

ISTITUTO VENETO DI SCIENZE, LETTERE ED ARTI

# LA STAUROTECA DI BESSARIONE FRA COSTANTINOPOLI E VENEZIA

a cura di

HOLGER A. KLEIN

VALERIA POLETTTO

PETER SCHREINER

## *ESTRATTO*

Il volume riporta le relazioni presentate alle giornate internazionali di studio *La stauroteca di Bessarione: restauro, provenienza, ambito culturale tra Costantinopoli e Venezia*, promosse da: Gallerie dell'Accademia, Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini di Venezia, Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, in collaborazione con: Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani, con il contributo di: Intesa Sanpaolo SpA nell'ambito del progetto Restituzioni, Fondazione Gerda Henkel (Düsseldorf), Venezia, 17-18 ottobre 2013.

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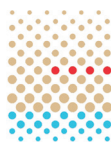
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FRA COSTANTINOPOLI E VENEZIA

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LA STAUROTECA DI BESSARIONE  
FRA COSTANTINOPOLI  
E VENEZIA

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ASSi	Archivio di Stato di Siena
ASPMVen	Archivio storico del Polo Museale del Veneto
BMCVe	Biblioteca del Museo Correr di Venezia
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HOLGER A. KLEIN

CARDINAL BESSARION, PHILIPPE DE MÉZIÈRES  
AND THE RHETORIC OF RELICS  
IN LATE MEDIEVAL VENICE\*

1. *Introduction*

Throughout the periods we have come to call the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, relics of Christ's Passion were venerated, collected, and treasured by individuals and religious communities in both Byzantium and Western Europe<sup>1</sup>. Already by the end of the fourth century, two cities in the Late Roman empire, namely Jerusalem and Rome, had gained considerable fame as repositories of some of these most cherished relics of Christendom, thus attracting not only significant numbers of pilgrims from near and far, but also considerable revenue streams that began to stimulate and support the local economy<sup>2</sup>. Constantinople,

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\* I am most grateful to the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, whose generous support for a summer of research in Venice in 2012 allowed for a close examination of the True Cross reliquary of the *scuola* di San Giovanni Evangelista and for archival research on the circumstances of its donation by Philippe de Mézières.

<sup>1</sup> For a brief summary of the role of the relics of Christ's Passion in Byzantium and Medieval Europe, see H.A. KLEIN, *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage*, ed. by L.J. TAYLOR *et al.*, Boston 2009, pp. 599-601, with bibliographic references. For various contributions to the topic, see also *Byzance et les reliques du Christ*, ed. by J. DURAND - B. FLUSIN, Centre de recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, Monographies 17, Paris 2004, pp. 15-30.

<sup>2</sup> On the 'economy of pilgrimage' and the impact of Holy Land pilgrims on local economies, see A. ZERBINI, *The Late Antique Economy: Primary and Secondary Production*, in *Local Economies? Production and Exchange of Inland Regions in Late Antiquity*, ed. by L. LAVAN, Leiden-Boston 2015, pp. 61-81; B. WARD-PERKINS, *Specialization, Trade, and Prosperity: An Overview of the Economy of the Late Antique Eastern Mediterranean*, in *Economy and Exchange in the East Mediterranean in Late Antiquity: Proceedings of a Conference at Somerville College, Oxford*, ed. by S. KINGSLEY - M. DECKER, Oxford 2015<sup>2</sup>, pp. 167-175; D. CANER, *Towards a miraculous economy: Christian gifts and material blessings in Late*

the imperial capital on the Bosphorus, joined their ranks a few centuries later, both as a result of the collecting activities of members of the imperial family and targeted efforts to rescue more prominent relics from sites and cities in the eastern parts of the empire that were threatened by war and conquest<sup>3</sup>. The loss of Jerusalem, first to the Persians in 614 and then to the Arabs in 637, eventually triggered the translation of the most distinguished relics of Christ's Passion to Constantinople and resulted in the permanent establishment of their cult in the capital<sup>4</sup>. By the end of the twelfth century, the empire's most important collection of relics, which included a large portion of the True Cross and the Holy Lance along with the column of the Flagellation, the Crown of Thorns, the purple robe in which Christ was dressed in mockery, and other tokens of his Passion, was kept at the Church of the Virgin of the Pharos, located within the precinct of the imperial palace and, as its name suggests, in close proximity to the palace's beacon or lighthouse. From here, certain relics would be carried forth to be venerated at Hagia Sophia and elsewhere on major feast days<sup>5</sup>.

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*Antiquity*, «Journal of Early Christian Studies», 14 (2006), pp. 329-77; J.P. SODINI, *La terre des semelles: images pieuses ramenées par les pèlerins des lieux saints (terre sainte, Martyria d'Orient)*, «Journal des savants», 1 (2011), pp. 77-140.

<sup>3</sup> See H.A. KLEIN, *Sacred Relics and Imperial Ceremonies at the Great Palace of Constantinople*, in *Visualisierungen von Herrschaft*, ed. by F.A. BAUER, Istanbul 2006 (Byzas 5), pp. 79-99; H.A. KLEIN, *The Crown of His Kingdom: Imperial Ideology, Palace Ritual, and the Relics of Christ's Passion*, in *The Emperor's House: Palaces from Augustus to the Age of Absolutism*, ed. by J.M. FEATHERSTONE - J.-M. SPIESER - G. TANMAN - U. WULF-RHEIDT, Leipzig 2015, pp. 201-212.

<sup>4</sup> On the circumstances and date of the transfer of Passion relics from Jerusalem to Constantinople, see H.A. KLEIN, *Niketas und das wahre Kreuz. Kritische Anmerkungen zur Überlieferung des Chronicon Paschale ad annum 614*, «Byzantinische Zeitschrift», 94 (2001), pp. 580-587; on the establishment of their permanent cult in the capital, see H.A. KLEIN, *Constantine, Helena, and the Cult of the True Cross in Constantinople*, in *Byzance et les reliques du Christ*, pp. 31-59.

<sup>5</sup> The Pharos church had been rebuilt and lavishly refurbished after the end of Iconoclasm (726-843) and gradually assumed the role of the empire's Holy of Holies. For a more recent assessments of its importance, see M. BACCI, *Relics of the Pharos Chapel. A View from the Latin West*, in *Eastern Christian Relics*, ed. by A. LIDOV, Moscow 2003, pp. 234-246; P. MAGDALINO, *L'église du Phare et les Reliques de la Passion à Constantinople (VII<sup>e</sup>/VIII<sup>e</sup>-XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, in *Byzance et les reliques du Christ*, pp. 15-30. See also KLEIN, *Sacred Relics*, pp. 79-81. KLEIN, *Crown of His Kingdom*, pp. 201-202.

The Crusader conquest of Constantinople in 1204 and the subsequent looting of its churches, chapels, and palaces, allowed yet another city, namely Venice, to enter the stage as a key repository of sacred relics of the highest order<sup>6</sup>. Separated from each other by almost a thousand nautical miles, yet inextricably linked by a long history of political, commercial, and cultural interactions, Constantinople and Venice were arguably the most prosperous and culturally refined cities in the Medieval Mediterranean. «Venice», as Donald Nicol once noted, «was born as a province of the Byzantine Empire, [...] grew into an ally, came of age as a partner and matured as the owner of extensive colonial possessions within the disintegrating structure of the Byzantine world»<sup>7</sup>. But not only in terms of its political, commercial, and cultural ambitions did Venice mature from an ally to a partner to a powerful rival of Byzantium. Also as a collector and guardian of relics of Christ's Passion did Venice compete with the Byzantine empire and its capital. By the late thirteenth century, Constantinople lay largely despoiled of its once famous ecclesiastical treasures. Many of them were now scattered across Western Europe, having found new homes in the most prestigious churches and monasteries of France and Germany, which had received them as pious gifts from crusading knights, traveling bishops, or entrepreneurial clerics, who had crossed the seas to visit Constantinople on their way to Cyprus and the Levant during the thirteenth century<sup>8</sup>. However, few churches or cities in Northern Europe could rival Venice in terms of the quality and quantity of sacred objects acquired. The earliest surviving inventories of the treasury of San Marco, composed in 1283 and 1325 respectively, present us with a vivid picture of the influx of wealth – both material and spiritual – that had resulted from the conquest of Constantinople and more than five decades of privileged

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<sup>6</sup> H.A. KLEIN, *Refashioning Byzantium in Venice, ca. 1200-1400*, in *San Marco, Byzantium, and the Myths of Venice*, ed. by R. NELSON - H. MAGUIRE, Washington D.C. 2010, pp. 193-225. H.A. KLEIN, *Die Heiltümer Venedigs – Die 'byzantinischen' Reliquien der Stadt*, in *Quarta Crociata. Venezia-Bisanzio-Impero latino*, II, ed. by G. ORTALLI - G. RAVEGNANI - P. SCHREINER, Venice 2006, 2 vols., pp. 699-736.

<sup>7</sup> D.M. NICOL, *Byzantium and Venice: A Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations*, Cambridge 1988, p. vii.

<sup>8</sup> See most recently D. PERRY, *Sacred Plunder. Venice and the Aftermath of the Fourth Crusade*, University Park 2015.

access to Byzantium's most sacred sites and valued treasures<sup>9</sup>. As we know from a ducal letter sent by Raniero Zeno (1253-68) to his ambassadors in Rome on May 30, 1265, three of the most precious objects that had come to Venice in the aftermath of 1204 included a relic of the True Cross and a crystal ampoule with the Blood of Christ. Together with a fragment of the head of John the Baptist, they had miraculously escaped a devastating fire in the treasury of San Marco some thirty years prior, reason enough for the doge to request papal recognition of their miracle-working powers<sup>10</sup>. Another Venetian Doge, namely Andrea Dandolo (1343-54), cited the same relics prominently in his *Chronicle* in the early 1340s, claiming for the first time that these treasures had been sent by his early thirteenth-century predecessor Enrico Dandolo (1195-1205) soon after the sack of the Byzantine capital<sup>11</sup>. As I have argued elsewhere, Andrea Dandolo's attempt to associate San Marco's most venerated relics with his namesake and predecessor seems to take Raniero Zeno's earlier efforts to propagate Venice's miracle-working relics a step further by explicitly linking divine with ducal agency, thus equating Enrico Dandolo's sacred endowment for San Marco with Empress Helena's alleged translation of a portion of the True Cross and the Holy Nails from Jerusalem to Constantinople, where they served as powerful reminders of Christ's Passion and Resurrection and safeguarded the city and empire through their miracle-working presence<sup>12</sup>.

Since scholarly attention has often focused on the earlier history of relic translations to the lagoon, including Enrico Dandolo's alleged gift of relics for San Marco, this essay explores the history of two

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<sup>9</sup> R. GALLO, *Il Tesoro di S. Marco e la sua Storia*, Venice-Rome 1967 (Civiltà Veneziana, Saggi 16), pp. 273-287.

<sup>10</sup> The third object mentioned in the letter was a piece of the skull of St. John the Baptist. For the letter of Doge Raniero Zeno to Marco Gradenigo, Francesco Giustiniano, Pietro Dandolo, and Nicolò Querini, see D. PINCUS, *Christian Relics and the Body Politic: A Thirteenth-Century Relief Plaque in the Church of San Marco*, in *Interpretazioni Venetiane: studi di storia dell'arte in onore di Michelangelo Muraro*, ed. by D. ROSAND, Venice 1984, pp. 39-57, here 57 (Appendix).

<sup>11</sup> ANDREA DANDOLO, *Chronica*, p. 280<sup>7-11</sup>: «obtinuit dux mirificam crucem auro inclusam, quam post inventionem matris Constantinus in bello secum detulerat, et ampulam sanguinis miraculosi Jesu Christi et brachium Sancti Georgii martiris, cum parte capitis sancti Johannis Baptiste, quas dux mictens Veneciam in una capela collocari iussit».

<sup>12</sup> See KLEIN, *Refashioning Byzantium*, p. 216.

other, yet no less important donations of dominical relics to Venetian institutions in the late medieval period<sup>13</sup>. The first one is a high-profile gift of a relic of the True Cross to the confraternity, or *scuola*, of San Giovanni Evangelista, which took place on December 23, 1369, through the generosity of Philippe de Mézières (1327-1405), the Grand Chancellor of Cyprus, who had first come to Venice in 1362 in the company of Peter I of Lusignan, the King of Cyprus (1358-1369), to drum up financial and military support for a new Crusade, and later settled in Venice more permanently<sup>14</sup>. The second gift, no less high-profile in character, consisted of two fragments of the True Cross and two pieces of the purple tunic of Christ and was pledged to the confraternity of Santa Maria dei Battuti della Carità in the summer of 1463 in response to the *scuola*'s appointment of the Greek-born humanist, Roman Cardinal, and titular Patriarch of Constantinople, Bessarion, as an honorary member<sup>15</sup>. Because Bessarion requested to hold on to these relics during his lifetime, the panel-shaped container, in which they were enclosed, did not arrive on the Rialto until May

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<sup>13</sup> For a more recent study on the relic donation of Enrico Dandolo, see PERRY, *Sacred Plunder*, pp. 30-31; K. KRAUSE, *Feuerprobe, Porträts in Stein. Mittelalterliche Propaganda für Venedigs Reliquien aus Konstantinopel und die Frage nach ihrem Erfolg*, in *Lateinisch-Griechisch-Arabische Begegnungen*, ed. by M. MERSCH - U. RITZERFELD, Berlin 2009, pp. 111-162; KLEIN, *Heiltümer*, pp. 798-802.

<sup>14</sup> For a more recent study on Philippe de Mézières and the historical circumstances of his time, see the various contributions in *Philippe de Mézières and His Age. Piety and Politics in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. by R. BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI - K. PETKOV, Leiden 2011; see also the classical study by N. IORGA, *Philippe de Mézières, 1327-1405, et la croisade au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 1896 [reprint: London 1973]. For a summary account of the circumstances of de Mézières donation to the scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista, see P. FORTINI BROWN, *Venetian Narrative Painting in the Age of Carpaccio*, New Haven 1988, pp. 60, and 139-142.

<sup>15</sup> On Cardinal Bessarion and his role in the political, philosophical, and cultural debates of his time, see the various contributions in «*Inter latinos graecissimus, inter graecos latinissimus*». *Bessarion im Wechselspiel kultureller Integration*, ed. by C. MÄRTL - C. KAISER - T. RICKLIN, Berlin-Boston 2013. For a summary account of the circumstances of Bessarion's donation to the scuola di Santa Maria della Carità, see most recently H.A. KLEIN, *Die Staurothek Kardinal Bessarions: Bildrhetorik und Reliquienkult im Venedig des späten Mittelalters*, in *Inter latinos graecissimus*, pp. 245-276; On the reliquary and its restoration, see also *Restituzioni 2013: Tesori d'arte restaurati*, sedicesima edizione, ed. by C. BERTELLI - G. BONSAINTI, Museo di Capodimonte, Gallerie d'Italia, Palazzi Sevallos Stigiliano, Naples, 23 marzo - 9 luglio 2013, Vicenza 2013, Nr. 18, pp. 78-81 (V. POLETTTO).

24, 1472<sup>16</sup>. While the reliquary itself is now known as the *Stauroteca di Bessarione*, it previously belonged to the Unionist Patriarch Gregorios III of Constantinople, who, after being forced into exile in 1450, spent his final years in Rome and bequeathed the reliquary to Bessarion on his deathbed in 1459<sup>17</sup>. Both the *stauroteca*'s earlier association with Gregory III Melissenos, or Mammas, and its later prominence within the religious, urban, and social fabric of late medieval Venice are, as I hope to demonstrate, of considerable importance for our understanding of late Byzantine reliquary design and its impact on the history of the cult of relics on the Rialto.

## 2. *Setting the Stage*

In order to understand the historical significance of these late medieval donations, one must recall that, already in 819, Venice had received an important donation of relics from Emperor Leo V (r. 813-20)<sup>18</sup>. This donation comprised «the body of the holy prophet Zachariah, a fragment of the True Cross, parts of the garments of Christ and his mother, and many other treasures»<sup>19</sup>. This imperial gift of relics was the likely result of a strong personal and political relationship Agnello Participacio had been able to establish with Leo V in the early decades of the ninth century, an effort that was honored not only in Agnello's recognition as *doge* by a Byzantine embassy in 811 but

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<sup>16</sup> A compilation of all relevant sources is contained in the *Dissertatio* of G.B. SCHIOPPAPALBA, *In perantiquam sacram tabulam Graecam insigni sodalitis Sanctae Mariae Caritatis Venetiarum ab amplissimo Cardinali Bessarione dono datam dissertatio*, Venice 1767. For the arrival date of the relic in Venice, see *ibid.*, 142-145; KLEIN, *Staurotehek*, 248.

<sup>17</sup> For further information on Patriarch Gregory III Melissenos, see S.L. BARNALIDES, Γρεγόριος ο Γ', ο τελευταίος πατριάρχης Κωνσταντινουπόλεως πριν από την άλωση και η φιλενωτική πολιτική του, Thessalonike 2001.

<sup>18</sup> For a synopsis of the historical context, see NICOL, *Byzantium and Venice*, pp. 17-19.

<sup>19</sup> ANDREA DANDOLO, *Chronica per extensum descripta*, ed. by E. PASTORELLO, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores XIII/1*, Bologna 1938, pp. 142-143: «Agnellus dux, vir catholicus, a Leone imperatore suscepit corpus sancti Çachariae prophete et partem Ligni Crucis et indumentorum Christi et Matris eius, cum plurimis thesauris...».

also in the bestowal of further titles on members of the Participacio family<sup>20</sup>. Leo's gift of relics seems to have been more than «a public demonstration of the emperor's favor»<sup>21</sup> towards a province that, after years of crisis, had started to consolidate and establish its political center more permanently on the islands of the Rialto. The fact that Leo is also said to have contributed funds and expertise to the construction and maintenance of the monastery that was to house the relics of St. Zachariah may further indicate that the gift of relics was not an isolated act of generosity, but the beginning of more permanent Byzantine interests in the newly established religious foundations on the Rialto. Already in the middle of the sixth century, Byzantine emperors had used similar tactics to bolster Ravenna's effort to raise its ecclesiastical profile to the rank of the much older and more prestigious archbishoprics of Rome and Milan by sending relics of the apostles Peter, Paul, John, Andrew, and Thomas as well as of St. John the Baptist and Zachariah, to the Byzantine stronghold in Italy<sup>22</sup>. After the fall of Ravenna in 751,

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<sup>20</sup> In 813, Agnello sent his son Giustiniano to Constantinople to attend Leo's coronation, on which occasion he was bestowed the title of *hypatos*. Eight years later, Agnello's grandson traveled to Constantinople to attend the coronation of Michael II's, in turn marrying a Byzantine noblewoman named Romana. See NICOL, *Byzantium and Venice*, p. 23. For the respective sources, see IOHANNES DIACONUS, *Chronicon Venetum* (= *Cronache Veneziane antichissime*, ed. by G. MONTICOLO, Rome 1890 (Fonti per la storia d'Italia, 9), pp. 57-171), pp. 106-107; ANDREA DANDOLO, *Chronica*, ed. by PASTORELLO, pp. 142 and 144; *Urkunden zur älteren Handels- und Staatsgeschichte der Republik Venedig, mit besonderer Beziehung auf Byzanz und die Levante*, ed. by G.L.F. TAFEL - G.M. THOMAS, Vienna 1856 (Fontes rerum Austriacarum 12/1), Nr. IV, 4.

<sup>21</sup> NICOL, *Byzantium and Venice*, p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> For a full list of relics acquired for Ravenna from Constantinople and elsewhere, see *Agnelli Ravennatis Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Ravennatis*, ed. by D. MAUSKOPF DELIYANNIS, Turnhout 2006 (Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis, 199), pp. 241-242. For an English translation, see AGNELLUS OF RAVENNA, *The Book of Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna*, translated with an introduction and notes by D. MAUSKOPF DELIYANNIS, Washington D.C. 2004, pp. 187-188. On the Byzantine effort to elevate Ravenna's political and ecclesiastical status against the interests of Aquileia, Milan, and Rome, see O. VON SIMSON, *Sacred Fortress. Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna*, Princeton 1987<sup>2</sup>, p. 17, note 54; O. DEMUS, *The Church of San Marco in Venice. History, Architecture, Sculpture*, Washington D.C. 1960 (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 6), p. 7; P. GEARY, *Furta Sacra: Theft of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*, Princeton 1990, p. 91; D. MAUSKOPF DELIYANNIS, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge 2010, pp. 206-213.

it was now Venice, Byzantium's most important ally in the Northern Adriatic, that became the recipient of important relics of Christ, the Virgin and a biblical saint to secure its ties with the capital and raise its ecclesiastical profile in the region<sup>23</sup>. How serious the empire's interest in Venice was, can be gleaned from the fact that relics of the True Cross, the veil of the Virgin, and the tunic of Christ, ranked among the Byzantine emperor's proudest possessions and were regarded as powerful *palladia* that were able to protect the city and empire<sup>24</sup>. Only a few years later, namely in December of 822, it was two of these very relics, namely the True Cross and the veil of the Virgin, that miraculously saved the capital from the assault of Thomas the Slav when they were paraded over the city ramparts by Patriarch Antonios and Theophilos, the son and co-emperor of Michael II (r. 820-29)<sup>25</sup>.

The *translatio* of the relics of St. Mark to Venice only a few years later, namely in 828, shows that the Venetians were by no means satisfied with the status of passive recipients of spiritually efficacious and politically opportune relics<sup>26</sup>. The timing of the translation of the

<sup>23</sup> For Venice's importance in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Italy and the significance of relics as proof of apostolic legitimacy, see DEMUS, *Church of San Marco*, pp. 3-7; F. DVORNIK, *The Idea of Apostolicity in Byzantium and the Legend of Saint Andrew*, Cambridge Mass. 1958 (Dumbarton Oaks Studies, 4), pp. 138-146.

<sup>24</sup> On the function of relics as powerful protectors of cities, see the classical study by N. BAYNES, *The Supernatural Defenders of Constantinople*, «Analecta Bollandiana» 67 (1949), pp. 165-177 [reprint: N. BAYNES, *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays*, London 1974, pp. 248-260]; Av. CAMERON, *Images of Authority: Elites and Icons in Late Sixth-century Byzantium*, in *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition: Univ. of Birmingham, Thirteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, ed. by M. MULLETT - R. SCOTT, Birmingham 1979, pp. 205-234, esp. 212-224 [reprint: Av. CAMERON, *Continuity and Change in sixth-century Byzantium* (London, 1981), Study XVIII]. See also H.A. KLEIN, *Constantine, Helena, and the Cult of the True Cross in Constantinople*, in *Les Reliques de la Passion en Byzance*, pp. 31-59, here 33-36.

<sup>25</sup> *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum*, ed. by H. THURN, Berlin-New York 1973, p. 34<sup>81-85</sup>. For an illustration of the procession, see the illustrated Skylitzes manuscript of the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, Cod. Vit. 26-2, fol. 33. V. TSAMAKDA, *The Illustrated Chronicle of Ioannes Skylitzes in Madrid*, Leiden 2002, p. 74 with Fig. 66.

<sup>26</sup> For the date of the arrival of the body of St. Mark in Venice and its earliest account, see N. MCCLEARY, *Note storiche ed archeologiche sul testo della Translatio S. Marci*, in *Memorie storiche Forogiuliesi*, pp. 27-29 (1931-1933), 223-264. See also M. MCCORMICK, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300-900*, Cambridge Mass. 2001, pp. 237-240.

relics of St. Mark to Venice leaves some suspicion that it was a direct and conscious response to the partisan decisions reached at the Synod of Mantua in 827 which backed Aquileia in its ongoing struggle against Grado for episcopal primacy<sup>27</sup>. Contrary to the outspoken claims of the earliest surviving accounts of the *translatio*, which insist that the reigning doge, Giustiniano, knew nothing about it until the body of the saint actually reached the shores of the Rialto, it may perhaps not be too far fetched to assume that the doge took a more active role in acquiring this and other relics, even though his Byzantine overlords had recently prohibited both travel and commercial contacts with Syria and Egypt<sup>28</sup>.

The acquisition of additional relics through gift, trade, and theft remained an important means for Venice to raise its political and ecclesiastical profile for centuries to come, culminating in the transfer of a large number of often prominent relics in the aftermath of the conquest of Constantinople in 1204<sup>29</sup>. However, as the story of Andrea Dandolo's promotion of his predecessor's donation of dominical relics to the Church of San Marco has shown, a successful translation of prominent relics alone was hardly enough to guarantee their continued efficacy in a new religious, cultural, and political environment. As was the case in the early centuries of the Christian cult of saints, relics (and their carriers!) relied on individuals – *impresarios* we may call them with Peter Brown – to champion and publicize the stories of their origin, acquisition, translation, and continued miracle-working power, and eventually inscribe them into both the public consciousness and the historical record<sup>30</sup>.

While efforts to acquire relics for Venetian churches and religious institutions seems to have slowed down considerably after the end of the Latin domination of Constantinople, Venice's continuing role

<sup>27</sup> GEARY, *Furta Sacra*, pp. 93-94; NICOL, *Byzantium and Venice*, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> The trade embargo is mentioned in ANDREA DANDOLO, *Chronica*, 144<sup>31-33</sup>; *Urkunden*, Nr. III, 3. On Venice's commercial activities in this period, see D. JACOBY, *Venetian Commercial Expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean, 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries*, in *Byzantine Trade, 4<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> Centuries: The Archaeology of Local, Regional and International Exchange*, ed. by M.M. MANGO, Farnham-Burlington 2009, pp. 371-391.

<sup>29</sup> For a summary account of the most prominent Venetian relic acquisitions between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries, see KLEIN, *Heiltümer*, pp. 791-798.

<sup>30</sup> On the importance of mythmaking in the process of publicizing the story of relics, see PERRY, *Sacred Plunder*, pp. 158-178.

as a center for the dissemination and trade in high-profile relics and reliquaries from Byzantium must not be underestimated. Many relics, the most famous being perhaps the Crown of Thorns, passed through Venice on their way to France or Germany, and the sale of others, that were to remain in Italy, was negotiated and concluded there<sup>31</sup>.

The latter case is perhaps most clearly attested in the acquisition of a substantial collection of relics and other precious items by the Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala in Siena in 1359. The deal was sealed, as it were, in Venice on May 28, 1359, between Andrea Gratia, a syndic of the Ospedale, and Pietro Torrigiani, a Florentine-born merchant, Venetian citizen, and resident of Constantinople, where a contract was drawn up that stipulated the conditions of the transfer of objects recently acquired in Constantinople<sup>32</sup>. Information concerning the provenance of the relic collection is provided by a document that apparently accompanied the contract of 1359 as an authentication<sup>33</sup>. Issued at Pera on December

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<sup>31</sup> For the relic of the Crown of Thorns, see most recently C. HAHN, *The Sting of Death is the Thorn, but the Circle of the Crown is Victory over Death. The Making of the Crown of Thorns*, in *Saints and Sacred Matter. The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, ed. by C. HAHN - H.A. KLEIN, Washington D.C., 2015, pp. 193-214; C. MERCURI, *Corona di Christo, Corona di Re: La monarchia francese e la corona di spine nel medioevo*, Rome 2004. See also the classical studies by F. DE MÉLY, *Exuviae sacrae Constantinopolitanae*, III, *La Croix des premiers croisés, la Sainte Lance, la Sainte Couronne*, Paris 1904; F. DE MÉLY, *La Sainte Couronne d'épines à Notre-Dame de Paris*, Paris 1927.

<sup>32</sup> ASSi, *Archivio Spedale Santa Maria della Scala*, Nr. 120, fol. 2r-9v. For a transcript of the document, see G. DERENZINI, *Le reliquie da Costantinopoli a Siena*, in *Loro di Siena. Il tesoro di Santa Maria della Scala*, ed. by L. BELLOSI, Siena 1996, pp. 67-78, here 73-78; P. HETHERINGTON, *A Purchase of Byzantine Relics and Reliquaries in Fourteenth-Century Venice*, «Arte Veneta», 37 (1983), pp. 9-30, here 29-30 (Appendix II). For an evaluation of the documents, see also G. DERENZINI, *Esame paleografico del Codice X.IV.1. della Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati e contributo documentale alla storia del 'Tesoro' dello Spedale di Santa Maria della Scala*, «Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Siena», 8 (1987), pp. 41-76. For an assessment of the significance of the transaction, see A. CUTLER, *From Loot to Scholarship: Changing Modes in the Italian Response to Byzantine Artifacts, ca. 1200-1750*, «Dumbarton Oaks Papers», 49 (1995), pp. 237-267, here 244-245; H.A. KLEIN, *Eastern Objects and Western Desires: Relics and Reliquaries between Byzantium and the West*, «Dumbarton Oaks Papers», 58 (2004), pp. 283-314.

<sup>33</sup> ASSi, *Archivio Spedale Santa Maria della Scala*, No. 120, 10r-11v. For a transcript of the document, see DERENZINI, *Le reliquie*, pp. 72-73; HETHERINGTON, *Purchase*, p. 28 (Appendix I).

15, 1357, by the papal legate to Constantinople, the Carmelite Peter Thomas<sup>34</sup>, and witnessed by three bishops as well as the Dominican inquisitor Philip de Contis, the document recounts that Peter Thomas, having heard about Pietro Torrigiani's relic collection, had visited the residence of the Venetian *bailo* of Constantinople in the company of the co-signing bishops to «examine with eyes and hands the precious relics, among which were to be found even those of Christ and the True Cross, on which he had hung, and of which there were no more precious in the whole world»<sup>35</sup>. The document further states that in order to assure the authenticity and provenance of the relics, Thomas had sent two of the bishops and the inquisitor to empress Irene, wife of Emperor John VI Cantacuzenos, who in turn testified that the relics had indeed come from the imperial palace, and that they had been put up for sale in the loggia of the Venetians out of necessity<sup>36</sup>. After presenting a list of the relics examined, Thomas finally asserts that «it seems as if the Lord Jesus Christ himself had led Torrigiani to Constantinople in order to take the relics out of the hands of the schismatics and bring them to a holy place just like the children of Israel where led out of Egypt by divine mandate» and that Torrigiani «may bring the relics to our Lord the pope and the most serene prince and Lord emperor of the Romans, since such priceless objects suit them best»<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> For an in-depth study of the life and career of Peter Thomas, see F.J. BOEHLKE, *Pierre de Thomas. Scholar, Diplomat, and Crusader*, Philadelphia 1966. See also the more recent article by R. BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI, *Philippe de Mézières Life of Peter de Thomas at the Crossroads of Late Medieval Hagiography and Crusading Ideology*, «Viator», 40.1 (2009), pp. 223-248.

<sup>35</sup> DERENZINI, *Le reliquie*, p. 72: «[...] nos ibi persepeximus oculis et tractavimus manibus tam pretiosas Sanctorum Reliquias immo quedam quae ad ipsum Dominum Nostrum Jesum Christum pertinent et de ipsa vera Cruce, in qua Ipse pependit, quae in mundo non possunt esse pretiosiora [...]».

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*: «[...] et misimus duos de predictis Episcopis tum [sic] Inquisitores [sic] hereticae pravitatis ad imperatricem uxorem Cathecuzinos, ut scirent ab ea si fuerant de domo imperiali, et asseruit cum grandissimo singultu, cordis dolore, quod pro necessitate fuerunt expositae venditioni in Logia Venetorum, et quod imperium iocalia non habebat tam pretiosa, nec de perditione aliqua tantum dolebat, quantum de alienatione earum [...]».

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73: «[...] enim venerabilem virum dominum Petrum predictum videtur Dominus Jesus Christus in Constantinopolim posuisse ut de manibus scismaticorum tam dignas auferret Reliquias et ad loca transferret sancta, prout filii Isdrael [sic] de mandato

The original purpose of this document is somewhat difficult to determine, but it may nonetheless serve as a clear indicator of how radically the Latin conquest and occupation of Constantinople had reshaped the traditional role of the Byzantine emperor as a guardian and distributor of dominical relics. Rather than bestowing such items as an act of imperial favor on high-ranking foreign dignitaries, the imperial household was now forced to sell them out of hard economic necessity. As I have shown elsewhere some time ago, the consequences of this development for the recipients of such sacred commodities are complex<sup>38</sup>. It not only created the need for institutional authentication, in this case by the Byzantine empress and the papal legate, it also resulted in efforts to disguise the commercial nature of such transactions. Instead of a purchase, the Venetian contract of 1359 repeatedly speaks of a *donatio* despite the fact that merchant was to receive a purely monetary compensation of 3000 gold florines to be paid in six-monthly installments and the provision of a lifetime residence in Siena<sup>39</sup>. But let me turn to a relic that actually stayed in Venice during the fourteenth century and soon began to enrich the city with its spiritual and miracle-working power, namely a fragment of the True Cross, donated to the confraternity of San Giovanni Evangelista in a festive act on December 23, 1369.

### 3. *Philippe de Mézières and his Gift for the scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista*

Philippe de Mézières, the relic's pious donor, had briefly visited Venice in the company of Peter I of Cyprus in 1362 and returned to the city for a longer stay in the spring of 1364 to negotiate the means of transportation for a future Crusade. Shortly after having been granted citizenship by the Senate on June 22, 1365, de Mézières

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Domini Egypriorum portaverunt bona [...] et rogavimus eum quod ad dominum nostrum Papam et ad serenissimum principem dominum Imperatorem Romanum portaret, vel faceret deportari, quia talia eos decent, quae sunt caeteris digniora.»

<sup>38</sup> KLEIN, *Eastern Objects*, pp. 283-314.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310.

seems to have left Venice in the company of Peter I and the crusaders they had been able to recruit, embarking on what should become known as the Alexandrian Crusade<sup>40</sup>. After the capture of Alexandria, de Mézières returned to Venice again in July 1366 and several times thereafter in further efforts to raise funds and arms for the fight against the Mamluks<sup>41</sup>. He is thus attested in Venice in August 1368 together with Peter of Lusignan, but when the king returned to Cyprus shortly thereafter, de Mézières stayed behind. We know that news of Peter's assassination on January 18, 1369, reached him on the Rialto, and it was like shortly thereafter that de Mézière began to put his own affairs in order. His will was drawn up probably during the following months and was eventually registered on January 20, 1370 [January 20, 1369, *more veneto*]<sup>42</sup>. Among de Mézières' various possessions is listed here as the third item «[the] venerable wood of the Holy Cross, decorated with silver»<sup>43</sup>. Later in the will it is specified «[...] that the most venerable wood of the Holy Cross [which is enclosed] in crystal, silver, and gold, and which I have received from my blessed father, the lord legate, may be handed over and remain at the church, where, God willing, I will be laid to rest [...]»<sup>44</sup>.

The origin of de Mézières' relic of the True Cross is thus

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<sup>40</sup> See A.S. ATIYA, *The Crusade in the Fourteenth Century*, in *A History of the Crusades*, ed. by K.M. SETTON, III (= *The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. by W. HAZARD), pp. 3-27. See also J. VAN STEENBERGEN, *The Alexandrian Crusade (1365) and the Mamluck Sources: Reassessment of the Kitāb al-Ilmām of An-Nuwayrī al-Iskandarānī*, in *East and West in the Crusader States: Context, Contacts, Confrontations III: Acta of the congress held at Hernen Castle, September 2000*, ed. by K. CIGGAAR - H. TEULE, Leuven 2003 (Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta 125), pp. 123-137.

<sup>41</sup> For an assessment of the political context in which these negotiations took place, see P.W. EDBURY, *The Crusading Policy of King Peter I of Cyprus*, in *The Eastern Mediterranean Lands I: The Period of The Crusades, 1191-1374*, ed. by P.M. HOLT, Warminster 1977, pp. 90-105; IORGA, *Philippe de Mézières*, pp. 328-352.

<sup>42</sup> ASVe, *Archivio Notarile, Testamenti*, busta 483, Nr. 33. See N. IORGA, *Le testament de Philippe de Mézières*, «Bulletin de l'institut pour l'étude de l'Europe sud-orientale», 10-12 (1921), pp. 119-140. K. PETKOV, *The Anxieties of a Citizen Class. The Miracles of the True Cross of San Giovanni Evangelista, Venice 1370-1480*, Leiden-Boston 2014, pp. 18-19.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126: «Item venerabile lignum Sancte Crucis in argentum decoratum».

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132: «[...] quod venerabilissimum lignum Sancte Crucis in cristallo deargento ac deaurato, quod habui a beato patre meo, domino legato, detur ac remaneat ecclesie ubi, Domino consedente, sepeliar [...]»

incontrovertably linked to his close friend and spiritual father, the Carmelite Peter Thomas, whom we have already encountered as the authenticator of Pietro Torrigiani's Byzantine relic hoard while he served as papal legate in 1357<sup>45</sup>. After having served as papal legate in the East, he advanced from his previous appointment as Bishop of Patti and Lipari, a title he had held since 1354, to the rank of Bishop of Coron on the Peleponessos in 1359, then to Archbishop of Crete in 1363, and eventually to Latin Patriarch of Constantinople in 1364. As we know from the *Life of Peter Thomas*, composed shortly after his death on January 6, 1366, by none other than Philippe de Mézières himself, Peter owned a relic of the True Cross, which he had held in his hands during the attack on Alexandria the year prior and again on his deathbed while addressing his household in the Carmelite convent of Famagusta on Cyprus one last time<sup>46</sup>. Interestingly, neither the circumstances of the relic's acquisition by Peter nor its bequest to Philippe de Mézière are spelled out in the *Life*. The same is true for de Mézières' own will, which merely states that the True Cross relic had been given to him by his spiritual father<sup>47</sup>. The only source that sheds any light on the provenance and circumstances of the relic's acquisition is another Venetian document, namely the privilege or act of donation of the relic to the scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista<sup>48</sup>.

Drawn up as a formal record of Philippe de Mézières' donation of the relic of the True Cross to the scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista, a process presided over by Ludovico Donà, the papal inquisitor of Venice and Treviso, and assisted by three secular members of the Venetian patriciate, namely Francesco and Elia Giustinian from the parish of San

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<sup>45</sup> For the circumstances of the legation to Constantinople, see *The Life of Peter Thomas by Philippe de Mézières*, ed. J. SMET, Rome 1954 (Textus et Studia Historica Carmelitana 2). See also BOEHLKE, *Pierre de Thomas*, pp. 137-149.

<sup>46</sup> See *Life of Peter Thomas*, ed. by SMET, p. 131: «Qui [...] super eminentiorem locum galeae nostrae stantem, crucem cum ligno Domini in manibus tenentem, et exercitum a dextris et sinistris benedicentem [...]», and p. 145: «Tunc ad lignum crucis se convertit, adorando, osculando, et mirabilia dicendo, et manibus iunctis veniam devotissime petiit omnibus amiliaribus suis, omnes ad lacrimas provocando [...]».

<sup>47</sup> See above, note 44.

<sup>48</sup> ASV, SG SGE, Reg. 496. For the most recent examination of the privilege and the circumstances of the donation, see PETKOV, *The Anxieties*, pp. 15-26.

Moise and Marco Morosini of the parish of San Silvestro, the privilege recounts in some detail the earlier history of the prior to entering into the possession of Philippe de Mézières. More specifically, it explains how Peter Thomas, during his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the years around 1360, had received the relic as a gift from elders of a Syrian Christian community, who, impressed by his piety and reputation, handed him the «golden, preciously decorated cross»<sup>49</sup>.

Interestingly, Philippe de Mézières does not mention this episode with a word in his *Life of Peter Thomas*<sup>50</sup>, even though, as Kiril Petkov rightly stressed, it would have greatly enhanced his narrative of Peter's exceptional piety and religious charisma<sup>51</sup>. While doubts about the veracity of the story are thus in order, it served an important purpose in the context of the relic's donation to the confraternity of San Giovanni: beyond the personality of Philippe de Mézières, whose reputation and authority as a secular leader were beyond doubt, it linked the provenance of the relic of the True Cross to a person of proven ecclesiastical authority, who had had both the means and opportunity to acquire such a treasure in legitimate ways from a source in the Holy Land. Whether the story recorded in the privilege was in fact true, or whether Peter had acquired the relic in a less legitimate way during his sojourns in the East, is an intriguing question, but ultimately one that is irrelevant for the purposes of this study<sup>52</sup>.

What is more relevant in this context is the fact that the precious relic Peter Thomas passed on to Philippe de Mézières in 1366, and which De Mézières in turn donated to the confraternity of San Giovanni Evangelista in 1369, is still preserved at its former home in the *scuola* of San Giovanni Evangelista today (Fig. 1)<sup>53</sup>. It is mounted atop a precious

<sup>49</sup> ASV, SG SGE, Reg. 496, line 16: «[...] unam crucem auream preciose ornatè [...]»

<sup>50</sup> Little is known about Peter Thomas's pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It must have taken place in or around 1358. For de Mézières' description of the episode, see *Life of Peter Thomas*, ed. Smet, pp. 81-82.

<sup>51</sup> PETKOV, *Anxieties*, p. 20.

<sup>52</sup> For other possible scenarios for Peter Thomas's acquisition of the relic, see *ibid.*, pp. 20-22.

<sup>53</sup> On the «Croce di San Giovanni Evangelista», see most recently G. DELFINI FILIPPI, *I reliquiari della Passione: Un'indagine sull'oreficeria nel Mondo Sacro*, in *Oreficeria sacra a Venezia e nel Veneto. Un dialogo tra le arti figurative*, ed. by L. CASELLI - E. MERKEL, Venice

reliquary cross commonly known as the «Croce di San Giovanni Evangelista», which belongs to a group of richly decorated Venetian processional crystal crosses of a type often referred to as «Tatzenkreuz» in German-speaking scholarship due to their characteristic paw-like terminal ends<sup>54</sup>. The body of the cross consists of five separate panels of rock crystal, three of which have been replaced by glass in subsequent periods. The roughly square-shaped panel at the center, and the lower of the two paw-shaped vertical cross arms are preserved in their original condition<sup>55</sup>. Each crystal panel is framed by a silver-gilt decorative border consisting of a drawn-out egg-and-dart frieze and a band of palmettes that grow towards the center of each crystal panel. From each of the terminal ends sprout silver-gilt tendrils, carrying an alternating sequence of cone-shaped blossoms and busts of prophets<sup>56</sup>.

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2007 (Ateneo Veneto, Ricerche Storiche, 8), pp. 71-82. See also *Omaggio a San Marco. Tesori d'Europa*, ed. by H. FILITZ - G. MORELLO, exh. cat. (Venice, Palazzo Ducale, October 8, 1994 - February 28, 1995), Milan 1994, Nr. 111, p. 236 (R. BARISON); H.R. HAHNLOSER - S. BRUGGER-KOCH, *Corpus der Hartsteinschliffe des 12.-15. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1985, Nr. 140, p. 126; E. STEINGRÄBER, *Studien zur venezianischen Goldschmiedekunst des 15. Jahrhunderts*, «Mitteilungen des kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz», 10 (1962), 147-192, here 154 with note 22; G. MARIACHER, *La mostra dell'artigianato liturgico: Chiesa di S. Vidal*, 1950, Catalogo a cura del Comitato diocesano di Venezia per l'Anno Santo, Venice 1950; G. FOGOLARI, *La teca del Bessarione e la Croce di San Teodoro di Venezia*, «Dedalo. Rassegna d'Arte», 3 (1922), pp. 139-160, here 158.

<sup>54</sup> On the history of the production of liturgical crystal crosses in Venice, see most recently S. GEREVINI, «*Sicut crystallus quando est obiecta soli*»: *Rock Crystal, Transparency, and the Franciscan Order*, «Mitteilungen des kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz», 56 (2014), pp. 255-283; See also M. COLLARETA, *Il cristallo nella liturgia religiosa e civile con qualche osservazione sulle croci veneziane in cristallo di rocca*, in *Cristalli e gemme: realtà, fisica e immaginario. Simbologia, tecniche e arte*, ed. by B. ZANETTIN, Venice 2003, pp. 495-512, esp. 507-512; L. CASELLI, *La croce di Chiaravalle Milanese e le croci veneziane in cristallo di rocca*, Padua 2002.

<sup>55</sup> See the (unpublished) report on the 2010 restoration of the «Croce di San Giovanni Evangelista» by Corinna Mattiello (C. MATTIELLO, *Il restauro della Santissima Croce della Scuola Grande San Giovanni Evangelista*, Venice 2010). I would like to express my gratitude to Gian Andrea Simeone, Guardian Grande of the scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista, for making this report accessible to me and allowing me to examine the reliquary during a visit on July 12, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Blossoms sprouting prophet busts become a standard feature in the design of Venetian crystal crosses during the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, but the design has earlier precedents in the decoration of the arm reliquary of St. George in the treasury of San Marco. See

Of the originally ten busts of prophets, seven have been preserved in their original form, while three have been replaced (Fig. 2). Two strong branches growing out of the cross's hexagonal micro-architectural node, flanking the lower cross arm on both sides and carrying the silver-gilt figures of the Virgin and St. John. As such the cross of San Giovanni Evangelista reflects a cross-type first witnessed in the thirteenth-century treasury relief and associated with one of San Marco's Byzantine relics of the True Cross (Fig. 3).

Rather than being inserted into the reliquary cross proper, the fragments of the True Cross are enclosed in a small house-shaped rock crystal container at the apex of its upper cross arm (Fig. 4). This container is carried by two putti, which, like the crowning figure of an angel with the *sudarium* and the Holy Face of Christ and the prominent ruby, seem to be later additions. The arrangement confirms a passage in Philippe de Mézières' will, which elaborates on the fact that the relic was already encased in a crystal container before its donation to the *scuola*<sup>57</sup>. Completing the figural decoration of the cross of San Giovanni is a silver-gilt crucifix on the front (Fig. 5) as well as, on the back, the figure of a bearded Saint John (Fig. 6), spreading his mantle to protect two kneeling *confratelli*. Below them, set inside a gothic aedicule, stand two figures of uncertain identity, one resembling a nimbed individual in monastic or confraternal garb (Fig. 7), the other one a military saint (Fig. 8) in short tunic with arms raised sideways above his head—one might think of a St. George or a flagellant from a scene of Christ's flagellation.

Clearly a pastiche in its current configuration, the cross has thus far been dated to the second half of the fourteenth or the early fifteenth century due to certain stylistic similarities with works of the so-called Sesto workshop, a family of Venetian goldsmiths and coin cutters attested in the last decade of the fourteenth and first half of the fifteenth century<sup>58</sup>. Proof of the fact that the commission of the cross can indeed

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STEINGRÄBER, *Studien zur venezianischen Goldschmiedekunst*, pp. 151-155, Abb. 3 and Abb. 6; *Il Tesoro di San Marco*, Nr. 159, pp. 162-163.

<sup>57</sup> See above, note 44.

<sup>58</sup> For the works of the Sesto workshop and its relationship to the «Croce di San Giovanni Evangelista», see STEINGRÄBER, *Studien*, pp. 150-158. A more comprehensive study of the cross is currently under way and will be published in *La Scuola Grande di*

be tied to Philippe de Mézières' donation of the relic can be presented here for the first time in the form of two inscriptions that seem hitherto to have escaped scholars' attention. These inscriptions, placed on the consoles carrying the gothic aedicules immediately above the micro-architectural node (Figs. 9-10), name Andrea Vendramin, the *guardian grande* of the scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista at the time of de Mézières' relic donation, and his *compagni* as well as the date of the completion of the cross, namely November 15, 1369:

M(ISIER) ANDREA D  
E VEDRAMI(N) • VA  
RDIA(N) • E I C[OM]PA[G]NI

MCCCLXVIII  
DE NOVEMBRI  
O ADI XV FE[CIT]

While the cross clearly underwent later modifications, the newly discovered inscriptions confirm unequivocally that the core of the crystal reliquary cross of San Giovanni Evangelista was commissioned by its *guardian grande* Andrea Vendramin on behalf of the *scuola* probably sometime in 1368/69 and finished more than a month before the solemn donation of the relic took place in a public ceremony on December 23, 1369<sup>59</sup>. Whether or not the completion of the reliquary played any part in de Mézières' decision to donate the relic to the confraternity contrary to the specifications in his will is difficult to ascertain. His change of heart remains curious in light of the wording and date of his will and cannot easily be explained on the basis of the available sources<sup>60</sup>.

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*S. Giovanni Evangelista a Venezia: Storia, Architettura, Scultura, Restauro*, a cura di L. LAZZARINI - M. DA VILLA URBANI, Venezia 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Erich Steingraber maintained that the original crystal cross from around 1369 was likely modified in the early fifteenth century, when the figural decoration (with the exception of the crowning angels) were added, and the seventeenth century, to which he ascribed the mount of the reliquary capsule atop as well as the cone-shaped fasteners for the prophet busts and blossoms. STEINGRÄBER, *Studien*, pp. 154, note 22.

<sup>60</sup> On the discrepancy between the date of the donation and the date of the registration of the will, see PETKOV, *Anxieties*, p. 19, with note 6. Based on the evidence of a letter preserved at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal (Ms. 499) Iorga gave preference to a date of

Perhaps more important than the ultimate motivations for de Mézières' donation of the relic is the fact that, once in the possession of the confraternity, it started to work miracles almost immediately<sup>61</sup>. The first such miracle seems to have occurred on March 3, 1370, the first Sunday of Lent, barely three months after the relic's donation to the *scuola*, likely during the relic's first public procession<sup>62</sup>. When carried over the bridge of San Lorenzo, the cross bearer stumbled, and the new crystal cross containing the relic fell over the parapet into the canal. Miraculously, it did not sink but hovered above the water until Andrea Vendramin, the *guardian grande* of the confraternity, jumped into the canal to retrieve it<sup>63</sup>. A week or two later, namely on March 9 or 16, 1370, the relic performed its second miracle, this time by saving two of Andrea Vendramin's ships carrying olive oil from perishing in a storm at sea<sup>64</sup>. Seven more miracles involving the relic should occur in the following hundred years, a third one in which Patriarch Francesco Querini played a crucial role already during the early 1370s, two more involving members of the confraternity of San Giovanni Evangelista in 1409 and 1414 respectively, yet another two healing miracles in the 1440s, a ship-saving miracle in 1461, and a final miraculous intervention and healing in 1480<sup>65</sup>.

While the cross acquired a reputation as «miraculosa» across Venice already during the first half of the fifteenth-century, leading the *scuola*

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December 23 (25), 1370, for the donation. See IORGA, *Philippe De Mézières*, p. 403, with note 4; IORGA, *Testamentum*, p. 120.

<sup>61</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the miracles of the True Cross of San Giovanni Evangelista within the socio-political context of fifteenth-century Venice, see generally PETKOV, *Anxieties*.

<sup>62</sup> For the date of the miracle on the Bridge of San Lorenzo, see *ibid.*, p. 27, with note 1.

<sup>63</sup> For the circumstances of the miracle and the life and career of Andrea Vendramin, see *ibid.*, pp. 27-46.

<sup>64</sup> For the date, circumstances, and significance of this second miracle, see *ibid.*, pp. 47-66.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, 67-87 (Francesco Querini and the Miracle with the Demoniac); pp. 89-103 (Miracle at the Bridge of San Lio); pp. 105-121 (Miracle of the Daughter of Nicolò di Benvegnudo); pp. 123-150 (Miracle of Paolo Rabia); pp. 151-176 (Miracle of the Son of Giacomo de Salis); pp. 177-203 (The Healing of Piero de Lodovico); pp. 205-234 (The Miracle of Antonio Rizzo); pp. 244-250 (The Miracle of the Son of Alvise Finetti).

to consider commissioning a cycle of paintings depicting the miracle stories as early as 1414<sup>66</sup>, the first written account attesting to its miraculuous activity in greater detail was not produced before around 1490, when a small booklet, or *incunabile*, was printed highlighting the story of the relic's donation to the *scuola* and the miracles it had performed to date<sup>67</sup>. The second extant source is a monumental cycle of paintings commissioned by the *scuola* from the most prominent painters in Venice, namely Gentile Bellini, Lazzaro Bastiani, Giovanni Mansueti, Benedetto Diana, and Vittore Carpaccio, between around 1494 and 1505/10 to commemorate visually the miracles of the relic of the True Cross in the confraternity's *sala dell'albergo*<sup>68</sup>.

The fact that the *incunabile* and the monumental cycle of paintings commemorating the history of the relic of San Giovanni Evangelista were commissioned around the same time at the end of the fifteenth century was likely no coincidence, but the result of the arrival of yet another precious relic of the True Cross in Venice only a few years prior, namely in 1472<sup>69</sup>.

#### 4. *Cardinal Bessarion and the Stauroteca for Santa Maria della Carità*

The relic in question and its precious container were a gift to one of the city's oldest and most distinguished religious confraternities, namely the *scuola* of Santa Maria della Carità, and its pious donor was

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<sup>66</sup> While the Chapter General of the confraternity voted in favor of its execution on November 4, little is known about the painting cycle commissioned in 1414. See P. FORTINI BROWN, *Venetian Narrative Painting in the Age of Carpaccio*, New Haven-London 1988, Cat. VI, Documents 1-2, p. 266. For the sources, see ASV, SG SGE, Reg. 71, fol. 188; Reg. 89, fols. 86-86v.

<sup>67</sup> Fondazione Musei Civici Venezia, Museo Correr, H. 249bis. See P. FORTINI BROWN, *An Incunabulum of the Miracles of the True Cross of the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista*, «Bollettino dei Civici Musei Veneziani d'arte e di storia», n.s., 27 (1982), pp. 5-8; FORTINI BROWN, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, p. 60.

<sup>68</sup> For the history and documents of this commission, see FORTINI BROWN, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, Cat. XV, pp. 282-286. See also pp. 60-76; 135-164, and elsewhere.

<sup>69</sup> P. FORTINI BROWN, *Honor and Necessity: The Dynamics of Patronage in the Confraternities of Renaissance Venice*, «Studi Veneziani», n.s., 14 (1987), pp. 179-212, here 191.

none else than the Greek-born cardinal, humanist, and papal legate, Bessarion<sup>70</sup>. Perhaps best known for his participation in the Ecumenical Council of Ferrara and Florence, at which he emerged as a key figure in the negotiations for a union of the Churches, Bessarion was made a Cardinal of the Roman Church in 1439 and settled in Rome, where his palazzo became an important meeting place for Italian humanists and Greeks ex-patriots, who had fled Constantinople following the Ottoman conquest in 1453<sup>71</sup>.

The circumstances that led to Bessarion's donation are well known through a number of documents, most of which survive in near contemporary or later copies<sup>72</sup>. In July 1463, ten years after the conquest of Constantinople, Pope Pius II had sent Bessarion to Venice in an attempt to rekindle and promote the idea of a Crusade against the Ottoman Turks<sup>73</sup>. It was not the first time Bessarion visited Venice.

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<sup>70</sup> For a summary account of the circumstances of the reliquary's donation to the *scuola* of Santa Maria della Carità, see KLEIN, *Staurothek*, pp. 245-276. For an overview of the history of the *scuole grandi* in general and the *scuola* della Carità in particular, see L. SBRIZIOLO, *Per la storia delle confraternite veneziane: dalle deliberazioni miste (1310-1476) del Consiglio di Dieci. Le scuole dei Battuti*, in *Miscellanea Gilles Gerard Meersseman*, ed. by M. MACCARRONE *et al.*, Padua 1970, II, pp. 715-763; R. MASCHIO, *Le scuole grandi a Venezia*, in *Storia della cultura veneta*, III, ed. by G. ARNALDI - M. PASTORE, Vicenza 1976-1986, 6 vols., pp. 193-206; P. FORTINI BROWN, *Le Scuole*, in *Storia di Venezia. Dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*, V, Rome 1992-2002, 14 vols., pp. 307-354; *Le Scuole di Venezia*, ed. by T. PIGNATTI, Milan 1981, pp. 30-32 (E.M. PEDROCO), with references to the scholarly literature. For the history of the church and convent, see R.J. GOY, *To the Glory of God: Building the Church of S. Maria della Carità*, «Architectural History», 37 (1994), pp. 1-23; G. FOGOLARI, *La chiesa della Carità di Venezia (ora sede delle Regie Gallerie dell'Accademia)*, Venice 1924 (Archivio veneto-tridentino 5).

<sup>71</sup> For access to the vast scholarly literature on Bessarion, see L. MOHLER, *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann*, Paderborn 1923-42, 3 vols.; J. GILL, *Personalities of the Council of Florence, and other essays*, Oxford 1964, pp. 45-54; *Bessarione e l'Umanesimo*, ed. G. FIACCADORI, Naples 1994; *Inter graecos latinissimus*, ed. by MÄRTL-KAISER-RICKLIN.

<sup>72</sup> A compilation of these sources is provided by G.B. Schioppalbalba, *In perantiquam sacram tabulam Graecam insigni sodalitis S. Mariae caritatis Venetiarum ab amplissimo Cardinali Bessarione dono datam dissertatio*. Venice 1767.

<sup>73</sup> On Bessarion's mission to Venice, see most recently P. KOURNIAKOS, *Die Kreuzzugslegation Kardinal Bessarions in Venedig (1463-1464)*, PhD Dissertation, Cologne 2009 ([http://kups.ub.uni\\_koeln.de/id/eprint/5364](http://kups.ub.uni_koeln.de/id/eprint/5364)); MOHLER, *Kardinal Bessarion*, I, pp. 281-316.

Already in 1438, he had come to Venice in the company of Emperor John VIII and Patriarch Joseph II on his way to the Council of Florence and Ferrara, a visit famously recorded by Sylvester Syropoulos<sup>74</sup>. A second visit followed in 1461, on the way back from a papal diplomatic mission to Germany<sup>75</sup>. On this occasion he was invited to sign the Golden Book of the city and also to join the city's Great Council as an honorary member<sup>76</sup>.

When he returned in the summer of 1463, Bessarion was received with even greater honors. As was befitting for a Roman Cardinal traveling as papal legate, the Doge and Senate went out to meet him in the lagoon on the *bucintoro*, the doge's great ceremonial barge, with chants, acclamations, and church bells resounding from all parts of the city<sup>77</sup>. It was not the last honor bestowed on Bessarion in Venice, for on August 29, a few weeks after his arrival in Venice, Marco della Costa, the Guardian Grande of the *scuola della Carità*, and a delegation of its most prominent members went to visit the Cardinal on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore and solemnly invited him to join their confraternity as a member<sup>78</sup>.

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<sup>74</sup> For Sylvester Syropoulos's account, see *Les "Mémoires" du grand ecclésiarque de l'Église de Constantinople Sylvestre Syropoulos sur le Concile de Florence (1438-1439)*, ed. by V. LAURENT, Rome 1971.

<sup>75</sup> On Bessarion's mission to Germany, see most recently C. MÄRTL, *Kardinal Bessarion im Deutschen Reich (1460/61)*, in *Inter graecos latinissimus*, pp. 123-150; E. MEUTHEN, *Zum Itinerar der deutschen Legation Bessarions*, «Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken», 37 (1957), pp. 328-333.

<sup>76</sup> Bessarion's presence in Venice towards the end of 1461 has been assumed on the basis of a passage in MARINO SANUDO, *Vite de' duchi di Venezia*, ed. by L. MURATORI, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores XXII*, Milan 1733, col. 1186. See M. ZORZI, *Bessarione e Venezia*, in *Bessarione e l'Umanesimo*, pp. 197-228, here 226, note 35. Proof for this assumption has recently been furnished by J. MONFASANI, 'Bessarion Scholasticus': *A Study of Cardinal Bessarion's Latin Library*, Turnhout 2011 (Byzantinos. Studies in Byzantine History and Civilization 3), pp. 42-45, here 43, note 71.

<sup>77</sup> Traveling as a papal *lagatus a latere*, Bessarion was due the same honors and privileges the Pope himself would have received upon his arrival in the lagoon. See C.M. RICHARDSON, *Reclaiming Rome: Cardinals in the Fifteenth Century*, Leiden 2009, pp. 98-99 with further literature. On the status of papal *lagatus a latere*, see G. SOLDI RONDININI, *Per la storia del cardinalato nel secolo XV* (con l'edizione del trattato *De cardinalibus* di Martino Garati da Lodi), Milan 1968 (Memorie dell'Istituto lombardo di scienze e lettere, fasc. 1).

<sup>78</sup> ASV, SG SMC, Reg. 140, fol. 137; SCHIOPPALBA, *Dissertatio*, pp. 122-123.

Bessarion accepted the honor and accompanied the delegation back to the Rialto in festive procession. Once there, Bessarion vowed in gratitude to bestow a special gift on the confraternity, namely «a wooden panel with a cruciform recess in its center, and placed in the recess a golden cross of the finest workmanship. And to its sides, inside the panel, of course, are placed above two pieces of the True Cross and two fragments of the tunic of Christ, namely of the saccos. And this same panel has on top another painted panel serving as a lid, which is similarly decorated with gilded silver»<sup>79</sup>. As the attested act of the donation further states, the panel had previously belonged to Gregory III Melissenos, the Patriarch of Constantinople. On his deathbed in 1459, he had bequeathed the reliquary to Bessarion, who, in turn, promised it to the scuola della Carità with the sole provision that he would like to hold on to it during his lifetime<sup>80</sup>.

Two letters, one written by Cardinal Bessarion on May 12, 1472, to announce his gift, the other written on July 6 by Andrea della Sega, the Guardian Grande of the confraternity of Santa Maria della Carità, acknowledging its receipt, highlight the further history of the object<sup>81</sup>. In the spring of 1472, the ailing Bessarion had been sent to France on

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<sup>79</sup> For the wording of the act of donation, see SCHIOPPAPALBA, *Dissertatio*, p. 129: «[...] Tabellam ligneam, in cuius medio est sculptura in figuram Crucis, in qua vacuitate inest Crux aurea subtiliter laborata. Inque lateribus ejusdem Crucis, in ipsa videlicet Tabula, in duobus quidem superioribus de vero Ligno Sancte Crucis duo frusta, in inferioribus vero lateribus duo frusta Tunice Christi, hoc est de Sacco. Tabulamque ipsam superius habere pro coperorium aliam Tabellam depictam, & argento deaurato aliquantulum ornatam».

<sup>80</sup> SCHIOPPAPALBA, *Dissertatio*, pp. 129-130: «[...] quod pretiosissimum, saluberrimumque depositum, & locatum in Urbe Imperatoria Constantinopolitana Christianis regnantibus, per manus imperatorum, atque Patriarcharum, devotissime tandem devenerat in custodiam olim clare memorie Gregorii Miseratione Divina dignissimi Patriarche Constantinopolitani, qui ob scandala, & pertinaciam Decretum Unionis Oecumenici Florentini Concilii detrectantium, piissimus ipse Pater, Sede sua relicta, Romam venit, ubi post sue Sanctitatis, & Fidei clarissima testimonia naturare concessit; & integerrimum, ac innocentissimum spiritum Deo reddidit. Ante obitum suum nominatim, atque affectuose predictam Sanctissimam gemmam Venerande Dominice Crucis, & Tunice ipsi Reverendissimo D. Cardinali, quem unice dilexerat, & paterno affectu, et Caritate fuerat persecutus, absenti tunc, & in Mantuano Conventu agenti legavit».

<sup>81</sup> Copies of the letters are preserved in ASV, SG SMC, Reg. 140, fol. 143v and fol. 144 respectively. For a transcript, see SCHIOPPAPALBA, *Dissertatio*, pp. 136-141 and 142-145.

yet another papal mission<sup>82</sup>, when he suddenly decided in Bologna that it was time to hand over the promised gift, which he had meanwhile «further adorned with silver, and fitted with a pole so that it could suitably be displayed in the context of pious devotion»<sup>83</sup>. Three trusted men from the Cardinal's *familia* were sent as couriers to hand over the precious panel, which, according to the confraternity's reply, arrived in Venice in early June. At the request of the Senate the reliquary was first displayed on the high altar of San Marco on Trinity Sunday, and then carried in solemn procession through the city and across the Grand Canal into the scuola della Carità accompanied by the entire populace chanting hymns<sup>84</sup>. Unfortunately, no visual record of this solemn procession survives that could match the description in Andrea della Sega's letter. However, one of the paintings commissioned to record the miracles performed by the True Cross of the *scuola* of San Giovanni Evangelista gives us a good idea what it might have looked like (Fig. 11): Gentile Bellini's 1496 depiction of the Miracle of Giacomo de Salis, a merchant from Brescia, which is said to have taken place on April 25, 1444, during a procession in Saint Mark's Square on the occasion of the patron saint's feast day, visualizes a very similar procession, yet foregrounding the relic of San Giovanni Evangelista rather than the relic of Santa Maria della Carità<sup>85</sup>.

As Patricia Fortini Brown has convincingly argued, we are witnessing here a forceful competition between two of Venice's most prominent *scuole* for the primacy of their relic of True Cross, a competition, I would like to stress, that was fought out by means of a

<sup>82</sup> For Bessarion's mission to France, see MOHLER, *Kardinal Bessarion*, I, pp. 416-425.

<sup>83</sup> ASV, SG SMC, Reg. 140, fol. 143v. SCHIOPPAPALBA, *Dissertatio*, p. 137. «Ornandam curavi argento quo est conclusa: & adhibendam hastam, ut ad gestationem in supplicationibus sit accomodata [...]».

<sup>84</sup> ASV, SG SMC, Reg. 140, fol. 144. SCHIOPPAPALBA, *Dissertatio*, pp. 143-144.

<sup>85</sup> For Gentile Bellini's painting of the Miracle of Giacomo de Salis and Procession in Piazza San Marco, see, among others, FORTINI BROWN, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, pp. 146-150 and 286; J. MEYER ZUR CAPELLEN, *Gentile Bellini*, Stuttgart 1985, pp. 70-77 and 133-134; H. COLLINS, *Gentile Bellini. A Monograph and Catalogue of his Works*, PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh 1970, pp. 48-56; S. MOSCHINI MARCONI, *Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia*, I, Rome 1955-70, 3 vols., pp. 61-63.

full-fledged media war involving both printed and painted matter<sup>86</sup>. Not only did the *scuola* of San Giovanni Evangelista appeal to the Council of Ten for permission to carry their True Cross reliquary in a special procession on the feast day of San Lorenzo only weeks after Bessarion's gift had arrived in Venice<sup>87</sup>. It also commissioned, between 1490 and 1506, the first printed record of the miracles thus far performed by its relic, and decided to monumentalize and actualize these miracles in a grand cycle of paintings that turned its own *albergo* into diorama of divine dispensation working through its relic of the True Cross in contemporary Venice<sup>88</sup>.

If the *scuola* of San Giovanni Evangelista indeed felt a threat to its own venerable relic and its long established miracle-working tradition, we need to ask why the newly arrived relics of the *scuola* della Carità could be perceived as such<sup>89</sup>. At the face of it, there could be little doubt about the antiquity and efficacy of the relic of San Giovanni Evangelista considering its association with the former Grand Chancellor of Jerusalem and Cyprus, Philippe de Mézières, and the Latin patriarch of Constantinople, Peter Thomas, as well as its attested donation to the *scuola* on December 23, 1369, and the commissioning of a precious reliquary by its Guardian Grande, Andrea Vendramin, and his compagni.

Yet, there was one aspect that must have filled the officers and members of the *scuola* of San Giovanni Evangelista with great anxiety in and after June 1472: visually speaking, the small splinters of the True Cross that had been donated by Philippe de Mézières a hundred years prior and were so artfully integrated into the larger crystal cross of 1369, seemed far less impressive than the Byzantine reliquary of Cardinal Bessarion, which followed a long tradition of panel-shaped containers of the True Cross in the Byzantine Empire and connected it to such venerable imperial examples as the famous *staurotheke* of the

<sup>86</sup> FORTINI BROWN, *Honor and Necessity*, pp. 191-198.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 193, with note 36.

<sup>88</sup> For the printed *incunabile*, see *supra*.

<sup>89</sup> Patricia Fortini Brown's suggestion that the *scuola* of San Giovanni's status as the sole confraternity in Venice to own a relic of the True Cross is convincing, but may ultimately fall short of explaining the forceful *artistic* response to the new arrival. See FORTINI BROWN, *Honor and Necessity*, p. 193 with note 34.

Proedros Basileios (Fig. 12) from the second half of the tenth century and similar examples (Fig. 13) preserved in the treasury of San Marco<sup>90</sup>. Like these *staurothekai*, the Bessarion Reliquary follows the common Byzantine format of a rectangular box with sliding lid and features a large interior cross that could be taken out of its precious container for private devotions<sup>91</sup>. And like the *Limburg Staurotheke* and related objects, the Bessarion Reliquary features smaller relic chambers on either side of the central cross (Tav. 8-9). In terms of their basic visual rhetoric, therefore, both reliquaries make the same claim, namely that their central detachable cross is formed of fragments of the True Cross and that this reliquary cross is flanked and further charged by additional relics surrounding it. A lengthy inscription on the reliquary cross in Limburg (Fig. 14) clarifies that the emperors Constantine and Romanos deemed the wood of the cross worthy to be encrusted with precious stones and pearls because Christ had gushed forth on it the energies of life<sup>92</sup>. A similar claim is made visually by the Bessarion cross

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<sup>90</sup> For the *staurotheke* of the Proedros Basileios, better known as the *Limburg Staurotheke* after its modern location in cathedral treasury of Limburg an der Lahn, Germany, see more recently H.A. KLEIN, *Die Limburger Staurotheke und der Kreuzkult in Jerusalem und Konstantinopel*, in *Im Zeichen des Kreuzes. Die Limburger Staurotheke und ihre Geschichte*, ed. by A. HEUSER - M.T. KLOFT, Regensburg 2009, pp. 13-30; B. PENTCHEVA, *Containers of Power. Eunuchs and Reliquaries in Byzantium*, «Res», 51 (2007), pp. 108-120; N. ŠEVČENKO, *The Limburg Staurotheke and Its Relics*, in *Thymiana ste mneme tes Laskarinas Mpura*, ed. by R. ANDREADE, Athens 1994, pp. 289-294. See also J. RAUCH, *Die Limburger Staurotheke*, «Das Münster», 8 (1955), pp. 205-212; E. AUS'M WEERTH *Das Siegeskreuz der byzantinischen Kaiser [...] in der Domkirche zu Limburg an der Lahn*, Bonn 1866, pp. 6-8. For a similar *staurotheke* in the treasury of San Marco, compare Inv. *Santuario* 75. See *The Treasury of San Marco in Venice*, ed. by D. BUCKTON, New York 1984, Nr. 13, pp. 156-159; *Il Tesoro di San Marco*, II, *Il Tesoro e il Museo*, ed. by H.R. HAHNLOSER, Florence 1971, Nr. 24, pp. 34-35; A. FROLOW, *Notes sur les reliques et les reliquaires byzantins de Saint-Marc de Venise*, «Deltion», 4 (1964-1965), pp. 216-217; GALLO, *Il Tesoro*, p. 25; A. PASINI, *Il Tesoro di San Marco in Venezia*, Venice 1887, pp. 33-34.

<sup>91</sup> KLEIN, *Staurotheke*, pp. 252-266.

<sup>92</sup> For the verse inscription on the Limburg Staurotheke, see A. RHOBY, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Ikonen und Objekten der Kleinkunst* (= *Byzantinische Epigramme in inschriftlicher Überlieferung*, vol. II), Vienna 2010, Nr. Me8, pp. 163-169; J. KODER, *Zu den Versinschriften der Limburger Staurotheke*, «Archiv für mittelhochdeutsche Kirchengeschichte», 37 (1985), pp. 11-31; W. MICHEL, *Die Inschriften der Limburger Staurotheke*, «Archiv für mittelhochdeutsche Kirchengeschichte», 28 (1976), pp. 23-43; E. FOLLIERI, *L'ordine dei*

(Tav. 8-9), which is covered in finest silver-gilt filigree, artfully arranged in undulating scroll motifs, thus visualizing the sprouting forces of life. Like the *staurotheke* of the Proedros Basileios, the Bessarion Reliquary carries a lengthy inscription, not on its back, but rather on its sides:

ΤΟΝ ΚΟΣΜΟ ΠΡΟΣΚΥΝΗΤΟΝ ΣΤ(αυ)ΡΙΚΟΝ ΤΥΠΙΟΝ  
ΑΡΓΥΡΟΚΟΣΜΕΙ ΑΔΕΛΦΟΥ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ  
ΕΙΡΗ(ην) ΘΥΓΑΤΗΡ ΠΑΛΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΝΑ  
ΣΩΤΗΡΙΑΣ ΕΗΤΕΥΞΙΝ, ΛΥΤΡΟΝ ΠΤΑΙΣΜΑΤΩΝ

The form of the cross, venerated around the world,  
was adorned with silver by the daughter of the emperor's brother,  
Eirene Palaiologina,  
for the forgiveness of her sins and the reward of salvation<sup>93</sup>.

This inscription, I would like to argue, is the only hint that provides us with a true understanding of the cataclysmic divide between the two reliquaries. As the choice of the word *typos* reveals, the detachable cross enclosed in the Bessarion Reliquary is *not* a reliquary cross<sup>94</sup>. It is a *sign* or *symbol* of Christ's life-giving cross, not the actual material substance of the True Cross on which Christ was crucified. This difference is crucial, because it confirms that the relic content of the reliquary of Bessarion is, in fact, limited to the small rectangular chambers flanking the filigree cross on either side (Tav. 3). Whether it was this realization that led a subsequent generation to rework the reliquary and fix the central 'reliquary' cross inside its cruciform recess is difficult to determine. Gentile Bellini's panel still shows a different, presumably the original configuration of the central cross, with the two archangel plaques

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*versi in alcuni epigrammi bizantini*, «Byzantion», 34 (1964), pp. 447-467. For a more recent attempt at an interpretation of the inscriptions, see B. PENTCHEVA, *Räumliche und akustische Präsenz in byzantinischen Epigrammen: Der Fall der Limburger Staurothek*, in *Die kulturhistorische Bedeutung byzantinischer Epigramme*, ed. by W. HÖRANDNER - A. RHOBY, Vienna 2008, pp. 75-83.

<sup>93</sup> On the inscription, see the contribution by A. RHOBY, *The Textual Programme of the Cross of Bessarion's Staurotheke and its Place within the Byzantine Tradition*, in this volume.

<sup>94</sup> On the relevance of the designation of the cross as *typos*, see the contribution by B.V. PENTCHEVA, *Cross, Tunic, Body: Liturgy, Materiality, and the Phenomenology of Salvation*, in this volume.

flanking the *titulus* beam rather than being placed above it (Fig. 15). The recent conservation campaign of the Bessarion reliquary provided further evidence for such a reworking campaign (Fig. 16), attesting that the archangel plaques with their now redundant nail holes, are no longer in their original position.

The Venetian reliquary of the *scuola* of San Giovanni Evangelista and the Byzantine reliquary of the *scuola* of Santa Maria della Carità thus ultimately worked in similar ways. They framed the small splinters of the relic of the True Cross enclosed in them in ways that augmented and inflated their miracle-working potential. However, the visual claim made by the Byzantine reliquary of Santa Maria della Carità was one charged with the full authority of Byzantine tradition. And yet, despite its distinguished provenance and the grand rhetoric of its filigree cross and richly decorated container, the relic of Santa Maria della Carità ultimately failed to produce the miracles necessary to compete with the well-seasoned and highly esteemed relic of San Giovanni. It also failed because the *scuola* of San Giovanni ultimately mounted a more successful media campaign to propagate and cement its relic's history and miracle-working power in the hearts and minds of their Venetian contemporaries.

It was not the last time a Venetian confraternity took up the challenge and vied for attention and primacy of *their* relic of the True Cross vis-à-vis those of others<sup>95</sup>. In 1499, when Ambrogio Contarini, a well-known patrician, seafarer, and member of the *scuola* of San Marco, fell gravely ill and lay on his death bed, he called Bernardino de Grassi, the *guardian grande* of the *scuola*, and its *scrivan* Vettor Ziliol to his home<sup>96</sup>. There, he presented them with a small reliquary cross of gold that contained a fragment of the True Cross. He vowed that he had obtained it in Constantinople and that «because of the virtue of its relic, some devils of Hell had been expelled from the body»<sup>97</sup>. While the confraternity was

<sup>95</sup> The following story paraphrases a much more detailed account in FORTINI BROWN, *Honor and Necessity*, pp. 198-204.

<sup>96</sup> For the life and career of Ambrogio Contarini, see *I Viaggi in Persia degli ambasciatori veneti Barbaro e Contarini*, ed. L. LOCKHART - R. MOROZZO DELLA ROCCA - M. TIEPOLO, Rome 1973; N. DI LENNA, *Ambrogio Contarini, politico e viaggiatore veneziano del secolo XV*, Padua 1921, both already cited in FORTINI BROWN, *Honor and Necessity*, p. 199, note 58.

<sup>97</sup> ASV, SG SM, Reg. 17, c. 17: «El qual legno lo dito esser del vero legno della croce

not in an immediate position to act upon these astounding revelations, monthly processions were ordered in 1505 for the cross to be carried to the high altar of the neighboring church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo lest «such a worthy relic should go without due veneration»<sup>98</sup>. The following year, a silver and crystal reliquary tabernacle was ordered for the relic, which was now carried not in monthly but daily processions<sup>99</sup>. By 1512, miracles were cited in the *scuola's* records, and Ziliol, the former *scrivan* and now *guardian grande* of the *scuola* approached Patriarch Antonio Contarini with the request to order all churches of Venice to proclaim faith in the genuineness of the relic's healing powers<sup>100</sup>. The patriarch quickly responded, approving the confraternity's request: forty days of indulgences were ordered for all men and women who visited the relic of the True Cross of San Marco, and as a result, the prestige of the relic as well as the income of the *scuola* increased exponentially.

## 5. Conclusion

In the second half of the thirteenth century, we saw a Venetian doge, namely Raniero Zeno, make a considerable effort to publicize and put on record the miracle-working qualities of some of the city's most prominent relics in order to increase their visibility and miracle-working potential. Unlike Raniero Zeno, who had relied on established processes and sought papal approval and confirmation for the miraculous survival of the relics of San Marco, his fourteenth-century successor Andrea Dandolo began to promote the fame of San Marco's relics by emphasizing their venerable history and ties to the ducal office. He did so by means of writing them quite literally into

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perché de la vertu de quello esta cazado del corpo diavoli dal inferno». Cited after FORTINI BROWN, *Honor and Necessity*, p. 200, note 59.

<sup>98</sup> ASV, SG SM, Reg. 17, c. 27: «[...] perche tanta degna reliquia non staghì senza debita veneratione [...]». Cited after FORTINI BROWN, *Honor and Necessity*, p. 201, note 63.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201, note 64, with reference to the source text preserved in ASV, SG SM, Reg. 75, c. 15v.

<sup>100</sup> ASV, SG SM, Reg. 17, cc. 100-101 Cited after FORTINI BROWN, *Honor and Necessity*, p. 205; P.L. SOHM, *The Scuola Grande di San Marco, 1437-1550: The Architecture of a Venetian Lay Confraternity*, Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University 1978, p. 182.

the historical record and, in the case of St. Isidore, by commissioning a monumental narrative picture cycle in the space in which they were kept<sup>101</sup>. During the course of the fourteenth and into the early sixteenth century, we witnessed equally powerful efforts by the city's most prestigious religious confraternities and their leaders to acquire new sacred treasures, thus becoming guardians and *impresarios* of their numinous powers. As we have seen with regard to the relics of the True Cross of the *scuole* of San Giovanni Evangelista and Santa Maria della Carità, a Byzantine pedigree was still important to unlock the relics' miracle-working potential. However, over the course of two centuries, the guardians and *impresarios* of Venice's foremost religious treasures had learned that stagecraft and the public performance of an object's efficacy was at least as important as its Eastern provenance in creating the proper environment, in which mere wood could become a relic and wield its miraculous powers.

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<sup>101</sup> For the translation of the relics of St. Isidore to Venice and the decoration of his chapel at San Marco, see KLEIN, *Refashioning Byzantium*, pp. 207-209.



Fig. 1 - Reliquary Cross of San Giovanni Evangelista, 1369 with later additions, front. Venice, Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista.



Fig. 2 - Reliquary Cross of San Giovanni Evangelista, 1369 with later additions, detail (prophet bust). Venice, Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista.

Fig. 3 - Reliquary Cross of Henry of Flanders (Santuario 55). Venice, Tesoro di San Marco.

Fig. 4 - Reliquary Cross of San Giovanni Evangelista, 1369 with later additions, detail (reliquary capsule). Venice, Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista.

Fig. 5 - Reliquary Cross of San Giovanni Evangelista, 1369 with later additions, detail (crucifix). Venice, Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista.



Fig. 6 - Reliquary Cross of San Giovanni Evangelista, 1369 with later additions, detail (St. John). Venice, Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista.

Fig. 7 - Reliquary Cross of San Giovanni Evangelista, 1369 with later additions, detail (figure of a saint or member of the scuola?). Venice, Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista.

Fig. 8 - Reliquary Cross of San Giovanni Evangelista, 1369 with later additions, detail (figure of a military saint). Venice, Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista.

Fig. 9 - Reliquary Cross of San Giovanni Evangelista, 1369 with later additions, detail (inscription in context). Venice, Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista.



Fig. 10 - Reliquary Cross of San Giovanni Evangelista, 1369 with later additions, detail (inscription panels). Venice, Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista.

Fig. 11 - Gentile Bellini, *Procession in Piazza San Marco* (Miracle of Giacomo de Salis), 1496. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.

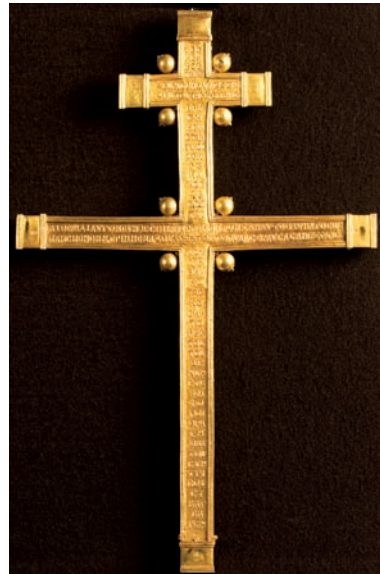


Fig. 12 a-b - Limburg Staurotheke theke (front, closed), ca. 963-985. Limburg a. d. Lahn, Dom- und Diözesanmuseum.

Fig. 13 - Staurotheke (Santuario 75). Venice, Tesoro di San Marco.

Fig. 14 - Limburg Staurotheke, cross (back), ca. 945-959. Limburg a. d. Lahn, Dom- und Diözesanmuseum.

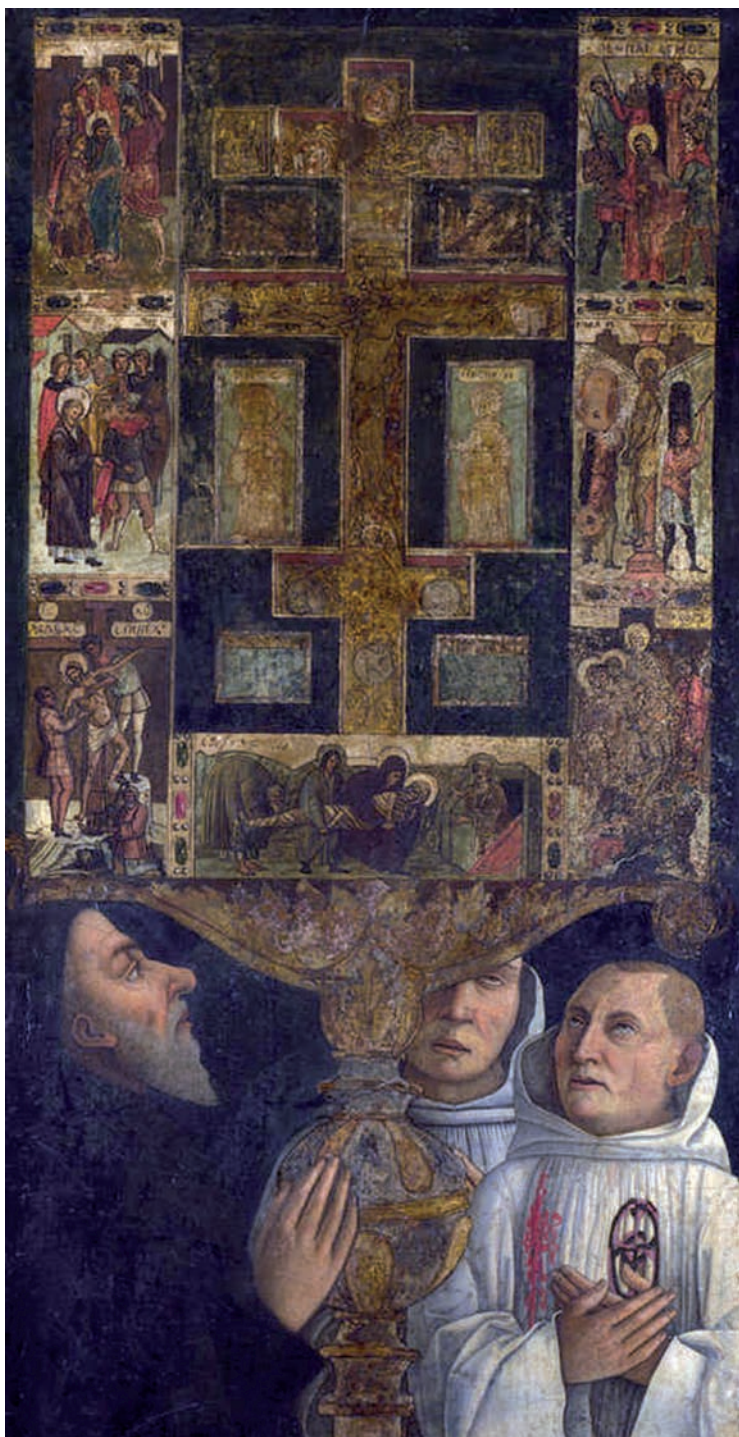


Fig. 15 - Gentile Bellini, *Tabernacle Door for the Reliquary of Cardinal Bessarion* (front), 1472-1473, detail. London, National Gallery of Art.



Fig. 16 - Reliquary of Bessarion, plaque with archangel, Venice. Gallerie dell'Accademia.



# TAVOLE

Stauroteca di Bessarione  
Venezia, Gallerie dell'Accademia



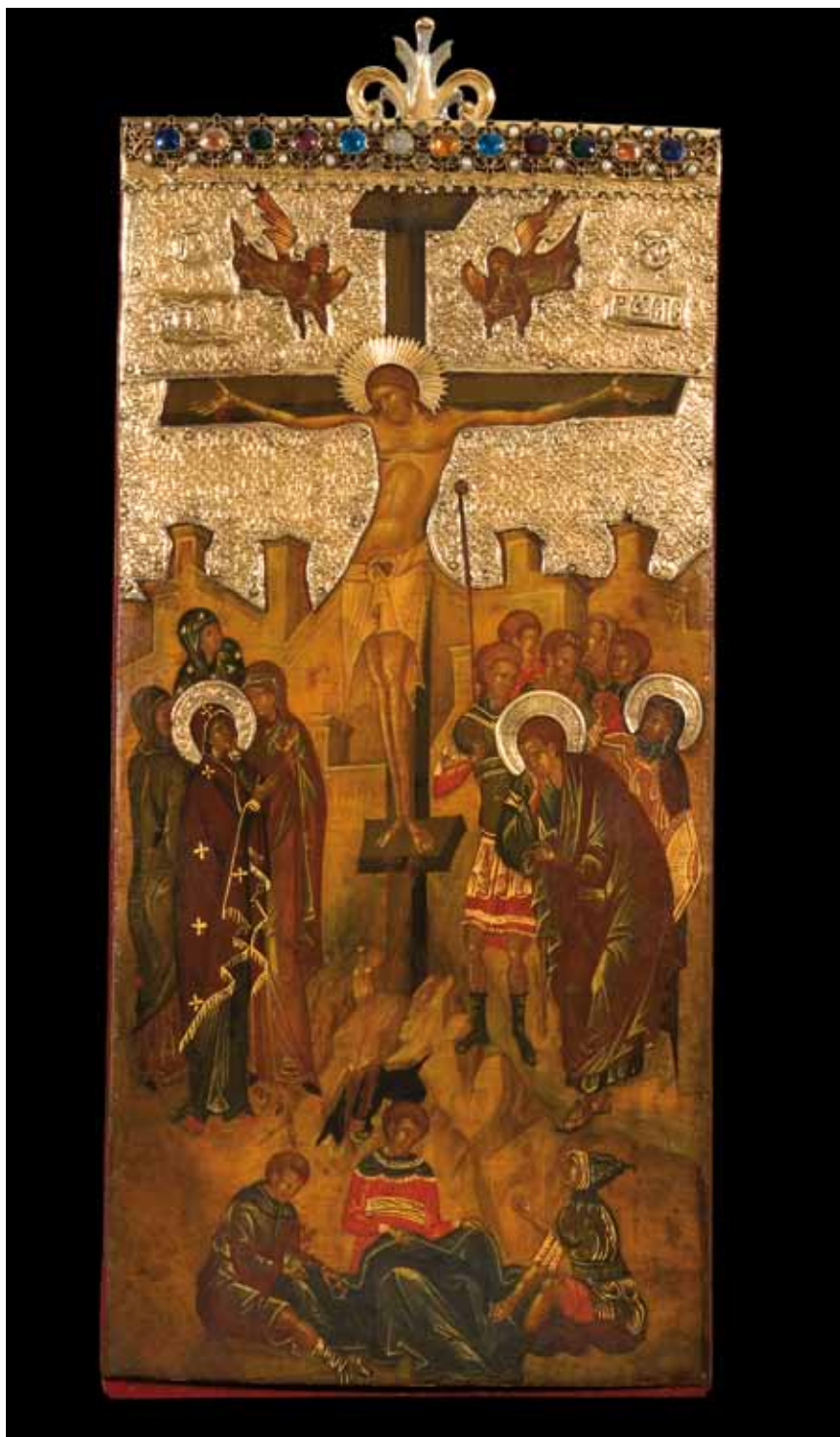
Tav. 1 - Intero aperto, recto.



Tav. 2 - Particolare con la tavola della *Crocifissione* inserita a scorrimento (prima del restauro).



Tav. 3 - Intero aperto, recto, particolare.



Tav. 4 - *Crocifissione*, tavola di chiusura, recto.



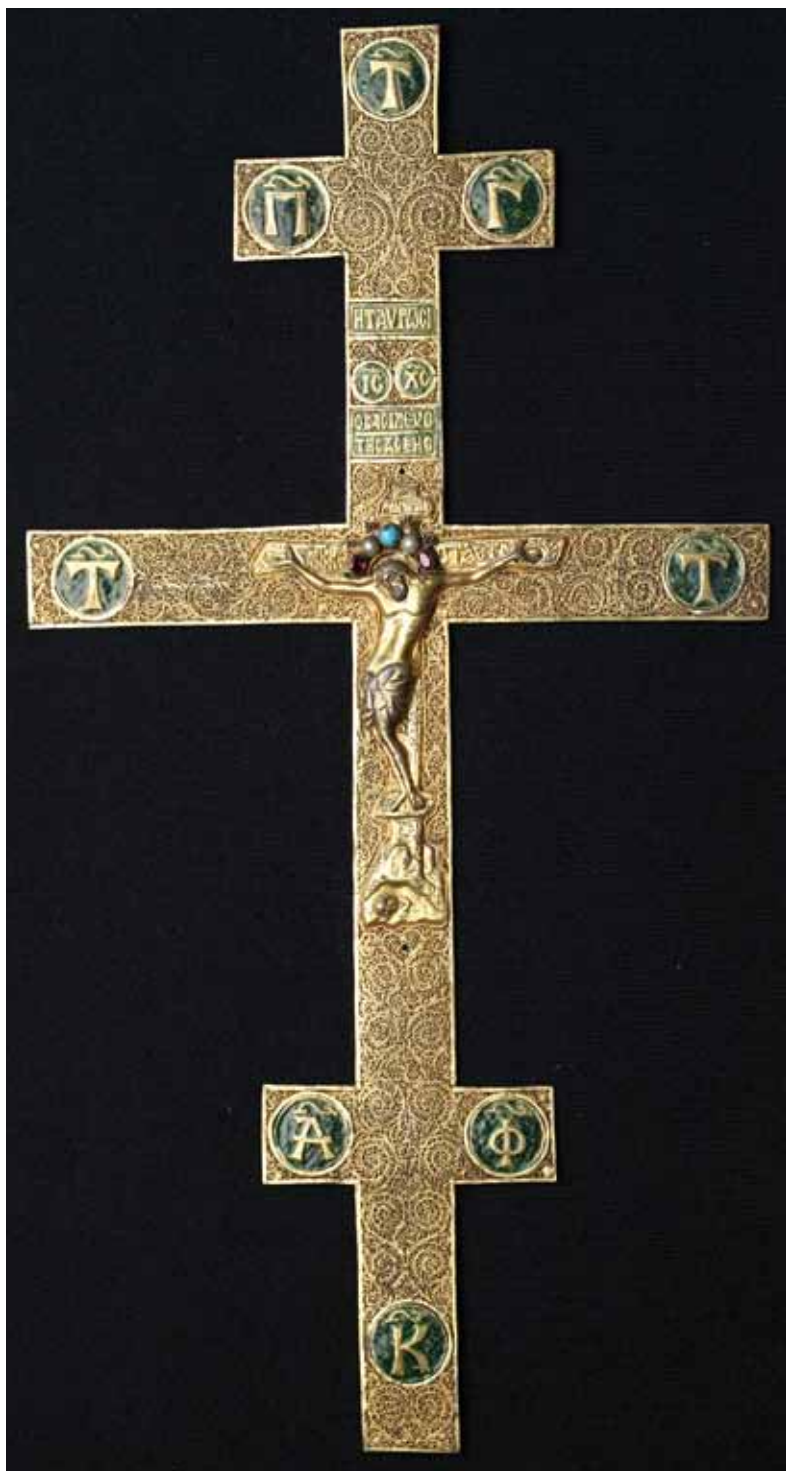
Tav. 5 - Tavola di chiusura, verso.



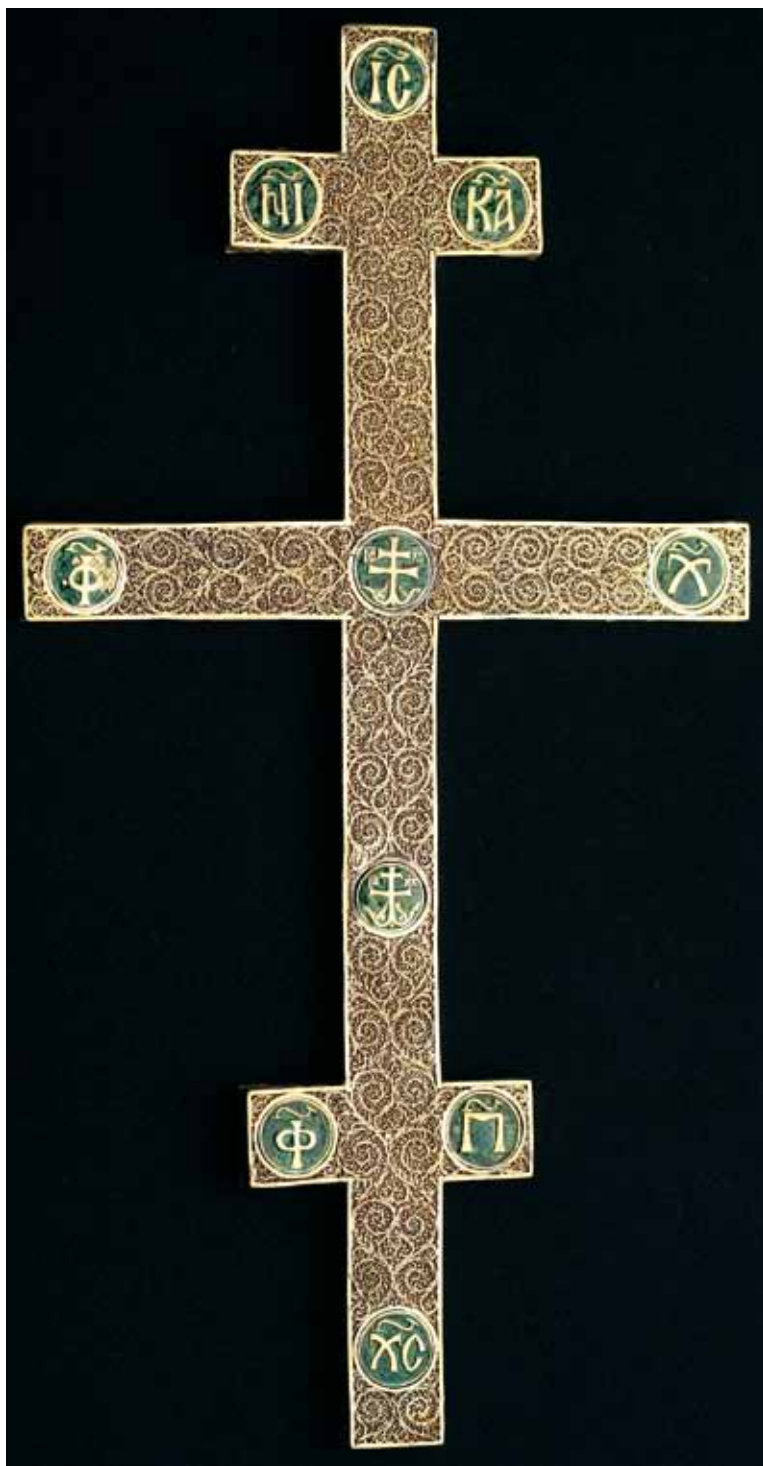
Tav. 6 - Intero, verso.



Tav. 7 - Iscrizione, verso, particolare.



Tav. 8 - Croce centrale, recto.



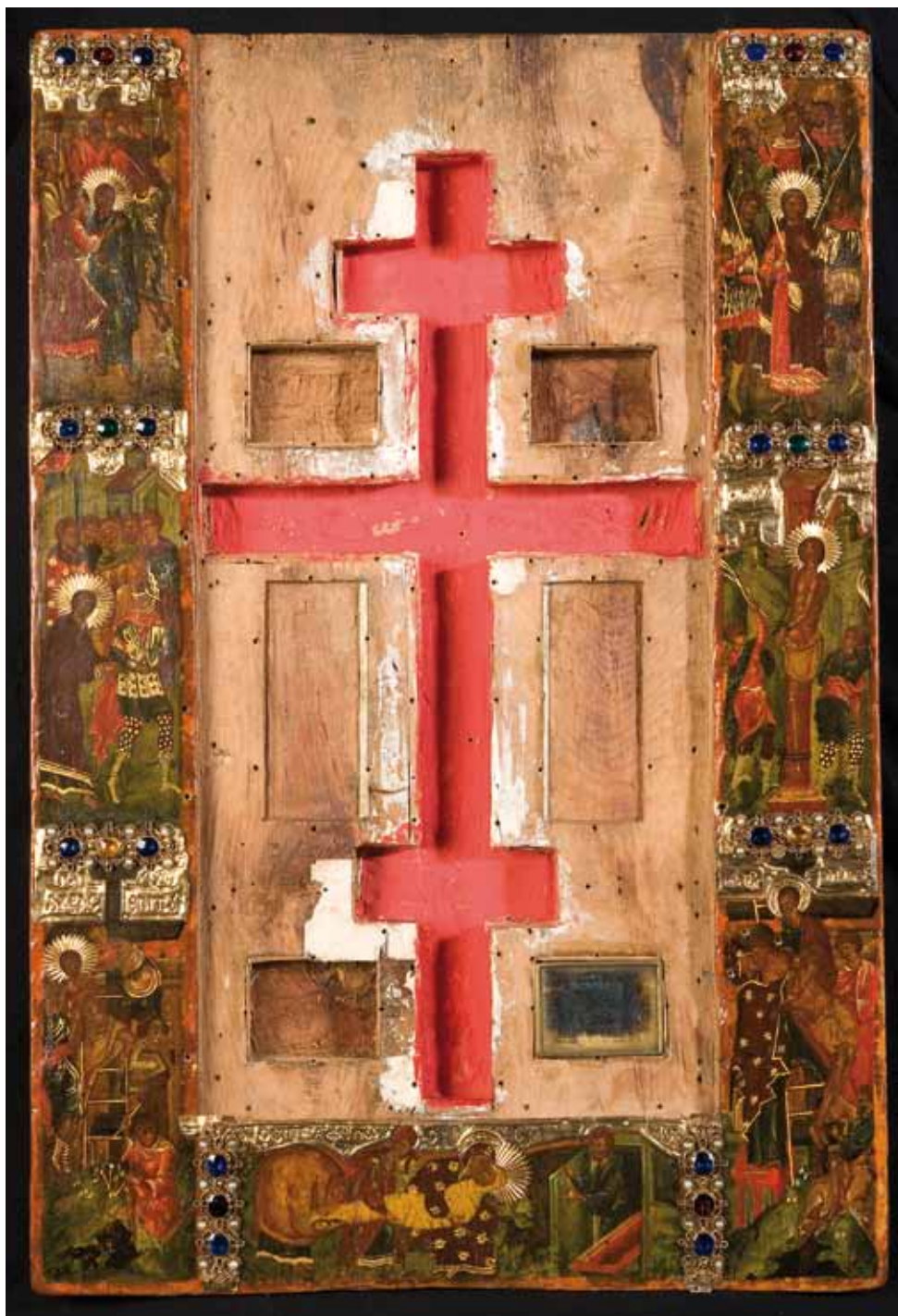
Tav. 9 - Croce centrale, verso.



Tav. 10 - *Costantino*, vetro dipinto.



Tav. 11 - *Sant'Elena*, vetro dipinto.



Tav. 12 - Parte centrale dopo lo smontaggio, recto.



Tav. 13 - Parte centrale dopo lo smontaggio, verso.



Tav. 14 a-c - Croce centrale, particolari della decorazione ad archetti lungo lo spessore.



Tav. 15 a-i - Croce centrale, particolari dell'iscrizione e della decorazione ad archetti lungo lo spessore.

