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# Horses on a Sacred Journey: Scicli's 'Cavalcata di San Giuseppe'

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**Abstract**

The feast of the father is celebrated every year throughout Sicily on the *onomastico* or namesake of St. Joseph, beloved of Italy, on 19 March. In the small village of Scicli, situated on a vast plain in southeast Sicily's *Provincia di Ragusa*, a splendid and spectacular cavalcade marks and memorialises St. Joseph's Day, conjoined with the feast of the 'Flight into Egypt.' To unravel and understand the intricate ritual, cultural, and religious layers of this blended festival, we will examine the structure and dramaturgy of this cavalcade, with specific attention to the role of these holy beasts as they are ritually transformed into agents of the sacred drama of protection and flight. The horses are caparisoned with saddlecloths woven of thousands of flowers, tintinnabulating belled necklaces, and elaborate and regal feathered headdresses of about 4 feet high—all hand-made weeks before by the townspeople. Their sumptuous regalia mark them as the *dramatis personae* of this complex and ostentatious ceremony. This essay will illuminate the steps in this ritual parade and some of the long historical relationships between man and beast in Sicily's quasi-liturgical ceremonies.

**Palabras clave:** Scicli, Sicily, *Cavalcata*, *festa*, St. Joseph

> The objective personality of the supreme being situates it in the world next to other personal beings … like it, but from which it is distinct. Men, animals (read horses), plants, heavenly bodies, meteors. … If these are simultaneously things and intimate beings, they can be envisaged next to a supreme being of this type. … By definition, the supreme being has the highest rank. But all are of the same kind, in which immanence and personality are mingled; all can be divine and endowed with an operative power; all can speak human language. Thus, in spite of everything, they line up on a plane of equality (Bataille, 1989, p. 34).

What do the smiling and confident prancing steeds embroidered on the Bayeux tapestry's scenes of the Norman King William embarking onto his ship have in common with the convivial caparisoned horses processing in the cavalcade of Scicli's annual feast of St. Joseph? Another image depicts King William and his men standing aside their grinning mounts. Perhaps their Norman ancestry connects them in a tenuous way.[1] But their happy and willing participation in a sacred Christian drama is what strikes at the heart of this comparison. Whether the deliverance of Normandy to William the Conqueror or of Joseph and the Holy Family to the safety of Egypt, these horses smile in the confidence that they guide and safeguard their human counterparts in the holy journey toward the good.

Horses are usually wary of water and hesitant and skittish about embarking onto ships. Still, they do so beaming with happiness in the late eleventh-century Bayeux tapestry—not because the artists were simple-minded or ill-advised but because they artistically and adroitly translated horses' cooperation in these decisive and sweeping events as a hearty and happy acceptance of their roles as participants in the journeys of salvation, alongside their human partners.[2] Horses

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[1] The Normans or Norseman who settled in northern France c.900, after years of plundering, conquered Sicily at the end of the eleventh century (c.1061 to 1091). Their presence in the area around Scicli was markedly impressive on medieval Sicilian culture—especially in their cultivation of the horse, like the Arabs settlers to Sicily before them. Animal studies posit that horses make specific facial expressions that transmit positive emotional states.

[2] The *Bayeux Tapestry* was embroidered c.1070 to celebrate the Norman defeat of the English at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The full episodic Latin inscription on the embroidered tapestry reads: "HIC VVILLELM: DUX: IN MAGNO: NAVIGIO MARE TRANSIVIT," or "Here Duke William in a great ship crossed the sea." Except for a few significant cataclysms—such as the earthquake of 1500, the plague of 1626, and significant floods scattered throughout the centuries—the *Cavalcata* has occurred almost yearly. Each time the *Cavalcata* or one of the other two major Spring festivals has been interrupted in centuries past, the people of Scicli have recorded this as a bad omen for their town and its people. The annual *Cavalcata* was paused for three years due to the coronavirus pandemic. It returned to Scicli this year, 2023, in full regalia. To this author, there is no other event like this anywhere in Sicily, Italy, or Western Europe.

smile because they are helpful despite their actual aversions or fears. At Scicli's *Cavalcata*, the horses exuberantly march in unison with St. Joseph and the Holy Family, one more joyfully arrayed than the next (Figure 1). In the words of the philosopher Georges Bataille, referenced above, these horses lining up for the *Cavalcata* in honour of St. Joseph, transparent to transcendence during this brief interlude in festival time, 'speak the language of man'.


*Figure 1 - At left, During Scicli's annual Cavalcata, a cheerful horse awaits the festa enfilade. Photo Credit: author. At the right, Bayeux Tapestry scene: Normans trim sails while crossing Dive River with horses. Photo Credit: Public domain, Wikipedia Commons.*

This idea is at the heart of the Cavalcata di San Giuseppe ritual, a grand parade of exultant, draped horses in full feather. This cavalcade takes place annually in the small village of Scicli on the feast of the father, celebrated each year on 19 March, the onomastico or namesake of St. Joseph, the beloved of Italy. In this event, Joseph's beloved steeds accompany and serve him in his essential role of protector and guide of the Saviour in their Flight into Egypt.

Other types of St. Joseph's Day rituals, involving elaborate displays, especially tiered tables of baked goods and other ritual foods, take place across Italy (and as well in cities across the USA with large Italian-American populations).3

[3] These three-tiered tables heavily laden with food are widely known as the "altars" of St. Joseph in Italy, offered by Sicilians in gratitude for the Saint's having ended a famine. Joseph's attributes (lily, staff, sandals, ladder, saw hammer, nails), breadcrumbs symbolising the sawdust of the Carpenter and twelve fish representing the apostles, grace the three-tiered table, honouring the Trinity. Joseph's feast day is also elaborately celebrated in many major cities in the United States and Catholic countries such as Portugal, France, Spain, and elsewhere as the feast of the Father. The festivals of

Giuseppe Pitré, the late nineteenth-century Italian ethnographer, who has amply documented the folkloric traditions of Sicily, described 'il pranzo di San Giuseppe,' with its sumptuous and highly ritualised foods, prayers, processions, and table settings, which take place in Scicli's many small neighbouring villages, such as Vicari, Borgetto, Polizzi, and Salaparuta. At these ritual dinners, the benestanti or wealthier community members prepare and serve the many customary ceremonial and significant foods such as spinach, chickpeas, roasted almonds, dolci di paste, and other sweets offered to the poor. These food offerings have deep symbolic meaning, usually associated with the season of their first appearance, cultivation, and ideas about man's relationship and homage to the divine. San Giuseppe bread in the shape of his bastone (walking stick), his beard, and other associated shapes are distributed to the town at a huge feast in honour of St. Joseph, li Santuzzi (Sicilian dialect for the holiest saint), and li Vicchiareddi (Sicilian dialect for the older man), the Universal Father (Pitré, 1900, pp. 22-24). St. Joseph's life mission was to provide for the Christian Redeemer, for his wife Mary, and humankind, and his ritualised festa celebrates his name and life's work.

However, none of St. Joseph's *festa* manifestations throughout Sicily or mainland Italy is as grandiose or unusual as Scicli's cavalcade. In this small village, situated on a vast plain in southeastern Sicily's *Provincia di Ragusa*, this extraordinary cortège marks and celebrates the scriptural Flight into Egypt in this ritual of Spring (Figure 2). In no other city in Sicily—or elsewhere—does this conflation of events take place: that is, the feast honouring St. Joseph, the Father, conjoined with the ritual celebration of the Flight into Egypt.[4] Herein lies the singularity of Scicli's feast, where horse accompanies man and is foregrounded,

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New York City and New Orleans, eighteenth- through twentieth-century coastal havens for emigrating Sicilians, are only two of the most well-known and remarkable.

[4] Flight into Egypt scenes appear on altar panels, church tympanums, manuscripts, mosaics, ivories, and other mediums early in Christian iconography from the fifth century onward. One of the earliest is in the mosaic on the south side of the triumphal arch at Rome's Sta. Maria Maggiore, dating to c.432–440. Another early appearance is on the relief panel on the Moone Cross, Co. Kildare, Ireland, in approximately the eighth century; this iconography reached Ireland from Byzantium and North Africa via manuscript trade. Flight scenes multiply throughout the High Middle Ages. For a reasonably thorough tracing of this iconography with images, see the Blogspot *Ad Imaginem Dei* of M Duffy (2015). 'The Flight into Egypt, Pt. 1' at http://imaginemdei.blogspot.com/2017/01/the-flight-into-egypt-holy-refugees.html. In the Baroque period, scenes of the Rest on the Flight into Egypt predominate over that of the Flight.

indeed commands, this important salvific event in the journey of redemption into Egypt.


*Figure 2 - At left, At the Cavalcata, men in traditional dress lead the bedazzled horse, with wheat sheaves and palm trees in the background. At right, a poster announcing the Cavalcata. Photo Credit: author.*

Investigating the scriptural sources of the Flight illuminates this conflation of celebrations. The story of the Flight is found in the second chapter of the gospel of Matthew (NJB, Matt. 2:13–23), and early Christian and later medieval representations often probed other apocryphal texts for visual ingredients of this scene of escape and rescue.[5] The gospel of Matthew (NJB, Matt. 2:1–8) briefly tells the story of the Magi's search for the 'King of the Jews,' which led them to King Herod of Judea (37 bce–4 bce) in Jerusalem and on to the fated Child in Bethlehem. Matthew understands this story as the fulfilment of the words spoken by God to the Prophet Hosea, 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and I called my son out of Egypt' (NJB, Hos. 11:1); Hosea was alluding to the special relationship between the Israelites and their God, by commemorating Exodus and the flight of the Jews. Matthew interpreted Hosea's words, some 800 years later, as foretelling the coming of the Messiah and fulfilling the Old Testament Scriptures in the New Testament.

The Magi, not heeding Herod's dictum to return and inform him of the Child's location, continued to Bethlehem, where they offered their precious gifts to the newborn Child in the stable. As well, they had been warned in a dream not to return

[5] All scriptural citations in this paper are from the New Jerusalem Bible, abbreviated herein as NJB.

to Herod, and they 'returned to their own country by a different way' (NJB, Matt. 2:12). Threatened by the prophecies of these wise men from the East and realising their return would not be imminent, Herod proclaimed his jurisdiction to execute all male children aged two and under, guaranteeing, he thought, the slaughter of the infant Christ. Although part of the Roman Empire in the first century, Egypt lay outside Herod's dominion and provided a source of refuge to the Holy Family.

Fortuitously, soon after the visit of the Magi and while still in Bethlehem, Joseph was also visited in a dream by an angel. The angel directed Joseph to make haste to Egypt with Mary and his newborn son, the infant Jesus, to escape the wrath of Herod, collaterally imaged in many painterly cycles and sculptures as the Massacre of the Innocents.[6] The Holy Family reached Egypt via the coastal road or *via maris.* This ancient trading route offered relatively safe travel. Many early Christian Coptic icons commemorate this beloved scene and feature the Holy Family, *cum* mule, fleeing to Egypt in a small boat for some part of their journey. The path of the Holy Family to safety is celebrated and remains, through today, a current well-marked pilgrimage route through Egypt.[7]

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[6] Matthew recounts the episode of the Flight into Egypt in his gospel (NJB, Matt. 2:13–23). The Flight episode is often shown in art as the final episode of the Nativity cycle and was a component in the cycles of the life of the Virgin and Christ. The iconic scene of the Rest on the Flight into Egypt, based on a passage in the apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, developed much later in the second quarter of the fourteenth century in the art of, for example, Giotto and other Italian and Northern Renaissance painters.

[7] Matthew's account of the Flight and events afterward is short on details. According to other textual sources, the Holy Family started their journey through northern Sinai until reaching Farama. Their stopping-off and resting places were transformed into churches and monasteries—some of the world's first—as Egypt became part of the "Holy Land." These physical sites have subsequently been amplified, and they have provided further details of the events. Egyptian sacred sites often feature unusual physical features. For example, literal "footstep" relics are prayer points in Egyptian sites where Joseph, Mary, and Jesus touched the Egyptian earth. Unusually shaped trees indicate landscapes that offered shelter to the Holy Family or healing springs where they drank. Their voyage on Egyptian soil was significant within Coptic manuscripts and icons—integral to the network of belief and ritual practice in the Coptic tradition—precisely since this is the only other part of the world where the Holy Family set foot. The Coptic iconic tradition was pictorially very conservative in nature. The pictorial characteristics of the Flight have remained essentially static for the past 1500 years since their Coptic inauguration. The Coptic Church annually celebrates the arrival and refuge of the Holy Family in Egypt on 1 June.

Iconographical characteristics of the Coptic Flight representations included, more or less: a haloed, bearded Father Joseph, shouldering his rucksack with right hand on his staff, pointing toward and leading the horse to the safety of the infidel land; the smiling horse (or mule) upon which Mary sits cradling her Child; often a heavenly angel, sometimes bearing wheat sheafs and pointing the way to safety; papyrus plants and a stream with smiling fish and birds; the signature date palm of Egypt.[8] Often even the plant life of Coptic icons and frescoes is depicted as bouncy and resilient, as if propelled from the ground with great energy and enthusiasm, because, together with the smiling animals, they participate in St. Joseph's act of rescue and salvation (Figure 3). There is no doubt a strong connection between these Coptic icons and Sicilian medieval and later artistic conventions, as Sicily was part of the Byzantine Empire for more than three centuries (from c.535 until about 825, when the Muslim conquest began) and was a centre of icon manufacture. This same tradition likely inspired the twelfth-century mosaics of Palermo's Cappella Palatina, widely praised throughout Sicily. The mosaic episode on the south sanctuary wall of Palermo's *Cappella Palatina* merges the dream of Joseph with the Flight, and the fishes and horse (not mule or donkey) of the flight are integrally cooperative with the mission of salvation (Figure 3).

*Figure 3 - At the left, The Dream of Joseph and The Flight into Egypt, 1140 and 1170, mosaic. The Southern Sanctuary of the Cappella Palatina, Palermo. Photo Credit: Online Web Gallery of Art.*

[8] The date palm is long associated with life, death, and deliverance in ancient Egyptian iconography. It was used in funeral rituals and buried in the tomb with the deceased. Hence this pagan symbol feeds into later Coptic and Christian iconography. Less commonly, Coptic icons depict the Flight in a small boat, always with the smiling horse/mule, alongside Mary embracing Jesus and Joseph, with their accompanying angel(s). The date palm tree is also significant in later images of the Flight (after c.1500), where it is featured in a miraculous event accompanying the Rest in Egypt: the tree willingly bends over, offering Joseph its dates to nourish his family.

All of these iconographical details appear as well in the decorations on the horses' coats of the Cavalcade; and perhaps, as well, the tight Coptic connection between beast and man—in which horse, fish, birds, even flowers, burst forth in participation in this holy journey—lives on in this *festa*, with its smiling steeds. In Scicli, this festival, like many other agriculturally linked Christian productions, conjoins ideas of the role of the protective father figure with the message of safety and deliverance—linking it with other spring agricultural festivals and rendering it personal and powerful to patriarchal Italy, where the father of fathers is especially revered. Along with the deliverance of Joseph and family, it proposes the bright awakening of nature after the melancholy darkness of winter. An investigation of the day's events unravels the many layers of this celebration and the singular conjoining of St. Joseph's feast day with the Flight into Egypt. An examination of the role of the horse in this sacred drama will reveal some of the long historical relationship between man and beast in a public ceremony that dates, at least in part and in some elementary form, from the eleventh-century Norman occupation of Sicily.[9] After Byzantine domination, the greater part of the Greek Orthodox population of Sicily was subdued by the Arabs and Berbers on the condition of slavery or 'protection' from the 831 occupation of Palermo or 'Bal'harm' (its Arabic name) through 1091. That year, Count Roger de Hauteville (or Ruggiero d'Altavilla, later King Roger 1 of Sicily), wrested nearby Noto from the Moors, clinching Norman domination of the island. By 1295, with the coronation of Frederick III as king, Sicily became an Aragonese possession until the island was united in the later nineteenth-century Kingdom of Italy through Garibaldi's campaign for unification, which began in Sicily. For both the militant Arab and truculent Norman conquerors of Sicily, and particularly in this area around Noto,

[9] While this is not the place to trace a detailed history of drama—from the earliest Romanesque music dramas of c.1100–1275 to the succeeding mystery plays, to the morality plays of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries—certainly a dotted line may be drawn from these earlier manifestations of liturgical drama through elaborate street productions/*feste* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, documented by the Confraternities and other church-linked associations of lay persons. Counter-Reformation policies greatly enhanced the power of church drama and *feste*, with music, processions, images, animal companions, and a panoply of sacred technology, especially in Sicily. For a magisterial study of the earliest music dramas, see bibliography in Fletcher Collins, Jr., *The Production of Medieval Church Music-Drama* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1972).

horses were culturally fundamental. Elements of both cultures are embedded into the celebratory events of this *festa* as well as that of the *Madonna delle Milizie*. The feast of *Maria Santissima delle Milizie*, the patron saint of Scicli, celebrates the naval victory of the Norman Roger de Hauteville over the Saracen Emir Belcàne (or Bel-Kan) in 1091 in the harbour of Scicli. Together with a colourful procession, featuring a performance of the ancient Arabic *morisca* dance, the Virgin Mary descends on a white horse to stampede the Saracen invaders. Scicli's official written and legendary history attributed the Christian victory to this miraculous descent of the Virgin Mary on white horse, stampeding the Saracen invader.[10]

Fused with the feast day of St. Joseph on 19 March and ritually performed during his *festa* celebration, the ritual re-enactment of the Flight into Egypt is staged in the streets of Scicli. This is one of the few memorable events of the scarce scriptural life of the diffident carpenter Joseph, wherein he is named and is an active agent. Like most of the countless Christian *feste* performed nearly weekly in Sicily—a palimpsest land of belief systems with a still largely poor, rural, and agrarian region—the *Cavalcata* is layered with Greco-Roman mythology and sacred technology, such as echo, for example, in Ovid's *Fasti* or Vergil's *Aeneid*. Genii, gods, and demigods have inhabited Sicily's mountains, caves, and waterways since the 8th century bc when Sicily became the first extrinsic Greek colony. Scylla and Charybdis, personalised supernatural beings, take cover in the Straits of Messina—defining peripheral boundaries, controlling the water, attacking sailors, sinking ships, taking tolls—managing the traffic of man—and remaining until today part of the eponymous popular geographical nomenclature.

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[10] The feast of the *Madonna delle Milizie*, who freed Scicli from foreign siege, was once a moveable feast but has been celebrated on the Saturday before Passion Sunday (two weeks preceding Easter Sunday) since 1736. The identification of the historical Belcàne is debatable, but many think this event refers more generally to the Barbary attacks along Sicily's southeast coast, frequent throughout the eleventh century. The struggle is recreated with the faithful descendants of these heroic Sciclitan citizens in colourful period clothes, brandishing period Middle Eastern and Norman weapons, with bells and thunderous drumbeats—all under Madonna's protection. For more detailed information on this festival, see Melchiorre Trigilia, *The Madonna dei Milici of Scicli: cristiani e musulmani nella Sicilia del Mille, i più antichi testi in volgare: storia, tradizione, fede, civilità, arte, folclore* (Scicli: Setim. Sitography), 1988. The representation of the Madonna on horseback, in sturdy, larger-than-life-size papier mâché, kept within the very same *Chiesa Madre* of the *Cavalcata*, is the only one of its type known by the author (and the subject of an ongoing investigation/publication). There is also a relic of the Madonna's footprint, like the relics discussed in Egyptian pilgrimage sites (see n. 9 above).

Understanding and parsing Sicily's multiracial and diverse ethnographic heritage and *feste* is as complicated as peeling the Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Norman, Angevin French, and Spanish onion it is. As well, the Kingdom of Sicily, with its key position in proximity to Rome and in the central Mediterranean, inevitably made it a fulcrum of politics of the High Middle Ages, in which this *festa* has its roots.

Scicli is one of Sicily's fantastical hill towns—perhaps it is the most breathtaking[11] (Figure 4). Sicily's massive and over-determined baroque churches, such as those in Scicli, form a natural and built proscenium for these *feste*, in which the real and earthly become the heavenly kingdom. Scicli's fussy and ceremonious baroque architectural backdrop, set against centuries of Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, and Norman building residue, lends solidity to the innate theatricality of the Sicilians and the stage-like quality of their quotidian life rhythms. The Sicilian playwright Pirandello's works are rooted in this interplay of fictional and real worlds. The long Spanish and Jesuit domination shaped Sicilian thoughts and

*Figure 4 - At left, Aerial view of Scicli. Piazza d'Italia on the right, where the cavalcade takes place. At the end of Piazza d'Italia, a glimpse of Chiesa Madre della Madonna delle Milizie, a Baroque church. Photo Credit: author.*

[11] Scicli is so picturesque that the Italian television detective serial programme, "*Il commissario Montalbano*," is based on A. Camilleri's crime fiction novels feature many views and locations in Sicily, notably in Scicli: the town hall on the baroque street *via Mormino Penna* (police station), the town hall in *Palazzo Iacono* (police headquarters is a few steps away). The television series ran for fifteen seasons (1999–2021) and was widely broadcast in Australia, France, Spain, Germany, the UK, and the USA, stirring much interest in touring Sicily. Scicli's old town centre is part of the World Heritage Site of the Val di Noto.

devotion into a theatrical mentality that encompassed exaggerated and exalted forms of religiosity.[12]

The warren of streets throughout tiny Scicli bristle with excitement as the *Cavalcata* prepares to launch—especially those at the juncture of the main episode (Figure 4). For a few hours before dusk, the long main *Piazza d'Italia*, which borders the baroque *Chiesa Madre della Madonna delle Milizie*, vibrates with the hushed sounds of preparation and excitement, as the crowds await the liturgical drama of the Flight. Before the drama begins, the piazza has been circled, unofficially, by men (of all ages) on their trotting horses (Figure 5).

*Figure 5 - Horses parade Scicli's streets with jingling bells, heralding the Flight's epiphany. Photo Credit: author.*

The horses are dressed in flowered scapulars and leather straps hung with small bells. When they trot down the streets, the high-pitched tintinnabulation creates a magical field, generating an other-worldly, high-vibrational atmosphere of foreboding and safety. The bells clean and clear the air like the 'Thrones,' one

[12] The Counter-Reformation "Society of Jesus," approved by Pope Paul III as a religious order of clerics regular on 27 September 1540 (in his bull *Regimini militantis Ecclesiae*), played a vital role in the development of faith and spiritual formation in Sicily. The Jesuits had developed their *Spiritual Exercises*, which lent a strong, distinctive spirituality to the new order. Already in Rome by 1537 and in Padua by 1542, the Jesuits sparred from city to city in Sicily to establish dominance at Messina, Catania, and Palermo. By 1553, the Jesuits had established a College in Bivona, near Agrigento and Scicli. Sicily had been ruled by viceroys from the Kingdom of Aragon since 1479 and Spain since 1504. Educators par excellence, Jesuits typically flocked to universities. See Paul Grendler, *The Jesuits and Italian Universities, 1548–1773* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), Intro., pp. 1–12, and chap. 2, pp. 37–67, for more information on this complex educational and spiritual development in Sicily.

of the high hosts of angels pictured in icons as great wheels with eyes at the base of the Christ's throne, cleansing, purifying, and dispelling evil from around the throne of the Pantocrator or Ruler of All.[13] The bells also audibly define the sacred, as they regulated the daily life of the Middle Ages, by measuring and ordering time, maintaining the cosmic order, and indicating breaks in nature and season. Profane time becomes sacred time. Like a fair, children are treated to rides on these magical, tinkling steeds that will deliver Christ to safety.

This public entertainment, ratcheting up the tension and engaging the *festa* participants, goes on for a few hours before the sacred drama begins. Meanwhile, the human and horse protagonists have been lining up in the nearby and hidden *vicolina San Giuseppe*, whose townhouses are laden with sky-blue banners displaying the lily of Joseph's purity (Figure 6).

*Figure 6 - Cavalcata horses and riders gather in vicolina San Giuseppe. Balconies with lily banners and festoons for Saint Joseph. Photo Credit: author.*

At the junction of the *vicolina* and the main piazza, a deep red satin curtain drapes the opening, masking it from the view of the main *Piazza d'Italia*, like a

[13] Christian theology allows for hierarchies of angels. These spiritual, non-corporeal beings are classified as Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. Angels appear in the Old and New Testaments, and since the church's earliest days, theologians have discussed angels, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius's *De coelesti hierarchia* (fifth–sixth century). The literature on angels is too vast to even summarise in a paper on this subject matter.

theatre's proscenium arch. The piazza is full of hundreds of people, alive with the chatter of the hoped-for victory, and proud of their costumes and mounts. Dusk arrives, and the main piazza now becomes tense with anticipation. Night falls, and the long, billowing, red curtains, which have been hung between the buildings where the *vicolina* spills onto the piazza, open as the ear-splitting fanfare of firecrackers add another auditory stimulus to this event (Figure 7). These sparkling rocket bursts fracture time and herald an epiphany.

*Figure 7 - As Mary, Joseph, and the Child enter Scicli's Piazza d'Italia, a grand entrance is created by the long red silk curtains strung between the townhouses. Photo Credit: author.*

The drama is launched as three elected townspeople perform the Flight into Egypt in the main piazza. The piazza is ritually transformed from the streets of Scicli into the road leading out of Bethlehem. Fortuitous citizens of Scicli have become transformed into the Holy Family, swathed in rich period robes. Mary and the Child are led by the aged and white-bearded St. Joseph, who in Sicily, in addition to being the surrogate father of the Holy Family, protects orphaned children and young nubile women against unlucky unions. All echo the prayer engraved on the many banners that line the street, 'Viva San Giuseppe,' as St. Joseph will lead the long march of escape from Bethlehem into Egypt.

With all the ritual paraphernalia of this *festa*—light, unfurling curtains, tinkling bells, and blasts of firecrackers—Scicli has been transformed into the holy ground of Bethlehem. Mary and the Child on horseback, led by St. Joseph, descend

through the curtained proscenium and spill onto the piazza, bursting the twenty-first century time barrier. As they proceed ceremoniously through the main artery, slowly proceeding toward the neighbouring low-lying village of Donnalucata, ritual bonfires or *pagghiari* are lit by young men, *giovanotti*, along the processional route, further purifying and clearing the passage of malevolent spirits and guaranteeing the purity of location against danger or pollution.[14]

Following the Holy Family, the grandiose cavalcade of caparisoned, belled horses march. These holy beasts are transformed into agents of the sacred drama of protection and flight on the *via sacra* of Scicli, as if it were the year 1 ad. The heavy and strong draught horses from neighbouring equestrian farms sport regalia which is breathtakingly ritualising and transformative. The horses' saddlecloths are woven of palms, a foretaste of the upcoming 'Entry into Jerusalem' of Holy Week, not long off (Figure 8).

*Figure 8 - Cavalcata horses wear saddlecloths of woven palm leaves and headpieces over 4 feet tall, creating a transformative, ritualistic atmosphere. Photo Credit: author.*

In today's celebrations, the saddlecloths are mounted not on wooden frames as they used to be but on lighter-weight foam-rubber braces, which harness the palm

[14] In the recent past, this piece of the drama has been outlawed because gas lines were installed under the city's streets. The concepts of "purity" and "danger" or "pollution" are derived from the writing of Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), an anthropological analysis of dirt, pollution, and disorder as threats to the social order.

coat, intricately interwoven with thousands of *violaciocca* or regional wallflowers. These *violaciocca* have been culled for their early spring blooms, durability, and deep and vivid red, yellow, blue, and white colours. The manufacture of these horses' coats involves, at a minimum, ten people working for one and one-half to two days to weave the *violaciocca* into floral designs into the horse coats. The palm harnesses also take days to construct. It is an event in which many of the townspeople have participated for centuries.

Clip-clop, clip-clop: the huge, strong draft horses, weighing in at about 2,650 pounds, mingled with high-stepping Friesians, lead the cavalcade. The horses are mounted and accompanied by young boys swaggering proudly in regional, folkloric dress—the fez-like stocking cap, black velvet pants, black leather boots, short-waisted jackets, and colourful scarves—all evocative of Middle Eastern and provincial farmer's outfits. The youthful riders, whose feet dangle high above the horses' flanks, bear the crossed sheaves of wheat of hope and deliverance, fertility, regeneration, hospitality, physical nourishment, and Eucharistic salvation (Figure 2). These wheat sheaves also remind us of St. Joseph's Old Testament prototype and namesake, Joseph (or Yosef), the eleventh of Jacob's twelve sons, who rose to power aside the pharaoh in Egypt after being sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. In Genesis (NJB, 37:7–11), this same Joseph, of Amazing Technicolor Robe fame, dreamed of sheaves of wheat, and his dream delivered Israel from seven years of famine after seven of plenty.

The wheat sheaves are also a material reminder that this feast is drawn from the yearly cycle of agrarian *feste*, which punctuates and protects the vulnerable farmer, always at the mercy of the land, always at the mercy of the Lord.[15] Holding *ciaccari* (bundles of burning rope grass), the crowds participate in the drama and illuminate the way for the Holy Family. As they march ceremoniously through the

[15] The *Cavalcata* is indeed one of the three main spring festivals of Scicli, along with Easter and the celebration of the feast of the *Madonna delle Milizie* (see n. 12). The crisscrossed sheaves of wheat could also be a link to the so-called wheat story, based on Apocrypha, which features a miraculous field of wheat that appeared on the Flight. The wheat was high enough to hide the fleeing family from Herod's hot pursuit. For an introductory discussion of the Flight image with the wheat story, see Duffy, *op. cit.*, Pt. 2, at http://imaginemdei.blogspot.com/2017/01/the-flight-into-egypt-variations-part–2.html.

*piazza*, the citizens of Scicli cheer, in dialect, 'San Giuseppe, l'ùrtimu varva,' **(**in Italian, 'l'ultima barba') or 'St. Joseph, the last (white) beard.' This expresses the hope and prayer and the collective folk wisdom that the last snow will fall, God willing, if not before, at least by 19 March, St. Joseph's feast day.

The multi-coloured *violaciocca*, expertly tucked and woven into the saddlecloths, emblazon the shoulders, necks, flanks, and heads of these steeds: scenes of the Flight, Joseph, and the Holy Family, the date palms of Egypt, Scicli's medieval crest—the rampant lion, Joseph's lily of purity, the date tree of the Rest in Egypt, angels, abstract designs such as crosses and another sacred symbol—all glyphs testifying to the exalted role of St. Joseph in protection of the Mother and Christ child from the Judean governor Herod (Figure 9).

*Figure 9 - Cavalcata horses' saddlecloths display colourful scenes of triumphant St. Joseph with putti and bearded Joseph holding Christ, violaciocca. Photo Credit: author.*

Some of the horses' dresses, cascading from these royal, refined, and obedient beasts, have circular or oval cut-outs, where painted canvases imaging St. Joseph and the Holy Family are fastened into these sumptuous, resplendent, anthropomorphised capes (Figure 10).

The horses are outfitted with headdresses, some 4 feet high, attached to their heads, which raise the horse even higher from the human visual level and plane (Figures 8 and 10). These headdresses give the horses a more humanised—if

giant—character, as if they might speak. They are dressed in flowered coats and bedecked with hats! The headdresses are embedded with wallflowers, front and

*Figure 10 - Cavalcata horse wears a headdress and cape with circular cut-outs for paintings, like St. Joseph. Photo Credit: author.*

back. Only their tails identify these transformed, otherworldly mounts. Some have wing-like shields behind their riders. Like their counterparts in medieval jousts, they are regal, elevated above their bestial nature, agents of salvation. They have become humanised in their participation in this salvific drama. They have been dressed, hatted, and, in short, made to look more like their human counterparts, ministering to a festive, sacred event.

*Figure 11 -Judges evaluate Cavalcata horses' attire and behaviour after a two-hour parade.*

After almost two hours of parading around the large *piazza*, the participants in this equestrian retinue are judged according to the most splendidly dressed and comported (**Figures 11 and 12**). The first, second, and third prizes are awarded, and the horses are then 'interviewed' by public television and other media regarding their names, addresses, breeds, ages, lineage, and the number of years they have served St. Joseph in the *Cavalcata*. Like models on a runway, these sacred steeds compete for the honour of the salvation of Christ; who will take the Christ child to safety?Their riders—usually very young boys tagged with numbers—are far less important in this task (**Figure 12**).[16]


*Figure 12 - Young men are given number tags and ride horses, the event's focus. Photo Credit: author.*

The horses' photos appear in the next day's newspapers and on internet sites throughout the southwest of Sicily (**Figure 13**).

Also, on the day after the cavalcade, the six competing horse costumes, *senza cavallo*, are displayed in the light of day. The winner receives a bronze statue that depicts the Holy Family's Flight into Egypt. The rider guards this *trophaeum* for a year, and then it is re-assigned to the following year's winner. There is also a fund to reimburse all the participants for the cost of flowers.

[16] In the past five years, young women have been accorded the honour of riding these horses—a dignity and recognition reserved for men within this traditional patriarchal system of southeast Sicily.

*Figure 13 - These horses are nearly human agents in the process of salvation, like their Norman ancestors. Photo Credit: author.*

This religious and fundamentally social drama erupts from the surface of agrarian life, revealing and resolving social tensions—in a process analogous to Western theatre. In the analysis of the anthropologist Victor Turner, dramatic time replaces routinised social living.[17] During the *festa*, the group's emotional climate is full of thunder and lightning, precisely because a public breach has occurred—in this case, the end of winter, the beginning of spring—coincident with Joseph's heroic act of Flight. The redressive machinery of the St. Joseph's festival forces the return of the *status quo ante* to the first days of the spring agricultural cycle, after the fires of cleansing and demonic expulsion, the sonic purification of bells, the enacted flight of the sacred personages and horses, and the consumption of selected ritual foods. This sacred technology holds the performative space together in a community of clean and protected prayer. The street assumes a spatial geography which is privileged through these ritual elements; Scicli's streets have become the *via sacra* of Bethlehem. There are other recorded folkloric events in the days around the 21st of March throughout Sicily, such as young men jumping over fires while young women clean the whole house—as we still continue to spring clean—

[17] Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (1982; New York: PAJ Publications, 1988), Intro. & chap. 1.

removing the elements that impede the progress of renewal of the year. Purification and deliverance are of the essence on this celebration of Old Man Winter, St. Joseph, and the Flight into Egypt. In the words of Georges Bataille, the philosopher of religion and other subjects: 'The festival is the fusion of human life. For the thing and the individual, it is the crucible where distinctions melt in the intense heat of intimate life' (Bataille, 1989, p. 54). While we cannot discern at first the horses' ability to transcend themselves, the immanence of the sacred within them, once they are ceremoniously, carefully, and mysteriously covered with their coats, their spiritual power is released: 'I am able to say that the animal world is that of immanence and immediacy for that world, which is closed to us, is so to the extent that we cannot discern in it an ability to transcend itself' (ivi, p. 23).

All of this ceremony emerges slowly from the late medieval period through the twentieth century to honour St. Joseph—scion of the house of King David, earthly spouse to Mary the Mother, and patron saint of the universal Roman Catholic church. He is second in importance only to Mary. And yet, when we examine St. Joseph's personality, his hagiography, his image remains crepuscular. The dearth of biographical information regarding Joseph in the gospels was somewhat supplemented by stories in early Christian apocrypha such as the *Protoevangelium of James* and the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*. And still, Joseph's trajectory throughout church history has not been one of meteoric ascent. He attracted little in the way of cult devotion for about 1,000 years.

Carolyn Wilson's singular and magisterial study of St. Joseph's identity and presence in Italian Renaissance art of c.1500–1600 re-evaluated the pre-Tridentine cult of St. Joseph, redirecting St. Joseph's historiographical tradition (Wilson, 2001, pp.1-20). St. Joseph emerged, from her competent research and analysis, not as simply the Counter-Reformation saint par excellence—as twentieth-century scholarship has posited. Joseph's popularity and the rapid promulgation of his cult—in terms of namesake churches and dedicated confraternities, especially in Northern and Central Italy—is comprehensively documented from the Early Church Fathers, through the medieval and ardent devotion of Benedictine abbot, mystic, and monastic reformer St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who characterised St. Joseph as 'a prudent and faithful servant … whom the Lord placed

beside Mary to be her protector, the nourisher of His human body and the single most trusty assistant of earth in His great design' (Ibid.).[18]

St. Joseph's rise to liturgical eminence continued in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, especially via the work of several church commentators, not the least of whom were St. Thomas of Aquinas and St. Albert the Great. The thirteenth-century Benedictines lobbied for the establishment of a universal feast in honour of Joseph, but it was not until 1479 that the Franciscan Pope Sixtus IV incorporated a feast honouring Joseph into the General Roman Calendar. The Council of Trent was silent about the cult of Joseph, and Joseph's reputation floated for about fifty years in abeyance. But by 1621, Pope Gregory XV ordered that the feast of St. Joseph be observed as a holiday of obligation throughout the Universal Church. In the seventeenth century, with its threats to the faith, war, heresy, and natural disaster, St. Joseph was again called upon through prayers to restore peace to Italy.[19] This title eventually was exalted by Pius IX in his declaration in 1870 of St. Joseph as Patron of the Church Universal.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke record that after the betrothal of Mary to Joseph, Mary conceived Jesus through the Holy Spirit's agency. Bypassing human agency, Jesus becomes the Son of God, through a mystery of faith. The categorisation of the foster father Joseph in the theological, societal, and pietistic hierarchy of the Church has been tenebrous albeit protean. Joseph is a workaday craftsperson in humble raiment—his Nazarene tunic, sandals, and cloak. He is quietly present and safeguards the family at birth and during the early infancy of Christ. His status as a proxy father is nebulous and enigmatic; he loses the twelve-

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[18] Part 1, traced the appreciation and articulation of St. Joseph's virtues and nobility to the early Church Fathers (St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, and Origen) who wrote about his genealogy, his chaste marriage, and his foster fatherhood, among other qualities of Joseph's moral excellence.

[19] I have abbreviated much of the Josephine history in this paper; it is a vast historiography. Wilson's study covers the many movements and changes in devotion to Joseph in minute detail, especially its international developments beyond Italy in France, Spain, and the New World. For example, at the early fifteenth-century Church Council of Constance, Jean Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris and representative at the Council of the King of France, not only appealed for a feast day but also wrote his "Josephina" (1418), which elaborated extensively on the role of St. Joseph during the flight into Egypt and sojourn there (Wilson, 2001., p. 7). Wilson also cited, summarised, and discussed important scholarship on Joseph done before her 2001 work. The General Roman Calendar is a compilation of the entire cycle of celebrations, including those of the saints, within the Catholic Church.

year-old child in the temple. The visual iconography associated with him helps excavate how he was understood historically: his lily-flowering rod which won Mary for him in his celibate marriage; his flowing hair and prematurely grey/white beard of age; his sack of nourishment for Mary and Christ; his protective and supportive shepherd's staff to rescue and deliver the family; his lily of purity; his kingly ancestors from the Old Testament's House of David testifying to his just, brave, loyal, and aristocratic character, despite his humble social station; his donkey/mule companion; and his somnolent state of mind, as he is the recipient of angelic and prophetic dream guidance leading to Christ's salvation.

And yet, he remains a somewhat shadowy figure. Indeed, the fact that he is the chosen of the Lord and, along with Mary, closest to Christ throughout his young life distinguishes Joseph. His pedigree is impeccable, and his holy nature is unassailable. But in the patriarchal early through relatively modern Church, these passive characteristics paled compared to many other sword-brandishing, dragon-slaying, swashbuckling saints. Why? For one, the Christian faith system was based on the Greek philosophical and later early Christian theological concept of Logos **(**Word, Speech, or Reason), which ordained that divine universal reason formed and ordered our world, giving it meaning.[25] Through St. John the gospel writer, this idea became associated with the nature of the godhead—that is, a godhead consummately and singularly defined by His thought, His speech, His written decree.

St. Joseph's reticence and passivity erase him from this dialogue when examined within this Old and New Testament philosophical tradition of Logos or speech as divine and salvific. The most important figure of the Christian tradition, apart from Christ and Mary, is MUTE; he does not speak. None of Joseph's words is recorded in any of the gospels. This presented a real and nearly insurmountable problem in the development of the story and iconography of St. Joseph. Only with

[25] Logos, from the Greek *λόγος*, as reinterpreted within early Christian theology, came to signify the principle of divine reason, incarnate in the person of Christ. It was articulated in St. John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (NJB, John 1:1). For a more detailed analysis, see J. Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues* (1975; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), Intro. & chap. 2.

the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Renaissance concentration on his *vita activa*, is Joseph heartily revealed and becomes accessible to believers through his *actions*, not his words. The Renaissance resurrected Joseph in its insistence on his active role in salvation—if silent! And it comes as no surprise that the proto-Renaissance mendicant Franciscan order, with its focus not solely on meditation and prayer but more importantly on active participation in the faith, would lead the charge for St. Joseph.[26]

It is through his skilful planning and execution of the 'Flight' that Joseph enters into the active realm of patriarchy, of the fatherhood of protectorship—so predominant and valued in the Western patriarchal culture of the Catholic church. The Flight is Joseph's successful manoeuvre, his *tour de force*, propelling him from passive, somnolent fathering into active protection, redemption, and salvation. In the Flight, Joseph becomes the agent of salvation, saving the Saviour from early death. The passive servant becomes an operative steward of Christ and executor of salvation for us all. He becomes the universal father. And, Joseph's agency is beckoned through the divine; that is, Joseph is prompted to act through a dream. He is the agent of the Lord, His divine emissary. Joseph's passive act of flight becomes an active redemption—perhaps the most important in church history. Building on this idea of Joseph's pro-active participation, sixteenth-century Northern Italians, out of concern for religious reform, created many paintings of the Flight and Rest in Egypt. These have been interpreted as metaphors for life as a pilgrimage, as allegories of progress of the pilgrim soul toward redemption—emphasising Joseph's role as a prototype for active participation in one's faith, for participating in the salvation of the Christ of mankind (Aikema, 1996, pp. 14-25).[27]

How better than to actively portray the redemptive mission of St. Joseph in the *loca sancta* of Scicli's streets? He has not only become an active agent in the

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[26] Wilson (2001, p. 11) has determined that the earliest known church built and named in honour of St. Joseph was the Benedictine Church of *San Giuseppe di Borgo Galliera* in Bologna, in existence, she claimed, by the twelfth century. As well, in the thirteenth century, the Benedictines advocated for the establishment of a universal feast in honour of St. Joseph and also embraced his liturgical veneration within their services. See also Wilson's n. 54, on p. 183, crediting Trombelli's (1767) and Branchesi's (1971) publications. The Franciscans accepted the Rule of St. Benedict.

[27] As quoted in Wilson, 2001, p. 71.

Flight, in the salvation of Christ and hence of mankind, but he also now mounts the noble horse of Scicli. He is raised above his admirers and faithful in his militant—if not military—mission. He is now restored to his rightful royal position among men as the royal scion of David. His docile and sluggish nature has metamorphosed. In most representations, Joseph rides a donkey or a mule; in Scicli, Joseph mounts a worthy beast. Why was the Sciclitan noble horse in this festival? How does the horse rise to this ritual height?

By the end of fourteenth century, medieval Europe had collected a complex body of animal lore, enshrined in the bestiary tradition, which emphasised the literary character of knowledge. Animals were texts to be read in order to reach a higher allegorical and Christological significance. In this genre, dogs and horses were different from and more highly valued than other domesticated animals. As Bruce Boehrer has pointed out in his recent anthropological anthology (Boehrer, 2007), by the end of the thirteenth century and before that in Norman France, a highly visible cultural cathexis or energy field had developed around the medieval horse or destrier:

> From the standpoint of common, practical experience, the high medieval period was better characterised by feudal, agrarian modes of social organisation in which a limited number of animals—the pig, the sheep, the cow, the goat, the ass, the hawk, the hen, the hart, the boar, the dog, the cat, and the horse—did a preponderance of the animal world's actual and symbolic work. … only a few were exalted like the hunting dog and horse (*ivi*, pp. 1-2).

The destrier, not a breed but a type of horse, was the finest and strongest war horse of the Middle Ages—better and stronger than the other so-called chargers, the rouncey. and the coursers. Described in medieval sources as the Great Horse, it carried knights in battle, tournament, and jousts, because of its size and its reputation. The destrier, from the Latin *dextarius*, was led by the squire, at the privileged knight's right side. The breeding of fine horses for warfare and hunt was the purview of the aristocracy and the privileged classes. The war horses—in the case of the *Cavalcata* the Friesians—were bred for knights in the Netherlands and were the noble mounts of the conquering Normans who rid Sicily of the Arab infidel, at the behest of the French popes in Rome.

Joseph's horse of our *Cavalcata* is of this noble lineage. His mule or donkey would not be worthy of this commission. Joseph emerges from this festival ennobled and effective, wholly alive and flowing with the energy of the noble transformative Friesian. He is lifted by his horse, literally and figuratively. He transforms from sluggish adjutant to militant conqueror. As well, the horses' natures are transformed in this holy pilgrimage to Egypt. In this quasi-liturgical performance, the horses of Scicli are separated from their own intimacy or nature. They are raised up, lifted out of their natural world and context, to ferry and sentinel Joseph the Protector toward sanctuary and freedom. In this ritual process, the man astride the horse is also altered, linked, as it were to the horse. The horse becomes quasi-human; St. Joseph, his worthy companion, transcendent to the power and speed of the horse. In the same way that a sacrificed animal becomes a supreme affirmation of life to the sacrifice, here the altered horse testifies to its quasi-human commitment, trust, and duty.

The horses of *San Giuseppe* are witness to a caesura in anthropocentric distinctions between humans and animals. Until today, the noble war horses of the *Cavalcata*, like their caparisoned Norman and Hohenstaufen forbears, participate as nearly human agents in the process of salvation. They offer mount to Joseph in the Sciclitan performance of the deliverance of Christ to safety as they did for the Normans in their purge (Figure 14). Let us recall that the French reform pope Gregory VII (1072–1085), who forced Emperor Henry IV to submit to papal power at Canossa (1077) and later excommunicated him, had established the ideals of *miles Christi* or 'soldier of Christ'; and during the late eleventh-century period of commercial revival and growing aristocratic exclusivity—especially in Norman Sicily—Scicli absorbed and blended all of this cultural history. Her horses save the Christ child; her beloved Joseph is awakened and ennobled astride them. He is no longer the refugee, father of a poor and simple family escaping persecution; in Scicli, he has become the equestrian *miles Christi*, the soldier of Christ, conquering the world's evil, inspired, and commissioned by a divine emissary.

*Figure 14 - Cavalcata horse depicting The Flight into Egypt on saddlecloth. Wallflowers in magenta, yellow, lavender, and white hues adorn the scene. Photo Credit: author.*

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