

Throughout the medieval period, images of the crucifixion have undergone a considerable transformation in their depiction of grief with particular emphasis on those gestures displayed by Mary and John. From its earliest incarnation in the Rabbula Gospels of A.D. 586 to its most emotive point in the frescoes of Duccio in the fourteenth century we see an evolution from an emphasis on Divinity and the Christ Triumphant to an emphasis on humanity and the Christ Patiens.

The depiction of Mary in crucifixion scenes was of considerable concern to theologians and artists alike. If Mary had foreknowledge of Christ's reincarnation would she show grief and to what extent would the mother of Christ grieve? These were fundamental questions central to Christian theology. Excessive gestures of despair such as those depicted in Classical painting and relief, whereby figures tore at their hair, clawed their faces, rent their robes and beat their chests were considered inappropriate for the depiction of holy figures¹. Divinity necessitated a dignified representation. Furthermore, an excessive display of grief would be in itself an expression of disbelief in the incarnation². This was insupportable in the holy personage of Mary, Mother of Christ.

Thus the gestures most frequently appropriated from classical examples are those of a more reserved nature, primarily the lifting of the veiled hand to the cheek, the clasping of hands with interlaced fingers, the holding of the left wrist by the right hand, the hand held to the face or chin, and the hands out-stretched. There is a degree of variation in the gestures displayed by Mary and John at the cross due to the non-descript nature of the Biblical account. All that is written is "And there stood beside the cross of Jesus, his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene"³ and no more. The lack of literary description allowed more freedom in the derivation of visual motifs.

¹ Barasch, 1976, p. 90

² Maguire, 1977, p. 128

³ Bible, John 19:25

In the Rabbula Crucifixion⁴, both Mary and John stand to the left of the cross facing Christ. Mary lifts a veiled hand to her face as if to stifle her cries. Her hunched shoulders are uncharacteristically emotive. Mary and John are balanced by three holy women on the far right, one of whom mirrors Mary's gesture. The spear of Longinus and the sponge of Stephaton form a compositional triangle at whose peak rests the Crucified Christ. His head is angled towards Mary and an emotional connection is suggested through the linear directives of the composition. The emotive and narrative content of the Rabbula Crucifixion scene is unusual in relation to its later representations. The scene is heavily populated and the crucified Christ whilst enlarged does not dominate the composition. John supports Mary on the left side of the composition rather than his usual position on the right. These elements relate more to crucifixion scenes of the thirteenth century. Whereas, in the Middle Ages, the narrative has been reduced to its essential elements. Extraneous mourners and the landscape have been eliminated and replaced with geometric design and flat colour. The elimination of competing background elements places more emphasis on the figures and their gestures.

In a German canon page with the *Crucifixion* (Fig. 2)⁵ c. 1160, the composition is wholly dominated by the cross which divides the pictorial plane into two symmetrical halves. Mary, though frontal in position angles her head towards Christ, her eyebrows contracted in a subtle expression of sorrow, her hands are clasped with her fingers interlaced. John raises his right hand to his head, his arm supported at the elbow by his left. The size of the crucified Christ and the extension of the cross beyond the picture plane thrust him into the foreground. The figures of Mary and John are retracted to a position behind Christ, subverted by the over-riding geometric design. Despite the close proximity of Mary to Christ there is little connection physically or emotionally. Though his eyes are closed, his triumph is alluded to in the raising of one eyebrow.

⁴ The Rabbula Gospels, *Crucifixion and the Resurrection*, A.D. 586, Illuminated Manuscript on Vellum, 34 by 26.5 cm

⁵ Canon Page with the Crucifixion, from a Sacramentary, German (Lower Saxony), ca. 1160, Tempera and gold leaf on vellum, 30.2 by 20 cm, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas.

A similar reduction of the narrative to overall design can be seen in a carved crucifixion scene on a ninth century Carolingian rock crystal (Fig. 3)⁶. Again the cross dominates and divides the composition. The gestures of Mary and John are highlighted by the lack of background. Their extended hands are almost violent in their gesticulations. The angles of the head, hands, the spear and sponge, again create a compositional triangle pointing to the ultimate peak and focus, the triumphant Christ.

In the 13th century, there is an increasing emotionalism in religious literature centering on Christ's passion⁷. Christians desired to connect emotionally with Christ's humanity and his position on the cross reflects this change. His body sags lower and his feet, now attached with a single nail, creates an awkward, undignified angling of the knees. As Christ sags lower Mary corresponds alike and John crosses to the left side to provide his support.

In Nicola Pisano's *Crucifixion* (Fig. 3)⁸ scene on the pulpit, Mary is shown in a transitory position. Her legs remain stiff in an upright position whilst her torso contorts awkwardly into an expression of swooning. Her left hand is on her heart, to indicate the fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy that the sword would pierce her heart⁹, and her right hand on her womb. Interestingly, John mimics this position as does the man to the right of the cross and the man behind him. The number of mourners has significantly increased and their repetition of Mary's gestures increases the emotional pathos of the scene.

In Duccio's *Crucifixion* (Fig. 4)¹⁰, the crowd of mourners has further increased. The definition of atmospheric space can barely support the numbers. The cramming of figures creates a closeness and intensity. We observe only their faces and their varying gestures of despair. Mary's swoon has progressed. It is more complete than Pisano's version although less dramatic. The crucified Christ is set high up in the composition. A large

⁶ Carolingian rock crystal carved with crucifixion scene, ninth century, 9 by 6.35 cm, Freiburg im Breisgau, Austiner museum

⁷ Barasch, 1976, p. 90

⁸ Nicola Pisano, *Crucifixion*, detail of the pulpit, 1259-60, Marble relief, Baptistery, Pisa

⁹ Neff, 1998, p. 257

¹⁰ Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Crucifixion*, scene from the Maesta Altarpiece, 1308-11, Tempera and gold on wood panel, Siena, Museo Dell'Opera dell Duomo

area of negative space surrounds him, isolating and emphasizing his suffering. The expansive space between Mary and Christ is traversed through the linear direction suggested by the angling of their heads towards each other. Mary's emotions are highlighted by the brilliance of her nimbus, in turn outlined by the subdued colors of the crowd. John no longer exhibits his own gesture of despair but rather focuses wholly on Mary, supporting her with his hands. The additional mourners now express the gestures previously displayed by Mary and John. A woman behind Mary, to the left of the composition lifts her veiled hand to her face, whilst numerous men to the right of the cross lift their hands to their chin or beard. The increasing emotiveness provides a powerful connection with the worshipper and serves to direct their thoughts to a higher level of spiritual contemplation.

Thus, from the sixth century, we see a progressive reduction of the narrative to its basic fundamentals in order to provide an instant communication of Christ's triumph over death. The later re-introduction of narrative elements focuses on a more complex communication of Christ's humanity and suffering through the correspondence of human pathos. Though these works differ greatly in their composition and design, their focus on Divinity or humanity, their function is the same. They both serve to focus the worshipper's mind on Christ's sacrifice and mankind's resulting salvation.



Fig.1. The Rabbula Gospels, *The Crucifixion and the Resurrection*, Illuminated Manuscript on Vellum, Syria, A.D. 586, Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana

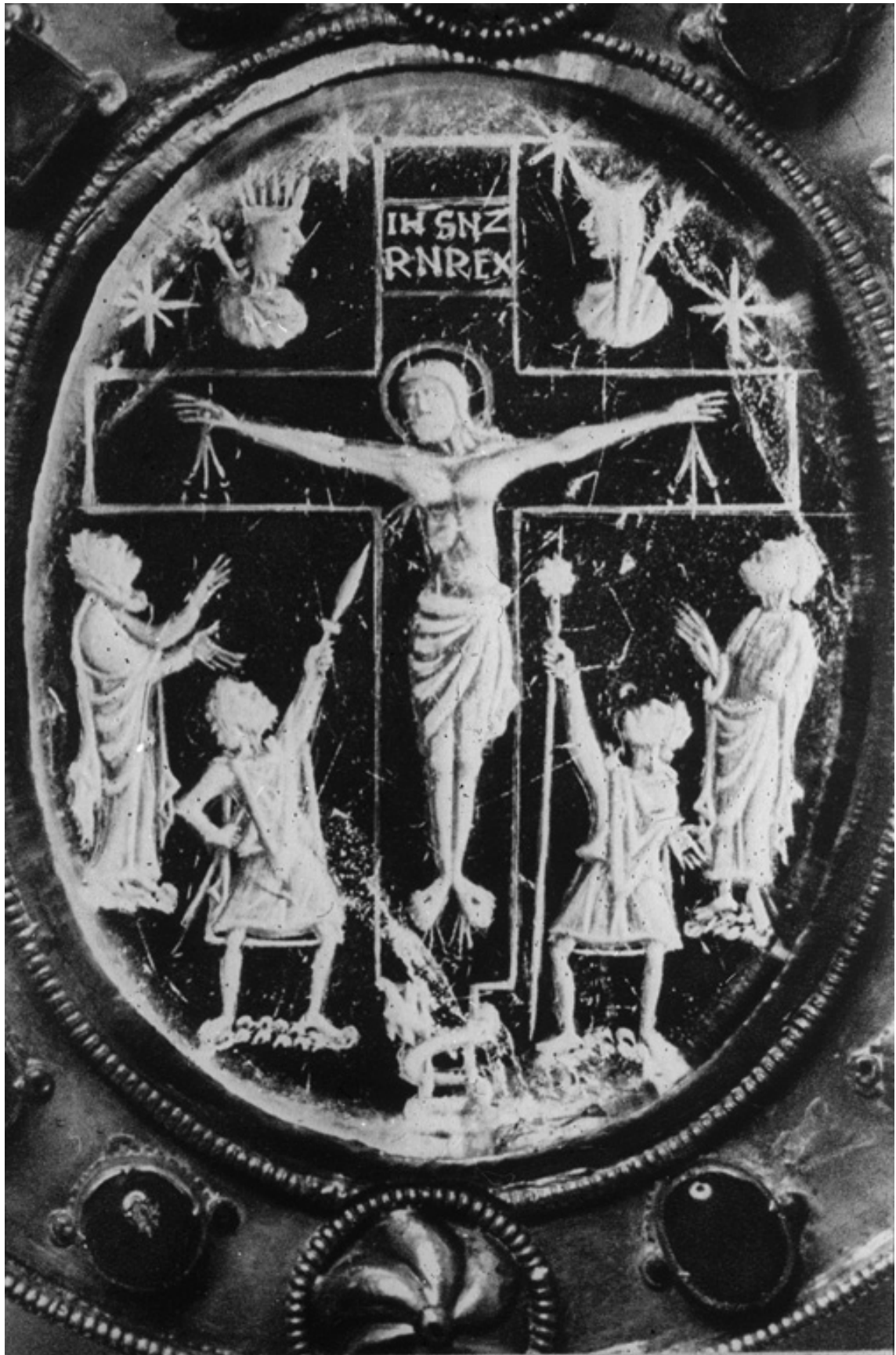




Fig. 4. Nicola Pisano, *crucifixion*, detail of the pulpit, 1259-60, 34 inches, Marble, Baptistry, Pisa

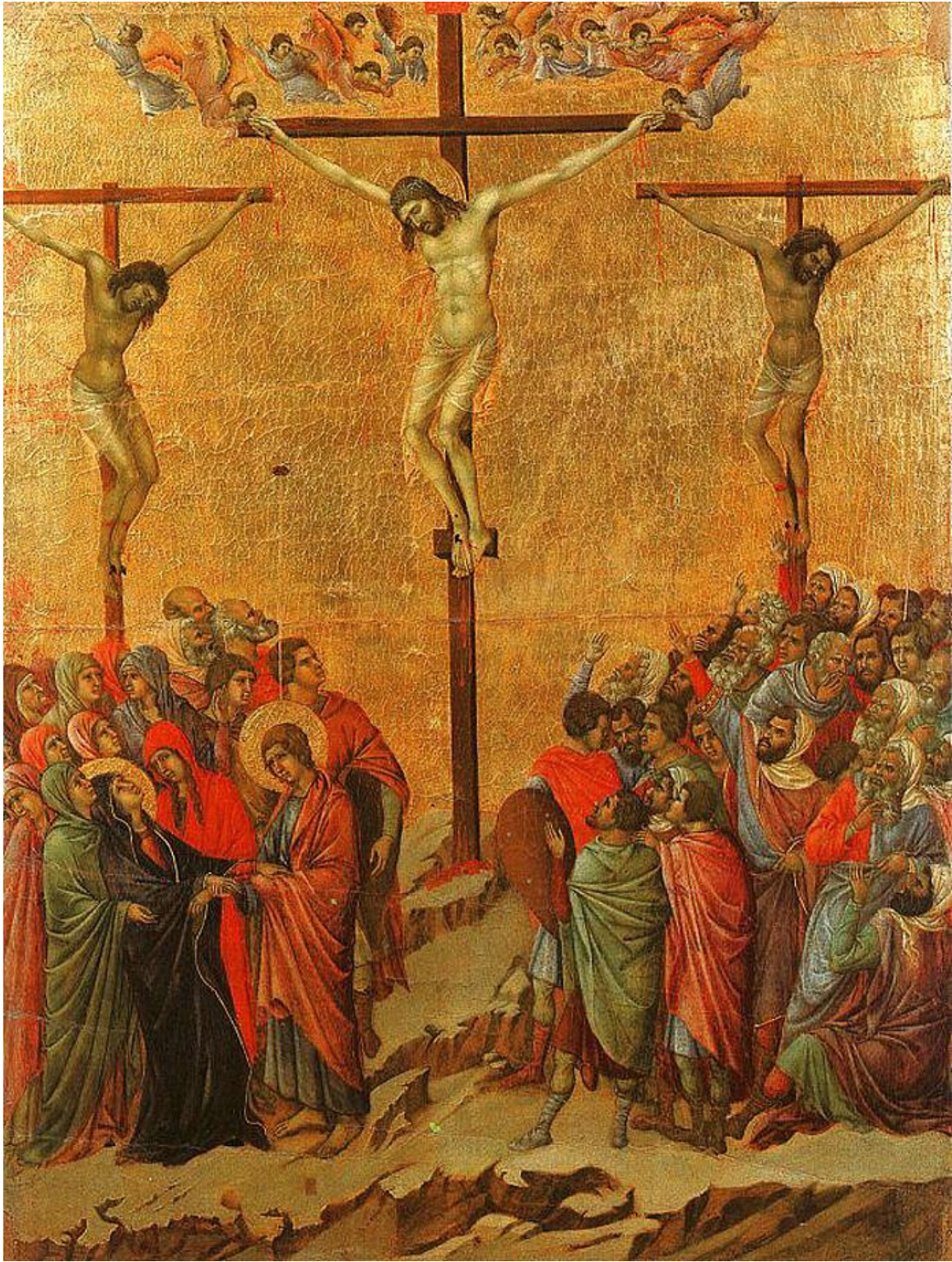


Fig. 5. Duccio di Buonisegna, *Crucifixion*, scene from the Maesta Altarpiece, 1308-11, Tempera and gold on wood panel, Siena, Museo Dell'Opera dell' Duomo

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