

An art-historical and scientific investigation into two Early *Cinquecento* Renaissance Polyptychs by Antonio de Saliba (1466/7 – c. 1535) on Sicily and Malta

Andrea Luca Bartolo¹, Charlene Vella²

¹ Andrea Luca Bartolo. Email addresses: andrea-luca.bartolo.19@um.edu.mt / andrealucabartolo@gmail.com

² Charlene Vella, OH 303, Department of Art and Art History, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, Msida, MSD 2080, Malta. Email addresses: charlene.vella@um.edu.mt / charlenevella@gmail.com

The most recent discovery of six privately owned panel paintings that are to be associated with the Sicilian Renaissance artist Antonio de Saliba's (1466/7 – c. 1535) now dismembered 1515 titular altarpiece for the Franciscan Observant Church in Rabat, Malta, along with the two central panels of the same altarpiece that are found within the church, has made it possible to fill in gaps in art-historical research on Renaissance art in Malta. It also allows for comparisons with Antonio's documented 1503-04 Taormina Polyptych at the Cathedral of St Nicholas of Bari, simultaneously generating new interest in this work, particularly for what survives of its elaborate Late Gothic gilded framework. This paper aims to reconstruct the Rabat Polyptych's framework digitally and hypothetically, using a similar approach to that employed for the digital reconstruction of the Taormina work. Additionally, the paper interprets and discusses the findings from various scientific analyses of the Rabat Polyptych's panels' current state of preservation and pigment and wood composition in relation to the field of conservation of cultural heritage.

Keywords: Sicilian Renaissance, *Cinquecento*, panel painting, Late Gothic, framework, digital reconstruction, diagnostic analyses, antonelliani, FTIR, XRF

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns two Renaissance polyptychs produced by Antonio de Saliba roughly in the middle of his career: the 1503-04 *Taormina Polyptych* (fig. 1) and the 1515 *Rabat Polyptych* (fig. 2). Whilst the earlier work retains all of its eleven panel paintings and much of its Late Gothic gilded framework, the later work – that was presumably originally composed of seventeen paintings in total – only survives in a dismembered state with eight known panels in varying states of preservation associated

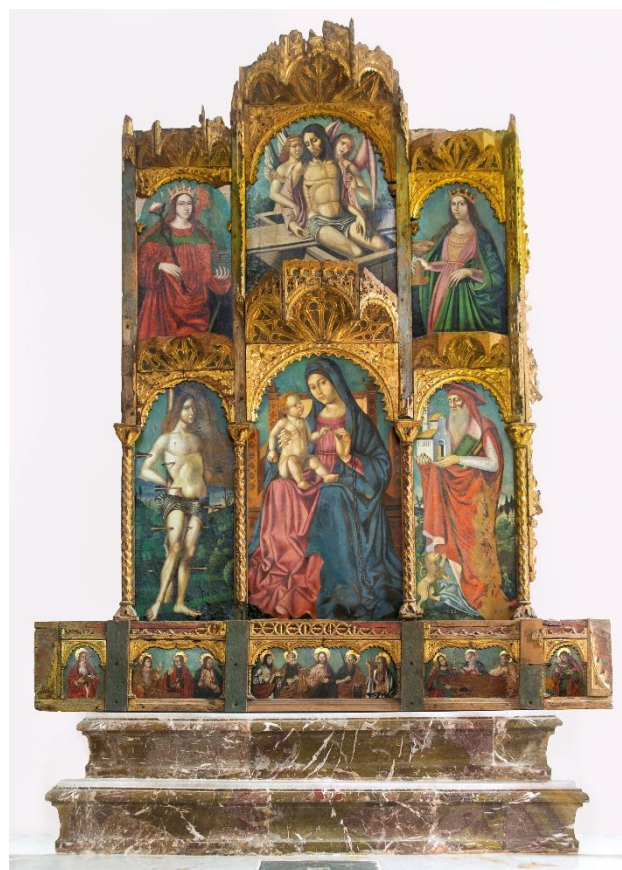


Fig. 1. Antonio de Saliba (1466/7 – c. 1535) and workshop, Taormina Polyptych, 1503-04, panel paintings and giltwood framework, c. 230 × 195 cm, Cathedral of St Nicholas of Bari, Taormina, Sicily.

with it, and a historic description of their original format, but with no trace of the original framework [1]. The losses that these altarpieces have suffered pose problems in trying

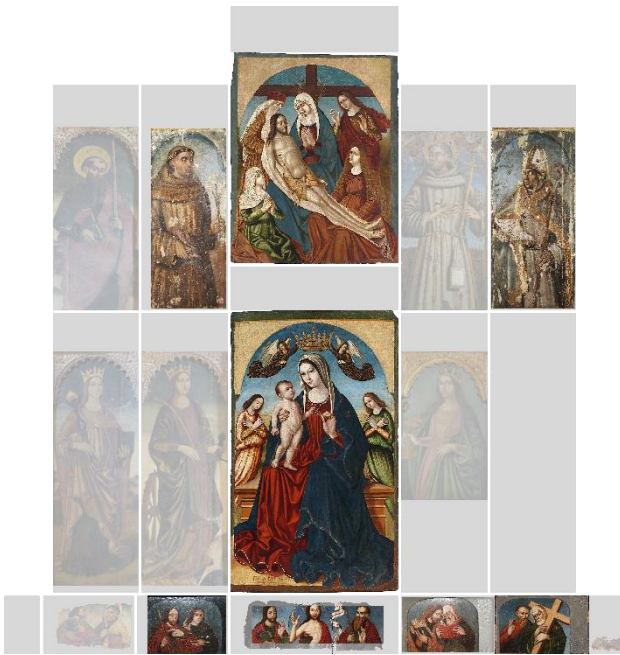


Fig. 2. A hypothetical digital reconstruction of Antonio de Saliba's Rabat Polyptych based on the physical description of the work provided by Giovanni Antonio Mercieca in 1730, including ghosted panels from other altarpieces by Antonio that match the description.

to understand their original aesthetic, material composition and visual impact as objects of religious devotion. Through extensive art-historical research, diagnostic analyses and conservation processes carried out in recent years, valuable data has been obtained leading to new insights and hypotheses to be made in relation to the possible visual completion of the works of art, as well as the artist Antonio de Saliba and his workshop's painting and manufacturing techniques.

II. THE TAORMINA POLYPTYCH

The *Taormina Polyptych* was commissioned from Antonio and his father the intagliatore or wood-carver Giovanni de Saliba (doc. 1461 – 1517?) in 1503 by the rectors of the Church of San Sebastiano in Taormina for the sum of 18 *uncie* [2]. It consists of panel paintings depicting a Pietà supported by Angels, St Agatha and St Lucy in the upper register, a Madonna and Child Enthroned, St Sebastian and St Jerome in the middle register, and a five-panel predella with the Christ Pantocrator and the twelve Apostles. The altarpiece is adorned with an elaborately carved Late Gothic giltwood framework.

In order to better understand the manufacturing techniques of the *Taormina Polyptych*, this altarpiece, that is today located at the Cathedral of St Nicholas of Bari in Taormina, Sicily, was studied at close range and its components measured and photographed extensively from



Fig. 3. Antonio de Saliba's Taormina Polyptych before conservation. (Source: Fondo Archivio Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione (<https://fotografia.cultura.gov.it/iccd/item/MPI6111380>))

different angles to thoroughly document the work whilst assessing its surviving sections [3]. This on-site study revealed details about the work that are not so easily identifiable and that had consequently been overlooked in the past due to the work's poor state of preservation. An inspection of the left side of the polyptych revealed the probable presence of the end of a recessed cross-bar at the back of the polyptych, as well as a lip join connecting the middle and upper register panels [4]. Examining the losses in the gilded fretwork decoration of the altarpiece was essential for the study of the underlying structures. The presence of blue pigment was observed on the thick vertical wooden elements that separate the predella panels, and also on the thinner vertical elements that separate the upper and middle register panels. Additionally, a red pigment was observed above and at the sides of the predella. The polychromy on these underlying structures would have been visible through the overlying pierced gilded fretwork, only some of which survives today. It is also likely that the blue-painted vertical elements separating the panels may also be providing structural support apart from their aesthetic purpose.

Two high-quality grayscale photographs of the polyptych taken pre- (fig. 3) and post-restoration in the early 1920s document the framework as it survived in the early 20th century, and thus provide a better idea of what the framework originally looked like [5]. Consequently, the photographs were vital for the production of a two-dimensional digitally reconstructed rendition of the



Fig. 4. The digital reconstruction of the Taormina Polyptych.

altarpiece and its framework in its entirety (fig. 4). The reconstruction was assembled using two dimensional shapes with the measurements recorded on site, whilst also filling in the losses in the framework by referring to the mentioned archival photographs. The original dimensions are hypothesised to be *c.* 245 × 195 cm.

III. THE RABAT POLYPTYCH

The *Rabat Polyptych* was a commission that Antonio de Saliba accepted in 1510 from the Franciscan Observant Church of Santa Maria di Gesù (*Ta' Ġiezu*) in Rabat, Malta, for the fee of 50 *uncie*. The altarpiece no longer survives in its original polyptych format but in a disassembled state and lacks its original Late Gothic framework. The eight known paintings associated with this Malta work consist of: two fully conserved central panels located within the church depicting a *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Angels* and a *Deposition*; two panels depicting three-quarter length figures of the Franciscan saints Anthony of Padua and Louis of Toulouse; and four predella panels collectively depicting the Resurrected Christ and Apostles. The original format of the altarpiece and the respective positions of the panels are described in a historical document – a physical description of the work provided by Giovanni Antonio Mercieca in 1730.

Although no documentation of the original framework of the Rabat altarpiece is known to exist, it is likely to have



Fig. 5. The digitally reconstructed framework of the Taormina Polyptych altered and superimposed onto the hypothetical reconstruction of the Rabat Polyptych.

bared some sort of similarity to that adorning the Taormina work and that Giovanni de Saliba may have been the woodcarver responsible for sculpting and gilding it [6]. This hypothesis is based on the fact that documentation shows Giovanni's ongoing collaboration with his son Antonio on at least fourteen commissions, with the commission of the Rabat work falling within this period of collaboration, that is, between 1497 and 1514, making it possible for this to have been an undocumented collaboration [2].

There are several possible reasons for the polyptych's dismemberment. As is also the case for other works by Antonio, it is believed that the components of the polyptych, including both the panels and framework, were dismembered and used as payment by the Franciscan friars who may not have had other means by which to pay for fees that they had. A change in taste that favoured more contemporaneous styles, may have facilitated this. It could also possibly be the case that the polyptych in its original format was no longer structurally sound and that the wooden framework (both the structural one at the back and the decorative one at the front) had decayed or suffered irreparable damage from insect infestations, leading to the polyptych's inevitable disassembly.

The already discussed reconstruction of the *Taormina Polyptych* was thus an important initial step that eventually led to the hypothetical digital reconstruction of Antonio's *Rabat Polyptych*'s framework (fig. 5).

Scientific investigations were carried out on a number of

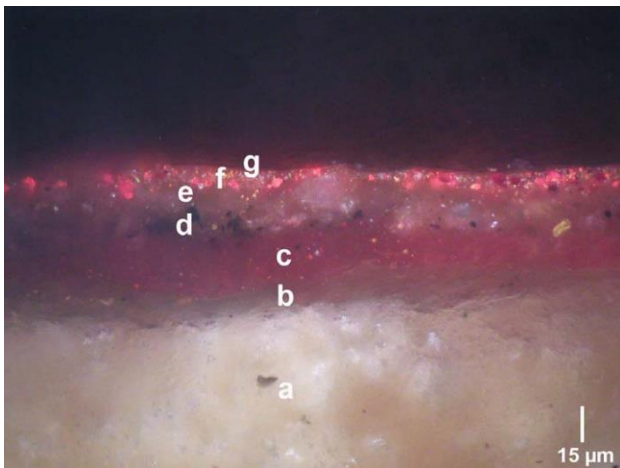


Fig. 6. A detail of a cross-section photograph of a pigment sample from the central predella panel of the Rabat Polyptych with an indication of the different layers.

the panels associated with the *Rabat Polyptych* throughout recent years. Diagnostic tests were carried out using ultraviolet (UV) fluorescence, infra-red (IR) reflectography and x-radiation (X-ray) wherein several layers of overpainting were observed, areas of carbon underdrawing were identified, and deeper past interventions such as old gesso infills were also observed [3]. Pigment samples from two predella panels were studied stratigraphically, using stereoscopic microscopy (ST), Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), x-ray fluorescence (XRF), selective staining tests on cross-section (SST), and optical microscopy with polarised reflected light on cross-section (MO-RL) [7], whilst wood samples were boiled, and transverse, tangential and radial sections were studied using transmitted light under an optical microscope at $40\times - 1000\times$ magnification [8][9].

RESULTS

The digital reconstruction of Antonio de Saliba's *Taormina Polyptych* aids in the visual interpretation of the original altarpiece as a whole and provides a clearer comparison between what the altarpiece looks like today and what it could have looked like when it was produced over five centuries ago. Although the digital reconstruction of the *Rabat Polyptych* cannot be compared to the physical work in its original polyptych format and no old photographs nor contemporary sketches of it are known to exist, the measurements taken of the lengths and widths of the associated panels were essential in order to deduce hypothetical overall dimensions of the altarpiece, essentially allowing for a close interpretation of the original overall dimensions. Through the scale reconstruction, the original dimensions are therefore hypothesised to be *c.* 380×350 cm.

The results for the pigment profiling carried out on two of the newly discovered predella panels (namely the

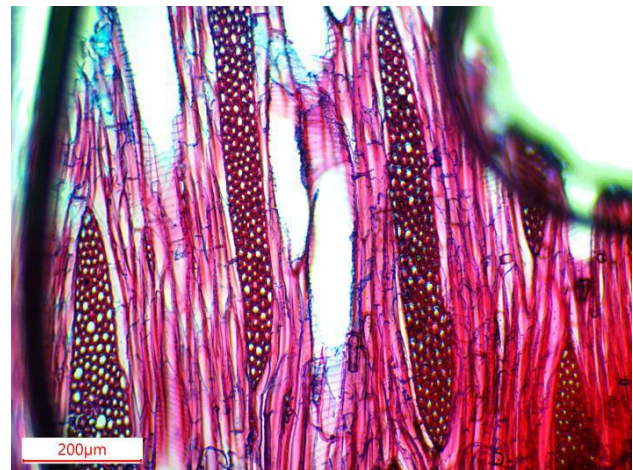


Fig. 7. A microscope image of axial parenchyma from a wood sample from the central predella panel of the Rabat Polyptych.

Resurrected Christ with Sts John the Evangelist and Paul panel, and the *St Andrew and an Apostle* panel) show that Antonio used an animal-glue-bound gesso layer for the preparation that he applied to the wooden support, a carbon-based underdrawing, a thin layer of animal glue that was applied to the gesso layer in order to reduce binder absorption into the gesso, a protein-based binder for the paint, indicating that the tempera technique was used, and that the colours of the paint itself were composed of several ground natural pigments including red lead, red lake, red and yellow ochre, lead white, carbon black, cinnabar, azurite, verdigris and lead-tin yellow. Pulverised glass was observed in some of the red pigments (fig. 6) [7].

Wood samples extracted from the same panels were initially boiled, and then tangential, transverse and radial sections were stained and studied under $40\times - 1000\times$ magnification using an optical microscope. The histological observations of the wood identified the genus as *Tilia spp.* (fig. 7), more commonly known as Lindenwood or limewood – not to be confused with the lime fruit, the scientific nomenclature of which is *Citrus sp.* [8][9].

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The digital reconstructions produced for the two altarpieces in question serve as tools in the comprehension of the visual completion of these altarpieces as works that were produced in the Early *Cinquecento* in Messina, Sicily, combined the Renaissance style of the paintings with the Late Gothic style of the intricately carved and gilded frameworks and polyptych formats. Emphasis is also placed on Giovanni de Saliba's exceptional skill at producing such high-quality, elaborate and intricately carved work.

The results for the pigment profiling and wood

identification of the Malta works were compared to those obtained from previous studies carried out on the panels of the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Angels* and *Deposition* at the Church of Santa Maria di Gesù in Rabat, Malta. The great similarity in the results obtained strengthens the attribution of the recently discovered works to the artist Antonio de Saliba and the hypothesis that they belonged to the same altarpiece on Malta.

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