

**BETWEEN THE IMAGES AND THE TEXT OF THE *DE VITA ET OBITU SANCTI GULIELMI*: A PORTRAIT OF WILLIAM OF VERCELLI, FOUNDER OF MONTEVERGINE<sup>1</sup>****Veronica de Duonni**

Università degli studi di Salerno

e-mail: veradeduonni@gmail.com

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**Resum**

Di Guglielmo da Vercelli, fondatore dell'abbazia di Montevergine vicino Avellino, solo recentemente è stata definita la sua spiritualità. Nonostante sia sopravvissuto il manoscritto contenente la sua vita e miracoli (Montevergine, Biblioteca dell'Abbazia, ms. 1), difficile è coniugare quanto narrato con le poche testimonianze artistiche. Nelle miniature che decorano il codice, il santo è raffigurato con un particolare abito che non trova seguito nella tradizione successiva verginiana. In questo contributo si è cercato di far luce sull'iconografia del santo, congiungendo il racconto agiografico con le immagini.

**Paraules clau:** Montevergine, Guglielmo da Vercelli, iconografia, manoscritto, agiografia, Sud Italia

**Abstract**

The spirituality of William of Vercelli, founder of the abbey of Montevergine near Avellino, has been defined only recently. Despite the survival of the manuscript containing his life and miracles (Montevergine, Biblioteca dell'Abbazia, MS 1), it is difficult to combine this account with the few artistic testimonies. In the miniatures decorating the code, the saint is depicted donning a specific habit that does not appear in the later tradition of the abbey. In this contribution I will try to clarify the iconography of the saint by combining the hagiographic narration with the images.

**Key Words:** Montevergine, Guglielmo da Vercelli, iconography, manuscript, hagiography, Southern Italy.

<sup>1</sup> This revised and enriched contribution was read at the International Medieval Meeting Lleida 2016, 20-22 June 2016 at the University of Lleida (Spain) with the title *Iconografia di Guglielmo da Vercelli, il santo che non varcò mai il Mediterraneo..*

William of Vercelli (1085ca-1142), founder of numerous communities in southern Italy, the best known of which was the abbey of Montevergine, can be traced back through the events of his spiritual activity thanks to the *De vita et obitu sancti Guilielmi confessoris et heremite*,<sup>2</sup> a manuscript preserved in the Library attached to the national monument of Montevergine and an essential source for those who have researched the early days of the abbey from the sixteenth century onwards. The *Legenda* has come down to us in two drafts, one from the 13th century, transcribed in Benevento, and the other from the 14th century, in Gothic, artificially brought together in the 17th century in the composite manuscript marked as 1. Reading his biography, the saint is presented as «licteralis scientie prius ignarus»<sup>3</sup> and is later defined as «tamquam homo ydiota et sine licteris nesciret quid faceret vel quid profferret».<sup>4</sup> Only from an unknown Ruggiero, with whom he stayed in Melfi, did he learn Psalm 109 and from then on «sacre Scripture fuit ei peritia».<sup>5</sup> The layman William, who in previous historiography was defined as belonging to the Benedictine order from the age of fourteen,<sup>6</sup> lived first as a voluntary penitent,<sup>7</sup> a practice that strongly characterised spiritual experiences between the 11th and 12th centuries, then as an itinerant preacher,<sup>8</sup> and finally, from about 1111 until 1113, as a hermit.<sup>9</sup> Having climbed to the top of Mount Parthenio, he suggested to the monks and priests who had gathered around him that they live according to a «norma anachoretica»<sup>10</sup> as he himself states: «meum est... consilium, fratres, ut propriis manibus laborantes, vicym et vestitum nobis, et quod seperest pauperibus erogemus acquiramus, et statutis horis convenientes, divina celebramus officia».<sup>11</sup> A normative model not very different from the *Institutio eremitarum* provided by Pier Damiani to his brethren at Fonte Avellana (ANDENNA 1983-1984), as shown by the possibility of being able to welcome *fratres* coming directly from the voluntary penitential experience, and the refusal of the title of abbot for the regent of the community, as was established in chapter XXVIII of *Opusculum XV*.<sup>12</sup> Soon, however, the orientation suggested by William, a model of life and perfection based (to use Andenna's expression) on the concept of *penitancia-humilitas*, elements on which the saint's *religio* was formed, was questioned by the priests who had joined him and who did not accept,

<sup>2</sup> Abbey of Montevergine (AMV), ms. 1. PANARELLI 2004a.

<sup>3</sup> AMV, ms. 1, f. 8r.

<sup>4</sup> AMV, ms. 1, ff. 25r-25v

<sup>5</sup> AMV, ms. 1, f. 8r. It is not by chance that this very psalm is quoted and first learnt by William. In fact, Psalm 109 (110) is one of the most famous royal psalms and has been taken up several times by the authors of the New Testament in reference to the victorious and glorified Messiah at the right hand of God (Es.: Mt 22, 41-45; Mc 12, 35-37; Lc 20, 41-44; At 2, 29-35). Cf. KIMCHI 2001. The importance of the psalms is emphasised within the Benedictine Rule, cf. VOGUÉ 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. DE PALMA 1933, ACOCELLA 1942b, MONGELLI 1960b and MONGELLI 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. MEERSSEMAN 1968, ANDENNA 1983-84.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. MEERSSEMAN 1965, HOUBEN, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> AMV, ms.1, f. 11v. Cf. HOUBEN 1992, PACAUT 1970.

<sup>10</sup> AMV, ms. 1, f. 37v.

<sup>11</sup> AMV, ms. 1, f. 15r.

<sup>12</sup> PETRI DAMIANI, "Opusculum XV", *PL* 145, col. 335-364.

above all, the absence of a distinction «between the “officium” and the “status”, among those who had the priesthood and those who did not» (ANDENNA 1983-1984: 106). They complained about William’s precepts on working with one’s hands and the principles of poverty, and asked the saint to build a church and buy books and sacred vestments. William agreed to these requests and travelled to Bari to buy what was demanded.<sup>13</sup> Shortly afterwards, the saint from Vercelli left the community of Partenio to found other communities, including that of S. Salvatore di Goletto.<sup>14</sup> As the *Legenda* reflects, this choice seems to have its origin in the conflicts between him and his first followers (VALAGARA 1942, DEL GUERCIO 1942, ACOCELLA 1942a). However, one must take into account that the first chapters of the biography were written by a monk from Goleta, who was probably more inclined to give greater prominence to his own community, where the saint was buried (VITOLO 2002). The subsequent historiography points to the original hermitic spirit rather than the discontent that sprouted at Partenio as the motivation behind William’s departure from the community of Montevergine (PANARELLI 2005).

Finally, in the course of a few decades, the community steadily moved towards a regulation rooted in the Benedictine rule, a move already highlighted by the presence of the name “abbas” for Alferio, and definitively confirmed between 1161 and 1172 when the *anchorite rule* was replaced by the Benedictine rule with the authorisation of Pope Alexander III (KEHR 1962: 130-131, n. 1, HOUBEN 1994, FONSECA 2000, VITOLO 2001), a transition present in many communities between the 12th and 13th centuries (PENCO 1985, CABY 2003).

However, there is no textual evidence left to shed light on the monastic habit worn by the first community of Montevergine. Only through an ancient and constant tradition (GIORDANO 1643), can we conclude that it was a white habit, as white was also the habit worn by St. John of Matera (MATTEI-CERASOLI 1938). The only elements through which it is possible to reconstruct the iconography of the saint are the figurative testimonies, which are actually few. William appears three times in the manuscript (figs. 1-2-3).<sup>15</sup> The saint is depicted barefoot with a red cassock, scapular and green pointed hood while leaning on the staff with his left hand. This particular attire was first interpreted by Father Tropeano as the manifestation of his *status* as a public penitent precisely because of the curved staff<sup>16</sup> and the presence of the red cross stamped on the robe.

Father Mongelli, who has explored the reasons behind this choice of colours, interprets this arrangement as a simple means of emphasising the presence of the scapular in the saint’s habit

<sup>13</sup> AMV, ms. 1, f. 15v.

<sup>14</sup> It is, as Jean-Marie Martin has pointed out, a double monastery, governed by an abbess and where the monks, from the Most Holy Mary Mother of God Crowned in Foggia, are called into *servitio congregationis ancillarum Christi*. Cf. BARRA 1970, MONGELLI 1983, MARTIN 1989, PANARELLI 2004b, ARALDI 2008.

<sup>15</sup> The manuscript was not bound until the 17th century by the Verginian priest Gian Giacomo Giordano. About the manuscript cf. PANARELLI 2004a. First published as LEGENDA S. GUILIELMI 1962.

<sup>16</sup> The other symbols of the journey are the stick and the saddlebag, as can be deduced from the *Liber Sancti Jacobi* (Santiago de Compostela, cathedral archives, ms. 1) in which it is explicitly stated that: «Accipe hunc baculum sustentacionem itineris ac laboris ad viam peregrinacionis tue ut devincere valeas omnes caternas inimici e pervenire securus ad limina sancti Iacobi», (I, XVII) Cf. LABANDE 1965, LACARRA 1963.

and thus to highlight the contrast between them. He is nonetheless aware that one must proceed with caution in the interpretation of colours “in ancient artistic representations, especially when reasons of art might suggest solutions that today we could hardly approve without reservations” (MONGELLI 1973: 16). However, he hypothesises that since there were very close links between the Abbey of San Guglielmo al Goieto and the Shrine of the Most Holy Mary Mother of God Crowned in Foggia, and that the latter passed to the Cistercians around 1225 (DI GIOIA 1971: 701-713), there was probably a desire to leave a trace of them in the codex, translating the black of the scapular and hood into green and contrasting it with red; a hypothesis on which he does not insist but which leaves room for discussion (MONGELLI 1973: 33).

What we learn from the text of the *Legenda* is that William, having reached the age of fourteen, «habitum sacre religionis assumpsit»,<sup>17</sup> an event that has been interpreted in the historiographical tradition as proof that the saint belonged to the *ordo monasticum* from the very beginning. As aforementioned, only Andenna’s careful analysis shed light on the true meaning of the term “religio” –thanks to Meersseman’s considerations– pointing out its use also to define penitential experiences. A further reading on his life shows that he left the city of Vercelli, «una contentus clamide, nudis etiam pedibus»<sup>18</sup> went on pilgrimage to St James of Compostella (LAS PEREGRINACIONES 1948-1949), motivated by a burning desire to visit the relics of those «ad perpetue felicitatis gloriam perfuendam».<sup>19</sup> William stayed at a blacksmith’s house (CHERUBINI 2005), eating only bread and water, sleeping on the bare earth and keeping *ut monachus* silence during the night hours (LABANDE 1965: 6). Before resuming his journey, he had his abdomen and belly girded with two iron rings.<sup>20</sup> The saint is therefore related to that “special category of pilgrimages” (VOGEL 1963: 39) which are the penitent pilgrims, who walk without clothes or footwear (*nudi homines, nudis pedibus*) with their torso, arms and legs chained; so much so that the expression *nudi homines cum ferro* seems to have become the technical term for penitent pilgrims. In the *Liber Sancti Iacobi*,<sup>21</sup> book I, XVII we read that: «Alii nudis pedibus, alii sine proprio, alii causa penitentiae liguati ferro» (IL CODICE CALLISTINO 2008: 215).

After his journey to Compostella, he crossed Italy with the intention of visiting the holy places of the Holy Land. However, having abandoned his desire to cross the Mediterranean, he decided to go to Salerno before setting out to Partenio, in the hope of replacing the iron rings –constantly subject to tearing (VOGEL 1963: 63)– an iron cuirass that he would never put down again. Then, like a true soldier of the Lord, he has his head encased in a helmet *quod vulgo cophia dicitur*.

<sup>17</sup> AMV, ms. 1, f. 4r.

<sup>18</sup> AMV, ms. 1, f. 4r.

<sup>19</sup> AMV, ms. 1, f. 4r.

<sup>20</sup> AMV, ms. 1, f. 7r: «Duos ergo michi circulos ferreos ad hunc modum facias, ut eorum unus ventrem, pectus alter circumdet, a quorum inferiori brachia duo ferrea porrigantu, unum a dextro latere alterum a sinistro. Que per humeros ad alteram inferioris circuli partem pervenientia, utrimque predictis circulis fortiter clavis colligentur».

<sup>21</sup> Saint James of Compostella, Cathedral Archives, ms. 1. The first edition of the Compostellan text was edited by WHITEHILL 1944. Edition consulted: IL CODICE CALLISTINO 2008.

Further references can be found in chapter XXI of the *Legenda*, available only in the codex in Gothic script, where it is said that «exuens se, quo indutus erat, scapularem, dedit eum uni discipulorum suorum».<sup>22</sup> This is the only description that seems to point to the saint's use of monastic-type clothing.

The production of codices in ms. 1 was carried out at S. Salvatore del Goletto, where William was buried, a claim further strengthened by the presence of the mid-thirteenth-century marble tombstone (fig. 4) depicting the saint with a hood on his head, a cassock and a scapular, thus reproducing the same iconographic scheme as the miniatures. The tombstone, stolen in the 1990s, is attributed to the master Urso (MONGELLI 1983, COLANTUONO 1992, GANDOLFO-MUOLLO 2013) that *hoc opus eximium laboravit / istud suis digitis artifex paravit*,<sup>23</sup> as could be read in the lost inscription on the saint's tomb, which also mentions Abbess Agnese (1197-1200) (SCANDONE 1957, MONGELLI 1979), who commissioned the work and was also responsible for the extension of the church.

Where then does the use of the white habit come from? The tradition is contradicted by the code itself, which therefore seems to be detached from the Verginian context. At Montevergine there is only one piece of evidence that attests to the community's adoption of the white habit, and that is the figure, unfortunately badly damaged, that appears at the foot of the so-called Madonna of St. William (fig. 5). The depiction of the monk who commissioned the work cannot be the founder of the order, since the panel, for compositional and stylistic reasons, can be dated to the last quarter of the 13th century (BECCHIS 2012) or, according to Muollo, to the first half of the same century (GANDOLFO-MUOLLO 2013), and should be considered to reflect the monastery's customs. Also from the Verginian milieu comes the Statute of Abbot Donatus,<sup>24</sup> dated 1216, in which the four depictions of monks –drawn in pen and left undecorated– are represented wearing the same cassock and scapular with hood. Also in the *Liber ad honorem Augusti*, the *monachus* who appears on f. 137r has been interpreted by historiographical tradition as belonging to the Verginian congregation, even though Father Mongelli had already raised his doubts in this regard (MONGELLI 1973: 15-19).

The only representation of William dates from mid-fourteenth century. It is located in a medallion on one of the two shorter sides of the sarcophagus of Bertrand de Lautrec in the Abbey Museum (GANDOLFO-MUOLLO 2013: 236-244). In one of the short sides we find Saint Benedict, with his cowl, holding a book, and on the opposite side is Saint William, with his cassock, scapular and hood, holding a book with his left hand –a clear sign that the abbey is now part of the Benedictine sphere– and his right hand is leaning on his staff, following the iconography of the *Legenda*.

<sup>22</sup> AMV, ms. 1, f. 46r

<sup>23</sup> The inscription has survived to this day through the transcriptions of historians, cf. MONGELLI 1960a.

<sup>24</sup> AMV, parchment 1297, COLAMARCO 2008.

The clothing with which William is depicted is quite similar to the monastic habit, so why the use of this colour combination to represent the saint in miniatures? Taking Pastoureau's point into account, it is the most frequent combination to designate the dress of aristocrats from the ninth century until the twelfth century (PASTOUREAU 2007: 109), but the scholar is cautious in reiterating that each case must be put in context and one should consider the variations of space, historical condition and cultural environment. In the sixteenth chapter of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), called by Pope Innocent III, these colours are forbidden to clerics, as well as gloves and shoes that are too elegant or pointed, brakes, saddles, bands and spurs ornamented with gold or with other superfluous decorations (CONCILIORUM OECUMENICORUM 1973: 227-271).

The colour of the monastic habit, in particular, only began to be taken into consideration from the 12th century onwards, when the debates and clashes between the monastic orders on the best way to follow the Benedictine rule were also played out from a chromatic point of view, resulting in the contrast between the *monachi nigri*, traditionally identified with the Benedictine communities, and the new *monachi albi* associated with the nascent Cistercian community and thus referred to by Peter the Venerable. (CONSTABLE 1967: 55-58).<sup>25</sup> While John Cassian's "De Institutiones" previously required monks to wear a girdle, there is no mention of the type of monastic habit to be worn, let alone the colour, in line with the dictates also expressed in the Rules of Columbanus and Saint Augustine. (MILLER 2014: 21). The Rule of Saint Benedict, on the other hand, devotes the whole of chapter 55 to monastic clothing (VOGUÉ 1977), but again there is no imposition regarding colour, and the choice of clothing seems to depend on the needs of the place and climate in which the monks reside, thus showing an abbot/father able to understand the needs of his community, following the principle of «quia dabatur singulis prout cuique opus erat», as stated in the Rule itself, quoting a passage from the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>26</sup>

In the case of William, his noble origin is in fact already mentioned in the first lines of the *Legenda*: «Guilielmus itaque venerabilis pater nobili progenie».<sup>27</sup> However, the saint's iconography seems to contain several elements capable of condensing his spiritual journey into a single image. The bare feet, as well as the staff and the red cross, which are not mentioned in the story, are a precise transposition of what is narrated in the text. In addition, another element confirming his *status* as a penitent that has not been taken into account by scholars, and it is also left out of the few descriptions in the miniatures, is the depiction of the saint with a beard. In fact, the *barba prolixa* became one of the characteristic elements of the new hermitic experiences that spread through the West between the 11th and 12th centuries, in imitation of the penitents and the first Desert Fathers. (CONSTABLE 1996).

<sup>25</sup> See also, on the need for self-affirmation and belonging to the monastic community also through chromatic distinction, SONNTAG 2008, DEL MASTRO 2013.

<sup>26</sup> On the clothing of the monks and the application of the Benedictine rule, see the report by DARTMANN in press.

<sup>27</sup> AMV, ms. 1, f. 3v.

There is little doubt that the habit can be identified with a monastic habit. In this respect, therefore, the *tau*-shaped staff, rather than being interpreted as a pilgrimage staff, could correspond to the crosier that appears in the same forms, just to cite two examples, in the *Chronicon Vulturense*<sup>28</sup> and in the so-called *Frammento Sabatini*.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the cross on the chest is another distinctive element of the abbot frequently found in representations such as, for example, the drawing on f. 231r of the Martyrology of Saint Mary of Gualdo.<sup>30</sup> However, if the cross is not sewn on, but held in the saint's hand, then the points of contact can be found in the Verginian context itself; in fact, Abbot Donatus is represented in the *Statuto* as follows: hooded cowl, cassock and astylar cross held with the right hand as if to hold up his signum crucis and thus opening the text.

What can be said, however, is that the red/green garment is certainly attributable to the milieu of the abbey of Goleto that, as we have seen, reproduces the same typology in the codex in Gothic script from a later century. At Montevergine, on the other hand, the presence, or rather the absence, of the founding saint –once he had left Partenio to go to other places– did not guarantee the consolidation of a specific representation. Indeed, the only certain evidence, the monk at the feet of the Virgin, is to be placed at a time when the community was already in the path of the Benedictine rule, so one must imagine an organisation of the community with a specific choice of habit. The absence of William even from the famous *Statuto*, in which the heavenly and earthly hierarchies of the Verginian community are manifested, is a clear demonstration of the direction the community took –relying mainly on Marian devotion, which guaranteed donations and gifts– unlike the Goleto, which made the saint the focus of its existence, preserving his remains and developing as a pilgrimage site.

It was not until 1599 that the monastic habit was truly codified. In the *Regula sanctissimi patri nostri Benedicti*, approved by Pope Clement VIII, we read that the colour white was chosen both for the monastic external garments and underwear. The tunic had to be long down to the feet with sleeves wide enough to hold a fist; the hooded scapular had to be of the same fabric and length as the tunic and, finally, completing the monks' attire, a light cloak for the summer and a heavier one for the winter had to be long down to their knees. (REGULA SANCTISSIMI PATRIS 1599: 121).

<sup>28</sup> Vatican Apostolic Library (BAV), ms. Barb. lat. 2724. Cf. SPECIALE 2004, OROFINO 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Archives of the Abbey of Monte Cassino (AAM), New acquisitions 1. The fragment, dated to the 11th century, consists of two joint but not textually contiguous papers containing news of a visit and donation by Charlemagne and a list of the abbots who governed the monastery from the 8th to the 9th century. Cf. IL FRAMMENTO SABATINI 2003.

<sup>30</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 5949. Cf. PACE 2007.

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Fig. 1 Illuminated capital N with the image of Saint William. AMV, ms. 1, f. 1r (author's archive)



Fig. 2 Illuminated capital N with the image of Saint William. AMV, ms. 1, f. 66r (author's archive)



Fig. 3 Illuminated capital G with the image of Saint William. AMV, ms. 1, f. 66v (author's archive)



**Fig. 4** Tombstone once on the tomb of S. Guglielmo al Goletto. Now missing (author's archive)



**Fig. 5** Verginian monk at the foot of the so-called 'Madonna of Saint William', Abbey Museum, detail (author's archive)