

## **Report on the habilitation thesis of Ivan Foletti: Le porte lignee di Santa Sabina. La zona liminare del narteca et l'iniziazione cristiana.**

Ivan Foletti for his habilitation thesis chose to address a famous Roman monument from the late antiquity, quite often studied, but which was not yet subject to a thorough and exhaustive approach. The wooden doors of Santa Sabina in Rome are one of the rare and the most important wooden monument from the 5th century; its sculpted panels are part of the oldest evidences of ecclesiastical early Christian art outside the field of funerary art. Some of them are without parallels and their interpretation remained disputed. It is not easy task in which Ivan has engaged.

A first look over the outline of the work of Ivan gives the impression of a very comprehensive approach to the topic. He starts with a large *status quaestionis*. In a second chapter, he enlarges his approach, addressing the topic of liminary spaces, of the function of the atrium in late antique churches, this detour being justified by the necessity to understand the space in front of the church. This is the topic of his third chapter. Both last chapters deal thoroughly with the meaning of sculpted panels, with questions of style, which Ivan, in a very interesting way, tries to connect with literary styles. A good and exhaustive conclusion closes this part. An indispensable catalogue, where Ivan addresses in details all individuals panels, giving for each a comprehensive bibliography, makes the second part of the volume.

The *status quaestionis* begins with the mention made by Pompeo Ugonio in 1588 and goes ahead with the first descriptions (and the first illustrations) of the door, dating from the 18th century. But, as Ivan notes, it is from the 19th century onwards, that the attention to the Santa Sabina door grows and, eventually, is subject to scholarly interest. Ivan stresses the opposition between the first art historians, authors of what Ivan calls "storia dell'arte universale", and what becomes a genuine scholarly approach, starting with an article of Kondakov in 1877, the first to give arguments for a late antique date of these sculptures. Ivan stresses the way, the sculptures of the doors find then their places in the important discussions around Byzantine art in the first years of the 20th century, in the opposition between, let us say, Riegl and Strzygowski. In this stage, the door is definitely attributed to the late antiquity. Ivan has the merit of insisting of some forgotten approaches, which are dismissed today, as the idea of an Italo-Gallic school and highlights the French nationalist ideology, which is hidden behind it,



even if it was developed by an American scholar, Baldwin Smith, but under the influence of Émile Mâle.

But it is only in the 50' that starts the last step of the knowledge of the door of Santa Sabina, with Felix Darsy at the beginning and going to Ivan himself, through many scholars, whose contributions are the starting point for his thesis. I was specially interested by the remarks of Ivan about the notion of "program", which I used in my own study about this door.

After this very complete look at the *status quaestionis*, Ivan doesn't go immediately to the analysis of the door itself. But, in a preliminary step, he comes to some general considerations which will constitute a frame for his own approach. He uses for this the notion of "liminary space", which was built up, at the beginning of the 20th century, by Van Gennep, a well known anthropologist. The doors, by themselves, as threshold between two spaces, may be seen as liminary. The originality of Ivan's approach is to consider of the possibility to use this notion for the atrium, the courtyard in front of most of the early Christian basilicas. He insists, following the achievements of Charles Picard and S. de Blaauw, on the use of the atrium by people, who are not allowed to proceed in the church, or who have to go out at the time of the celebration of the Eucharist. One aspect is important for the development of his thesis: he stresses the importance of the atrium as "initiatic and baptismal place", even if the atrium has not been created for this function.

At his place, Ivan introduces the wooden doors of the Ambrosian basilica in Milano, the only real parallel with Saint-Sabina, with an interesting stress on the possible interpretation of David as an allusion to Theodosius, which seems quite convincing. Of course, in a thesis about Saint-Sabin's door, it was absolutely necessary to introduce Milan's door. My first thought was that this place in the development was not the most appropriate place to do it. But Ivan gives a good justification, insisting on the figure of David as sinner and penitent.

This chapter may be considered as a preliminary one. It helps Ivan to introduce the next one, which addresses the very role of the narthex of Santa Sabina, issue which is important for him, because, as the reader will notice later, this issue is essential for his interpretation of the iconography of the door. This way to proceed is very characteristic for Ivan: he goes ahead, little by little; each step is actually a new argument leading the reader to the conclusion Ivan aims to direct it. It is very well done; nevertheless, it may sometimes be dangerous, even for himself to be caught in a development whose base is not absolutely sure or should be open to discussion. In this chapter, I am not completely convinced by some of the conclusions of Ivan about the importance of Santa Sabina on the Ash Wednesday, but I have myself no strong



arguments against this idea. Therefore I consider that the approach of Ivan is absolutely possible.

The following pages, where Ivan analyses the scenes of the door in a way to put them in accordance with his interpretation of the function of the door, are very well written. His analyses of the scenes, which may have a baptismal signification are fine, complete and demonstrate an excellent knowledge of the patristic texts. The references given by Ivan are welcome, conclusive. I would like to stress this strong point of this thesis, a very good use of the literary sources.

In the same way, I cannot but agree with his interpretation of the scene of Petrus, Christ, and the cock, as well as with the idea that the Baptism was surely represented of one of the missing panels.

The pages about the scenes which are supposed to stress the importance of salvation seem a little bit less obvious in the way they are exposed. Actually we come back to the question of the baptism. But it is not only the patristic texts which Ivan knows very well; the same has to be said about the way he uses the poor sources we have about the early Roman liturgy. Ivan knows the texts, proposes strong interpretations, as it can be seen in the pages on the relation of some scenes with the Eucharist.

We may have the impression that Ivan, commenting these panels, gives systematically an interpretation as if they would announce or symbolise the Baptism. We can notice this for instance in the case of a scene of Christ's miracle, which is difficult to identify. But again, it is not possible to demonstrate that it is not true. As well among the rich signification of the Rapt of Elias, the Baptism is well attested, especially in texts written by Ambrosius. Does it absolutely mean that, this is the right interpretation of this scene? Again, I don't want to say that these affirmations are wrong, but they may bear the risk of being part of a circular reasoning, I mean, to comfort the initial conclusion, which in a first step allowed these interpretations. It would be good, that Ivan shows that he is aware of this difficulty.

Very interesting and new is his interpretation of a panel, usually seen as showing Christ's Ascension. Ivan, with very good arguments considers that it represents the rapt of Enoch. He quotes texts of Ambrosius which are a strong back-up.

In the last pages of this chapter, Ivan sums up the conclusions of the preceding pages. He sees the scenes of the door as very close to the initiation preparing the Baptism. In this way, the decoration of the door has a consistent meaning. Long years ago, I have proposed a quite different analysis and a quite different interpretation. But I consider the interpretation of Ivan as interesting and quite possible. I am a little bit more sceptical about the idea that the people,



who walk through this passage or even the catechumens, who, in some occasions, as relates Ivan, are gathered in the space in front of the door, will focus on these scenes. I wonder if these panels, some of which are quite difficult to interpret could really have this function. But my point of view doesn't say that it has no sense to try to understand the meaning of these pictures, as Ivan did it in a very scholarly way. I am just not sure that the onlookers were able to understand most of them, even, if, possibly, homilies could draw the attention of the audience of some of them.

The next step of the demonstration of Ivan is to try to understand the meaning or, better said, the logic of the choice of the scenes. He makes an interesting distinction between two kinds of association, chronological or in relation with a meaning. But the distinction may not be absolutely strict, as Ivan himself stresses; for instance, the program of the triumphal arch of Santa Maria Maggiore would need further explanations.

The next chapter "Stile e Retorica" is a very interesting one, beginning with a subtle distinction between "maniera" and style, which will arouse many discussions, as well as Ivan's conclusion that more than one style may be present in one and the same workshop. He is right to say that these various styles are not due to the use of various models for these scenes (nevertheless, some pages later Ivan acknowledges the use of models). Actually, the point of Ivan's demonstration is to stress that the various styles have also nothing to do with various hands, but are consciously chosen depending on the iconography, i.e on what the artist wanted to show. The comparison with the rhetoric and with the different style levels is very interesting; Ivan gives some well chosen examples. Actually it is a very important affirmation and it is to hope that Ivan tries to develop it more than it is possible in the limits of a thesis. He has already started to do it in some papers. The quote from Augustinus which he gives is, again, very important to show how Christian writers could use and adapt the classical rhetoric. These various levels of style are in the last pages of this chapter used to make a new proposition concerning the original disposition of the panels in the door. He starts with the affirmation that the panels now missing could be the panels on the bottom, which are more exposed to destruction. This is a reasonable idea. He goes a step further, arguing that these panels had only an ornamental decoration. Ivan gives some arguments, which sound good, even if he cannot prove it.

I cannot but agree with his proposition of the reconstitution of three rows of small panels. For the great panels, he tries to put them together to get visual groups, but groups which are linked with ideas associations. It is an interesting and original decision, which will surely arouse a lot of discussions, but which deserves to be considered with attention. Ivan proposes an order

where the finest sculptures are in the upper register, which shows also the ascension of the prophets and the vision of God. It is not necessary to give here all the details; the proposition of Ivan is a coherent one. A good, concise conclusion finishes this first part of the thesis.


The second part is a critical corpus of the panels. Each scene is first precisely described, followed by a note, which gives a critical story of the interpretations, using also the most recent publications. Eventually, Ivan tries to go further and, in many cases, adds something to the current interpretation.

I will discuss here shortly only one panel. One of these problematic scenes is the scene, he interprets as Transfiguration. As Ivan stresses, it is one of the most difficult and of the most disputed panels from the Santa-Sabina door. The interpretations go from the meeting at Emmaus to the Transfiguration or to the Traditio Legis. Ivan choose to come back to the interpretation as Transfiguration. This decision fits with the positioning he proposes for this panel. Other positioning could suggest another interpretation. It is another example of the quality of the work of Ivan. Even in difficult or disputable questions, his propositions are consistent and well-argued. The same may be said about the "Enoch" panel, which I mentioned already above.

It is not necessary in this report to come back to every scene. It is enough to say, that, as in the first part of his thesis, the description are well done, the bibliographies are up to date and the arguments given by him are coherent and strong even if, for some scenes, some discussions or disagreements will arouse.

To conclude this report, I want to stress the quality of the work of Ivan Foletti. This habilitation thesis has the expected level and meets absolutely the requirements placed on habilitation thesis.

In Triboung 7/10/2015

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized initial 'L' followed by a long horizontal stroke.