

The *Cain and Abel* in the National Museum: The case for Giuseppe Vermiglio*

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The imposing picture of *Cain and Abel* in the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta (199 x 163.5 cm.) (Plates 1,2) has long eluded secure attribution.¹ The picture hung in the Grand Master's palace at least from the early nineteenth century, and bore traditional designations to both Ribera and Caravaggio.² Modern interest in the work, however, dates from Roberto Longhi's listing of it in 1943, without comment, as a product of one of Caravaggio's leading Roman-based disciples of the second decade of the seventeenth century, the Mantuan, Bartolomeo Manfredi (1582-1622), to whom he also gave a similar (though by no means identical) *Cain and Abel* in the Palazzo Pitti.³ But despite the (partial) logic of this judgement (especially in terms of certain aspects of the Valletta picture's *facture*), and the reverence with which scholars have approached all *pronunziamenti* from this great connoisseur, no-one any longer believes it to be by Manfredi. In 1970, Evelina Borea, in her exhibition catalogue, *Caravaggio e Caravaggeschi nelle Gallerie di Firenze*, proposed that the Pitti painting was more likely to be by the Pisan Caravaggist, Orazio Riminaldi (1594-1631), who was active in Rome towards the end of the second decade, and hinted, without claiming, that the Malta picture might also be his - a view strongly endorsed by Mina Gregori in 1972.⁴ Richard Spear, however, acutely rejected the attribution of

* My thanks to Maria Rosa Antognazza, Dominic Cutajar, Don Stefano Tardani, and Pamela Willis for their help during the preparation of this article.

1. Modern catalogue entries on the picture, all of which stop short of offering an attribution, are as follows:- J.A. Cauchi, *National Museum: XVII Century Masters*, Malta, 1957, p.3, cat. no.8; Antonio Espinoza Rodriguez, *Paintings at the National Museum of Fine Arts*, Valletta, 1990, p.80, no.81; Dominic Cutajar, *Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, Malta: A commentary on its history and selected works*, Valletta, 1991, p.23. Dominic Cutajar, Curator of Fine Arts, was subsequently quick to accept the attribution to Giuseppe Vermiglio of the picture here under review (on the advice of Gianni Papi), and it has been labelled in the Museum as by him since the mid-1990s.
2. A.A. Anderson, *Journal of the Forces with a Particular Account of Malta*, London, 1802, p.138 [as Spagnolet (i.e. Ribera). Situated in the gallery of the Grand Master's Palace]; Louis de Boisgelin, *Ancient and Modern Malta*, 3 vols., London, 1804, vol.I, pp.39-40 [once again as Spagnolet and in the gallery]; Blanch Lintorn Simmons, *Description of the Governor's Palaces in Malta, and Catalogue of Pictures*, 2nd edition, Malta, 1895, p.147 [no.143, rm.XV, as Caravaggio. Reference to its restoration in London in 1886 by Mr. Seguier].
3. Roberto Longhi, "Ultimi studi sul Caravaggio e la sua cerchia", *Proporzioni*, I, 1943, p.49, note 42.
4. Evelina Borea, *Caravaggio e Caravaggeschi nelle Gallerie di Firenze*, exhibition catalogue, Florence, Palazzo Pitti, 1970, no.14, pp.23-4; Mina Gregori, "Note su Orazio Riminaldi e i suoi rapporti con l'ambiente romano", *Paragone* (Arte), no. 269, July 1972, pp.37,42 and 43.

either work to Riminaldi, and also doubted Longhi's ascriptions to Manfredi, even though he conceded that both pictures *might conceivably be* by the same hand - arguing, nevertheless, that they were sufficiently different to suggest that, if indeed the work of one man, they must have been executed at very different stages of the anonymous artist's career. He also suggestively paralleled the Malta canvas's forceful, animated conception with that of the version of the same subject attributed to Lionello Spada in the gallery at Capodimonte, Naples.⁵ The next stage in the saga came with the Manfredi exhibition held in Cremona in 1988, when the Pitti canvas was reinstated as by Manfredi (a very plausible reconsideration in the light of our increasing knowledge of this artist, and one now accepted by Mina Gregori), whereas the Valletta *Cain and Abel* was viewed as clearly by another hand - more tied, in its treatment of anatomy, to traditions of *disegno*, which is at variance with the freer, more luminous handling of the Pitti picture.⁶ With the National Museum picture thereby freed up to new speculation, Ferdinando Bologna, in 1991, has interestingly reverted to a Neapolitan solution, very tentatively proposing a connection with Filippo Vitale.⁷ But while this brings us back close to the traditional ascription to Ribera, and despite the fact that aspects of the graphic brushwork and of the realization of landscape have broad affinities with Vitale, an attentive reading of technique, colour and style cannot sustain a Neapolitan origin. It was for this reason, among others, that I argued in 1993 that the Valletta masterpiece *might be* by the Bolognese artist Lionello (or Leonello) Spada.⁸ Spada was thought by Mina Gregori and Federico Zeri to be the author of two series of frescoes in the Grand Master's palace, an insight which has subsequently been confirmed by Stefania Macioce's documentary discovery showing that Spada was in Malta painting frescoes in the Magistral palace for the Grand Master, Alof de Wignacourt, in 1609/10.⁹ More importantly from my point of view, the *Cain and Abel* was conceptually just right for Spada in that it betrays, in almost equal proportions, the joint influence of Caravaggio and Annibale Carracci, artists to whom we know that he was deeply indebted. Indeed, Spada was trained in Bologna by Annibale's cousin, Ludovico, and later, according to his seventeenth-century biographer, Carlo Cesare Malvasia, became so fascinated in

5. Richard Spear, "Caravaggisti at the Palazzo Pitti", *Art Quarterly*, Spring 1971, p. 109, note 14.
6. Giuseppe Merlo, in *Dopo Caravaggio: Bartolomeo Manfredi e la Manfrediana Methodus*, exhibition cat., ed. Mina Gregori, Cremona, 1987, p.82.
7. Ferdinando Bologna, *Battistello Caracciolo e il primo naturalismo a Napoli*, exhibition cat., Naples, 1991, p.112.
8. John Gash, "Painting and Sculpture in Early Modern Malta", in *Hospitaller Malta, 1530-1798*, ed. V. Mallia-Milanes, Malta, 1993, pp.541-3.
9. Mina Gregori, "A New Painting and Some Observations on Caravaggio's Journey to Malta", *The Burlington Magazine*, CXVI, no.859, October 1974, pp.600-03; Stefania Macioce, "Leonello Spada a Malta: nuovi documenti", *Storia dell'arte*, 80, 1994, gennaio-aprile, pp.54-58.

Rome with the art of Caravaggio that he became known as the *scimia del Caravaggio*.¹⁰

The most recent intervention on the picture known to me, however, was made by Francesco Frangi in 1994. Frangi, who seems to have been unaware of Bologna's and my own contributions, has proposed, in a tightly argued footnote to his groundbreaking article on the hitherto little-studied Piedmontese/Lombard painter from Alessandria, Giuseppe Vermiglio (c.1587-c.1635), that serious consideration should be given to attributing the *Cain and Abel* to this mysterious yet highly gifted painter who worked in Rome during the first two decades of the seventeenth century before returning north c.1620.¹¹ For Frangi, the key factors are the academicizing, almost sixteenth-century figure types, the characteristic, schematic rendering of the hands, and profound visual affinities with a number of specific pictures by Vermiglio: several renderings of the theme of the *Sacrifice of Isaac* [especially Milan, Musei Civici del Castello Sforzesco; and one in a private collection], which, as Gregori has shown, are indebted to Caravaggio's two versions of the subject [in the Piasecka-Johnson collection, Princeton, and the Uffizi]; and the *Saint Sebastian with an Angel*, also in the Castello Sforzesco.¹²

Here I would like to support Frangi's highly perceptive proposal with a number of additional observations, and also offer some suggestions about the artistic genesis and Roman career of this stylistically complex painter. It is true that several features point tantalisingly towards Spada, whose authorship of the Valletta canvas still remains a remote possibility, especially since we now know that he visited Malta. But an arguably far greater number of factors point to Vermiglio who was, like Spada, as strongly influenced by the Bolognese as by Caravaggio, and whose style, more specifically, even suggests contact with Spada himself.¹³

Apart from marked similarities of design, figure-type and technique with the works specified by Frangi, the bronzed flesh tones and schematized technique of the figure of Cain in the National Museum picture are distinctly reminiscent of the figure of Christ in Vermiglio's only securely documented painting (upon which the whole of his oeuvre is posited), the markedly Caravaggesque *Incredulity of St. Thomas*,

10. For Spada, see Fiorella Frisoni, "Leonello Spada", *Paragone (Arte)*, no.299, January 1975, pp.53-79, and plates 45-71.
11. Francesco Frangi, "Giuseppe Vermiglio tra Caravaggio e Federico Borromeo", in *Studi di storia dell'arte in onore di Mina Gregori*, ed. Miklós Boskovits, Milan, 1994, pp. 161-69, with full bibliography; for the *Cain and Abel*, pp.164-165, note 13.
12. *Ibid.*, plates 3,4 and 5; Mina Gregori, "Il Sacrificio di Isacco: un inedito e considerazioni su una fase savoldesca del Caravaggio", *Artibus et Historiae*, 20, 1989, pp.140-1, note 16.
13. Frangi, *op. cit.*, p.167.

signed and dated 1612, in the small Roman church of San Tommaso ai Cenci¹⁴ (Plate 3). Furthermore, the essentially graphic technique of outlining features (such as eyes) with a firm yet fluid brush seems to be distinctively Vermiglian, as does the singular, almost liquid contexture of the highlights on eyes (cf., for example, that on Abel's right eye with the corresponding one on David in Vermiglio's *David and Goliath* in a private collection).¹⁵ Facial types in the *Cain and Abel* also find their equivalents in Vermiglio's established *oeuvre*, such as the echoing of Cain's face in that of the figure immediately behind and to the left of Christ in the *Incredulity of St. Thomas*, or, even more compellingly, that of the second shepherd from the left in the later *Adoration of the Shepherds*, signed and dated 1622 (Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera)¹⁶ (Plate 4). And if the latter conjunction is perhaps best understood in terms of the artist's recycling of his own types, another comparison suggests the Caravaggesque possibility of him painting directly from the same human model on more than one occasion. For the lively, streetwise countenance of Abel (a Caravaggesque *ragazzo* if ever there was one) bears more than a passing resemblance to that of the cane-wielding tormentor, second from left, in the *Crowning with Thorns/ Mocking of Christ*, formerly in Palazzo Altieri, Rome (Plate 5). The latter, which was at one time attributed to Spada, and is closely derived from Caravaggio's picture of the same subject in the Giustiniani collection (now Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), has been plausibly attributed to Vermiglio by Frangi, even though he does not compare it directly with the Malta painting in the way I propose.¹⁷

Finally, the impressive landscape background of *Cain and Abel* is fully consistent with Giuseppe Vermiglio's demonstrable mastery in this field - most apparent, among his surviving works, in the paintings he did after his return to Lombardy around the end of the second decade of the seventeenth century. Thus works such as the aforementioned *St. Sebastian*, and the signed and dated *Last Supper* and *Adoration of the Shepherds* (both 1622, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera) suggest many points of comparison with the Valletta picture, bearing in mind that the latter was probably executed earlier in the artist's career and is consequently rather darker and more Caravaggesque in colouring and style.¹⁸ This notwithstanding, there are pronounced similarities between the depiction of the grazing sheep in the *Cain and Abel* and the *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Plate 4), as well as between the colouring of the skies in

14. I am greatly indebted to Don Stefano Tardani for unlocking the church to allow me to view the picture. See colour illustration in Roberto Longhi, *Il palazzo non finito: Saggi inediti 1910-1926*, Milan, 1995, plate 65; and discussion on pp.173,178,180,201, 207,211, and 212.

15. Frangi, *op. cit.*, plate 8.

16. For the latter, see ed. Carlo Pirovano, *Pinacoteca di Brera: Scuole lombarda, ligure e piemontese 1535-1796*, Milan, 1989, p.89, plate 37.

17. Frangi, *op. cit.*, pp.162-3.

18. *Ibid.*, plate 5; ed. Carlo Pirovano, *op. cit.*, pp.90, 92, colour plates 37 and 38.

the two pictures (an attractive mesh of pink and sky blue). These telling affinities may yet help to clinch the attribution, thereby fulfilling John Cauchi's seemingly prophetic observation in 1957 that "What looks full of promise in the picture is the landscape, which may well be a decisive factor in the attribution, after the canvas is cleaned".¹⁹

If, therefore, as now seems probable, the Valletta *Cain and Abel* is by Vermiglio, how does it slot into his putative stylistic development? Our knowledge of his career is decidedly sketchy, but the scattered documents published by Antonio Bertolotti in 1884 evoke his involvement in Rome in a picaresque, indeed Caravaggesque-style bohemian subculture of artistic rivalry and brawling.²⁰ On 20 February 1604, he confirmed the testimony of his master, the now unknown Perugian painter, Adriano di Monteleone (under whom he was working in Piazza Nicosia), who had been wounded in the head by his own wife, at the instigation of two other unknown painters, Antonio and Giacomo Panciale. While the following year, on 23rd June 1605, we encounter him again in the Roman police records, when the lieutenant of the Bargello recorded the following:- "Hier sera alle due hore di notte incirca andando alla cerca per Roma, passando per il corso, rincontro al hostaria del Monte di Brianza, trovai Gioseffo Vermiglio quale portava la spada senza licenza et cosi lo presi e mandai prigionarlo". Only a month previously, on 28th May, Caravaggio himself had been arrested for carrying a sword and dagger without a licence.²¹ Clearly there was a law and order problem with artists in Rome during the heady first years of Caravaggio's fame! And, sure enough, we meet Vermiglio on a third occasion in 1611 (without indication of day or month), submitting a petition, together with his colleague, Giovanni Paolo Marti/(e)gnano, to the Governor of Rome (no less), begging that proceedings against them for attacking yet another painter, Silvio Oliverio, in a brawl, should be abandoned on the grounds that a reconciliation had been effected through the mediation of friends. He was still in Rome at the end of the second decade, apparently acting in the capacity of a dealer in 1618, when he sent three pictures by Filippo Napoletano to the nobleman, Pietro Guicciardini, in Florence; and then recorded as residing in 1619 in the 'Contrada dei bergamaschi' (Bergamasque quarter), parish of San Lorenzo in Lucina, together with a "Hierolamo pitor".²²

Even if Vermiglio's propensity for violence was by no means unique among the artists of his time and place, his experiences found obvious issue in the graphic aggression of the Valletta *Cain and Abel*. Like Caravaggio, his art was fuelled by his

19. J.A. Cauchi, *op. cit.*, p.3.

20. Antonio Bertolotti, *Artisti Subalpini in Roma nei secoli XV, XVI e XVII: Ricerche e studi negli archivi Romani*, Mantua, 1884, pp. 167-169.

21. Mia Cinotti, *Michelangelo Merisi detto il Caravaggio: Tutte le opere*, Bergamo, 1983, p.243.

22. Gino Corti, "Il Registro de' mandati dell'ambasciatore granducale Piero Guicciardini e la Committenza artistica fiorentina a Roma nel secondo decennio del Seicento", *Paragone (Arte)*, 1989, no.473, pp.110,130; Roberto Longhi, "Ultimi studi su Caravaggio e la sua cerchia", *Proporzioni*, I, 1943, p.30.

life. However, in this case, the image draws upon Caravaggio's art too, for the stooping gesture of Cain grasping his brother's wrist derives either directly from Caravaggio's analogous one in the Contarelli chapel *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* of 1599-1600 (Plate 6), or from Manfredi's variant of it in the aforementioned Pitti *Cain and Abel*. That Vermiglio was deeply inspired by Caravaggio's formulations is equally apparent in other works from his Roman years, including the various versions of the Sacrifice of Isaac and the ex-Altieri *Crowning with Thorns* referred to above. But there are many signs in Vermiglio's surviving oeuvre that he was equally influenced by the art of the Carracci and their followers, especially, though by no means exclusively, after his return to the north. As the perceptive Abate Lanzi noted in the late eighteenth century, basing himself largely on his knowledge of the late works, "Sembra da varie imitazioni di teste che studiasse ne' Caracci e non ignorasse Guido; ma nel colore par che avesse lezione da qualche fiammingo".²³ Indeed Reni's shadow looms particularly large over such a work as the Brera *Adoration of the Shepherds*. Nevertheless, it is clear that a complex and as yet dimly understood interaction with a number of Bolognese painters had already developed in Rome. As Frangi proposes, "E del tutto probabile, tuttavia, che già nei suoi anni romani Giuseppe fosse entrato in rapporto con gli artisti emiliani di stanza in città, e nell'elenco dei possibili incontri, oltre ai nomi più ovvi, come quelli di Annibale Carracci, Guido Reni e Domenichino, si dovranno inserire anche a quelli del Lanfranco, di Giacomo Cavedoni, di Lionello Spada, tutti artisti che in qualche modo sembrano interferire con la vicenda del pittore piemontese".²⁴ However, the number of purely Emilian allusions in Vermiglio's late work (to the Bolognese Annibale or to Cavedoni, for example), as distinct from those to works executed by Bolognese artists in Rome, raises the possibility for Frangi that Vermiglio also worked, or studied, in Bologna at some stage.²⁵ Which leads us directly back to *Cain and Abel*. For, as I argued in 1993 when endeavouring to link the picture with Spada, the energetic pose of Cain that is so closely tied to that of the assassin in Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* in the region of its left arm, is equally obviously, indeed unequivocally, derived in its raised right arm from that of the club-wielding Remus in the fresco of *Remus chasing the Cattle Thieves*, painted by Annibale Carracci in the Palazzo Magnani, Bologna in 1590 (Plate 7).²⁶ In fact, other elements of the pose and the drapery seem indebted to the Carracci prototype, as do the sheep, the figure in the middle distance, and even aspects of the background landscape, with its trees silhouetted against the sky.

23. Luigi Lanzi, *Storia Pittorica della Italia, dal risorgimento delle Belle Arti fin presso al fine del XVIII secolo*, 3rd, revised and expanded, edition, Bassano, 1809, vol.V, pp.377-8.

24. Frangi, *op. cit.*, p.167.

25. *Ibid.*, p.167.

26. See, Donald Posner, *Annibale Carracci: A Study in the Reform of Italian Painting around 1590*, London, 1971, vol.II, p.24 and plate 52c.

If it is now possible to view such a strong Bolognese connection dovetailing with a Roman Caravaggism as just as probable a combination for Vermiglio as for Spada, the poetic and deftly sketched landscape introduces an additional twist. For while its roots in Annibale's Palazzo Magnani fresco are clear, its elaboration is more along the lines not so much of Elsheimer, as of Elsheimer's disciple in landscape and Caravaggio's in figure painting, the Roman-based Venetian, Carlo Saraceni - as seen especially in Saraceni's *Martyrdom of Saint Agapito* (c.1610-12, Palestrina, cathedral).²⁷ Indeed, Vermiglio seems to have been familiar with at least one other, probably even earlier, picture by Saraceni, the *St. John the Baptist in the Desert* (Rome, Doria-Pamphilj Gallery), since he adapted its pose for his own picture of the same subject in the museum of the Certosa di Pavia.²⁸

The disparate biographical details and multiple points of stylistic reference explored in this article open up more questions than they answer. What they do seem to reinforce, however, is a sense not so much of rigid artistic camps in early seventeenth-century Rome, as of a very fluid and dynamic, but also very circumscribed art scene, in which nearly all artists there for any length of time knew each other, and nearly all exchanged ideas and influences.²⁹ That Vermiglio, more than most, was almost equally fascinated by the two main trends in contemporary painting, Caravaggism and Carraccesque classicism, is perhaps testimony to his aesthetic judgment. But it will take more documentary discoveries to ascertain just how and when he moved around and between this fertile artistic nexus. It is more than possible that he knew Caravaggio, Annibale, Guido Reni, Saraceni, Spada, and many others, personally, and that his north Italian (Piedmontese-Lombard) origins may have favoured gravitation towards the likes of Caravaggio and Saraceni. But the other unknown painters to have emerged from his fragmented biography may also have been crucial links in the chain. One final speculation about his Caravaggesque affiliations may be in order: it was noted above that he was residing in the Bergamasque quarter of the parish of San Lorenzo in Lucina in 1619, and that he sold some pictures to Piero Guicciardini in Florence the previous year. Now, both of these facts are not inconsistent with him having known the close Roman disciple of Caravaggio known

27. Anna Ottani Cavina, *Carlo Saraceni*, Milan, 1968, p.110, cat. no. 47, and plate 86. John Cauchi several years ago first drew my attention to the Saracenesque qualities of the landscape.

28. Aspects of the abbreviated landscape background of the Saraceni *St. John* could also relate to that of the Valletta *Cain and Abel*. For Vermiglio's *St. John*, see Frangi, *op. cit.*, plate 7; for Saraceni's, Ottani Cavina, *op. cit.*, p.112, cat. no. 55, where it is described as a very early work, and plate 42. More recently, she has argued, not altogether convincingly, that the picture is possibly by Saraceni's French follower, Guy François:- Anna Ottani Cavina, "Les peintres de la réalité et le cercle caravagesque de Rome: Réflexions sur l'atelier de Saraceni", in Jacques Thuillier et al., *L'art en Lorraine au temps de Jacques Callot*, exhibition cat., Nancy, 1992, pp.63-64.

29. During the Baglione libel trial, on 13 September 1603, Caravaggio had said:- "I think I know nearly all the painters in Rome". See Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 1955, p.277.

as 'Cecco del Caravaggio', and now identified by Gianni Papi as Francesco Buoneri from Bergamo.³⁰ Guicciardini was to commission the *Resurrection of Christ* (Chicago, Art Institute) from Buoneri for the Florentine church of Santa Felicità in 1619.³¹ And, as it happens, there are also some stylistic affinities between Cecco and Vermiglio - not least in the introduction of a half-length figure at the bottom right of Vermiglio's *Crowning with Thorns*, which is the only element of the composition absent from Caravaggio's Giustiniani prototype, but parallels a comparably situated repoussoir figure in Cecco's *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* in the National Museum, Warsaw.³²

Given that *Cain and Abel* was obviously always highly rated in Malta, and was in the Grand Master's palace from at least the early nineteenth century, the question arises as to why and when it was acquired. Despite the circumstantial evidence favouring Spada, the stylistic arguments in favour of Vermiglio's authorship are very strong. It may have been a direct commission from Alof de Wignacourt (Grand Master, 1601-22), with the subject selected as an injunction against violence amongst the young and often unruly Knights at the convent in Valletta. Certain details, such as the blood on the ground under Abel's head [he appears to have already had his throat cut, despite the bludgeoning that is under way!], allude directly to God's chastisement of Cain in *Genesis 4*, 10-12:- "The Lord said, 'What have you done? Hark! your brother's blood that has been shed is crying out to me from the ground. Now you are accursed, and banished from the ground which has opened its mouth wide to receive your brother's blood, which you have shed. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield you its wealth. You shall be a vagrant and a wanderer on earth'". The story was to become a famous Christian *exemplum* specifically advocated by St. John:- "For the message you have heard from the beginning is this: that we should love one another; unlike Cain, who was a child of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were wrong, and his brother's were right" (1 *John* 3, 11-12).

Exactly how Vermiglio could have come to work for the Knights remains a mystery. The Caravaggesque aspects of the picture suggest that it was done at some time between c.1609 and c.1620, when Vermiglio was based in Rome, and prior to the more fully Emilian and Lombard tenor of his late style. Could he have visited Malta? Lionello Spada was, tantalisingly, accompanied by an unnamed assistant when he visited Malta to execute his frescoes for Wignacourt in 1609-10, although Vermiglio is not known to us as a fresco painter.³³ Or he might have gone there at some point in

30. Gianni Papi, *Cecco del Caravaggio*, Florence, 1992.

31. *Ibid.*, p.11.

32. *Ibid.*, p.41, plate 3.

the second decade. Alternatively, his activities as a dealer/middleman in the case of the Filippo Napoletano pictures sold to Guicciardini in Florence may imply a developed skill at marketing. The Florentine Knights were certainly in the forefront of art patronage at the time of Caravaggio.³⁴ However, if the picture was not done for the Grand Master himself, other possibilities from amongst the ranks of the Knights also suggest themselves. The Lombard nobleman, Ippolito Malaspina, who had lived in Rome between 1603 and 1605, and later commissioned Caravaggio's *St. Jerome* in Malta in 1607-08, was a compatriot of Vermiglio; while Ferdinando Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, for whom Vermiglio is known to have worked after his return to Milan, and whom he could have known earlier when Ferdinando had just been made a Cardinal and was resident in Rome between 1610 and 1612, was also a Knight of St. John.³⁵ While Vermiglio himself was certainly not a Knight of St. John, he was, apparently, at some stage made a Knight, although it is not clear in which Order. If not a papal knighthood, it is not inconceivable that he had been made a member of the select Mantuan Order of the Holy Blood, instituted by Duke Ferdinando's father, Vincenzo, in 1608.³⁶

Whatever the channel by which it reached Malta, the National Museum's impressive canvas stands as further testimony both to the acumen of the Knights' patronage in the age of Caravaggio, and to Vermiglio's own growing reputation as an artist who surely deserves to be viewed as more than the "inconsequential craftsman" of Alfred Moir.³⁷ Rather, one is inclined to see his uniquely potent blend of Caravaggism and Bolognese naturalism, fully confirmed by the present picture, as

33. Stefania Macioce, *op. cit.*, p.55.

34. Namely, Antonio Martelli [see John Gash, "The Identity of Caravaggio's Knight of Malta", *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXIX, no.1128, March 1997, pp.155-60], and Francesco dell'Antella [see, L. Sebregondi Fiorentini, "Francesco dell'Antella, Caravaggio, Paladini e altri", *Paragone (Arte)*, 383-5, Jan.-March 1982, pp.107-22; and David Stone, "In Praise of Caravaggio's Sleeping Cupid: New Documents for Francesco dell'Antella in Malta and Florence", *Melita Historica*, vol.XII, no.2 (1997), pp.165-177].

35. For Malaspina, see J. Gash, *ibid.*, p.156, and pp.159-60. Ferdinando Gonzaga (1587-1626) was made a Knight of St. John on 8 June 1592. Cf. B. del Pozzo and R. Solaro di Govone, *Ruolo Generale de' Cavalieri Gerosolimitani della Veneranda Lingua d'Italia*, Turin, 1714, pp.168-69. He became Cardinal on 7 December 1607 and Duke after the death of his brother, Francesco, in December 1612 - resigning from the cardinalate in 1615 in order to devote himself more fully to his ducal duties. His enthusiastic patronage of painting both in Rome and Mantua has been well documented by Pamela Askew, who notes his fondness for certain Caravaggesque, or semi-Caravaggesque, painters such as Saraceni and Grammatica [P. Askew, "Ferdinando Gonzaga's Patronage of the Pictorial Arts: The Villa Favorita", *The Art Bulletin*, vol. LX, no.2, June 1978, pp.274-96].

36. For the reference to Vermiglio as 'cavalier Vermiglio', see C. Pirovano, *op. cit.*, p.88. The Mantuan knights were the *Cavalieri del Santissimo Sangue di Giesu Cristo*. See, Filippo Bonanni, *Catalogo degli Ordini equestri e militari esposto in imagini e con breve racconto...*, Rome, 1711, entry no. 103.

more accurately reflected in Luigi Lanzi's crisp eighteenth-century assessment:- "Io lo considero come il miglior pittore a olio che vanta l'antico Stato di Piemonte, e come uno de' miglior italiani del suo tempo".³⁸ Well, almost!

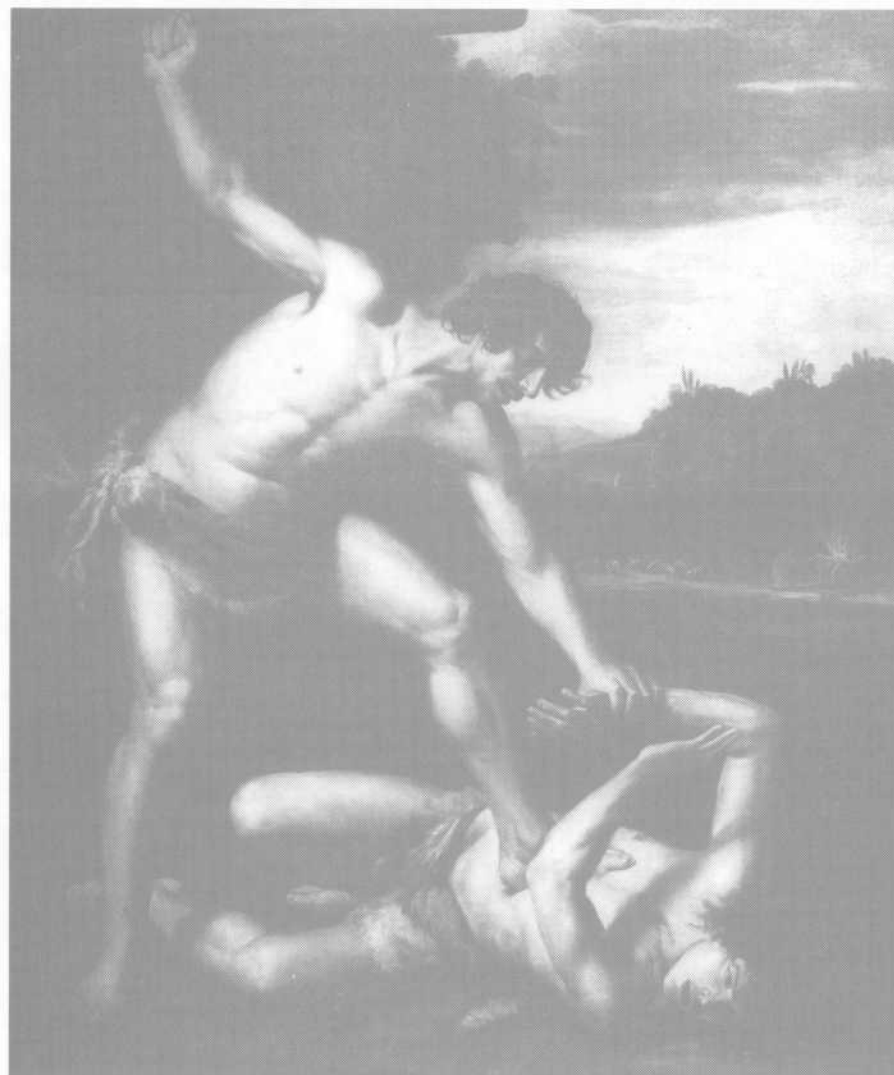


Plate 1: Giuseppe Vermiglio (?), *Cain and Abel*. Canvas. National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta.

37. Alfrd Moir, *The Italian Followers of Caravaggio*. Cambridge, Mass., 1967, vol.I, p.69.

38. Luigi Lanzi, *op. cit.*, vol. V, p.378. A painting of *Jael and Sisera*, recently discovered in the stores of the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan (130 x 103cm.; Inv. 1197), together with other pictures attributed to Vermiglio, is compositionally close to the *Cain and Abel* and further strengthens the case for Vermiglio's authorship of the Valletta canvas. See, Marco Rossi and Alessandro Rovetta, *The Pinacoteca Ambrosiana*, Electa, Milan, 1997, p.200 (with illustration).



Plate 2: Detail of 1 (head of Abel).

Plate 3: Giuseppe Vermiglio, *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*, 1612. Canvas. San Tommaso ai Cenci, Rome.

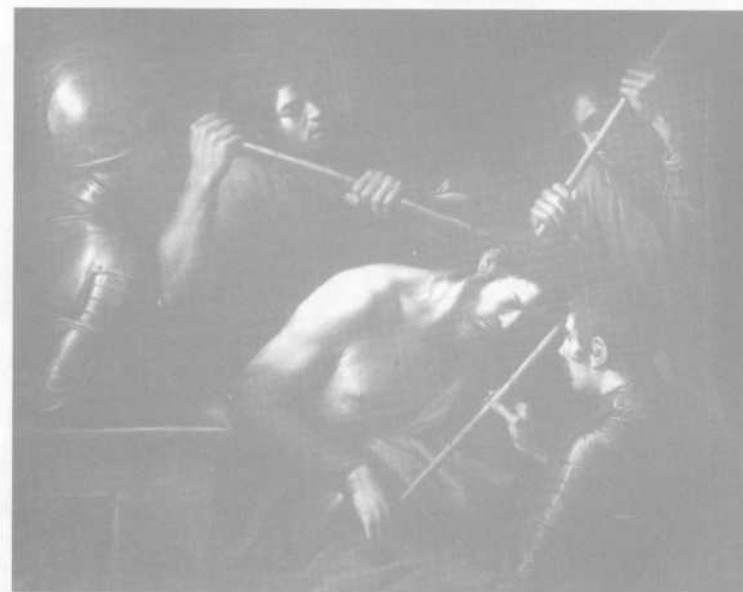


Plate 4: Giuseppe Vermiglio, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1622. Canvas. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.
 Plate 5: Giuseppe Vermiglio (?), *The Crowning with Thorns/Mocking of Christ*. Canvas. Formerly Palazzo Altieri, Rome.

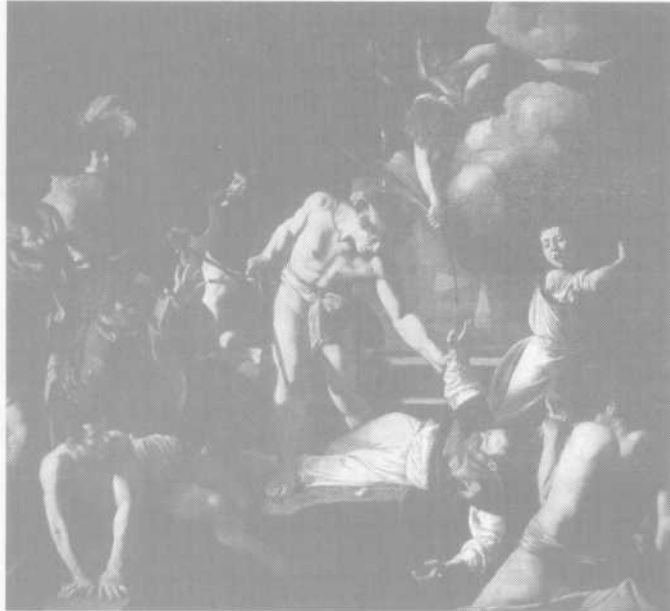


Plate 6: Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, 1599-1600. Canvas. Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.

Plate 7: Annibale Carracci, *Remus chasing the Cattle Thieves*, 1590. Fresco. Palazzo Magnani, Bologna.