

# The Volto Santo

Each year on 13 September, the streets of Lucca are lit by thousands of candles and people's voices are hushed, even as they crowd around Piazza San Frediano at 8 pm (or even earlier) to try to get a first glimpse of the procession known as the Luminara, held on the eve of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, 14 September.

Lucchese émigrés return from around the world and renew their ties to their hometown. For the religiously faithful, it is a solemn experience, and for everyone it is an expression of communal solidarity. In the procession are not only church representatives; there are also representatives of all the groups serving the public good, such as the ambulance corps, emergency workers, fire-fighters, and there are citizens dressed in medieval clothes. The sounds of chanting (*Evviva la Croce, la Croce è viva!*) and local bands alternate with solemn silence. In Via Fillungo, many people lean out of their windows to look down on the procession as it passes.

At the heart of the experience is a legend. According to this legend, Nicodemus, who assisted Joseph of Arimathea in placing Christ in his tomb, carved the black Christ from a piece of wood, 2.4 meters (8 foot) tall. He fell asleep before completing the face and awoke to find it had been completed by an angel (hence the Volto Santo, or Holy Face). The statue was then hidden for 700 years in a cave in Palestine.

In 782 A.D., the statue was miraculously transported from the Holy Land to Luni, a colony on the coast of Tuscany about 100 km from Lucca. Bishop Johannes travelled from Lucca to

Luni, loaded the statue onto a wagon, and let his oxen make their own way to Lucca. The statue was kept first at San Frediano, where a fresco cycle narrates the legend of Nicodemus, and later in the Cathedral (which was built in 1070 A.D.).

A visit to the Cathedral to see the Volto Santo was a desired stop on the Via Francigena for pilgrims on their way to Rome. Dante, writing between 1308 and 1321, knew of the Holy Face. A demon in *Inferno*, Canto XXI, cries out: *Qui non ha luogo il Volto Santo! Qui si nuota altrimenti che nel Serchio.* (This is not the place of the Volto Santo! Here one swims differently than in the Serchio.)

In 1484, Matteo Civitali built a little 8-sided temple from Carrara marble to hold the sculpture within the Cathedral.

This very special carving is the oldest intact wooden relic in Europe.

Nowadays, the culmination of the procession is the entrance into the Cathedral to view the black Christ. When all the cortege have arrived at Piazza San Martino, a mass and concert take place, followed at about 11.30 pm by fireworks near the Serchio River outside the city walls. The following day another mass is held.

Visitors who show disrespect at this solemn time are frowned upon by the Lucchese who uphold the tradition.

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