mystic Domenico Aschinia, the painter Giovanni Andrea Coppola created the painting (1656) for the new cathedral, commissioned by Pappacoda (fig. 06). It is an iconographic model which, in a short space of time, becomes the official image of the saint and his city (Galante 1989, 2011). Lecce is no longer ‘in the hands’ of its patron but ‘at the feet’ of her protector. The passage from Irene to Oronzo is evidence of the new counter-reformed devotionalism imposed by Pappacoda, based on the binomial love-fear. Only on this condition can the community, at the feet of its protector, enjoy his miraculous sanctity. As in the *Passio*, Oronzo, depicted wearing a mitre, cope and crozier, is surrounded by angels pointing to the city in the distance. Coppola's painting is very popular; replicas are to be found not only in the smaller towns of Salento but also in the Land of Bari. Although the replicas almost faithfully follow the layout of the original work, the town represented sometimes changes according to the place for which the painting was made, thus realising “a sort of appropriation of the protection of the saint that the communities make through his image” (Galante, 1989, p. 51). There are interesting variants, such as the canvas in the parish church of Poggiardo, where the proto-bishop flies in the sky, protecting both Lecce at his feet and the small town, supported by an angel who places him under his blessing hand. Very similar is the setting of the canvas by the painter Carlo Rosa from Bitonto, where Saint Oronzo imposes his hand on both the city of Lecce and the city of Campi Salentina. Unlike the canvas of Poggiardo, the two urban centres merge into a single view. Coppola's iconographic model is also used in later works with the proto-bishop as the protagonist and in the depiction of other saints, including Saint Irene: in the painting of San Pietro in Lama (late 17th-early 18th century), the saint protects both the town and the city of Lecce from lightning, following the compositional scheme of Saint Oronzo of Poggiardo. In the embroidered paintings by Marianna Elmo (18th century), the saint flies through the clouds,

spreading her protective mantle over the town and keeping out the lightning.



Figure 6. G.A. Coppola, Saint Oronzo knocking down the idols and protecting the city, Lecce Cathedral, c. 1656.

## 5. Chapels, Altars and Elements of Street Furniture in the Province

Together with the devotional paintings, in the space of a few years, numerous chapels, votive columns and altars were dedicated to St Oronzo in most small towns in the Salento (V. Cazzato, M. Cazzato, 2016). Pappacoda's punctual pastoral visits were often accompanied by miraculous events which fuelled building fever. In Specchia, in the lower Salento, a church was built (1656-57) in which, according to Bozzi, five miracles occurred. In Diso, in 1658, a chapel was dedicated to the saint in a suburban area, which was the focus of the albeit modest 18th-century expansion; a column was erected in the square in front of it, whose reference model, in miniaturised form, was (as with all the votive columns erected in the province) that of Lecce. (Cazzato, Fagiolo, 2013, p. 172). Another column with an octagonal section (17th century) is erected in Botrugno. A statue of Oronzo is also on the base of the column in Maglie (1686-88) dedicated to Our Lady of Graces, where the saint appears together with St Nicholas, St Anthony of Padua and St Leonard.

The image of the proto-bishop is also on some city gates, protecting the entrance to some towns. In addition to Porta Rudiae in Lecce, the 'Porta Terra' in Castrignano del Capo and, during the 18th century, the gate of the village of Acaya is dedicated to him.

Most churches in Terra d'Otranto had at least one altar dedicated to Oronzo in the second half of the 17th century. When he visited the centres of the province, the bishop Pappacoda often gave orders to encourage the cult of Oronzo. In Surbo, in 1660, he ordered that a chapel be built in the Matrix, completed in 1662. In the following visit in 1667, he ordered that an altar be built, the work of Ambrogio Martinelli (1667-70). By the same sculptor, one of the most prolific during the 17th century was the altar (1658) in the parish church of Monteroni. Some angels fly over the frame carrying the bishop's mitre, the palm of martyrdom and a crown. The same angels, carrying bouquets of roses, are on the portal of the Collegiate Church of Campi, also by Martinelli, with the statue of Oronzo between the coupled columns. The saint became the patron saint of Campi in 1656; during the pastoral visit in 1660, a chapel was built under the direction of Pappacoda in front of the Collegiate church, with the consequent demolition of some houses (1670). The high altar dedicated to the saint has statues of the other patrons, Giusto and Fortunato, above the columns. The new cult does not completely exclude the old devotion to Irene, whose statue is nevertheless relegated to the doorway of the sacristy.



## 6. Conclusions

The Orontian cult did not wither in a short time; indeed, it was reinvigorated on the occasion of epidemics, famines and calamitous events such as the earthquake of 1743, which devastated many towns in Terra d'Otranto. The Orontian Passio and the architectural language it nourishes underline the strength of the devotional instrument deployed by the bishop of Lecce. The triumph of Saint Oronzo is, in fact, the triumph of Pappacoda. Through a lucid political initiative, the prelate sanctioned the consolidation of sacred Lecce, turning the city into a means of political-religious propaganda, while a dense network of sacred signs marked out the territory, which found its identity by rallying around the local martyr saint. Not only was a counter-reformed symbolic apparatus built, but a real culture of the sacred in which Oronzo is the heart of a territory to be protected against all sorts of calamities. In this spirit, in the 1770s, as a sign of gratitude for the end of a period marked by famine and pestilence, Giuseppe Greco built the Ostuni spire (1771) on the model of the Neapolitan spires.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Endnotes

1. The "counter-reformed rules" with which Saint Charles' theory of architecture was identified, later defined in the *Instructionum Fabricae et Supellectilis ecclesiasticae*, were diligently followed only in the few years between their printing (1577) and Pellegrino Tibaldi's departure for Spain in 1587.

2. This paper has been presented at the SPACE International Conference 2021 on Architectural Culture and Society.

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