



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

Deruta, Pinacoteca Comunale

## Pietro Vannucci known as Perugino

(Città della Pieve circa 1450 - Fontignano 1523)

*Eternal Father, Saint Romanus and Saint Roch*

Fresco; 186 x 128 cm

The fresco comes from the church of San Francesco, and more precisely from the wall by the first altar on the left dedicated to the Madonna dei Dolori. Fortuitously discovered in 1846, it was detached in 1953; since 1975 it has been part of the civic collection. Its realisation was decided by "public decree" around 1475, as recorded by the inscription at the bottom, to beseech divine protection against the plague that was then raging in the area, to which the figure of Saint Roch in particular refers, traditionally invoked as intercessor against epidemic diseases.

The biographical identify of Saint Roch is very sketchy. The main features handed down by hagiography are as follows: born in Montpellier between the late 13<sup>th</sup> century and early 14<sup>th</sup> century, Roch, of noble origins, sold all his possessions in favour of the poor and set out to Rome as a pilgrim, with whose typical dress, cloak and wayfarer's staff he is also depicted in this fresco. Having devoted himself in various places to looking after plague victims, in Piacenza he himself contracted the illness, manifesting itself with a swelling at the join of his thigh, which in time became his iconographic attribute, and he took refuge in Sarmato, near the river Trebbia, where a dog took such a liking to him that each day it brought him a loaf of bread stolen from its master's table. The latter, whose suspicions were aroused by the constant thefts, followed the dog and on discovering the invalid, took care of him. After he had recovered Roch returned to Montpellier, but he was so wasted by the disease that nobody recognised him and, mistaken for a criminal, he was thrown into prison where he died five years later. His relics, stolen in mysterious circumstances in 1485, were taken to Venice, where the school of Saint Roch was founded, a brotherhood devoted to the care

of the sick, from which many similar institutions derived.

Romanus, on the other hand, saint and martyr of the Eternal City, appears in hagiographic tradition as one of the soldiers present at the martyrdom of Saint Lawrence, when he was converted and baptised by the hand of the saint. His punishment was not long in coming: he was first scourged and then beheaded outside Porta Salaria. His body, recovered by the presbyter Justin, was buried in a crypt in the Agro Varano. His cult was especially strong in Rome and in the surrounding area.

The image has until recent times, when it was still *in situ*, been the object of intense veneration, attested to by the damage to the painted surface caused by the application of metal votive offerings over the years. Even when the plague epidemics had ceased, Saint Roch and perhaps Saint Romanus too, evidently continued to be invoked as protectors from infectious diseases in general.

Considered for a long time to be the work of Fiorenzo di Lorenzo, the fresco has recently been traced back to the young Perugino on the basis of a comparison with the *Adoration of the Magi* preserved in the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria in Perugia and has been dated 1476 in relation to the veneration received that year by the altar of the Madonna dei Dolori. Of particular interest is the view of Deruta, which in its "realism" makes tangible the object of celestial protection.