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MARIA AIMÉ VILLANO, Les colonnes du ciborium de San Marco à Venice (Culture et société médiévales 43). Turnhout: Brepols 2025. 496 pp., 103 b/w ill., 10 plates. – ISBN 978-2-503-61170-9

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The sculpted ciborium columns around the altar of the San Marco Church in Venice are a monument of great importance because of the complete conservation of the pictorial program, beginning with the Protevangelium of James and ending with God in his glory, surrounded by tetramorphs and angels. Despite this, scholars have not discussed the columns all that often. THOMAS WEIGEL's 1997 doctoral thesis stands out, as it convincingly refutes the previously dominant view – advocated by ELISABETTA LUCCHESI PALLI in 1942 – that the columns were created in the 13th century, and proposes a 6th-century date. WEIGEL also attempts to trace the columns' journey from Constantinople to Venice and discusses their possible location in the Eastern Roman capital. He has dealt with the columns' inscriptions but only addressed a few of their iconographic aspects.[1] His work was recently followed by that of MARIA AIMÉ VILLANO. First published online, without any images, under the title 'Le colonne del ciborio della basilica di San Marco a Venezia' (2020), it has now been printed in French together with early 20th-century photographs of the column reliefs taken by OSVALDO BÖHM. Monuments referenced for comparison are not illustrated.

The book's layout may have been determined by the publisher rather than the author, but even so, its design as a 'sea of text' is unfortunate. Illustrations come at the end and mostly show several column zones at once. Their captions (which would have been helpful to a viewer unfamiliar with the reliefs) give no precise description of the depicted scenes.

1. T. WEIGEL, Die Reliefsäulen des Hauptaltarciboriums von San Marco in Venedig. Studien zu einer spätantiken Werkgruppe (Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte des Mittelalters und der Renaissance 5). Münster 1997; IDEM, Le colonne istoriate del ciborio dell'altare maggiore. In: IRENE FAVARETTO (ed.), Le colonne del ciborio. Arte, Storia, restauri della basilica di San Marco a Venezia. Quaderni della Procuratoria. Venice 2015, pp. 11–23, T. WEIGEL, Le iscrizioni delle colonne, ibid., pp. 20–23 ; IDEM, Ipotesi sul ruole delle colonne protobizantine del ciborio di San Marco nel quadro delle lotte di potere a Costantinopoli dopo il 1204. In: ETTORE VIO (ed.), San Marco. La basilica di Venezia. Arte, storia, conservazione, vol. 2, Venice 2019, pp. 11–19.

An introductory section on the state of research, including 'Nouveaux arguments en faveur d'une datation au XIII^{e} siècle' and 'Nouveaux arguments en faveur d'une datation à l'antiquité tardive' (pp. 38–43), is followed by a chapter on 'Contexte' (pp. 47–66). VILLANO discusses here the three ciboria erected at San Marco, the main altar one, its capitals and bases, the roof of this ciborium, the figures placed on it, the floor, and the main altar itself. The next chapter, 'La syntaxe des formes' (pp. 67–92), includes an epigraphic excursus (pp. 78–92). The columns' inscriptions are generally dated to the 13th century,[2] but VILLANO assigns then a 12th-century date (pp. 82–86). She points out that Venice already maintained trade relations with Constantinople in the 11th century, so it is possible that the columns stood in a Catholic church belonging to the Venetians somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean (e.g. Constantinople or Alexandria) and may have received their Latin inscriptions there. She thus finds it 'plausible' that the columns may have been brought to Venice by sea as early as the 12th century and may have formed the first ciborium of San Marco (pp. 90–92, esp. 92). This hypothesis cannot be easily verified: VILLANO does not properly explain why a 13th-century date for the inscriptions cannot be correct[3] and does not reproduce the 12th-century comparanda from Trento and Venice (pp. 82ff.) on which she bases her argument. She is aware of the difficulties of epigraphic dating (p. 84). THOMAS WEIGEL already pointed out in 1997 (pp. 27–130, esp. 130) that no known inscription has letter forms entirely similar to those found on the ciborium columns (a variety of letters is clearly visible in OSVALDO BÖHM's photographs on pp. 395–485).

The bulk of the book discusses one by one the individual scenes on all four columns (pp. 93–337). Each section comprises a description that does not go into great detail, a 'commentaire critique' and 'comparaisons'. A 'bibliographie spécifique' usually lists only literature dealing with the scene at hand. The parallels cited by VILLANO are often unreferenced, making it is impossible to ascertain where a monument has been published and what it looks like. Such lack of footnotes does not meet the standard generally required of scholarly work.

2. See most recently WEIGEL, Le colonne istoriate.

3. In her discussion of the inscriptions on p. 83, VILLANO does cite WEIGEL's work, though without page numbers.

The author sums up her purposes as follows: ‘Le but de ce livre était donc de decomposer l’ensemble en ses parties, de les analyser dans leurs particularités, mais pour les considerer ensuite dans leur unité et dans le contexte de San Marco’ (p. 333). Thus, VILLANO did not intend systematic examination of the scenes’ iconography. Her interest lies in medieval depictions (and later ones, extending into the Baroque period), which she often merely lists. It is unclear to me what the context of San Marco is supposed to mean for the ciborium columns and what VILLANO’s iconographic comparisons reveal in this respect.

The Christian monuments cited as comparanda are given short shrift and, regrettably, not treated with the accuracy they deserve. Even some toponyms are rendered incorrectly: it should be Kızıl Çukur (not Kizil Çukur), Derebağ Kilise (not Derebag Kilise), Sarica Kilise (not Sanca Kilise). On p. 133, a so-called tree sarcophagus in the Vatican Museums is mentioned as a parallel for a Christian depiction of the Orans; in its present form, however, this is a product of the 18th century.[4] Another example of Orans iconography from the Coemeterium Maius depicts not Mary (p. 133) but a mother with her child. (It would have been easy to refer to encyclopaedia articles on this subject, which is not uncommon in Classical and Late Antiquity.) The woman being blessed by Christ on Column B: Zone 6 is represented in the type of the Small Herculaneum Woman – not Venus pudica, as VILLANO writes (p. 204).

It does not seem that the author has examined the ciborium columns closely and directly. Following COSTANTINI, she identifies the vessel standing on a table in front of the bride’s house in the centre of Column B: Zone 3 – a bowl on a high foot – as a chalice and relates it to the Eucharist celebrated on the occasion of the wedding (p. 205). This ‘chalice’ is filled with objects that are no longer recognisable. It is an example of the Constantinopolitan custom of furnishing the bride’s house with precious items for her wedding. In the meal scene on Column B: Zone 4, a similarly filled bowl stands on the table – this is found several times in other depictions of the Last Supper and already appears as a secular object on the dining table during the Roman

4. HUGO BRANDENBURG, Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage, vol. 1, Wiesbaden 1986, cat. 60; CRISTINA GENNACCARI, Museo Pio Cristiano. Documenti inediti di rilavorazioni e restauri settecenteschi sui sarcofagi paleocristiani. Bollettino monumenti, musei e gallerie pontificie 16 (1996) 153–285, esp. 177 (fig. 25), 182. What VILLANO means on p. 133 n. 163 by her reference to Volume I, 2 of the Repertorium remains a secret: the numbers cited do not correspond to any volume.

Imperial period.[5] Interpreting the vessel as a 'chalice' is far-fetched, if only because it is filled with solid objects and not with a liquid.

According to VILLANO, the depiction of the married couple blessed by Christ on Column B: Zone 6 is supposed to be a representation of the Christian wedding rite (pp. 208–210, 212) – even if, as she herself points out, this rite only developed gradually. She has not examined the couple's two diadems closely, as these do not resemble the Middle Byzantine wedding crowns in Athens (mentioned without a footnote on p. 208):[6] on them, a flat, semicircular element filled with a cross is attached to the top of the band, a feature not found on the couple's diadems at San Marco. Contrary to VILLANO's view (p. 208, no footnote), the scroll held by the man is not a marriage contract, since such contracts are never depicted in Eastern Roman wedding scenes; rather, it is probably a reference to a foundation.

VILLANO commendably cites new documents for the history of San Marco. In 1604, its altar ciborium was surmounted by a wooden dome where numerous candles were placed, especially at Christmas. These led to a fire, as a result of which the wood was removed (p. 51f.). Had VILLANO looked closely at the columns, she would have noticed that the front of the Last Supper table on Column D: Zone 1 shows traces of damage by fire and has been reworked in a post-antique style. Late Roman tables are usually covered with a long tablecloth, but their legs are visible.[7] The front of the table here is discoloured black and features non-antique openings that resemble round windows; an ornamental band runs across the central opening. This can now be explained in light of VILLANO's source: during the fire, falling parts of the wooden dome or something else set alight by it damaged the Last Supper table. The addition of window and circular motifs was an elegant way of removing the black discolouration as much as possible and of diverting attention from the damage. The black discolouration on the trees

5. See, for instance, the Rossano Gospel: RAINER WARLAND, Allegorese in Byzanz. Die Weisheit Salomos und die Anfänge der biblisch-allegorischen Bildkunst in Konstantinopel. Regensburg 2021, p. 77, fig. 2.38. Or the House of the Buffet Supper at Antioch: KATHERINE M. DUNBABIN, The Roman Banquet. Images of Conviviality. Cambridge 2003, p. 160f., figs. 93–94.

6. See GARY VIKAN, Art and Marriage in Early Byzantium. Dumbarton Oaks Papers 44 (1990) pp. 145-168, esp. 145 (fig. 2), 152f.

7. See, for example, the wooden furniture feet in JOSEF STRZYGOWSKI, Catalogue générale des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire : Koptische Kunst. Vienna 1904, 135f. (cat. 8799–8801); ELISABET ENSS, Holzschnitzereien der spätantiken bis frühislamischen Zeit aus Ägypten. Funktion und Dekor (Spätantike – frühes Christentum – Byzanz: Reihe A, Grundlagen und Monumente 13). Wiesbaden 2005, p. 51 (cat. 390–403).

of the Mount of Olives, also on Column D: Zone 2, is likely to have resulted from fire-damage, as well.

Despite its shortcomings, VILLANO's study ultimately advances research on the columns. In her summary, she makes it clear that a medieval origin can be ruled out for them. A number of the subjects depicted on them were no longer represented in the Middle Ages – with the exception of the (early) wall paintings of Cappadocia, – while others are more common in Late Antiquity than in the medieval period (p. 333). A depiction of Christ's descent into the underworld may well have existed, as this idea was widespread in the Mediterranean from the 3rd century onwards, and indeed a gemstone from the 6th or 7th century has survived.[8] The Crucifixion, which shows the Lamb rather than Christ's body on the cross, corresponds to ancient iconography (pp. 333f.). The composition of the scenes also points to Late Antiquity (p. 334). Thus, a medieval date for the columns can be excluded – but the question remains when they were actually produced. In her original dissertation of 2020, VILLANO proposed the 5th century (pp. 130, 131); in the book under review, she suggested, 'for stylistic reasons', the 5th or early 6th century at the latest (p. 334) – though without undertaking a detailed stylistic analysis, which is in any case scarcely possible, given the limited corpus of surviving Constantinopolitan sculpture. Connections between the ciborium columns and certain reliefs from Constantinople were already noted by THOMAS WEIGEL in 1997. A more reliable basis for dating is provided by the iconography, to which VILLANO, however, has not devoted enough attention.

8. JUTTA DRESKEN-WEILAND, A Gem with the Representation of the Anastasis in the Burton Y. Berry Collection. In: SAIT CAN KUTSAL – FEDOR SCHLIMBACH (eds.), Preguntando se llega a Roma. Festschrift für Achim Arbeiter zum 65. Geburtstag. Heidelberg 2023, pp. 41–56.

A full examination of the iconography of all four columns will in my opinion show that they date from the Justinianic period. There are further questions that need to be examined in detail. Standing before the monument in San Marco, one is overwhelmed by the multitude of images. Why were these particular scenes chosen, why are they arranged in this specific way, do any of them interact with one another? How did they relate to the liturgical function of the ciborium? What role did the celebrant play, and was the worshipper also taken into account? How were the columns viewed in the 6th century? What do the images tell us about Justinianic Constantinople?

Keywords

late antique sculpture; Christian iconography; Constantinople; Venice