The continuity between pagan and Christian cult

nearby the archaeological area of Naquane in Capo di Ponte.

Research inside the Church of Saint Faustina and Liberata

Introduction

When it was proposed to me to write a brief essay about the “Church of the Saints” in Capo di Ponte, I ask myself who they were and why the local piety has chosen, among the wide Christian pantheon, these two sisters, stranger to the local tradition. The cult of Saint Faustina and Liberata is an isolated phenomenon in Camonica Valley: for this reason, the dedication seems curious and it deserves attention.

There is another question I ask myself and I will try to discuss about it in these few lines, although they are certainly not exhaustive: I would like to establish if there could be a link between the surrounding archaeological areas of Naquane, Pagherina, Piana degli Svedesi (The Swedish Plain) and Campanine with the building of the church.

Others researchers have already carried out this idea and we have to consider their studies as a basis for this research.

Who were the Saints?

In Capo di Ponte the two sisters are simply known as the Saints. Similarly, the building is defined as “the church of the Saints” and by extension the area where the church stands, where there is also a small residential settlement, it is also locally called “Sante” (Fig. 1). The sisters, according to local tradition, probably lived as hermits in Capo di Ponte and according to the most widespread hagiography, Faustina and Liberata were two sisters who lived during the sixth century, daughters of a certain Giovannato, a sir who lived in the fortress of Olgisio in Pianello Val Tidone, in the province of Piacenza. The two young women, given the social status and wealth, were promised in marriage to two men of their social class, but the girls didn’t want to give themselves to the married life after the vision of a woman mourning the death of her husband and in order to avoid the birth pangs and so fled from the castle and lived as a hermits and later moved to Como and joined the Order of the Benedictines which was spreading in those years. During their existence they were accompanied by a tutor: the pious Marcello, who we might call a spiritual father. Father Gregorio Brunelli, a Capuchin who originally comes from a small town in Upper Camonica Valley and who lived in the second half of the seventeenth century, in his book Curiosi trattenimenti, printed in 1698, expatiates in different passages romancing the hagiographic story.

It is conceivable that the area was very busy because of the road that passed through; even the dedication of an altar of the church to the Saints Philip and James could remind the presence of a medieval resting place since St. James is often thought as patron saint of xenodochia (free hospices for pilgrims and foreigners).

The miraculous event took place during a natural disaster that threatened to destroy the small town of Serio. Serio was also the name of the stream which swollen after days of rain and which hung over the small village. The people, unable to save their homes from water and rocks, then went to the church, not because a safer place, but because they hoped to receive help from God; in the meantime the river flooded the area and swept away stones that hung on people and things. The people took refuge near the church, and invoked the saints, who appeared with Marcello and laid their hands on a “bad stone” and immediately stopped it and diverted the flow of water thus saving the church (Fig. 2). The spread of the saints’ cult in other zones is often so confusing that in some areas of Europe Saint Liberata is identified with St. Wilgeforte and other names depending on geographical location, but even with some variations, the Saint is always linked to women’s fertility and to frail children protection.

Why were Faustina and Liberata chosen?

In Camonica Valley the Saints are documented only in Capo di Ponte; it seems that the act of dedication is a move cleverly designed and engineered by some educated person concerned - perhaps - about the continuity of pagan worship in the area and who knew, which is very likely, the engraving practice which was still ongoing in the area above Campanine of Cimbergo; the presence of two Saints coming from far away and not very well known except by the villagers of Capo di Ponte, seems to assert an enough learned design of the cult.
Near the place, now called "Sante", there are the famous prehistoric site of Naquane, the area called Pagherina and low Campanine, also affected by prehistoric carvings and by a resumption of attendance for the engraving purpose from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century.

The toponym Naquane, as demonstrated in a compelling article by Angelo Fossati, most probably refers to the original name of "Aquane" (acqua = water; the term “Aquane” phonetically refers to the water, but it doesn’t mean water), that is to say the semi-divine figures which populated the central-eastern Alps and that can be found also in classical literature.

The toponym Aquane, found at other sites and in Roman inscriptions, confirms the link of the name with the cult of water because Aquane are female anthropo-zoomorphic mythological figures that can be turned into otters and mermaids that dwell in lakes, caves and springs.

Even before the discovery of the name Aquane on a copy of an early nineteenth century map, Mario Alinei already connected the area called Naquane to the female mythological figures known as those of the “Saints”, also nearby the church of Capo di Ponte there are caves, nowadays disused, but still easily found. The caves of Capo di Ponte are reported by the population and mentioned in a pastoral visitation (bishop’s visitation) as the home where the sisters would live. The tradition of Capo di Ponte considered the caves as the places where babies were born and the Saints played a significant role because they were invoked as patronesses of women in labour. Iconographic evidence, dating from the XV-XVI centuries and which comes from outside Camonica Valley, confirm this protection without restraint, dwells in order to provide evidence of the truthfulness of the story: on this point, is an example his sentence through which he states that the large boulder with the handprints leaved by the three Saints is a testimony which makes up for the lack of other data that got lost during the flood. A

Even on the cliff of Olgisio Rock (Placentia), where Faustina and Liberata were born, there are prehistoric caves known as those of the “Saints”; also nearby the church of Capo di Ponte there are caves, nowadays disused, but still easily found. The caves of Capo di Ponte are reported by the population and mentioned in a pastoral visitation (bishop’s visitation) as the home where the sisters would live. The tradition of Capo di Ponte considered the caves as the places where babies were born and the Saints played a significant role because they were invoked as patronesses of women in labour. Iconographic evidence, dating from the XV-XVI centuries and which comes from outside Camonica Valley, confirm this protection without restraint, dwells in order to provide evidence of the truthfulness of the story: on this point, is an example his sentence through which he states that the large boulder with the handprints leaved by the three Saints is a testimony which makes up for the lack of other data that got lost during the flood. A

The boulder, the rock carvings and the water
But who in Capo di Ponte could replace so ably a pre-Christian cult? The question remains unanswered, but it is conceivable that also in 1607 the priest Antonio Ricci, archpriest of Cemmo, felt the need to revive the holy presence by writing a short life of the Saints, which was printed, but not found. Gregory himself, a little in contrast with many of his accounts where he drag on fictional digressions without restraint, dwells in order to provide
very interesting and controversial question is exactly the boulder kept in a chapel inside the church.

The stone has the engraving of six paired hands made through pecking technique (Figs. 3-5). Ausilio Priuli believes that the stone was already present on site before the flood of the thirteenth century and the catastrophic event did nothing but bring it to light; according to the author the handprints would be traced back to prehistory. It seems very unlikely that the handprints date back to prehistoric period; if it was so, we should put forward too many correspondences.

The six imprints are indeed coupled in pairs so that the side pairs have the same size and features, while the central pair is more squat and bighter, as well as placed higher. That shows that the central handprints were imprinted by Marcello: a man with bigger hands and taller than the two sisters who made in-print the engraved hands. From the tracing which was published it is clear that this is a carving dating back to historical age but since we don’t know its exact location and environment, it is impossible to add more. While an outline engraved hand was recently discovered and traced on rock n.7 in Pagherina, a place located about 200 meters away from the church of the Saints.

It is also interesting the idea advanced by Giacomo Camuri, who, in a learned and speculative article, recognizes a link between certain representations of doe on rock n. 14 of Naunque Park that should identify themselves as “the archaism of the goddess, who rediscover through the images of the couples the original face of Nymf, the spirit of the water which is not very different from the rivers or lakes goddesses of the of the Balkan legends, all figures which are wonderfully related to deer or to pairs of doe”.

The author himself, focusing on the importance of water in the area of investigation, suggests several connections and similarities between the Aquane and the goddess Artemis. In fact, both Artemis and the Aquane are young and virgin; Artemis has been given birth without pain; she is also considered as an elderly and virgin person, propitiator of births; both the Aquane and Artemis have also powers of metamorphosis and reproduction.

Making reference to Gimbutas’ opinion, I would like to give another example of continuity of the cult of Artemis and Diana a worship of a Christian Saint has been created, have been documented. We can take into consideration the case of Saint Brigit, who is venerated in Ireland and Scotland, or Saint Verena to Chiarone; the rock is scattered with holes for pilings, stairs and basins to collect water. On the side towards the Tidone there is a very big cave with steps carved into the living sandstone rock: everything should lead to think of a holy place dedicated to the cult of Saint Faustina and Liberata, a boulder, which looks like an altar, comes out of the ground; the continuous human habitus attendance has been attested.

In the county of Louth to Faughart, in Ireland, the sanctuary of Saint Brigit possesses a stone that has the name of the Saint; the site is also full of megalithic graves and of other big stones placed upright by the side a river.

Still in Ireland, there are the sources of Saint Brigit which are visited with great celebration in springtime: around the sources of the Dungiven parish there is also a big river stone with footprints. As demonstrated by this brief catalogue, the “christian goddesses” are linked by common elements.

According to Gimbutas “the greek Artemis Eleithia, the Thracian Bendis, the Rehtia of Veneto and the roman Diana, like the Fale still presents in European folk beliefs [...] are undeniably descendants of the prehistoric Goddess Giver of Life”.

These archaic female figures and their Christian descendants are mistresses of the mountains, of rock, of water, of woods and animals, and they are also giver of health. “Throughout prehistory and history, it [the goddess] appears as a bird-woman, bird or woman. As aquatic bird, she was the woman who fed humanity and increased material goods."

The similarities seem very compelling on several fronts: cultural, iconographic as well as for the goddesses characteristics and for the descriptions of places. In Capo di Dante there is the pair of women, who favour fecundity and protect women in labour, there are the boulder with the prints, the cave where babies are born; the two Saints, live in caves and in the middle of the wood, they have power over stones and over the course of water.

In order to understand other similarities with the piety in Capo di Dante and the relation between the Saints and territory, it should be thought back to the places where Faustina and Liberata got under way. The Fortress of Oligosio is situated on a plateau with steep rock faces and two rivers, the Rio Tinello and the Chiarone; the rock is scattered with holes for pilings, stairs and basins to collect water. On the side towards the Tidone there is a very big cave with steps carved into the living sandstone rock: everything should lead to think of a holy place dedicated to the cult of Saint Faustina and Liberata, a boulder, which looks like an altar, comes out of the area.

The church and the cult of the Saints

The cult of the Saints in the diocese of Como should spread as long ago as before the year one thousand, but it is more likely that an intensification occurred as a result of a new translation of the relics, ordered by Bishop Leone de Lambertenghi; the operation took place on the 14th of May 1317 and the corpses of the Saints moved from the cathedral of Como to the Church of San Carpoftoro. It is probably conceivable that during the exhumation other relics were created, because of subdivision or contact, in order to send them in as many churches.

Perhaps as result of the translation, which took place in Como, the cult of the Saints gained new vigour strong and spread; but in order to spread the cult of the Saints among the people of Camonica Valley it was necessary to furnish the Church with images and, even more important, the mortal remains through contact thanks to the relics. Even following these considerations, it could be argued that it was after the fourteenth century when the relics of Faustina and Liberata reached Capo di Ponte.

In this regards it is curious the passage handed us down by Father Gregorio who told the discovery. The interest is not only provided for the data itself, which is not to be considered as historic truth, but because the monk constructs the narration on the model of the hagiographic literature. In particular, the relics are not taken by someone, but there is a chance discovery in a box kept in the middle of the altar of the old church; once the holy
relics have been discovered, they were placed inside the new church which was being built. It has been already said that the stone has been situated in the same place for several millennia, but the engraving of the handprints should date back to Christian epoch since the fourteenth century.

For this analysis, the bishop's visits can be useful. It is more interesting for this study the imposition of 1580 made by the learned apostolic visitor Cardinal Carlo Borromeo: a few years later Bishop Pilati (1573) the church is so still in bad condition that Borromeo ordered several important structural interventions. The cardinal announced that "In oratorio Sanctorum Marcellini, Faustinae et Liberatae, Area, in qua asseritur reconditas esse reliquias Sanc- tarum Faustinae et Liberatae, pallio semper tecta teneatur", thus confirming the veracity of the relics, confirming also the presence of the engraved boulder with the hands. The acts report that on the boulder there are the handprints of the Saints and Marcello.

1580 is therefore a definite date for the presence of the engraved boulder and it's very likely, given the description of Borromeo, that the 6 hands were already present because in the description of the boulder he mentions the three saints. In addition to the eye evidence is also noteworthy that the cardinal takes care of setting a specific sacred space around the boulder with a low wall closed by a gate and covered with tiles (Fig. 3). In the case of the church of the Saints the visitor (Borromeo), who is very attentive to the identification and to the elimination of pagan worships, does not care to stop the visit to the engraved rock: on the contrary, he decide to incorporate it inside the holy place (Fig. 6). Behaving like that he gives veneration dignity through the arrangement of an adequate coverage and protection.

From the visit of Monsignor Nava on the 18th of August 1809 we know that the Saints lived in that area when they were alive, and some low caves are mentioned as, according to tradition, the places where the Saints lived.

As a final consideration with regard to the worship we have to remember that the church was dedicated, and in fact the devotion persists, to the mystery of the Ascension, a feast felt deeply by the inhabitants and which took place originally around the church of Saints. The Ascension is the final event of Christ's earthly residence and place of the ascent to heaven: and the place of the Ascension is the last strip of land that Christ touched. They have documented some sites where the footprints of the Redeemer, who left them on slabs of stone before lifting to God Father, are kept.

The place and the caves
The caves of the Saints were known inside the tales which circulated among the people living in Capo di Ponte, and they were also cited in the bishop's visit above-mentioned. However, I must confess that these evidences didn't allow to understand and prove whether the belief was linked to oral tradition, or based on a historic fact. From the accounts I thought the caves as shallow rock shelters which was opened on one side and small. In order to write this essay I got to mount a quick search of the area, to locate the site and to go down into the caves.

All with the help of Ilaria Zonta, whom I thank for the cultural and logistical support. In reality the caves are a series of tunnels which are large and high enough to live in them. The caves are situated on the right side of the church beyond the inner court and beyond the area of the engraved rock, but always part of the same building complex; over the caves a building, that has partially covered and perhaps protected them from the destruction, was built. There are also masonry works which probably date back to more recent historical periods. However, it is of great interest the presence of big rocks that form the walls. Inside the deepest cave there is a big slab which is probably made up by a single rock surface that functions as ceiling (Fig. 9). The entrance is very narrow, but the interiors is livable. Unfortunately, we merely had a quick tour in the absence of light and research permissions and also because of safety reasons; I publish in this essay some images (Fig. 8) of this discovery in the hope that in future someone could broach the subject in a systematic way. I limit myself to reporting the use of a carved ashlar for the building of a wall (Fig. 10); the ashlar was engraved with zigzag marks representing the waters and already seen in the nearby Romanesque church of San Siro in Cemmo.
Some notes about the church

After visiting the church in the light of the information gathered from the bishops visits and, even more, from hagiographical texts, I would like to report some observations that I consider very interesting and in some ways exceptional. For reasons of space I shall confine myself to draw up a list of these.

On the right side of the church there are two chapels containing respectively the stone with the footprints of the Saints and the wooden group of the Lament over the Dead Christ. Among these rooms and the church there is a part of what is presumed to be the oldest Romanesque church, and then a section which is dated back to the eleventh-twelfth century: it is half an apse with the remains of frescos dating back to the late sixteenth century. I’m certain of recognizing in these frescos the fusion of the two cults present in the church: the Ascension of Christ and the Saints. Hence, we might suggest the link between the footprints of the Ascension and the handprints of the Saints.

The frescoes of the church are reminders of specific episodes of the Saints’ lives and local events such as the miracle of the boulder (Fig. 2). I consider very interesting the accurate citation of stories that took place outside Camonica Valley I have been able to find in some of the learned authors’ texts, who didn’t come from Camonica Valley and who wrote about the Saints’ lives.

I was aware of the presence of some paintings representing the Sibyls, which long ago were placed on the walls of the church and now are kept in the house of the priest of Capo di Ponte; while I was visiting the church, the presence of other 6 Sibyls which was frescoed 3 by 3 in the intrados of the two side chapels of the church, surprised me. The Sibyls are ancient female figures dedicated to the prophecy; some of them did the predictions in caves situated in places which are not easily accessible. Certainly they were born in the pagan world, but from the fifteenth century they were reassessed and “used again” even in Christian circle because, according to some authors, they forecasted the coming of Christ in certain passages of their prophecies (Fig. 14). The Renaissance then appropriated the Sibyls, it freed them from the pagan world by giving them the dignity to be represented inside the churches often alternating them with the representations of Old Testament prophets who forecasted the coming of the Messiah: they are usually represented in pictorial groups concerning the life of Christ or even more in pictorial groups with the stories of the Virgin. In the church of the Saints in Capo di Ponte the six painted Sibyls have been represented without the prophets and even the reference to the life of the Virgin and Christ is not present24. So, it is possible to affirm that the presence of Sibyls doesn’t depend on the prophets. Only as food for thought I would like to put forward the hypothesis that suggests an analogy between the Saints and Sibyls, but even more with Aquane: in fact the Aquane knew the future and the past, as well as the Sibyls are one of the clearest examples of a pagan female figure ‘redeemed’ by the Catholic Church.

I conclude by signaling a further iconographic anomaly I report as such and I shall deal at another time. In the frontal of the high altar where the Saints have been depicted (in the middle), there are also wooden decorative elements. Among them, in the two basements of the responds which are inserted between the small spiral columns placed on either side...
and which supported the niches with the statues of the Saints, there are pairs of figures, perhaps mythical figures. They are two animals which face each other and turn their muzzles, which seem to be made up of a beak, into the upper plate of a fountain which is supported by a second plate (Fig. 15), a lower and bigger one, where the animals rest the front limbs formed by claws. The bodies, as well as the napes, look plumed, while the lower limbs ended with a twisted tail like a snake.

We can’t name these figures, but they certainly remember the pairs of animals, half birds and half fishes, of which the face is hidden; the fact that they rest the muzzle and the claws in a fountain suggests that these have connections with aquatic creatures: they look like mermaids. We don’t want and we can’t say they are the Aquane, but it is reasonable to assume that such a decoration can’t be placed by accident. According to Massimo Centini, in the Alpine folk tradition the Anguane (our Aquane) are considered as “a kind of fairies, which have absorbed many of the symbolic features which are typical of pre-Christian aquatic nymphs”25; the author himself shows the older Christian source which was found from the same; it is the De Jerusalem Celesti (XIII century) wrote by Brother Giacomo of Verona, who “considers the ‘aiguana’ as synonymous with mermaid”26.

Contrary to the other above-mentioned authors, Centini didn’t find certain elements of an hypothesis concerning an iconographic link between the images engraved on Naquane rocks and Aquane / Adganae. The previous authors have never mentioned the decorative element carved in wood in the frontal.

Other two statuettes, which are placed at the sides of the frontal and represent naked human figures, are even more curious and emblematic; we have a back view of one (Fig. 16) and a front view of the other, but both the statuettes have bandaged faces which are covered by a bandages so as to hide their features. The hair is black and it stands out from the rest of the body that is made of gold leaf. The poses and their covered faces give a sense of anguish as well as the bodies which give the impression they are wriggling. Their bodies look like the children’s one, but they aren’t angels because they don’t have any wings. In the figure on the left, which is viewed from the front (Fig. 17), the female sex is recognizable even if the breasts are not prominent: in the very act of wriggling we can note that it holds a scroll behind its back, but the face is awfully covered. With reference to Aquane it is well-known that the name couldn’t be identified, but that they were prophetesses: in the Christian iconography the scroll usually indicates foresight while the covered face could show anonymity. The children could also refer to the intercession of the Saints as they encourage the births, but doesn’t explain the bandaged face. Among the hypothesis, pending in-depth studies, we can include even the “unborn” children who have not received the light, or the children who were born, but died before baptism, and were then forced to the Limbo state27.

Conclusions

I think that what I have explained is enough to provide at least a preliminary account and some food for thought, so I hope other researchers could study the subject in depth. For example, it would be interesting to study the triad of the three holy virgins - Faustina, Liberata, Paolina - which has also references into the triads of the Celtic religion28, but although there are links, this comparison seems too strained, with reference to the state of research; on the contrary it is necessary to wonder if the triad, made up of the two sisters and Marcello, may have some previous worship which is rooted in the research area. See also the traditional Ascension celebrations, a feast that usually takes place toward May. According to what has been handed down by oral sources, we can find in the past rites of Capo di Ponte rustic cults which coincide with the spring season. This eve was passed in a very libertine way: the devotees came to the sanctuary of the Saints and they spent the night there. Furthermore the pilgrims were in the habit of resting their own hands on the handprints engraved on the stone, but the religious celebration turned into a fair and it was a meeting for the trade of iron goods which was made by craftsmen of local and Camonica Valley forges. Angelo Fossati29 suggests that we are talking about pre-Christian cults and rituals related to fertility and the iron and other oral evidence reports that during the night vigil there was a use of lighted candles and sexual excesses. I conclude with a final thought noting how the proper name of the prehistoric goddesses of the waters wasn’t known, but they were generally called Aquane, as well as in Capo di Ponte the church, the place and the feast are not those of Faustina and Liberata, but it is used a generic “Sante”, so much so that even nowadays some inhabitants don’t know their names.

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in 1299 the population spread over Capo di Ponte, Paspardo and Cimbergo. The author reports of findings 4-7. The stream came down from the mountains of nel secolo XIII, in «Dal Tonale al Sebino», 1 (1952), pp. 174-177. During this research, in tazione dell’arte rupestre della Camonica Valley (the Cypress Cave), because there is a big tree grown "del Corvo", in «Quaderni del Popolo», 1983, III, p. 119.

A. SINA, Serio. L’antico villaggio travolto e distrutto nel secolo XIII, in «Dal Tonale al Sebino», 1952, pp. 4-7. The stream came down from the mountains of Passo Tonale. The study reports of findings of roman buildings inside the nineteenth century. The village was abandoned in the middle of the thirteenth century; from the bishops investitures it follows that in 1299 the population spread over Capo di Ponte, Cemmo and Zurla.


A. FOSSATI, LA ROCCA DELLE ISCRIZIONI DI CIMERGO, in «Rivista di Antropologia», (1936), n° 31, tab. II, fig. 2. Archaeological summer camp 2010 organized by the Dipartimento Val Camonica and Lombardia of CCSP Capo di Ponte (BS), which I would like to thank for the provided materials.


A. PRIULI, “Le mani delle Sante” a Capodiponte nel quadro più ampio delle figure manufatti preistoriche e di tradizione in Italia, in «Quaderni Camuni», XIV (1994), p. 119. The author reports a detailed research of other engravings with imprints which were found in Italian sites. Even A. FOSSATI, L’età del Ferro nelle incisioni rupestri della Valle Camonica, in AA.VV., Immagini di un’aristocrazia dell’Età del Ferro nell’arte rupestre camuna in Essays on the occasion of the exhibition in Milan - Sforzesco Castle, Milano, 1991, p. 84, writes that inside the church “there is a rock with prehistoric carvings in 14th century fresco."


Ibid. p. 111.


As a matter of fact there are many evidences of the devotion to the Saints in Como. There are evidences in frescos (Town museums), but also in marble bas-reliefs inside and outside the cathedral.

A. FAPPANI, 1983, p. 120. There are clashes among the versions about the bishop's visits which have been reported by A. Fappani and by V. BONOMELLI, La Vallemontana della Controforma nelle visite del vescovo Bollani, Brescia, La nuova Cartografica, 1978.


On the front of the two respective arches of the chapels, where there are the Sibyls, the four Doctors of the Church are frescoed.


Ibid. See also what writes Maria Gimbutas concerning the figure of the bird and the livi with the words: “the goddess Bird was the Source and the Dispenser of the moisture that gives life, which is an ancient and continuous human concern. As a waterfowl, it connects the heaven and the earth, and probably it believed that its earthly dwelling reflected an aquatic divine realm”, in M. GIMBUTAS, 1990, p. 29.


A. FAPPANI, 1994, p. 204.