

# THE MOON IN THE 14th CENTURY FRESCOES IN PADOVA

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**Abstract.** Padova, already in the 14th century a great cultural center of international reputation, struggled with the problems posed by the Moon with Pietro d'Abano, physician and astronomer. But it was with the great painters of that time, namely Giotto and Giusto de' Menabuoi, that its most intimate connections with the contemporary popular culture and theology were illustrated. Giotto depicts the Moon in the *Giudizio Universale* of the Scrovegni Chapel (1305). The Moon appears on the upper part of the painting, to the left of Christ the Judge, to crown together with the Sun, His presence. The Moon is a heavenly body similar to those appearing on Roman coins of emperors, to signify the Judge is an immortal creature. The color is pale, witeish, almost veiled. More important, the Moon has a face that by popular belief was that of Cain, condemned to amass 'mucchi di rovi spinosi' for the fire of the damned (Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia*, Inferno XX, 126). Giusto de' Menabuoi on the other hand expounds, in the Crucifixion of the Duomo (1375 ca), a theological interpretation. The day of God's justice, following the death of the Savior, the Moon will burn and the Sun will pale (Isaiah, 24, 23). And indeed the Moon has a dark reddish colour. Therefore, while in Giotto the Moon is seen as in the popular beliefs, Giusto underlines the theological visions of his times with the words of the prophets.

## 1. Foreword

Padova, perhaps surpassing Florence for the number of frescoes of 1300, displays in three important buildings paintings relative to the Moon. These are:

- (1) The Giotto chapel in the Arena (1305)
- (2) The Baptistery of the cathedral (1375 c.)
- (3) The *Palazzo della Ragione*, included here since the parietal decoration of the beginning of the 15th century takes inspiration from the astrological themes proposed by Pietro d'Abano (+1315).

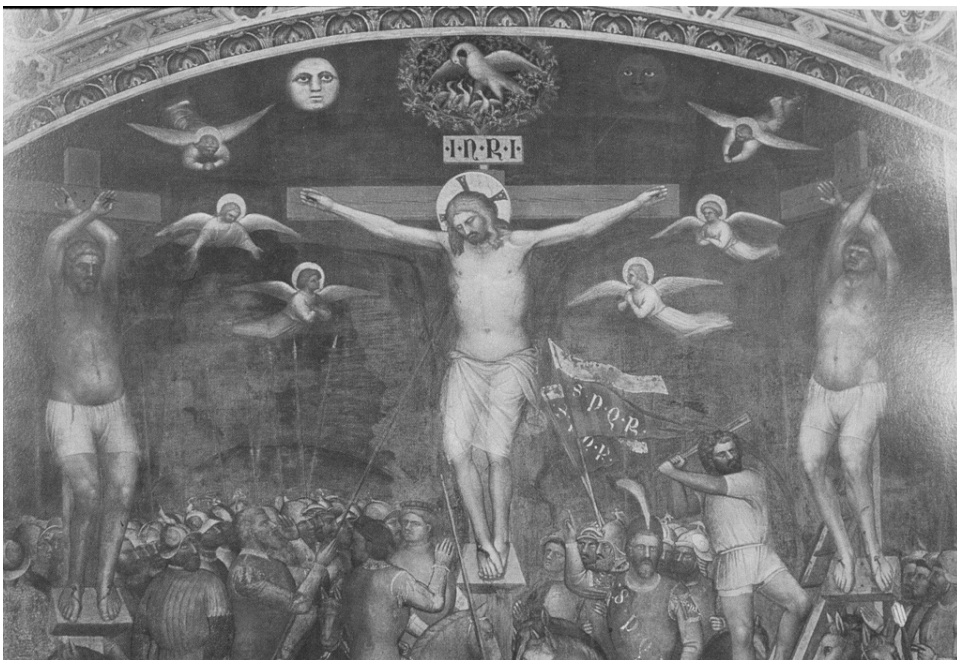
In the Giotto chapel and in the Baptistery the Moon appears with the Sun at the top of the scene of the crucifixion. In the Palazzo della Ragione the Moon is set in the month of June, as a queen presiding over vegetation. Her influence is over water and over human beings, but expressed qualitatively, respecting the freedom of each, after the astrological creed of Pietro d'Abano.

But let's consider the single paintings.





*Figure 1. Giotto's Chapel in the Arena: the final judgement.*



*Figure 2. Baptistery of the Cathedral: crucifixion.*



Figure 3. Palazzo della Ragione: month of June, the Moon.

### 1.1. GIOTTO CHAPEL

The crucifixion scene, the first to be frescoed and reference point for the whole cycle of paintings, shows at the top the two celestial bodies, Sun and Moon, taking part in the great tragedy of the crucified Christ.

To begin with, we agree with the German scholar Gerd-Heinz-Mohr, that the positioning (Sun to the right and Moon to the left of Christ) is typical of the classic tradition to set the two bodies above the most important personalities to honour them; what's more, the crucifixion is also meant to state the right of Christ to take his place in the high heavens, among the shining immortal creatures.

Nevertheless, the fact that inside the Sun the image of a king is clearly visible, and that the Moon has a strange "face", requires some explanation.

The influence of the astrological beliefs of Pietro d'Abano is evident, he had in fact followed Ptolemy in the sequence of the planets in the skies, with the *astro fulgente* in the middle: The Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. The “planet” Moon displayed a proper motion completely anomalous and represented a popular symbolism, believed since many centuries. She would express no less than the features of Cain, there confined for the murder of his brother Abel. This is a concept that both Giotto and Dante derived from the past tradition that Dante himself rendered immortal in the Divine Comedy. In the xx *canto* of *Inferno*, v.126, besides celebrating the period of the full Moon (Holy Friday, first day of Dante's voyage) he refers to “Cain and thorns” to indicate the Moon itself (the thorns being the spots). Dante then returns to the same concept in *Paradiso*, II, 51, where he quotes “those lunar spots, popularly believed to reproduce Cain's features, castaway on the Moon and damned to carry for eternity a sheaf of thorns”. The dark circles under the eyes, the marked prognatism of the lower lip, and the shape of the nose, form indeed a characteristic face, emerging from a big dark shade, as if in hiding for his evil deed.

The presence of Cain, murderer of his brother, takes here a highly tragic meaning: Cain mutely attends to the death of Christ as if emblematically repeating the same kind of homicide, the just dies by the treacherous hand of a loved one.

The Moon is set on the left of Christ and sheds its tenuous light on the terrible site, one that Giotto probably left to his collaborator to paint. Such is the adherence to popular beliefs and to the pseudo-letters by Paul, passing from hand to hand among the cultured and uncultured.

As Giotto painted the Christmas comet following the model appearing in the papers by Pietro d'Abano, so for the Moon also he took inspiration from the same source, adding as a personal touch the shape reported by the popular fantasy.

## 1.2. THE BAPTISTERY OF THE CATHEDRAL

The crucifixion in the Baptistery of the cathedral by Giusto de Menabuoi, although still following the iconography of Giotto's chapel, shows a more marked derivation from Christian literature. Thus, although maintaining for the Sun and the Moon the typical European folk tradition of seeing a human face inside the circle of the Moon, here the biblical influence is more evident.

A large red Moon hovers above the thief, on the left of Christ. In other words he is the one inviting Christ to save himself and the others to demonstrate he is truly God's son. Here in the baptistery the Sun and the Moon appear to represent anthropologically the sadness for the tragedy of the death of our saviour. But in the red colour there certainly is a remembrance of Isaia, 24, 23 (“erubescet luna et confundetur sol”, the Moon will blush and the Sun pale).

This is the aspect the two heavenly bodies will take at the end of the world for the final judgement, as cosmic participation to the death of Christ. This intense red likens the Moon to a “secchione” in Dante's words, the pan with flaming pitch

used by sailors for their ships. Again it's the red of the waning Moon as it looks in the springtime evenings, recalling the sadness of whoever stands near the great crucifixion scene.

This interpretation also sheds light on Caifa's attempt (see the so-called Gamaliele gospel) to explain these cosmic happenings (reddening of the Moon and paling of the Sun) as artifices of magicians. Caifa tells Pilate: "This is the season when magicians turn the Moon like blood and rob the Sun of its splendour, and with their power control the production of the harvest. . .".

It is clear thus that Giusto de Menabuoi's crucifixion in the Baptistery shows closer biblical connections and the influence of some fine theologian, of whom there was abundance in Padova in the second half of the XIV century.

### 1.3. THE PALAZZO DELLA RAGIONE

Although the the present cycle of frescoes is dated to the third decade of 1400 (that is after the great fire that almost destroyed the hall of the city of Padova), it is generally believed that Mireto and his collaborators, great believers in astrology, have remembered the previous 1300 cycle surely inspired by the great theme of the influence of the skies on the free activities of each single individual (Pietro d'Abano). Surely admirable is the representation of the Sun as a sundial inside the palace.

I wish to state first of all (and I believe to have been the first to say so among friends) that it would be useless to look for Giotto's hand in the frescoes on the walls of the Palazzo della Ragione. As related by Giovanni da Nono, Giotto painted the constellations (or Zodiac) in a part that should have been very visible, which I believe to have been the ceiling of the large central room, at the time set exactly in the center of the palace itself. A wooden ceiling, maybe similar in iconography to that of the Scrovegni Chapel. This is the part that was burnt in the 1420 fire.

This said let's examine the Moon. It is represented on the southern wall dedicated to the month of June. It is depicted as a queen on a chariot with four wheels. That it is a heavenly body is demonstrated by the 8 rays surrounding her (a usual representation also of the planets). The sacredness of number eight is a sign of belonging to the highest realities, to the sphere of the superhuman, alluding to something divine. The chariot is related to the goddess Selene (one of the names of the Moon in the Greek mythology) and it refers to the flowing of time, to the waning and waxing of the shape, in a perennial cycle.

The anthropomorphic tradition requires that the Moon has a face, and here nothing recalls the medieval belief related to Cain. Instead it is to be noted that the convexity is towards the West, meaning a waxing Moon. This is also the time of vegetation growth, and this is also ascribed to the Moon influx. That is why in the fresco the figure holds a small green tree. Cultivation and growth are strictly bounded to the water factor, and in fact on the wall near the effigy of the Moon there are many scenes related to water: a young man swimming, a marine crab, a boat

with fishermen, trees along a river . . . the influence of the Moon is therefore directed at the arts and crafts, as it was proper of the Palazzo della Ragione itself. But, concluding, we might say that here is in evidence the intuition by Giamblico and certainly by Dante of an influence of the skies directed more at the single individual than to a category of artisans, but always respecting individual freedom.

## 2. Conclusions

The 14th century in Padova can be said to extend its pictorial interpretations in a wide range, from the philosophy of the heavenly influence expounded by Pietro d'Abano, to the religious views, and to the civic interpretation where each is the maker of his/her fortunes as in the famous latin citation by Appius Claudius: *Arbiter est suae quisque fortunae*.