

ASPECTS OF A SHIPWRECK – St. Paul on Malta

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“...the word has universal authority, [whereas] the image is always individual and specific, one aspect only out of the many that we know exist.” Neil McGregor¹.

This essay takes up the suggestion of Neil McGregor that in order to acquire a deeper understanding of a religious subject, we need ‘different aspects, different visions’. It would be difficult to find visions that at first sight differ more fundamentally in their approach than those of certain artists depicting the arrival of St. Paul on the island of Malta: we examine a few in detail, irrespective of their date or context, in McGregor’s fashion.

We begin with a work familiar in Malta itself, an altarpiece by Stefano Erardi for St. Paul’s Collegiate Church in Rabat. [Fig. 1] Here a wrecked ship identifies the scene, but is not relegated, as in other local



Fig. 1 Stefano Erardi (1630-1716): *Shipwreck of St. Paul*, oil on canvas: Collegiate Church of St. Paul, Rabat, Malta.

versions, to a distant coast shown in the upper section as a simple mark of recognition for the event. This artist plans the entire scene in accordance with the classic ‘rule of enclosure’: to this effect both ship and coastline are brought nearer to the action, and placed to the right of the panel so that darker areas of vessel and leaden sky can be seen as joining the tree on the left side to form a great arch over the heavens, uniting within an all-encompassing frame the activity beneath. And here the ‘heroic’ figure of St. Paul dominates a group of other passengers who have reached the shore, standing with his right arm raised high as he shakes

¹A quotation from Neil McGregor’s Introduction to G. Finaldi et al., *The Image of Christ: catalogue of the exhibition Seeing Salvation*, The National Gallery, London, 2000, pp.6–7.

off the snake. He is placed exactly at centre-stage, for we are watching a classically centralised drama, the aim of which is the ennoblement of the figure by means of its centrality and the symmetry of the surrounding circle of activity. Eradi's figures are in fact an interesting mix of the classical and the mannerist, in which the posture of each figure has been individually conceived: for the main protagonists there is decorum, solidity, and for minor figures, exempt from decorum, the freedom to display emotions by facial expression, by a fanning out of the fingers or similar demonstrative gesture². In spite of this amalgam, or perhaps because of it, Erodi shows St. Paul as timeless, universal, and preaching to a questioning, uncertain world that is at the same time unified under God's protection.

A small painting on copper by Adam Elsheimer³, *St. Paul on Malta*, portrays a saint with very different characteristics, though they are not instantly discernable. [Fig.2] First and foremost, by choosing a night



Fig. 2. Adam Elsheimer (1578-1610): *St. Paul on Malta*, copper, 17 x 21.3 cm; London, The National Gallery, inv. no. 3535.

scene Elsheimer was free to demonstrate features for which he became famous: an extraordinary range of the effects of light, particularly as it illuminated the natural world. Thus our eyes are immediately drawn to the drama of a horrendous storm. It occupies the upper two-thirds of the panel: an area of general darkness, where diagonal beams of light from sky and from a lighthouse give brief glimpses of rocky coast, leaping spray, wreckage and fallen trees. One tiny figure can just be seen emerging from the debris.

Impressive as this is as a shipwreck, Elsheimer's personal understanding of the landing of St. Paul only becomes clear within the lower third of the panel, where a horizontal strip of stony ground extends along its lower edge, creating an area that is visually all but separated from the turmoil above. It is packed with figures, in this case discernible to a greater or lesser degree by the light of a fire near the left margin. Within a group around this fire, light catches the outline of a snake and the red mantle of a bare-footed St. Paul, a figure otherwise differing little from those leaning forward to watch him in quiet wonderment.

²Amongst the crowd, near the left margin, the artist Stefano Eradi (1630–1716) has included his self-portrait: he turns to the viewer and gestures towards St. Paul. The sources of St. Paul's idealised head, clothing and pose are identified by Gerald Bugeja in 'From Eradi to Zahra: the Emilian Connectio', in ed. J. Azzopardi, *St. Paul's Grotto, Church and Museum at Rabat, Malta*, Malta 1990.

³Adam Elsheimer (1578–1610) was German, born in the staunchly Protestant city of Frankfurt. He settled in Rome for the last ten years of his short life, where he joined a group of intellectuals and various artists working in Vatican circles, and eventually converted to Catholicism. For full references and bibliography see my article 'Interpreting St. Lawrence', *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. IV No 3, Summer 2008, pp. 58–63, concerning a painting in the Wignacourt Museum, Rabat, Malta.

Along the remainder of this lower edge all is quiet activity: the removal and drying of their clothes by a group of men, women and children in various stages of undress. There are no social distinctions here, and some are helping others as they struggle to pull off their soaked garments and hang them up to dry. For this artist then, the fact of being saved by Divine Providence has not only rendered the passengers outwardly indistinguishable one from another, but with the recognition of a new reality, each individual exhibits a quiet readiness and helpfulness - an atmosphere that brings into line the figure glimpsed in the upper section, leaving the devastation with a confident step, to join his companions with his contribution of firewood. Moreover, their salvation has come from a saint seen both as unassuming and untiring, who, having reached the shore, continues his mission.

It is the untiring strength of purpose of St. Paul that is depicted metaphorically by a present-day artist, Clive Upton, who shows the saint as a man of immense physical strength facing physical danger a rough sea. Moreover, in his struggle to reach the coast he bears on his shoulders a man to whom he is chained, and whose strength was failing—the Roman centurion in whose charge he had been travelling to Rome⁴. [Fig.3]



Fig. 3. Clive Upton (1911-2006): *The Great Shipwreck*, from *The Story of Paul Retold*, private collection.

In these examples artists have focussed variously on the message itself, the difficulties overcome and the courage of the messenger. Thus with Eradi the nature of the message is powerful, overwhelming—features he transposes to the commanding figure of the messenger. Elsheimer's main focus on the other hand is on the danger that has been overcome in order to reach dry land—the terrifying storm—and shows a saint who then quietly continues his mission, whilst those who have followed him to safety have been granted the blessings of a new life. And Upton visualises St. Paul's untiring strength of purpose, in terms of physical strength at a time of physical danger—a strength he employs in the rescue of one in dire need of assistance.

Placed side by side, the individually different visions of artists celebrating a momentous event are found to be complementary, and taken together they cannot but deepen our understanding of the subject.

⁴For the centurion, Julius, see Acts 7. Clive Upton (1911–2006) was an artist whose wide range of illustrations included those for 'The Story of Paul Retold', published in the magazine for children *Look and Learn*, from which the one shown here, 'The Great Shipwreck', is taken.