

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

Cascia, chiesa di Sant'Antonio Abate

Maestro della Dormitio di Terni and workshop

Stories of Saint Anthony Abbot
Frescoes

The church and the adjacent former monastery, once inhabited by Benedictine nuns, are now owned by the Commune of Cascia. The present-day church was built between the late 14th and the early 15th century, probably on the site of a settlement of Benedictine monastic cells documented since 1025. Following the earthquakes of 1599 and 1703 the church was completely transformed, although the presbytery area was spared, as was the adjacent nuns' choir with the magnificent fresco cycle of *Stories from the life of Christ* by Nicola da Siena (1461).

The cycle dedicated to Saint Anthony is divided into sixteen scenes laid out on three registers. Inscriptions in the vernacular, which have now almost totally disappeared, illustrate the content of each individual scene. In the lunettes: the *Conversion of Saint Anthony* (1) and the *Saint distributes his riches to the poor* (2); the *Clothing of the saint* (3) and the *First temptation* (4). On the walls: *A further temptation of the saint* (5); the *Reconstruction of the oratory* (6); the *Release from the serpent* (7); the *Dream of the king of Palestine* (8); the *King of Palestine sends provisions to the desert* (9); the *Arrival of the caravan at the cave* (10); the *Encounter with a holy monk in the form of a satyr* (?) (11); *Recognition and blessing of the holy monk* (12); the *Visit of Anthony and the holy monk to the coenobium* (13); *Saint Paul the hermit and Saint Anthony are fed by the raven* (14); *Death and burial of Saint Paul* (15); *Funeral of Saint Anthony* (16). The scenes in the bottom register do not follow an ordered sequence and should be read from one wall to the other (cf. diagram).

Born in Heracleopolis in Middle Egypt around 251, Anthony lived as a hermit in the desert near the Red Sea. Many disciples gathered round him and he remained their spiritual father until his death (356). His cult soon spread throughout the West and the legendary life of the saint, related by Saint Athanasius in the second half of the 4th century and later supplemented by Saint Jerome, was hugely popularised by the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Varagine.

An example of ascetic sanctity aimed at the attainment of spiritual perfection, as witnessed by the epic struggles fought in the desert against the demons, Saint Anthony was, however, the object of a markedly popular cult in two distinct yet connected respects: as the patron saint of animals and as a healer of skin diseases, in particular of *herpes zoster* or "Saint Anthony's fire".

There are numerous fresco cycles dedicated to the life of the saint. Umbria boasts examples of particular iconographic

richness, such as the one painted by Andrea di Cagno in the mid-15th century in the church of San Francesco in Montefalco or the one in the church dedicated to the saint in Beroide near Spoleto, which is on a smaller scale and shows more popular characteristics.

The narrative leap in the cycle here and the doubtful interpretation of several of the scenes (see nos. 11, 12 and 13) make way for the theory that knowledge of another text helped to define the iconography in Cascia: in other words the 6th-century *Vita Patrum*, which in all probability was translated into the vernacular by the Blessed Simon Fidati of Cascia (1285-1348), an Augustinian preacher and founder of monasteries and charitable institutions in Florence. Besides the life of Saint Anthony, the book deals with the biographies of the monks of the Thebaid Desert, including that of the hermit saint Pafnutius, whose name is just about legible in the inscription in scene no. 13 and who could, therefore, be identified as the protagonist of all the scenes in the bottom register of the right-hand wall. This narrative "parenthesis", together with the one relating to the life of Paul the hermit on the back wall, also found in the *Vita Patrum*, would designate the cycle in Cascia as a "minor" version of the well-known and rare cycle of the *Lives of the Desert Fathers* in the Camposanto in Pisa.

The community of Cascia, represented here by the nuns of Saint Benedict, had at least two good reasons for honouring Saint Anthony Abbot with such a wealth of detail. First of all, in its Apennine hinterland, just as in that of nearby Norcia, examples of hermitic life of ancient memory were perpetuated and secondly its inhabitants and monastic institutions relied upon pasturage and livestock farming as one of their principal sources of income.

The cycle, together with the *Evangelists* on the vault, was painted at the beginning of the 15th century by the Maestro della Dormitio di Terni, the conventional name that embraces a fairly large series of works distributed over a very wide geographical area, stretching from Terni to Spoleto and from Santa Maria di Pietrarossa near Trevi to Vallo di Nera in Valnerina. The substantial catalogue attributed to the painter and his workshop is an interesting proof of the linguistic phenomenon that was so widespread in the Umbro-Marche region for the whole of the first quarter of the 15th century at least and which is characterised by a purely anagraphic belonging to the international style, revealed by the use of a few words rather than by mastery of the language.

