

SAGGIO

The politics of domesticating the Eternal: the roadside shrines of Sicily

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Abstract

This contribution proposes a new interpretation of roadside shrines located in city streets, refusing to place them in the category of the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, who had politicised devotion, distinguishing that exercised by the bourgeoisie from that of the vulgar. The study focuses on roadside shrines set up along certain alleys in Sicily. The reflection undertaken is indispensable for tracing the origin of those ritual behaviours, which are not only individual but also communitarian, with a shift in the paradigm of the social drama of ritual from structure to processes, emphasising how simple rustic altars are windows onto an inner world that opens up in society, going far beyond institutions and politics.

Palabras clave:

roadside shrines; ritual; Sicily; *feste*; Christian tradition

Roadside shrines of saints and other heavenly personalities punctuate the streets of Sicily's and the *mezzogiorno*'s villages and mountaintop hamlets. Anchored and vigilant in their glass-sheltered niches, just above pedestrian eye-level, these effigies are daily graced with fresh flowers and *ex-votos* and nocturnally illuminated by votive candles. They stand sentinel in their hallowed vestibules, guarding their neighborhood communities.



Fig. 1. Exterior View of edicola votiva on via Peralta, Scicli, Province of Ragusa, Sicily

These wayside spaces — quasi-domestic, interiorized, elegiac, and embellished with homespun offerings — invite the daily passer-by to visit and venerate, to slip into another sheltered temporal realm, for a minute or two during his/her busy public day.

Since the late medieval period, many wayside shrines have also become the rallying point for serenade and prayer during saints' celebrations or *feste*. During the *feste*, effigies descend from their homes to become the *dramatis personae* in the continually re-enacted sacred drama of village processions. These *edicole votive* project, literally and figuratively, from the liminal street

facades they inhabit, from home to community, linking temporal and spiritual relationships. They establish a politics of continuing sacred interaction from the pedestrian to the sacred, from the everyday to the eternal, in an intimate politics of renewal, resurrection, and commemoration.



Fig. 2. *Edicola votiva with the Holy Family, in Enna (town center), Sicily. Detail of interior at right.*

But how do we categorize or approach the study of these small, popular, intimate sanctuaries within the traditional, strict discipline of art's history or even more broadly within the cross-disciplinary study of art, religion, and anthropology? Just as these shrines cross temporal and spiritual boundaries in their material essence, their study fits not-so-neatly within traditional disciplines, categorizations, methodologies, and politics. In my focus on the roadside shrines of Sicily, this work serves, along with recent initiatives, to debunk the still-lingering eighteenth-century, two-tiered academic model, crystallized by the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume in his *Natural History of Religion* (1757), which drew sharp distinctions between the religious experience of the elite social classes and the vulgar poor and other marginalized groups, such as women. The religious experience of the vulgar poor and women was relegated to the realm of popular superstition; the elite faithful was considered more enlightened, more refined, more pure of mind and heart—as were their artistic

manifestations. The popular, untransformed residue of religious belief, it was figured, failed to be something else—a model very like the Roman separation between *religio* and *superstitio*. The roadside shrines or *edicole votive* of Sicily partake essentially of this popular underbelly of religion and art and lurk on the margins of elite spirituality. They have been ignored, for the most part, by most American art historians; Italian scholars have worked on these shrines in taxonomic and somewhat theoretical regional studies, within the last generation, in an attempt to catalogue their many types and manifestations. There are very few studies which try to link these popular shrines to liturgical events or church ceremonies.

Our Bari *Convegno*¹ prompts this very question of political categorization: is all art history, criticism, and ordering of artifacts political? That is, how do our understandings of religion and religious art, partake of this political bias toward organized religion with its high art, which relegates these shrines, these popular expressions of belief, hope, and transcendence, to the category of minor, superstitious, and popular low art? Indeed, most political regimes—the Catholic Church included—use the arts as propaganda, consciously deploying images and monuments to endeavor to shape the consciousness of their populations—sometimes in a repressive or authoritarian manner. Political power and discourse have shaped the discipline of art history, and the art that ‘survives’ from eras past is whatever the authorities deemed important enough to be recorded. Our histories of art are, by and large, the histories of monuments and works of art compatible within certain systems of belief.

These small roadside shrines are, however, subversive and unruly in their popular origins, their materiality, and their spiritual potential; they defy our traditional academic categories. Along with the *feste* or religious festivals with which so many are associated, these popular shrines stand outside the political and intellectual parameters of that discourse, representing a corruption or misappropriation of authorized teaching and ritual, inconsequential curiosities, irrelevant to the main developments in religious and artistic history.

¹ *Arts and Politics International Conference. Rhetorical Quests in Cultural Imaging*, Bari, 4-6 November 2015.

These *edicole votive* remain sealed off from the dominant art historical discourse by their designation as popular, profane, and superstitious.

How then are we to think about the social and cultural place of devotionism, our direct engagement with sacred figures amid the quotidian circumstances of life—outside the politically guarded walls of the Church? These shrines and the *feste* in which they participate, are deemed theologically incoherent, ambiguous mixtures of the sacred and the profane. As well, what do we do with the many different community practices that surround a popular religious event—neighborly socializing, fairs, the placing of flowers, photos, food, or other domestic objects within these *edicole*, popular processions to and from them, popular songs sung to the saint within the *edicole*, often in dialect. In Figure 3, we see a different sort of *edicola votiva* in Cefalù, Sicily, adorned with vases and baskets with flowers, regularly refreshed and placed in front of this life-size wooden ‘Man of Sorrows’ statue, descended and paraded through the streets in a distinct ceremonial pathway during the festivities of Holy Week, preceding Easter.



Fig. 3. Edicola votiva with life-size wooden statue of the crowned Christ, enchainé at the column, and wearing a votive medal in Cefalù, Sicily. Detail of Christ and ex voto medal, at right.

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Are rustic, ordinary shrines such as this one to be included within scholarly definitions of religion and religious art, which are implicated in much broader social, political, and cultural agendas? This question inevitably entails what we are willing to tolerate as religion and religious art, what we find intolerable, what boundaries we insist upon—between persons, between the living and the dead, between the past and the present. What boundary transgressions frighten us? Which behaviors are socially acceptable, and which offend us. Which religious postures do we sanction and which do we condemn? These *feste* throughout Italy have been orchestrated since the late medieval period and are still continually manifest. In Sicily, there is hardly a week when a saint is not commemorated, brought back to life and paraded throughout the many villages and towns of this southern Italian island.

Temporality is at the very essence of the roadside shrines I examine. Like the tomb or grave, to which they are often structurally related, these *loca sanctorum* harbor a presence, the memory of a departed saint—very like saints’ graves or tombs, where, in Peter Brown’s words, heaven and earth meet and are joined. In Figure 4, an *edicola votiva* in Palermo (at left), one can witness how these shrines, are most often structurally similar to grave monuments (at left), with their pedimented and glass-enclosed shrine areas, continually-refreshed floral arrangements, and small votive candles, often electrified. Both monuments recall and commemorate a lost soul. They are holy because they make available to the

visiting faithful on earth, a measure of the power and mercy in which the departed may be partaking in his/her eternal resting place.



Fig. 4. At left, edicola votiva of Our Lady in the San Isidro District, outside Palermo, located just above eye level, on the street. At right, cemetery gravesite near Xalapa, Veracruz, prepared for 'Days of the Dead' celebrations.

In this grisaille analysis of this complex set of popular monuments, we will examine just a few of the many shrine types of the hundreds I have studied and photographed throughout Sicily². One of the more rustic of roadside shrines is a small *edicola* devoted to Saint Rita, located along the side of *Strada Statale* 118, on the exit road leading from Piana degli Albanesi toward Altaforte, near Palermo [Figures 5 and 6].

² This paper forms part of a larger study the author is planning to publish in book form, devoted to the *edicole votive* of Sicily.

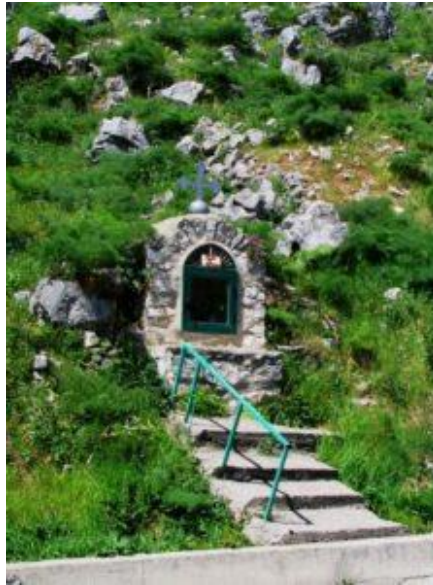


Fig. 5. Edicola votiva of Santa Rita, on exit road (SS 118) from Piana degli Albanesi toward Altaforte, Sicily.



Fig. 6. Detail of edicola votiva of Saint Rita, on SS 118, leading from Piana degli Albanesi toward Altaforte, Sicily.

This hillside shrine is approached from a railed set of four stairs, just beyond the road's shallow drainage area. When you arrive at the top step and peer in through the green glass hinged window or door, you find a well-tended, motley group of ordinary objects. The small effigy of Saint Rita, perched on a stone slab against the back wall of the shrine, is regularly graced with fresh flowers and potted plants and is nocturnally illuminated by red-glass votive candles. This wayside space, quasi-domestic, interiorized, and embellished with homespun offerings, invites the daily passer-by to slip into another sheltered temporal realm for a minute or two. 'Viva Santa Rita', signals the tin sign attached to the fanlight

window—as if she were still there. Rita, the saint of Cascia, married an abusive man at age 14, became a mother, was widowed, was eventually accepted into an Augustinian convent, and is annually commemorated on the day of her death, 22 May (1447). She is associated with roses because the loaves of bread she hid under her robe to distribute to the local hungry, against her husband's wishes, turned to roses when he questioned her and ripped off her clothing searching for evidence of her 'transgression'. She was canonized by Pope Leo XIII on 24 May, 1900, but has undoubtedly been commemorated and honored since long before then. Devoted to the suffering Christ, Saint Rita is remembered as meditating on the Cross, a thorn of which is said to have fallen and pierced Rita's forehead, leaving a wound which bled for 15 years before her death. Because of her inordinate suffering, St. Rita has become the patron saint of impossible causes, incurable illnesses, abusive relationships, and in Sicily, the saint to whom men should pray regarding sexual impotence. En route, many Sicilians stop here to venerate and share their private woes with Rita, who understands through experience, their impossible plights.

This small portal into the eternal is a node of safety, grace, and regeneration. It only takes a few minutes to venerate St. Rita and refresh oneself, like stopping at a roadside fruit stand for an apple. Visiting locals regularly provide Santa Rita with offerings of her legendary roses, light her votive candles, and place photos of their dear and departed at this highland shrine, beseeching her for help, comfort, and hope. She intervenes and alleviates troubles for the itinerant passer-by, motorist, or cyclist.

The styles, sizes, and locations of these shrines are various. The *edicole votive* in Figures 7 and 8, although attached to private apartments in Catania and Agrigento respectively, strike different chords and respond to different needs.



Fig. 7. Edicola votiva with Mary and Child, off via Lungomare, Catania, Sicily.

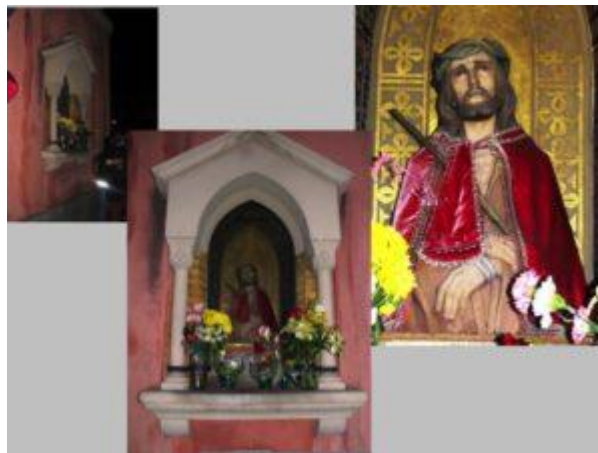


Fig. 8. Three views of edicola votiva with Man of Sorrows, in city center Agrigento, Sicily.

In the Catanese example in Figure 7, the very loved and venerated Mother Mary and Child Jesus, are harbored in a small windowed shrine with a decorative wrought-iron fanlight, set within the second story, high above the street level. The painted iconic pair is sheltered by white curtains, which are drawn and opened for view and veneration. This moveable curtain draws us in as well as keeps us out, according to the apartment occupant's wishes. It is baroque and theatrical, providing a liminal barrier or invitation into this warm, lighted domestic space.

Usually depicted naked above the waist with his wounds exposed, the 'Man of Sorrows' in this Agrigentine statue in Figure 8 has his shoulders and upper torso draped in a scarlet faux-velvet fringed robe. Crowned with thorns, hands bound, and heart transfixing with a sword, he gazes dolefully heavenward

with his head slightly slumped to his right. His open eyes which link the pious viewer to him visually and spiritually, assure us and fill us with hope that while dreadfully suffering, the Man of Sorrows is still alive among us. A slot beckoning offering is set below him, as is seen in Figure 9.



Fig. 9. Edicola votiva with Man of Sorrows, Agrigento, Sicily.

He is honored with fresh carnations, chrysanthemums, and other flowers, on this snowy evening in early February, during Agrigento's annual folkloric *Sagra del mandorlo in Fiori*, the Almond Blossom Festival, celebrating the first almond blossoms of the season. Descendant from its Byzantine iconic prototype, the image of the *vir dolorum* became a popular devotional image in the West in the later Middle Ages. This figure of the aggrieved and humiliated Christ, moments before his ignominious death, reminds the faithful visitor of his suffering for our transgressions and our redemption through his pain. Surely we can offer something to him in our daily peregrinations by the way of this shrine of popular access. *Ecce Homo* visits Agrigento; *Ecce Homo* lives in Agrigento; *Ecce Homo* is our neighbor. We are taking part in his suffering with our prayer, our daily visit, our contemplation, and our devotion at this wayside shrine.

Many roadside shrines border on the kitschy; fewer others are large, spacious, freestanding, and nearly chapel-like, usually marking major crossroads

or highways, such as that in Figure 10, on the road into Piana degli Albanesi, southwest of Palermo. It invites the motorist to park, pray, offer roadside flowers, pay tribute, and ask for solace and protection en route. This more ambitious domed *edicola votiva* has an altar for the celebration of mass during pilgrimage or *fiesta*. It is a modest outdoor chapel of sorts, with windowed doors on three sides, allowing full entrance by the devoted caretaker and priestly celebrant.



Fig. 10. Freestanding edicola votiva, outside of Piana degli Albanesi, near Palermo, Sicily.

In the capital city of Palermo, second in noise level only to Catania, in all of Europe, many different types of roadside shrines offer quiet reflection. This Palermitan *edicola*, sheltering a painted image of Mother Mary and the Child Jesus in Figure 11 looms high above the eye- or street-level of the average Palermitan. Others, however, are more accessible and integral to the gaze and contemplation of the local resident or passing tourist.



Fig. 11. Edicola votiva with Mother and Child on vicola San Nicolo degli Scalzi in Palermo, Sicily.

On via Maqueda in Palermo, a major street in the middle of a shopping district, there are two *edicole* flanking a central monumental round-arched portal, as seen in Figure 12.



Fig. 12. Two edicole votive with Man of Sorrows, at left and Maria Addolorata, at right, on via Maqueda in downtown Palermo, Sicily.

At left, a red-robed Man of Sorrows statue is sheltered. At right in Figure 13, in a photo taken on the following day, his counterpart, the equally-decorated and robed Mother of Sorrows or *Maria Addolorata*, has been honored with fresh roses in a trimmed-down plastic water bottle, perched on the wrought-iron gate of its glass enclosure, which has tiny scrolled prayers folded into the interstices of the grill.



Fig. 13. Detail of Figure 12, Maria Addolorata shrine on via Maqueda, Palermo, Sicily.

These two statues beckon, inviting the daily and average passer-by to slip into another sheltered temporal realm for a minute or two, to leave a flower in the water for Mary, and to take a prayer card from among the many which are tucked within the gate. In Figure 14, you see a devotee pause for a prayerful interlude, amidst the hustle-bustle of the street, after she has taken a prayer slip from the grill of the *edicola*. I watched her read the prayer, send up her wishes, and return the prayer to the grill, before she departed to resume her daily routine.



Fig. 14. Two edicole votive with Man of Sorrows, at left and Maria Addolorata, at right, on via Maqueda in downtown Palermo, Sicily.

From at least the early modern period through today, many wayside shrines also become the rallying point or stations for serenading and prayer during saints' celebrations. This wooden 'Christ at the Column' in Figure 3 descends—as do other effigies—from his *edicola* home to become the main character of the village processions during the sacred drama of Holy Week *feste*. Specially dressed and accoutered for these events—much like their neighbors within local churches—this 'Ecce Homo', necklaced with a silver *ex voto*, 'awakens' to participate in community feasts. The social space of this *edicola* is multivalent, functioning some of the time as a meditative or sacred center, but also, as a social rallying point for confraternities and other groups. During these holy performances, the townspeople will sing dirges to him, lower him onto a bier, follow his march throughout the town, transforming the streets of Cefalù into the sacred *via crucis* of Jerusalem, merging geographies and collapsing temporalities.

Like the tomb or grave to which they are essentially, psychologically, and anthropologically related, these *loca sanctorum* harbor the memory presence of a sacred departed. Just as at the martyrs' graves, heaven and earth are joined at these shrines, the temporal homes for souls separated from their bodies at death. Like the saints tombs of early Christianity, they become nodes of power and centers of community ritual. They are decorated with popular, inexpensive, lustrous objects—not the candelabra, mosaics, and gilded roofs of martyria but rustic, everyday substitutes: neon lights or dime-store candles, plastic flowers in water bottles, holy cards, *ex votos*, domestic textiles, rosaries, necklaces and crosses around the necks of plaster or resin figurines of saints. They are domestic, pedestrian, shared spaces of epiphany and interaction—prayer phone booths or cyberstations—where local residents communicate with their holy guardians, ask for protection and favors, pray for holy intercession. They are black holes in the daily route from home to shopping to work and back, black holes which connect us to their heavenly source. Their temporal mode is not the traditional western linear progression from past to present to future, but rather a warp in time, a puncturing through layers, toward the eternal. They bend the real time of the city street and rural route back into spiritual time, in a reflexive process. The time inside of the *edicole* space is static, rupturing the flow of real

world time, and their presence in the streets changes the nature of real time in the outside world. They create circular relationships between cause and effect. They reinforce the sacredness of the urban or village landscape and its agricultural products.

They reveal Sicily's self-constructed, privileged place in salvation history, woven of Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Norman, and Spanish threads. The place, behavior, timing, and ritual panoply of *feste* show how sacred spaces of the church, street, and home, and ordered behavior of procession, sacrifice, food, and revelry take place within sacred time. All of these rustic monuments are active components of the material culture of holiness and mark and map Sicily's sanctity. These *loca sanctorum* have culturally, ritually, and materially footprinted the sacred spaces in which cosmic order is continually reestablished through communal church and folk ritual. These very authentic rituals are not invented traditions, but rather they exist, as it were, within the frame or on the margin of modernity, postmodernity, and globalization. Roadside shrine placement, for example, and their patterns of liminal location, link communities with the saints, the seasons, and the yearly labors, in sacred time through carefully designed processual walkways around them.

Victor Turner in his *Anthropology of Performance* (1983) has conceived fundamental theories of performative ritual. Turner establishes the ideals of liminality and threshold as concepts integral to ritual—ritual as relating social drama to aesthetic drama, and ritual as restoring behavior and linking the performative to social and ethical community structure. Turner's approach, based on his concept of social drama reflects a shift in paradigm from a focus on the structure to the processes of cultural performances, subsuming language and other non-verbal communications into ritual conduct. Far from having been 'museum-ed' as have many post-Renaissance western artistic traditions, *edicole votive* and their aesthetic panoply may now be conceived of as processual and present. They demand an investigation that accounts for the "magic mirror" Turner claims these cultural performances hold up to nature, reflecting texture, style, and given meaning within their Sicilian communities.

Western history, as it has been written from the Derridian ‘center’, has politically marginalized Sicily, due in great part, to its cultural diversity. For the last two centuries, its language and reputation for lawlessness and political corruption have rendered Sicily hard to explore physically and thus to understand. Sicily’s roadside shrines offer us a field of popular but sacred spaces, alternative to the powerful and higher-ranked sacred space of church or chapel. They are, in the words of Michel Foucault, heterotopias, or real spaces—as opposed to utopias or sites with no real space/place; they are, as Foucault has formulated ‘countersites’, presenting us with privileged, forbidden, or perfect spaces that turn reality upside down. These heterotopic *edicole votive* begin to function at full capacity when people arrive at breaks with traditional time, such as in religious or folk ritual. Entrance to these spaces requires rites of permission, gesture, pause, and purification, all witnessed in the varied ritual celebrations at these sites.

I would argue that these small, personal, sacred spaces are powerful, at the very intersection of inner experience and the outer world, completely enmeshed in the structures of Sicilian culture and devotionism. Power circulates through them in a vital, popular, musky way. The power they harness is not institutional or hierarchical but rather popular—that power which helps us understand who we are and how we are good, in relationship to one another. As a Sicilian lives through religious idioms, he/she prays in a distinct language, focusing on certain ideas, arranging his/her body in the ways prescribed by her/his traditions—bending low to pray, crossing oneself, offering flowers, installing prayer petitions within niches, serenading effigies living in these sacred places. All of these behaviors and expectations—especially at the popular and pedestrian level—help us realize the power of transcendence, the power of good over evil.

The roadside shrines of Sicily, tremendously over-determined by repetitive community care, reflect each individual’s importance in the world. They are not accompanied by any grand, mechanized paraphernalia such as waterfalls or eternal flames. Their power is in their simplicity, their spontaneity, their essential privacy, their innocence, their naiveté. They contain and witness to everyday life and experience with relics and personal scraps of an individual’s past life, while

connecting with a strong chain of transcendent power. In their simplicity and individuality, they are poignantly elegiac and uplifting to those who contemplate them.

Illustrations

Figure 1: Exterior View of *edicola votiva* on via Peralta, Scicli, Province of Ragusa, Sicily.

Figure 2: *Edicola votiva* with the Holy Family, in Enna (town center), Sicily. Detail of interior at right.

Figure 3: *Edicola votiva* with life-size wooden statue of the crowned Christ, enchained at the column, and wearing a votive medal in Cefalù, Sicily. Detail of Christ and *ex voto* medal, at right.

Figure 4: At left, *edicola votiva* of Our Lady in the San Isidro District, outside Palermo, located just above eye level, on the street. At right, cemetery gravesite near Xalapa, Veracruz, prepared for “Days of the Dead” celebrations.

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Figure 10: Freestanding *edicola votiva*, outside of Piana degli Albanesi, near Palermo, Sicily.

Figure 11: *Edicola votiva* with Mother and Child on vicola San Nicolo degli Scalzi in Palermo, Sicily.

Figure 12: Two *edicole votive* with Man of Sorrows, at left and *Maria Addolorata*, at right, on via Maqueda in downtown Palermo, Sicily.

Figure 13: Detail of Figure 12, *Maria Addolorata* shrine on via Maqueda, Palermo, Sicily.

Figure 14: Two *edicole votive* with Man of Sorrows, at left and *Maria Addolorata*, at right, on via Maqueda in downtown Palermo, Sicily

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