

Venice, Materiality, and the Byzantine World

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Session Organizers: Brad Hostetler (Kenyon College); Joseph Kopta (Pratt Institute)

The Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Symposium leading to the 2010 publication of *San Marco, Byzantium, and the Myths of Venice* introduced new perspectives on Byzantine and Venetian visual and material culture that extended Otto Demus's survey of Saint Mark's basilica. The authors' application of more recent approaches—such as the social function of spolia, the act of display, the construction of identity, and cultural hybridity—brought fresh analyses to a complex and richly decorated monument. This panel seeks to expand this methodological discourse by taking into account questions related to materials, materiality, and intermediality between Venice and Byzantium. The arrival of material culture from the Byzantine world to Venice as gifts, spoils, or ephemera during the centuries surrounding the Fourth Crusade allowed for both appropriation and conceptual transformation of material culture. In light of the renewal in interest of Venice's Byzantine heritage, this panel seeks to reflect on the interaction of material culture between la Serenissima and the Byzantine world, especially during the eleventh through fifteenth centuries. Topics are wide-ranging, including, but not limited to: issues of reception and cultural translation; changing concepts of preciousness; different valuation of materials between Venice and Byzantium; the fluctuating simulation of material visual effects; the transformation of Byzantine objects incorporated into Venetian frames; intermedial dialogue between Byzantine and Venetian art; and the process and technique of manufacture of works between Byzantium and Venice. Some points of departure include: the building of San Marco itself; Byzantine objects in the Treasury; Byzantine manuscripts included as part of the Cardinal Bessarion gift to the Republic; the monuments on Torcello; or issues raised as a result of recent conservation projects. New cross-cultural methodologies from art historical, anthropological, or sociological fields are welcome.

Justin Greenlee (University of Virginia)

“The *Staurotheke* of Basilios Bessarion as a Weapon for Crusade”

In this paper, I focus on the Byzantine *staurotheke*, or reliquary of the True Cross, that was likely given by the soon-to-be patriarch of Constantinople, Gregory III, to Basilios Bessarion in c. 1438/40 and eventually donated to the brothers of the Scuola della Carità in Venice (1464). Building on the work of J.B. Schioppalalba and Holger Klein, I examine the so-called “Reliquary of Cardinal Bessarion” in light of Venice's maritime empire in the fifteenth century, and more specifically the cardinal's desire to convince the Senate to engage the Venetian fleet against the Ottomans. I argue that Bessarion's Crusading efforts were motivated by the fall of the Peloponnesus, in particular, look to relate the cardinal's gift to the contents of a speech he delivered to the Venetian Senate in 1462/63. On this occasion, Bessarion's tried to rally the Senate's support for Crusade (and effort that only succeeded, temporarily), and I suggest that the cardinal's oration is integrally related to his later use of the *staurotheke* as an instrument for Crusade.

To further investigate Bessarion's use of objects as forms of persuasive speech, I contrast the ritualized function of *staurothekai* in Italy and the Byzantine world, and examine the possibility that the meaning of Bessarion's example was eroded during its cultural translation from Constantinople to Venice. While a Venetian audience would have no doubt

appreciated the *staurotheke*'s material richness, they may not have grasped the reliquary as a *weapon* or appreciated it as an overt symbol of the need to "take up the Cross" and embark on Crusade. Such a meaning is suggested, however, by Bessarion's coat of arms, which shows a *staurotheke* being grasped by members of both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. The heraldic, performative, and diplomatic context of the *staurotheke* come together to suggest a disconnect between Byzantine and Italian reception of the object, and I hope to investigate this loss of meaning throughout my paper.

Ana Munk (University of Zagreb)

"*Sacer Lapis* in Andrea Dandolo's Program for the Baptistery of San Marco"

Sacer lapis, the granite slab upon which Christ presumably sat and preached serves as the altar stone in the baptistery of San Marco to this day. It was brought by the Venetian army as a war booty from the Venetian Crusade of 1122-1124, as reported by Cerbano Cerbani's translation narrative. On the way back to Venice, the sacred stone of Tyre saved the Venetian fleet from the tempest because the One who sat on it "governs the winds and seas." It was a trophy of a great victory over a well-fortified city of Tyre in a naval battle when the Venetian army, called by the Pope Calixtus II and allied with Baldwin II of Jerusalem, defeated the Fatimids. The doge Domenico Michiel expressed his pride in the victory on his tomb epitaph: "Tyre with Syria I present to you Christ, redeem me."

The presentation intends to evaluate the significance of this relic in Andrea Dandolo mosaic program in the baptistery. Andrea Dandolo had two spaces decorated around the Crusader relics: the baptistery altar with Christ's stone and San Isidoro chapel for the body of St. Isidore. Both relics laid dormant until the doge Andrea Dandolo and the procurators of San Marco decided to activate their symbolic and narrative potential.

As we know, this evocative relic was not the only one that marked the space of the baptistery as a relics' *lapidarium*. One, however, wonders what prompted the move of Pilastri Acritani from the nearby Porta da Mar and the main entrance from the south to just few meters farther, toward the baptistery door? The lunette over the baptistery door displays the reused late antique, most likely Syrian sigma-shaped altar stone. Taken together these spolia narrow topographical coordinates to Syria and Palestine, rather than Constantinople. Between two stone markers, the pillars of Acre and the stone of Tyre, the geographical distance narrows even further to about 40 kilometers between Acre and Tyre, both major Crusaders' port city and strongholds in the eastern Mediterranean until they were both taken by the Mamluks in 1291. It will be shown that these political circumstances were of major importance to the economic interests of Venice in years when the baptistery mosaics were created between 1343 and 1354 when the doge Andrea Dandolo was the head of the state.

I will also examine two marble panels to the viewer's left of the baptistery altar reported as marked by bloodstains of St John the Baptist's martyrdom. The head of Saint John the Baptist, referenced in the mosaic above the panels, is the relic of the Fourth Crusade kept in the treasury. Both the stone of Tyre and bloodstained panels reinforce the rhetoric of the Crusade in the baptistery space. Alfred Gell's distinction of iconic and aniconic images (such as marble plaques stained with blood and a simple granite slab of Tyre) explains the dynamic between aniconic stones and images: "The aniconic image of the god in the form of a stone is an index of the god's spatio-temporal presence, but not his appearance." The lack of God's appearance, however, is plenty compensated by the image in the dome over the altar

space where the enthronement theme is expanded on in seeming contradiction to Dandolo's exasperation over the political and trading standstill in the eastern Mediterranean.

Mark H. Summers (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

“Material Meanings: Islamic Rock Crystal from Constantinople to Venice”

In 1231, a catastrophic fire destroyed most of the treasury collection of San Marco in Venice. Miraculously, a group of relics brought to Venice after the sack of Constantinople in 1204 survived the inferno. Writing to Venetian ambassadors in Rome in 1265, the Doge Ranieri Zeno implored his men to tell the Franciscans, Dominicans, and the Pope, so that all might hear of the miracle. The surviving relics, which included a crystal ampule with the blood of Christ, relics of the True Cross, and a fragment of John the Baptist's skull, are depicted in a mid-13th century relief. The relics are also easily identifiable in the 1283 treasury inventory; all are noted within the first eight entries.

While the letter, the relief, and the inventory each point to the significance of this set of reliquaries, by some twist of fate the relics and their containers also survive to the present. As a result, the group has been the subject of scholarly study. After coming to Venice, these relics performed multiple functions: they could be used to shore up political power (Debra Pincus), they contributed to the construction of Venice's mythical connection to the East (Holger Klein and Thomas Dale), and they were exemplary of a Venetian *translatio* movement that justified their sacred theft (David Perry).

While the existing scholarship has established some of the ways reliquaries functioned broadly in medieval Venice, this paper takes a closer look at the Reliquary of the Holy Blood. Framed at the center of the relief carving and listed first in the 1238 inventory, this reliquary combines an Islamic rock crystal vessel and a 13th century Venetian setting. Shaped as a monstrance, the reliquary showcases the materiality of the crystal and its contents, which lend the vessel a red hue. Framed this way, the crystal took a distinctive format, appearance, and function that set it apart from other rock crystal pieces in the treasury, fundamentally altering the way its material was presented to and understood by its Western audience.

Danai Thomaidis (Ca' Foscari University, Venice)

“Byzantine Icons in Venetian Piety: Medium – Message – Fruition from the East to the West”

This paper aims to study the introduction and fruition of Byzantine icons into Venetian piety between the 13th and the 18th century. While a large number of scholars have examined the issue of the political and religious motives that determined the introduction of Byzantine icons in Venice, less attention has been directed to the influence that this Byzantine *medium* had in the formation of Venetian popular identity. With the reception of these images in the *Serenissima* we witness their gradual incorporation into local popular customs. Venetian citizens began to venerate them, transforming this Byzantine import into an inextricable aspect of local visual culture. Miraculous stories began to circulate and popular novels were created among the inhabitants, which worshipped the icons in great measure in churches and private houses, as well as in the little “*capitelli*” placed along the streets. It was in such *medium* that they seek for help and salvation.

On this occasion I present some examples of the incorporation of Byzantine icons into Venetian liturgy, as well as in other religious practices that took place beyond the sacred ecclesiastical space, in an attempt to provide a more complex anthropological image of their

absorption and impact into Venetian popular piety. I aim in such way to provide a contribution to the further understanding of the motivations that led a Catholic population such as the Venetian one to promote this icons into the devotional medium *par excellence*, as testified by textual and visual evidence.

Galina Tirnanic (Oakland University)

“The Triumphal Gateway of Venice: Columns on the Piazzetta di San Marco”

Two granite columns supporting the statues of Saint Theodore and the lion of Saint Mark stand close to the edge of the Piazzetta di San Marco in Venice, where the land meets the sea and where medieval Venice met the world. The two-column ensemble consists of disparate parts, brought to Venice from disparate places and manufactured at different times out of a variety of materials, but the final result is a unified whole functioning as a symbolic gateway to the city of Venice. A prominent monument in its own right, the ensemble has received sparse attention from art historians. Scholars have investigated individual elements, such as the bronze lion, the hybrid statue of St. Theodore, the carvings on the bases of the columns, or the granite shafts themselves, but the significance of the columns as more than the sum of their parts is still elusive. Placed at the edge of the sea but at the same time in the heart of the city, the columns were used as a backdrop for a variety of religious and civic ceremonies over the centuries. Imbued with an aura of liminality, they marked the threshold between Venice and the rest of the world, between ceremony and everyday life, and in some instances between this world and the next. Tracing the history of the columns from their Byzantine origins as structural components through their gradual transformation into a coherent monument of Venetian self-representation, this paper investigates how the material elements lost or preserved their original meanings and how those transformed meanings contributed to the effects of the whole both in its own setting and in its intertextual connections with comparable monuments in Constantinople and other cities.

John Witty (Emory University)

“The Santa Chiara Polyptych: A Trecento Translation of a Hybrid Luxury Aesthetic”

An elaborate gilded architectural frame guides the viewer’s encounter of the Franciscan and Christological scenes that are the focus of Paolo Veneziano’s (active 1333-58) Santa Chiara polyptych in Venice’s Accademia galleries. The altarpiece’s architectural frame is a crucial aspect of the object’s design. The frame contextualizes the work within a hybrid visual culture that favored an aesthetic of heightened visual complexity. This taste for strikingly complex objects is built upon a legacy of interaction between Venice and Byzantium. A landmark example of this hybrid visual culture is the *Pala d’Oro*. Under the patronage of doge Andrea Dandolo (ruled 1343-54), the altarpiece’s Byzantine enamels were enclosed in minute gothic architectural frames. Dandolo’s interventions enshrine the precious enamel representations of angels, apostles, and prophets in a framework that creates the effect of saintly multitudes in a palace of gold: the Heavenly Jerusalem of Revelation.

As Paolo Veneziano’s workshop was commissioned to make the weekday cover for the *Pala d’Oro*, the artist and his collaborators would have been intimately familiar with the design of this composite object central to Venetian devotion. Based on the second chapter of my dissertation, this presentation will engage the Santa Chiara polyptych, the *Pala d’Oro*, and related objects to demonstrate how Paolo Veneziano’s workshop adopted the *Pala d’Oro*’s representation of the Heavenly Jerusalem as a conceptual and material framework. Translated and enlarged in the more humble medium of gilded wood in the Santa Chiara

polyptych, gothic architectural framing devices guided late medieval viewers' perception of devotional content. The conceptual framework of the heavenly Jerusalem is the means by which a visually complex aesthetic of spoliation encountered in the *Pala d'Oro* was translated into a repeatable, encompassing structure for facilitating devotional experience in altarpieces commissioned from Paolo Veneziano's workshop for churches throughout the city of Venice and further afield.