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VOLUME 4 / 2020
Topic of the Year: Connective (T)issue

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# ARCHEOSTORIE JOURNAL of PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY

**VOLUME 4 / 2020** 

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## Discovery in Torcello: Venice was born Carolingian and not Byzantine

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## **Abstract**

Frescoes dating to the 9th century were discovered in Torcello; they are the oldest revealed in Venice. They tell a very different story on the origin of the city.

"They are not from Venice, are they?". "Yes, indeed. And to be more precise, they come from Torcello!". The epigraphist Flavia de Rubeis could not believe her eyes when the archaeologist Diego Calaon showed her the photograph: it portrayed frescoes of the 9th century, the oldest ever found in Venice. They were correlated by painted captions in a clear Carolingian handwriting. This while it has always been said that Venice was the irreducible bulwark of the Byzantine Empire in the West. Despite the period of lockdown, de Rubeis could not resist: she hopped on the first train from Rome and rushed to Torcello to see such an "oddity" in person.

Now that she has studied it with care, de Rubeis confirms: such handwriting is found uniquely in the Po Valley and only in the 9th century. Its ties are with the rest of Europe, not with Byzantium! The same can be said for the painting style, featuring vivid colors and the horror vacui (the need to decorate all available spaces), traits which are the opposite of the Byzantine hieratic figurative style. On one side they portray Mary and a handmaid, on the other a beautiful Saint Martin.

**∂ Open Access ■ Translated by:** Michael Campeggi

Neywords: Venice, Torcello, frescoes, carolingian age, basilica



Fig. 1. Torcello, Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta: Fresco dating to the 9th century, Saint Martin of Tours.

## Conservation and important excavations

They were discovered by a group of archaeologists from the University of Venice headed by Diego Calaon, that is supporting the work of the conservators during the consolidation of the mosaics and of the masonry of the apses of the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello. The works were commissioned by the Patriarchate of Venice after the incredible floods of last November. and were financed by Save Venice with 2 million euros. In the Chapel of the Diaconicon, the right apse in the Basilica, archaeologists explored the area between the vault decorated with mosaics and the roof: a space full of rubble that, once cleared, revealed the few frescoes still preserved on the walls.

What story do they tell? Calaon has been convinced for some time: what Venetian historiography has led us to believe out of convenience, is really not the true story. The truth is that the origins of Venice were, like all the mainland of that time, subject to the Carolingians. Politically and culturally, Venice was born Carolingian. "This was already affirmed by the historian Wladimiro Dorigo during the 90s – he recalls – He even said that the first building of the San Marco Basilica, still dating to the 9th century, resembled the Cathedral of Aachen".

## Venice's true story

Calaon has been working to shed light on the true story of Venice's origin, a story shadowed by mythological narratives. And he is doing it through archaeology. Therefore, he chose to excavate in Torcello, one of the first places settled by the inhabitants of the mainland after the demise of the Roman empire. Specifically, it was the people from Altino, a Roman city on the edge of the lagoon: since their harbor was becoming swampy, for trade purposes the Altinates gradually moved closer to the center of the lagoon. First, to Torcello, then to Venice. Therefore, there was no sudden escape from the barbarians that were invading the peninsula, but a progressive shift towards the lagoon. This happened for security purposes, since the imperial authority was no longer able to guarantee protection, but also for commercial reasons, since roads were abandoned, and trade was carried out by sea.

Torcello is therefore a milestone for truly understanding the birth of Venice. In fact, it is here that Calaon has found harbors, arsenals, warehouses, workshops, and dwellings. He also studied the Basilica, convinced that the structure we see today is from the 9<sup>th</sup> century and is therefore Carolingian. Now he has proof: the frescoes, the many sculptures, and the investigations of the masonry. Moreover, excavating under the altar of the Diaconicon, he reached the foundations, which date without doubt to the 9th century. Then, during the 11th century, the Basilica was re-decorated and re-built, and the frescoes were replaced by the beautiful and famous mosaics in Byzantine style. At that moment, things changed. Radically.

## Mediterranean trade

How did it happen? Calaon has the answer, based on archaeology. The first official mention of Venice dates to 814, year of the treaty of Aachen, an agreement between Carolingians and Byzantines, which still remains ill-defined. "Shortly after, Venice issues its first currency – Calaon explains – The obverse of the Venetian coin features the city of Venice, while the reverse is decorated with the face of Louis the Pius, the son of Charlemagne and his successor. The link between the city and the emperor is thus clear".

Calaon carries on talking about the Venetian merchants that would navigate for all of the century on behalf of the Carolingians and who traded more with Alexandria of Egypt than with Constantinople: the Islamic influences in Venetian art come from here, just as with the corpse of their patron Saint Mark, whose body was stolen from Alexandria precisely during the 9th century. But then, Alexandria declined as a commercial port, and the strong Venetian fleet took advantage of the crisis in Constantinople, gradually replacing the Byzantines in the trade with the East.

## **Byzantine Venice**

So, we have reached the moment between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century when the Dodge Pietro Orseolo II is able to finally defeat the pirates, assuring a safe navigation in the Adriatic Sea. He signs a treaty with Constantinople, the Golden Bull. He marries his eldest son Giovanni to a

Byzantine princess, while his son Orso, who became bishop of Torcello, has the basilica decorated in Byzantine style. It is the point of no-return: Venice from now on will look to the East. Venice is Byzantine and is ready to re-write its history under this new light.

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