

# An Ancient Place Without Antiquities. The Rialto as *lieu de mémoire*

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**Abstract** The article discusses the *spolia* still preserved in the Rialto area and in the Church of San Giacomo. The article, therefore, describes the capitals of the church, an erratic early Byzantine capital located in the surroundings and the sculpture of the so-called 'Justice'. This short essay aims to illustrate that in this area of the city of Venice, which has traditionally been considered of ancient origin, only few antiquities are present. The most important evidence is to be found in the Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, a place of memory marked by a special relationship with *spolia*.

**Keywords** Venetian Architecture. Rialto. Spolia. Ancient Roman Capitals. Early Byzantine Capitals. Venice as Justice. Lieu de mémoire.

It is surprising that the area of the Rialto has not been considered in recent literature as a place of memory that, through its silence, could weave an evocative narrative about the relationship with antiquity in Venice.<sup>1</sup> There is no comparison with the Marciana area, to which numerous contributions have been dedicated. In particular, of interest here are the recent studies by Luigi Sperti, which have examined the complex of the Basilica, the Piazza and the Piazzetta in the light of an articulate and ambitious public political project.<sup>2</sup>

The area of the Rialto, on the other hand, is marked by the absence of such a multiplicity of symbols, especially *spolia*. Instead, here we find a few fragments of antiquity, a few excerpts of a history that transcends them, such as an early 'V' or 'lyre' type Byzantine capital, which is conserved in erratic form on the Fondamenta del Vin in Rio Terà San Sil-

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<sup>1</sup> In writing this article, I would like to pay tribute, in equal measure, to the memory of Claudia Barsanti and to Luigi Sperti for their constant and generous advice. The essay incorporates some contents published in Italian in Pilutti Namer 2015: I would like to thank the director of the *Ufficio beni culturali ecclesiastici ed edilizia di culto* of the *Patriarcato* of Venice, Arch. Gianmatteo Caputo, and the secretary, Dr. Irene Galifi, for allowing me to study the capitals of the Church of San Giacomo at Rialto.

<sup>2</sup> Sperti 2018, with further bibliography.

vestro [fig. 1], or the interesting combination of ancient capitals, columns and bases located inside the Church of San Giacomo di Rialto [fig. 2], designed to achieve a sophisticated global effect, a coarse allure of antiquity for a place considered to be the oldest settlement in the emerging Venice.<sup>3</sup>

Two Corinthian capitals and one composite capital can be traced back to the Severan period. The first is number 3 [fig. 3], an Asiatic Corinthian capital of 'type 5 Pensabene', composed of two crowns of eight leaves.<sup>4</sup> In the former, this takes on an enlarged form in relation to the second, whose two upper leaves of the median lobes are articulated in such a way as to give a triangular outline to the leaf tops of the second crown. On the angular cauliculi are grafted helices transformed into two symmetrically opposed 'S-shaped' tendrils that terminate in the abacus to form the flower, which is no longer visible. The type is widely attested both in Italy, also in contexts of re-use (e.g. in Catania Cathedral, in the *matronei* of Bari Cathedral, Capua Cathedral), and in the Mediterranean (e.g. in the mosque of Kairouan, Tunisia, and in the colonnaded street of Perge, Turkey).<sup>5</sup> No. 5 [fig. 4] is also an Asiatic Corinthian capital of 'type 5 Pensabene'. The specimen is distinguished by the greater refinement in the rendering of the acanthus and in the workmanship of the helices, which are arranged in parallel to the abacus and separated from it by the insertion of an additional convex lath that connects the volutes. A compara-

ble specimen, despite the lack of the cauliculi, is reused in the Basilica of St. Mark. Deichmann suggested a dating of this piece to the 5th century AD, which by comparison with the capital in question can be rectified and placed between the late 2nd and early 3rd century AD.<sup>6</sup> No. 1 [fig. 5], on the other hand, is a composite capital of an Asian type, characterised by two crowns of three-lobed leaves, separated in the first and that in the second touch each other to create an elongated oval-shaped shadow area, surmounted by an Ionic kyma with a volute channel distinguished by the presence of the ovoid and lancet band and by angular half-palmettes that join the lateral volutes. In this case, too, the piece is compared with the 'type 5 Pensabene', from which the dating is derived, even assuming a possible reworking of the item that was necessary for its installation. A second comparison is made with an identical piece reused in Capua Cathedral (Pensabene 1990, 23, fig. 22). Three similar pieces are also reused in the Basilica of St. Mark: two of them are directly comparable, but present a different decoration of the volute channel, here featuring an ivy shoot.<sup>7</sup> Finally, there is no. 4 [fig. 6]: this too, is an Asiatic Corinthian capital, but rather similar to 'type 11 Pensabene'. Indeed, the morphology consists of two crowns of eight leaves, which in the first one touch each other, forming geometric figures, while in the second the upper leaf of the median lobes is distinct from the oval background outline, the so-called 'horn motif'; the angular caulicu-

<sup>3</sup> For columns and bases see Lazzarini in this volume. A catalogue of the pieces with measurements is included in the appendix to the article.

<sup>4</sup> Pensabene 1986, 309-10, fig. 2c. See also Pralong 1993, 133-46; Pralong 2000, 81-101. Sperti sets them between Pensabene's types 14 and 17, but the chronology is still the same (ca. AD 300) (Sperti 2004, 236).

<sup>5</sup> For a list of comparisons, see Pensabene 1986, 309-10; for the *matronei* of Bari Cathedral: Calia et alii, no. 12, p. 194, fig. 5; for Capua Cathedral: Pensabene 1990, 24, fig. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Deichmann 1981, no. 574, p. 127, table 42: a generic dating to Late Antiquity in Minguzzi 2000, tab. p. 186 (Type III).

<sup>7</sup> Deichmann 1981, nos. 267-9 (esp. nos. 267-8), pp. 68-9, Table 15. Deichmann proposes a date to the 5th century AD, to be revised. Minguzzi suggests that the dating should be changed to the 5th/6th century AD and assumes the provenance as Constantinopolitan (Minguzzi 2000, Type IV.b, p. 134, tab. p. 188).

li are much reduced, as are the volutes and helices. The type is marked by the presence of a small leaf as a calyx for the stem, though not moulded, of the abacus flower, which features schematic mouldings of either side, the so-called 'two-zone abacus' (Pensabene 1986, 313-14, fig. 4c). The dissemination framework of this type is very broad, encompassing Italy, including re-used examples (see two identical examples reused in Salerno Cathedral, one Canosa Cathedral, one in the Basilica Maggiore of San Felice in Cimitile), Europe and the Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup> In the specific context of Venice, two similar pieces are found in the Basilica of San Donato on Murano,<sup>9</sup> while two identical ones were reused in the Basilica of St. Mark and have been dated by Deichmann in the generic terms of the 3rd/4th century AD.<sup>10</sup>

No. 6 [fig. 7], on the other hand, is a Corinthian capital of the so-called 'lyre' type. It is in fact characterised by two crowns of four large trilobed acanthus leaves and the 'U' shape of the volutes (similar to the lyre, hence the name). In the canonical form these usually include a sprig, a flower or an inverted leaf, whereas in the current piece there is a stylised phytomorphic shoot. As Claudia Barsanti has noted, the type derives from classical prototypes, namely capitals with double 'S' volutes, so-called 'lireggianti', manufactured in the micro-Asiatic area during the 2nd/3rd century AD and exported throughout the Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup> The type is widespread



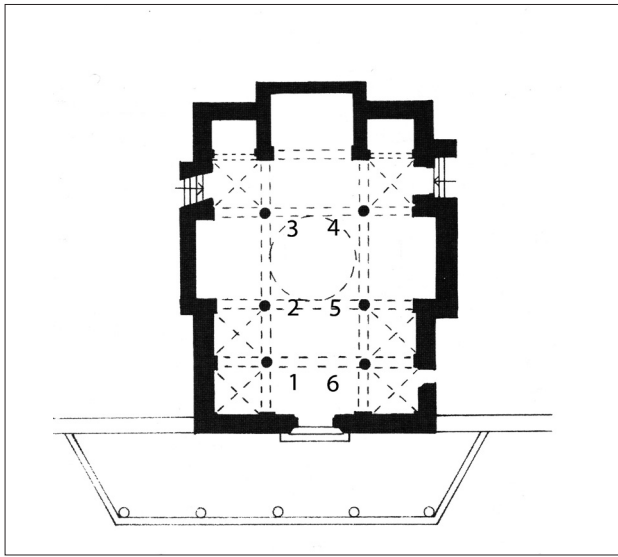
**Figure 1** Early Byzantine capital of the 'V' or 'lyre' type, with part of a column, in Rio Terà San Silvestro (CC licence)

<sup>8</sup> For a list of attestations of this type, cf. Pensabene 1986, 313-14, fig. 4c, and, for the Salerno capitals, Pensabene 1990, 20, figs 12-13 as well as, for the Canosa capital, 88-9, fig. 123.

<sup>9</sup> Sperti 2004, nos. 2, 13, pp. 233-5, figs 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> Deichmann 1981, nos. 3-4, pp. 29-30, table 1. Minguzzi suggests raising the date to between the 1st and 3rd century AD. (Minguzzi 2000, tab. p. 186, Type III).

<sup>11</sup> For the typological study and diffusion see Kautzsch 1936, 65-7; Pensabene 1986, 353; Sodini 1989, 163; Barsanti 1989, 125-35; Zollt 1994, 176-87; Guiglia Guidobaldi 1999; Pralong 2000, 88 (Type IV).



**Figure 2** Plan of the Church of San Giacomo di Rialto with indication of the numbers of the capitals (Elaborated by the Author)

in Italy<sup>12</sup> and also in Venice, where there are a conspicuous number of pieces: in the Basilica of St. Mark,<sup>13</sup> in the vestibule and atrium of the Ca' d'Oro,<sup>14</sup> and in the porticos and loggias of the Palaces Businello-Giustiniani<sup>15</sup> and Ca' Loredan Corner Piscopia,<sup>16</sup> in the aedicule of the right and left façades of the Church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari (Pilutti Namer 2008-09), in the lagoon area on Torcello in the church and the portico of Santa Fosca (Guiglia Guidobaldi 1995, 604, 623 figs 9-10), and out of context in Venice itself.<sup>17</sup>

Lastly, we come to no. 2 [fig. 8]: this refers to the 'type IV Kautzsch' of Byzantine Corinthian capitals, consisting of eight crowns of acanthus leaves with large denticles that touch each other to form the *mask akanthus*, but which differs from the canonical 'type VII' in that it retains, among the ribbon-like volutes that are arranged almost in parallel with the angular leaves of the second crown, the semi-circular emergence of the *kalathos* rim.<sup>18</sup> The capitals of the group IV of Kautzsch can be dated to the last quarter of the 5th century AD, but the flattening of the relief and the presence of the atrophied helices facing the abacus boss do not suggest an important reworking process but rather the manufacture of the piece in the second half of the 11th century, as in some examples from Murano (Sperti 2004, nos. 1, 3, 8, 9, pp. 238-42, fig. 5, p. 241). The capital can be compared to a piece

<sup>12</sup> For the literature review see Barsanti 1989, 129-35, for Italy 133-4 footnotes 171-81.

<sup>13</sup> Deichmann 1981, nos. 263-6, 280, 287, 369-70, 407, 417, 523, 526, 531, 535, 556, 559, 562, 577, 583, 586, 591, 604, 624, 628. This is the group III.h in Minguzzi 2000, 132, tab. p. 187.

<sup>14</sup> For the atrium, Goy 1992, 255; for the vestibule, Barsanti suggests that the capitals are not from the 15th century, but rather 19th-century reinterpretations of pieces from the 5th-6th century AD. (Barsanti 2002, 62 fn. 16).

<sup>15</sup> One capital in the portico di riva, two in the polyphora of the loggia on the main floor, two in the polyphora of the loggia directly above (Barsanti 2002, 65).

<sup>16</sup> Two modern pieces in the portico di riva, one in the loggia (Barsanti 2002, 63 fn. 23).

<sup>17</sup> These are three pieces from Ca' Farsetti, now in the Archaeological Museum: Polacco 1981, cat. 69-71, pp. 66-7; the aforementioned capital in Rio Terà San Silvestro (*supra*, fn. 3).

<sup>18</sup> Barsanti 1989, 111-25; Sodini 1989, 172, fig. 4; Sodini-Barsanti-Guiglia Guidobaldi 1998, 316.





**Figure 3** Asian Corinthian capital of the “Type 5 Pensabene”. Late 2nd-early 3rd century AD. Marble. H. cm 56; I crown cm 19.5; II crown cm 14.5; Ø cm 41. Conservation status: good. Photo: Böhm Mariacher 1954, 44 fn. 3; Sperti 2004, 236; Pilutti Namer 2015



**Figure 6** Asian Corinthian capital of the “Type 11 Pensabene”. Late 3rd-early 4th century AD. Marble. H. cm 56; I crown cm 22; II crown cm 14; Ø cm 41 ca. Conservation status: good. Photo: Böhm Mariacher 1954, 44 fn. 3; Sperti 2004, 236, fig. 3 a p. 237; Pilutti Namer 2015



**Figure 4** Asian Corinthian capital of the “Type 5 Pensabene”. Late 2nd-early 3rd century A.D. Marble. H. cm 56; I crown cm 23.5; II crown cm 20; Ø cm 44.6 ca. Conservation status: good. Photo: Böhm Mariacher 1954, 44 fn. 3; Sperti 2004, 236; Pilutti Namer 2015



**Figure 7** Early Byzantine Corinthian “lyre-shaped” capital. Late 5th-early 6th century AD. Marble. H. cm 48; I crown cm 20; II crown cm 27; Ø cm 36.3. Conservation status: intact. Photo: Böhm Barsanti 1989, 135 fn. 80; Barsanti 2002, 65 fn. 35; Dorigo 2003, 253 (reproduction); Pilutti Namer 2015



**Figure 5** Composite capital close to the “Type 5 Pensabene”. Late 2nd-early 3rd century A.D. Marble. H. cm 51; I crown cm 16; II crown cm 13.5; Ø cm 39, 8 ca. Conservation status: good, all the leaves are chipped and there are probable signs of reworking and restoration. Photo: Böhm Mariacher 1954, 44 fn. 3; Sperti 2004, 236; Pilutti Namer 2015



**Figure 8** Corinthian capital imitating the proto-Byzantine “Kautzsch Type IV” with two crowns of leaves. Second half 11th century AD. Marble. H. 59 cm; I crown 19 cm; II crown 25.5 cm; Ø 45.5 cm. Photo: Böhm Dorigo 2003, 88 (reproduction); Sperti 2004, 242; Pilutti Namer 2015

reused in the Basilica of St. Mark in particular, which shows the same schematisation of the volutes and helices, turned towards the abacus boss with a spiral wound end.<sup>19</sup> Valid here for this piece is therefore also the argument that has already been established on the 'Byzantine style' production that took place in Venice in the 11th and again in the 12th century, already analysed by Hans Buchwald starting from the Basilica of St. Mark of the 11th century and including pieces scattered throughout the entire area of influence of the growing city.<sup>20</sup>

Among the antiquities from the Rialto area, I should also mention a sculpture of considerable interest, which conveys its message at first glance, the so-called Rialto Justice [fig. 9]. The statue is a fascinating pastiche of the modern age realised through the synthesis of sculptures from different periods: the head is from the Hellenistic period, the body from the ancient Roman time (with the addition of a crown, scales, and a metal sword), the Istri-an stone base is from the Renaissance period and incorporates the ancient pedestal (Traversari 1991).

Two fragments of statues of deities thus give life to an original sculpture, an allegory of Justice - a highly opportune warning in an area of tribunals, commerce, business - which at the same time embodies Venice. Venezia, a city that in the eyes of the rulers and of the Venetians appears as a beautiful, florid woman with curly blond well-coiffed hair, either Venus or Madonna, wearing white and gold robes as in Paolo Veronese's painting in the Doge's Palace.<sup>21</sup> Here again, in the 14th-century bas-relief on the outer façade, sculpted by Filippo Calendario, we find a depiction of Venice enthroned, who bran-

dishes a sword, to express her authority and blur her allegorical interpretation in the guise of Justice (Wolters 1976, fig. 178, cat. 49) [fig. 10].

We do not know whether this important sculpture was correctly identified as ancient in modern Venice. To get an idea of the perception of the place as ancient, we have to go back to the old stones, the *spolia*, of San Giacomo di Rialto, as if they were relics, visual memory supports serving to define and qualify the historical antiquity of the place. At the centre of a debate that has been going on for decades is the issue of the 'origins of the lagoon settlement', a debate that unavoidably stems from the myth of its foundation, which converges on the date of 25 March 421 AD. Recent literature has clarified in detail the mystifying elements of this interpretation and, after sifting through the superfetations and fantasies,<sup>22</sup> what remains of the tradition is the sought-after connection of the Venetians with the centuries-old history of ancient Rome and with the legacy that this civilisation had left in Europe and the Mediterranean. In other words, a heritage that, in the complex process of constructing the cultural memory of the city, is opposed to elements that are considered allochthonous and external (the 'barbarians'). What the Venetians are concerned with is the connection with the ancient Roman civilisation, in all the elements considered worthy of admiration: prosperity, infrastructures, monumental splendour, military strength, and the conservative attitude of society (including religious devotion). These are all elements that to us may seem naïve, but which should not appear strange in pre-industrial times,

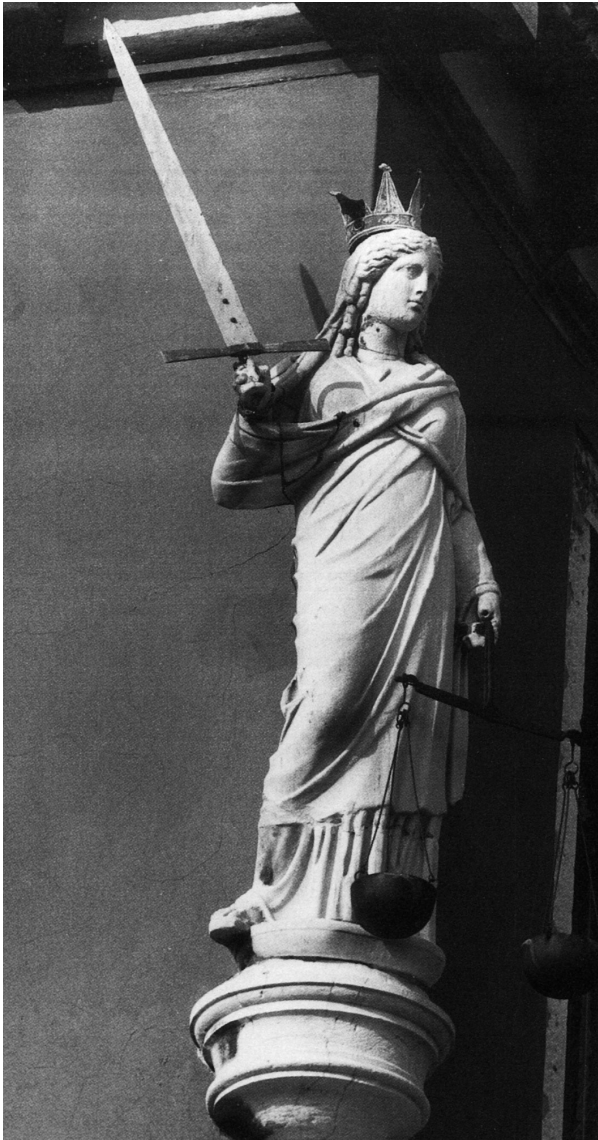
<sup>19</sup> Deichmann 1981, no. 382, p. 93, pl. 25. The capital is part of a group (which also includes no. 361, p. 89, pl. 23; no. 363, p. 90, pl. 23; no. 366, p. 91, pl. 24; no. 368, p. 91) reconsidered by S. Minguzzi, confirming the dating to the 5th century AD suggested by Deichmann (Minguzzi 2000, type III.i, p. 132, tab. p. 187).

<sup>20</sup> Buchwald 1962-63; 1964. Recently, see Sperti 2004, 240-2.

<sup>21</sup> Paolo Veronese, *The Triumph of Venice*, oil on canvas, 1582.

<sup>22</sup> Ravegnani 2020, 51-3; Ortalli 2021.





**Figure 9** Sculpture of the so-called 'Justice at Rialto', pastiche of the modern age realised through the synthesis of sculptures from different periods. Photo © Ceolin in Traversari 1991, fig. 2



**Figure 10** Filippo Calendario, Venice as Justice. 14th century. Venice, Doge's Palace. Photo © Wolters 1976, vol. 2, fig. 178, cat. 49



**Figure 11** Venice, Rialto. Church of San Giacomo. Detail of the *all'antica* medieval frame.  
Photo: Böhm, elaborated by G. Guidarelli

when all or almost all of the building works were the result of human will and human and animal effort. To emphasise, therefore, with *pietas*, the sacral antiquity of the place, the parish priest Natale Regia, who in 1531 undertook major restoration work involving far-reaching architectural modifications *in marmore notanda*,<sup>23</sup> may also have intervened in the replacement of some of the ancient capitals in place in the church. This intervention would explain the unusual presence in Venice of as many as four capitals belonging to the Roman imperial age (1, 3, 4, 5)<sup>24</sup> besides a more common piece from the early Byzantine age and a second belonging to a Venetian production from the medieval age. Of Byzantine tradition, the *quincux* is emphasised by a frame connected with the classical tradition, with *ovoli* and *lancets*, which could

be dated to the 12th century (Dorigo 2003, 89) [fig. 11]. The effort, therefore, to combine the East and the West, to keep intact the simulacrum of an ancient place to be worshipped, also persists in the Renaissance, and perhaps above all, as a result of the observation of the material culture of the building: of columns, capitals, cornices, as well as of the bricks and cornerstones that make up the perimeter walls.

These are the antiquities of an ancient area that seems lacking in them, carefully retained and reworked over the centuries to preserve intact the memory of a place that for the Venetians symbolised their origins, but also - by comparison - the splendour of their own recent achievements.

<sup>23</sup> See Guidarelli in this volume.

<sup>24</sup> On the most ancient Roman capitals in Venice see Sperti 2016.



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