

The sacred image of the
MADONNA
of CAPO COLONNA



“ *There is, in the devotion to the Madonna, something truly arcane, inexplicable and evocative, enclosed in the dimension of a unique religious fact, in which mystery and reason, legend and history, myth and ritualism, identity and subordination are intertwined, expressed in every age by men and women, young and old.* ”

The history

One of Crotone's oldest traditions recounts that it was Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, a disciple of Saint Paul, who evangelized the Pythagorean city.

Many ancient authors claim that it was he who brought the painting of the Madonna to Crotone.

He planted the cross in the city, and in the temple, in place of the pagan goddess, he erected the image of the Virgin painted by Saint Luke, accompanied by an inscription proclaiming her “Mater Domini praesidium et cor huius urbis” (Mother of God, guardian and heart of this city).

The promontory of Capo Colonna has been a destination for Marian devotion since the dawn of Christianity; Hera Lacinia was once venerated on the Lacinio promontory, but with the advent of the Christian religion, the cult of the pagan goddess was replaced by that of the mother of Christ.

The ancient temple was abandoned, and all the pilgrims who had once, for centuries, paid homage to the wife of Zeus in her sumptuous residence turned their attention to the small votive shrine that arose a few steps from the Doric building, which later became the church of the Madonna di Capo Colonna, where the painting was kept for a long time.

The sacred image of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Capo Colonna has always been connected to the past and recent history of the city of Crotone.

In 1519, according to contemporary chronicles, the Turks who had previously landed at Capo Colonna had unsuccessfully attempted to burn it. They subsequently decided to take with them the object, which they con-

sidered magical due to its fire resistance, but were forced to abandon it at sea because the Saracen galley carrying it was unable to set sail.

The painting was later found on the Irto beach by the farmer Agazio Lo Morello; it was subsequently taken to the Church of Gesù e Maria at the Convent of the Minims of San Francesco di Paola and, after a brief interlude at the Convent of Santa Chiara, it found its final resting place in a chapel in the Cathedral of Crotone, exclusively dedicated and built to house the sacred effigy.

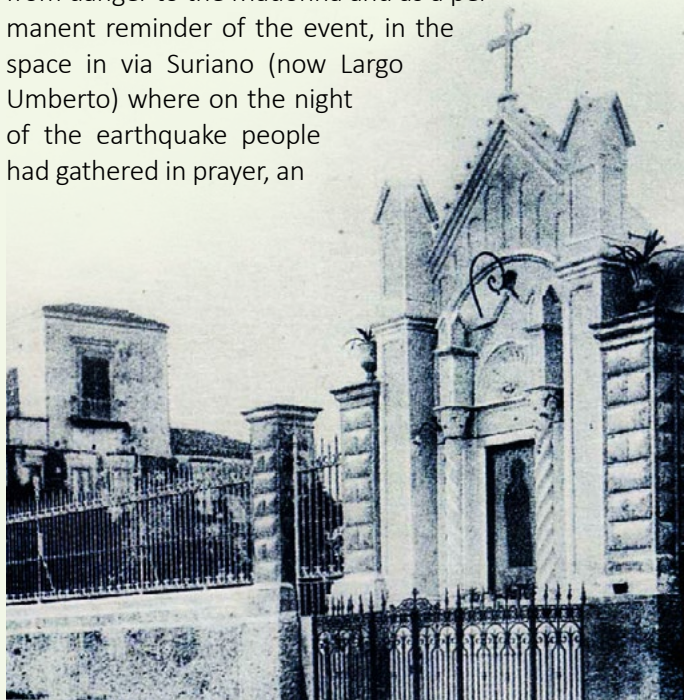
The painting of the Madonna of Capo Colonna has been the subject of numerous extraordinary events, and the memory of these events was recorded in a manuscript, copied by Canon Basoino in 1598, progressively updated, and subsequently printed in 1918 by Monsignor Beniamino De Mayda.

Among the many testimonies collected therein, we find graces, miracles, healings, and wonders, which have increased the fame of the sacred canvas throughout southern Italy. Famous is the intervention attri-



buted to the Virgin Mary during the attack of the Turks in 1638, during which the population, having taken refuge within the castle walls and now at the end of their strength, placed the painting of the Madonna on the curtain between the two towers for their own defense; it was then that the besiegers, seeing the inexplicable and blinding splendour that the dark figure emitted, blinded and seized by terror, could not

do nothing but run away, raising the siege. Another event will contribute to strengthening the certainty among the people of Crotona that Maria di Capo Colonna was placed by heavenly will to protect and defend the city: during 8 March 1832, there was a dramatic earthquake that sowed destruction throughout Calabria, but caused neither victims nor injuries in Crotona. The population attributed the escape from danger to the Madonna and as a permanent reminder of the event, in the space in via Suriano (now Largo Umberto) where on the night of the earthquake people had gathered in prayer, an



altar was erected, subsequently enlarged and enriched in 1916, in which a small copy of the Virgin of Capo Colonna is kept.

In 1986, following the sacrilegious theft of the jewels that decorated the painting, a gift from many generations, which occurred in the Cathedral Basilica of Crotona during October 1984, the sacred icon was embellished with a new, finely decorated silver plate by the Crotona master goldsmith Gerardo Sacco, who in 2007 would also create the two diamond stars placed on the head of the virgin and the baby Jesus.

The painting



The history of the painting is shrouded in mystery. There was a notable effort to study its period, style, place of origin, the hand that painted it, who brought it to Crotona...

The most authoritative conclusions date the painting back to the 11th-12th century, of Egyptian-Syriac rather than Byzantine style, transported to Capo Colonna to the existing abbey of the Basilian monks of San Nicola di Salica and subsequently transferred to the city to defend it from the Saracen invasions which frequently followed one another on the Lacinio Promontory. In the Eastern Roman Empire, during the reign of Leo III the Isaurian in 730, an edict was promulgated, containing the order to destroy sacred icons and the persecution of those who did not respect the imperial provisions.

Due to the resulting iconoclasm, many monks fled, finding refuge in the Italian peninsula, in particular in Calabria, giving rise to numerous monasteries which over time became true centers of Christianity, spirituality and civilisation.

The monks brought books and works of sacred art from the East, including many paintings and it is widely believed that one of these paintings was the Madonna of Capo Colonna. However, it is difficult to see in the painting distinctive features of a well-defined historical and artistic period, it cannot even be placed in a correct stylistic current, also due to the restoration interventions that have affected the painting over the centuries, to preserve it and save it from inexorable wear and tear. What can be admired, however, beyond the technical judgement, is a standing Madonna, holding baby Jesus in her arms in the very tender act of breastfeeding (Galaktotrophousa according to Byzantine iconography), a figure that bursts in and breaks the barriers of time, which continues to be observed by faithful and otherwise, with a sweet and maternal gaze, always ready to offer listening, help and comfort.



The painting as it appeared before the sacrilegious theft of 1983

Based on an idea by Mons. Alessandro Saraco, rector and parish priest of the Cathedral Basilica of Crotona.

Texts and photos by the Krotoniate Archaeological Group.



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