

The Church of San Giacomo di Rialto in the Medieval Era

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Abstract The Venetian church San Giacomo di Rialto is one of the oldest surviving medieval structures on the Lagoon today. Constructed around the year 1000, it follows a 'Greek cruciform' or cross-in-square architectural layout which was predominantly developed in the territories of the Byzantine Empire during the High Middle Ages (1000-1204). This paper examines the significance of the architecture of San Giacomo. This paper details the history of the construction of the church and subsequently its importance in the physical, ideological, and cultural construction of medieval Venice. In this paper I evaluate the difference between Eastern and Western architecture in the Medieval Mediterranean and how San Giacomo exemplifies or challenges both styles.

Keywords San Giacomo di Rialto. Venice. Medieval architecture. High Middle Ages. History of Venice. Romanesque. Byzantine. Medieval. Greek cruciform. Basilica.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Structure of the Church of San Giacomo di Rialto. – 3 Medieval Architectural Styles. – 4 History and Mythology. – 5 Constantinople or Rome. – 6 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

The Church of San Giacomo di Rialto has been dubbed by scholars as the only surviving example of small Byzantine parish churches in Venice. According to historian Ennio Concina, as many as twenty small, local churches – concentrated around the areas of Rialto and San Marco – belonged to this originally Eastern design.¹ These parish churches were planned around a central square, three sides of which extend to form three arms, rooted with barrel vaulting to produce the design of a Greek cross. This cluster of churches – contemporaneous with the oldest remaining basilicas in the Lagoon – appeared to be derived from this architectural tradition that originated in Medieval Constantinople, known as Byzantine architecture. San Giacomo di Rialto is the only surviving structure of this group on the main island of Venice.

¹ Concina 1998, 71-80.

The earliest reliable documentation for San Giacomo di Rialto dates to the year 1152.² However, according to local historiography, San Giacomo di Rialto is the oldest ecclesiastical structure on the Lagoon, predating the founding of the city of Venice itself; its foundations being the first stones laid on the island by their founders in the fourth century. It is widely believed that the current structure was built at the beginning of the High Middle Ages (1000-1204).³

Some scholars speculate that the architectural landscape of Venice at the time of the construction of San Giacomo di Rialto could have looked like an *alterum By-*

zantium.⁴ Richard Krautheimer argues that Venice in the High Middle Ages was a direct emulation of Constantinople, the “westernmost cultural stronghold of the Eastern Empire”; simultaneously a “powerful member of both the European and Near Eastern political and economic communities”.⁵ This belief is widespread throughout academic discourse. Fortini-Brown, Pincus, Demus et al. concur that the aesthetic character of early Venice was directly informed by the historic relationship between Constantinople and the Veneto region. San Giacomo is a direct product of this medieval cultural exchange.

2 Structure of the Church of San Giacomo di Rialto

The church is a free Greek cross-in-square with an extended western arm, surmounted by a dome and supported by six free-standing columns.⁶ The central arm of the crucifix is divided into three: the narthex is supported by two columns with the remaining four supporting the dome above the central space where the nave and transept intersect.⁷ The columns that mark the transept support the vaults which divide the nave into its tripartite structure. These columns are of Greek marble and feature Corinthian, Composite and Byzantine-style capitals. The dating of these columns has been highly contested. Some are as old as the second century, whilst others are contemporary with the construction of the church in

the eleventh century. Their provenance is largely Eastern Mediterranean and Levantine.⁸ The attribution of these columns attests to the maritime successes of Venice, which is an important part of their culture. Further, the eclectic styles and from various ages are symbolic of Venice as a whole – a city that lays claim to the history of both Constantinople and Rome. Two integrated pillars adorned with faint inscriptions demarcate the sanctuary and the entrance, with further inscriptions on the walls either side of the entrance and above the East and West doors of the transept.⁹ All the columns and arches in San Giacomo are supported by a network of metal struts attaching to one of the main interior walls [fig. 1].

² Ousterhout 2019, 101.

³ See Agazzi in this volume.

⁴ Krautheimer 1992, 405-11.

⁵ Krautheimer 1992, 405-11.

⁶ Concina 1995, 124-40.

⁷ Concina 1995, 124-40.

⁸ Concina 1995, 124-40. See Lazzarini in this volume.

⁹ Concina 1995, 124-40.



Figure 1 Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice. Network of metal struts supporting columns and arches

The current church has been modified and rebuilt up until the fifteenth century, and the Gothic façade is a later addition to the original structure.¹⁰ This façade includes an ironically inaccurate clock and a polygonal

portico supported by five columns.¹¹ The extensive modifications and restorations of the structure are indicative of its importance to the everyday Venetians. The church has been dubbed “the only surviving example of small

10 Pilutti Namer 2011.

11 Concina 1995, 124-40.

Byzantine parish churches in Venice”,¹² chiefly due to its faithful rendering of a Middle-Byzantine domed martyrion. However, much of the discussion around San Giacomo has focussed on its pseudo-historic origin in the founding myth of Rivoalto and Venice, rather than its architectural importance.¹³

San Giacomo underwent many phases of reconstruction throughout its history, and an inscription in front of the main altar inside the church details a reconstruction by parish priest Natale Regia in 1531.¹⁴ The inscription to the right of the altar [fig. 2] is a copy of the original that is to the left-hand side [fig. 3] and is completed with Regia’s coat of arms. This includes a celebratory phrase

dedicated to Regia and his interventions and reconstructions between 1531 and 1532.¹⁵ Sansovino records internal mosaics in 1581, which confirms that the reconstructions under Regia did not modernise the church as was customary in Venice during the Renaissance era.¹⁶ Furthermore, between 1600-01 large public construction works were carried out on the church with the intent to improve the appearance of the building.¹⁷ The restoration was not intended to strengthen the structure, but rather to enhance the aesthetic of the church.¹⁸ These construction works indicate the importance of the carefully preserved ‘antique’ furnishings at San Giacomo.¹⁹

3 Medieval Architectural Styles

The architecture of the church resists easy categorisation. Its explicitly Eastern architectural design conflicts with its Western location. The consensus amongst scholars is that this architectural style – stemming from the Middle-Byzantine artistic tradition – was standardised and disseminated to the Veneto as migration to the Lagoon began.²⁰ The evolution of this architectural style

can be traced back to the third century.²¹ In early medieval architecture, architectural forms were generally heterogeneous according to regional differences and gradual developments over time. Yet evidence exists of a shared, surprisingly standardised architectural church plan across seemingly separate Christian communities.²² By the end of the fifth century, liturgical changes caused

¹² Howard 2002, 45-50.

¹³ See Guidarelli in this volume.

¹⁴ Pilutti Namer 2011.

¹⁵ Pilutti Namer 2011.

¹⁶ Pilutti Namer 2011.

¹⁷ Concina 1995, 130-40. See Guidarelli and Moucheront in this volume.

¹⁸ Concina 1995, 130-40.

¹⁹ See Pilutti Namer in this volume.

²⁰ Fortini Brown 1997, 13.

²¹ Krautheimer 1992, 23-39.

²² Outserhout 2019, 101.

alterations to be imposed on the spatial organisation of churches. Cruciform churches in this period show the introduction of the tripartite division of the sanctuary to delineate a space for the *Prothesis* rite of preparing the bread and wine for the Eucharist.²³ Despite the overlap in ritual and beliefs between Roman Catholic and Orthodox Catholic liturgy, the centralised cruciform church developed to accommodate the specific needs of the latter denomination. Multiple variations on the centrally planned type had emerged by the end of the fifth century.

By this time, the centrally planned church type had become the standard, with multiple popular variants, the most prevalent of which being the cross-in-square, the tetraconch and octagonal structures, all of which developed to specifically support a dome over the central space.²⁴ Two main variants of the 'cross-in-square' style can be found in Venice. The large multi-domed basilica, such as the Basilica of Saint Mark, and the much smaller single domed churches, such as San Giacomo. The 'cross-in-square' design, which is often referred to as 'Greek cruciform', was named after the equal sided crucifix used in Greek Orthodoxy.²⁵ These churches were typically built around a cross with arms of equal length within a compact square composed of three spatial units: the narthex, nave and sanctuary and often surmounted

by a dome above the central nave space.²⁶ Such designs provide an interesting contrast to the Latin cruciform basilica plan: a rectangular nave with three aisles, divided by colonnades.²⁷ In the case of larger Greek cruciform structures, four additional domes typically surmount each arm of the crucifix layout.²⁸

This style belongs to the Middle Byzantine architectural tradition and became popular during the High Middle Ages. In a modern world largely unfamiliar with the term 'Byzantium', Byzantine artistic developments are usually neglected, as they don't neatly fit into the linear understanding of European cultural history. The architectural and artistic developments of the Byzantine Empire are lesser known and understudied in comparison to contemporaries in Western Europe. Rather than following the trajectory of Western architecture - developing from small Middle Ages basilicas to large Gothic Cathedrals - Byzantine architecture seemed to shrink by comparison, with the popularisation of small, centralised and domed churches. San Giacomo is not solely Byzantine despite its evidently Eastern plan yet is not entirely Romanesque either despite its geographic and cultural location. When it is given scholarly consideration, its complex nature is invariably simplified. The significance of the architectural form of this church has been greatly diminished by centuries of apparent misidentification.

23 Leontis 2009, 31-51.

24 Ousterhout 2019, 101.

25 Krautheimer 1992, 167-75.

26 Krautheimer 1992, 167-75.

27 Krautheimer 1992, 167-75.

28 Concina 1998, 35-8.

4 History and Mythology

Due to the mythological appendages attached to San Giacomo, it is incredibly difficult to ascertain the date of its actual foundation. According to Andrea Dandolo (1343-54), the church was built as a gift to the Saint who saved the city from a disastrous fire which broke out shortly after its founding on the 25th of March 421 AD, the feast day of the Annunciation.²⁹ The legendary consecration of the church, which took place precisely a year after its construction began, was attended by Bishops from the neighbouring towns of Padua, Altino, Oderzo and Treviso.³⁰ The founding myth of San Giacomo authenticates the sanctity of the Lagoon in the Middle Ages, and in turn, this myth makes abundantly clear the importance of this medieval structure to the construction of Venetian identity. It was a place devoted to religion that is protected by God.³¹

Local legend aside, little is known about the actual foundation of the church. The structure underwent ex-

tensive renovation in 1071 under the ordinance of Doge Domenico Selvo; the oldest verifiable documentation relating to its foundation dates to 1152.³² According to information advanced by plaques inside the church today, the site was officially reconsecrated in July 1177 under Pope Alessandro III. The authentic occurrence of this event has been confirmed by historian Roberto Cessi.³³ In the Venetian tradition, the church was the only surviving structure saved by divine will from another devastating fire that broke out in the Rialto area in 1514.³⁴ This event affirms the special sacred status of the city as presented in Venetian historiography. Further, the repeated rescuing of the first church built by the first inhabitants indicates that the devotion of the people has been recognised and rewarded by divine forces. The people of Venice constructed a church as their first permanent structure and the preservation of that church contributes to the assembly of Venetic civic identity as a city favoured by God.

5 Constantinople or Rome

Venice in the High Middle Ages was much closer to Rome than Constantinople, both geographically and ideologically. In terms of religion, Venice naturally adopted a Roman type of Christianity and liturgical services were unsurprisingly conducted in Latin.³⁵ Therefore, it

is perhaps surprising that distinctly Roman Christianity was practised in a building developed in an Eastern Orthodox tradition. When constructing San Giacomo, it would have been more reasonable to refer to the Roman tradition. Some of the earliest archaeological evi-

²⁹ Pilutti Namer 2011.

³⁰ Pilutti Namer 2011.

³¹ See Guidarelli in this volume.

³² Concina 1998, 17-45.

³³ Pilutti Namer 2011.

³⁴ Concina 1995 124-40.

³⁵ Ousterhout 2019, 507.

dence of Christian buildings in the Mediterranean are found in Rome. The Catacombs of St Callixtus on the Via Appia date to 230, a century before the inauguration of the city of Constantinople.³⁶ Moreover, Constantine may have only built few churches in Constantinople, but he also did construct the Lateran Basilica in Rome in 313.³⁷ Originally dedicated to Christ, the basilica later became the most significant church in the city – the Basilica of St. Peter, the Cathedral of Rome.³⁸ Rome certainly had a comparable Christian identity as Constantinople. Therefore, that the Venetians of the eleventh century did not turn to the West as a reference for the construction of San Giacomo is unusual. It is initially unclear why the Venetians consciously embraced an Eastern architecture for their latent city state when Rome was still a flourishing Christian centre in its own right.

The architecture of San Giacomo highlights the strong connection between Venice and the East. Constantinople became the capital of a Christian Empire in 313 after the Edict of Milan officially recognised the religion.³⁹ Constantinople had no previous sacred associations, unlike its religious counterpart Rome.⁴⁰ Constantinople was virtually a clean slate whilst Rome had to contend with its ancient history of pagan polytheism during a time when such old beliefs were actively rejected in favour of Christianity. Constantinople was a holy city from its conception, a fact which eventually established it as the capital of a Christian Empire, whilst Rome offered a different aesthetic culture to Venice. The ancient past of Rome

would have appealed to the early inhabitants of the Lagoon when constructing San Giacomo di Rialto as the region lacked any noteworthy historic settlements. It is worth recognising that the Greek cruciform churches in Venice, including the Basilica of St. Mark, were constructed at around the same time as the iconic Romanesque cathedral at Pisa.⁴¹ Opting for an explicitly ‘Constantinopolitan’ architecture could indicate a conscious desire to deviate from existing Western religious centres that were close to Venice. This rivalry with the ‘Romanesque’ cities across the Western Mediterranean could be indicative of a civic anxiety felt by the medieval Venetians over their lack of a comparable ancient past. The construction of San Giacomo as contemporaneous with the fabrication of a mythological founding story of the city attests to the insecurity of Venetian identity before the High Middle Ages. The role of legend and myth in the founding of San Giacomo is significant as it is indicative of the attitude that medieval Venetians had towards their heritage as they were constructing their new city. A prime example of the employment of myth in medieval Venice is the legend of the founding of Venice by Antenore in the thirteenth to fourteenth century.⁴² The Venetians fabricated a comparable founding story to that of Rome which indicates an attempt to establish their city as equal in greatness. This narrative established a history for the Venetians that legitimised their standing in the socio-political sphere of the medieval Mediterranean. Therefore, in terms of culture and architecture, the me-

³⁶ Ousterhout 2019, 7.

³⁷ Mango 1986, 18-30.

³⁸ Ousterhout 2019, 13.

³⁹ Doig 2008, 23.

⁴⁰ Concina 1998, 17-45.

⁴¹ Ousterhout 2019, 514.

⁴² Fortini Brown 1997, 112-20; Muir 1981; Pincus 1992.

dieval Venetians that built San Giacomo did not neglect their Italian neighbours entirely, instead they adopted elements of Roman culture for a different purpose. Here, it seems that the Venetians turned to Rome for its prestigious historic past and to Constantinople for its future ascending Christian status. The two concepts converge as one in the ecclesiastical architecture of San Giacomo.⁴³

As cruciform church, San Giacomo legitimises the clear religious authority of Venice in the medieval Med-

iterranean society. Regardless of the crucifix structure being 'Greek' and not 'Latin', a compact church on a clear cross design effectively communicates the piety and devotion of those who constructed it. The cruciform shape is most apparent when viewed from above and it is therefore an important 'visual' means of communicating devotion to God. It is a clear and simple plan, purposefully selected because of its religious symbolism.

6 Conclusion

The medieval church of San Giacomo di Rialto is the embodiment of the fluidity of Venetian architecture: it is an amalgamation of various cultures that when combined, create something entirely new and unique. Often tragically upstaged by the dazzling Basilica of St. Mark, San Giacomo nevertheless maintains its primacy in Venetian history at the physical and ideological heart of Venice. It is no accident that San Giacomo is based on an Eastern ar-

chitectural model – it became a symbol of the emergence of Venice. Rather than a far-flung Byzantine outpost in the Northern Adriatic, or a *Nova Roma* of any sort, Early Venice should be reconceptualised as a city that outgrew their Byzantine past, eschewed their Roman connections, and emerged as a rival power in the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages that out-last-ed them both, and it all started with the small local parish church San Giacomo di Rialto.

⁴³ See Pilutti Namer in this volume.

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