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The Italian Caravaggio, among others, di SHEILA MCTIGHE

[...] The other fruitful change of date suggested by the discovery of documents is represented by an enlarged edition of Michele Cuppone's *Caravaggio, la Natività di Palermo, la nascita e scomparsa di un capolavoro*.⁷ Bellori's Life of Caravaggio described the artist's visit to Palermo during his time in Sicily, from 1608 to 1609, where, according to Bellori, he painted the *Nativity with St Lawrence and St Francis* for the Oratory of S. Lorenzo (Fig.4). Shortly before, he had created a very different Nativity: the *Adoration of the shepherds* for S. Maria degli Angeli, Messina (Fig.3). Bellori's authority meant that the evidence of our eyes was not taken seriously. Several art historians had voiced suspicions that the Palermo painting was closer to those Caravaggio made in his prime years in Rome: it represents the same models as those found in the *Rest on the flight into Egypt* (c.1596–97; Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome) and the *St Matthew and the angel* altarpiece (1602–03; Contarelli Chapel, S. Luigi dei Francesi, Rome), and its solid technique and lighter palette are quite different from the sketchier and much darker manner of his final years. Since the painting was stolen in 1969, visual analysis perhaps stood on shakier ground, as it had to be based on old photographs. However, changing Bellori's dating required the discovery of a document of April 1600, a contract with Caravaggio to provide an altarpiece 'cum figuris' of an unnamed subject, which another document, of November 1600, revealed was fulfilled for a total price of 200 scudi. Although the first document was published by Gian Ludovico Masetti Zannini in 1971,⁸ it took years of probing by a series of art historians, including Maurizio Calvesi, Lothar Sickel, Francesca Curti and Giovanni Mendola as well as Cuppone himself, to tease out of the name of the contract's broker – a Siennese merchant named Fabio Nuti living in Naples – and the network of connections between Siena, Naples, Rome and Palermo that underpinned the commission. The conclusion: when an altarpiece by Caravaggio faced the public for the first time, it was in Sicily, not Rome. He probably never saw the *Nativity* in situ in Palermo, which is odd given how carefully he designed for the sites of his Roman altarpieces. Caravaggio's first public works were unveiled in Rome to sensational reception – '*gran schiamazzi*' ('loud discussions') according to Baglione, yet his first altarpiece met with no such fanfare, due to its absence from Rome.

Cuppone's volume pairs an account of the *Nativity*'s genesis with an account, much less happy, of its twentieth-century theft. There is much more to be found out about this vanished altarpiece, not least by research into the community of textile merchants and bankers who patronised Caravaggio in his early days, about which Francesca Curti has interesting things to say in her contribution to *Il Giovane Caravaggio*, 'Mercante, pittori, intermediari in rapporto con Caravaggio'. This is a very productive use of archival material [...]

⁷ *Caravaggio, la Natività di Palermo: Nascita e scomparsa di un capolavoro*. By Michele Cuppone. 127 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (Campisano Editore, Rome, 2021), €30. ISBN 978-88-85795-73-6, first published in 2020.

⁸ G.L.M. Zannini: 'Un dipinto del Caravaggio', *Commentari* 2–3 (1971), pp.184–86.