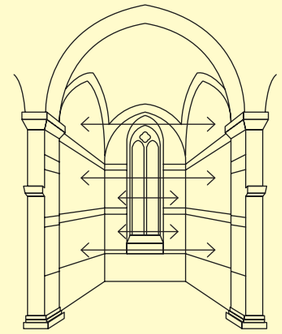
Piero della Francesca

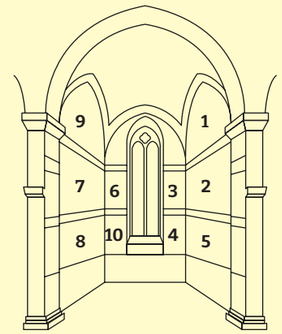
Piero della Francesca (Borgo Sansepolcro, 1412/1416 - 1492) is one of the most influential artists of the Italian Renaissance. His friend and great mathematician Luca Pacioli called him ‘el monarcha de la pittura’ (the monarch of painting) to pay homage to the great painter’s stature. His works, made up of harmony, geometric spaces, volumes, light and balanced in perspective on a mathematical and rational construction, measured in every single detail, influenced the art of several great artists of his time and inspired many painters of the next generation.

Legend of the True Cross

The Legend of the True Cross tells the story of the wood used to build the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified.
The episodes are taken from the ‘Legenda Aurea’ by Jacopo da Varagine, a collection of lives of saints and explanations of liturgical feasts written by the Dominican friar, transcribed between 1260 and 1270 and widely spread throughout the Middle Ages. Although it was reworked several times, its primary source remains the Apocryphal Gospels. The passages concerning the story of the True Cross are notably the two chapters on the feasts of the Invention of the Cross and the Exaltation of the Cross. The pictorial cycle, divided into three levels on the central and side walls of the Bacci Chapel, is not distributed according to a chronological order, but mainly follows formal criteria, without renouncing philosophical-theological correspondences between facing scenes.



Thematic symmetry



Scene Sequence

episode 1

Death and Burial of Adam

This scene, like most of the episodes depicted in the chapel, includes three consecutive phases of the narrative. Starting from the right, the narrative describes the moment when the dying Adam sends his son Seth to the gates of Heaven to ask the Archangel Michael for the oil of the mercy wood to cure him. In the distance, the narrative continues with the dialogue between Seth and the Archangel while, on the left, the focus is on the moment of Adam’s burial with his son planting on his tomb, not yet covered with earth, the branch received by the Archangel that will grow into the tree which will be used to make the Cross of Christ.

episode 2

Adoration of the Sacred Wood and Meeting between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

Set in the time of King Solomon (970 - 930 B.C.), who ordered to cut down the tree to build the Temple of Jerusalem, the wood, which turned out to be unsuitable, was used as a bridge over the Siloe. All the characters depicted in the representation are dressed according to 15th-century fashion. On the left-hand side of the scene, the procession of the Queen of Sheba, with ladies, horses and footmen, stops in front of the bridge and the queen, sensing the sacred nature of the wood, kneels with folded hands in adoration. On the right, the procession is welcomed inside Solomon’s palace. The queen bows in homage to him and informs him of the prophecy about the future use of the beam.

episode 3

Burial of the Wood of the Cross

The scene depicts the burial of the sacred wood by three men who, carrying out Solomon’s orders, will hide the wood which, according to the words of the Queen of Sheba, will be the cause of suffering for the Jewish people. The three figures allude probably to the frailties of every human being: the first, without trousers embodies lust, the second, with clenched teeth, stands for wrath, and the third one, well-dressed and crowned with vine leaves evoking Bacchus, represents gluttony.
Although both the composition and the design are the work of Piero, critics agree in ascribing the pictorial realisation of this scene to his assistant identified as Giovanni di Piamonte.

episode 4

Constantine’s Dream

The scene depicted on the back wall of the chapel depicts one of the key episodes of the ‘Legend of the True Cross’ and one of the most important testimonies of the Italian Renaissance. Constantine, asleep in his tent, receives in a dream an angel who brings him the revelation of the Cross, ‘In hoc signo vinces’, with which he will defeat his adversary. The play is set at dawn in a camp. Two soldiers guard the tent inside which the Emperor Constantine is sleeping, while in the foreground, a young man sitting on a step looks towards the spectator.
The real focus of the scene is the light coming from the angel flying above them, shining on the tent and the imperial bed.

Frescoes by Piero della Francesca

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episode 5

Constantine's victory over Maxentius

It is October 28, 312 A.D., a decisive date for the fate of Christianity. The right side of the scene gives a glimpse of Maxentius, who, together with his people, flees in terror fording the river. All that remains of his figure are part of his hat and a fragment of his torso, while in the foreground, one of the fleeing warriors turns back with an expression of fear.
On the left instead is the army of Constantine, advancing on his grey horse, with the slow pace of the conqueror, emphasised by the crests adorned with feathers and plumes, the yellow banner with the imperial eagle and the soaring spears silhouetted against the sky in the background. The true focus of the episode is the Christian symbol, which makes the enemy soldiers flee.

episode 6

Torture of the Jew

After the victory obtained through the power of the Cross of Christ, Constantine converted to Christianity and set out to find the wood of the Cross to worship it as a relic. He instructed his mother Helena - who had always been a Christian - to carry out this search. Once in Jerusalem, Helena learns of the existence of a Jew, Judas, who knows the place where the three crosses are buried, namely that of Christ and those of the two thieves. The Empress then has the Jew captured and tortured, having him lowered into a well without food or water. The scene is dominated by the large central tripod supporting the winch, hoisted to raise and lower the tortured man.

episode 7

Finding and Recognition of the True Cross

On the left, dressed in black and wearing a crown on her head, we find Helena. The woman, following the revelation of the burial place of the three crosses, identified near Jerusalem, goes to the site to unearth them, accompanied by her court and a group of servants. On the right, against the backdrop of the great temple dedicated to Venus, built, according to legend, where the crosses were buried, St Helena with her ladies proceeds to recognise the Cross of Christ, which she obtains by means of a miracle: the true Cross resurrects a dead young man, who was already in his coffin to be buried.

episode 8

Battle of Heraclius against Kosroës

Meant to end with the crushing victory of the Christian emperor Heraclius against the pagan Kosroës in 628 A.D., the scene is dominated by a huge number of men and horses. The warriors, dressed in colourful Roman costumes, pierce their enemies who, almost defenceless, try in vain to protect themselves with their shields. The intervention of horsemen in armour, coming from the left, who burst unstoppably into the middle of the fray, appears decisive for the fate of the battle. On the far right of the scene, in front of the great canopy that surmounts the blasphemous throne of Kosroës with its splendid architecture in perspective, the final episode takes place with the death sentence of the Persian king.

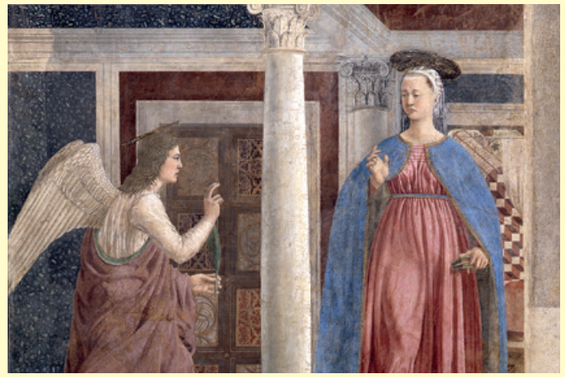
episode 9

Exaltation of the Cross

The Persian king Kosroës was defeated and killed, and the Christian emperor Heraclius was able to recover the Cross of Christ. The scene is divided in two by the open space in the centre, dominated by the clear dawn sky against which the great Cross stands out in the foreground. On the left, led by Heraclius, is the procession of figures wrapped in large cloaks thickly folded and brightly coloured. On the right, a group of Jerusalem notables, young and old, welcome the arrival of the sacred wood on their knees, in adoration. The cross is the decisive element from a symbolic point of view: it dominates the scene to emphasise the victory of faith and Christianity and stands as the natural conclusion of the cycle.

episode 10

Annunciation



The scene shows the archangel Gabriel respectfully handing the palm, symbol of victory, to Mary, depicted within classical architecture decorated with coloured marble and white marble columns, while holding a prayer book in her left hand. Piero della Francesca meticulously describes the details that make up the representation. The loggia, realised with extreme attention to the rules of perspective, once again testifies to his knowledge of the subject. The characters depicted have sculptural features and the scene is dominated by a sense of stillness, aimed at making the characters even more statuesque.