

## Caravaggio's Maltese Inspiration \*

John Gash

Caravaggio's Maltese oeuvre and its influence on art on the island and elsewhere have been the subject of increasing scrutiny over the past sixty years.<sup>1</sup> But the impact that Malta may have had on Caravaggio has only recently begun to be seriously considered. David Stone, in particular, has convincingly demonstrated not only how the great **Beheading of St. John the Baptist** in the oratory of St. John's was conceived in response to the ritual and ideological requirements of the Knights, but also that minor aspects of its design were derived from an engraving of 1588 by Philippe Thomassin in the statute-book of the Order.<sup>2</sup> The latter should come as no surprise, because Caravaggio was always very alert to the visual ideas he found in paintings, prints and sculptures.<sup>3</sup> He never followed another artist's composition slavishly, yet would adapt striking motifs or passages to his own ends. Indeed this practice was more frequent with him than has sometimes been recognized. It was pursued with a

\* I am indebted to Pamela Willis, Keith Sciberras and Joe Galea - Naudi for their assistance during my research on this article.

1. Among the more recent literature on the Maltese Caravaggio and his influence, see, *inter alia*, with further bibliography, Mina Gregori, "A New Painting and Some Observations on Caravaggio's Journey to Malta", *The Burlington Magazine*, CXVI, no.859, October 1974, pp.594-603; L. Sebreghondi Fiorentini, "Francesco dell' Antella, Caravaggio, Paladini e altri", *Paragone (Arte)*, 383-5 (Jan.-March 1982), pp.107-22; Mario Buhagiar, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands, 1400-1900: Painting*, Malta, 1987; Maurizio Marini, *Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio "pictor praestantissimus"*, 2nd ed., Rome, 1989; P. Faruggia-Randon (ed.), *Caravaggio in Malta*, Malta, 1989 - including important articles by Dominic Cutajar on "Caravaggio in Malta. His Works and his Influence" and John Azzopardi, "Documentary Sources on Caravaggio's Stay in Malta"; Maurizio Calvesi, *Le Realtà di Caravaggio*, Turin, 1990; John Gash, "Painting and Sculpture in Early Modern Malta", in *Hospitaller Malta*, ed. Victor Mallia-Milanes, Malta, 1993, pp. 509-603; Stefania Macioce, "Caravaggio a Malta e i suoi referenti: notizie d'archivio", *Storia dell'Arte*, LXXXI, 1994, pp.207-28; John Azzopardi, "Un 'S.Francesco' di Caravaggio a Malta nel secolo XVIII: commenti sul periodo maltese del Merisi", in *Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio: La Vita e Le Opere attraverso i Documenti*, ed. S. Macioce, Rome, n.d.[?1997], pp.195-211; John Gash, "The Identity of Caravaggio's 'Knight of Malta'", *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXIX, no.1128, March, 1997, pp.156-60; and David Stone, "The Context of Caravaggio's 'Beheading of St. John' in Malta", *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXIX, no.1128, March 1997, pp.161-70.
2. D. Stone, *ibid.*, esp. p.165.
3. For an interesting example of the influence on him of a Dürer print, see K. Hermann Fiore, "Caravaggio's 'Taking of Christ' and Dürer's woodcut of 1509", *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXVII, no. 1102, pp.24-27; and for his inventive use of antique sculpture (despite the myth put about by Bellori and others that he totally rejected the antique in favour of nature), Sergio Benedetti, "Classical and Religious Influences in Caravaggio's Painting", in *Saints and Sinners: Caravaggio and the Baroque Image*, exhibition catalogue, Boston/Chicago, 1999.

democracy of spirit during the course of his travels, making no distinction between major and minor artists, styles or periods. His sole consideration seems to have been the dramatic or emotional force, and potential applicability, of the motif.

Here I shall be drawing attention to two paintings seen by Caravaggio in Malta that seem to have stimulated his own pictorial imagination, and also speculating about the possible Maltese origins of a painting thought by a growing number of scholars to be by him: the **Toothpuller** in the Palazzo Pitti (Plate 7).

The two pictures that Caravaggio was inspired by are the triptych of the **Lamentation over the Dead Christ**, ascribed to the circle of the Netherlandish artist Jan van Scorel (1495-1562) (Museum of St. John's co-Cathedral, Valletta); and the **Flagellation of Christ** (dated 1572) by the Florentine, Stefano Pieri (sacristy of St. John's co-Cathedral) (Plates 1, 2 & 3).<sup>4</sup> Caravaggio is bound to have known these works, since they were housed in prominent places in the Order's public buildings - the former in the chapel of the Grandmaster's Palace, the latter probably still in Caravaggio's day over the altar of the chapel of the English Langue in St. John's, at the entrance to the Oratory.<sup>5</sup> While he must have seen both pictures on a regular basis, and either immediately or gradually grasped their relevance to his own enterprise, he did not apply the ideas gleaned from them until after he had left the island and moved on to Sicily and back to Naples. Caravaggio was, in fact, blessed with an exceptionally good visual memory, but the lapse of time also had the beneficial result of subjecting the remembered motifs more fully to the transforming alchemy of his own imagination.

It is, on one level, only to be expected that Caravaggio would have appreciated an early Netherlandish painting like the **Lamentation**, with its sober, yet moving, realism - even if there are relatively few specific examples of such influence in his work that one could quote. Yet what fascinated him most here was not the realistic detail but the emotional charge carried by a particular device: that of the Mater

4. *The Lamentation*, Inventory no. M.190. Central panel, 104.2 x 71 cm; whole, including frame, 119 x 171 cm. *The Flagellation*, Inventory no. G.665. 369 x 294 cm.

5. For the 'Van Scorel', see Mario Buhagiar in J. Azzopardi, ed., *The Order's Early Legacy in Malta*, Malta, 1989, p.27, no.8. The work was recently moved from the Cathedral Museum, Mdina, to the Museum of St. John's. Achille Ferris, *Il Maggior Tempio di S. Giovanni Battista in Malta*, Malta, 1900, p.84, dates Pieri's *Flagellation* to 1572, and records the artist's signature at the base of the column. See also Dominic Cutajar, *History and Works of Art of St. John's Church Valletta*, Malta, 1989, pp.63, 82, 84. For Pieri's life and art, see Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più Eccellenti Architetti, Pittori etc.*, ed. G. Milanesi, Florence, 1885, pp.312, 610; Giovanni Baglione, *Le Vite de' Pittori, Scultori et Architetti dal Pontificato di Gregorio XIII fino a tutto quello d'Urbano Ottavo* (Rome, 1649), p.89; and Filippo Baldinucci, *Notizie dei Professori del Disegno da Cimabue in Qua*, ed. F. Ranalli, Florence, 1846, pp.501-2.

Dolorosa's face pressed up against that of her dead Son.<sup>6</sup> For when, after his flight from Malta and brief residence in Syracuse, he came, in the first half of 1609, to paint one of the most memorable passages in his entire oeuvre - the face of Martha weeping over that of her dead brother, Lazarus, in the great altarpiece of the **Raising of Lazarus** for Giovanni Battista de' Lazzari (Messina, Museo Regionale) (Plate 4, 5) - it was precisely this formulation that he sought to reinvent. Of course Caravaggio intensifies and sharpens the motif by inverting the faces of Martha and Lazarus into polar opposites (Life and Death - although death on the verge of being transformed once again by the Light of the World into life). And should any doubt remain about Caravaggio's source, one has only to note the abbreviated structure of Lazarus's face, which is a conscious reminiscence of the triangulated face of Christ in the Malta **Lamentation**. Indeed, one gets the impression that the slightly 'primitive' formal simplifications of the 'van Scorel' triptych were especially attractive to the sensibility of the late Caravaggio.

By contrast, it was to a more sophisticated style of painting that Caravaggio turned in connection with his **Flagellation of Christ** for the De Franchis (Di Franco) chapel in San Domenico Maggiore, Naples (now Capodimonte) (Plate 6). A good deal of ink has been spilt over whether the altarpiece was executed during Caravaggio's first or second Neapolitan visit (1606-07 or 1609-10), with Roberto Longhi in 1959 influentially arguing on stylistic grounds in favour of the latter. The publication in 1977 by Vincenzo Pacelli of bills of payment from the patron, Tommaso de Franchis, to Caravaggio on 11 and 29 of May 1607 (for 250 and 40.09 ducats respectively) seemed, for a time, to settle the issue in favour of the earlier date bracket, even though the subject of the picture in question is not recorded.<sup>7</sup> However, both Ferdinando Bologna and Pacelli himself have subsequently resurrected the debate, arguing that the **Flagellation** may well have been either completed or altered *after* Caravaggio's move to Malta in July 1607.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, x-radiographs taken in 1982 show that the kicking tormentor on the right has been painted over a complete, perhaps kneeling, figure in the middle distance, who seems to look lovingly at the suf-

6. The motif is, of course, not unique to this painting: one finds it, in varying permutations, in a good many fifteenth and sixteenth-century pietàs. A particularly close Netherlandish example, from which the van Scorel may derive, is that by Quentin Matsys (finished by W. Key) in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich [See, Federico Zeri, *Pittura e Controriforma: L'arte senza tempo di Scipione da Gaeta*, Turin, 1957, plate 47].

7. Vincenzo Pacelli, "New documents concerning Caravaggio in Naples", *The Burlington Magazine*, CXIX, no.897, December 1977, pp.819-29.

8. For the fullest restatement of Bologna's views, and a resumé of the whole debate, see F. Bologna, ed., *Battistello Caracciolo e il primo naturalismo a Napoli*, exhibition catalogue, Naples, 1991, pp.22 and 257-58. For Pacelli, see Vincenzo Pacelli, "Gli ultimi anni della produzione artistica di Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio", in Dominic Cutajar, ed., *Malta and Caravaggio*, Malta, 1986, pp.81-95., and Pacelli's book, *L'ultimo Caravaggio*, Todi, 1994, pp.41-47.

fering Christ.<sup>9</sup> He is well integrated into what must almost certainly have been a first version of the picture, and very probably represented one of the de Franchis family, for it was a well-established convention to incorporate a kneeling patron in depictions of the **Flagellation**.<sup>10</sup> For Bologna, who discerns a difference of *facture* between the right-hand tormentor in Caravaggio's **Flagellation** and the rest of the picture, the execution (or reworking) of the right half of the picture must have occurred after Caravaggio's documented return from Sicily to Naples in the autumn of 1609, especially because he sees a great similarity between the conception and execution of that figure and that of the right-hand gravedigger in the **Burial of St. Lucy** (Santa Lucia, Syracuse), painted in the last months of 1608. He also argues that the bills of payment of May 1607 neither specify nor suggest a final payment, so that Caravaggio may well have sailed to Malta in July 1607 before completing the **Flagellation**. While these various observations are important, some of the conclusions that Bologna draws from them are inconsistent. Why, for example, was the right-hand side of the picture reworked as late as 1609/10 if a version had not even been finished prior to the move to Malta?

Pacelli, too, believes that Caravaggio may not have finished work on the picture prior to his first documented journey to Malta, although he, like Bologna, fails to consider the issue of a reworking of an apparently finished version as distinct from completion, at a later date, of an unfinished commission. On the other hand, Pacelli considers that Caravaggio's second campaign of work on the picture (whether reworking or completion) more logically follows soon after his first recorded voyage to Malta in July 1607, and would have involved a fairly speedy return trip to Naples, rather than waiting till his documented, final return in the autumn of 1609. His reasoning is that far too many of Caravaggio's works seem to have been done in Naples (and far too few in Malta) to accommodate to the relatively limited time spans of the two Neapolitan sojourns as currently conceived, and the full year and a quarter apparently spent in Malta. And while some of us doubted such an early resumption on the grounds that, since Caravaggio was made a knight of St. John on 14 July 1608, he would have been required by the statutes of the Order to remain "in convent" for a whole year prior to his accession,<sup>11</sup> it is clear from Stefania Macioce's and John Azzopardi's recent documentary discoveries that Caravaggio's situation vis-a-vis the knighthood was wholly exceptional, and that permission for his nomination, because he had committed homicide, was still being sought from the Vatican in February 1608.<sup>12</sup> So that Pacelli's speculation about one or more return trips to

Naples *during* Caravaggio's Maltese sojourn now seems at least possible. Furthermore, unlike Bologna, Pacelli discerns no differences of handling between the right and left halves of the picture, thereby concluding that the work as we know it today was painted more or less during the same phase, even though reworked. And in this connection he notes that Caravaggio could have returned to Naples for the sale there of his two pictures, the **Madonna of the Rosary** and **Judith and Holofernes**, in September 1607.

Whatever the case, it is highly likely, as I first argued in 1993, that Caravaggio painted the right-hand kicking figure as a result of seeing Stefano Pieri's **Flagellation** in Malta.<sup>13</sup> Stefano Pieri (1542-1629) was a Florentine Mannerist who probably executed his **Flagellation** for the Florentine Grand Master, Pietro del Monte, in 1572. His work is imbued with a Mannerist grace and élan that testify to its ultimate derivation from Sebastiano del Piombo's picture of the same subject in San Pietro in Montorio, Rome (1521-24). But its dark background, striking tenebrism, and dramatic realism also betray the beginnings of the Florentine reform of painting, and would doubtless have struck a chord with Caravaggio. More crucially, the kicking pose of the rearmost of the two right-hand torturers very closely parallels that of the cognate figure in Caravaggio's version. Even the positioning of his arms is comparable. (In the picture's currently highly damaged and repainted state, it might seem at first glance as if the foreground figure is the kicking one, but a closer inspection makes it clear that the leg, in fact, belongs to his semi-concealed accomplice behind). The motif harks back to north European paintings and prints of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, but is absent in Sebastiano's altarpiece, and is only intermittently deployed in the idealizing Italy of the sixteenth century.<sup>14</sup> All of which increases the likelihood of Pieri's figure having inspired Caravaggio.

Various possible scenarios suggest themselves:- (A) Caravaggio had finished the original version of his **Flagellation** in June 1607, as the records of payment might suggest, but, having seen Pieri's picture in Malta, altered the right hand figure on a subsequent occasion - either fairly soon (if we assume that the July 1607 visit to the island was a brief, reconnaissance mission), or much later in 1609-10. If either were the case, one would need to account for the fact that the right-hand 'patron' figure on the original paint surface, as revealed by the x-radiograph, was done away with. (B) Although it is likely that the payments discovered by Pacelli refer to the Naples

9. See illustration in V. Pacelli, *ibid.*, 1994, p.43.

10. E.g. the signed drawing by Lambert Lombard in the Musée d'Ansembourg, Liège, which contains both a kneeling donor and a kicking tormentor.

11. See John Gash, "Painting and Sculpture in Early Modern Malta", *op. cit.*, 1993, p.528.

12. Articles cited in note 1.

13. John Gash, *op. cit.*, 1993, p.521.

14. An interesting Italian sixteenth-century engraving of the school of Marcantonio Raimondi in the British Museum shows one of the torturers kicking Christ, but this time at stomach level (a traditional variant). It also includes a figure in the background kneeling down and tying up a bunch of birch twigs, comparable to the one in the left foreground of Caravaggio's picture.

**Flagellation**, there is no proof that they do - and, if they do not, the likelihood of a 1609-10, post-Pierian execution is enhanced. (C) Alternatively, if the payments do relate to the project, it is even possible that Caravaggio had been advised of Pieri's picture by some of his Hospitaller friends in Naples (or by the artist himself, since Pieri lived and worked in Rome during Caravaggio's time there), and gone to view it by way of 'research'.

The extent of the influence of Pieri's image on Caravaggio's is conjectural. But it is interesting to note that, in addition to the kicking motif, that of pulling Christ's hair is common to both. Although the latter was not uncommon, the particular pose and demeanour of the left-hand, hair-grasping figure is remarkably similar in both pictures. And if, in the last resort, Caravaggio's more concentrated and naturalistic representation, anchored in the study of life models, is more masterly and moving, though rather less fluent, than its Mannered counterpart, the catalytic effect of Pieri's picture on the Lombard's omniverous imagination surely insists on being recognized.

If the Maltese artistic environment sparked off such reactions in Caravaggio's mind, what about the wider environment? Did life on the island provide specific stimuli, as would be the case with Favray's genre paintings a century and a half later?<sup>15</sup> Conventional wisdom has always held that Caravaggio more or less abandoned genre painting with the beginnings of his success as a religious painter c.1600. But this is almost certainly an oversimplification generated by the random survival of images. And the growing groundswell of opinion in favour of the Florentine **Toothpuller** (Plate 7) as an authentic late work by Caravaggio may well yet overturn the old orthodoxy.<sup>16</sup> For my money, there is a good likelihood that this damaged painting was executed by Caravaggio himself no earlier than the Maltese period, for it incorporates such a wide range of reminiscences of his own works from disparate locations as to make it more likely that it was painted by the master himself than by a peripatetic follower. It also had a decisive impact on northern Caravaggists such as Honthorst and Rombouts, who must have seen it in the Medici collection - in Honthorst's case no later than 1620, when he returned to Utrecht. But the attribution is nonetheless a borderline one. The 'sources' include the **Martyrdom of St. Matthew** (Rome, Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi) for the raised arm of the patient and the pose of the semi-nude man to the right; the **Madonna of the Rosary** (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum) and the lost **Virgin and Child with the Infant St. John**, both of which were probably painted in Naples in 1606-07, for the back

view of the little boy leaning on the table in the left foreground; the old crone type of figure found in Caravaggio's Roman **Judith and Holofernes** (Rome, Galleria Nazionale, Palazzo Barberini) and his Colonna estates **Supper at Emmaus** (Milan, Brera, 1606) for the wrinkled, bug-eyed woman at the far right; and the portrait of the Florentine Knight, **Antonio Martelli** (Florence, Palazzo Pitti), which was probably painted in Malta in 1608 and taken back to Florence the following year, for the figure of near-identical pose and demeanour third from the left.

But where, if it is a Caravaggio, was the **Toothpuller** painted - in Malta, Sicily, or Naples during Caravaggio's last year? Although the picture is very damaged, and even though technical arguments cannot prove conclusive, there are marked technical similarities with the works done by Caravaggio in Malta. Erich Schleier long ago drew attention to the fact that the picture is very close to the Pitti *Portrait of a Knight* (Antonio Martelli),<sup>17</sup> while the blotchy highlights also bear direct comparison with those of the **St. Jerome** now also in the oratory of St. John's. And here I should like to offer one or two further speculations (no more) about its possible Maltese genesis.

The **Toothpuller** is partly inspired by yet another Netherlandish source, Lucas van Leyden's engraving of the same subject of 1523, which furnished Caravaggio with the idea for the slouch hat worn by his rather comic dentist with puffed out cheeks. Indeed Caravaggio may have had his attention drawn to this print by Vasari's high praise of it as a masterpiece of naturalism.<sup>18</sup> But, as always with Caravaggio, the individual figures give the appearance of having been in large part painted direct from life, which in turn raises the question of whether this is merely a staged reenactment, or whether it bears some closer relation to an actual toothpulling situation?

The extensive practice of medicine at a high level in the Knights' Sacra Infermeria in Valletta is well known. But did the system in Caravaggio's day include dentistry, as it certainly did in the eighteenth century?<sup>19</sup> That there were Maltese dentists in the first half of the seventeenth century is, however, confirmed by the case of the doctor Joseph Cossaeus, who chose the subject of dental surgery for one of his graduation theses at the university of Montpellier in 1636.<sup>20</sup> In addition to such a broad circumstantial possibility, the appearance of two of the figures in the picture may reflect the Maltese scene. We have already noted that the dignified-looking man third from left

17. Erich Schleier, review of the exhibition, "Caravaggio e i Caravaggeschi nelle nelle Gallerie di Firenze", *Kunstchronick*, XXIV, no. 4, 1971, p.88.

18. Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più Eccellenti Architetti, Pittori etc.*, ed. G. Milanesi, Florence, 1885, vol.V, p.411.

19. Paul Cassar, *Medical History of Malta*, London, 1964, pp.513-14.

20. Paul Cassar, *ibid.*, p.513.

15. John Gash, *op. cit.*, 1993, pp.593-94.

16. For a full discussion of the picture and its history, see Mina Gregori in Mina Gregori, ed., *Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio: come nascono i capolavori*, Milan, 1992, pp.328-47.

has echoes of the portrait of Fra Antonio Martelli. But the bald-headed figure next to him, who appears to be wearing pantaloons, might well be based on some Turkish slave. He is the only totally bald figure in Caravaggio's *oeuvre*, although some of his followers, such as Manfredi and Cecco, did replicate the type - possibly under the influence of this very picture. But Caravaggio was interested in reality rather than types. Certain surviving images of Moslems from the 16th/17th centuries, such as those engraved in Nicolo de' Nicolai's *Le Navigazioni et Viaggi, fatti nella Turchia* of 1580, do suggest analogies with the figure in question - whether it be the shaven head of a Turkish Dervish or the pantaloons worn by two Moorish pilgrims to Mecca (Plates 8 & 9).<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the semi-clad figure who leans forward from the bottom-right is sporting a kind of *undress* that would not be inappropriate to a patient, or even member of staff, in the Infermeria come a Maltese summer!

Should the hypothesis of a Maltese origin for the **Toothpuller** turn out to be correct, there would be no shortage of potential Florentine patrons from among the ranks of the Knights. And Caravaggio certainly had links with their community. Apart from the portrait of **Antonio Martelli**, he also painted in 1608 the **Sleeping Cupid** for Fra Francesco dell' Antella, Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt's Florentine Secretary for Italy. But the **Toothpuller** was recorded in the Grand Ducal collection in Florence as early as 1638, and had probably already been there for some time, hinting at the possibility of a direct Medici commission. Recent, or relatively recent, Medici Knights Hospitaller in 1608 were (with dates of accession):- Francesco (1585), Attilio (1591); Alberto (1591); Don Antonio, natural son of Grand Duke Francesco (1595); and Pietro (15 May 1598).<sup>22</sup> If such an important connection was indeed forged by Caravaggio during his Maltese interlude, it would have followed on logically from his earlier affiliation during the 1590s with Cardinal Francesco del Monte, representative in Rome of the Grand Duke Ferdinando de' Medici.

21. Nicolo de' Nicolai, *Le navigazioni et viaggi, fatti nella Turchia*, translated from French into Italian by Francesco Flori, Venice, 1580, pp.110 and 119.

22. Bartolomeo del Pozzo and Roberto Solaro, *Ruolo Generale de' Cavalieri Gerosolimitani della Veneranda Lingua d' Italia*, Turin, 1714, pp.152-3, 166-7, 168-9, 174-5, and 180-1.



Plate 1: School of Jan van Scorel, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ with Joseph of Arimathea and Mary Magdalene*. Triptych. Panel. 119 x 171 cm. (including frames). Museum of St. John's co-cathedral, Valletta.  
 Plate 2: School of Jan van Scorel, *Lamentation*. Central panel. 104.2 x 71 cm.

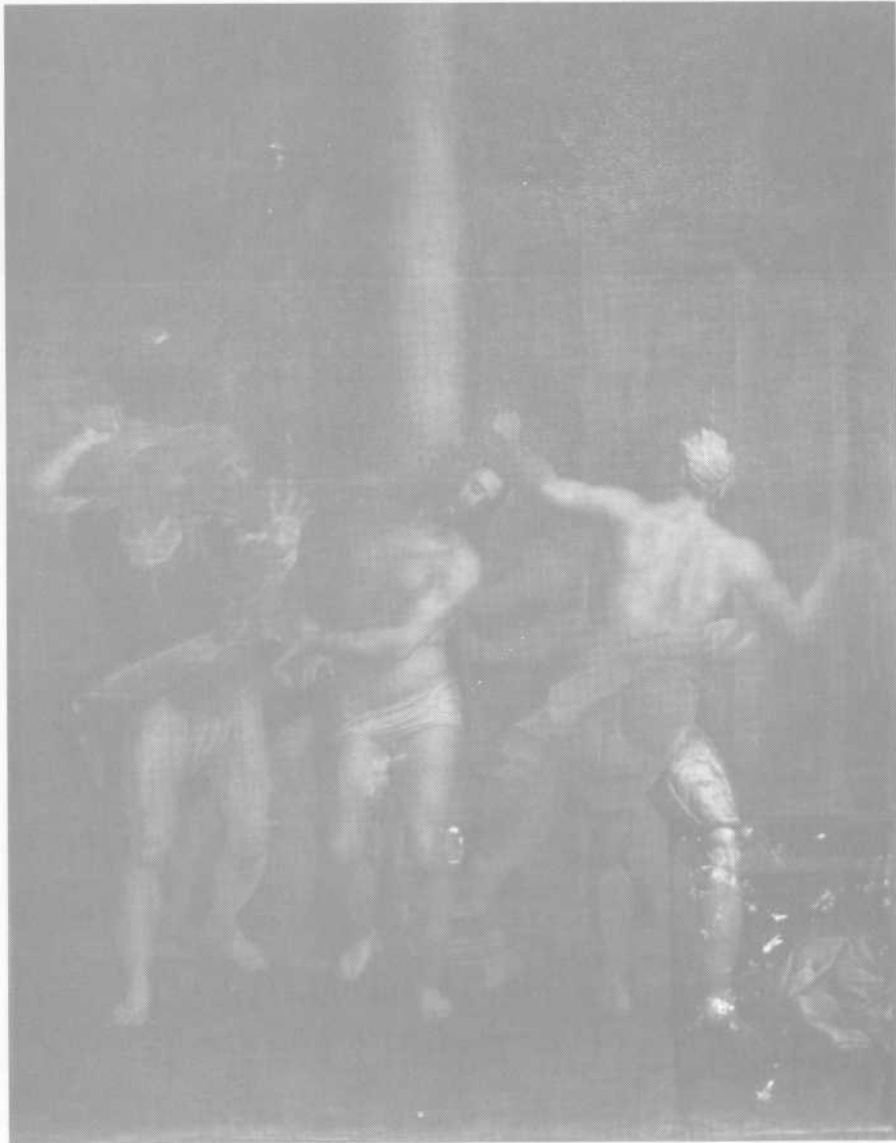


Plate 3: Stefano Pieri, *The Flagellation of Christ*. Canvas. 369 x 294 cm. Sacristy of St. John's co-cathedral, Valletta.



Plate 4: Caravaggio, *The Raising of Lazarus*. Canvas. 380 x 275cm. Messina, Museo Regionale.

Plate 5: Caravaggio, *The Raising of Lazarus*. Canvas. 380 x 275cm. Messina, Museo Regionale. Detail.

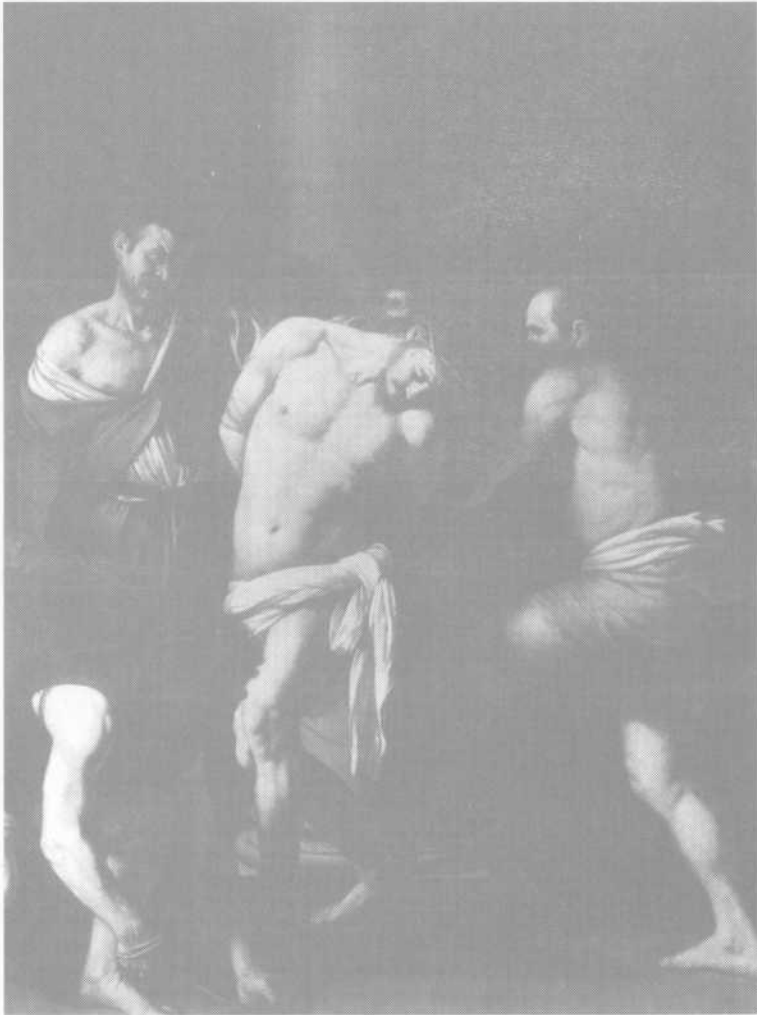


Plate 6: Caravaggio, *The Flagellation of Christ*. Canvas. 286 x 213cm. Galleria Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.

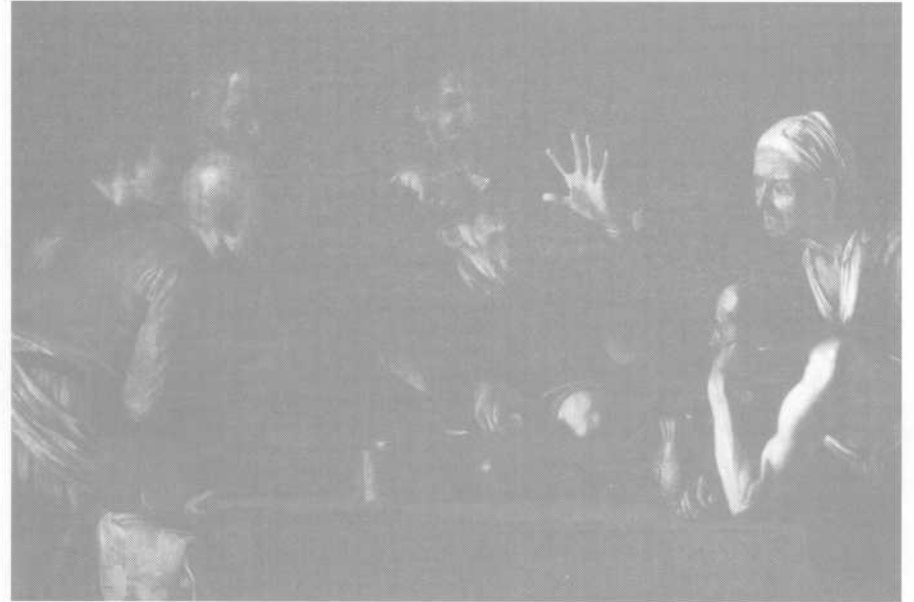


Plate 7: Caravaggio (?), *The Toothpuller*. Canvas. 139.5 x 194.5 cm. Palazzo Pitti, Florence.



Plate 8: Anon, *Dervasio religioso Turco*. Engraving in Nicolo de' Nicolai, "Le Navigazioni etc.", 1580.

Plate 9: Anon, *Peregrini Mori tornando dalla Mecha*. Engraving in Nicolo de' Nicolai, "Le Navigazioni etc.", 1580.