

Michele Tomasi, *Le arche dei santi: Scultura, religione e politica nel Trecento veneto*. (Études Lausannoises d'Histoire de l'Art 13.) Rome: Viella, 2012. Pp. 338; black and white and color figures. € 45. ISBN: 9788883347252. doi:10.1017/S0038713413002728

by **William R. Levin**

Sculpted funerary monuments may seem an art-historical digression, but occasionally a book such as Michele Tomasi's *Le arche dei santi* appears that rightly returns them to the center of their respective cultures, emphasizing their (sometimes former) prominent locations, expensive materials, opulent design, exquisite craftsmanship, and – literally – monumental size. An extended history lesson on the society of the fourteenth-century Venetian republic and an art-historical overview of some twenty regional tombs of saints, this thoroughly researched study is a welcome addition to both fields. Abundant footnotes and bibliography disclose the author's command of his subject, grounded in previous scholarship, much of it hard to access. Color plates of the tombs photographed mainly from the front and numerous halftone figures mostly capturing details, both visible and not in the plates, are uniformly excellent.

The book's sociological premise emerges in the introduction: building on recent investigations into the medieval cult of saints – what they tell us of power relationships and values among assorted religious and civic authorities as well as the hopes and fears of the general populace – Tomasi demonstrates how saints' sepulchral monuments and their iconography expressed materially those same cultural forces. He focuses on the Veneto and nearby areas during the trecento for the large number and richness of, and sometimes extensive documentation for, surviving examples to provide insight into the "varied interactions among such diverse actors" constituting that society. An entombed saint frequently did double duty, serving a religious purpose, as a focus of prayer, and a political one, as a rallying point for an urban population and elements of the local clergy promoting communal interests against those of rival municipalities or a grasping homegrown or regional tyrant.

Most of these tombs (*arche*) consist of a free-standing sarcophagus atop columns; two of them feature caryatids. Chapter 1 emphasizes the importance of recapturing initial appearances and even locations inside churches. Problems encountered include removal of bodily remains and subsequently altered usage, reconstruction following relocation, loss and replacement of original elements, inadequate extant documentation, and questionable earlier assessments. Chapter 2 addresses formal aspects of Venetian *arche* of the trecento stemming from belief in the saintly body as supernatural, a conduit for God's grace. Accessibility to and physical contact with the container for such a body were paramount, and costly materials such as variegated marble panels enhanced the experience. So did elevation and visibility; hence the supports beneath the sarcophagus, which among other things recalled the ancient

episcopal rite of *elevatio* confirming a new cult, augmented the sense of wonderment when viewed from afar and added space for the prayerful below the coffin. The sanctity of its contents was affirmed by association with an altar, whether rising behind and above the *mensa* like an altarpiece or its flat top serving as the *mensa* itself. Tomasi bases these and other conclusions on translated texts, relegating original Latin wording to the footnotes. In all these ways the tomb of St. Anthony of Padua, completed in 1263, was seminal.

Patronage and its various motivations are the subject of chapter 3. Here Tomasi introduces his principal methodology: analyses of individual monuments as case studies, each an exemplar to which he may return to support subsequent observations. The Frenchman Bertrando di Saint-Geniès, the midtrecento patriarch of Aquileia, was a force of nature, a papal intimate and territorial overlord, who in part through artistic commissions reasserted the independence of his domain and his own spiritual authority within it against neighboring potentates, archrival Grado, and even mighty Venice. The tomb he ordered for Sts. Hermagoras and Fortunatus (ca. 1340) – eventually transplanted to Aquileia's key ally Udine after its deployment for the beatified body of the patriarch himself – proclaimed possession of the remains of the first-century evangelical protomartyrs of the region, functioning thus as a power statement and patriotic call to arms. Bertrando's predecessor Pagano della Torre, the Franciscan chapter in Udine, and that city's government, which eagerly covered the costs, all benefited from the *arca* commissioned in 1331 as a focus of pilgrimage and prayer to Blessed Odorico da Pordenone, a well-traveled Franciscan to whom were attributed miraculous cures. Other examples of patronage in the Veneto present variations on a theme stressing relationships among diverse local ecclesiastical and civic authorities often against a background of feudal ambitions, Guelph-Ghibelline factionalism, and intercity controversies. In every instance the sponsors of a venerated individual's cult expected to profit from construction of a tomb intended as its centerpiece.

In chapter 4 Tomasi clarifies what tomb patrons wished to communicate through iconographical choices in presenting the deceased. Details may vary considerably, though in all cases establishing the true presence of the saint's body as an efficacious pathway to God was fundamental. Motifs and forms recalling the early Christian era ennobled saints of the distant past. Angels, and similarly Annunciation groups, assured the faithful of the deceased's heavenly abode and hence ability to intercede for them. A *gisant* afforded worshippers vicariously a coveted view of the entombed body and instilled confidence

in its wholeness and incorruptibility, which thus was both effective in curing disabled supplicants and a model of Christian virtue fit for resurrection. Blessed Enrico da Bolzano appears on each face of his sarcophagus in Treviso (1315) alongside other saints buried there, who validate the newcomer in their midst. Similarly, the three great early Dominican saints – Thomas Aquinas, Peter Martyr, and Dominic himself – join another of their order, Blessed Giacomo Salomoni, on his monument in Forlì (1340), welcoming him into their privileged fold. The aforementioned sepulchre of Odorico da Pordenone offers a Franciscan parallel. Narrative reliefs adorn only two of the *arche*, in both cases emphasizing the passion of the saints commemorated.

Tomasi in chapter 5 turns to material and liturgical accoutrements that complemented and enhanced tombs and cults, of avail to patrons and petitioners alike. Biographical and historical inscriptions stressed the intercessory *virtus* of the departed, signaling a tomb's importance even to illiterates. Spatial separation and sumptuous decorations surrounding a memorial such as that of St. Isidorus (1355), with wall mosaics enlivening an eponymous chapel in San Marco, Venice, intensified the saint's aura while exalting the project's overseers. Iron gates and baldachins also hallowed sepulchral sites. A portable reliquary extended a saintly body's ambit; the container's form and often rich surface decorations frequently carried iconographical meaning, and occasionally indications of patronage. Expensive textiles, costly wax candles and votive offerings, and ardent crowds, especially, all embellished a saint's tomb while strengthening the cult that engendered it. Supplementing these physical appointments were accounts of miracles, feast-day masses, processions, and games honoring the revered deceased.

Chapter 6 confronts the vexed question of attribution. Sculptors' names attach only to the tombs of St. Simeon in Venice (1318) and Odorico da Pordenone. (A third such memorial, for St. Peter Damian in Faenza [1354], is not extant.) Tomasi plays well the game of pinpointing stylistic affinities in sketching the parameters of artistic workshops. He concludes that sculptors of the Veneto did not specialize in funerary

monuments, that while Venice was their center they traveled obligingly, that their work was of high quality, and that they effectively absorbed outside influences. Given the lack of necessary documentation, however, Tomasi infers that much regarding these carefully planned monuments was communicated orally.

In his brief concluding chapter Tomasi urges additional contextual explorations of art in regions beyond the traditional central Italian axis, in particular examining the roles of the mendicant orders and bishops as engines of the cult of saints. A "corpus" of the individual tombs surveyed completes the text, uniting information and ideas pertinent to each that earlier are presented in a dispersed manner. These summaries include biographical notices; physical descriptions and condition reports; full inscriptions; comments on dating, style, physical transfers, surrounding spaces, patronage, and iconography; and lastly pertinent bibliography. Questions raised and opinions rendered by previous scholars are considered both here and in the preceding chapters, and Tomasi is never hesitant to caution against or reject dubious and contrary hypotheses while making his own usually convincing proposals.

Typographical and verbal errors are minimal (though p. 85, line 23, and p. 276, line 8: not "Ponziano" but "Gregorio"; p. 109, line 12: not "gennaio" but "giugno"; p. 151, n. 42: not "Padre" but "Figlio"). The ordering of halftone figures is perplexing, and restricting the index to names of places and persons unfortunate. Tomasi's chronological sequencing of the narratives on the posterior of the Hermagoras and Fortunatus tomb (pp. 157–64, 276; figs. 46–48) is flawed because of his mistaken left-to-right reading of it and the Evangelist symbols at the corners; he also misidentifies two figures in the consecration scene in the related fresco cycle (p. 160). But in neither case does it subtract from his overall analysis of this monument, which like everything else in Tomasi's deeply pondered, well-considered study makes a solid contribution to our understanding of culture in the fourteenth-century Veneto.

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