

The Legend of the Volto Santo and the Cleaver

The **Volto Santo** (Holy Face) of Lucca, a tangible sign of recognition for the citizens of Lucca and an impressive aspect of Lucca's history, art, and tradition, can be found within the Cathedral of San Martino, in the historic center of the town.

For centuries this has been a very important religious reference for pilgrims who, coming here from every part of the world, have knelt in its presence since the Middle Ages.

There is much to be said about this important symbol of the town of Lucca, which is part of the enormous cultural heritage of the community. And many are the legends that over centuries of history have contributed to its importance and its veneration. Among these, one of the most often told is that of the *mannaia* (cleaver), which reveals the powerful significance of this religious icon.

A certain Giovanni di Lorenzo, originally from Picardy, in France, debarked in Naples in order to make a pilgrimage to the holy house of Loreto. He then directed his steps towards Lucca, which he wanted to reach in time for the celebration of the Santa Croce and to prostrate himself in front of the Volto Santo.

It was early September of 1334 and the pilgrim, passing near Pietralunga, in Umbria, went down to a stream to drink. A few steps from the bank, the pilgrim noticed an inanimate human shape on the ground. He approached and realized that it was none other than the corpse of a man who had recently died. The pilgrim bent down to observe the poor man, praying for his soul. Unfortunately, a group of people arrived and accused him of having committed the crime. They immobilized him and turned him over to the local authorities.

*Cleaver in Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca.
Photo by Marianne Rossi*



*Miniature from the Codice Rapondi, 1400 ca.
(Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Pal. lat. 1988)
Source: Heidelberg, Biblioteca dell'Elettore Palatino di Baviera)*

The pleas and explanations of the pilgrim, who naturally proclaimed his innocence, were useless. He was handed over to the law and imprisoned. Though he continued to deny having been the killer, he was subjected to torture. The poor man resisted for a while, but finally, unable to hold up against the torture, declared himself responsible for the deed, which he in fact had not committed.

Branca de' Branci, the chief magistrate of Pietralunga, signed the death sentence. The poor condemned man then implored his last hope. He prayed to the Volto Santo, swearing that if his life were spared he would not only go to Lucca to worship him, but would continue his voyage as far as Santiago di Compostela.

When the hour arrived, the pilgrim, praying again to his possible savior, was forcefully dragged to the platform, where his head was placed on the block. The executioner gave a huge blow with the cleaver, but this could not do its job. Incredibly, the cleaver did not decapitate the man. A second attempt was made, with the same result. Three times the cleaver failed to cut off the condemned man's head!

At this point, Giovanni di Lorenzo begged to be believed. As proof of his innocence, he invoked the miracle of having survived decapitation by the executioner. The crowd was impressed, and proclaiming his innocence out loud they announced that a miracle had occurred.

It was 11 September 1334. Giovanni rushed toward Lucca to throw himself at the feet of the Volto Santo.

Nowadays, almost 700 years after this miracle, the cleaver is conserved in the cathedral. It hangs near the temple, an eternal memory of what happened on that day.

– by Gabriele Muratori and Marianne Rossi
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