

MITTEILUNGEN  
DES KUNSTHISTORISCHEN  
INSTITUTES  
IN FLORENZ



LXIV. BAND — 2022  
HEFT 2



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HEFT 2

# MITTEILUNGEN DES KUNSTHISTORISCHEN INSTITUTES IN FLORENZ

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**Umschlagbild** | Copertina:  
Polidoro da Caravaggio,  
*Elias wird vom Engel geweckt* | *Elia svegliato dall'angelo*  
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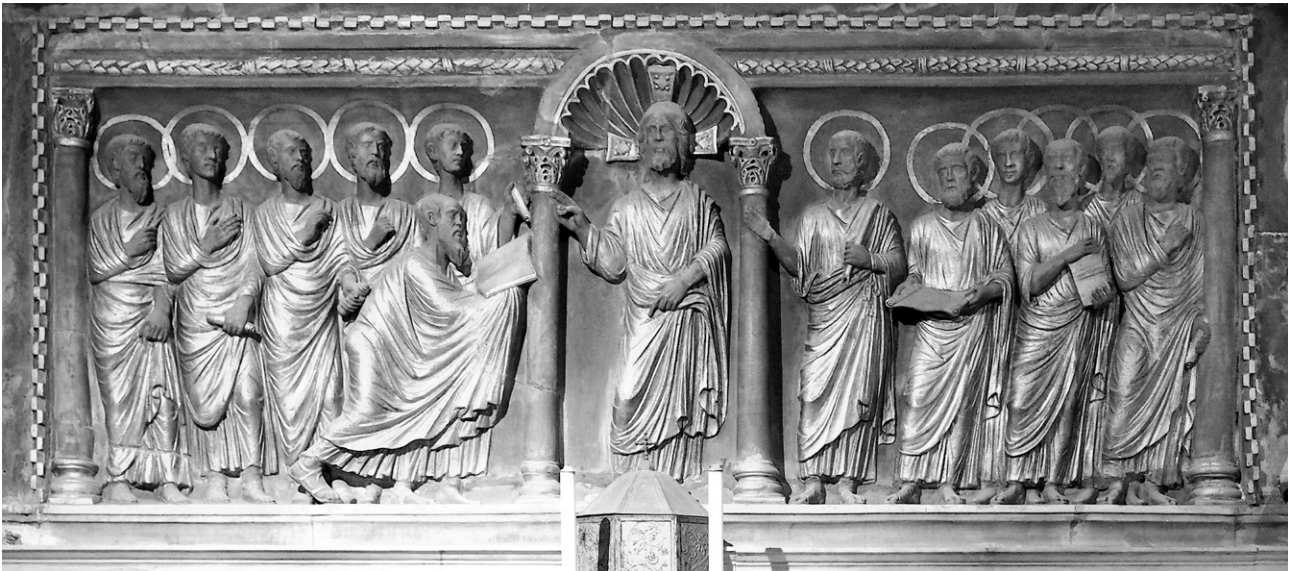
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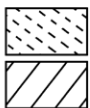
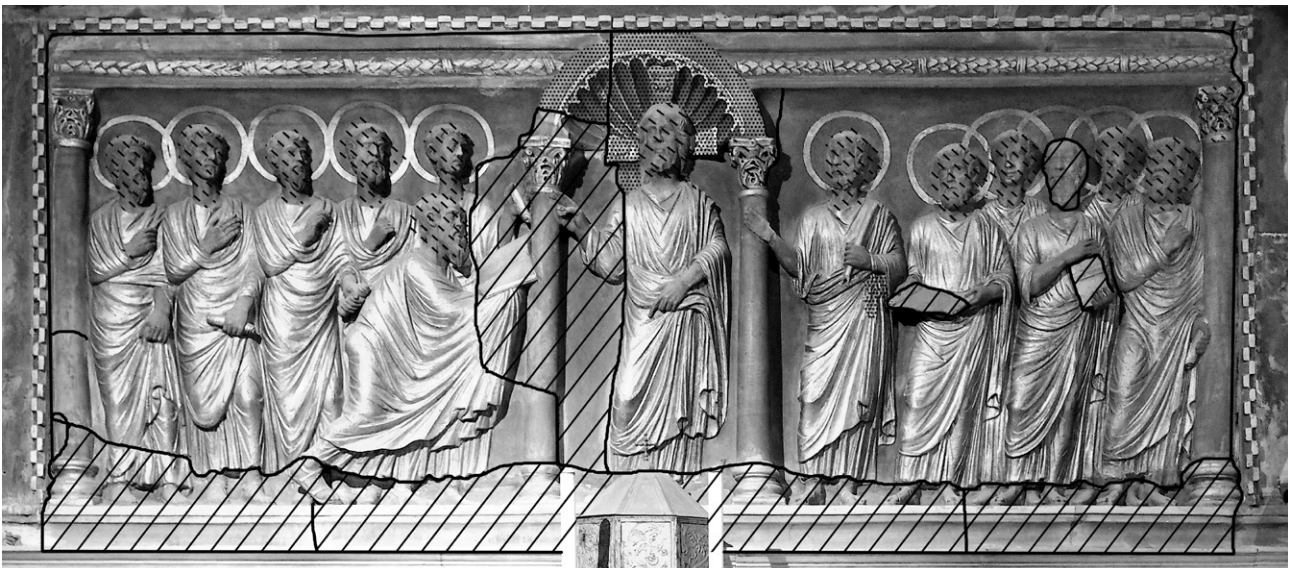
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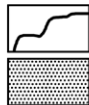


1 *Traditio legis* relief.  
Venice, San Marco,  
Cappella delle Reliquie



Reworked parts

Inserted parts



Cut and broken edges

Additions in stucco

2 *Traditio legis* relief with markings  
that show broken edges, cut lines,  
additions, and reworked elements



## The *Traditio Legis* Relief in San Marco in Venice Medieval Copy or Early Byzantine Original? A Response to Armin F. Bergmeier

Helga Kaiser-Minn

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The *traditio legis* relief (Fig. 1), located in one of the most prominent places of San Marco in Venice, namely on the east wall of the Cappella delle Reliquie in the treasury, was one of the subjects of Armin F. Bergmeier's article on "The Production of *ex novo* Spolia", published in this journal in 2021.<sup>1</sup> Bergmeier subsumes the relief under the pseudo-spolia of a Venetian workshop imitating Early Byzantine style around 1260. Since the author does not consider its state of preservation, I would like to summarize here in brief the results from my earlier examination of the relief<sup>2</sup> and present new findings which strengthen my claim that it has been created in Constantinople at the end of the fourth century.

### The Material Evidence of the Relief

The examination of the *traditio legis* relief, undertaken in 1994 together with the marble specialist Lorenzo Lazzarini, revealed that it consists of several pieces.<sup>3</sup> Fracture and cutting lines are clearly visible (Fig. 2), and the pieces are made of different materials: The figures in tunics and pallia are parts of a frieze sarcophagus made of Proconnesian marble, whereas the piece be-

tween Christ and the apostle bent forward with veiled hands is, instead, made of Italian marble of medium grain size. The head of the third apostle from the right has been attached, as can be seen by the crack on his neck, while the remaining twelve heads have been reworked, as evidenced by the roughness of their surface. Furthermore, a part of the unrolled *rotulus* of the apostle on Peter's right side has been added. The scallop shell, Peter's two keys, and the cross nimbus, moreover, are made of stucco, and some of the hands have probably been reworked. The garments, the capitals, the scallop shell, and the cross nimbus are gilded.

The fragmentary frieze sarcophagus originally represented a *traditio legis* to Paul. It originated during the Theodosian era at the end of the fourth century in Constantinople and came to Venice possibly in the wake of the Fourth Crusade in 1204. The relief was sawn vertically along the body of Christ, either in Constantinople to facilitate transport or in Venice, where the centrepiece at the left of the cut edge was sawn out and a newly carved relief piece was inserted into the gap in order to change the iconography of the relief: Instead of Christ letting his *rotulus* unroll in the veiled hands of Paul, the central part now reads as the

<sup>1</sup> Armin F. Bergmeier, "The Production of *ex novo* Spolia and the Creation of History in Thirteenth-Century Venice", in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, LXII (2020), pp. 126–158, esp. pp. 140–143. Otto Demus, *The Church of San Marco in Venice: History, Architecture, Sculpture*, Washington, DC, 1960, pp. 172f., had left open whether the work is a medieval copy or a heavily reworked Early Byzantine relief. For additional literature on the question of the origin of a number of Venetian works in Early Byzantine style, see Bergmeier, pp. 128f., notes 6–12.

<sup>2</sup> Helga Kaiser-Minn, "I due rilievi di marmi nel tesoro di San

Marco: nuove fotografie, nuovi aspetti", in: *Storia dell'arte marciana: sculture, tesoro, arazzi*, conference proceedings Venice 1994, ed. by Renato Polacco, Venice 1997, III, pp. 278–288; *eadem*, "Ein theodosianisches *traditio-legis*-Relief aus Konstantinopel und seine Wiederverwendung und Vorbildfunktion in Venedig", in: *Sarkophag-Studien 6: Akten des Symposiums "Sarkophag der römischen Kaiserzeit: Produktion in den Zentren – Kopien in den Provinzen"*, conference proceedings Paris 2005, ed. by Guntram Koch/François Baratte, Ruppolding/Mainz 2012, pp. 219–232.

<sup>3</sup> For what follows, see Kaiser-Minn 1997 (note 2) and *eadem* 2012 (note 2).



3, 4 Fragments of a sarcophagus with the *Healing of the bleeding woman*. Barletta, Museo Civico



evangelist Mark presenting his Book of the Gospel to Christ.<sup>4</sup> Without modifications, the figure of Paul could be transformed into Mark, because unlike in Byzantine pictorial tradition, in Western iconography the evangelist is depicted with the same features: “[...] the head bald, the beard long, [...] his hair mixed with a little gray”.<sup>5</sup> Contemporarily, the third apostle from the right – originally Mark – had to be turned into Paul by replacing his head with a new one featuring the latter’s physiognomy.

These alterations must have been made before the mid-thirteenth century, whereas the heads of the other apostles and of Christ were probably reworked at a later moment. Finally, when Jacopo Sansovino in 1530 redesigned the choir area and the relief was moved to the Cappella delle Reliquie, it was supplemented with stucco and partially gilded.

Although this reconstruction has largely been accepted by recent scholarship,<sup>6</sup> Bergmeier does not engage with it and eludes the problem of the reworked parts.<sup>7</sup> As evidence for his medieval dating, Bergmeier cites “the style of the heads”, some

of which resemble the thirteenth-century prophets on the Porta dei Fiori, and the large hands, in which “each limb with its veins” is depicted with great attention to detail.<sup>8</sup> Yet these are precisely the parts which were reworked in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance with chisel and stucco.

#### The *Traditio Legis* in the East

Most of Bergmeier’s arguments against an Early Byzantine origin of the work, however, are iconographic. In particular, he claims that “no reconstruction of the original relief is possible that would turn the scene into either of the two standard forms” of the *traditio legis* and that this iconography “was virtually unknown in the Eastern Mediterranean”.<sup>9</sup> Recent archeological findings, however, suggest that the best quality examples among the early Christian sarcophagi in Ravenna, including those depicting the *traditio legis* to Paul, were imported from Constantinople. They can be regarded as excellent examples of Constantinopolitan art and complement the scant finds made

<sup>4</sup> On the iconography of Mark, see Gregor Martin Lechner, “Iconografia di San Marco”, in: *Omaggio a San Marco: tesori dall’Europa*, exh. cat. Venice 1994/95, ed. by Hermann Fillitz/Giovanni Morello, Milan 1994, pp. 71–84: 72.

<sup>5</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. by Theodor Graesse, Leipzig 1850, p. 267: “[...] recalvaster, proluxa barba [...] canis adpersus”. The Venetians developed a mixed language, a kind of Esperanto or “lingua franca” by using Western and Byzantine motifs side by side. See Hans Belting, “Die Reaktion der Kunst des 13. Jahrhunderts auf den Import von Reliquien und Ikonen”, in: *Ornamenta Ecclesiae*, exh. cat., ed. by Anton Legner, Cologne 1985, III, pp. 173–183.

<sup>6</sup> Cf., among others, Ruth Papadopoulos, *Die Skulpturen des 13. Jahrhunderts an San Marco in Venedig*, Würzburg 2002, p. 171; Wladimir Dorigo, *Venezia romanica: la formazione della città medievale fino all’età gotica*, Verona 2003, I, p. 218; Wolfgang Wolters, *San Marco in Venedig: Ein Rundgang durch Kunst und Geschichte*, Berlin/Munich 2014, pp. 194f.; Johannes G. Deckers/Guntram Koch, *Konstantinopel, Kleinasien – Thrakien – Syrien – Palästina – Arabien*, Wiesbaden 2018 (*Repertorium der Christlich-Antiken Sarkophage*, 5), pp. 6 and 97f., no. 169.

<sup>7</sup> To support his claim, Bergmeier (note 1), p. 142, instead maintains that Guntram Koch “rejects the possibility of a Constantinopolitan



5 Sarcophagus fragment from Bakırköy with four apostles. Istanbul, Archeological Museums

in Istanbul.<sup>10</sup> The special iconographic variant of the depiction, as shown in the Venetian *traditio legis* relief, is also testified by a number of fragments. In the Eastern Mediterranean, only a few examples of early Christian sarcophagi produced by the prolific workshops of Constantinople are fully preserved. This effectively means that, for documentation purposes, every fragment is of great importance. Four such fragments found in different locations offer a comparison with the *traditio legis* relief in Venice and allow the conclusion that the latter is part of a group of stylistically related Theodosian works from Constantinople.

The front panel of a Constantinopolitan sarcophagus is preserved in three pieces in Barletta (Figs. 3, 4).<sup>11</sup> Despite the lacunae in the central section, we can still recognize that it showed Christ turning slightly to the left to a female figure crouching on the ground. The scene thus depicts the healing of the bleeding woman, who touches the hem of Christ's pallium. Her bent posture is a variant of that of Paul/Mark on the Venetian relief. While the extended right arm of Christ is lost, the

left side of his body corresponds in style and iconography to the figure of Christ in the *traditio legis* relief.

The relief fragment from Bakırköy (Fig. 5) in Istanbul shows four apostle figures clad in tunics and pallia.<sup>12</sup> It originally featured a fifth figure, which was chiseled off for a later reuse of the slab. Traces of the feet are still visible, its tips pointing to the right; together with the outlines of the knee and traces of the outstretched arms along the right edge they indicate that this figure was facing right and leaning forward. We therefore can surmise that it was receiving something from another person to the right, which must have been Christ letting his *rotulus* unroll in the veiled hands of Paul. There is no other plausible interpretation of the scene than as a *traditio legis* to Paul, as proposed by Kollwitz in 1941.<sup>13</sup>

The relief fragment from İznik (Fig. 6) may also have come from a workshop in Constantinople.<sup>14</sup> It shows two figures, recognizable as Peter and Christ. They correspond to the Venetian relief in all details. Peter holds the staff of his cross in

or late antique origin of the relief". However, this opinion refers to a book Koch published in 2000; in response to my publications, he later revised his opinion and, in 2018, included the relief in the reference catalogue of early Christian sarcophagi as the product of a Constantinopolitan workshop that was created at the end of the fourth century and reworked in the Middle Age (Deckers/Koch [note 6], pp. 6 and 97f, no. 169).

<sup>8</sup> Bergmeier (note 1), pp. 142f.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 141f.

<sup>10</sup> Deckers/Koch (note 6), pp. 16–18.

<sup>11</sup> Proconnesian marble, 0.89 × 1.07 m; cf. Deckers/Koch (note 6), pp. 95–97, no. 167. The Barletta relief is sawn lengthwise and crosswise, probably to facilitate the transport from Constantinople. The large round hole in the left fragment was cut when this part of the relief was later used as a well cover.

<sup>12</sup> Proconnesian marble, ca. 1.49 × 0.74 m. Cf. Johannes Kollwitz, *Oströmische Plastik der Theodosianischen Zeit*, Berlin 1941, pp. 153–161; Deckers/Koch (note 6), pp. 21f., no. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Kollwitz (note 12), p. 155.

<sup>14</sup> Marble, 0.70 × 0.64 m; cf. Deckers/Koch (note 6), p. 84, no. 151.





6 Fragment of a sarcophagus with the figures of Christ and Peter. İznik, Archeological Museum



7 Sarcophagus fragment from Yedikule with five apostles. Istanbul, Archeological Museums

the same way and raises his right hand in acclamation, turning slightly to face Christ. With his left hand, Christ holds the folds of his pallium or puts his hand on the bulge of the folds while spreading his index finger, as in the Venetian relief. After ruling out all other possibilities, in 2005 Urs Peschlow published a reconstruction of the fragment that corresponds, except for the columns and the arcade, to the *traditio legis* relief in Venice.<sup>15</sup>

The relief fragment found in Yedikule (Fig. 7) shows the outlines of – according to the number of their feet – five figures staggered in depth.<sup>16</sup> The heads of the first three are broken off, while the two figures on the right have even been cut down to the waist. The angled right arms of the two figures on the left that are entirely visible are covered by the pallium up to the wrist, while their hands grip the bulge of the pallium's folds. The three figures in front hold closed *rotuli* in their left hands.

All four fragments originated in Constantinople between 380 and the early fifth century. Except for the one from Yedikule, whose marble type has not been determined, all are made of Proconnesian marble and are closely connected in terms of composition, figure scheme, and style, as can be seen from the synopsis of

their outline drawings (Fig. 8). The three apostle figures on the left of the *traditio legis* relief in Venice (1) correspond to those on the sarcophagus fragments from Bakırköy (3) and Yedikule (5). The figure of Christ on the relief in Venice (1) is most closely related to those on the reliefs in Barletta (2) and İznik (4). Finally, the figure of Peter carrying the cross on the Venice relief (1) is similar to the same figure on the fragment in İznik (4).

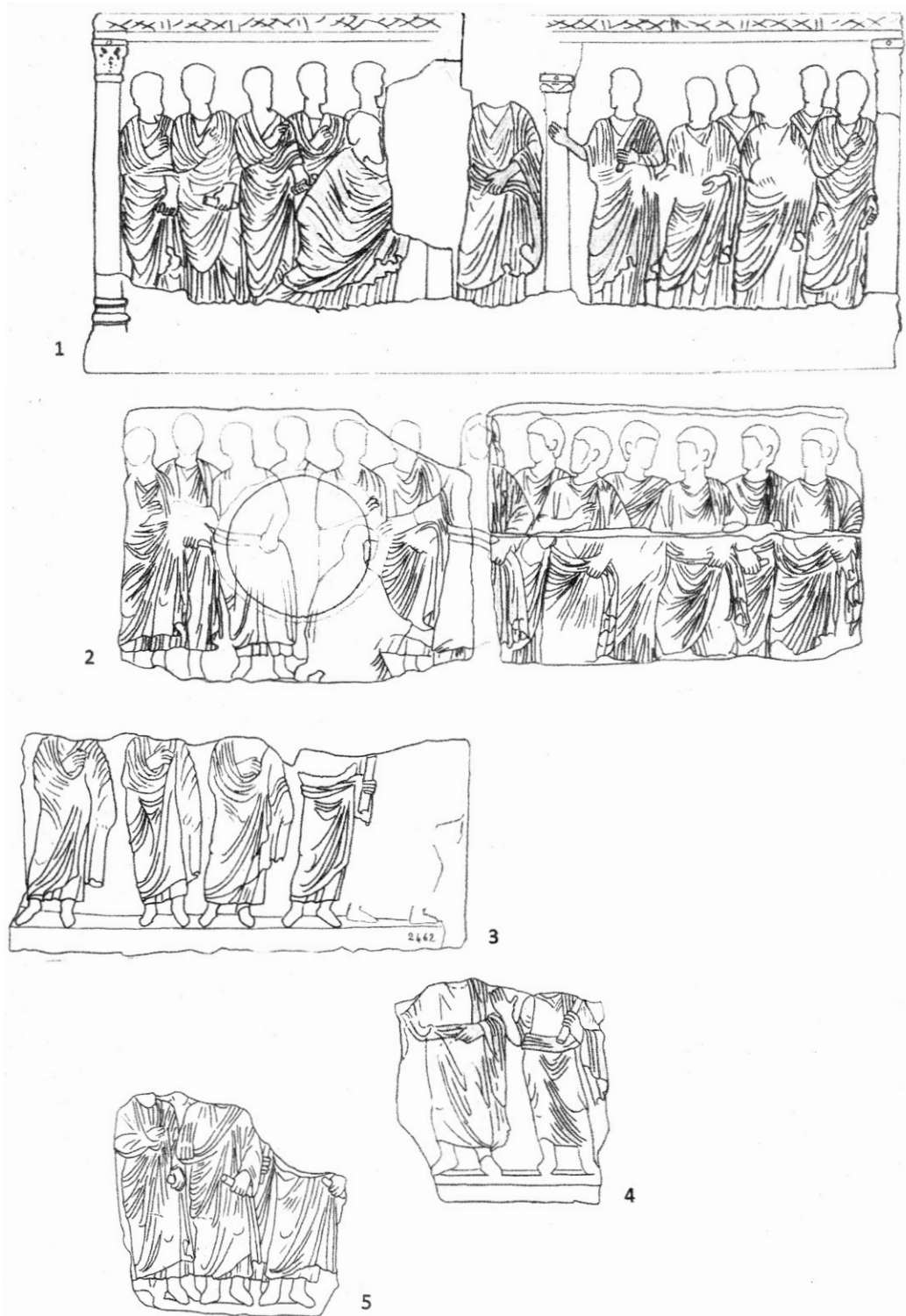
The conclusion from this synopsis is that the relief fragments were either produced in the same workshop or based on a common model. Iconographic variations were possible with minimal effort, as evidenced by the comparison between the *Healing of the bleeding woman* in Barletta and the *Traditio legis* in Venice. The Bakırköy fragment plays the key role in proving that the subject of the *traditio legis* to Paul in this iconographic composition already existed in Early Byzantine Constantinople.

Once this is established, Bergmeier's other objections against an Early Byzantine origin of the *traditio legis* relief are easily dismissed. According to him, "it is strange that all apostles on the left side of the relief (except Paul) hold scrolls, while those on the right side hold either scrolls or books".<sup>17</sup> Yet one of

<sup>15</sup> Urs Peschlow, "Überlegungen zur oströmischen Sarkophagskulptur: Ein neues Fragment aus İznik/Nikaia", in: *Zwischen Polis, Provinz und Peripherie: Beiträge zur byzantinischen Geschichte und Skulptur*, ed. by Lars Martin Hoffmann, Wiesbaden 2005, pp. 823–844.

<sup>16</sup> Proconnesian marble, 0.67 × 0.73 m; cf. Deckers/Koch (note 6), pp. 22f., no. 4. The geometric ornament on the back of the fragment suggests a reuse in the eleventh or twelfth century, possibly for a choir screen.

<sup>17</sup> Bergmeier (note 1), p. 142.



8 Synopsis of the fragments from Venice (1),  
Barletta (2), Bakırköy (3), İznik (4), and Yedikule (5)



the two alleged books (held by the fifth apostle from the right) is clearly an unrolled *rotulus*, while the one that the third apostle from the right (representing once Mark, now Paul) presses to his chest is an addition of the thirteenth century,<sup>18</sup> as is his head. Finally, Bergmeier's claim that "[...] the stump of a cross carried by Peter has no parallel in the surviving visual evidence from late antiquity"<sup>19</sup> is contradicted by the fragment from Āznik (Fig. 6) showing this very motif.

Even if we ignore all these observations and accept Bergmeier's point of view, his suggestion that the relief was made around 1260 in the Venetian workshop based on an Early Byzantine model would raise a series of questions that are difficult to answer: Why would the relief have been fragmented? Why would the central part have been cut out and supplemented with a different type of marble immediately after its creation? Why would the traces of repair have been left so obviously visible? And why would an Early Byzantine model that made it to Venice disappear without a trace?

### The Impact of the *Traditio Legis* Relief as a Model in Venetian Art

The *traditio legis* relief had a discernible influence as a model in the workshop of San Marco.<sup>20</sup> In the middle of the thirteenth century, the relief with Christ in a laurel wreath carried by angels, now placed on the same wall in the Cappella delle Reliquie, was carved as a counterpart for the *traditio legis* relief and closely follows its style and formal motifs.<sup>21</sup> Another example is the right part of the figure frieze of the Porta di Sant'Alipio,<sup>22</sup> which quotes the apostles from the relief without their compositional context. The similarities between the two works lead Bergmeier to the conclusion "that both the relief and

the portal sculptures have been carved by the same workshop in the second half of the thirteenth century".<sup>23</sup> This assumption, however, requires modification: both must in fact have been in the same workshop, but the *traditio legis* relief was there in its role as the highly valued model to produce sculptures in a pseudo-Byzantine style.

What is more, the history of the relief's impact extends far beyond San Marco and the thirteenth century. As has been observed, Tullio Lombardo's relief depicting the Coronation of the Virgin (1502) in the Bernabò Chapel in San Giovanni Crisostomo shows striking compositional and stylistic similarities.<sup>24</sup> According to Sarah Blake Wilk "both the chapel and the entire church of San Giovanni Crisostomo are derived from Byzantine models".<sup>25</sup> In keeping with this ambience, Tullio Lombardo chose the Early Byzantine relief from San Marco<sup>26</sup> as his stylistic reference, even though it is a very unusual model for the subject of the Coronation of the Virgin.<sup>27</sup>

In 1530, the *traditio legis* relief was bricked into the east wall of the Cappella delle Reliquie, the sanctuary created for the presentation of the relics.<sup>28</sup> This suggests that the relief itself is to be regarded as one of the famous "Byzantine relics"<sup>29</sup> of Venice, which would explain the ostentatious disclosure of all fractures and cut edges, inserted parts, and traces of reworking.

### Photo Credits

Armin F. Bergmeier, Leipzig: Fig. 1. — Holger Kaiser, Hemsbach: Figs. 2, 8. — Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Rome: Figs. 3–5. — Urs Peschlow: Fig. 6. — From Deckers/Koch (note 6): Fig. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Deckers/Koch (note 6), p. 98: "Statt des aufgeschlagenen Codex wird der zehnte (von links) einst das untere Ende eines Rotulus mit der Linken gefasst und die Rechte auf dessen oberes Ende gelegt haben."

<sup>19</sup> Bergmeier (note 1), p. 143.

<sup>20</sup> See Kaiser-Minn 2012 (note 2), pp. 229f. I have to revise my statements about the ciborium columns of the main altar of San Marco. In the meantime, they have been identified with convincing evidence and arguments as spolia from Byzantium, although Bergmeier (note 1), pp. 144–147, continues to maintain a thirteenth-century origin; see the contributions by Thomas Weigel, Anne Markham Schulz, Maria da Villa Urbani, Ettore Vio, Antonella Fumo and Lorenzo Lazzarini in the volume *Le colonne del ciborio*, Venice 2015 (= *Quaderni della Procuratoria*, 10 [2015]). Jutta Dresken-Weiland is preparing a monograph on the columns that will show the derivation of all scenes of the ciborium columns from Early Byzantine models and textual sources.

<sup>21</sup> See Kaiser-Minn 1997 (note 2), pp. 278f. and figs. 1, 2; Bergmeier (note 1), p. 136, who, however, subsumes it under "thirteenth-century funerary sculpture", although the original pediment proves that it must have been an altar front.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 137–140 and figs. II, 12.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 143.

<sup>24</sup> Sarah Blake Wilk, *The Sculpture of Tullio Lombardo: Studies in Sources and Meaning*, New York/London 1978, pp. 94–96, 120f., 142f.; see also Anne Markham Schulz, *The Sculpture of Tullio Lombardo*, London 2014, p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> Wilk (note 24), p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> The Barletta relief is iconographically even closer to Tullio's relief. It was probably still in use in Tullio's time, possibly serving as an altar front in the church of Santi Simone e Giuda in Barletta; see Deckers/Koch (note 6), p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> The comparison with Tullio Lombardo's relief raises the question about the middle section of the *traditio legis* relief with the arcade: Was the upper end of the niche originally an entablature? Since the scallop shell is made of stucco and dates from 1530, this possibility should be considered.

<sup>28</sup> See Kaiser-Minn 2012 (note 2), pp. 230–232.

<sup>29</sup> On the "Byzantine relics", see Holger A. Klein, "Die Heiltümer von Venedig – die 'byzantinischen' Reliquien der Stadt", in: *Quarta Crociata: Venezia, Bisanzio, Impero latino*, conference proceedings Venice 2004, ed. by Gherardo Ortalli/Giorgio Ravegnani/Peter Schreiner, Venice 2006, II, pp. 789–823.