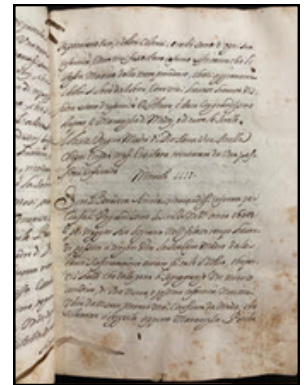


The Mysteries Embedded in a Manuscript Miracle Collection

This newsletter's guest columnist is Laura Ackerman Smoller, Professor of History at the University of Rochester, NY. Widely known for her explorations on medieval and Renaissance European astronomy and prophecy (History, Prophecy, and the Stars: The Christian Astrology of Pierre d'Ailly, 1350-1420) and her award-winning investigation of Vincent Ferrer (The Saint and the Chopped-Up Baby: The Cult of Vincent Ferrer in Medieval and Early Modern Europe), Laura is now working on a new book project, tentatively titled "Astrology and the Sibyls."

As students of hagiography, we know that our sources can illuminate a wide range of topics. That simple point was brought home to me when I spent time with a manuscript recently acquired by the institution where I teach (uncatalogued manuscript, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, University of Rochester). The manuscript in question was compiled in the Dominican nunnery of Santa Maria della Pietà in Palermo, Sicily, in the early seventeenth century, and it records forty-one miracles worked through the intercession of a small carved ivory image of the Virgin Mary housed in the nunnery.

The manuscript begins by telling the story of the wonder-working image: how a nun named Sister Maria d'Amari had been cured through the merits of a statue known as Our Lady of Trapani; how she decided as a consequence to have a small ivory copy of the Trapani Madonna made for herself, which she wore around her neck; how the pendant itself was miraculously restored after its clasp broke when she washed it; and how Sorella Maria herself was named "custodatrice" of the sacred image. The Madonna of Trapani is a life-size alabaster sculpture of the Virgin and infant Jesus housed the Santuario dell'Annunziata (Sanctuary of Our Lady of the Annunciation) in Trapani, some forty-five miles west of Palermo.





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It is possible that Sister Maria had not traveled to Trapani itself in search of her cure, although the shrine had been, since at least the fifteenth century, one of the major pilgrimage sites in Sicily. The statue from Trapani itself spurred numerous copies, and at the time of Sister Maria's cure—sometime around the year 1600---, she could have visited one of the several reproductions of the image in Palermo: in the cathedral, in the church of St. Francis of Assisi (home to at least two copies), or in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine.

The manuscript itself tells a story apart from the miracle tales inscribed within. It is clear that the sisters of the Monastero della Pietà intended for their ivory reproduction to be the source of supernatural succor, just as the original in Trapani was, for the manuscript book in which they began recording miracles associated with their image contains scores of blank leaves following those on which the forty-one miracles are inscribed. The volume's lovely binding is embossed with a depiction of the Virgin and child, clearly modeled on Our Lady of Trapani (and presumably on Sister Maria's pendant copy). A leaf has been cut out following the tale of the image's origin that begins the manuscript, and the text picks up partway through the story of the first miracle recorded in the manuscript. I suspect that the missing leaf contained another depiction of the wonder-working Madonna on its recto side, commencing the first miracle narration on the verso. That image must at some point have been excised, either for its artistic value, or—more likely—as another locus for divine assistance.

Following this introductory material, the manuscript lists forty-one miracles, recorded in at least three different hands. Of those tales, forty are records of miraculous healings. The scribes who wrote down these miracles kept a careful record of the miraculéés' symptoms, also dutifully noting the fruitless efforts of physicians to cure their ailing patients. The sisters of Santa Maria della Pietà witnessed cures from fevers, pains, apostemes, loss of voice, stomach troubles, grave illnesses, loss of sight, flows of blood, sore throats, inflammations of the chest, gas, coughs, and psychological woes (especially sadness, including the cure of one sister suffering from “amor malancolico”—perhaps a form of love-sickness?). There were a lot of fevers, including cases of fevers specifically described as “tertian fevers.”

Most interestingly, there are three tales from 1603-04 of nuns who suffered from a “maravigliosa infirmità” (a marvelous illness), one never seen before and unknown to physicians. The nuns' disturbing symptoms, described in great detail, included periods in which they appeared dead for upwards of a half an hour, followed by a sudden phase in which the affected sister would jump up in the air (three or four palms high). The afflicted at times turned about like a millstone, made sucking motions and noises, and were overcome by such great tremors that neither their fellow nuns nor the physicians attending them were able to restrain them.



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One sister would fall to the ground and slither about like a snake. In each case, after months in which the symptoms went on day and night, and in which physicians' remedies were of no avail, contact with the miraculous image of the Blessed Virgin at last brought the suffering nun back to full health. In one of these cases (Miracle 4), Sister Benedetta Amodei's physical sufferings came on top of the intense emotional pain of losing her beloved mother. In a fourth, possibly related case, the sister's terrible trembling began after a large painting fell from the wall just beside her in the chapel.

What was going on here? Historians of medicine typically caution against a desire to jump from textual description to retrospective diagnosis, and, based on my reading of many medieval miracle stories, I tend to concur with their reticence. So what is interesting to me is what remains unsaid in these tales. In not one of these cases is there a hint that the "marvelous disease" could possibly be a sign of demonic possession. This absence is striking because, as Brian Levack and others have shown, epidemics of possessions were becoming increasingly frequent in nunneries in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe—one thinks of the spectacular possessions of the nuns of Loudon in 1634, for example. Here, with a cluster of four seemingly intractable cases within a span of less than two years, the nuns of Santa Maria della Pietà—and the physicians they summoned—breathed not a word that the spectacular behaviors exhibited by these nuns might look not like a "marvelous disease," but rather like demonic possession. The reasons for their resolute insistence on a medical interpretation of the sickness that preceded these miraculous cures remain as mysterious to me as do other questions raised by this intriguing manuscript.

If the manuscript begins with the tale of the nunnery's acquisition of the wonder-working copy of Our Lady of Trapani, it clearly was also intended to document a burgeoning cult surrounding the ivory pendant. The multiple scribes who noted miracles owing to the Blessed Virgin's intercession traced a widening circle of awareness of the power of the sacred image. The first eleven miracles (all recorded by scribe number one), were cures of sisters in the convent (or in one case a "sorella conversa" or lay sister). With miracles eleven through twenty-two, recorded in the same hand between 1604 or 1605 and 1608, we see the extension of the cult, whose fame perhaps spread through the nuns' family and spiritual networks, beginning with the cure of a noble woman who was the niece of one of the sisters in the convent, and including healings of a priest and a Dominican friar, as well as other local laypersons, many of whom were children. A second scribe recorded four miracles between 1608 and 1611 in a truly beautiful hand: cures of a priest, two nuns, and a certain Vincent, whose poem of thanksgiving and praise the scribe also included in the manuscript. A third hand begins a list stretching from 1611 through 1619, predominantly detailing cures of local laypersons of high social standing: persons designated as "gentlemen" or by their titles ("baron" and "baroness"), to whom the pendant was brought in their sickbeds (presumably in Palermo). Seventeenth-century convents were much more permeable than implied by the word "cloister."



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It's tempting to read a certain perfunctory attitude in the jagged, careless handwriting and truncated narrations in this third set of cures, especially when compared to the earlier tales, indicative perhaps of waning interest in the little pendant. But the truth is, we don't really know why, after 1619, the nuns of Santa Maria della Pietà stopped recording miracles worked by their replica of Our Lady of Trapani. Perhaps the plague that, according to the eighteenth-century Palermitan historian Antonio Mongitore, swept through the city in 1624 and drove its citizens to a vow to the actual statue in Trapani wiped out the memory of the nuns' own simulacrum. Or, perhaps, the sisters' receipt of a new, much larger and more magnificent statue of the Virgin in 1626—itsself credited with its own spate of miracles—led to the little ivory image's falling into oblivion. Whatever the answer, the manuscript itself remains a physical embodiment of this intriguing mystery.