Piero della Francesca: The Legend of the True Cross

Figure 1: (O_Pi_1) San Francesco, Arezzo (left) and Santa Croce, Florence (right)

One of the most charming openings to any story that I know is that of the Tuscan children's classic *Pinocchio*:

'Once upon a time there was—"a King", you'll all say at once. No, boys and girls, you're wrong. Once upon a time there was a piece of wood'—'c'era una volta un pezzo di legno'.

This phrase could also serve as the opening of the story I shall be telling in this lecture. It is about a piece of wood, and we shall follow its adventures from parent tree to a cutting, from a cutting to another tree, from tree to a piece of timber that was twice carried by a king and itself carried one of those kings, was twice buried, was stolen by a heathen king, and rediscovered by a saint, who was the mother of the first Christian emperor. So it is a fairy-story, a story of 'once upon a time'; it does involve a king or, rather, several kings; but the subject is nevertheless a 'piece of wood'.

The story is told in two separate entries in the *Golden Legend*, in May and September; and the illustrations, or the pictorial narratives, that concern us are to be found in two Franciscan churches, one in Arezzo, the other in Florence (cf. plan in fig. 2). The Florentine church is, in fact, not dedicated to a saint, but to the Holy Cross itself, the 'Holy Rood'—'Santa Croce'.

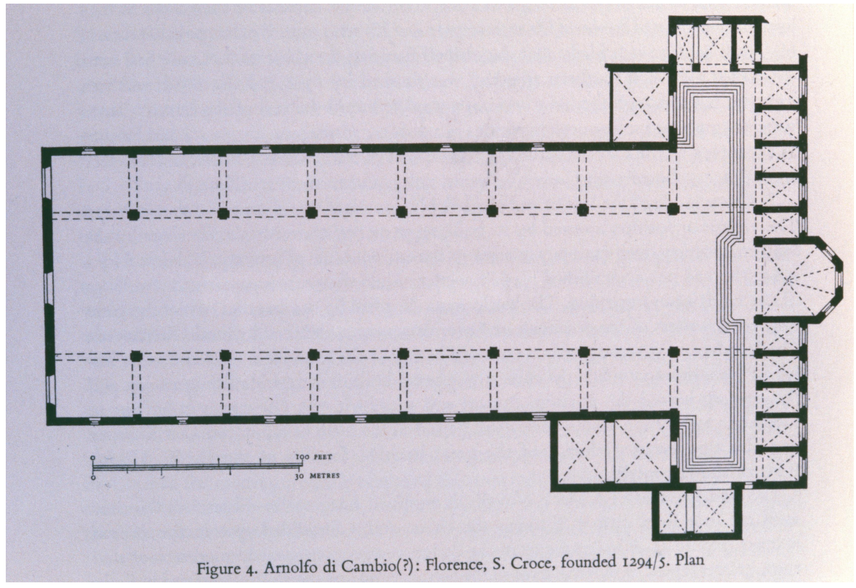

Figure 4. Arnolfo di Cambio(?): Florence, S. Croce, founded 1294/5. Plan

Figure 2: (O_Pi_2) Plan of Church of Santa Croce, Florence

In both churches the frescos are in the place of honour; that is, in the Presbytery or Choir, the area reserved for the clergy behind the High Altar of the Church. The altar itself would have been topped by a large wooden crucifix, as you see in this image of the same Church:

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As far as the cross itself is concerned, all the advantage lay with Florence, because what you see in fig. 3 is, or was, the famous crucifix by Cimabue. But as far as the frescos are concerned, the advantage lies very much with Arezzo.

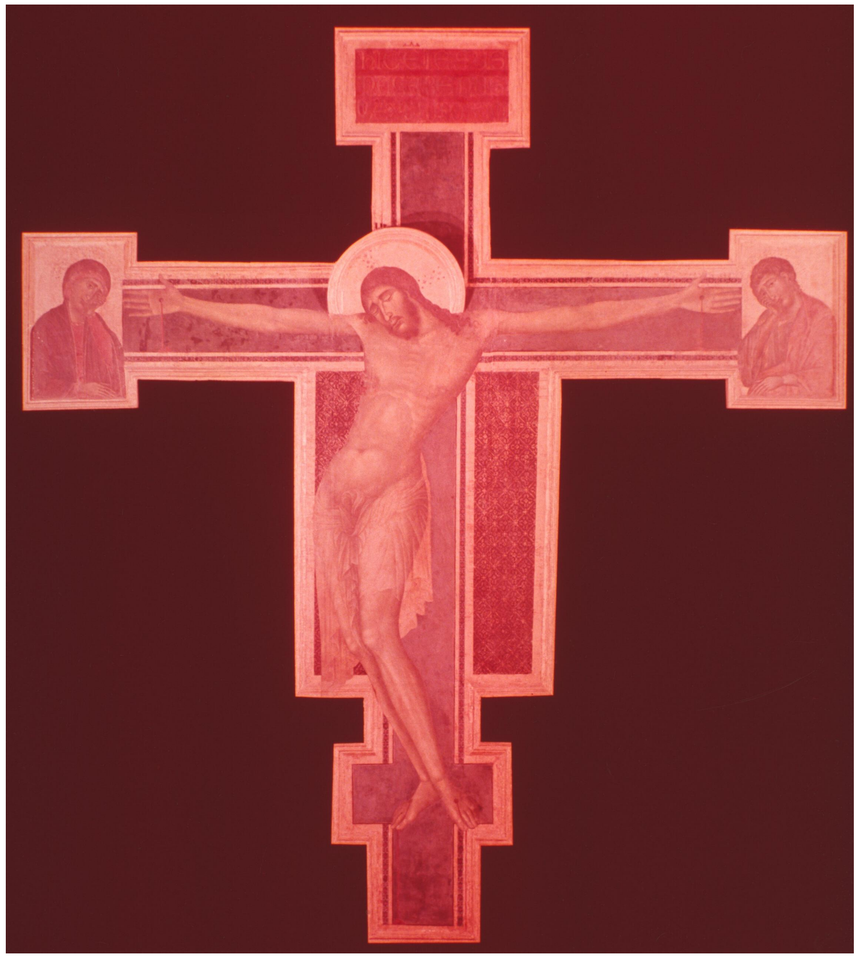

Figure 3: (O_Pi_3) Cimabue’s *Crucifix*

The Florentine cycle was done earlier, in the 1390s, by an artist who was called 'Angelo' (Agnolo), the son of Taddeo Gaddi, who had been the chief assistant and heir of Giotto. Agnolo remained fair and square within the tradition of Giotto, as you can see from this panel of the *Coronation of the Virgin*, now in the National Gallery, which is very closely derived from an altar-piece in Santa Croce done by Giotto and his workshop back in the 1330s:

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Agnolo would have had ample opportunity to study fresco painting in further work by his father, and also by Giotto himself in the two chapels which you see here:

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The frescos at Arezzo were done sixty years later, in the 1450s, by Piero della Francesca. And despite the damage they have suffered they are still clearly a master work of a major painter, epitomising many of the qualities of the new art of the fifteenth century.

Figure 4: (O_Pi_4) Map of central Italy

Piero was in some sense a local or provincial painter. We know that he was employed at Rome and Ferrara, but the works he did there have been lost or destroyed. His relatively few surviving works were done for Urbino, or Arezzo, or the little town of Borgo San Sepolcro (cf. map in fig. 4), where he was born between 1410 and 1420, and where he died in 1492—the *Baptism* in fig. 5, now in our National Gallery, was done for Borgo:

Figure 5: (O_Pi_5) Piero's *The Baptism of Christ*

However, it is more important to think of Piero's apparent isolation as the consequence of a private obsession. In his *Lives of the Artists*, published in the 1550s, Giorgio Vasari, who grew up in Arezzo, had good reasons for presenting Piero as a supreme 'mathematician' or 'geometer'.

In a moment, therefore, we shall distinguish two main aspects in his passion for geometry; but before doing so, we must take account of his purely empirical interest in the fall of light and its role in modelling bodies in relief. Piero was not particularly interested in local colour, or in surface patterns, but, rather, in volume and mass, and in how to represent the most subtle differences in relief by the most subtle gradations of tone. His almost miraculous control is seen most clearly when he restricts himself to the range running from 'rather light' to 'light' and on to 'very light indeed'. In *The Baptism*, for example, is characteristic that he treats the bark of the tree and the skin of Christ's body as though they were both made of white marble. As a result, subtle variations in tone are to be attributed not to differences in the make-up of the substance itself, but to the fact that differing facets of the surface are making different angles to the source of light and to the eye of the spectator.

The first main consequence of his passion for geometry is his attempt to resolve all the complex and irregular bodies which are found in nature into the cubes, spheres, cylinders and cones of their divine prototypes or exemplars; and, perhaps most characteristically, to find the living compromise between sphere, cylinder and cone, which is to say the 'egg' or 'ovoid'.

Figure 6: (O_Pi_6) Piero's *Virgin of Mercy*

fig. 6 shows the central panel of an altar-piece that Piero painted for his home town in 1445. It represents the so-called ‘Virgin of Mercy’, that is Mary as protecting her supplicants under her voluminous robe. If we concentrate our attention above her cape, and if we renounce the blandishments of colour (fig. 7), you will see that all wisps of hair have been tidied away; that the neck is a cylinder, placed on a section of a cone; and that the head is an egg under a section of an inverted cone:

Figure 7: (O_Pi_7) Detail from Piero’s *Virgin of Mercy*

The point emerges even more clearly if we turn the image upside-down (as in fig. 8); and this unfamiliar presentation will also help you to register how the eye-lids and the lips are treated as even smaller eggs, while the nose is a smaller column (with base, shaft and capital):

Figure 8: (O_Pi_8) Inverted detail from Piero's *Virgin of Mercy*

The second, more technical aspect in Piero's passion for geometry was that which led him to compose a detailed treatise on Linear Perspective, in order to teach other painters how to represent, on a flat, two-dimensional surface, any conceivable three-dimensional object, seen from any conceivable view-point. The three images in fig. 9 are taken from that treatise and demonstrate that he uses the same meticulous approach whether he is drawing the wicker frame of an elaborate contemporary hat, the capital of a classical column, or the human head:

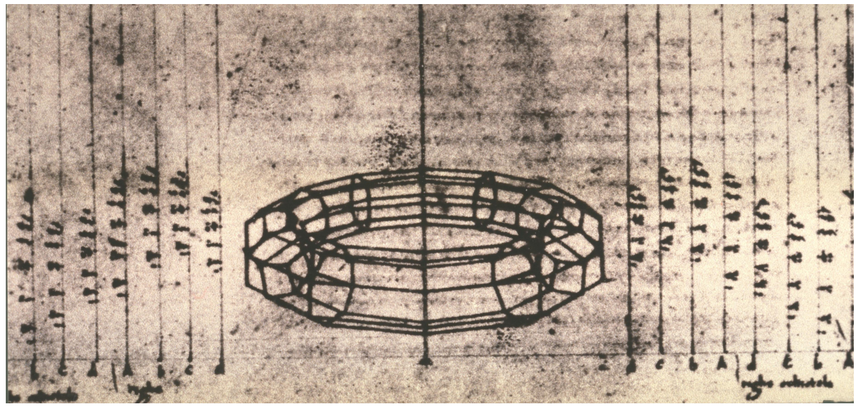

Figure 9: (O_Pi_9) Three illustrations from Piero's *De prospective pingendi*

The elaborate measurements and cross-sections enable him to render a head, or a capital, or a hat from any angle—the more challenging, the better. Often he seems to take a single column-like head and neck, and to turn it through various angles to create different people within the one frame (cf. the detail in fig. 10):

Figure 10: (O_Pi_10) Detail from Piero's *Meeting between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon*

Given these obsessions, it is not surprising that Piero derived intense pleasure from the representation of classically inspired *architecture*: where the material is white marble; where the architect has already idealised the feet, trunk and head of the human body in the base, shaft and capital of a column; and where everything is regulated, as the Bible says 'in weight, measure, and number'.

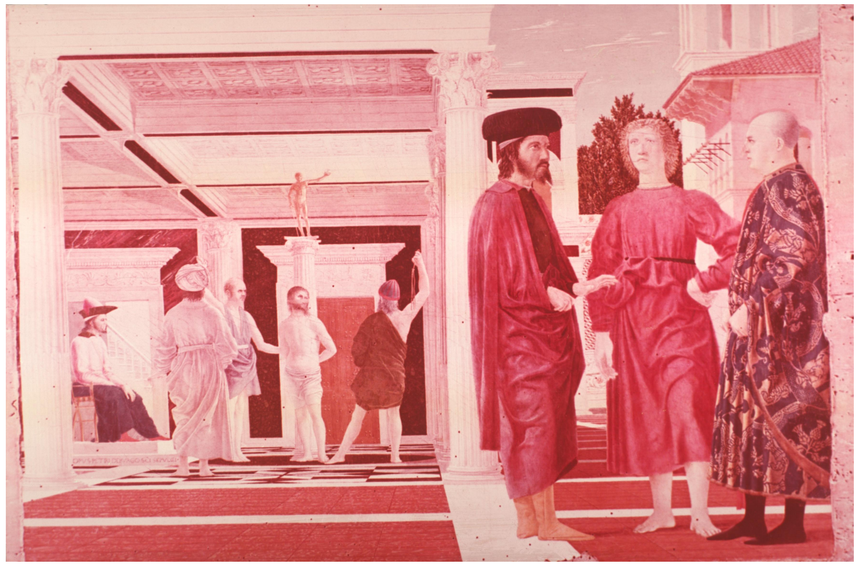

Figure 11: (O_Pi_11) Piero's *Flagellation of Christ*

The painting which distils all that I have been saying into a single image is the famous *Flagellation* at Urbino (1455) in fig. 11 (it ought now to be retitled *The Vision of St Jerome*), which measures about two foot by nearly three foot. Ignore the three enigmatic figures to the right and focus on the classical interior (fig. 12), noticing the low view-point that exposes the measured recession of the coffered ceiling and calls forth a geometrical tour de force in the rendering of the black and white slabs on the floor, and where the 'marble' body of Christ (or of St Jerome dreaming he is Christ) is tied to the marble column, but stands as stock-still as a statue:

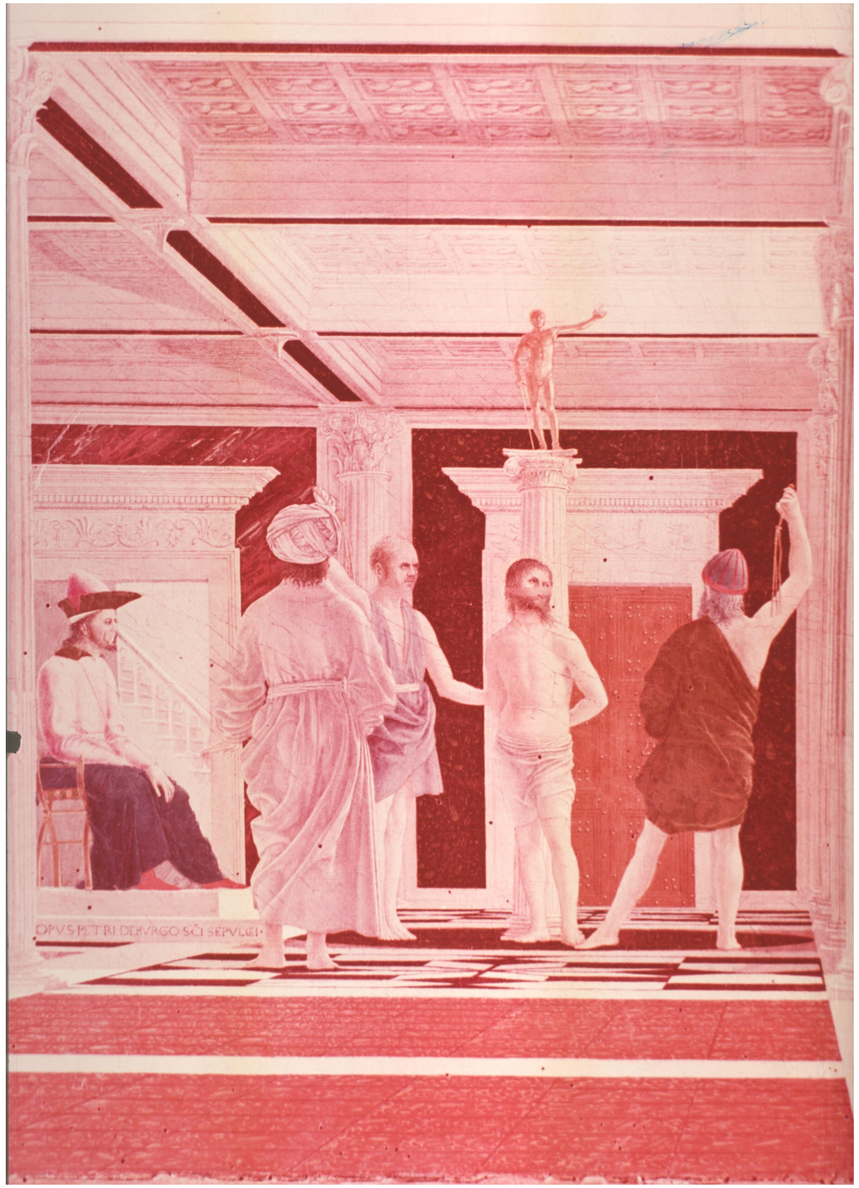

Figure 12: (O_Pi_12) Detail from Piero's *Flagellation of Christ*

In another artist, one would interpret the soldier's raised arm as expressive of movement. Here it grows out like a branch on the trunk of a tree, which is itself treated like a marble column running from his head perpendicularly down through his right leg.

So much by way of an introduction to Piero's art. Let us now return to the two choirs of the two churches in Florence and Arezzo, and look at the general layout of the frescos in the two cycles.

Figure 13: (O_Pi_13) Views of Santa Croce (left) and San Francesco (right)

Look first at Santa Croce, of which you can see the windows, the vaulting and the colours in fig. 13a, and the whole of the left-hand wall in the black-and-white photograph in fig. 13b.

The two main parts of the narrative—as narrated in the two separate entries in *The Golden Legend*—are given one wall each, the first on the right, the second on the left; and each wall is divided into four 'chapters', beginning in the lunette at the top, and proceeding down to the bottom.

Figure 14: (O_Pi_14) View of San Francesco

The choir of Piero's church in Arezzo is lower; and it is also narrower (as you can see in fig. 14), since there is only one window instead of three, as at Florence. There is room for only three superimposed tiers on the side walls (as is clear in the diagram in fig. 15); but the area of each lunette and of each rectangle is about the same as at Florence, that is, about 25 foot across in each case.

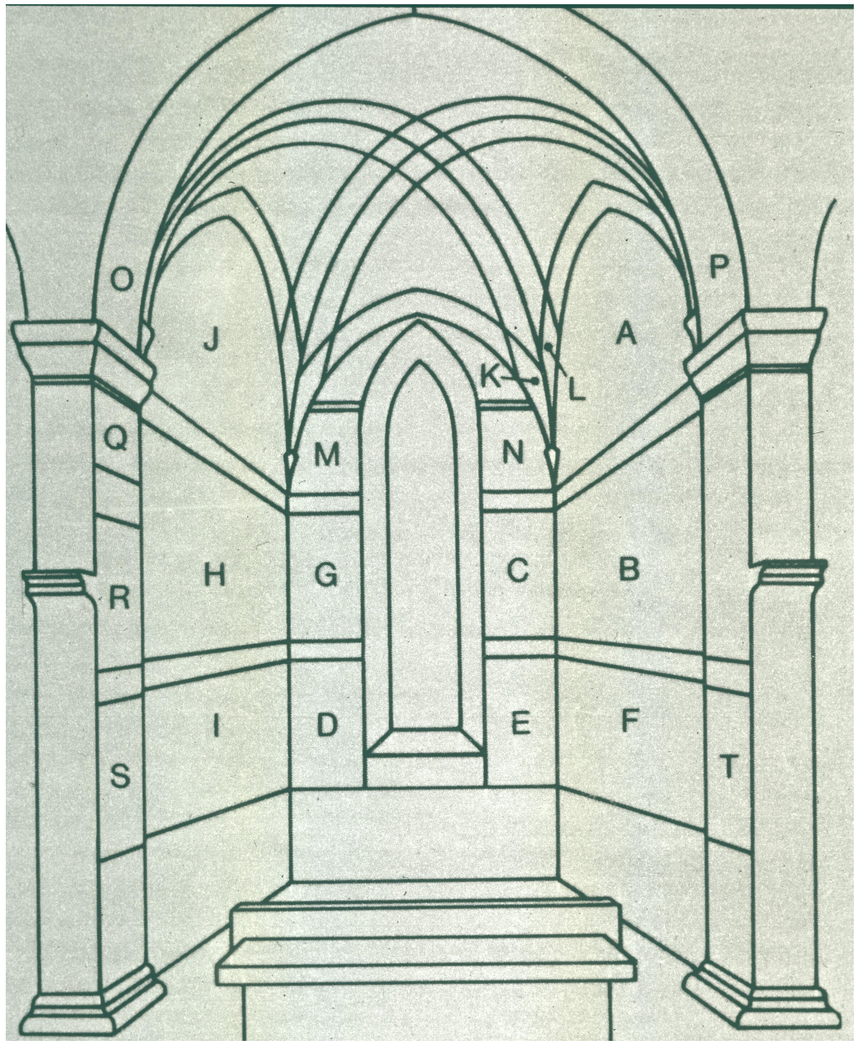

Figure 15: (O_Pi_15) Diagram of frescos in San Francesco

At Arezzo, however, there are four narrower frescos on either side of the window, in addition to the six zones on the side walls. And since both Piero and Agnolo are quite willing to accommodate up to two episodes within a single pictorial frame, they each have an equivalent amount of space.

The first major difference in the two layouts is that Piero does not divide the two stories (the Finding of the Cross, and the Exaltation of the Cross) evenly between the left and the right-hand walls. Although his first two 'chapters' are duly 'told' in the right-hand lunette and in the rectangle immediately below it (as in Florence), the narrative sequence thereafter is very irregular. Look at the letters that indicate the narrative sequence in fig. 15 to see how we must pass downwards from A to B; then sideways to C; then horizontally right across the bottom, D, E, F; while on the left-hand wall, we proceed horizontally from G to H; then downwards to I; before climbing to J.

No doubt there were many different factors determining this very unusual departure from the obvious narrative sequence; and the patron and his advisers may well have had their say. Yet the main reasons seem to have been artistic. Piero is interested in scenes that lend themselves to 'contemplation in stillness', and he wanted to create a host of rhymes or symmetries between frescos of the same height, whether they face each other across the choir, or lie to the left and right of the window.

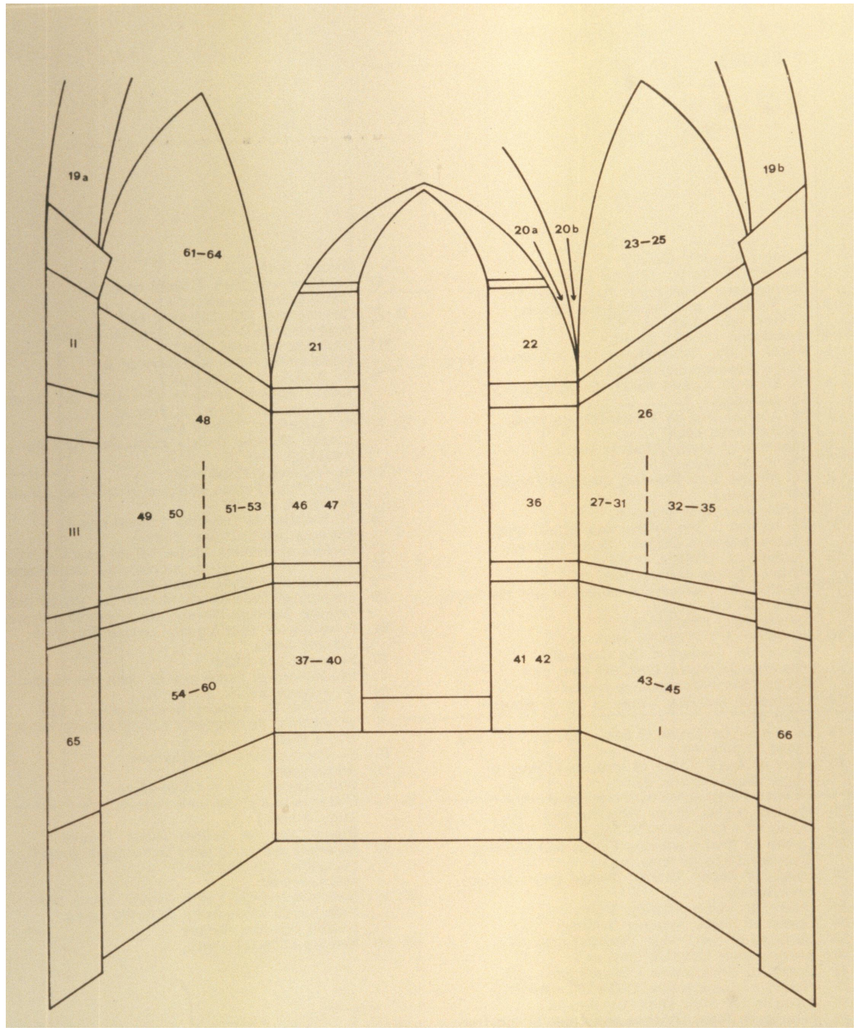

Figure 16: (O_Pi_16) Alternative diagram of frescos in San Francesco

To recapitulate, then, have a look at the *alternative* diagram of the layout in Arezzo in fig. 16, and remember that there are six *large* zones on the side walls, consisting of a lunette and two rectangles to both right and left; and that there are four *narrower* zones, on either side of the window on the altar wall.

Figure 17: (O_Pi_17) *The Death of Adam* by Agnolo Gaddi (left) and *[FIXME: RIGHT slide missing, or rather the film has fallen out of the slide holder—it's Lunette with Adam, Piero n. 23 in Scala series]*

The first scene in the story, which is represented in the right lunette both in Florence and in Arezzo, begins thousands of years before Christ, in fact just three days before the death of our common ancestor Adam. In the *Golden Legend* it goes as follows:

> 'One day when Adam was old and ailing, his son Seth went to the gate of the Garden of Paradise and asked for a few drops of the oil from the Tree of Mercy, that he might anoint his father's body and thus repair his health. But the Archangel Michael appeared to him and said: "Nor by thy tears, nor by thy prayers, may you obtain the oil of the Tree of Mercy, for men cannot obtain this oil until five thousand five hundred years have passed", which is to say, after the Passion of Christ.'
>
> 'Nevertheless, the Archangel Michael gave Seth a branch of the miraculous tree—the same that had led Adam into sin—and told him that on the day when this tree should "bear fruit", his father would be made whole. And when Seth came back to his house he found his father already dead. He planted the tree over Adam's grave, and the branch became a mighty tree which still flourished in the time of King Solomon'.

The story is easier to follow in Florence (fig. 17a), even when you are standing at ground level in the church itself. He uses the convention of a 'double scale' in order to make Seth and Michael enormous (on the hill and in the sky), and he uses a high view-point to display Adam's dead body in his shroud, with Seth planting the cutting in his heart at the centre of a half-circle of mourners, all of them in 'appropriate', 'sacred' robes.

Piero uses a single, very low view-point (and therefore horizon) and spreads his actors in a frieze right across the foreground, very close to the frame. Seth and the angel are relegated to the back-ground, at a size proportionate to their distance.

Figure 18: (O_Pi_18) Detail from Piero's *The Death of Adam*

In the group on the right (fig. 18), the artist concentrates on extreme old age and infirmity, showing an emaciated Adam, in profile, his stick on the ground, supported by Eve, stick in her hand, her breasts withered and hanging low. A grandson rests on his hoe, while Seth, the son, lifts his robe to set out on the journey, and a scantily dressed granddaughter looks solemnly down. All of them, in their attitudes and simple dress, remind us of the Lord's curse recorded at the end of the third chapter of Genesis, that they must earn their bread by the sweat of their brow.

On the left and in the centre, in the scene around Adam's dead body (you see him in profile at the very bottom of the picture), Piero follows an alternative version of the story and has a seed planted in Adam's *mouth*, far less dramatically than in Gaddi. He reserves the drama for the woman's outflung arms—a ritual gesture of grief and mourning, which is both 'cross-like', and reminiscent of Mary Magdalene at the foot of the cross in many representations of the crucifixion.

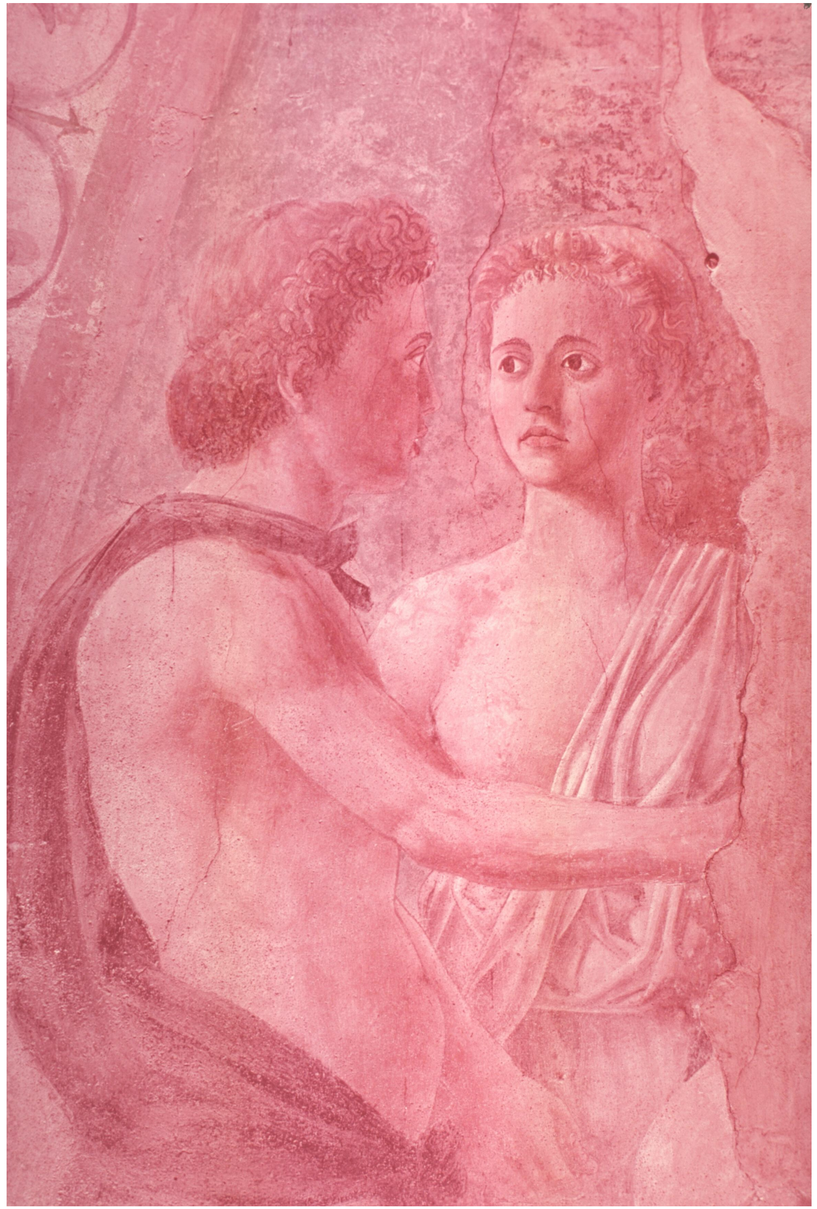

Figure 19: (O_Pi_19) Detail from Piero's *The Death of Adam*

Seth and the others are still, with heads bowed, while at the extreme left (cf. detail in fig. 19) two of the great-grandchildren look at each other 'with a wild surmise': they are in the presence of natural death for the first time in human history, but they are also 'wondering' at the planting of the seed, and of the promise of being made whole. The top of the lunette is, or was, dominated by the tree, the *lignum*, the 'pezzo di legno'—either the parent tree in Eden, or the tree that was still flourishing in the time of King Solomon—spreading its boughs like a cross, and rhyming with the triumphant cross, which we shall see in the other lunette, on the left-hand side, at the end of our cycle (see fig. 61 below).

Figure 20: (O_Pi_20) Agnolo Gaddi's *Procession of the Queen of Sheba / Burial of the Holy Wood* (above) and Piero's *Procession of the Queen of Sheba / Meeting between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon* (below)*

We now move down one level in both churches, and take up the story during the reign of King Solomon, at which time the tree planted by Seth was still flourishing. The *Golden Legend* version of the story goes like this:

'Solomon was struck by the beauty of the tree and he cut it down in order to use it in the erection of the Temple. But no place could be found where it could be used: for sometimes it appeared to be too long, and other times too short; and when the builders tried to cut it to the length desired, they discovered that they had cut off too much. So they became impatient with the tree, and they threw it across a pond to serve as a bridge. But when the Queen of Sheba came to Jerusalem to try the wisdom of Solomon with hard questions, she had occasion to cross this pond; and, in spirit, she saw that the Saviour of the World would one day hang upon this tree. She therefore refused to put her foot upon it, but knelt instead to adore it'.

We can see her act of adoration on the left of both frescos; and, ignoring the area to the right in each case (which belongs to another separate episode, and is different in each of the two cycles), we can see that the composition of this *Adoration* is broadly similar.

Figure 21: (O_Pi_21) Detail from Agnolo Gaddi's *Procession of the Queen of Sheba*

In a landscape of hills and trees, the crowned Queen, still youthful, kneels in front of a baulk of timber thrown across a stream (cf. fig. 21), while her ladies-in-waiting stand in a group behind her, and some grooms hold horses in order to show that the party are on a journey. This is exactly as one would expect to find in an *Adoration of the Magi*, and the 'quotation' is clearly deliberate, because the 'oriental queen' who 'came to Jerusalem' was interpreted as a prefiguration of the Three Kings from the East. But then the differences begin—Piero separates the sexes, and he uses the two very large trees to reinforce the division between the groups.

Figure 22: (O_Pi_22) Detail from Piero's *Procession of the Queen of Sheba*

His white horse and the heads of the other three horses are very convincing, at least when considered as *sculptures* of horses. Light falls from the left, casting a clear shadow across the doublet and hose, and modelling the legs of the men and the horses, which are equally column-like. The two grooms (cf. fig. 22)—one with the dagger in his belt, the other holding a whip—exchange pregnant glances, like the ones you saw in the first scene; but they also might also serve as fashion plates for contemporary costume, illustrating the differences between pleats and closer tailoring, or, if you like, the differences between a round column and a fluted column.

Figure 23: (O_Pi_23) Detail from Piero's *Procession of the Queen of Sheba*

Piero's love of architecture is recalled even more strongly in the group of attendant women (fig. 23), where everything is equally motionless, and where the fluting or pleating of the dresses, and the 'capital-like' headdresses contrast with the smooth columns and the ovoids of the long, bare necks, the shaven foreheads, the plucked eyebrows, and the close fitting head veils of the majority—as you can see better in the close-up in fig. 24:

Figure 24: (O_Pi_24) Detail from Piero's *Procession of the Queen of Sheba*

The two ladies in profile (or *near* profile) are clearly 'sisters'—which is also a tactful way of pointing out that Piero often uses the same model for different characters in his stories, examining the same head from different angles, as we saw earlier. They are also 'cousins' to the Queen; and the study of her profile in fig. 25 is a lovely example of Piero's powers of understatement, concentration and 'inwardness':

Figure 25: (O_Pi_25) Detail from Piero's *Procession of the Queen of Sheba*

No less than the Meditation on old age and death in the lunette above, an Adoration is the perfect subject for his art. This is borne out once again in the complementary scene to the right of the same fresco (fig. 26), which represents the meeting between Sheba and Solomon, and which enables Piero to portray another act of veneration (this time of a sacred king and an ancestor of Christ), even though this episode has nothing to do with the story of the True Cross, and does not occur in Gaddi's cycle.

Figure 26: (O_Pi_26) Detail from Piero's *Meeting between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon*

Before we examine the figures in this scene, go back to fig. 20b and look closely at the perspective, noticing that the vanishing point of the system is just to the left of the temple, so that you can see the whole entablature at the side, and even the volutes of two of the rear columns. Its vanishing point is also very low, just above the baulk of timber, and this is why the ceiling beams are so prominent, and why the columns, pilaster and marble panels of the classical building can both separate the groups and bind together the members of each. It is also the reason why the figures seem much taller and more imposing than you might expect.

Figure 27: (O_Pi_27) Detail from Piero's *Meeting between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon*

I must not dwell on the ladies (whom you saw very briefly at the beginning of the lecture, cf. fig. 10, above), nor even on the isolated central figures and the act of reverence by the Queen to the King (fig. 27). What we really must look at, though, are the heads of the four men (fig. 28), in order to enjoy a very vivid portrait of the donor, and the study of a complex hat, seen from a very awkward angle (just like the temple), as well as the profile of the wearer of the hat, which is a typically quiet tour-de-force:

Figure 28: (O_Pi_28) Detail from Piero's *Meeting between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon*

According to *The Golden Legend*, the Queen prophesied to Solomon that 'upon this tree would one day be hanged the man who would put an end to the Kingdom of the Jews'; and the next scene illustrates Solomon's attempt to prevent the prophesy from coming true. At Arezzo it lies on the altar wall, just to the left of Sheba's *Adoration*; and it looks as you see it in fig. 29 (it measures about ten foot high by six foot wide):

Figure 29: (O_Pi_29) Piero's *Burial of the Holy Wood*

In Florence (cf. detail in fig. 30), it forms the right-hand area of the fresco we saw in fig. 20a:

Figure 30: (O_Pi_30) Detail from Agnolo Gaddi's *Burial of the Holy Wood*

The story consists of just one sentence—'Solomon ordered that the tree be buried deep in the earth'—and although there is a great deal one might say about Piero's 'expressionism' here, I shall content myself with two obvious comments on the 'symbolism'.

Figure 31: (O_Pi_31) Detail from Giotto's *Road to Calvary* (left, flipped) and detail from Piero's *Burial of the Holy Wood* (right)*

You can see that the left-hand labourer supports the diagonal of the great beam as though he were Jesus carrying the cross to Calvary (the prototype is illustrated in fig. 31a with a reversed image from the Arena Chapel). The black and white detail in fig. 31b clearly shows that the artist (surely, not the master himself) painted the labourer's hair and expression to make us think of the Man of Sorrows under the Crown of Thorns.

Figure 32: (O_Pi_32) Agnolo Gaddi's *Recovery of the Wood from Which the True Cross is Constructed*

Piero now leaves out two important scenes which together form the subject of Gaddi's third fresco (fig. 32). In the *Golden Legend* we read that 'at the spot where the tree was buried, the miraculous pool called Bethesda later welled up, so that it was not only the Descent of the Angel' (as narrated in the Gospel of John, Chapter 5) 'but also the power of the tree buried in the earth which caused the water to move and the sick to be healed'. Gaddi reinforces the last point by including a medieval hospital in the background!

Then we read: 'when the Passion of Christ drew nigh, the wood of the tree floated to the surface of the water. And when the Jews saw it, they fashioned our Lord's cross from the wood'. Gaddi shows five contemporary carpenters at work in the right foreground with his usual efficiency and clarity.

The crucifixion itself is taken for granted in both fresco cycles. (In the text of the *Golden Legend*, the relevant material belongs to the entries for Holy Week; while in the two churches, the crucifix is displayed prominently on or above the altar itself.) But Piero does include his own rather oblique allusion to the coming of the Son of Man, by placing a scene of the Annunciation (fig. 33) in the lower register to the left of the window:

Figure 33: (O_Pi_33) Piero's *Annunciation*

You can see from the detail in fig. 34 that this narrow fresco is one of Piero's loveliest evocations of classicising architecture. Notice that the perspective system converges on a point which is very low (as usual with him), and lying outside the composition to the right; while the light in the painting seems to come from the window in the church to illuminate the marble of the column, with its composite capital, that seems to form the upright of a 'Cross' which has the entablature above as its beam:

Figure 34: (O_Pi_34) Detail from Piero's *Annunciation*

The Annunciation lies to the left of the window (as you saw in fig. 16); and we now make two horizontal moves to the right to absorb the story of the Emperor Constantine, three hundred years later. In fig. 3 a you see the first of the two scenes, which you should imagine as being paired with the Annunciation. It too has an angelic messenger and another clear allusion to the cross.

RIGHT = FIXME: Dream of Constantine, called 34 a in text above in order not to disturb the numeration [slide missing]

The story of Constantine is narrated in the *Golden Legend*, but is only loosely connected with the wood of the True Cross and its rediscovery. If we ask why Piero included it, and Gaddi left it out, the answer could be in two parts. The first is a question of temperament: Gaddi is the story-teller, Piero the contemplative. The second would reflect the dramatic changes in the balance of power in the Near East in the first half of the fifteenth century. The Turks began their main advance to the West after 1390, and Constantinople would fall in the year 1453, while Piero was at work on these frescos. Successive popes in the fifties and sixties were to proclaim 'crusades'—that is, Holy Wars 'in the Sign of the Cross'—with the aim of driving the infidel from Jerusalem and from the Holy Land. So Piero and his patrons are here indulging in a mixture of wishful thinking and propaganda.

Back to the story (I remind you that three hundred years have elapsed since the previous episode):

> 'At that time an innumerable horde of barbarians under Maxentius was massing on the bank of the Danube, making ready to cross the river, in order to subjugate the entire West. At these tidings, the Emperor Constantine marched forth with his army and camped on the other bank of the Danube. Constantine was filled with fear at the thought of the battle which he had to undertake. But in the night an angel awoke him and told him to lift up his head. And Constantine saw in the heavens the image of a cross described in shining light; and above the image was written in letters of gold the legend: "In this sign you shall conquer".'

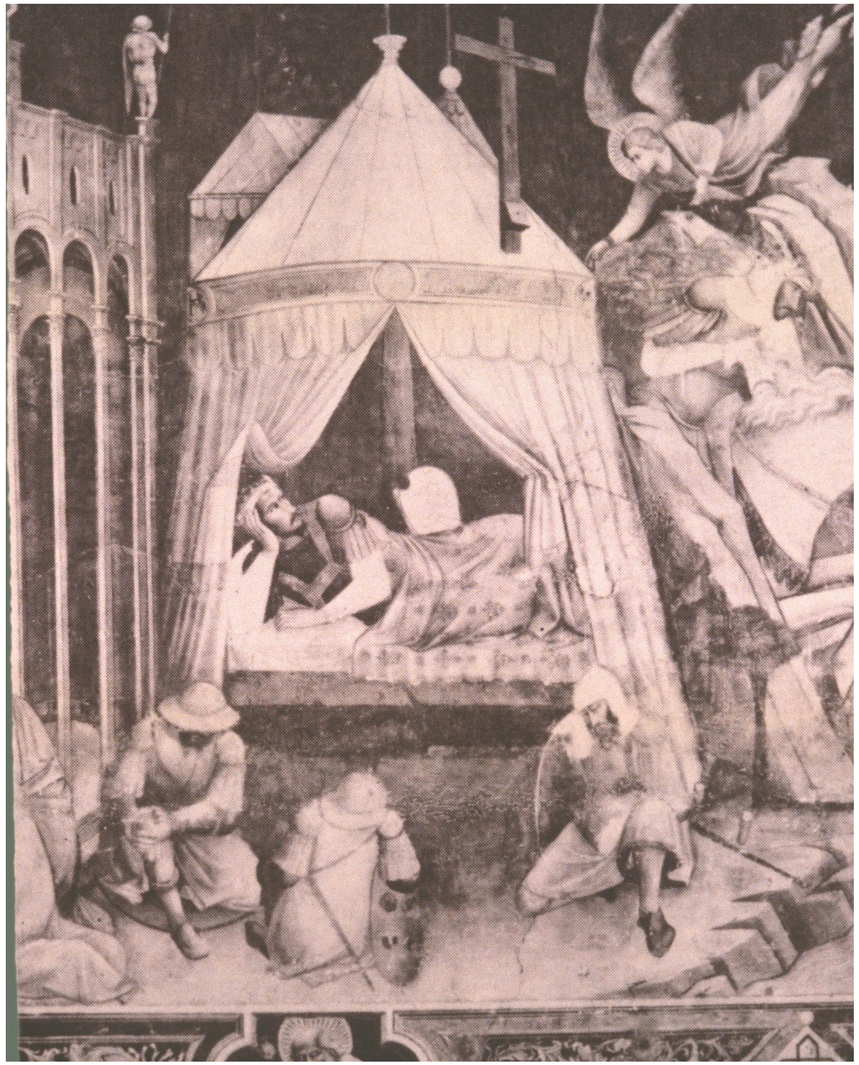

Figure 35: (O_Pi_35) Detail from Agnolo Gaddi's *Dream of Emperor Heraclius*

For many people, Piero's narrow fresco (fig. 34a) is the most memorable scene in the whole cycle, and it comes as rather a surprise to discover that he found inspiration in Gaddi's cycle—Gaddi having adapted the dream in order to make it fit a rather similar episode later in the story. If you look at the detail in fig. 35, you will see that the shape of the pavilion, the opening, the pole, the sleeping emperor, the three soldiers, and the angel in the sky are all there in Florence in 1390. But of course, closer comparison only heightens one's awareness of the transformations that Piero has brought about. Everything and everyone in Piero's fresco is stock still, whether standing, seated, or lying down (whereas Gaddi's emperor is agitated even in sleep). This immobility provides the maximum contrast for the irruption of the angel, who is bathed in supernatural light and so boldly foreshortened as to be almost unrecognisable. It is the angel himself who forms the 'Sign of the Cross in shining light'.

Yet neither the usual stillness and solemnity, nor the downward rush, is as amazing as the suggestion of darkness, unevenly illuminated by celestial light. Vasari was quite ecstatic about this effect even a hundred years later; and no Italian painter had achieved anything remotely comparable before—let alone in the medium of fresco! So look at the play of light over the stretched red canvas of a cone, or in the folds of the brailed up entry; and focus on the light in the detail in fig. 36, as it catches the edge of dark metal, or plays irregularly over the woollen cloth worn by the splendidly calm and youthful aide-de-camp.

Figure 36: (O_Pi_36) Detail from Piero's *Vision of Constantine*

We come next to the consequences of that dream, which are shown immediately to the right, in the lowest scene of the right wall.

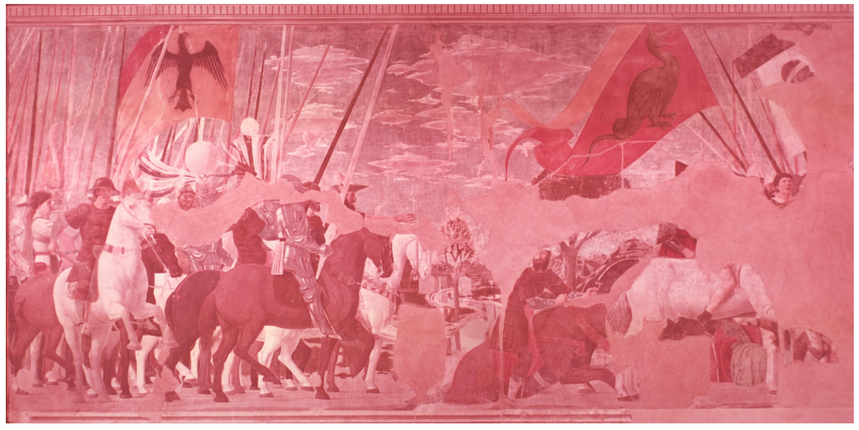

Figure 37: (O_Pi_37) Piero's *Constantine's Victory over Maxentius*

This fresco is almost 25 feet across, and as you can see, damp and chemicals have played havoc much of the surface. Hence it is easier to follow the story if you look at the black-and-white image below, a copy in water-colour done 170 years ago, when the fresco was still more or less intact:

Figure 38: (O_Pi_38) Watercolour copy of Piero's *Constantine's Victory over Maxentius*

The story goes as follows:

'Constantine took heart at the heavenly vision. He had a wooden cross made and he commanded that it be carried in the van of the army.' (Piero makes him carry the cross himself.) 'He then implored God that his hand, armed with the sign of salvation, should not be stained by the blood of Romans who had been conscripted into Maxentius's army. He fell on the enemy, drove them across the Danube, and put them to flight'.

Piero has in effect seized the opportunity to paint the first and last scenes of a three-part 'Battaglia', that is, he shows one army advancing, and the other routed and put to flight; and there are some interesting parallels with Paolo Uccello's famous *Battle of San Romano*, of which fig. 39 shows the last scene (now in the Uffizi) and the first scene (now in the National Gallery, and which is perhaps closer in general effect):

Figure 39: (O_Pi_39) Paolo Uccello's *Niccolò Mauruzi da Tolentino unseats Bernardino della Ciarda at the Battle of San Romano* (above) and* Niccolò Mauruzi da Tolentino at the Battle of San Romano *(below)*

Like Uccello, Piero is having a lot of fun with fluttering heraldic banners, patterns of raised lances, statuesque horses, and men in complex suits of armour (cf. fig. 40a).

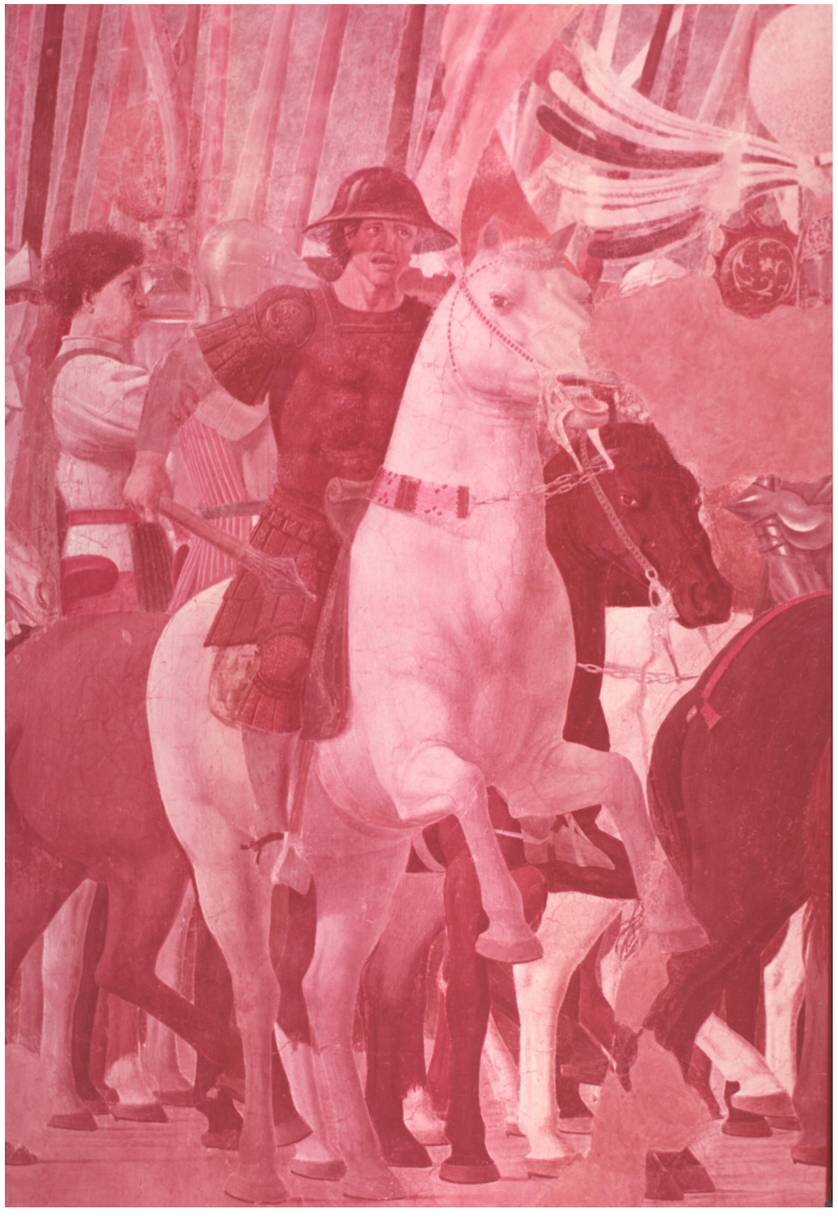

Figure 40: (O_Pi_40) Two details from Piero's *Constantine's Victory over Maxentius*

But the mood is tranquil. No blood is to be shed, and so the most significant detail may be the mighty River Danube (fig. 40b), looking very much like the source of the River Tiber near Borgo San Sepolcro, calmly reflecting the sky, buildings and trees, and patrolled by swans, or white ducks.

Figure 41: (O_Pi_41) Detail from Piero's *Constantine's Victory over Maxentius* (left) and Pisanello's *Portrait Medal of John VIII Palaeologus

Constantine rides forward, serenely confident of a bloodless victory in the Sign of the Cross. His features and his hat (fig. 41) are borrowed from a famous portrait-medal by Pisanello, showing the man who had been emperor of Constantinople in the 1440s—the last but one eastern emperor, as it proved, since his successor was killed when the Turks captured Constantinople, more or less exactly when the fresco was being painted.

After his bloodless victory, Constantine is said to have found out about Christianity, and to have been converted and baptised. The next two scenes in the story concern his mother, St Helena, and how she came to rediscover the True Cross, in whose sign her son had been victorious.

Figure 42: (O_Pi_42) The choir at San Francesco, Arezzo

In fig. 42, I remind you of the whole choir at Arezzo. We have seen Adam, Solomon, the burying, the dream and victory of Constantine; we are now about to change sides and climb again to the middle tier, beginning in the narrow fresco on the altar wall.

Figure 43: (O_Pi_43) Piero's *Torture of the Jew*

fig. 43 shows the results of St Helena's skills as a detective—both in finding people, and then in persuading them to talk. The hatless man is called Judas, and he is the only person in the Jewish community at Jerusalem who knows where the timber of the true cross was buried after the crucifixion. When Helena tracked him down, he refused to part with his secret, because he believed that the rediscovery 'would bring to an end the Kingdom of the Jews'; so Helena had him put into a dry well-shaft, without food, to consider his position. A week has gone by, and Judas has just indicated that he will reveal all; in consequence, he is being hoisted and helped out of the well:

Figure 44: (O_Pi_44) Detail from Piero's *Torture of the Jew*

There is quite a lot one ought to say even about such a simple scene; but from the point of view of the story, one must only remember Judas's brown coat; and from the point of view of the whole design, one should note the diagonals of the huge wooden tripod, which help this scene—letter G on the diagram in fig. 15—to balance and to rhyme with its partner, which was dominated by the diagonal of the beam being lowered into a narrow hole.

We must look for similar rhymes or echoes as we move sideways to fig. 45 (this is the large fresco marked with a letter H in fig. 15, which is of course directly opposite letter B, the scene with the Queen of Sheba).

Figure 45: (O_Pi_45) Piero's *Finding and Recognition of the True Cross*

Like its partner, it is about 25 feet wide, and it is divided by architecture into two scenes. On the left, in the part nearest the nave, a queen is again seen in profile, standing, with head bowed; and in the part nearest the altar wall, the same queen kneels in profile to adore the wood of the cross. It is directly opposite the scene you saw in fig. 23, and the features of the two queens are virtually identical. Gaddi, for his part, had combined the same two episodes in one fresco at the bottom of his right-hand wall:

Figure 46: (O_Pi_46) Agnolo Gaddi's *Retrieval and Trial of the Three Crosses*

Let us make ourselves perfectly familiar with the two distinct moments in the story. According to the *Golden Legend*, Judas led them to a place 'near a Temple of Venus, which had been raised by the Emperor Hadrian, so that whoever should come to adore Christ would appear to adore Venus at the same time. And for this reason Christians had ceased to visit the place. But Helena had the temple torn down, whereupon Judas himself started to dig into the earth, and twenty foot beneath the surface he found three crosses, which he at once caused to be carried to the Queen'.

Gaddi (fig. 46, on the right) shows us just the first of the crosses, and he places his tightly packed, overlapping figures to the left and the right of three workmen in the pit.

Figure 47: (O_Pi_47) Detail from Piero's *Finding and Recognition of the True Cross*

Piero (fig. 47) spaces his figures most beautifully, with the heads of the main figures all at the same height; *except*, of course—and the exceptions are all motivated in different ways—the labourer who is stooping, the dwarf, and the labourer in the pit (whom the low viewing point cuts off at the waist).

The main figures are Queen Helena, with her calm-faced officer; a labourer heaving out the second cross; Judas in his brown coat (alas, now without his head), directing operations and supporting the first cross; and two other labourers, in repose, on either side of him—one with his mattock over his shoulder, the other leaning on his shovel, with an expression that was much admired by Vasari (cf. detail in fig. 48).

Figure 48: (O_Pi_48) Detail from Piero's *Finding and Recognition of the True Cross*

We move on to the miracle presented in the other half of the fresco, both in Arezzo and Florence. fig. 49 shows you the two relevant details (and for once, you can see Gaddi in colour):

Figure 49: (O_Pi_49) Details from Piero's *Finding and Recognition of the True Cross* (left) and Agnolo Gaddi's *Retrieval and Trial of the Three Crosses* (right)

The story goes like this:

'It remained only to distinguish the cross to which Christ had been nailed from those of the thieves. All three were set up in an open space; and Judas, seeing the corpse of a young man being born to the two, halted the cortège, and laid first one, then another of the crosses over the body. But the corpse did not move. Then Judas laid the third cross upon it; and instantly the dead man came to life.'

One must never neglect the architecture in Piero. So look at the modern street scene shown in steep recession on the extreme right, and notice the half-concealed marble cupola and lantern at the very top (both probably inspired by Brunelleschi's cupola and lantern for the cathedral in Florence). Then focus on the geometrical façade of the temple in classical style (or rather, in the style of Leo Battista Alberti) which once again is a technical tour-de-force, because it is seen from very low down, and is not quite fully frontal.

Next let your eye come down to the three male bystanders on the right, whose headgear reminds you that we are in the East; and follow their gaze to the miracle, with its incredibly difficult exercise in the foreshortening of the cross, coming out towards us over the resuscitated youth (cf. detail in fig. 50a). Finally, enjoy the truly 'Pierian' moment of adoration (fig. 50b), where the heads of Helena and her companions, echo those of Sheba and her ladies on the opposite wall.

Figure 50: (O_Pi_50) Two details from Piero's *Finding and Recognition of the True Cross*

That is the end of the story of the Invention—that is 'Finding'—of the True Cross.

The final scenes in the two cycles are taken from the legend relating to the Feast of the *Exaltation* of the Cross, which fell on September 14.

Figure 51: (O_Pi_51) Gaddi's *Helena Returns the Cross to the People*

In Florence, Gaddi had devoted the whole of his second wall to episodes from these further adventures of the True Cross, beginning at the top, in the left lunette (fig. 51), in which Helena (with a halo surrounding her elegant, eastern hat) returns the cross to its rightful place in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, while the inhabitations (FIXME ??) kneel in adoration.

We need not dwell on this, nor on the second scene (fig. 52), which takes place three hundred years later, in 615, when the King of the Persians, Chosroës, who has conquered the Middle-East, comes to Jerusalem and to the Holy Sepulchre, and steals some pieces of the cross, before being driven away in terror:

Figure 52: (O_Pi_52) Gaddi's *[title needed]*

You may be able to make out four horsemen galloping out of the city gate, one of whom is carrying a large chunk of wood on his shoulder, while the old infantry man with a scimitar in the foreground has another large piece of the cross tucked under his arm. Neither of these episodes is to be found in Piero.

Gaddi's third fresco, however, deals with an episode that we also find at Arezzo, where it appears as the lower of the long frescos on the left wall. In fig. 53, you can see details of the crucial moment in the story, as interpreted by each artist.

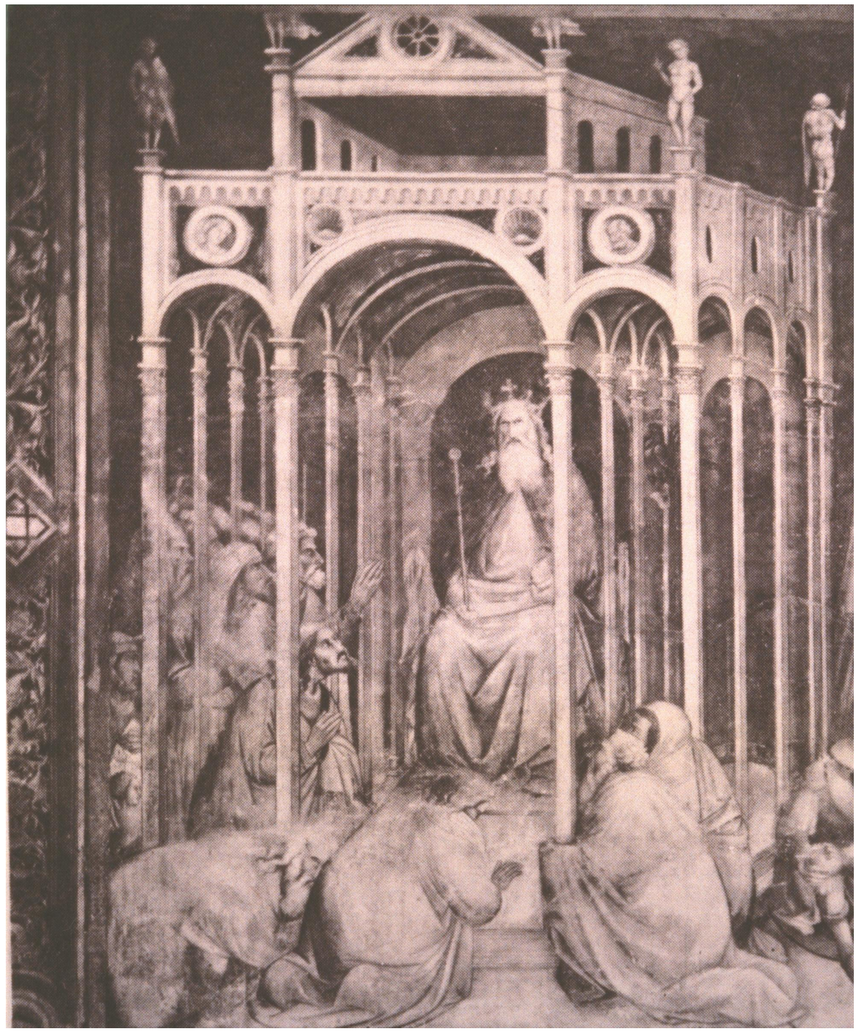

Figure 53: (O_Pi_53) Details from Agnolo Gaddi's *Worshiping of Chosroës* (left) and Piero's *Battle Between Heraclius and Chosroës* (right)

The story concerns the mad delusion that came to afflict King Chosroës (as it seems to afflict so many absolute rulers): he wanted his subjects to adore him as God. Quoting from the *Golden Legend* again:

'He built a tower of gold and silver studded with shining gems, and placed upon it the images of the sun and the moon and the stars. Then, handing over his kingdom to his son, the profane king seated himself in this temple, demanding that all salute him as God. Seating himself upon the throne as the Father, he set the wood of the cross at his right side, in the Son's stead and a cock at his left as the Holy Ghost, and commanded that he be called God the Father'.

Piero shows the throne empty; but you can clearly see the cockerel and the wood of the cross on his right.

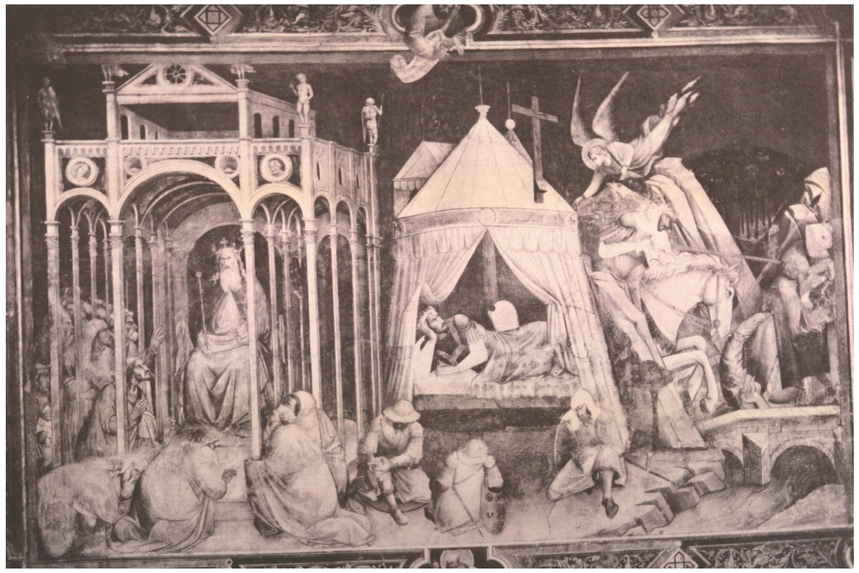

Figure 54: (O_Pi_54) Agnolo Gaddi's *Worshipping of Chosroës / Dream of Emperor Heraclius / Heraclius's Combat with Chosroës's Son*

fig. 54 gives you the chance to see the whole of Gaddi's fresco, and you will recognise in its centre the scene which helped to inspire Piero for his *Dream of Constantine*. This represents the Emperor Heraclius, who is being urged by an angel in his dream to attack Chosroës and to avenge this blasphemy.

In the scene on the right of Gaddi's fresco, barely visible, you may be able to make out a tiny bridge over the River Danube, where Heraclius, in white armour on a white horse, is unseating his dark opponent, who is the *son* of King Chosroës (the two armies having agreed, in the best traditions of epic poetry, that the dispute should be settled by single combat between the leaders).

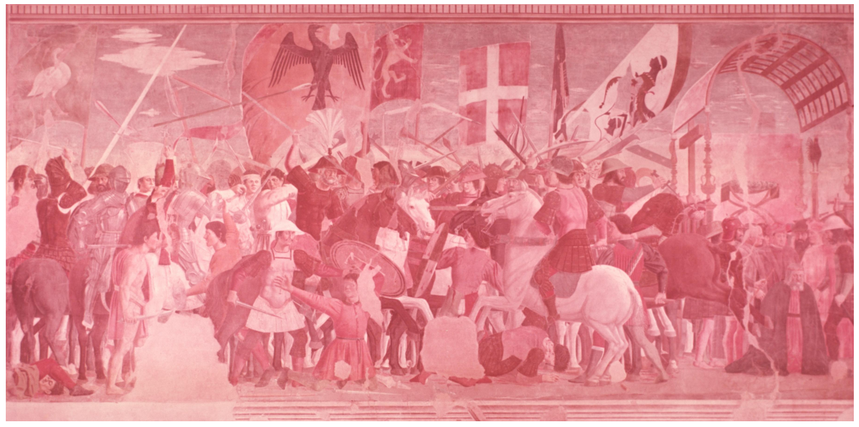

Figure 55: (O_Pi_55) Piero's *Battle Between Heraclius and Chosroës*

Piero, by contrast, refused to be tied closely to the letter of the *Golden Legend*. He had a large space to fill, which he wanted in some way to rhyme with the bloodless Victory of Constantine at the same height on the opposite wall; and he chose to present a full-scale *Battaglia* in close-up, like a battle scene on a Roman sarcophagus. Nevertheless, he knew the story; and the text of the *Golden Legend* enables us to identify the man on the white charger as the son of Chosroës, and the man on the dark horse in dark armour as the emperor, Heraclius.

Figure 56: (O_Pi_56) Two details from Piero's *Battle Between Heraclius and Chosroës*

Take a moment to enjoy the heraldry of the banners, with the swarthy maiden toppling over before the Roman eagle, the Tuscan lion, and the Holy Cross; and to focus on the detail in fig. 57 of the soldier behind Heraclius, whose sleeve and jerkin are one of the supreme examples of Piero's power to suggest the role of light as a modeller of forms:

Figure 57: (O_Pi_57) Detail from Piero's *Battle Between Heraclius and Chosroës*

There is a great deal of Piero's art, too, in the detail of the trumpeter in fig. 58, with his puffing cheeks under the chef's hat, alongside the head of a knight who is totally enclosed in his helmet.

Figure 58: (O_Pi_58) Detail from Piero's *Battle Between Heraclius and Chosroës*

The last part of the story (fig. 59) on the right of the fresco, in front of Chosroës temple or tower, shows the mad old king about to have his head cut off after having refused to be baptised (as always, the headgear and inscrutable faces of the bystanders are not to be ignored):

Figure 59: (O_Pi_59) Detail from Piero's *Battle Between Heraclius and Chosroës*

We see the very next moment in the story in Gaddi's last fresco in Santa Croce (fig. 60), where the executioner is sheathing his sword, having done the deed:

Figure 60: (O_Pi_60) Agnolo Gaddi's *Emperor Heraclius Beheads Chosroës and Enters Jerusalem with the True Cross*

The upper section and the whole of the right half of Gaddi's fresco (above and to the right of the diagonal line of rocks), illustrates the end of the legend of the *Exaltation of the Cross*—the same scene that Piero placed in the lunette at the top of his left-hand wall:

Figure 61: (O_Pi_61) Piero's *Exaltation of the Cross*

Once again, you will probably find it easier to follow the story in Gaddi's version.

'Heraclius carried the Holy Cross back to Jerusalem. He descended the Mount of Olives, riding on his royal charger and arrayed in imperial splendour and was about to re-enter by the gate through which Christ had gone to his Passion, when, suddenly, the stones of the gate fell down and formed an unbroken wall against him. Then, to the astonishment of all, an Angel of the Lord appeared over the gate, holding a cross in his hands, and said: "When the King of Heaven, coming to his Passion, entered in by this gate, he came not in royal state but riding on a lowly ass. And thus he left an example of humility to his worshippers". Then the King burst into tears, took off his shoes, and stripped himself to his shirt, took up the Cross of the Lord and humbly carried it to the gate. Instantly, the hardness of the stones felt the power of God go through them, and the gate lifted itself aloft, and left free passage to those who sought to enter'.

Gaddi, as always, is the faithful story-teller or illustrator. If the tale requires two scenes to make its point, he gives you two scenes. Hence he shows the same gate twice: in the centre, beneath the angel, where it is still bricked up; and on the right, where you can see the miraculous aperture. Piero's instinct, by contrast, leads him to concentrate exclusively on the climax of the story; and he 'exalts' the cross (carried as it would be in a contemporary religious procession) at the very top of the wall, letting it rise up into the lunette, to answer the towering tree in the lunette on the opposite wall (cf. fig. 17b above), the tree which would provide the wood for the cross.

Figure 62: (O_Pi_62) Detail from Piero's *Exaltation of the Cross*

We can see the high Greek hats and a bishop's mitre among the emperor's followers standing on the left, and we can see the citizens of Jerusalem kneeling on the right, but, by an irony of fate, damp has attacked and almost obliterated the figure of the Emperor himself in the centre, and so we have to take his shirt and his air of penitence and humility on trust. But perhaps this very accident confirms the relevance of the opening words of Pinocchio with which I began: 'Once upon a time there was…a King…No, you're wrong, once upon a time there was a piece of wood': 'C'era una volta un pezzo di legno'.