

POPE NICHOLAS V AND PASSION BOOTY
IN PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA'S
FLAGELLATION OF CHRIST

MARIE TANNER¹

In 1961, Colin Eisler contributed a fundamental article, “*The Athlete of Virtue: The Iconography of Asceticism*,” to a festschrift for Erwin Panofsky;² in it, Piero della Francesca’s *Flagellation of Christ* in Urbino figured prominently in Colin’s development of this theme. I am glad to draw closer to Colin’s important study by discussing another facet of Piero’s picture. This article explores an aspect of Jerusalem imagery in the years surrounding Pope Nicholas V’s Jubilee of 1450,³ and it broadens the focus of previous studies by considering the picture in the context of contemporary papal ideology. Singling out a renewed interest in the Holy Spoils that Titus brought to Rome following his destruction of Solomon’s Temple in 69AD — a list expanded to include Passion relics — it concerns the representation of Flavian booty in Piero della Francesca’s *Flagellation*. I do not address the much-debated identity of the three figures in the foreground, yet this new reading may lead to rethinking the question.

Piero’s *Flagellation* (fig. 18.1), apparently for Federigo da Montefeltro, and variously dated between the mid-1450s and 1470s,⁴ presents a disorienting view of the scourging of Jesus. Christ is set apart, ensconced in Pilate’s Praetorium; the three figures in the foreground stand outside the architectural

¹ I am grateful to Colin Eisler for guiding my graduate studies with patience, encouragement and wit, and for his continuing support in the decades that followed. The breadth of his knowledge and the standards he set in his own work remain a constant inspiration.

² Eisler, “*The Athlete of Virtue*,” 82–97.

³ Parts of the present article are drawn from my book, *Jerusalem on the Hill, Rome and the Vision of St. Peter’s in the Renaissance*, (Turnhout: Harvey Miller, 2010).

⁴ For questions of dating, patronage, provenance and interpretation that is not related to these spoils, and for additional bibliography, see Lavin, *Piero della Francesca: the Flagellation*, Bertelli, *Piero della Francesca*, Lightbown, *Piero della Francesca*, Ginzburg, *Indagini su Piero*.

“box.” Their incongruous costumes set them apart in time and they do not interact with the narrative; one is reminded of the “Sprecher” in a medieval Passion play.⁵ Beneath the picture appeared an inscription derived from Psalm 2.2, *Convenerunt in unum*.

There were a number of Trecento and Quattrocento precedents for setting the scourging of Christ in Plato’s Praetorium; the subject inspired images both beautiful and deeply touching. In the early Trecento, Duccio set the scene in a schematic portico; another image by Pietro Lorenzetti’s school establishes a compositional format that Piero closely follows: a deep setting; classicizing architecture; and Pilate’s placement in relation to Christ and the scourgers; a group of bystanders appear at the right. In all of these, and in a Quattrocento rendering by the Osservanza Master. Christ stands behind the column. On the North Doors of the Florentine Baptistery, Ghiberti had extricated him from this position but not from the manacles. As Piero will do, these artists progressively re-imagined Christ as a classical nude.

Drawing the best from the older traditions, Piero’s *Flagellation* is original in many ways. It is stunningly unique in its measured perspectival space that reflects contemporary and Vitruvian architectural principles and in the reconstruction of Pilate’s Praetorium in a Roman classical style. With the biblical scene set deep in its confines, we perceive the narrative as one with its architectural surroundings: Christ, column and door form an entity, proximate in space and further unified by the brilliant light from the coffered ceiling directly above, where a gilded statue on the column marks the join. A shaft of light casts equal light on the staircase behind Pilate. Framed and illuminated by an Alberti-inspired architectural setting, column, door and steps transform the narrative of the *Flagellation* into an architectural “Arma Christi.” This iconic treatment leads us to an important and unexplored aspect of the picture that relates to the papal cult of relics ascribed to the Emperor Titus during the reign of Pope Nicholas V (1447–1455).

In 1452 Pope Nicholas crowned Frederick III Holy Roman Emperor. Nicholas Muffel accompanied the emperor on his trip to Rome. In Muffel’s *Description of Rome*, the scourging whip and the door of Pilates’ palace are first added to the list of relics that Titus brought from Jerusalem following his conquest of the city and destruction of Solomon’s Temple.⁶ The door, gilded

⁵ See, for example, Eming, “Gewalt im Geistlichen Spiel,” 1–22

⁶ Muffel, *Beschreibung der Stadt Rom*, 12, “Item von dem dor, damit Christus geschlagen ward vor Pylatus das und jar vil anders heyltumbs ist do and hat zu dem merern teyl

as in Muffel's description, appears for the first time in Piero's *Flagellation*. To Christ's left, behind Pilate, rises another visual anomaly, a partially visible flight of steps leading to a further space that we do not see.⁷ With the words "Ecce Homo" Pilate delivered Jesus to His enemies from its summit. Titian, who would give equal emphasis to these steps in his *Ecce Homo* of 1543 (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.), shows us the crowd-filled piazza to which they lead; Christ descends them to take up the cross and begin his Passion. Giovanni Rucellai, in Rome for Nicholas V's Jubilee of 1450, records the stairs as a Passion relic. He notes that pilgrims in Rome for the Jubilee climbed the blood-stained steps from Pilate's palace, now at the Lateran, on their knees.⁸ Muffel gives a similar account of their veneration.⁹ Within a few decades the *Scala Sancta Christi* was documented as belonging to the list of relics that the Emperor Titus brought to Rome from Jerusalem.¹⁰

The Titus Legends

From the mid-first century BC until the seventh-century Muslim conquest, Jerusalem formed part of Rome's imperium. In 66 AD, Jewish objection to pagan icons in Solomon's Temple fuelled rebellion against Roman rule. This

pracht Tytus mid Vespasianus von Jerusalem mit der Fronika und die vier eren seulen, die bey dem hohen altar stenn." 21: "Item auch sind do XIII seulen, die im tempel Salomonis gestanden sind, die al einer arbeit rein und sten zwu bey der Fronica altar do die gulden porters vermaurt ist und die andern zwolf seulen sind im kor, darunter ist auch die seul, do unser her Cristus ... prediget im temple Salomonis and an dieselben seulen pringt man die menschen, die do besessen sind mit dem pdsem geist, die werden al erledigt, als vii man yr darhringt." For Muffel's account of the columns, see also Kinney, "Spolia," 30, 34.

⁷ Lightbown, *Piero della Francesca*, 54, notes that the *Scala santa* was recognized in the fifteenth century as the *Scala Pilati*.

⁸ "La scala del palazzo è Pilato, dove stette Cristo quando si diè la sententia della morte sua, la quale venne di Gerusalem, et per più devotione quegli che vanno al giubileo, et massime gli oltromontani, la saghono ginochioni." Rucellai, *Della bellezza e anticaglia di Roma*, 407.

⁹ Muffel, *Beschreibung*, 16; "zwischen der cappellen -sancta sanctorum ... do ist die heylig stig, darauf Christus zu dem richthaus gefurt ward zu dem urteil, do in der richter Pylatus verurteilt zum todt und dieselbig stig ist von weys grabn merbelstein und hat XXVIII schon lang staffeln ... do het in vor Pylatus den Juden geweist unter der durnen kron, do er sprach: ecce homo."

¹⁰ Fra Mariano, *Itinerarium*, 141. For Fra Mariano's residence in Rome during the time of Julius II, see editor's note, iv, n. 2.

was fanned into a full-scale conflagration by an internal power struggle for leadership of the Jews. At the epicentre of the struggle stood the sacred citadel of the people, now transformed into a fortress for its warring Zealots and the Idumaeans who joined them. The Temple mount soon became the bloody battleground of a civil war; Jews walled within the Temple precinct massacred their fellow countrymen. The Romans, led by Titus, entered the battle with the crumbling of the last bulwark, Antonia Tower. Following this, in one of the most terrible sieges in history, Titus took the city. As the flames consumed the Sanctuary, the Romans planted their standards within the Temple area, and there hailed Titus as emperor.¹¹ The battle is movingly described by the Jewish Josephus Flavius, governor of Galilee, who opposed the Zealots and when captured became an adherent of the Roman cause. His history is the most detailed account of any first century event in the Roman Empire.

Set apart from other Roman conquerors of Jerusalem by the destruction of Solomon's Temple, Titus was renowned for his plunder of the Temple's sacred relics. In suppressing a smaller insurrection a century before, Pompey had approached but stopped short of entering the sanctuary; this left Jewish ritual undisturbed. Josephus described the enormity of Titus' feat, calling his deed to have the implements of the inner sanctuary a greater feat than Pompey's; with these he embellished the Temple of Peace. The Spoils accompanied Titus' cortege on its return home to Rome; they formed palpable testimony to the victory that was visually chronicled in battle scenes on the accompanying tableaux of his famous arch (fig. 18.2). The spoliation of the Temple dislodged the icons of the faith, and ended its long line of High Priests.

Extracting new meanings from the earlier historian's references to Christians, the fourth century historian Hegesippus construed the destruction of the Temple as God's vengeance for the killing of Christ.¹² Titus indirectly became a party to this act of divine retribution when Sulpicius Severus (d. ca A.D. 420) recorded that to "eliminate the superstitious beliefs of the Jews," Titus made a conscious decision to destroy the Synagogue.¹³ This

¹¹ Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 6:328.

¹² Hegesippus has been identified with Jude Isaak, (Anklager) in the service of Pope Damasus in 372. Scholars have traced the probable origin of this idea to Origen (d. 253/254 A.D). For a survey of the literature on this theme, see Schreckenberg, *Die Christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte*.

¹³ Sulpicius Severus (d. 420) (Chronicon II, 30, 6, 9, 8, quoted in Brandon, *Fall of Jerusalem*, Appendix IV).

attribution laid the foundation for later Christian exegetes who moulded a new persona for Titus as “the Avenger of Christ’s death.” St. Veronica’s legend was integrated into this rewriting of history. When she wiped Christ’s face on the way to Calvary, her veil was imprinted with his Image. Called to Rome by the reigning Emperor, she healed him with the touch of her *sudarium* and Titus was dispatched to Jerusalem to avenge Christ’s death.

A new chapter in the revised history of the Jewish war began with the First Crusade, which ended the Muslim occupation of Jerusalem and established the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. The earliest mention of Titus’ revenge in a crusading context dates to an Encyclical attributed to Pope Sergius IV (1009–1012); it calls for armed aid to regain the Holy Sepulchre from Muslim control. The pope assured certain victory to would-be soldiers by recalling the precedent of Titus who avenged Jesus’ death when he attacked Jerusalem.¹⁴ Sergius’ dates concur with Caliph el-Hakim’s destruction of the Holy Sepulchre in 1009. As the legends proliferated, similar rhetoric was used to marshal crusading forces, the public’s appetite whetted by the public performance of “Vengeance” legends.

Another aspect of Titus’ actions was brought to the fore in support of papal supremacy. A separate body of late medieval Church-oriented literature that drew on Early Christian sources related Titus’ relocated Spoils to papal prerogatives. The commonplace concepts of Rome as the New Jerusalem and the Roman pope as the successor to the sacerdotal dignity of the Old Testament priest-kings were sustained by this transfer, which was visually documented on the Arch of Titus.

In the *Descriptio Lateranensis Ecclesiae*, written on the orders of Pope Alexander III (1149/59–81), John the Deacon claimed the Spoils for the Lateran’s high altar.¹⁵ To Josephus’ ancient list, John added the Ark of the Covenant, the Tablets of the Law, the urn of Manna, the rod of Aaron, the staff of Moses and the Temple Columns as part of the cache donated to the Church. This expanded list was supported by Hegesippus’ record that all the biblical spoils were intact when Pompey entered the inner sanctum of Solomon’s Temple.

¹⁴ Gieysztor, “The Genesis of the Crusades: The Encyclical of Sergius IV (1009–1012),” Encyclical Part I, 21.

¹⁵ *Descriptio Lateranensis Ecclesiae* in *Codice topografico*, 3:319–373. See Herklotz “Der Mittelalterliche Fassadenportikus,” 80ff for this competition; also for the role that the Old Testament relics played in the polemic of the Lateran as *Sinagoga*.

In the second half of the Quattrocento, Titus rose in prominence as donor of the Spoils, replacing an earlier emphasis on Constantine. As an argument for papal primacy, this approach could draw on the fact that Titus' "donation" conveyed Old Testament authority from the Holy Land during the Petrine period.¹⁶ Legends of Titus' Christian conversion brought added strength to this line of thought. Much of the jockeying for position in the intra-mural battle between the Lateran and the Vatican was played out in claims to possession of columns from the Temple of Solomon. When he visited Rome in 1170, Benjamin of Tudela recorded that he saw two bronze columns inscribed with Solomon's name at the Lateran that were brought by Titus.¹⁷ John the Deacon concurred with this provenance but listed the number of columns as four.¹⁸ A century later, an anonymous member of the papal curia identified a column of St. Peter's with one from the Temple of Solomon.¹⁹ This early development and the rivalry it reflects set the stage for the increase in the number, properties and importance of the Spoils that took place following the papacy's return to Rome from Avignon. As other relics were added, their provenance traced to Solomon's Temple, and Titus credited with their transport, the history of possession was antedated to provide a seamless continuous record of papal authority resting on Titus and the Spoils. As the centuries wore on, claims to the Spoils formed an increasingly important part of the papacy's claim to primary status in the Universal Church.

A major change occurred in the years surrounding the reign of Pope Nicholas V (1447–55) in retroactive histories that placed a Flavian gloss on Jerusalem Spoils, with an emphasis on St. Peter's. This development was concurrent with Nicholas' plans to reconstruct the Apostle's Church. Josephus described the doors of Solomon's Temple, "Two story's high ... (with historiated) golden panels." In the last description of old St. Peter's (1455), Nicholas' canon Maffeo Vegio affirms that Filarete's bronze doors for Pope Eugenius IV replaced earlier doors that commemorated the portals of

¹⁶ Jerusalem was taken in 68–69; according to Eusebius, the Apostle was martyred in 68 BC.

¹⁷ Urlichs, *Codex urbis Romae*, 178.

¹⁸ *Descriptio Lateranensis Ecclesiae in Codice topografico*, 3:319–373.

¹⁹ According to Walter Cahn, the *Memoriale de Mirabilibus*, written during the reign of Urban V (d. 1370) and Gregory XI (d. 1378), is the earliest author to credit even one column at St. Peter's to the Temple of Solomon. "Solomonic Elements in Romanesque Art," 67.

Solomon's Temple that were damaged when Titus took Jerusalem.²⁰ In the same period Nikolaus Muffel numbers fourteen Solomonic columns at St. Peter's; twelve in the choir, two in Veronica's altar, and the Colonna Santa, and attributes their transport to Titus and Vespasian.²¹ In a contemporary illustration to Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*, the columns assume the Old Testament authenticity that was now attributed to them. They adorn Solomon's Temple in Jean Fouquet's *Pompey Entering the Holy of Holies*, which may reflect developments in Rome when the artist received concessions from Nicholas V.²² Muffel also credited Titus with the transport of Veronica's *sudarium*,²³ long proclaimed by Papal Bull to be St. Peter's most precious relic, even surpassing Peter's tomb. As the Quattrocento advanced, the list of Spoils grew, providing heightened evidence of the Church's standing as the New Jerusalem.

These accounts which bear a Nicholine imprint are contemporary with the rediscovery of the Temple of Peace. While this massive monument that is visible today on the old Via Sacra was known throughout the Middle Ages, its identity had been forgotten. Its recognition as the Flavian Temple of Peace — an identity that endured until the nineteenth century when an archaeologist recognized it as the Basilica of Maxentius — brought attention to the building's treasures, the booty captured from the Jews. Poggio Bracciolini, an outstanding humanist in the papal employ, recounts the discovery in a treatise on the past glories of Rome that he dedicated to Pope Nicholas V in 1447.²⁴ Flavio Biondo, an outstanding antiquarian and Nicholas' secretary, affirmed the identity by the Temple's proximity to the Arch of Titus and the Colosseum, monuments built close in time to celebrate the victory in Jerusalem.²⁵

²⁰ Maffei Vegio *De rebus antiquis*, Bk. IV, 84–85: “Portas ... quae Medianae dictae. ... Vocata autem Argentea ab Honorio Pontifice ... totam argenteis variisque picturis ornavit, incitatus (ad) id quod de templo Salomonis memoriae proditum est, cujus portas, atque a Tito Imperatore posteo bello, quod contra Iudaeos suscepit, igne succensas fuisse ... a Leone III pulcrius etiam et pretiosius restitutum ... Eugenius III ... aeneam restauravit.” Josephus, *Jewish War*, VI, 228 noted, “Titus ... issued orders to set the gates on fire.”

²¹ Muffel, *Beschreibung*, 21.

²² On Fouquet's grand tour in Italy (1449) and Nicholas' concessions to him, see Cianfarini, “Riflessi del soggiorno romano,” 383.

²³ Muffel, *Beschreibung*, 12.

²⁴ Bracciolini, *De varietate fortunae*, IV, 234.

²⁵ Biondo, *Roma restaurata*, Bk. III, 48v–49r.

These developments set the framework for incorporating Flavian architecture into the ecclesiastical architecture of Rome. The evocation of the Colosseum in the churches of the Capitol during the second half of the Quattrocento layered a Christian meaning onto Flavian deeds. The adaptation of this type of Roman exterior to a church façade occurred first in 1461 at the Benediction Loggia of St. Peter's, where it served as the scaffold for the pope's blessing of the Faithful. The Colosseum arrangement of superimposed orders became a leitmotif of Roman Quattrocento ecclesiastical architecture, with examples at San. Marco, Palazzo Venezia and the Cancelleria. The trend continued into the new century and beyond with Bramante's design of a multi-story loggia following the Colosseum's sequence of Doric, Ionic, Corinthian Orders for the main façade of the Vatican palace.

Nicholas V's "centralization" of the Italian peninsula was a counterpart to his recontouring of the capital. The restitution of temporal power in the papal estates was a main concern of the restored papacy that the pope himself expressed with his last words "by God's grace ... I was able ... to heal with peace and tranquility the towns that were lost, and settled everywhere so that no trace of war remained either within the church nor in all of Italy."²⁶ He achieved these ends by recovering territories of the *Patrimonium*, through formal and informal alliances, and by establishing feudal lords as vicars; acts which served to transform leaders who had come to power in the states of the church into official delegates of Rome.

Nicholas perceived that a peace treaty based on a general agreement among all the Italian powers was the only way to preserve the status quo.²⁷ He invited the great and small Signorie and communities of Italy to join in an *Italic League*. Consisting of five regional states, Venice, Milan, Florence, Papal Rome, and Naples, with other Italian states as secondary members, the League's intentions were to maintain peace among the Italian States; conserve them against attacks from within and without; guarantee their present possessions, and prepare a crusade against the Turk.²⁸ Rome was established as the seat of the League; the pope was granted the right to deliberate for all of its members and given the authority to act in the event one of its members did not obey the peace Nicholas' former secretary, Poggio Bracciolini, now First Counsellor of Florence, documents the pope's power as president of the

²⁶ Manetti, *Vita*, Bk. III, 194.

²⁷ Illardi, "The Italian League," 134.

²⁸ Soranzo, *La Lega Italica*, 17-18, 135.

League to adjudicate in matters of conflict and to bring arms to bear against dissenters.²⁹ It was the first confederation united in a pact under papal, not under imperial leadership.³⁰

In *Italia illustrata*, which he dedicated to the pope in 1453, Flavio Biondo broadened the vista on antiquarian studies; he moved away from an isolated discussion of Rome to a consideration of the peninsula as an entity; in this way setting forward legal, geographical and archaeological bases for unity.³¹ Nicholas' established important typologies for town planning, and for civic and ecclesiastic architecture. His plan for symmetrical streets and piazzas initiated a new tradition, which found realization with Pius II at Pienza, and Federigo da Montefeltro in Urbino among others. Federigo was apostolic vicar in the temporal affairs of his county and Captain General of the Church.³²

All of this transpired in the midst of Nicholas' rebuilding of Old St. Peter's and his restoration of the Vatican Palace. Nicholas completed the *Cortile del Papagallo* in 1454 and a group of artists was called to decorate rooms where Raphael later painted. Vasari tells us that Piero was summoned to the Vatican by Nicholas; he is believed to have formed part of this *équipe*.³³ This article argues for a consideration of Piero's *Flagellation* against the backdrop of historic developments and of the papal cult of Titus' Spoils as they are chronicled above.

Piero's "stagings" of the biblical narrative takes on historical relevancy when we consider that the sites of the Prison and the Flagellation were transferred to the porticoed courtyard of the Holy Sepulchre in the middle ages; a dramatic recreation of events of the Passion was occasionally

²⁹ Poggio Bracciolini, cited in Soranzo, *La Lega Italica*, 146.

³⁰ Past accords between the emperor and the pope were not effective in this period. Two imperial diets, Ratisbon and Frankfurt of 1454, concluded little; so, for the first time, the League was formed among the pope and the signorie in Italy and not under the aegis of the Holy Roman Emperor; see Soranzo, *La Lega Italica*, 124.

³¹ See Burroughs, *Sign to Design*, 221.

³² The ducal courts of Renaissance Italy that had political affinities with the Pope and similar crusade objectives also revived Flavian imagery. One example is the use of Titus coin types by the Montefeltro of Urbino, whose coat of arms and whose territories the della Rovere absorbed in the sixteenth century. Federigo who was a relative of the Della Rovere, received the title of duke from Pope Sixtus IV in 1474.

³³ See Lightbown, *Piero della Francesca*, 82–83, 179–180.

set against this backdrop.³⁴ A theatrical context, one infused with Flavian color, may also shed light on the picture's "bystanders." In the first sermon of a widely performed Quattrocento play by the Benedictine monk Eustache Marcadé (d. 1440) that is based on the legend of Titus as the Avenger of Christ's Death, a preacher explicates the phrase "*Convenerunt in unum*" as a prophecy of David concerning the villainous conspiracy of the Jewish elders against Jesus.³⁵

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³⁴ This discussion is drawn from Ousterhout, "The Temple, The Sepulcher and the Martyrion," 78. He notes that a room in the northeast corner was identified as the Prison of Christ as early as the ninth century. For connections between Piero's painting and the Holy Sepulchre that are expressed in architectural quotes from Alberti's Rucellai chapel, see Lavin, "Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation*," 324–325.

³⁵ Seven editions were published between the end of the fifteenth and the middle of the sixteenth century. On Marcadé, see Wright, *Vengeance of Our Lord*, 222f, 236f, 247.

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