



Images and stories of saints in the regional territory and in its museums

Bettona, chiesa di San Crispolto

Stefano Notari

(18th century)

Stories of Saint Crispoltus

Oil on canvas

The two canvases are copies of a fresco cycle dedicated to Saint Crispoltus, commissioned from Cesare Sermei by the Friars Minor Conventual some time in the mid-17th century and destroyed in 1797 when the building was converted. The Bettona Commune entrusted the painter Notari with the task of handing down a record of it.

The thirty-six episodes provide the only complete pictorial version of the legendary life of Saint Crispoltus, bishop and patron saint of the town. A late *Passionary* (12th century) of an extremely spurious nature recounts that Crispoltus was among the first followers of Christ, sent to Italy by the apostle Peter: having arrived in Bettona he worked miracles, converted the inhabitants and was elected bishop by Saint Brice. The Emperor Maximinian had him arrested and when he refused to recant he was tortured and put in prison, where he continued regardless to make conversions and work miracles. He was then thrown into a furnace, but the fire did not burn him; then he was scourged and sawn in two. This account also appears incongruous from the chronological point of view, since Crispoltus would have to have lived for almost two hundred years in order to have arrived in Italy at the time of Saint Peter and then be martyred in the 3rd century under Maximinian's rule. It is for this reason that the historian Jacobilli, in his *Lives of the Saints and Blessed Souls of Foligno* of 1628, suggests that two saints were involved, both called Crispoltus but living in two different eras: one from the East and one from Bettona.

The doubtful authenticity of the historical figure of Crispoltus and the presence of a church dedicated to him in the 11th century and standing on the site of his martyrdom do indicate, however, a major revival of the cult of the local holy martyr in that period. This is also one of the many cases in which a saint, venerated as a martyr and as a bishop, comes to represent a

symbol of municipal autonomy. Indeed it was precisely to extol the municipal identity that in 1265 the saint's body was stolen from the Abbey and moved inside the walls of Bettona. Thus, in 1352, the Perugians, having defeated Bettona, were able to rob it of the sacred relics. More than four centuries later it was the Commune once again that was responsible for commissioning the copies of Sermei's frescoes, which, it should be noted, continue to adhere to the traditional version of the legend of the saint, despite Jacobilli's claims and an inspection in 1634, following which the remains of two bodies were found in the urn beneath the high altar in the church of San Crispolto.

So closely linked to the Umbrian town as he is, the figure of Crispoltus is rarely encountered in works painted for other centres: an exception to this is the *Crucifixion and saints*, formerly attributed to the young Niccolò di Liberatore but more probably the work of Mazzaforte's workshop, preserved in the Pinacoteca Civica in Spello, where the saint is depicted in bishop's vestments and is characterised by the iconographic attribute of the saw.

The Biblioteca Comunale in Assisi houses a group of sixteen preparatory sketches drawn by Sermei for the fresco cycle. Almost all in pen and ink, the drawings can be traced back to the artist's later graphic production, around the 1650s. Several of the studies have captions that also appear in the compendiums painted by Notari, who faithfully transcribed the inscriptions annotating the scenes in the cycle and restricted himself to a purely iconographic reproduction of the episodes, realised in a more simplified and flowing style than that used in the drawings in Assisi.

