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THE STONE OF SANSEPOLCRO: RELIC, IMAGE, AND THE RESURRECTION OF JERUSALEM IN TUSCANY

LA PIEDRA DE SANSEPOLCRO: RELIQUIA, IMAGEN Y LA RESURRECCIÓN DE JERUSALÉN EN TOSCANA

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ABSTRACT

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem had a lasting effect on the spirituality of the medieval West, not least through the unique meanings and associations carried by its relics. This paper focuses on a stone relic thought to have been brought from Christ's tomb by two pilgrims returning to the Tuscan town of Sansepolcro. I examine it in the context of other stones eleventh-century pilgrims allegedly brought from the Holy Sepulcher to Europe and find that it sparked a distinctive belief. While other Italian towns, such as Pisa and Bologna, built architectural copies of the Holy Sepulcher and attempted to recreate the topography of the holy city, the inhabitants of Sansepolcro held that the stone relic miraculously made the Holy Sepulcher immanent in their town and expressed this affinity in images, including Piero della Francesca's "The Resurrection".

KEYWORDS: Borgo Sansepolcro, Stone relics, Jerusalem, pilgrims, Holy Sepulcher.

RESUMEN

La iglesia del Santo Sepulcro en Jerusalén tuvo un efecto duradero en la espiritualidad del Occidente medieval, especialmente a través de los singulares significados únicos y las asociaciones espaciales y geográfica que sugieren sus reliquias. Este artículo se centra en una piedra relicario que se creía que procedía de la Tumba de Cristo, portada por dos peregrinos que regresaron a la ciudad toscana de Sansepolcro. Examino esta pieza en el contexto de otras piedras pretendidamente portadas por peregrinos desde el Santo Sepulcro a Europa, hasta el punto de reconocer que provocó unas creencias específicas.

Mientras otras ciudades italianas, como Pisa y Bolonia, construyeron copias arquitectónicas del Santo Sepulcro e intentaron recrear la topografía de la Ciudad Santa, los habitantes de Sansepolcro sostuvieron que la reliquia de piedra hizo milagrosamente el Santo Sepulcro inmanente en su ciudad y expresó esta afinidad a través de imágenes, incluida “La resurrección” de Piero della Francesca.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Borgo Sansepolcro, reliquias de piedra, Jerusalén, peregrinos, Santo Sepulcro.

According to its foundation story, the Tuscan town of Borgo Sansepolcro originated with two pilgrims, Egidio and Arcano. The pair were on their way home from Jerusalem and Rome and bore with them precious relics, including a fragment of Christ's tomb. Directed by God in a dream, they built an oratory to house their treasures in the upper Tiber valley. The structure was originally dedicated to Saint Leonard and later became a Benedictine monastery. A lay community gradually grew in the surrounding Borgo and was established as a commune in the late twelfth century.¹

Historians have long recognized that Sansepolcro's civic and religious culture was idiosyncratic. James Bunker discussed the prominence of the confraternities in governing town affairs,² while Christa Gardner von Teuffel and others have stressed the town's affiliation with the Holy Sepulcher, expressed by the continued devotion to its cult.³ An image of the Holy Sepulcher on the late twelfth-century seal of an abbot of Sansepolcro suggests an early identification of the abbey with the holy site (Fig. 1). A later example, Niccolò di Segna's fourteenth-century altarpiece, which dominated the abbey church of Sansepolcro, depicts the resurrected Christ stepping out of his sepulcher (Fig. 2). By the mid-fifteenth century, the image of the resurrected Christ was established as the town's emblem. Not much later, Piero della Francesca painted the theme in the Sala del Consiglio of the Palazzo Communale (Fig. 3).⁴

¹ G. P. G. SCHAFER, “Sansepolcro e le sue origini: Un tema storiografico”, in *Una Gerusalemme sul Tevere. L'abbazia e il «Burgus Sancti Sepulcri» (secoli x-xv)*, Atti del convegno (Sansepolcro 2012), M. BASSETTI, A. CZORTEK, E. MENESTÒ (eds.), Spoleto: CISAM, 2013, pp. 11–54.

² J. R. BANKER, *Death in the Community: Memorialization and Confraternities in an Italian Commune in the Late Middle Ages*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988; and Id., *The Culture of San Sepolcro During the Youth of Piero Della Francesca*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003.

³ Ch. GARDNER VON TEUFFEL, “Niccolò di Segna, Sassetta, Piero della Francesca and Perugino”, *Städels Jahrbuch* 17 (1999), pp. 163–208; Id., *Una Gerusalemme sul Tevere: L'abbazia e il «Burgus Sancti Sepulcri» (secoli x-xv)*; A. CZORTEK, “Borgo Sansepolcro e Gerusalemme: Dalle reliquie alla toponomastica”, in *Come a Gerusalemme: Eversioni, riproduzioni, imitazioni dei luoghi santi tra medioevo ed età moderna*, A. BENVENUTI and P. PIATTI (eds.), Firenze: SISMEL, 2013, pp. 309–56.

⁴ The main studies include M. APA, *La Resurrezione di Cristo: Itinerario sull'affresco di Piero della Francesca a Sansepolcro*, Sansepolcro: Biblioteca Comunale di Sansepolcro, 1980, with a complete anterior bibliography; M. A. LAVIN, *Piero della Francesca*, New York: Abrams, 1992, pp. 37–39, 108–11; R. LIGHTBOWN, *Piero della Francesca*, Milan: Leonardo, 1992, pp. 194–202; E. BATTISTI, *Piero della Francesca*, Milan: Electa, 1992, vol. 1, pp. 216–25; vol. 2, pp. 478–84; M. BAXANDALL, *Words for Pictures: Seven Papers on Renaissance Art and Criticism*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003, pp. 117–61; and J. R. BANKER, *Piero della Francesca: Artist and Man*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 107–13.



Fig. 1: Abbot's seal, Abbey of Sansepolcro, late 12th century, Rome, Palazzo Venezia, Collection Corvisieri
(Illustration: Pnina Arad)

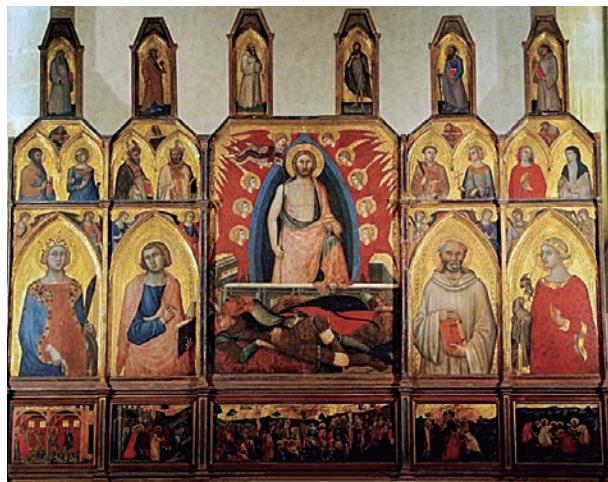


Fig. 2: Niccolò di Segna, Resurrection Altarpiece, Sansepolcro Duomo, ca 1348
(Image credit: Public domain)

Here I focus on one particular aspect of the town that, while duly noted, has not received the attention it deserves: the role that the stone relic from Christ's tomb played in the town's development.⁵ Often neglected in general discussions of relics or seen as a separate category of "devotionalia", or "pilgrim souvenirs",⁶ material remnants of the *loca sancta*, such as stones from the Holy Sepulcher, have increasingly gained more scholarly attention.⁷ They have been conceptualized as *loca sancta* relics, countering the notion that the cult of relics

⁵ C. GERBRON explores the appearance of the stone relic in Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection* in "The Stone and the Dream: On Piero della Francesca's Resurrection", *Studies in Iconography*, 38 (2017), pp. 142–73. CZORTEK addresses holy land relics in "Borgo Sansepolcro e Gerusalemme", pp. 314–15.

⁶ See H. A. KLEIN, "Eastern Objects and Western Desires: Relics and Reliquaries Between Byzantium and the West", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004), pp. 283–314; G. FRANK, "Loca Sancta Souvenirs and the Art of Memory", in *Pèlerinages et lieux saints dans l'antiquité et le moyen âge: Mélanges offerts à Pierre Maraval*, B. CASEAU, J.-C. CHEYNET, and V. DÉROCHE (eds.), Paris: Travaux et Mémoires, Association des amis du Centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2006, pp. 193–201.

⁷ J. M. H. SMITH, "Portable Christianity: Relics in the Medieval West (c.700–c.1200)", *Proceedings of the British Academy* 181 (2014): pp. 143–67; and EAD., "Relics: An Evolving Tradition in Latin Christianity", in *Saints and Sacred Matter: The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, eds. C. HAHN, H. A. KLEIN (eds.), Dumbarton Oaks Symposia and Colloquia, Washington, DC: Harvard University Press for the Trustees of Dumbarton Oaks, 2015, pp. 41–60; J. ROBINSON, L. de BEER, A HARNDEN (eds.), *Matter of Faith: An Interdisciplinary Study of Relics and Relic Veneration in the Medieval Period*, London: British Museum, 2014; A. LESTER, "Remembrance of Things Past: Memory and Material Objects in the Time of the Crusades, 1095–1291", in *Remembering Crusades and Crusading*, M. CASSIDY-WELCH (ed.), London and New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 73–94; and R. BARTAL, N. BODNER, B. KÜHNEL (eds.), *Natural Materials of the Holy Land and the Visual Translation of Place, 500–1500*, Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2017.

was exclusively concerned with the bodies of the saints.⁸ Carrying the religious and legendary connotations attached to the place of origin, such a relic could serve as *pars pro toto*, a part signifying the whole.⁹

Relics of the Holy Sepulcher, a site with a lasting effect on the spirituality of the medieval West, carried unique meanings and associations.¹⁰ I will examine the relic of Sansepolcro in the context of other stones thought to have been brought from the Holy Sepulcher to Europe by eleventh-century pilgrims and suggest that it sparked the distinct belief among the Tuscan inhabitants that Jerusalem was integrated into their own town's urban fabric.

During the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, numerous churches were built to reference Christ's tomb by suggesting the architectural features of the Anastasis rotunda and through their dedications, decorations, and liturgy.¹¹ While other Italian towns, such as Pisa and Bologna, built architectural copies of the Holy Sepulcher and attempted to recreate the topography of the holy city,¹² the inhabitants of Sansepolcro held that the stone relic itself made the Holy Sepulcher immanent in their town and relied on images in particular to express its miraculous affinity with Jerusalem.

RELICS OF THE HOLY SEPULCHER

The earliest known evidence of the founding of Sansepolcro is a passage at the beginning of the *Libro Rosso*, the city's accounts register, which was written in 1418 by the notary Francesco di Cristofano Largi.¹³

As everyone knows, the two holy pilgrims, Arcano and Egidio, the principal founders of this our land, had gone to the Holy Sepulcher of Jesus Christ and from there had obtained certain holy relics; and then they had gone to visit the steps of the consecrated churches of the blessed Sts. Peter and Paul Apostles in Rome, and from there had obtained, through their holiness and devotion, more relics of saints; and turning around, they left Rome to go back to their fatherland, Arcadia. But this did not please Sir our Lord God, who had foreseen that this our land would have its first building miraculously through the hands of these two holy pilgrims; so, when they arrived in Valle di Nocea, which the Ancients called this place where we are because it was full of enormous walnut trees,

⁸ B. REUDENBACH, "Holy Places and Their Relics", in B. KUEHNEL, G. NOGA-BANAI, and H. VORHOLT (eds.), *Visual Constructs of Jerusalem*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2014, pp. 197–206.

⁹ BARTAL, BODNER, KÜHNEL, *Natural Materials of the Holy Land*.

¹⁰ C. MORRIS, *The Sepulchre of Christ and the Medieval West: From the Beginning to 1600*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹¹ Bianca KÜHNEL, Galit NOGA-BANAI, and Hanna VORHOLT (eds.), *Visual Constructs of Jerusalem*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2014; and Kathryn Blare MOORE, *The Architecture of the Christian Holy Land: Reception from Late Antiquity through the Renaissance*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

¹² Neta BODNER, "The Baptistry of Pisa and the Rotunda of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem—A Re-consideration", in *Visual Constructs of Jerusalem*, pp. 95–105; and EAD., "Why Are There Two Medieval Copies of the Holy Sepulchre in Pisa? A Comparative Analysis of San Sepolcro and the Baptistry", *Viator* 48 no. 3 (2018), pp. 103–124. For Bologna, see Robert G. OUSTERHOUT, "The Church of Santo Stefano: A 'Jerusalem' in Bologna", *Gesta* 20 (1981), pp. 311–21.

¹³ M. SENSI, "Arcano e Gilio, santi pellegrini fondatori di Sansepolcro", in *Vie di pellegrinaggio medievale attraverso l'Alta Valle del Tevere, Atti del convegno (Sansepolcro, 1996)*, E. MATTESINI (ed.), Città di Castello: Petrucci Editore, 1998, pp. 17–58.

they rested, took bodily food, and as pleased God fell asleep with words of him in their mouths; and, while sleeping, the blessed Arcano saw in a vision that he should make his tabernacle in that place and should no longer hope to return home. Naturally eager to see his homeland, Arcano stood up and called for his companion; after two similar visions he tried to leave, lured by the sweetness of his Arcadia. He took up his things and making sure that none was missing, he realized that he did not have the holy relics. He, who had placed all his hope and singular devotion in them, began to feel afflicted while looking for them carefully. And finally, humbly raising his eyes and hands joined together toward heaven, he saw the case in which were the said Holy Relics. Hence, struck by the miracle that what had no feathers flew up to a very high branch of a walnut tree, and no longer wishing to oppose the will and predestination of the glorious God, he decided to remain in this place. He reobtained the Holy Relics and settled there. Certain peasants who understood the miracle left their own homes, gathered and erected new buildings in this place, and multiplied so much in a short time, as pleased God, that it was a marvelous thing. Given that the said holy pilgrims came from the Holy Sepulcher of Jesus Christ, they named these first buildings Borgo di Sancto Sepolcro.¹⁴

As the story goes, the relics, remnants of one holy site, chose their new location and thus made it sacred. By attaching themselves to the local walnut tree, which gave the site its name, the relics provided a new name. Largi goes on to explain that among the relics was “some stone of the Holy Sepulcher in which our Lord Jesus Christ was buried, and in whose name this land was built”.¹⁵ While Largi’s account emphasizes place names, the time of the miracle is not entirely clear.

Another version from the *Historia Burgi Sancti Sepulcri*, written in 1454 by an anonymous Camaldoles monk, dates Arcano’s dream to 937 and claims that the relics were

¹⁴ “Como è a tucti palese i doi sancti pelegrini Arcano e Gilio, principali fondatori de questa nostra terra, erano andati al Sancto Sepolcro di Yhesu Christo e de li havieno optenuti certi sancti reliqui e da poi erano andati a visitare i gradi de le consacrate chiese di beati sancti Pietro e Paulo apostoli in Roma, e de li ancho havieno per loro sanctità e devotione optenuti più reliqui di sancti e, dato volta sì, si ritornavano da Roma in Archadia per ripatriare. Ma non piacque così a messer Domenedio, che havia preveduto questa nostra terra, per le mani di detti doi sancti pelegrini, miracolosamente havesse il primo edificio, si che pervenuti in valle di Nocea, che gli antichi cusì chiamavano questo luoch ove siamo, imperoché era piena di grandissime noci, reposandose, preso il corporal cibo, come fo piacere di Dio s’adormentaro con le parole di lui im bocca e, dormendo, il beato Archano ebbe in visione che li convenia fare in quel luoch il suo tabernaculo e che non sperasse più ripatriare. Archano, naturalmente desideroso veder la sua patria, levatose in pè e chiamato il suo compagno, doppo doi simili visioni tentò partirse, tracto da la dolceça de la sua Archadia. Enprese le sue cose, fatto di quello conto che niente li manchasse, ritrovò non havea i Sancti Reliquii. Ello, che in quelli havea tucta la sua sperança e singulare devotione, cominciò forte a dolerse, sutilmente per quelli ricercando. E finalmente gli occhi e le gionte palme al cielo umilmente levando, vidde il bossolo nel quel erano i prefati Sancti Reliquii. Onde, compuncto dal miracolo, che quello che non havea penne era volato in uno altissimo ramo di noce, non volendo più opponerse a la volontà e predestinatione del glorioso Dio, disposto remanere in questo luoch, rihebbe i Sancti Reliquii. E qui fermatose, concorsero certi paesani, i quali inteso il miracolo, lasciate le proprie habitationi, edificaro in questo luoch nuovi edificii, e multiplicaro tanto in pocho tempo, come fo piacere di Dio, che fo cosa mirabile. I quali primi edifici, imperò che i prefati sancti pelegrini veniano dal Sancto Sepolcro de Yesù Christo, nominaro Borgo di Sancto Sepolcro”. I cite Cyril GERBRON’s translation, “Stone and the Dream”, p. 149. The text appears in Gian Paolo G. SCHAFER, *Cronisti borghesi del Quattrocento*, Selci-Lama: Pliniana, 2011, pp. 145–46. For an introduction to the text and its author, see pp. 10–13, 16–18. Earlier traces of the legend are reported in CZORTEK, “La fondazione dell’abbazia e la nascita del Burgus”, in *La nostra storia: Lezioni sulla storia di Sansepolcro*, A. CZORTEK (ed.), Sansepolcro: Graficonsul, 2010, vol. 1, pp. 147–49.

¹⁵ Di Cristofano LARGI, *Leggenda Egidiiana*, p. 146: “de la pietra del Sancto Sepolcro ove fo immesso il nostro signore Yesu Christo, a cui nome fo edificata questa terra”.

first housed in a chapel kept by a Camaldolesian hermit. In 1012, another Camaldolesian monk called Bonilo, “seeing that the Borgo had grown to the dimension of a city, built a pontifical temple”.¹⁶ The *Historia* was most likely referring to the Benedictine monastery dedicated to the Holy Sepulcher and the four evangelists mentioned in a 1013 bull as “mon(aster)ii sancti sepulchri ac s(anc)t(i) quattuor evanglitarum, qui situm est in castro Felicitatis in loco qu(i) Nociati . . .”.¹⁷ Scholars have contested the authenticity of the bull and its account of the early Benedictine monastery in the Valle di Nocea, yet such a monastery would accord with other examples of Benedictine monasteries dedicated to Christ’s tomb during the eleventh-century wave of monastic reform.¹⁸ As Andrew Jotischky demonstrated, the reform movement often expressed affinity with Jerusalem in the pilgrimages of prominent monastic figures as well as the dedication of monastic establishments to Christ’s tomb.¹⁹

Moreover, bringing back relics from the Holy Sepulcher was common practice in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries.²⁰ For example, Hervé, bishop of Orléans, built a church to house his Holy Sepulcher relics in the priory of La Ferté-Avrais (1033–36).²¹ Excavations of the foundations of the abbey church founded in the Piedmontese town of Fruttuaria revealed a round chapel recreating the Anastasis rotunda. It was apparently built to house Holy Sepulcher relics brought by William of Volpiano (990–1031), a prominent reformer of Benedictine monasticism.²² Relics from the sepulcher were also brought to recreations of Christ’s tomb in Constance and Paderborn.²³

The fifteenth-century accounts of Sansepolcro’s origins should be read in light of the town’s continuing efforts to gain civic autonomy. The town acquired its own diocesan only at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when the monastery, reformed by the Camaldolesian

¹⁶ In SCHARF, *Cronisti borghesi*, p. 30.

¹⁷ *Oesterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften*, 2nd rev. ed., Vienna, 1989, vol. 17, pp. 916–17, no. 483.

¹⁸ SENSI, *Arcano e Gilio*, pp. 17–58.

¹⁹ Andrew JOTISCHKY, “Monastic Reform and the Geography of Christendom: Experience, Observation and Influence”, *Transactions of the RHS* 22 (2012), pp. 57–74.

²⁰ R. BARTAL, “Relics of Place: Stone Fragments of the Holy Sepulchre in Eleventh-century France”, *Journal of Medieval History* (2018), 1–16.

²¹ “I brought with me relics of the Holy Sepulchre of our Lord Jesus Christ, in veneration of which, inspired by God, I embarked on the construction of a worthy church for these relics, near the castle of my lord Landric, with his licence and permission and with the consent and agreement of my brothers Alberic and Theduin”. Diana WEBB, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimages in the Medieval West*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2001, pp. 43–44. A. FROLÓW notes a tenth-century narrative about the dedication of a church “sur un fragment de la Vraie Croix et sur des reliques du Tombeau”, in *Les Reliquaires de la Vraie Croix*, Paris: Institut Français d’Études Byzantines, 1965, p. 237, n. 140, citing MGH SS 15: 1270.

²² Carolyn Marino MALONE, “The Rotunda of Sancta Maria in Dijon as ‘Ostwerk,’” *Speculum* 75, no. 2 (2000), pp. 285–317, at 301–2.

²³ Emil SPATH, *Zeichen der Hoffnung. Das heilige Grab im Konstanzer Münster*, Lindenberg: Kunstverlag Josef Fink, 2007; Sveva GAI, Claudia DOBRINSKI, Clemens KOSCH, Sven SPIONG, and Martin KROKER, “Die Siedlungsentwicklung Paderborns im 11. und frühen 12. Jahrhundert im Kontext der westfälischen Bischofsstädte”, in *Canossa 1077, Erschütterung der Welt: Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur am Anfang der Romanik*, vol. 1: *Essays*, Christoff STIEGMANN und Matthias WEMHOFF (eds.), Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2006, pp. 251–64. On Paderborn as an evocation of Jerusalem and Rome, see Bianca KÜHNEL, “Jerusalem Between Narrative and Iconic”, in *Jerusalem as Narrative Space*, G. WOLF and A. HOFFMANN (eds.), Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002, pp. 115–17.

congregation after 1137, separated from the neighboring bishopric of Città di Castello.²⁴ However, the accounts do share some characteristics with earlier foundation stories that feature relics of the Holy Land, which could include stones, wood from the cross, and tokens from other places.²⁵ Eleventh-century foundation stories tend to emphasize stones. According to the foundation story of Villers-Saint-Sépulcre (Oise), upon his return from pilgrimage, Lancelin of Beauvais decided to build an edifice in honor of the church in Jerusalem to house the precious stone he brought back from it, known as the *carreau*, the tile²⁶. In the story recounted in the office of the Holy Sepulcher at the Benedictine monastery of Beaulieu-lès-Loches in the Touraine, its founder, Fulk Nerra, brought a relic of the Holy Sepulcher from his second pilgrimage to Jerusalem and dedicated the church, among other dedications, to the *Dominici Sepulchrum*. Like Arcano and Egidio, Fulk also brought back a piece of the True Cross as well as other relics from his visit to Rome, but the stone from the Holy Sepulcher gave the new site its name.²⁷ Similarly, Adérald, the archdeacon of Troyes, with the support of the order of Cluny, founded a Benedictine house in the small town of Villacerf to house the great number of relics he brought back from his pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Rome. His vita emphasizes the fragment of the Holy Sepulcher, recounting how, in his fervent devotions at the place of Christ's burial, he wet the tomb with his kisses and made such an impression on the guards that they granted him a fragment of the tomb.²⁸

It is no surprise that stones feature prominently in the foundation stories of church buildings; after all, setting up a new church required placing a foundation stone. The trope of anointing a stone also played a significant part in dedication rites.²⁹ Together with other Holy Land relics, stones from the Sepulcher were often used in rituals to consecrate churches. According to the *sermo in dedicatione ecclesiae Sanctae Mariae Riphollensis*, for example, pieces of the True Cross and the Holy Sepulcher were laid under the altar when the new church of Ripoll was consecrated in 1032, just as at Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa.³⁰

²⁴ CZORTEK, "Borgo Sansepolcro e Gerusalemme", pp. 309–56.

²⁵ Y. HEN, "Les authentiques des reliques de la Terre Sainte en Gaule franque", *Moyen age: Revue d'histoire et de philologie* 105, no. 1 (1999), pp. 71–90; Holger A. KLEIN, "Eastern Objects and Western Desires: Relics and Reliquaries Between Byzantium and the West", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004), pp. 283–314; Georgia FRANK, "Loca Sancta Souvenirs and the Art of Memory", in *Pèlerinages et lieux saints dans l'antiquité et le moyen âge: Mélanges offerts à Pierre Maraval*, Béatrice CASEAU, Jean-Claude CHEYNET, and Vincent DÉROCHE (eds.), Paris: Travaux et Mémoires. Association des amis du Centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2006, pp. 193–201.

²⁶ Pierre LOUET, *Histoire et Antiquitez du pais de Beauvaisis*, Beauvais: chez la vefue Valet, 1631, pp. 639–40.

²⁷ The church's first dedication was to the Cherubim, Seraphim, and the Trinity and only later to the Holy Sepulcher, but this dedication seems to have become the most prominent. R. BARTAL, "Un Saint-Sépulcre à Beaulieu-lès-Loches". *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* 61 (2018), pp. 217–228.

²⁸ Vita S. Adelardi, *Acta Sanctorum*, October, Paris, 1866, 8: 993.

²⁹ Amnon LINDER, "'Like purest gold resplendent': The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Liberation of Jerusalem", *Crusades* 8 (2009), pp. 31–51 at 36 n. 3.

³⁰ Nikolas JASPERT, "Eleventh-Century Pilgrimage from Catalonia to Jerusalem: New Sources on the Foundations of the First Crusade", in *Crusades* vol. 14 (2015), pp. 159–60. Many eleventh-century examples are noted in FROLOW, *La Relique de la Vraie Croix*, nos. 191, 194, 197, 216, 226, 232, 243, 251, and some stone relics are mentioned in Robert G. OUSTERHOUT, "Architecture as Relic and the Construction of Sanctity: The Stones of the Holy Sepulchre", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 62 (2003), pp. 4–23, especially 23n68.

The prominent place of stone relics in foundation stories calls up the well-known biblical exegetical associations between Christ and stones or rocks that imbues divine presence to the new construction. Christ compares himself to a cornerstone in Matthew 21:42, a metaphor, drawing on Psalms 117:22, that appears several times in the New Testament.³¹ Medieval writers went further, identifying Christ with such biblical stones as the one Jacob rolled off the mouth of the well to water Rachel's flock (Genesis 29:10) and the one David launched at Goliath's forehead (1 Samuel 17: 22-24).³² Most importantly, Christ was understood as the cornerstone of his universal church. Peter was the "rock" Christ built his church on, the faithful were its "living stones"; the apostles its "pillars".³³

According to the author of the *Historia Burgi Sancti Sepulcri*, the building of the abbey church of Sansepolcro, which housed the town's precious relics, was itself miraculous. He states that, like Christ, the church rose up from the sepulcher or, more accurately, its ruins, not in Jerusalem but in Tuscany: "During the year 1012 after the birth of the Lord, the church of the Holy Sepulcher in the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the infidels; it can be said to be truly amazing that our own new church in Borgo Sansepolcro was built in the image of the destroyed church, as though its foundation had arisen from the materials of that church; just as the phoenix rises from a phoenix, so in the same way it took the origin of its material being and name".³⁴

According to the *Historia*, then, the fifteenth-century citizens of Sansepolcro considered their abbey church not an architectural copy of the Holy Sepulcher but as the Holy Sepulcher itself, resurrected from its fragments in a new location. Notably, the stones from the Sepulcher enabled this miraculous reappearance. As a piece of bone could signify the entire body of a saint, so a piece of stone taken from Christ's tomb could stand for—or indeed, reconstitute—the entire Holy Sepulcher Church in Jerusalem.

The notion of the material relic as *pars pro toto* finds visual expression in Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection* in the Palazzo Communale (Fig. 3). Behind of the soldier on the right is a large stone read by scholars as the relic Arcano and Egidio brought from Jerusalem.³⁵ More recently, Cyril Gerbron suggests that its placement in proximity to the sleeping soldier recalls Arcano's dream as well as the stone pillow on which Jacob dreamed of a ladder between

³¹ Gerhart Burian LADNER, "The Symbolism of the Biblical Corner Stone in the Medieval West", in *Images and Ideas in the Middle Ages: Selected Studies in History and Art*, Rome: Storia e Letteratura, 1983, vol. 1, pp. 171–96.

³² See the discussion in Yamit RACHMAN-SCHRIRE, "The Stones of the Christian Holy Places of Jerusalem and Western Imagination: Image, Place, Text (1099–1517)", Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2015, pp. 14–20.

³³ Joseph C. PLUMPE, "Vivum Saxum, Vivi Lapides : The Concept of 'Living Stone' in Classical and Christian Antiquity", *Traditio* 1 (1943), pp. 8–9. The citations are from Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 2:20–22; I Peter 2:4–6; Galatians 2:9; and Revelation 3:12; 2:9. Cf. LADNER, "Symbolism of the Biblical Corner Stone", vol. 1, pp. 171–96.

³⁴ In SCHARF, *Cronisti borghesi*, pp. 36–38: *Nam cum eisdem temporibus currentibus annis nativitatis Domini millesimo duecentimo ecclesia Sancti Sepulchri civitatis Ierusalem ab infidelibus destructa fuisse mirum projecto hoc dici potest, ad instar illius destrucere novam hanc ecclesiam nostram in Burgo Sancti Sepulcri constructam fore tamquam ex illius materialibus exortam principiis, sicut ex fenice fenix exoritur, ita etiam et rei et nominis originem traxisse.* On the story of this church, which became the city cathedral in 1520, see *Il Duomo di Sansepolcro, 1012–2012: Una storia millenaria di arte e fede*, Liletta FORNASARI (eds), Sansepolcro: Aboca, 2012.

³⁵ BAXANDALL, *Words for Pictures*, p. 133. See also LAVIN, *Piero della Francesca*, pp. 37–39; and GERBRON, "Stone and the Dream", pp. 142–73.

heaven and earth, a familiar trope in foundation stories, that configures the founding at Borgo Sansepolcro as a biblical event.³⁶

The appearance of the stone as a large chunk of white rock brings the raw material of the sites and buildings of Jerusalem to mind. Its uncut, rocky surface recalls the local limestone of Jerusalem as figured in contemporary depictions of Golgotha; for example, Giotto's Crucifixion at the Scrovegni Chapel.³⁷ Its large size may strike us as improbable, but it reflects how contemporaries imagined such stones. Adérald, the archdeacon of Troyes, described the relic he took from the Holy Sepulcher as a "saxi sacri e sepulchro" (sacred stone from the Tomb); Jerusalem pilgrims used the word *saxum* to describe great masses of stone.³⁸

The whiteness of Piero's stone also suggests its origin and role in the materialization of Christ's tomb in Sansepolcro's civic hall. By the later Middle Ages, Christ's tomb was traditionally depicted as white marble, perhaps based on pilgrims' accounts of the site.³⁹ One of the few stone relics from the Holy Sepulcher to survive into modernity, recorded in a black-and-white photograph in 1965, the stone from Villers was a rectangular tile of white or yellow marble measuring twenty centimeters.⁴⁰ An eighteenth-century record of the stone that Fulk Nerra supposedly brought from the Sepulcher and held in Beaulieu-lès-Loches indicates that it too was a piece of white marble.⁴¹

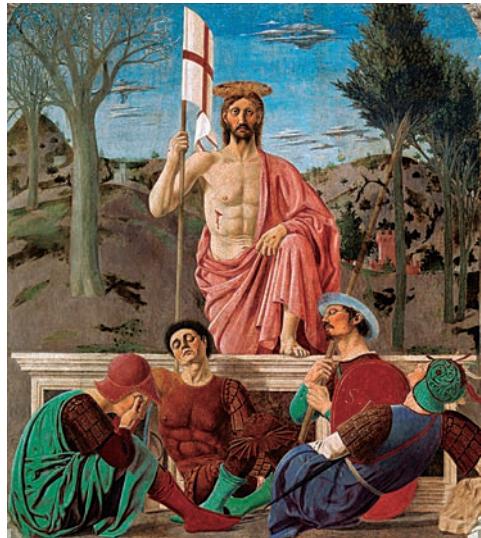


Fig 3. Piero della Francesca, Resurrection of Christ, ca 1460, Museo Civico, Sansepolcro
(Image Credit: Public domain)

³⁶ GERBRON, "Stone and the Dream".

³⁷ On Golgotha in the Western imagination, see Yamit RACHMAN-SCHRIRE, "The Rock of Golgotha in Jerusalem and Western Imagination", in *Räume der Passion Raumvisionen, Erinnerungsorte und Topographien des Leidens Christi in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Hans AURENHAMMER and Daniela BOHDE (eds.), Hamburg: Vestigia bibliae: Jahrbuch des Deutschen Bibel-Archivs, 2015, pp. 29–48.

³⁸ RACHMAN-SCHRIRE, *Stones of the Christian Holy Places*, p. 14.

³⁹ Fabio BARRY, "Painting in Stone: The Symbolism of Colored Marbles in the Visual Arts and Literature from Antiquity until the Enlightenment", Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2011, pp. 425–27. Marble was also a way of demonstrating the stone's worth and often associated with silver and gems. E. GRABINER, "L'iconographie du faux marbre, le cas de l'église Franque à Abou-Gosh", *Cahiers de Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa* 38 (2007), pp. 137–42.

⁴⁰ For the description of the stone, see L. MARSEAUX, "Le reliquaire de Villers-Saint-Sepulcre", *Revue de l'art Chrétien* (1889), pp. 497–99.

⁴¹ Alexandre de SALIES, *Histoire de Foulques Nerra, comte d'Anjou d'après les chartes contemporaines et les anciennes chroniques – suivie de l'office du Saint-Sépulcre de l'abbaye de Beaulieu dont les leçons forment une chronique inédite*, Paris: Chez J.-B. Dumoulin, 1874, p. 533.

IMAGES OF THE HOLY SEPULCHER

The efficacy of the stone relic to resurrect the Holy Sepulcher in the Tuscan Borgo was asserted through iconography. Unlike in Pisa or Bologna, where architecture as well as topography was used to recall Jerusalem, images in particular served to express this miraculous affinity in Sansepolcro.

According to the *Historia Burgi Sancti Sepulcri*, the fragment of Christ's tomb was housed in the abbey church of Sansepolcro, which was built "in the image" of, and as a substitute for, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem; the pilgrimage church's 1009 destruction led to some of the most inventive and explicit references to Christ's tomb in the West.⁴² Two relatively well-known contemporary examples are the monasteries erected at Villeneuve d'Aveyron and Cambrai, both built in response to pilgrimages. The first was founded by the returning pilgrim Odilo, son of the Count of Rouergue, in 1053. He specified constructing the church on the plan of the prototype; it was built as a rotunda with four pillars at the center and three apses, in clear reference to the Anastasis rotunda in Jerusalem after its restoration by Constantine IX Monomachos around 1048.⁴³ Similarly, after an unsuccessful attempt to reach the Holy Land, Bishop Liébert (r. 1051–76) from Cambrai dedicated a monastery to the Holy Sepulcher. It was a rotunda-shaped edifice with a tomb aedicule at its center.⁴⁴

In contrast, the abbey church in Sansepolcro was built as a basilica with no central ground plan (Fig. 4),⁴⁵ which was the more typical marker of a Holy Sepulcher copy.⁴⁶ However, it was not unusual for eleventh-century abbey churches with a basilican plan to be dedicated to the holy tomb, such as, for example, the churches at Frutturia and at Beaulieu-lès-Loches, the latter originally built with an exceptionally long nave and an eastern transept that supported a large lantern tower.⁴⁷ Besides their dedications, identifying the high altar with Christ's tomb was another way to turn a church with a basilica plan into a Holy Sepulcher, as perhaps at Beaulieu-lès-Loches. In his *Mémoires*, written in the eighteenth century, Dom Galland, a monk of the

⁴² B. KÜHNEL, "Productive Destruction: The Holy Sepulchre after 1009", in *Konfliktbewältigung vor 1000 Jahren: Die Zerstörung der Grabeskirche in Jerusalem im Jahre 1009*, Thomas PRATSCH (ed.), Berlin: Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2011, pp. 33–56.

⁴³ C. PÉQUIGNOT, "L'église de Villeneuve-d'Aveyron : Une église bâtie à l'image du Saint-Sépulcre", *Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa* 26 (1995), pp. 147–53.

⁴⁴ O. LEHMAN-BROCKHOUS, *Schriftquellen zur Kunstgeschichte des 11. und 12. Jahrhunderts für Deutschland, Lothringen und Italien*, 2 vols., Berlin, 1938, no. 1670; *Vita Lierterti episcopi Cameracensis auctore Rodolfo monacho S. Sepulchri Cameracensis*, A. HOFMEISTER (ed.), *MGH SS* 30:2, Leipzig, 1934, pp. 838–66.

⁴⁵ Most recently, Joost KEIZER, *The Realism of Piero della Francesca*, London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 80–81.

⁴⁶ Richard KRAUTHEIMER, "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Mediaeval Architecture,'" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942), pp. 1–33.

⁴⁷ J. HARDION and L. BOSSEBOEUF, *L'Abbaye de Beaulieu-lès-Loches et quelques monuments de sa dépendance*, Tours, 1914; Abbé G. PLAT, "La Touraine, berceau des écoles romanes du Sud-Ouest", *Bulletin Monumental* (1913): pp. 367–78; J. VALLRY-RADOT, "L'ancienne église abbatiale de Beaulieu-lès-Loches", *Congrès archéologique Tours* (1949), pp. 126–42; René CROZET, "Églises romanes à déambulatoire et chapelles rayonnantes entre Loire et Gironde", *Bulletin Monumental* (1936), p. 49; C. LELONG, "Beaulieu-lès-Loches", *Touraine Romane* (1977), pp. 165–71; L. HALPHEN, *Le compte d'Anjou au XI siècle*, Paris, 1906; 2nd ed., 1974; O. GUILLOT, *Le comté d'Anjou et son entourage au XI siècle*, Paris, 1972; and IDEM, "La consécration de l'abbaye de Beaulieu-lès-Loches", *Mémoires de la Société archéologique de Touraine* IX (1975), pp. 23–32.

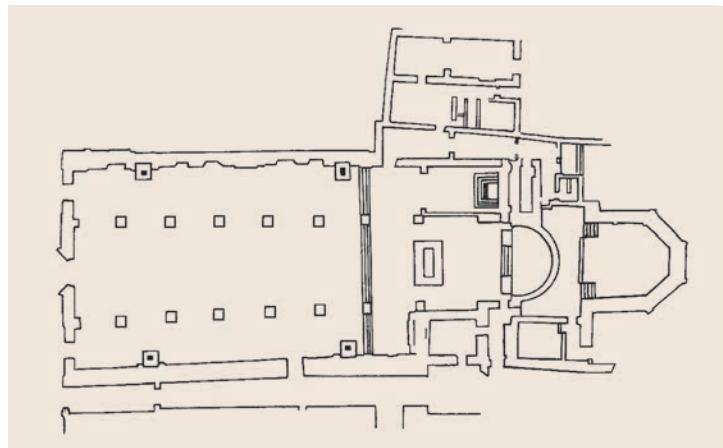


Fig. 4. Sansepolcro, Cathedral formerly Abbey, Groundplan. After Christa Gardner von Teuffel, "Niccolò di Segna, Sassetta, Piero della Francesca and Perugino", Städels-Jahrbuch 17 (1999), p. 164
(Illustration: Pnina Arad)

abbey, recollected a traditional belief that in reconstructing the church after a wind storm, Fulk built a tower in the "manner of the Holy Sepulcher".⁴⁸ Marie-Thérèse Camus identified this tower with the eastern lantern tower above the crossing, noting that the high altar was located beneath it. She speculates that it held the prized sepulcher relic and was the center of Holy Sepulcher celebrations.⁴⁹

However, in Sansepolcro, the high altar was not placed under a crossing nor did it house the stone relic.⁵⁰ The relics resided in a now-lost chapel behind the altar. Instead, from the mid-Trecento, the town's dedication, identical to that of the church, was expressed visually by the polyptych altarpiece traditionally attributed to Niccolò di Segna (Fig. 2). Possibly inspired by Pietro Lorenzetti's extensive passion cycle frescoed in the Lower Church of Assisi circa 1315–19, Segna depicted Christ stepping out from his sepulcher, whose lid has been shifted to its right edge, while four soldiers sleep in the foreground. The predella depicts a crowded Calvary at the center of a detailed passion cycle.⁵¹

The image of the Resurrection on the high altar served to identify the church in Tuscany with the holy site. Before 1140 in the Holy Sepulcher church in Jerusalem, a Byzantine mosaic of Christ in Limbo was transferred from the apse of the rotunda to the new main apse over the high altar.⁵² This theme, as well as the Maries at the empty tomb, appeared in the seals of the

⁴⁸ Dom J.-M. GALLAND, *Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire de l'abbaye de la Très Sainte-Trinité de Beaulieu-lès-Loches, achevés en 1751*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, n.a. fr. 6652, f. 110; J. HARDION and L. BOSSEBOEUF, *L'Abbaye de Beaulieu-lès-Loches*, pp. 27–28.

⁴⁹ Marie-Thérèse CAMUS, "L'abbatiale de Beaulieu-lès-Loches. Nouvelles propositions", in *Monuments en Touraine, Proceedings of the Congrès archéologique de France, 155e session, 1997*, Paris: Librairie Picard & Etuna, 2003, pp. 23–24.

⁵⁰ For the celebration of the feast of relics in Sansepolcro, see SENSI, *Arcano e Cilio*.

⁵¹ GARDNER VON TEUFFEL, "Niccolò di Segna", pp. 167–70.

⁵² Jaroslav FOLDA, *The Art of the Crusaders in the Holy Land 1098–1187*, Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 229.

patriarchs of Jerusalem during the period of the Latin Kingdom and on the main apse of the church of Abu Gosh.⁵³ It spread to the West through other seals, ampullae, metal work, illuminated manuscripts, and pilgrimage reports and was reformulated with the image of Christ's Resurrection, which had been part of feast illustrations and Christological cycles at least since the eleventh century. The seals of the Benedictine monastery at Cambrai, which was dedicated to the Holy Sepulcher in 1064, demonstrate the diffusion of diverse Holy Sepulcher iconography in Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They depict the angel sitting in the tomb, the angel showing the empty tomb to the three Maries, and Christ stepping out of the tomb.⁵⁴

When the author of the *Historia* says Sansepolcro was built in the "image" of the Holy Sepulcher, he may have been thinking of the abbey church's high altar. Like most contemporary high altars of churches in Siena and Florence, that of Sansepolcro was adorned with an enormous polyptych, composed of a large central panel and slightly smaller side panels that recalled the church's architecture.⁵⁵ Too heavy to be moved, these paintings were site specific, often anchored to the church floor by buttresses dropping down the sides of the altar table. They were elaborate architectural constructions that followed the plan of the church: the shape of the panels, topped by an arched pediment, mirrored the church nave and its flanking aisles, the columns echoing the monumental columns separating the nave from the aisles.⁵⁶ In Segna's altarpiece, four saints, each in a pointed niche, flank the central Christ in his mandorla, mirroring the basilica's general structure.

Image and medium, content and form, made the Holy Sepulcher immanent in the abbey church of Sansepolcro. So did ritual. Christ is almost frontal in the polyptych's central panel. Robe drawn back to display his side wound, he triumphantly holds the vexillum in his right hand. He is framed by a blue mandorla surrounded by ten seraphs with red flaming wings. This formal and colorful focus made the Savior's miraculous appearance above the Holy Sepulcher vivid to the congregation. The representation of his body above the altar would parallel the elevated Host, and the drops of blood flowing from his side infer the Eucharistic wine. The altarpiece shows the invisible significance of the Eucharist, the real presence of Christ, by reenacting his Resurrection.

Any altar can be viewed as a memorial of Christ's tomb during the Eucharistic ritual. Consecration rites sometimes prescribed burying the Eucharist in the relic cavity of the altar, explicitly called its grave. According to the Roman *Ordo XLII* (ca. 750), in consecrating a church, the bishop would lay three particles of the body of the Lord and three grains of incense—recalling the balsam used at the burial of the martyrs—in the altar's grave, and the relics were then closed inside.⁵⁷ In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, altar surfaces were sometimes designed to recall a sarcophagus, colored to imitate stone, and included in their

⁵³ G. SCHLUMBERGER, F. CHALANDON, and A. BLANCHET, *Sigillographie de l'Orient latin*, Paris : Ernest Leroux, 1943, p. 75.

⁵⁴ GARDNER VON TEUFFEL, "Niccolo di Segna", pp. 166–67.

⁵⁵ Eve BORSOOK and Fiorella SUPERBI GIOFFREDI, *Italian Altarpieces 1250–1550: Function and Design*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

⁵⁶ KEIZER, *Realism of Piero della Francesca*, p. 112.

⁵⁷ G. J. C. SNOEK, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist: A Process of Mutual Interaction*, Leiden: Brill, 1995, pp. 186–87.

decoration an image of Christ standing erect in his tomb as the Man of Sorrows. In such cases, fictive stone, painted sarcophagus, actual altar, and Christ's body merge into a single representation that is both the historical tomb and a liturgical device supporting the Eucharistic rite.⁵⁸

Piero della Francesca's monumental altarpiece *Madonna Misericordia*, commissioned by the Compagnia della Misericordia in Sansepolcro in 1445, is equally complex in its evocation of site, matter, and ritual (Fig. 5). At the center, a Madonna of Mercy opens her mantle to protect the members of the confraternity who performed works of mercy and, as supplicants, served as surrogates for the people of Sansepolcro.⁵⁹ The narrative scenes exalt the town's identification with the Holy Sepulcher. From the Crucifixion at the pinnacle to the five panels in the predella, they focus on the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. The Savior's tomb appears in the central panel of the predella, nearest to the altar and on the axis of the elevation of the Host. In this image, his body, wrapped in a white shroud, is lowered into the sarcophagus, rather than rising from it as in Segna's image, yet both actions inscribe Christ's presence on the altar. Two other images of the sarcophagus appear in the predella (in the *Noli me tangere* and the three Maries visit), and the pilasters depict Egidio and Arcano, who carries the box with the relics. The altarpiece, then, conflates the actual relics, their spiritual manifestation, and their identification with the town. Made for the altar of the confraternity's oratory, the work assembles twenty-six figures meant to reflect the faith of the community for which it was made, members of which are shown with Mary in the central panel.⁶⁰

Piero's *Resurrection* in the Sala del Consiglio of the Palazzo Communale was clearly influenced by Niccolò di Segna's altarpiece in the abbey church (Figs. 2 and 3). The relations between tomb and sleeping soldiers, Christ's gesture, and the color of his shroud are similar. However, in Piero's version, one of Christ's legs is depicted inside the sarcophagus, and its lid is not visible. As Gerbron notes, the tomb looks like a stone table, an altar. The painting thus transferred sacredness to the seat of political power, infusing the Palazzo with the presence of Christ and the relic that together justify and legitimize the communal government's authority.⁶¹ In depicting the stone relic under the soldier's head, it evokes the town's foundation story and manifests the miraculous reappearance of the Holy Sepulcher in Tuscany. It signals not only the town's name and title but also, by referring to the Segna altarpiece, the particular site of the abbey church built to house the precious relics from the Holy Land upon God's command.

Stone, altar, and abbey church were figuratively related: each implied the other. This reciprocal process extended to the town and its surroundings. Piero placed the resurrected Christ in a naturalistic landscape reminiscent of the Tuscan hills surrounding the Borgo, which he had already depicted in his *Baptism of Christ*. There, Marilyn Aronberg Lavin observed that the castle with its crenellated tower to Christ's left closely resembles to the medieval and

⁵⁸ GERBRON, "Stone and the Dream", p. 159.

⁵⁹ On this polyptych, see Diane COLE AHL, "The Misericordia Polyptych: Reflection on Spiritual and Visual Culture in Sansepolcro", in *The Cambridge Companion to Piero della Francesca*, Jeryldene Wood (ed.), Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 14–29.

⁶⁰ On this point, see Timothy VERNON, "The Spiritual World of Piero's Art", in *Cambridge Companion to Piero della Francesca*, pp. 37–42.

⁶¹ GERBRON, "Stone and the Dream", pp. 159–161.



Fig. 5. Piero della Francesca, Polyptych of the Misericordia, 1460-1462, Museo Civico, Sansepolcro
(Image Credit: Public domain)

Renaissance architectural types that would have been encountered around Sansepolcro, and it also features the walnut trees mentioned in the *Libro rosso*.⁶² Although less overt, the tall, smooth gray trunks in the background of the *Resurrection* certainly evoke walnut trees as well.

For the inhabitants of Sansepolcro, seeing their city as Jerusalem was not a figment of devotional imagination nor a fictive conceit. While other Italian towns built architectural copies of the Holy Sepulcher and attempted to recreate the topography of the holy city, the inhabitants of Sansepolcro held that the stone relic that inspired the very foundation of their town made the Holy Sepulcher immanent among them and relied on images to express this intimate affinity with Jerusalem. While no architectural features emulated the sacred sites of the holy city in Sansepolcro, the stone relic, high altar, and abbey church at the heart of the town made it Jerusalem. One of the city's fifteenth-century chronicles is clear on this point: with the destruction of the old Jerusalem, Sansepolcro could simply be called the "new Jerusalem".⁶³

⁶² M. A. LAVIN, *Piero della Francesca's Baptism of Christ*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981, pp. 24–26. For a recent discussion of Piero della Francesca's treatment of landscape, see KEIZER, *Realism of Piero della Francesca*.

⁶³ Alessandro GORACCI, "Breve istoria dell'origine e Fondazione dell' città del Borgo di San Sepolcro", in Filippo VILLANI, *Le vite d'uomini illustri fiorentini*, Florence: Coen, 1847, p. 158.