

Re-visioning St. Sebastian Nicoletto da Modena's Reworked Engravings of *St. Sebastian*

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Abstract In around 1522, the date on his engraving of St. Roch, Nicoletto da Modena reworked a print of St. Sebastian of shared dimensions to create a pendant. In the second state, St. Sebastian is enlarged and placed in the front of the picture plane, focusing our attention on his body. This paper will consider how Nicoletto draws from printmakers including Marcantonio and Campagnola to re-vision his St. Sebastian's anatomy through sensitive tonal modelling of his flesh. Whether an epidemic of the plague in 1522-4 prompted Nicoletto to make these prints of the plague saints and whether these engravings were issued in Padua, where he is documented from around 1497-1506 will also be considered.

Keywords Nicoletto da Modena. Saint Sebastian. Printmaking. Padua. Plague. Andrea Mantegna.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Nicoletto da Modena's Activity. – 3 Nicoletto's St. Sebastian: Sources and Interpretation. – 4 Reworking St. Sebastian in a Second State. – 5 Situating Nicoletto's St. Sebastian and the Printmaker's Later Activity.

1 Introduction

From early in the history of printmaking the high cost of copper, used for printing plates, resulted in plates being recycled or reworked and issued as subsequent states.¹ In a field for which little documentation survives, the changes incorporated into different states of a print can provide important evidence of print production and reception. One such case is the engraving of *St. Sebastian* [figs 1-2] by Nicoletto da Modena (active ca 1490-

1522) that survives in two states, each of which are known in only one impression, which, measuring 283 × 205 mm, is of larger dimensions than other examples in the printmaker's oeuvre or of prints by his contemporaries.² The first state of Nicoletto's *St. Sebastian* dates stylistically and technically to around 1512, the date on his *St. Anthony Abbot*.³ Intriguingly, Nicoletto returned to the plate some years later to produce a second state,

1 Stijnman 2012, 25-6, 152-3; Landau, Parshall 1994, 24.

2 Hind 1938-48, 5: 122, no. 38; Zucker 1984, 220-1, no. 2508.073; Zucker 1991, 34-6. Each state survives in only one known impression. The first state measures 299 × 206 mm and is held in the Collection Edmond du Rotschild, housed in the Louvre, Paris. The second state is known in a unique impression held at the Malaspina collection, Pavia. Malaspina 1824, 2: 38; Segre 2003, 98-9 fn. 25.

3 Hind 1938-48, 5: 117, no. 19; Zucker 1984, 175-6, no. 2508.016; Lambert 1999, 289, no. 547. Impressions of the engraving of *St. Anthony Abbott* are known in the British Museum, London; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden; Ambrosiana, Milan; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Louvre, Paris; Musei Civici, Pavia; Gabinetto Nazionale delle Stampe, Rome, and Albertina, Vienna. The impression at the British Museum measures 146 × 103 mm.



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when he reworked the saint's body, enlarging it and bringing it forward in the picture plain. In the second state the saint is modelled in a softer style that responds to the prints produced in the second decade of the sixteenth century by printmakers including Giulio Campagnola (1482-after 1514), Jacopo de' Barbari (ca 1440/50-1515/16) and Marcantonio Raimondi (1480-1534), and is close to the technique that Nicoletto employs in his *St. Roch* dated 1522, which has similar dimensions to the *St. Sebastian*.⁴ Previous scholarship has convincingly proposed that Nicoletto made the changes to the second state of *St. Sebastian* to issue it as a pair with the *St. Roch*. Surprisingly, why Nicoletto chose to revise only the figure of the saint

when he reworked the plate for *St. Sebastian*, and what made him decide to issue it as a second state accompanying the *St. Roch* in around 1522, has not been investigated. This article will trace the changes introduced in the second state of *St. Sebastian* to consider what may have prompted Nicoletto to rework this print and change the presentation of St. Sebastian. There is no known surviving documentation on Nicoletto for the period in which both states of *St. Sebastian* were produced. This article will investigate whether the visual sources that inform Nicoletto's interpretations of *St. Sebastian* can shed light on where the printmaker may have made these prints.

2 Nicoletto da Modena's Activity

Nicoletto da Modena has been described as 'the most prolific' of early Italian engravers.⁵ He produced around 120 prints of which at least eighty are signed. A further forty can be attributed to him on stylistic and technical grounds, making his oeuvre one of the largest bodies of work by an Italian printmaker to come down to us from the turn of the sixteenth century.⁶ However, the prints of Nicoletto have rarely been the subject of focused investigation. The scarcity of archival documentation has left many questions relating to Nicoletto and the production and reception of his engravings unanswered. Payments made between November 1497 and 19 February 1498 for assisting Francesco da Brazolo to paint and gild figures above the choir in the basilica of Sant'Antonio in Padua are the earliest record of his activity; a contract dated 4 June 1506 to paint a chapel at the Villa at Torre for Bishop Pietro Barozzi indicates that he was still working in Padua in the opening years of the sixteenth century.⁷ "Nicholeto da

Modena / Ferrara 1507", inscribed on the ceiling in the Cryptoportico of the Domus Aurea, probably records Nicoletto's presence in Rome at this time and indicates that the artist had a connection with Ferrara.⁸ Previous scholarship has speculated that Nicoletto returned to Emilia or the Veneto after his time in Rome.⁹ Nicoletto's name indicates that he was from Modena and it is likely that he may have had links with nearby Ferrara and the Este court. Oriana Baracchi has rightly proposed that a payment on the 23 July 1510 to a "master Nicoletto painter" for painting two window jambs in the so called chamber of Borso d'Este, in the Palace in Modena, may be evidence that the printmaker was working for the Dukes.¹⁰ However there is no further documentation known to link Nicoletto to the Este court. Three dated engravings, his *Four Nude Women* of 1500, *St. Anthony Abbot*, of 1512, and *St. Roch*, of 1522, record his activity as a printmaker into the early 1520s.¹¹ As has been suggested in previous literature, the landscapes compris-

⁴ Zucker 1991.

⁵ Hind 1938-48, 5: 111; Zucker 1984, 157.

⁶ According to Hind, Nicoletto use thirteen different signatures, twelve monograms and three devices. Hind 1938-48, 5: 110-11. Landau, Parshall 1994, 102. For a recent discussion of the printmaker's activity: see Girondi, Crespi 2011, 44-5.

⁷ ArA, serie 13.38 (365), c. 39r-v. For the contract with Barozzi see: ASP, N, t. 3395, f. 440r-v. The contract with Barozzi is published in full in Sambin 1962, 124-6; extracts from the contract are also published in Sartori 1976, 424; Baracchi 1997, 80-2.

⁸ Dacos 1969, 147-8, appendix 1; Weege 1913, 19, fig. 13.

⁹ Bury, Landau 2004, 189; Pierpaoli 2000, 50-2; Zucker 1984, 157; Levenson, Oberhuber, Sheehan 1973, 467-8.

¹⁰ "To Master Nicoletto painter for painting two large windows overlooking the outer street of the room called that of Duke Borso" (*a M.ro Nicoletto depinctor per depingere le due fenestre grande di verso la strada di fuoravia nella camera ditta del duca Borso*). ASMo, CD, Massaria, Modena, b. 49, reg. anno 1510, c. 94v. Published in Baracchi 1997, 83.

¹¹ A unique impression of the first state of *Four Nude Women* is held at the British Museum, London, and measures 168 × 120 mm. Two impressions of a second state of *Four Nude Women*, which has Nicoletto da Modena's signature scored through, are known: they are held in the Gabinetto Nazionale delle Stampe, Rome, and in the Albertina, Vienna. Hind 1938-48, 5: 134, no. 98; Zucker 1984, 245-6, no. 2508.110.

ing of lagoons and gondolas in several Nicoletto's later engravings may indicate that he returned to work in the Veneto.

In his engravings Nicoletto responds to the technique, compositional formulae and style of contemporary printmakers including Andrea Mantegna (ca 1431-1506), Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), Giovanni Battista Palumba, Marcantonio Raimondi, Giulio Campagnola and Jacopo de' Barbari, while maintaining his own idiosyncratic style, allowing a loose chronology of his work to be established and possible geographical location of production and reception to be proposed for his works. Around half of his

prints are of religious theme, while the rest mainly represent mythological subjects or grotesque compositions. A recent examination of the secular engravings has revealed that they often incorporate complex iconography that draws on a variety of literary and visual sources to build a detailed representation of a specific subject probably intended for an erudite audience.¹² The possible sources of Nicoletto's *St. Sebastian* and the specific iconographic interpretation of the subject will be considered here for the first time to investigate where each state of the print may have been produced and its original intended function.

3 Nicoletto's St. Sebastian: Sources and Interpretation

In the first state of Nicoletto's *St. Sebastian* the saint is shown in the centre foreground, tied to the column of a ruined arch, his body pierced with three arrows. A landscape to the left of the saint extends to a distant city and hill-top town. To the right, an arcade leading back to an altar recalls that of Nicoletto's print of *St. Anthony Abbot*, dated 1512. The similarity of these architectural details, combined with technical competency and variety of marks to render different textures – from the saint's flesh pierced with arrows through to ivy climbing through crumbling walls – indicates that *St. Sebastian* was made at a around the same time.

The male figure, placed in front of a central arch shown turning and raising his face to look up above his left shoulder, recalls the painting of the same subject which Mantegna made for the Paduan Podestà in 1459, now located in the Gemäldegalerie, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.¹³ The figure of Nicoletto's *St. Sebastian* is strikingly close to that of Mantegna's painting. Both saints have angular features framed by tight curls of hair and the attention to the musculature of their bodies, in particular their torsos, is informed by the study of ancient sculpture. The *all'antica* figure type combined with the classical form of the column and arch convey the period of the reign of Emperor Diocletian (244-311 AD), in which St. Sebastian lived and was martyred. Unlike Mantegna, Nicoletto portrays the saint pierced with only three arrows. Showing the saint struck with so few arrows allows the

printmaker to focus our attention on the impact of each one. Nicoletto emphasizes the depth of the arrow through a thick dark line at their point of insertion, inviting us to contemplate the pain that each has inflicted. Placed at almost equal distances apart, the arrows guide our eye to separate points of the saint's body and emphasize his elegant *contrapposto*. The gentle sway of St. Sebastian, as he stands shot with arrows and tied to the column, accentuates his ideal *all'antica* beauty and combines with his upward gaze to convey how through his faith he will overcome his attempted martyrdom. Propped up against the plinth of the arch to which the saint is tied rests a quiver with arrows. The absence of the archer to whom the quiver belongs and representation of the saint above our viewpoint, using *sotto in su* perspective, invites the audience to place themselves in the viewpoint of one of his executioners as we contemplate the saint's martyrdom. Throughout the composition Nicoletto weaves a complex iconography that suspends the action of the narrative and invites us to consider the saint's youthful body and, through the arrows that puncture it, his resurrection from this attempt on his life.¹⁴

The distant landscape on the left of Nicoletto's engraving reflects those employed in Mantegna's works, including the *Martyrdom of St. James* in the Ovetari Chapel, Padua, of 1448, the *Agony in the Garden* from the predella of the San Zeno altarpiece, Verona, of 1456-59, now located in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours, the *St. Sebastian* of ca 1480, now in the Louvre, and his engraving of the

¹² Bartlett-Rawlings 2019.

¹³ Mantegna's *St. Sebastian* measures 68 × 30 cm.

¹⁴ Marshall 2002, 256.



Figure 1 Nicoletto da Modena, *St. Sebastian*, state 1. ca 1512. Engraving on paper, 295 × 205 mm. Paris, Louvre, Réunion des Musées Nationaux

Deposition from the Cross.¹⁵ Nicoletto's city, with its gateway, obelisks and tower surmounted by a Turkish half-moon, recalls similar backdrops in Mantegna's works that were circulating in prints

such as *Deposition from the Cross*, as well as paintings such as *Martyrdom of St. James* in the Ovetari Chapel, that the printmaker would have known through his time working in Padua. Above the city

¹⁵ Mantegna's *Agony in the Garden* from the predella of the San Zeno altarpiece, Verona, of 1456-59, measures 71 × 93 cm, the *St. Sebastian* of ca 1480, measures 250 × 140 cm, and his engraving of the *Deposition from the Cross* measures 448 × 359 mm.

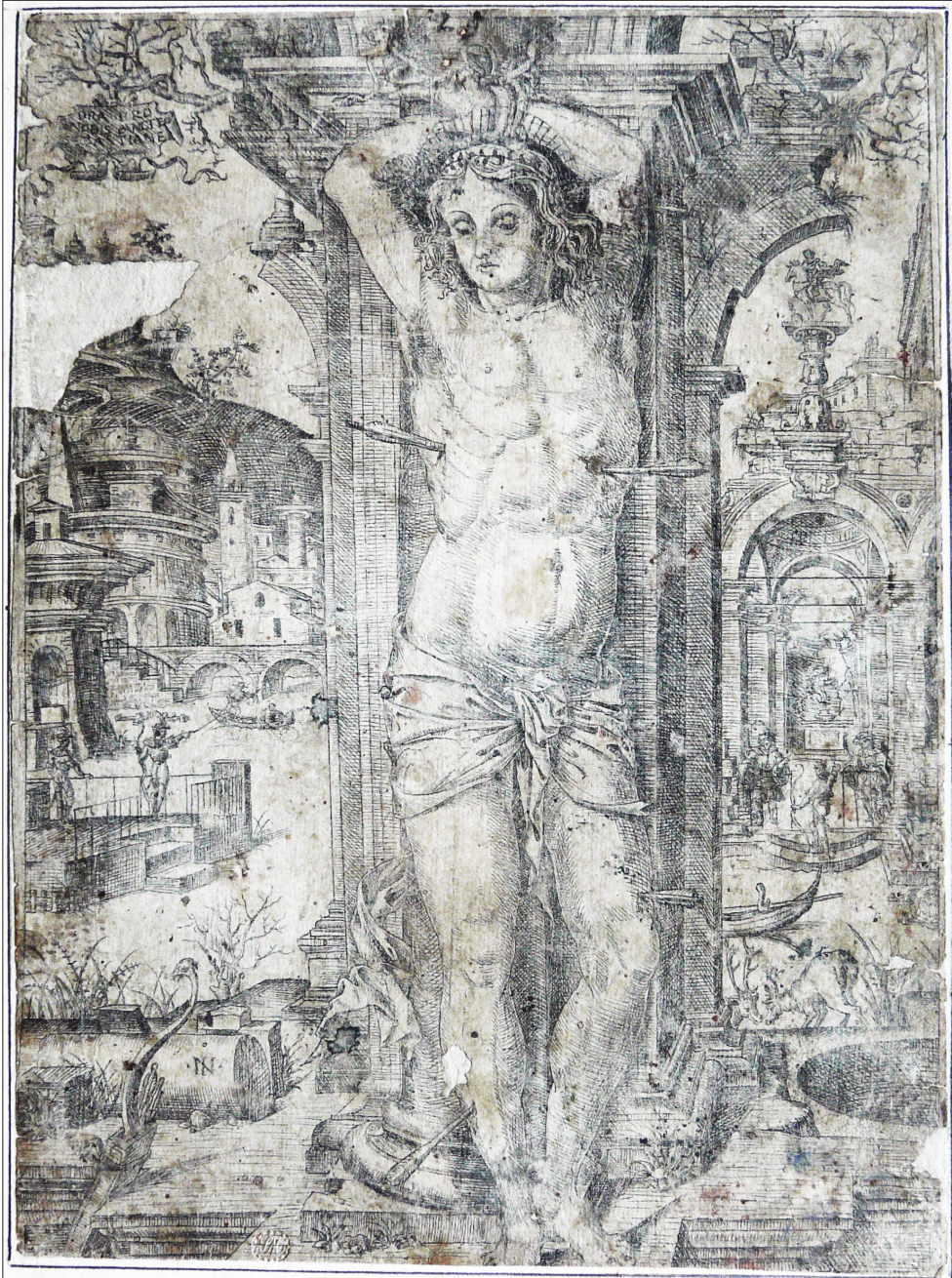


Figure 2 Nicoletto da Modena, *St. Sebastian*, state 2. ca 1522.
Engraving on paper, 285 × 209 mm. Pavia, Musei Civici

Nicoletto introduces a path that winds up a rocky mountain crop to a small hill-top town. The motif of path winding up to buildings surmounting a distant rocky promontory is particularly close to that in Mantegna's *St. Sebastian* (of ca 1480), suggesting that the printmaker either knew the painting or had access to drawings related to it. The motif

of this hill-top town recalls a passage from Jacobus de Voraigne's *Golden Legend*, one of the main sources for the life of Saint Sebastian available to Mantegna and Nicoletto, where the author draws on the iconography of the City of God being a hill-top town reached through a difficult path or martyrdom when he gives the etymological interpre-

tation of the saint's name as meaning 'one who pursues the beatitude of the city on high'.¹⁶

Further elements in Nicoletto's composition contribute to the story and iconography of St. Sebastian. To the right of Saint Sebastian, a colonnade leads back to an altar surmounted by a burning flame around which three archers gather following their persecution of the martyr. The altar stands under crumbling *all'antica* architecture conveying the end of Paganism with the rise of Christianity, here represented by Saint Sebastian in the centre foreground of the print, whose ideal heroic body is shown withstanding his attempted execution. Just above the right elbow of the saint, ivy pushes its way through the bricks of the arch, destroying its construction. Pliny the Elder observes that ivy is capable of damaging masonry and trees and its introduction in Nicoletto's print acts as a metaphor for Christianity ending pagan beliefs.¹⁷ Hyssops and plantains growing in cracks of the masonry on the ground are also introduced by Nicoletto for their symbolism. In her discussion of Mantegna's paintings of St. Sebastian, Joan G. Caldwell has proposed that the choice of these two plants may have been to underline the dichotomy between Pagan world (the cold and inconsistent plantains) and Christian belief (the warm hyssops).

Observing how a hyssop can root in rock, which he compares to Christ, the French canonist Guillaume Durand (ca 1230-1296) writes that the plant, "rooted and grounded in Christ, cannot be plucked up or separated from his love".¹⁸ Here the inclusion of hyssop growing on the left Nicoletto's print just above the column bearing Nicoletto's interlaced signature "NI" conveys St. Sebastian's consistent love for Christ for which he was martyred. On the opposite side of the print, Nicoletto shows a stag and a doe at the edge of a lagoon. Their inclusion in the iconography of St. Sebastian is unusual. Nicoletto includes a stag in another print of the saint, probably produced at a similar time, suggesting that the animal had significance for his interpretation of the saint. In both prints the animal is placed behind the martyr and at the edge of a lagoon. Its proximity to water was intended recall *Psalms* 41,1: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God" and convey Saint Sebastian's piety and longing for God. The large circular void directly in front of the doe's hind leg is mysterious. One possible explanation for it could be Nicoletto wanted to remind the viewer of the catacombs on the Via Appia, Rome, where Saint Sebastian's body was interred and where he was first venerated.¹⁹

4 Reworking St. Sebastian in a Second State

Intriguingly, in the second state of *St. Sebastian* Nicoletto changes just the figure of the saint. However, the interventions made to the plate alter the composition to such an extent that it is only in recent scholarship that the engraving was recognised as a second state.²⁰ In the second state the saint is given a greater immediacy through being enlarged, with his body now extending to almost the entire height of the print and being brought forward in the picture plane. Here the saint's body stands firm against the crumbling arch, which has been retained from the first state, to convey the triumph of Christianity over Paganism, symbolised by the *all'antica* architecture. Through enlarging the figure, Nicoletto emphasises the saint's presence and prompts the viewer to focus on his body and martyrdom. In the second state, the engraver changes

the mantegnesque features of St. Sebastian. The saint now has a rounder face framed by long tresses of hair. Here he no longer looks up with his mouth open as if suffering but instead gazes down, directing our eyes to the quiver of arrows propped up against the left of the arch that Nicoletto has kept from the first state, with his mouth closed as if resolved in his martyrdom. In the second state, Saint Sebastian is shown with more pronounced *contrapposto* to emphasise the sinuous form of his body, which is represented using curved parallel strokes of the burin that follow and describe the form and musculature of the body. The softer modelling shows Nicoletto's awareness of contemporary print-makers active in the Veneto such as Giulio Campagnola and Jacopo de' Barbari. The round face framed by shoulder length hair of the second state recalls

¹⁶ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 23 "St. Sebastian", 97 (Granger Ryan 2012); Caldwell 1973, 375.

¹⁷ Pliny writes: "Ivy is injurious to all tree and shrubs and makes its way through tombs and walls", *Natural History*, XVI, 62 (Rackham 1938-52); Caldwell 1973, 376.

¹⁸ William Durandus, *The Symbolism of Churches and of Church Ornaments*, 121 (Mason Neale, Webb 1842); Caldwell 1973, 375-6.

¹⁹ Barker 2007, 90.

²⁰ Zucker 1991, 28-37.

that in a print by Jacopo de' Barbari from around 1510-12, also a *St. Sebastian*, suggesting that he was responding to figural types as well as the techniques of printmakers active in the Veneto when he reworked this print. As in Jacopo's engraving, in his reworking of the print Nicoletto shows the saint tied to his support with rope wound around his wrists. The positioning of the saint's arms above his head also occurs in the first state of the engraving. It is possible that Nicoletto's decision to show the saint with arms above his head in the first version shows an awareness of Jacopo's print, which was made at around the same time. Earlier representations of St. Sebastian, such as Giovanni Mansueti's altarpiece of *St. Sebastian between Saints Liberale, Gregory, Francis and Roch* of around 1500 in the Accademia, Venice, exist and would have provided visual sources of the saint with his arms raised for both printmakers. The twisting body of Nicoletto's saint resting his weight on his right leg and turning his body to the left and head to the right is close to that in Mansueti's interpretation, suggesting that the printmaker was familiar with the altarpiece then in the church of San Francesco, Treviso. Nicoletto is recorded in 1505 as a witness in Treviso for the sale of a piece of land, suggesting he had links with the city that may have brought him into contact with Mansueti's altarpiece.²¹

It is unusual for Nicoletto to rework a plate and it is curious that he focussed his intervention solely on the figure of St. Sebastian in his print. The second state is shorter than the first, having the top 10 mm trimmed. There are losses in the paper and it is difficult to establish whether its shorter height is the result of the print being trimmed or Nicoletto trimming the plate. It is tempting to consider that the alterations to the plate's dimensions and representation of St. Sebastian may have been carried out at the same time by Nicoletto following damage to the plate. The practice of extending the life of printing plates by reworking them can be traced in surviving impressions of engravings. One such example is a set of four grotesque orna-

ment panels by Nicoletto issued in three states. The success of these engravings resulted in the plates needing to be reworked to strengthen the lines of the original compositions before they were issued in a second state. The stiffness of line in the second state suggests that the work was not carried out by Nicoletto, indicating that the plates had passed to another printmaker. The address of Antonio Salamanca ("Ant. Sa. exc."), added to the third state, records that the plates changed hands a second time. By reworking the figure of the saint Nicoletto recycles it, renewing his representation. One further example of a print issued in a second state by Nicoletto is that of *Leda and the Swan*, which is in fact a reworking of a plate engraved in the first state by Giovanni Battista Palumba. Due to the scarcity of documentation on print production in the first decades of the sixteenth century, the presence of this second state of *Leda and the Swan* provides important evidence of the practice of selling or exchanging plates between printmakers at that time. Nicoletto introduces changes to the original composition, adding a distant mountain range under clouds in the upper right and hiding traces of Palumba's signature, which he had burnished out, under a tuft of grass before adding his own on a rock in the lower centre of the plate. The interlaced signature "NICOLET" on the second state is used in six other works by the printmaker.²² These works are executed in a technique using more regular lines to create softer modelling, which Nicoletto developed around 1515-20 in response to prints issued in the Veneto by Giulio Campagnola, Domenico Campagnola (1500-1564) and Jacopo de' Barbari, and in Rome by Marcantonio Raimondi. By introducing minimal changes, Nicoletto develops Palumba's plate into a work that, with the addition of his own signature, appears to be of his own making. Nicoletto's decision to change the figure of St. Sebastian can be seen as having a similar purpose to his reworking of Palumba's *Leda and the Swan*.²³ In each case, by carrying out minor interventions to the plate,

²¹ AST, N I, busta 307, 140v. An extract of the document is included in the nineteenth-century transcriptions made by the notary Gustavo Bampo. See: Gustavo Bampo, *Spogli dei protocolli dei notari dell'Archivio notarile di Treviso, tra il sec. XIII e il XVII, in relazione all storia, arti, lettere*, BCT, ms. 1411, fasc. VI, c. 2r. Antonio Sartori cites Bampo's manuscript as including a reference to a Nicolò di Andrea. Sartori 1976, 424.

²² Hind 1938-48, 5: 128, no. 66; Zucker 1984, 214, no. 2508.061; Lambert 1999, 301-3, no. 576. In 2011 an engraving of *St. Giles and the Hind*, which includes the same signature of interlaced letters, was identified and published by Giulio Girondi and Matteo Crespi (2011, 44-5).

²³ A unique impression of the first state, measuring 150 × 99 mm, is known and is held in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. Impressions of the second state, 152 × 100 mm, are known and are held in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, British Museum, London, Albertina, Vienna, Museo Civico, Bassano del Grappa, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, Dresden King Friedrich Augustus Collection, Musée Condé, Chantilly, Collection of the Duke of Devonshire, Chatsworth, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Malaspina Collection, Musei Civici, Pavia, Cabinet Rothschild, Louvre, Paris, Graphische Sammlung der Eidgenössischen Technischen Hochschule, Zurich. See Hind 1938-48, 5: 257, no. 9; Zucker 1984, 220-1, no. 2507.0004.

Nicoletto is able to reinvent the print. In the case of *St. Sebastian*, he retains the setting as it is still relevant to the iconography of the saint. Nicoletto's new vision of the plague saint for the second state of his engraving, enlarged and brought forward in the picture plane, responds to that by Jacopo de' Barbari. The sensitive of parallel lines that softly describe the contours of the saint's flesh also indicates that Nicoletto was aware Jacopo's print and that in using a similar technique in his second state the printmaker was aiming to create a work that would appeal to a similar audience.

The type of changes introduced by Nicoletto to his *St. Sebastian* recall the interventions made by Francesco Rosselli to his engraving of the *Flagellation* in the 1490s, over a decade after the first state was issued. Scott Nethersole has recently observed how the ideal *all'antica* figure, which unusually is also used for Christ's two persecutors, is changed in the second state to a more ascetic type that conveys the Saviour's suffering. In the second state, the column to which Christ is tied is enlarged, making it appear to bear down on the figure and emphasising the impact of each blow from his persecutors' whips.²⁴ The focus on Christ's pain in the second state of the *Flagellation* may respond to the preaching of the priest Savonarola, who the engraver is known to have had sympathies for. However, as Nethersole notes, the figural type introduced in the second state also shows awareness of northern prints, making it difficult to establish whether Savonarola's preaching prompted this change in interpretation of the subject.

As has been discussed above, the shared technique and close dimensions of the second state of Nicoletto's *St. Sebastian* and *St. Roch*, dated 1522, suggests that the plate was reworked at this time. The date on *St. Roch* may offer a key to understanding what prompted the engraver to make the interventions in the second state of his *St. Sebastian*. These prints may have been intended to

be sold at shrines dedicated to the saints. However, the decision to produce these two prints in around 1522 might also have been in response to a growing need for images of the plague saints. Such prints provided easily transportable devotional images for prayer to saints Sebastian and Roch through which to invoke protection against the plague. On a *cartello* suspended from a tree in the upper left corner of the print is an invocation to Saint Sebastian to pray for the viewer ("ORA PRO NOBIS SANCTE SEBASTIANE") while that which appears as if carved into the plinth in *St. Roch* links the saint with salvation from the plague ("ROCHE BEATISS SALVA NOS A PESTE"). In each case Nicoletto has chosen to place the symbol of crossed branches, which he frequently uses as a signature, below the invocation to the saints. The constant threat of the plague in the opening decades would certainly have meant that there was a demand for images of these two saints. Nicoletto's oeuvre includes a total of seven engravings of St. Sebastian, indicating the demand for prints of the saint during his career. Although the date of 1522 on *St. Roch* has been noted in previous scholarship, making this the last known dated print by the artist, the link between this date and an outbreak of the plague in Italy between 1522 and 1524 has not been made.²⁵ *St. Roch* is the last of three engravings dated by Nicoletto. By introducing the date alongside the invocation to the saint, the printmaker emphasises both the current threat of the plague and emphasizes the importance of St. Roch in offering protection against the disease. Reworking *St. Sebastian* in a similar manner to *St. Roch*, through using softer modelling and bringing the saint into the foreground to fill the height of the composition, Nicoletto effectively creates a pair of engravings that would appeal to his contemporaries, inspire prayer and in turn offer protection against the plague then threatening Italy.

5 Situating Nicoletto's St. Sebastian and the Printmaker's Later Activity

In their representations of *St. Sebastian* both Mansueti and Jacopo de' Barbari introduce softer modelling to emphasise the sinuous form of the saint shown with his arms raised above his head. It is curious that, while Nicoletto also shows the saint with his arms above his body, the first state of his print draws on the work of Mantegna for both the

features of the saint and setting. Throughout his career Nicoletto often changed his style in response to that of the main artists and printmakers in the centres where he was working. Amongst his earliest engravings are copies after or compositions in the manner of those by Mantegna. These works were likely produced in Padua in the 1490s and show the

²⁴ Nethersole 2018, 116-20.

²⁵ Henderson 1989, 166-8, 176; Duncan, Scott 2001, 312-3; Cohn 2010, 20-6.

artist responding to the continuing demand for inventions in the style of Mantegna, who had been active in the city earlier in the century. The interest in mantegnesque works in Padua can also be seen in the paintings of Jacopo Parisati, called Jacopo da Montagnana (1440/3-1499) who, like Nicoletto, worked for the bishop Pietro Barozzi. Stylistically, his *St. Sebastian* dates to around 1512, when the printmaker was no longer following Mantegna's technique or compositions in his engravings. The decision to create a mantegnesque composition in the first state follows seems a conscious one. The figure and arch closely recall those in Mantegna's painting made for the Paduan Podestà in 1459 raising the question of whether it was produced in Padua audience familiar with the painting and whether this print is evidence of Nicoletto returning to Padua and the Veneto in the 1510s.

A ceramic *tondo* signed "NICO/LETI" and showing the *Virgin and Child enthroned between saints Roch and Lucy* (Musei Civici, Padua) also suggests that Nicoletto maintained ties and may have returned to work in Padua in the second decade of the sixteenth century. Recorded as being immured in the wall of a house on the Via Boccalerie, in the parish of Santa Lucia, the ceramic *tondo* may have been made as a sign for a workshop located there, as proposed by Andrea Moschetti.²⁶ The *tondo* recalls a number of Nicoletto's engravings and its composition is particularly close to that of *Madonna and Child Enthroned Between Two Saints*, of about 1506.²⁷ Similarly, the sinuous figure type of saints Roch and Lucy can be seen in the printmaker's group of fourteen prints with shared dimensions showing figures in settings of landscape *all'antica* architecture. These prints include the *St. Anthony Abbot* dated 1512 and can therefore be placed at about this time.²⁸ The elegant *contrapposto* of St. Lucy, turning to her right and holding a jar in her left hand, is particularly close to that of Nicoletto's print of the saint from this group of fourteen single figures.²⁹ The stylistic similarity between his engravings and the ceramic *tondo* confirms his authorship and dates this work

to around 1512. Although not proposed in previous scholarship, the ceramic *tondo* indicates that Nicoletto maintained links with Padua following the death of Pietro Barozzi and that he may have returned to work there after his sojourn in Rome from around 1507.

The ceramic *tondo* signed "NICO/LETI" and Nicoletto's *St. Sebastian* that draws from Mantegna's painting both suggest the printmaker maintained links with Padua and that he may have returned to the city after his time in Rome in 1507. Although the first state of *St. Sebastian* closely follows Mantegna's interpretation, characteristically Nicoletto does not entirely copy the model and instead looks to other sources, including other works by the painter for the landscape setting and representations of the saint with his arms above his head (for example, those by Mansueti and Jacopo de' Barbari). The printmaker's decision to rework *St. Sebastian* in a second state suggests that he was responding to a growing demand for the subject, likely prompted by an outbreak of the plague in around 1522. The changes introduced in the second state show the artist engaging with a new ideal figure type that drew from antique art but was represented with softer modelling to capture the fall of light on musculature that is now more curvaceous. The figure of St. Sebastian in the second state is closer to representations by Mansueti and Jacopo de' Barbari, and his technique of delicate parallel lines that curve around the forms of the saint's body recalls that by other Venetian artists such as Giulio and Domenico Campagnola, suggesting that Nicoletto was still working in the Veneto when he produced this print. Although Nicoletto changes only the central portion of the plate his remodelling of the saint transfigures the print, updating its style to create a pair to his *St. Roch*. The new *all'antica* body, sensitively rendered through Nicoletto's burin strokes, emphasizes St. Sebastian's purity from sin. This, combined with the enlarged figure of the saint, prompts our contemplation of his martyrdom and invites our prayer for his invocation against the plague.

²⁶ The *tondo* measures 525 mm diameter. Moschetti 1938, 253-60; Hind 1938-48, 5: 138, no. 119.

²⁷ Hind 1938-48, 5: 123, no. 39; Zucker 1984, 177-9, no. 2506.018; Lambert 1999, 293-5, no. 557.

²⁸ The group of fourteen engravings is accepted as being produced in around 1512, the date included on *St. Anthony Abbot*. See: Hind 1938-48, 5: 124-7, nos 46-60; Zucker 1984, 200-8, nos 2506.041-2506.041.

²⁹ Hind 1938-48, 5: 125, no. 47; Zucker 1984, 201, no. 2508.042.

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ASM CD	Archivio di Stato di Modena, Camera Ducale
ArA	Archivio della Veneranda Arca di Sant'Antonio, Padova
ASP	Archivio di Stato di Padova, Notarile
AST	Archivio di Stato di Treviso, Notarile I
BCT	Treviso, Biblioteca Comunale

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