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THE FLOWERING FOOT OF FLORA. DETAIL OF SANDRO BOTTICELLI, *PRIMAVERA*, LATE 1470S OR EARLY 1480S, TEMPERA ON PANEL, 202 X 314 CM, GALLERIA DEGLI UFFIZI, FLORENCE.

DEVOTIONAL TATTOOS IN EARLY MODERN ITALY

TATUAJES DEVOCIONALES EN LA ITALIA DE LA EDAD MODERNA

Guido Guerzoni¹

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Abstract

This essay seeks to analyze the production and dissemination of devotional tattoos in Early Modern times, focusing on the Italian case. It explores the details of their functions and meanings, and their intellectual reception. Nineteenth century theories stated that tattoos appeared in Europe only after the travels of Cook and Bouganville to savage Polynesia. There are many reasons to state that tattoos never disappeared in Italy, though. In the Roman Empire tattoo was considered «an indelible mark of infamy», while «tattooing of the whole body», was known as the «barbarian» custom. Between the fourth and the fifth century, the world of Christianity witnessed a progressive subversion of meanings originally approved for that practice of tattoo, by externalizing the signs of pain, transforming the figure of infamy in the patent expression of faith. Despite ambiguous attitude of Catholic authorities towards tattooing, this practice was a public ritual and this publicity was continually reiterated, revealing a social belonging.

Keywords

Devotional tattoos; Early Modern times; Italy; public ritual.

Resumen

Este ensayo pretende analizar la producción y difusión de los tatuajes devocionales en la Edad Moderna, con especial atención a Italia. Explora los detalles sobre sus funciones y significados, así como su recepción intelectual. Las teorías decimonónicas situaban la aparición de los tatuajes en Europa en un contexto posterior a los viajes de Cook y Bouganville a la Polinesia salvaje. Sin embargo, hay muchos motivos para creer que los tatuajes nunca desaparecieron de Italia. En tiempos del imperio romano el tatuaje fue considerado una «señal de infamia» y tatuarse el cuerpo, una práctica «bárbara». Entre los siglos IV y V, el cristianismo fue testigo de una progresiva transformación de los significados originalmente atribuidos

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a los tatuajes: se vivió un proceso de externalización de las señales del dolor y de transformación de la original infamia en una expresión de fe. Pese a las actitudes ambiguas que siempre mostraron las autoridades católicas hacia el tatuaje, esta práctica se convirtió en una ritual público y su visibilidad fue perpetuada, revelando un sentido identitario de pertenencia a un grupo.

Palabras clave:

Tatuajes devocionales; Edad Moderna; Italia; ritual público.

.....

I WOULD LIKE to make a few considerations on the production and dissemination of devotional tattoos in Early Modern times, and their intellectual reception, focusing on the Italian case, in which the presence of tattoos is documented since – at least – 3.400-3.100 BC, the period in which flourished Ötzi, the iceman mummy of Similaun, found in September 1991, with 53 tattoos adorning his body. It is not a brand-new issue, having been analysed in the past.² Nevertheless I reckon it is worthy to raise the question, both to confront with the vast number of studies that in the last few years addressed these issues, and to delve on the details of functions and meanings relevant to the religious practice.

Finalizing the essay *I tatuaggi sacri e profani della Santa Casa di Loreto* (sacred and profane tattoos in the Holy House of Loreto) published in 1889, ethnologist Caterina Pigorini Beri described a:

peculiar tradition encountered in almost every population of ancient Piceno, between the sea and the Tronto, Umbria and Abruzzi. This smart, kind and straightforward population in which apparently the Umbrian and Etrurian civilization mixed up, traditionally used tattoos: men in particular. And it is easy to notice because the tattoos are generally on their arms, close to the wrists.

The observer is always surprised seeing the peasants in the fields, with their sleeves rolled up, showing these symbolic signs in a turquoise shade of blue: a silhouette, a motto, a cross and the symbols of passion, with the sun and the moon, or the Holy Spirit and one or two pierced hearts, sometimes under a cross lodged in a globe or in a star; then the eternal, indelible forget-me-not as the song goes.

The tattoo is so natural and common that nobody talks about it. In fact, to my knowledge, nobody in the villages ever mentioned this strange tradition, peculiar to that region, that necessarily has a primary ethnographic and historical relevance.³

The same observation was made few years before, by the abbot Stoppani, who described this barbarian practise in his book published in 1881. He noticed in Loreto strange thugs, who were «jumping and beating like castanets some tablets of wood»

2. See for instance SCUTT, Ronald & GOTCH, Christopher: *Skin Deep: The Mysteries of Tattooing*. London, Peter Davies, 1974; MAERTENS, Jean-Thierry: *Le dessein sur la peau. Essai d'anthropologie des inscriptions tégumentaires*. Paris, Aubier Montagne, 1978; OETTERMANN, Stephan: *Zeichen auf der Haut. Die Geschichte der Tätowierung in Europa*. Frankfurt am Main, Syndikat, 1979; ANZIEU, Didier: *Le moi-peau*. Paris, Dunod, 1985; FAVAZZA, Armando R.: *Bodies Under Siege: Self-Mutilation and Body Modification in Culture and Psychiatry*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987; RUBIN, Arnold (ed.): *Marks of Civilisation. Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. Museum of Cultural History, Los Angeles, 1988; SANDERS, Clinton R. & VAIL, D. Angus: *Customizing the Body. The Art and Culture of Tattooing*. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1989; MASCIA-LEES, Frances E. & SHARPE, Patricia (eds.): *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation and Adornment. The Denaturalization of the Body in Culture and Text*. Albany, State University of New York Press, 1992; GELL, Alfred: *Wrapping in Images. Tattooing in Polynesia*. Oxford, Oxford Studies in Social & Cultural Anthropology, 1993; POLHEMUS, Ted & RANDALL, Housk: *The Customized Body*, New York, Serpent's Tail, 1996; MIFFLIN, Margot: *Bodies of subversion. A secret History of Women and Tattoo*. Juno Books, New York, 1997; FLEMING, Juliet: «The Renaissance Tattoo», *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 31 (Spring, 1997), pp. 34-52; CAPLAN, Jane (ed.): *Written on the Body. The Tattoo in European and American History*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000; GILBERT, Steve G.: *Tattoo History. A Source Book*, New York, Juno Publishing, 2001.

3. PIGORINI BERI, Caterina: *Costumi e superstizioni dell'Appennino Marchigiano*. Città di Castello, S. Lapi, 1889, p. 291.

inviting «people to do something that I did not understand immediately...».⁴ He was dumbfounded when he saw «a girl come forward, fresh-faced, innocent-looking and smiling». She chose a holy sign and then «left the arm at that jerk. That vile man began to spread with a black paint the salient features of the incision. Then he applied the tablet on that poor arm and he pressed it in such a way that it remained printed in black. Then began the shameful carnage. He wielded a stiletto made in steel and with his hand animated by an almost convulsive shudder, he began to tease, injure blood to the poor victim. He passed and repassed on the lines of engraving, until all that filth was absorbed».⁵

I found some tablets engraved in the sixteenth century at Loreto (Figures 1-29) and they can be grouped into six main categories: I) Tattoos related to Order of Saint Francis (Franciscans were the first keepers of the Loreto sanctuary); II) Tattoos associated to the Company of Jesus; III) Tattoos related to both previous orders; IV) Various religious tattoos; V) Love tattoos; VI) Miscellaneous, with tattoos of young spouses (doves, according to the say «and the verb turned into flesh and inhabited us»), and widowers' with skull and crossed shinbones and the motto *memento mori* tattooed below.

However, the statement made by Pigorini Beri was not completely true. Cesare Lombroso, the famous/infamous founder of Italian criminal anthropology, who collected an astonishing bulk of drawings and photographs, focused on tattoos (Figure 30) and had already observed in 1878 the habit of devotional tattoos, there and elsewhere. He revealed that in Lombardy, near the Sanctuary of Caravaggio, shepherds preferred the «cross superimposed to a globe or a heart and surrounded by candles»; the image of the Blessed Sacrament was appreciated especially by people of Naples, together with crucifixes, patron saints, and the portraits of the dead,⁶ while on the arms of the people from Romagna it was common to see christograms in the shape of a capital H,⁷ similar to those described by Giuseppe Pitré in Sicily, some decades earlier.⁸ This geographical distribution was confirmed by a rich national lexicography: *retrato* (portrait), *marco* (mark), *signo* (sign), *devozione* (devotion), *marconzito* and *'nzito*.

These sources invite us to reconsider mainstream nineteenth century theories and scholars, which stated that tattoos appeared in Europe only after the travels of Cook and Bouganville to savage Polynesia. The historical practice of devotional tattooing in Italy was a comprehensible matter of embarrassment, since it questioned unfaltering tenets of the anthropological school of positivist matrix, which stressed, not only in Italy, the atavistic, deviant, and «extra-European» features of tattoos. These theories, lacking serious historical foundation, saw in the «sign of Cain» the *trait d'union* underlining the association between the savages described by coeval

4. STOPPANI, Antonio: *Il bel paese*, Milano, Giacomo Agnelli, 1881, p. 164.

5. *Ibidem*, p. 164.

6. LOMBROSO, Cesare: *Uomo Delinquente in Rapporto all'Antropologia, Giurisprudenza e alle Discipline Carcerarie. Delinquente-Nato e Pazzo Morale*. Torino, Fratelli Bocca, 1884, pp. 300-1.

7. PIGORINI BERI, Caterina: *op. cit.*, p. 303.

8. PITRÉ, Giuseppe: *Usi e costumi, credenze e pregiudizi del popolo siciliano raccolti e descritti da Giuseppe Pitré*. Palermo, il Vespro, 1870-1913, vol. I, p. 465.

FIGURES 1-15. TATTOOS WOODEN ENGRAVED TABLETS, SIXTEENTH CENTURY, BASILICA DELLA SANTA CASA, LORETO: 1-4 CRUCIFIX, 5 ROOSTER, 6-7 HOLY GHOST, 8-9 CROSS, 10 OSTENSORIUM, 11 GLOBE, 12-13 MONOGRAM OF ST. BERNARDINE, 14-15 MADONNA OF LORETO.

FIGURES 16-29. TATTOOS WOODEN ENGRAVED TABLETS, SIXTEENTH CENTURY, BASILICA DELLA SANTA CASA, LORETO: 16-17 MADONNA'S SYMBOLS, 18 OUR LADY OF SORROWS, 19 IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, 20 ST. ANTHONY OF PADUA, 21-22 ST. FRANCIS, 23 ST CLARE, 24 ST. MICHAEL, 25 PURGATORIAL SOULS, 26-28 DIVINE PIERCED HEARTS, 29 TWO PIERCED HEARTS.

FIGURE 30. LOMBROSIAN PLATE OF TATTOOED MEN, NINETEENTH CENTURY, MUSEO DI ANTROPOLOGIA CRIMINALE, CESARE LOMBROSO, UNIVERSITÀ DI TORINO.

explorers, geographers and anthropologists, and the *urban cavemen*, responsible or potentially responsible for the most heinous crimes against human society.

To understand the embarrassment of that time, however, we have to go back to the devotional function, and the genuinely popular practice of a very ancient tradition, which questions those lingering historical assumptions. In the traditional classification of tattoos made by Lombroso and De Blasio (tattoo of love, of nickname, of revenge, of graduation, of contempt, of profession, of beauty, of age, ethnic, obscene, hereditary, symbolic, psychic, religious), the causes that kept this custom would have been the imitation, the idleness, the spirit of the sect, the erotic passions, the atavism and, finally, the religion.⁹ Hence the difficulties encountered

9. See BERTÉ, Francesco: «Il tatuaggio in Sicilia in rapporto alla resistenza psichica», *Archivio di Etnografia e Antropologia*, 22 (1891), pp. 205-230; CERCHIARI, Luigi, G.: *Chiromanzia e tatuaggio. Note di varietà, ricerche storiche e scientifiche coll'appendice di un'inchiesta con risposte di Ferrero, Lombroso, Mantegazza, Morselli ed altri*. Milano, Ulrico Hoepli, 1903; DE ALBERTIS, Orazio: *Il tatuaggio nelle prostitute. Studio psico antropologico*. Genova, Stab. tip. del Commercio, 1888; DE BLASIO, Abele: *Il tatuaggio dei camorristi e delle prostitute di Napoli*. Torino, Fratelli Bocca, 1894; *idem*: *Il tatuaggio ereditario e psichico dei camorristi napoletani*. Napoli, Tocco, 1898; *idem*: *Ulteriori ricerche intorno al tatuaggio dei camorristi napoletani*. Napoli, ivi, Camilla e Bertolero, 1902; *idem*: *Il tatuaggio*. Napoli, Priore, 1905; *idem*: *Tatuaggi anarchici in delinquenti monarchici*. Napoli, Luigi Piero, 1906; *idem*: «Tatuaggi di delinquenti precoci», *L'Anomalo* (1914), pp. 2-12; *idem*: *Tatuaggi artistici in disertori francesi*. Torino, Fratelli Bocca, 1911; EULA, Donato C.: *L'espressione del tatuaggio. Appunti critici d'antropologia criminale*. Milano, Corriere sam bisemtin, 1897; FRANCI, G.B.: *Tatuaggio politico in un delinquente d'occasione*, Siena 1915; GURRIERI, Rafaele: *Il tatuaggio nella antropologia e nella*

FIGURE 31. TATTOOS WOODEN ENGRAVED TABLETS AND CORRESPONDING PRINTS, SIXTEENTH CENTURY, LORETO, BASILICA DELLA SANTA CASA.

in trying to bring to order, according to likely paths, such complex phenomenon: beyond the hypocritical wonder for the blatant infraction of the biblical precepts that banished every form of self-mutilation and permanent modification of the body, considered the masterpiece of God, some reservations were tactically made about the lawfulness of such a privately idolatrous relationship. I would dare to say, in front of some tattoo artists, customized.

In the case of Loreto, in fact, both the very wide range of patterns (more than four hundred have survived) (Figure 31) and their paradoxical modernity (i.e. the success of the images such as Santa Filomena, canonized in 1833, or the Immaculate Conception, whose dogma was declared only in 1854), which make me not obliterate entirely the possibility that even free tattoos were performed, aside the choice of tabellar motifs. As indeed observed Pigorini Beri: «no other sanctuary has so many tattoos (even if there are other shrines that have such strange custom) as that of Loreto: and, a fact worthy of the highest attention is this: the sacred tattoo of Loreto, without speaking for now of the amorous that is a direct consequence of it, it has a singular variety of types and symbolic figures»¹⁰.

medicina legale. Bologna, Zanichelli, 1912; LOMBROSO, Cesare: *Il tatuaggio*. Torino, 1866; *idem*: «Sul tatuaggio in Italia in specie fra i delinquenti», *Rivista Carceraria*, 17 (1875), pp. 113-26; *idem*: *L'uomo delinquente*. Milano, Hoepli, 1876; MIRABELLA, Emanuele: *Il tatuaggio dei domiciliati coatti in Favignana, con prefazione del Prof. Cesare Lombroso*. Roma, Tipografia Editrice Romana, 1903; MOLINARO DEL CHIARO, Luigi: *Il tatuaggio*. Napoli, G. M. Priore, 1905; OTTOLENGHI, Salvatore: *Il tatuaggio nei minorenni corrigendi*. Torino, Fratelli Bocca, 1898; PONTECORVO, Carlo: *Il tatuaggio e sua importanza antropologica e medico-legale*. Roma, Tip. Mariani, 1891.

10. PIGORINI BERI, Caterina: *op. cit.*

We can therefore imagine the bewilderment of several nineteenth century authors, who unwillingly penned masterpieces of humour, such as *Artistic tattoos of French deserters*, *The psychic and hereditary tattoos of Naples' camorristi*, *Anarchic tattoos in monarchic criminals*, *Political tattoos in an occasional criminal*, or *Tattoos and the somatic aesthetics of negroes*. Proud of putting in the preface of their treatises the canonical quote of Théophile Gautier: «The brute feels that the ornament traces an indelible border between him and the beast, and when he cannot embroider his clothes, he decorates his own skin», they welcomed these discoveries with comprehensible embarrassment.

The first obstacle was represented by the epithelial taboo, by the intolerant embarrassment, a *skin feeling* one could say, for this painful use of the integument that forced to overcome the Manichean concept of «social skin», aptly described by Terence Turner: «The surface of the body becomes, in any human society, a boundary of a peculiarly complex kind, which simultaneously separates domains lying on either side of it and conflates different levels of social, individual, and intra-psychic meaning. The skin (and hair) are the concrete boundary between the self and the other, the individual and society».¹¹

In the limbs of male and female devotees, the shame of permanent deformation added up to the publicity of the act and the fact, since tattooing was a public ritual and the tattoos were intentionally done in visible parts of the body. But this publicity was continually reiterated, revealing a social belonging, so privately identitarian even before confessional, which turns intolerable for bourgeois clichés in terms of body visibility and aesthetics of nudity. The devotional tattoo, although it expressed noble sentiments, being the non-metaphorical incarnation of an unshakable faith, shattered several taboos in one shot: the peasants, in fact, did not get tattooed in the pudent and shameful parts, like the mafiosi, the camorristi, the pederasts, and the prostitutes. On the contrary, they preferred cutaneous garments exposed to sunlight, sort of personal sanctuaries prêt-à-porter, ready to welcome the breath of the air and the look of the peers.

According to the classical literary sources, many ancient people were tattooed: the Assyrians described by Luciano, the Dacians and the Sarmatians who according to Pliny «corpora sua inscribunt», the Thracians observed by Herodotus, so full of ink that they originated the expression Thracianotae, but not the Christians, nor, much less, the devoted servants of the Holy Roman Church. In fact, whether it was Arii, Agatirsi, Britanni, Cananei, Geloni, Libi, Nubiani, Pitti or Scizi, the tattoo denounced, without words, the barbarian nature of its bearers. Hence the die-hard belief that in Italy, these primitive forms of bodily modification had disappeared since antiquity, together with the extinction of the *mores* of the ancient barbarian populations.

This is curious because the Latin word for tattoo (which is a Polynesian lemma first appeared in English in Captain Cook's Voyages in 1770), namely *nota* (note,

11. TURNER, Terence: «The social skin: interface with the world», in CHERFAS, Jeremy & LEWIN, Roger: *Not Works alone: a cross-cultural view of activities superfluous to survival*. London, Temple Smith, 1980, p. 139.

writing), derives from the substitution of the greek *stizein* (stinging, itching, root of which was derived from stigma, *ta stigmata*, stigmàta) with the verb *inscribo*, which has the same etymology of *scribbles*. Stigmàta were presumably tattoos, and at the early beginning of Christian culture and literacy we found these writings in the flesh, *these biographies*: the tattoo was first writing, the expression of a completed thought, narration, vote, speech, epic, history.

In this regard I believe that it would be wrong to assume that the tradition of tattooing, not only religious symbols, was a recent novelty in Loreto, and broadly speaking, Italy. It was an ancient practice, carried out at least since the fifteenth century, but probably never interrupted from Roman times. Let's consider for instance the description provided in the codex Urbinate Latino 1217, preserved in the Vatican Library and entitled *Thesaei Pines, Urbinatis speculum de cerretanis*, which according to the authoritative opinion of Pietro Camporesi was written between 1484 and 1486. The author described a peculiar habit of the Pauliani, a bizarre Christian sect whose members, thanks to the intercession of Saint Paul, were insensitive to snake poison, living with them and bearing a snake tattooed on their shoulders.

The description provided by Teseo Pini is fairly impressive: in Rome «they draw first on the arm or shoulder a serpent. Then with the tip of a very thin needle they make small bites over the figure. After they rub them with soot or coal dust or with the juice of certain herbs. The flesh absorbs through the bites that color and remains perpetually the sign, and so Paulani lead and show the blue/black spots in the shape of a snake on the white skin». Few years later the *Provisione elemosinaria per li poveri di qualunque sorte della città di Bologna*, published in the same city in 1548, when speaking of beggars, stigmatized those who «dye and dot (*maculano*) their flesh by exhibiting misfortunes of their country, fire, war or other ruins». The same kind of tattooed beggars, in Rome, were known as «istoriati», (where «istoriare» means to decorate with historical or legendary scenes), indirectly recognizing with this title the narrative dimension of the stories written of their bodies.

But tattooing in Early Modern Italy was not only a deviant practice. The Neapolitan abbot Diego Bernardo de Mendoza, who died in 1650, revealed a Marian tattoo on his chest, associated to a devotional practice known as «Slavery of Mary».¹² Its motives were similar to those described by the French traveller Jean de Thévenot, who in the spring of 1658 visited the holy sites of Palestine. On the 29th of April, a Monday, he spent all day with his travelling companions «to have our arms tattooed, like all Pilgrims who are Christians of Bethlehem following the Latin rite which is practiced...».¹³ Were the Pilgrims and the Crusaders coming back from the East responsible of importing this exotic practice in the Italian land, flaunting like a trophy their turquoise arms? Or this tradition was common in many other areas, not only in Italy, and we just ignored its existence?

12. CORRAIN, Cleto, et al.: «Il tatuaggio religioso in Loreto», *Ravennatensia*, 6 (1977), pp. 381-96, quoted at pp. 388-89.

13. In PERDRIZET, Paul: «La miraculeuse histoire de Pandare et d'Echédore, suivie de recherches sur la marque dans l'Antiquité», *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 14 (1911), pp. 54-129, quoted at p. 113.

The sources I quoted raise many historical questions. Among the many, I will pick up two of them. The first is represented by the ambiguous attitude of Catholic authorities towards tattooing, criticized in chapter XIX, v. 28 of Leviticus («You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks upon you»), condemned by the Nicaea Council of 325, and abhorred by the Church Fathers. This practice could be explained by remembering that in the Roman Empire¹⁴ tattoo was considered «an indelible mark of infamy», while «tattooing of the whole body», was known as the «barbarian» custom: for them, tattooing was always utilitarian, and usually a sign of degradation.¹⁵ In the Latin world, it was used to punish fugitive slaves, prisoners of war or criminals with defamatory, punitive or preventive functions (for Juvenal and Apuleius the condemned *in ergastula* were *inscripti* or *litterati*).¹⁶ Many were *damnati ad metalla* (condemned to the mines), condemned to gladiatorial schools,¹⁷ the *probosae personae* (mimes, teachers, technitai Dionysiou, gladiators, prostitutes, lenons and ruffians),¹⁸ to close with the freshmen (*fabricienses*) of the arsenals. The only exceptions were the tattoos of the soldiers, who engraved on the right arm the name of the emperor and the date of their engagement, although even in this case some degree of coercion is visible, as such signs made desertions much more difficult and risky.

In most cases, therefore, the tattoo was considered to be: «an indelible mark of infamy which adds insult to injury, and makes the punishment permanent, should (under unforeseen circumstances) the other punitive situation prove temporary».¹⁹ Sometimes the name of the crime was inscribed (K for Calumnia, F or FGV for Fugitivus), in other cases the offended authority, in others still the penalty to be served: almost all the Christians condemned to the forced labor in the mines were tattooed on their forehead with the sentence *Ad Metalla*.

14. See BURRUS, Virginia: «Macrina's Tattoo», *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 33 (2003), pp. 403-17; COLEMAN, Kathleen M.: «Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments», *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 80 (1990), pp. 44-73; DÖLGER, Franz J.: *Sphragis: eine altchristliche Taufbezeichnung in ihren Beziehungen zur profanen und religiösen Kultur des Altertums*. Paderborn, Schöningh, 1911; *idem*: «Religiöser oder profaner Charakter der Stammestätowierung?», *Antike und Christentum*, III, 3 (1932), pp. 204-9; *idem*: «Beiträge zur Geschichte des Kreuzzeichens», *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, 1 (1958), pp. 5-19; ELM, Susanna: «Sklave Gottes - Stigmata, Bischöfe und anti-häretische Propaganda im vierten Jahrhundert», *Historische Anthropologie*, 7, 3 (1999), pp. 345-63; *idem*: «Marking the Self in Late Antiquity. Inscriptions, Baptism and the Conversion of Mimes», in MENKE, Bettine & VINKEN, Barbara (eds.): *Stigmata. Poetiken der Körperinschrift*. Paderborn, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2004, pp. 47-68; GUSTAFSON, Mark: «Comdemnation to the Mines in the Later Roman Empire», *Harvard Theological Review*, 87 (1994), pp. 421-33; *idem*: «Inscripta in fronte: Penal Tattooing in Late Antiquity», *Classical Antiquity*, 16 (1997), pp. 79-105; *idem*: «The Tattoo in Later Roman Empire and Beyond», in CAPLAN, Jane (ed.): *Written on the body: the tattoo in European and American History*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 16-31; JONES, Christopher P.: «Stigma: Tattooing and Branding in Greco-Roman Antiquity», *Journal of Roman Studies*, 72 (1987), pp. 139-55; *idem*: «Stigma and Tattoo», in CAPLAN, Jane (ed.): *Written on the body: the tattoo in European and American History*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 1-15; SCHÖNFELD, Walther: *Körperbemalen, Brandmarken, Tätowieren. Nach griechischen, römischen Schriftstellern, Dichtern, neuzeitlichen Veröffentlichungen und eigenen Erfahrungen, vorzüglich in Europa*. Heidelberg, Huthig, 1960; ZIMMERMANN, Konrad: «Tätowierte Thrakerinnen auf griechischen Vasenbildern», *Jahrbuch des Deutschen archäologischen Instituts*, 95 (1980), pp. 163-96.

15. JONES, Christopher P.: «Stigma: Tattooing and Branding...», p. 143.

16. JONES, Christopher P.: «Stigma: Tattooing and Branding...», pp. 149-50 and 153.

17. GUSTAFSON, Mark: «Inscripta in fronte...», p. 83.

18. ELM, Susanna: «Marking the Self...», p. 58.

19. GUSTAFSON, Mark: «Inscripta in fronte...», pp. 89-90.

In light of this evidence, we can understand the virtuous association between slavery, stigmata and martyrdom: many Christians were proud to bear witnesses to their faith, their «being slaves of Christ». When saint Paul in his Letter to the Galatians (6,17) claimed to have: «the stigmata of Jesus» on his body, he immediately qualified himself as his slave, ensuring the eternal luck of the term, used to identify bodily signs that for self-laceration or mystical transmission advertise the intimate participation of the stigmatized to the sufferings of Jesus Christ. In this sense, as Susanne Elm pointedly noted: «as long as occurs voluntarily, such markings can be read as representing supreme disregard of even the highest authority manifested in the immaculate body, and thus as projecting an authority that transcends such power and become unassailable».²⁰

However, the positions held by the leaders of the Church were ambiguous. On the one hand they officially deprecated these forms of devotion, disputing the idolatrous tendencies that made them almost indistinguishable from those prevalent among the heretical and heterodox movements, with whom they were in open, and sometimes bloody, conflict. On the other hand, the hierarchies were forced, in hostile environments, to permit the nobility of purpose, not being able to defer the risks run by those who bravely showed the distinguished marks of their faith, nor being able to ignore the presence of obligations rather explicit. Thus, between the fourth and the fifth century, the world of Christianity witnessed a progressive and significant subversion of meanings originally approved for that practice. This subversion, by externalizing the signs of pain, transformed the figure of infamy in the patent expression of faith, a symbol of martyrdom.

Not by chance in mid-sixth century Procopius of Gaza found that many Christians had tattoos on their shoulders or arms with the name and symbols of Christ, the beloved figures (ΙΧΘΥΣ, Greek acronym for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Savior), INRI, Α and Ω, the emblems of the fish, dolphin, lamb or anchor, christograms and symbols of the cross. They were bold letters of everlasting devotion, lively and pulsating holy scriptures, inscribed on the arms and the hands of those who carried an eternal declaration of love and obedience. They would be forever inscribed on their flesh, till death, a proof of their faith proudly flaunted in front of infidels and non-believers.

For this reason, I am strongly convinced that tattoos never disappeared in Italy. They crossed unscathed the centuries that separated the decline of the Roman Empire from the publication of manuals for confessors. For example, amongst the *Decisiones prudentiales casuum et quaesitorum conscientia* of Reverend Father Prospero Domenico Maroni, from Cagli, published in Forlì in 1702, it is mentioned, as thirty seventh case, the interesting example of «women that during the celebration of Saint John Baptist trace crosses or other signs on the body of men or women, puncturing the flesh with pins so that they could better absorb the ink that is poured on the wounds after bleeding...».²¹

20. ELM, Susanna: «Pierced by Bronze Needles: Anti-Montanist Charges of Ritual Stigmatization in Their Fourth-Century Context», *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 4 (1996), pp. 409-39, quoted at pp. 414-5.

21. In CROCIONI, Giovanni: *Superstizioni e pregiudizi nelle Marche durante il Seicento*. Bologna, Cappelli, 1947, p. 75.

FIGURE 32. J. WHATMAN, IL MARCATORE DI SANTILLI (TATTOOIST IN NAPLES), CA. 1820, COLORED AQUATINT, 78 X 103 MM, IN A. CHIUSOLE, ITINERARIO DELLE PITTURE, SCULTURE, ED ARCHITETTURE PIÙ RARE DI MOLTE CITTÀ D'ITALIA, N. P., N. D.

Bleeding reminds the relevance of the devotional rituals, which must be taken into account. Those are less tied to earthly permanence of the outcome, the trademark blue or blackish – mute albeit talking witness of a feeling that did not fear death and pain – but rather to the ephemeral performative mode that accompanied the execution of devotional tattooing. All descriptions gathered underline that the rite of tattooing was celebrated *coram populo*, according to the canons of a public martyrdom, though no doubt individual: as anyone that had a tattoo knows, during the operation the limb, stimulated by the instrument of the tattooist, «spews blood». From this perspective, similarly to what occurred in other extreme devotional practices, from self-flagellation to stripping the flesh off knees or feet soles, these cutaneous icons replicated, in public but bearable forms, the technical modalities of crucifixion.

Pilgrims used to have the forearm tattooed, near or onto the hand, as if they wanted to imitate Saint Francis' *stigmata*, a practice confirmed by the shapes and dimensions of the matrixes that have been preserved. Though slightly differing, from a minimum of two by four centimetres (find 887, Heart of Jesus pierced by a sword *Cuore di Gesù trafitto da una spada*) to a maximum of five by eight (find 848, Crucifix *Crocifisso*), they generally developed in length, proving the usage of having the hollow or more frequently the back of the forearm tattooed. This habit confirms the ostensory function of the multitude of *signes* inflicted, which were sheer *insigna Cristi*, and not by chance the nail of the tattooist in fact insisted on

wrists of Italian martyrs, leaving forever impressed the *stigmata* of their suffering (pain can be quite intense, especially near those points which are replete of nerve endings, such as, precisely, wrists).²²

To this pain, the metaphorical one often added up, since a remarkable number of issues evokes quite explicitly gory piercings. The versions of the Madonnas of Seven Pains (covered in blades and stabbed in various fashions), or the sacred hearts of Jesus pierced with rapiers and daggers, underline the evocative power of this votive means, since the pain of the incision guaranteed the atonement of sins and the perennial remembering of the suffering of object and subject in the act of devotion.

What remains open is the big question: why don't we have painting or other visual reproduction of tattoos? Was it simply tolerated but officially criticized, suggesting the painters not to reproduce this popular, a little bit pagan, costume? (Figure 32) What is notorious is that this censorship was as old as ignored by many other believers, and mostly by those who were more involved, namely the pilgrims: «it is an old custom for Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem to be tattooed there with some religious symbol, their name, or initials, and the dates of the pilgrimage».²³ Nevertheless, the infraction of this prohibition was equivalent of blasphemy to any visual artist. And since the artists often left the imperishable trace of their signature on their artworks, it was not advisable to commit a crime so serious, for which were expected very severe penalties.

22. See on these aspects MADFIS, Eric & ARFORD, Tammi: «The Dilemmas of Embodied Symbolic Representation», *The Social Science Journal*, 50, 4 (2013), pp. 547-556.

23. See OUSTERHOUT, Robert: «Permanent Ephemera: The 'Honourable Stigmatisation' of Jerusalem Pilgrims», in BARTAL, Renana & VORHOLT, Hanna (eds.): *Between Jerusalem and Europe. Essays in Honour of Bianca Kühnel*. Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2015, pp. 97-109.

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