

# Marbles and Stones in the Church of San Giacomo di Rialto

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**Abstract** The accurate autoptic study of marbles and stones in the Church of San Giacomo di Rialto (Venice) reveals the identification of around twenty lithotypes, most of which are from the Triveneto area, but some imported from outside this area, including three marbles (Proconnesian marble, Verde Antico, Pavonazzetto) taken from ancient monuments, albeit most probably recovered on the Venetian market. Among the first, 'local' ones, in addition to the typically Venetian stones (Istrian stone, nodular limestones from Verona, Euganean trachyte) some other types were added during the important restorations the church underwent in the 16th-17th centuries, notably in Grigio Carnico marble and Breccia di Brentonico, while Carrara marble, Breccia Medicea and Rosso di Francia marble were brought to Venice in the Baroque age via the thriving stone trade of the Italian peninsula.

**Keywords** Rialto. Church of San Giacomo at Rialto. Marbles. Stones. Reused materials.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Marbles and Stones *in situ*. – 2.1 Left Side Altar, Known as the Orefici Altar, Dedicated to St. Anthony Abbot, by Vincenzo Scamozzi. – 2.2 Altar in the Left Apse Dedicated to St. Francis of Assisi. – 2.3 High Altar Dedicated to St. James the Apostle. – 2.4 Altar in the Right Apse Dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua. – 2.5 The "Dell'Annunziata" Altar on the Right Side, Altarpiece by Marco Vecellio. – 3 Conclusions.

## 1 Introduction

The Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, vulgo 'San Giacometo', is not, as is generally assumed, one of the oldest churches in Venice, as its construction dates back to the end of the 12th century, but it is among the most popular in the city due to its location at the foot of the Rialto Bridge (west side) and its proximity to the historic Rialto market. There is little left of the primitive church, even with regard to the building and the ornamental materials that had survived the considerable restoration and renovation work carried out in the 16th cen-

tury (around the year 1531) and in the 17th century (from 1601 onwards).<sup>1</sup>The present study is a kind of *ekphrasis* of stone materials that takes into consideration the most notable lithotypes currently in use in the structures and

decoration of the altars and floor of the church, by identifying them macroscopically on the basis of their textural and chromatic characteristics and setting them in their chronological context of use.

## 2 Marbles and Stones *in situ*

The visit to the church begins from the portico in front of its main west-facing façade, a portico added in the 14th century and almost unique in Venice. This is elevated from Campo San Giacomo by two steps of Istrian stone (Lazzarini 2008), is paved with small blocks (*masegni*) of Euganean trachyte<sup>2</sup> with bands of Istrian stone and is entirely covered by a roof supported by five small columns of Proconnesian marble (*marmor proconnesium/cyzicenum*) (Lazzarini 2015) set on octagonal bases of Istrian stone. These small columns form a homogenous group with regard to the size and quality of the marble: the heights vary from 1.99 to 2.03 m, and the maximum diameters at the base from 27 to 30 cm; the Proconnesian marble is of the slightly veined/grey-coloured quality, sometimes better identified as of the *listato* variety. The nature of the marble and the homogeneity in size suggest that these are reused columns from a sole ancient monument. Over the columns, the splendid Gothic capitals are also made of marble, the origin of which is, however, impossible to determine by autopsy.

In the interspace between the third and the fourth column from the left of the portico, in the main façade of the church is a Gothic portal composed of alternating red Verona *broccato* ashlar<sup>3</sup> and white Istrian stone, all of which were carved with the traditional Gothic saw. The Verona red nodular limestone is in a precarious state of conservation, in particular in the lower part of the portal, and in need of urgent restoration.

In the interior, the pavement with a chequerboard pattern consists of squares (34 × 34 cm) of white Istrian stone and red Verona *broccato* [fig. 1]. It contains seven tombstones: three are in front of the absidal area, two of red Verona *broccato* (framed by *nembro rosato* limestone) interposed by one of Istrian stone, and two in front of the lateral altars. Of the two, the one on the left consists of one large slab of red Verona *broccato* framed by a band of Istrian stone with inserted longitudinal rectangular panels of white-veined black limestone, most likely to be identified as *nero Timau*;<sup>4</sup> in the tomb on the right, the large slab is of red *broccato*.

<sup>1</sup> On the history of the church see Franzoi, Di Stefano 1976, 13-14, Mazzariol 2019 and the articles of M. Agazzi, D. Collins and G. Guidarelli in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> On the geology of the Euganean Hills and trachyte see De Pieri, Gregnanin, Sedeà 1983; on the *masegni* in Venice see Lazzarini 2021.

<sup>3</sup> This is one of the most common varieties of the so-called Nembro Group, some nodular limestones like the *broccato* belonging to the geological formation known as 'Rosso Ammonitico Veronese' dated to the Dogger pro parte-Malm, outcropping in several areas of the Lessini Mountains (province of Verona), on which Albertini 1991, 37.

<sup>4</sup> This Devonian limestone was, and still is, extracted in the homonymous site (namely in the localities of Pramosio and Valcollina) in the Carnic Alps; on its related general geology, Venturini 2006, 57-65; for the specific geology of this stone, Castelli, Podda 2010, 28, 32.



**Figure 1** Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice. Pavement with a chequerboard pattern consists of squares of white Istrian stone and red Verona broccade. Photo © Böhm

*catello*,<sup>5</sup> and the frame is also made of the Veronese *nembro rosato*.

The church is divided into a nave and two aisles by two rows of three columns, all of them which come from ancient monuments, as is evident from the frequent jointing of two shafts [fig. 2]. These columns are

made of Proconnesian marble, even though it is difficult to detect its variety because of the considerable dirt from ancient coatings, possibly undertaken with organic substances that had been chromatically altered,<sup>6</sup> and due to superficial deposits of atmospheric particulate matter/candle smoke. All but one, the second on

<sup>5</sup> It corresponds to the small nodule variety of *broccato*, and is the most valuable variety of Veronese red limestone.

<sup>6</sup> In the past, in Venice, cooked linseed oil was the most commonly used organic substance for stone conservation.

the right, stand on a base of Istrian stone, in some cases brought up to a uniform height by interposed rings of marble (unidentified). Their dimensional description is provided below:

- first column on the left: is composed of two fragments, the smaller one at the bottom being 50 cm high with a diameter of 38 cm, surmounted by a shaft 1.99 m high;
- second column: as the one above, it is composed of a 56 cm fragment of Istrian stone at the bottom, with a diameter of 40 cm, and a 2.18 m-high marble one placed upon it, without the upper part of the shaft;
- third column: one single shaft of 2.98 m, with a diameter of 42 cm at most;

- first column on the right: one fragment of a shaft 86 cm high and 40 cm in diameter below, a second one 2.26 m high;
- second column: one shaft 2.75 m high, with a diameter of 40 cm;
- third column: a single shaft 3.00 m high and 40 cm in diameter.

It was not possible to get close to the capitals, also ancient and related to the first church,<sup>7</sup> and identify the stone material with certainty: however, from binocular observation, all six of them seem to have been carved in a crystalline, truly metamorphic marble.

### 2.1 Left Side Altar, Known as the Orefici Altar, Dedicated to St. Anthony Abbot, by Vincenzo Scamozzi

The two steps are made of *nembro rosato*; the platform displays a beautiful geometric design with small perspective cubes made of small black *lavagna* tiles,<sup>8</sup> white marble (probably from Carrara)<sup>9</sup> and *grigio di Roveré* (province of Verona) limestone (Albertini 1991, 30) [fig. 3]. The main structure of the altar is made of Proconnesian marble blocks and slabs (at the base) and Carrara marble (side parts and elevation), with an antepend-

ium decorated with a central slab and two lateral panels of *verde antico* (*marmor thessalicum*) (Lazzarini 2007, 223-44) [fig. 4]. The four beautiful small columns are also made of this diffused marble (not of serpentine, as reported in some guidebooks), one that is always reused in ancient Venetian buildings, where it is often used precisely for columns in the main altars.<sup>10</sup> The columns are 2.51 m high with a diameter of 27 cm.

<sup>7</sup> On the capitals see Pilutti Namer in this volume.

<sup>8</sup> *Lavagna* is the common name given to the black slate (flat-parallel-textured carbonaceous phyllite) that was exploited since pre-Roman times, and then continuously, in the homonymous site and in others in the Eastern region of Genoa; on this material, Savioli 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Dolci 1980; Bradley 1991.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. in the Basilica of St. Mark (in the apsidal altar, and as a covering in the ciborium), and in the high altars of the churches of St. Salvador and Santa Maria Formosa, where their relative four columns have been cut in the dark variety of *verde antico*.



**Figure 2** Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice. View of the interior with the main nave with two rows of three columns made of Proconnesian marble. Photo © Böhm



**Figure 3**  
Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice.  
Orefici Altar. Photo © Böhm



**Figure 4**  
Church of San Giacomo  
di Rialto, Venice. Orefici Altar,  
antependium. Photo © Böhm



**Figure 5**  
Church of San Giacomo  
di Rialto, Venice. Altar dedicated  
to St. Francis of Assisi, antependium.  
Photo by the Author

## 2.2 Altar in the Left Apse Dedicated to St. Francis of Assisi

The platform consists of three slabs of different quality and size of Proconnesian marble, evidently taken from the former church, or from some other buildings. The antependium is covered with slabs of *breccia di Brentonico*<sup>11</sup> [fig. 5] which has deteriorated due to salt crystallisation: on the surface, they present the brush strokes of a conservative coating with deep-browened organic matter that was extended to the entire altar. The Istrian stone

riser features red panels made of *broccatello* from Verona (perhaps a replacement for the original *breccia di Brentonico*, which had also deteriorated prematurely if, as is assumed, this altar is the counterpart of the one to the right of the apse for its materials). The two small columns are made of *nembro rosato*: they are 1.77 m high, with a diameter of 21 cm.

## 2.3 High Altar Dedicated to St. James the Apostle

The two steps leading up to the altar are made of *nembro rosato* marble, a limestone that is also used in the altar platform, decorated with a geometric pattern of stone tiles composed of white and grey Carrara marble, red Verona limestone and *grigio carnico* limestone,<sup>12</sup> with various elements of different shapes and sizes of *verde antico*, and one of *pavonazetto* marble (*marmor phrygium/ docimenum/ synnadicum*).<sup>13</sup> The altar structure is made of *nembro rosato* marble; the antependium is decorated with large panels of *verde antico* in the dark variety, Verona *broccato* and *nero Timau*. The riser presents a base,

an entablature and lateral niche frames of *nembro rosato*. The tabernacle features a base of antique *pavonazetto* marble, and panels of *verde Alpi* marble [fig. 6],<sup>14</sup> while the six small columns are of *verde antico*. The statue of St. James by Alessandro Vittoria, the two angels and the lateral putti are made of white, slightly veined Carrara marble.<sup>15</sup> The four side columns are made of good quality *grigio carnico* limestone [fig. 7], and they stand 2.40 m high, with a diameter of 30 cm. Four *grigio carnico* pulvins surmount the capitals.

**11** The *breccia di Brentonico* is of the intra-formational type, and formed from clasts of Lyassic limestones known as *giallo Mori* (from the nearby homonymous village, quarries in Castione, province of Rovereto): it reached Venice around the first half of the 16th century, and was used in the 17th-18th centuries mostly for altars in the guise of small columns and panels.

**12** *Grigio carnico* cataclastic limestone belongs to the same formation as *nero Timau* (see fn. 7). It differs slightly from it because it underwent very weak metamorphism that probably burnt part of the carbonaceous pigment, making it lighter in colour. The quarrying localities are located in Timau, Paluzza and Forni Avoltri (UD). *Grigio carnico* is a very common marble adopted for decoration in Venetian Baroque altars: important examples of columns made in this material can be admired in the high altar of the Church of Santo Stefano, and in that of San Lio, as well as in altars in the Churches of San. Cassiano, San. Giacomo dall'Orto, etc. Altar Panels are so common that a list of them would occupy too many pages.

**13** Monna, Pensabene 1977, 29-77; Pensabene 2010.

**14** *Verde Alpi* is a generic name for a vast group of green stones, petrographically classifiable mostly as ophicalcites, some of which were already quarried in ancient Roman times both in sites in Valle d'Aosta (e.g. Val Tournance) and Piedmont (e.g. Val di Susa): see Pieri 1958, 177, 292-3. Their use in the form of altar panels and, more rarely, of columns, dates to the late Baroque.

**15** See Siracusano in this volume.





**Figure 6** Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice. Altar dedicated to St. James the Apostle, tabernacle. Photo © Böhm

#### 2.4 Altar in the Right Apse Dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua

The two steps and the altar structure are made of Istrian stone. The platform is made of two slabs of Proconnesian (*fasciato* variety) marble. The antependium is decorated with a central tondo and two lateral panels in *rosso di Francia* limestone [fig. 8] from Languedoc (Bourrouilh, Bourque 1999), probably substituted for original *breccia di Brentonico* that was badly altered if, as it is believed,

the two apsidal altars were symmetrical and made simultaneously: indeed, this breccia is still present in the panels at the base of the riser. Further evidence of the homogeneity of the stone materials employed in the two altars is provided by the two *nembro rosato* columns that are similar both in quality and in size (1.8 m high, 22 cm in diameter) to the ones on the altar of St. Francis.



**Figure 7**  
Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice. Altar dedicated  
to St. James the Apostle, detail. Photo © Böhm



**Figure 8**  
Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice. Altar dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua. Photo © Böhm



**Figure 9**  
Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice.  
"Dell'Annunziata" Altar. Photo © Böhm



Figure 10 Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice. “Dell’Annunziata” Altar, antependium. Photo © Böhlm

## 2.5 The “Dell’Annunziata” Altar on the Right Side, Altarpiece by Marco Vecellio

The steps and the altar structure are made of Istrian stone [fig. 9]. The platform itself is made of the same stone, featuring two rectangular side slabs and, in the centre, three polychrome squares made of small tiles in *lavagna* stone, white Carrara marble, *grigio di Roveré* limestone, surrounded by a frame made of *breccia di Arbe* (Lazzarini 2000). The antependium is decorat-

ed with three *verde antico* panels, once again of the dark variety, while some coloured panels that have been completely lost due to severe deterioration are missing in the riser in Istrian stone, like the entablature: what remains are two small squares made of *verde Alpi* marble, and two central rectangles of *breccia di Arbe*; the lateral ones beneath the columns are of *breccia medi-*

cea.<sup>16</sup> The two columns (height 2.09 m, diameter 23 cm) are of Proconnesian marble, including one of the *fasciato* variety [fig. 10].

The stoup features an elegant, moulded base of Istrian stone where a fragment of a column and a fine ba-

sin, both of white marble, have been placed. The one for the basin is translucent and formed of calcite crystals showing a medium grain size (approximately 2-3 mm in diameter), suggesting the use of the very famous Parian marble.

### 3 Conclusions

From the identification provided of both structural and ornamental stone materials, general information about their chronology, circumstances of use and significance can be derived. Following the adopted descriptive sequence, and thus firstly considering the pavement of the church, it can be said that its characteristics coincide perfectly with the majority of pavements in Venetian Renaissance churches. These are covered with large square tiles of Istrian stone alternated with others of red Verona limestone forming chequered patterns, the same materials and pattern adopted in many private palaces in the Renaissance and throughout the Baroque age (Lazzarini 2010; Lazzarini 2018). The more elaborate pavements of the platforms are also quite common in Venice: the one of the Goldsmiths' altar (Lazzarini 2010, 62), in particular, features in the Church of St. Rocco other similar examples in design, and partly in materials, possibly suggesting the employment of the same craftsmen,<sup>17</sup> who brought with them the same preparatory cartoons and stone materials. On the other hand, the decorative pattern and the materials of the platform of the Annunziata altar clearly recall some details of the floor of the nave of the Church of Miracoli (Lazzarini 2010, 61), possibly taken as a model.

As already mentioned, at "San Giacometo" the columns of the portico, the large ones of the nave and the two small ones of the Annunziata altar, all made of Proconnesian marble, are undoubtedly re-used, as in the church of San Giovanni Decollato (vulgo San Zan Degolà), and in many other major Venetian churches. They attest to the long lasting availability of this marble on the Venetian stone market that I have no hesitation in describing as a centuries-old phenomenon, as I already stated in a previous article,<sup>18</sup> and are evidence of the Venetian merchants' frequentation of *Fondaci* and ruins of Graeco-Roman/Byzantine cities in the Eastern Mediterranean. The same can be said for the fine columns and *verde antico* panels of the Scamozzi altar: this prestigious marble originating from Thessaly, although not comparable in quantity to the Proconnesian one, is among the most frequently used coloured marbles of Eastern Mediterranean origin in the Renaissance and the Baroque period, not just in Venice but in the Italian peninsula as a whole. The decorative role assumed in this church is also worth noting, as in many other Renaissance ones in the city, by the coloured stones from Verona present in several varieties, in this church in particular in the *nembro rosato* limestone of some columns and

<sup>16</sup> It is a calcareous *meta-breccia* exploited in various Versilian localities (Stazzema, Monte Corchia, Seravezza, etc.) and in remarkable quantities under the Medici family: Zangheri 1993; Bartelletti, Amorfini 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Or perhaps of various 'tajapiera' who were using the same preparatory cartoons.

<sup>18</sup> See fn. 4.

steps. Of particular note is also the presence, in the late 16th century, of the *grigio carnico* marble in the form of the four beautiful columns on the high altar, and *brecchia di Brentonico*. This one was regrettably so deteriorated in the antependium of St. Anthony's altar that it was replaced, inappropriately in terms of colour, by *rosso di Francia* limestone, which is also one of the most dif-

fused and valuable<sup>19</sup> stones in Baroque altars all over Italy. The identification of the same materials at work in the two lateral apsidal altars eventually led to the conclusion that they were built at the same time and with the same lithotypes, some of which – that is the Proconnesian marble of the platforms – may have been taken from remains of the primitive church.

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<sup>19</sup> Its abundance in Venice, including in the form of massive columns (as for example in the Church of Santo Stefano), is indeed impressive, especially if we consider the very long and dangerous transport by sea (as evidenced by a few shipwrecked cargoes, Beltrame et al. 2012), involving the circumnavigation of the Italian peninsula that was needed to deliver this stone from south-western France to the lagoon.

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