

The dramatic history of the plot against the Dominican friar, Peter from Verona: “a holy craniotomy”

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During the Middle Ages, Verona was not only the city of Romeo and Juliet, but also the scene of the gruesome murder of the Dominican friar, Peter, from Verona. Peter is the copatron of Verona with Saint Zeno. He was canonized by Pope Innocent IV on March 1253 after an interval of only 337 days from his death, making him the fastest papally canonized saint in history. In the official iconography, he is always represented calm and with a gash across his head, something that should support our neurosurgical patients!

Peter was born in the city of Verona in 1206 from a family, perhaps, sympathetic to the Cathars. This heresy held many adherents in the thirteenth century of Northern Italy. He went to a Catholic school and later to the University of Bologna, where at the age of fifteen, he met Saint Dominic, joined the Order of the Friars Preachers (Dominicans), and became a celebrated preacher throughout the northern and central Italy.

In 1252, Pope Innocent IV appointed him Inquisitor in Lombardy. Peter evangelized nearly in the whole of Italy, preaching in Rome, Florence, Bologna, Genoa, and Como. The Cathars, against whom he preached, were a heretical group that had adopted elements of dualism, also called Manichaeism, rejecting the authority of the Pope and many

Christian teachings. The hatred and frenzy of the Manicheans increased as they grew more and more obstinate. They knew well that unless they gave up their ungodliness, they could hope for no understanding with Peter whom they looked upon as the scourge and destruction of their sect. Accordingly, they conspired to kill him. The principals in this plot were Stefano Confalonieri, Tommaso da Giussano, a little village between Milan and Como, Guido Sacchella, and Giovanni della Chiusa. The price they agreed to pay the assassins was forty Milanese lire, which were placed in the hands of Tommaso da Giussano. For the execution of the crime, they chose Pietro Balsamone, commonly called Carino; and this man selected Albertino Porro for his assistant.

From Milan, the friar went to Como, where he was prior. The conspirators let the Easter festivals pass. On the Saturday, within the octave of Easter, April 6, 1252, Peter left his convent before daybreak to return to Milan on foot.



Fig. 1 The cover illustration shows “St. Peter Martyr,” an oil painting by Antonio Cavaggioni (1702–1767) who is a minor manieristic painter from Verona (a property of the Administration of the City Hospital of Verona)

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Exhausted by his long fasts, and weak from the quartan fever, he was obliged to walk slowly. Carino, who had remained in Como for 3 days, on learning of the saint's departure, followed in an eager pursuit. On the way, he was joined by Porro, his associate in crime. The friar preacher had made about half of his journey when he was overtaken in thick woods near a place called Barlasina.

According to the tradition, Carino struck the friar with a pruning knife which opened his head with a large and deep wound. Then, seeing that Peter, though no longer able to speak, was, through the sheer force of his will, using his

finger to write the first words of the Creed in his own blood, Carino sank a dagger into his breast. The painting of Antonio Cavaggioni (Fig. 1) shows the moment immediately after the first stabbing: the Dominican friar, collapsed, with a large knife in his head, commending himself to God and reciting the Apostles' Creed and the vision of the female saints. Looking closely at the painting, it stands out that there is no blood dripping on the friar's clothes despite the stab that had surely dissected the superior sagittal sinus (perfect hemostasis during an incredible case of holy awake surgery!).