

Iconography Notes: Wymondham Abbey *Stations of the Cross*

February 2014

Visualization Approach: In composing this new series of *Stations*, I adopted the traditional (14th c Franciscan) technique of affective devotion and imagined that I was present and witnessing first hand each stage of Jesus' journey to Golgotha. (This seemed an appropriate approach to the challenge of depicting this particular narrative - given the decision to use 14th c Italian painting techniques and style).

Scriptural reference: A very literal, direct interpretation of Scripture was used (that is where a *Station* actually had a scriptural basis). The bibles used were the *New Jerusalem Bible* and the online version of the *Douay-Rheims* bible.

Scenery: The backgrounds of *Stations I – IX* were based on stylised versions of the actual Station sites in the Old City of Jerusalem, the various distinctive buildings, chapels, arches, architectural features – all the places and features known to millions of Christian pilgrims and recognisable as today's Via Dolorosa. This powerfully evokes the City – particularly for those who have made their pilgrimages there. My own records, notes and photographs were used, following my research-pilgrimage to Jerusalem in April 2012.

For *Stations X to XIV* - which take place on what is now the site of the Holy Sepulchre – deliberately empty backgrounds were used to emphasise the barren hill-top of Golgotha as it was on Good Friday and the lonely Sacrifice that only Christ could fulfil.

Other important inspirational sources for the iconography, format and colour scheme, garments etc came from Oberammergau Passion play images; the three small *predella* panels of *The Arrest*, *Way to Calvary* and *The Deposition* from the Santa Croce altarpiece by Ugolino di Nerio (active 1317 – died 1339), and *The Annunciation* panel from the Siena Duomo altarpiece by Duccio di Buoninsegna (active 1278 – died 1318). All four panels are in the National Gallery, London.

Method: A cycle of prayer, contemplation, draft designs were undertaken until the final designs was reached; then the process for each panel consisted of transferring the design to a pre-gessoed linden-wood panel; application of a red (or porphyry in the case of Station XII) bolus ground followed by the lengthy process of water-gilding with 23 ct loose gold leaf, burnishing and punching the haloes. The traditional painting process began with the opening base layers of tempera to background and clothes, followed by their linear definition and highlights; the opening layers of tempera was then applied to the flesh parts, faces and hands using a terre verte base and the *verdaccio* modelling according to Cennino Cennini's trecento technique. The all-important highlights, definitions and finishing touches concluded the painting process. Each panel was subsequently varnished with the Roman numerals added and edges finished in a deep red shade to match the Ninian Comper Reredos.

STATION I: Christ before Pilate

The arched setting and limestone pavement are from the Station II 'Church of the Imposition of the Cross' on the Via Dolorosa. Station I proved unusable (a mosque). Here the (2nd century AD) Lithostroton 'Judgement Seat' (Mt 27:19) is used - as well as the Roman style arches to create Pilate's Praetorium.

Christ shown before Pilate (Jn 18:33) with bound hands (Mk 15:1) wearing a 'rich robe' (Lk 23:11). [The red colour is a necessary practical device for instant recognition from a distance]. Pilate asks 'are you the King of the Jews?' Christ is shown raising his hands and answering 'Mine is a kingdom not of this world' (Jn 18: 36).

On the wall behind Pilate, in the deliberately shady corner is a roundel of the Roman Emperor – a pagan icon opposite the new icon that is Christ.



STATION II: Imposition of the Cross

Set within the imagined Praetorium compound - using again the same architectural features and site as before, the two soldiers (not in Roman centurions' uniform – but as universal medieval soldiers after those depicted by the 14th century artist, Ugolino di Nerio) strain and struggle to control the heavy cross they lower onto Christ's shoulder. He has been scourged and re-dressed in his own clothes (Mt 27:31) and will carry his own cross (Jn 19:17).

Christ's eyes are shown closed – to emphasise his moment of private, interior preparation for receiving the cross.

N.B., There is no 'crown of thorns' depicted in this series – this device is never shown in Orthodox iconography or late medieval Italian art as it was regarded as unworthy to show an item made by those who mocked Christ. I decided to stay consistent with this tradition on account of the painting style used.

Likewise, the decision to depict a traditional 'Latin' two-piece *crux immissa* with the long vertical *stipes* shaft, rather than the more historically likely *patibulum* horizontal cross-beam, was based on wanting to stay within a visually familiar sacred art tradition.

STATION III: First Fall (without scriptural reference)

Setting – the street corner where the Via Dolorosa turns left into the main drag by the little chapel of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate. This is where someone carrying such a difficult heavy piece would fall as they tried to manoeuvre it.

The three arches of the chapel have been stylised into a trinity motif. Christ stares ahead down the street in shock. Behind him is the invented character of The Boy – the innocent witness and bystander representing us all. He carries the *titulus* - the placard Pilate ordered written in 'Hebrew, Latin and Greek' (Jn 19:19-20). The figure of the boy will appear in all three 'Falls' (Stations VII and IX) and is based on a little lad photographed in the main street near the Damascus gate (see below left).



Station IV – Jesus meets his Mother

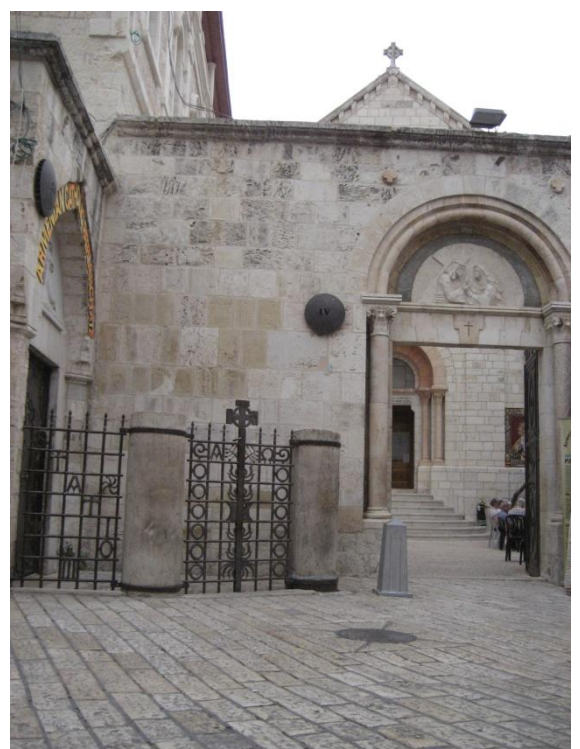
This incident is referred to synoptically (Mt 27:31; Mk 15:20 and Lk 23:26)

The archway is based on the entrance to the church of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate.

Longinus the Centurion 'who recognised Christ' is depicted – at the beginning of his process of knowing- but the *stipes* of the cross separates him from the Holy Family.

The Virgin is deliberately shown in a dignified and restrained manner, concealing her intense trauma – rather than in a dramatic, hysterical pose which would be anti-canonical and unseemly for portraying the Mother of God.

Here we see the unique relationship between the Virgin and her son. She clutches her blue mantle too herself to keep hold of her composure. [The blue is glazed with genuine lapis lazuli pigment.



Station V: The Cyrenean bears the Cross

Lk 23:26

'... they seized on a man, Simon from Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and made him shoulder the cross and carry it behind Jesus'.

Simon is shown with a darker complexion and ethnicity indicating his North African origins.

[Whilst researching this image, and looking closely at the *Andata* by Simone Martini from the 1312 Orsini polyptych, I realised that the Sienese Master, Martini had quite probably portrayed himself as the cross-bearer, appropriate given the shared first name. Until I discover otherwise from other Trecento art historians, I am claiming this representation as my discovery.] In the Martini image, the Cyrenian wears a pilgrims peaked hat with its pilgrims Shell motif, which I have borrowed for this Simon. He also has a cloak and bag, emphasising the theme of Journey.

The background is a stylised version of the church at Station V on the Via Dolorosa, where one turns right up the alley. Christ is shown looking surprised as his step and that of the Cyrenian fall into sync.



Station VI: Veil of Veronica (without scriptural reference)



The background setting is the edifice of a church along the narrow alley, there is a remnant of a stone column – one of the earliest Station markers – embedded in the wall (shown above right).

‘Veronica’ is of course a play on the Latin and Greek for true image, *vera ikon*. And as a female character, is therefore entirely fictitious. [There is however, an analogy with the early Orthodox Eastern Christian *acheiropoiotos* legend of ‘the image not made by human hands’ in which Christ, en route to Calvary, imprints his image on a cloth (*mandylion*) to heal king Agbar of Edessa at the request of the king’s emissary.

The steep incline of the Via Dolorosa and the difficulty of Christ’s route is emphasised in the gradient of the steps and unsettling perspective.

Veronica’s head is uncovered – she has removed her veil to wipe Christ’s face – this exposure of the hair bonnet would be considered shameful by observant Jewish ladies but shows the depth of Veronica’s compassion in her decision to override social convention and risk scandal.

Station VII: Second fall (without scriptural reference)

The background and setting is the archway at the T-junction of the Via Dolorosa with another market street, where the route turns left. There is a church marking the seventh station but the use of the archway in front of the church mirrors that of the Romanesque arches within Wymondham Abbey and serves a better artistic purpose.



The Boy appears again – the proto-pilgrim figure – he leans against the archway, watching Christ intently from the shadows, as we the viewers, also do. Christ has now fallen on all fours, the cross leans against the top of the archway, where it has caught on the stonework.

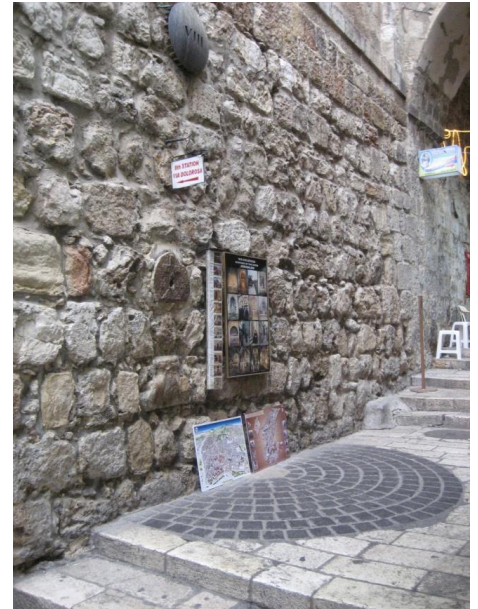
Station VIII: Christ meets the Women of Jerusalem

Referred to by Luke (23:27-31) as the women ‘who lamented and mourned for him’. This *Station* depicts the moment when Christ addresses the women,

‘Daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for me; weep rather for yourselves and for your children, the days are surely coming when people will say ‘blessed are those who are barren...’

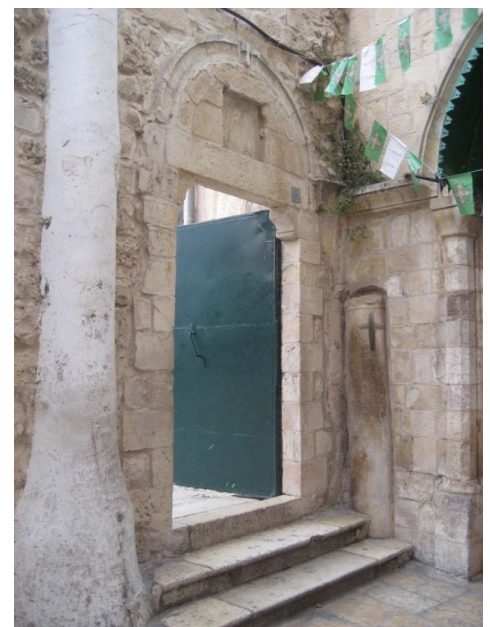
The female figure on the left of the group turns away to hide her grief, her hand held to her face in the ancient Byzantine mourning gesture. The other two women listen, the mother clutches her young babe tighter upon hearing the chilling prophecy.

The slight gradient and series of steps on the Via Dolorosa at Station VIII is all that really distinguishes this part of the route.



Station IX: Third Fall (without scriptural reference)

The setting is St Helen’s Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate church, tucked away down an alley. The actual Station is marked by one of the early columns embedded in the wall by the doorway. Beyond the doorway is an open area which is the roof of part of the Holy Sepulchre complex (the domes of the church can be seen above the wall).



The Boy is distraught and wants to cry out as he watches Christ fall heavily and awkwardly on the steps, clearly exhausted. The cumbersome cross separates the two figures emphasising their different status.

Station X: The Stripping of Christ (without scriptural reference and by implication)

John (19:23) refers to the soldiers who cast dice for his seamless undergarment, 'woven in one piece from hem to neck' hence the depiction of the tug-of-war between the two men, stressing their concern with literally, material values and their lack of spiritual awareness and compassion.

Christ's hands – forcibly held aloft – are in the *orans* prayer position, as befits the Great High Priest. Christ keeps his dignity despite his exposure, humiliation and ordeal. He wears a *perizoma* (loincloth) in a precious lapis lazuli blue colour – a Franciscan art reference.

[This is an original composition, and not derived from any other image.]

Station XI: Christ is nailed to the Cross (by implication)

All the Gospels refer to Christ's 'crucifixion', but the nailing of the limbs to the cross is not specifically mentioned and was not the only method used by the Romans in the 1st century AD. To underscore the brutality of the execution and to depict this *Station* traditionally, the nailing has been emphasised in the way the soldier kneels with the raised hammer - almost silhouetted against the gold. Christ is stretched before us in an explicitly sacrificial and helpless, undignified manner. The human part of him turns his head away. The scene is the barren white-grey limestone of Golgotha. In a break with iconographic tradition, the nails will be driven through Christ's wrists as is historically evidenced – not through his palms.

Station XII: The Crucifixion

Mark (15: 33) describes 'when the sixth hour came there was darkness over the whole land'. This 'darkness' is symbolised by the use of a dark polished clay ground (bole) in an imperial porphyry/purple colour instead of the divine 'light' which the gilded backgrounds represent.

The image is deliberately empty and devoid of other figures, Christ hangs dead on the Cross, removed from us. The more gentle 'S'-shaped sway of the body is based on the *Christus patiens* Byzantine type.

Station XIII: The Deposition

This image is a homage to Ugolino di Nerio and almost entirely based on his *Deposition*, c.1324, (National Gallery, London) in which we see Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus introduced, in accordance with Mt 27:57.

Station XIV: Entombment

According to Jn 19:38-42, the 'secret disciple', Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus remove the body and bind it with linen cloths, myrrh and aloes (about a 100 pounds in weight).

Mt 27:57 tells how Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary' sat opposite the sepulchre. In this last *Station*, the Virgin has been placed on the bottom left edge of the scene, mourning with the Magdalene opposite her on the right.

The 'lamenting Mary' device is in part based on a rare manuscript illustration of *The Deposition, Entombment and Lamentation* from the Armenian Evanglisty (c.1268) by Toros Rosline.

Above the women, in the darkness of the new tomb are Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus preparing the body upon the *arcosolia* (recessed stone burial bench).

Care has been taken to illustrate a 1st century Jewish tomb (see illustration below) from Jerusalem. Traditionally, bodies were prepared and laid on the *arcosolia* for about a year, after which time the family of the deceased would return to the tomb and collect the bones in a *khokim* (ossuary box). This box (of stone or clay) would then be stored in one of three little vault chambers hewn-out underneath the bench.



Source: [rsc.byu.edu/archived 'Jesus and first century Jewish burial practice'](http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/Jesus%20and%20first%20century%20Jewish%20burial%20practice)