

ALEKSANDRA KRAUZE-KOŁODZIEJ

THE EAST MEETS THE WEST: INFLUENCES OF THE LATIN
AND BYZANTINE TRADITIONS IN THE NORTHERN ADRIATIC
REGION SEEN IN THE BASILICA OF SANTA MARIA ASSUNTA
ON TORCELLO ISLAND*

Abstract. With an emphasis on the distinctive decoration of the Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta on Torcello Island in the Venetian Lagoon, in my paper, I try to highlight the influence of Latin and Byzantine traditions on the iconography of the northern Adriatic region.

The research is divided into three main sections. First, I note the main possible historical and cultural reasons of the interpenetration of many civilizations and traditions in this area, thereby quickly presenting broad features of the northern Adriatic Sea. Then, I describe Torcello's broad cultural legacy. The variety of religious buildings on the island vividly demonstrates its crossculturalism. I focus on the Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta, where several architectural and iconographic elements combining Latin and Byzantine inspirations create an artistic and unique fusion. In the third section, I look at the scenes shown in the eastern and western sections of the Basilica, the stylistic variations and similarities occurring there, the inscriptions present in the mosaic decorations, and the iconographic motifs that either complement or match each other.

Finally, in the concluding section, I stress the unique character of Torcello Island and the great quality of the mosaic decorations in the Basilica as resulting from the presence of the studied Latin and Byzantine elements, which together offer a harmonious whole and complementarity between two major European cultural traditions.

Keywords: northern Adriatic Sea; Torcello; Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta; Venice; Latin and Byzantine tradition; medieval iconography

ALEKSANDRA KRAUZE-KOŁODZIEJ, PhD, Assistant Professor at the Department of Language Acquisition and Didactics, Institute of Linguistics and Institute of Art Studies, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin; correspondence address: Instytut Językoznawstwa KUL, Al. Racławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland; e-mail: aleksandra.krauze-kolodziej@kul.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1984-1163>.

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NA STYKU WSCHODU I ZACHODU –
WPŁYWY TRADYCJI ŁACIŃSKIEJ I BIZANTYJSKIEJ
W OBSZARZE PÓŁNOCNEGO ADRIATYKU
NA PRZYKŁADZIE BAZYLIKI SANTA MARIA ASSUNTA NA WYSPIE TORCELLO

Abstrakt. Kładąc nacisk na wyjątkowość dekoracji mozaikowej Bazyliki Santa Maria Assunta na wyspie Torcello w Lagunie Weneckiej, artykuł ma na celu podkreślenie wpływu tradycji łacińskiej i bizantyjskiej na ikonografię obszaru północnego Adriatyku.

Praca została podzielona na trzy główne części. Na początku autorka zwraca uwagę na możliwe historyczne i kulturowe przyczyny przenikania się wielu wpływów kulturowych i tradycji na badanym obszarze, tym samym skrótowo ukazując charakterystykę północnego Adriatyku. W drugiej części opisano szerokie dziedzictwo kulturowe Torcello. Różnorodność budynków sakralnych na wyspie szczególnie ukazuje jej wielokulturowość. Autorka koncentruje się na Bazylice Santa Maria Assunta, gdzie kilka elementów architektonicznych i ikonograficznych łączących inspiracje łacińskie i bizantyjskie tworzy wyjątkową artystyczną całość. W trzeciej części badaczka przygląda się następującym elementom: scenom przedstawionym we wschodniej i zachodniej części świątyni, występującym tam różnicom i podobieństwom stylistycznym, inskrypcjom obecnym w dekoracjach mozaikowych oraz motywom ikonograficznym, które uzupełniają się lub odpowiadają sobie.

Na koniec autorka podsumowuje omówione wcześniej treści, podkreślając wyjątkowy charakter wyspy i wysoką jakość dekoracji mozaikowych w bazylice. Wynika to z obecności przebadanych elementów łacińskich i bizantyjskich, które pomimo pozornej sprzeczności, oferują harmonijną całość i komplementarność między dwiema europejskimi tradycjami kulturowymi.

Słowa kluczowe: obszar północnego Adriatyku; Torcello; Bazylika Santa Maria Assunta; Wenecja; tradycja łacińska i bizantyjska; ikonografia średniowieczna

INTRODUCTION

“A complex, fragmented space in a complex, fragmented time” and “a major channel of communications between East and West”—these phrases, as defined by Magdalena Skoblar, encapsulate the essence of the medieval Adriatic. The region stands as a vital territory where geographical, historical, and cultural influences have interwoven over the centuries, shaping the “realities of local communities ... and their entanglement, first with the Byzantine Empire, and then with Venice”.¹

Throughout the ages, the convergence of the Byzantine East and Latin West in this relatively small area has rendered the Adriatic Sea region truly

¹ Magdalena Skoblar, Introduction to *Byzantium, Venice and the Medieval Adriatic. Spheres of Maritime Power and Influence, c. 700-1453*, ed. Magdalena Skoblar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 1.

unique. This brief exploration aims to delve into the symbolic journey across cultural and, consequently, iconographical boundaries. Its primary objective is to outline the profound impacts of both Latin and Byzantine traditions on the iconography of the northern Adriatic Sea. Due to the intricate nature of this subject, the article focuses on a specific location where Greek and Roman cultural impacts are very strong—the island of Torcello.

Situated at the northern end of the Venetian Lagoon since ancient times, this place has been a meeting point for various cultures, giving rise to a distinctive melting pot of influences. Torcello serves as a “historical and cultural lens” through which, on a smaller scale, trends and mechanisms present in the broader territory of the Adriatic Sea can be observed.

1. THE NORTHERN ADRIATIC SEA REGION: ON THE BORDER OF CULTURAL INFLUENCES²

The Adriatic Sea spans a surface area of 138,600 km, with a roughly rectangular shape, approximately 800 km long and from 90 to 200 km wide.³

² A rich and detailed literature has been written on Latin and Byzantine historical, political, economic, and cultural influences visible in the region for centuries. The most relevant impacts in the context of the article are those in Antiquity and the Middle Ages; they are discussed, e.g., in Robert L. Beaumont, “Greek Influence in the Adriatic Sea before the Fourth Century B. C.,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 56, no. 2 (1936): 159–204; Fiamma Lenzi, ed., *L’archeologia dell’Adriatico dalla preistoria al Medioevo: atti del convegno internazionale, Ravenna, 7, 8, 9 giugno 2001* (Firenze: All’Insegna del Giglio, 2003); Keith Robert Jr. Fairbank, “A Dividing Sea. The Adriatic World from the Fourth to the First Centuries BC,” (PhD diss., Brown University, 2018), accessed June 30, 2024, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:792869>; see also Skoblar, *Byzantium, Venice and the Medieval Adriatic*.

On the Byzantine presence in the territory of what is now Italy, from political, historical, and cultural perspectives, as well as its influence on the art of the area, see Otto Demus, *Byzantine Art and the West* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970); Guglielmo Cavallo, Vera von Falkenhausen, and Raffaella Farioli Campanati, *I Bizantini in Italia* (Milano: Libri Scheiwiller 1982); Antonio Carile, “La presenza bizantina nell’Alto Adriatico fra VII e IX secolo,” *Antichità Altoadriatiche* 27 (1985): 107–9; Salvatore Cosentino, ed., *A Companion to Byzantine Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); in the latter, see especially the contribution by Massimo Bernabò, “Medieval Art in Italy and Byzantium (ca. 550–1050): A Viaticum,” in *A Companion to Byzantine Italy*, ed. Salvatore Cosentino (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 669–94.

³ Miroslav Gačić et al., “Overview,” in *Physical Oceanography of the Adriatic Sea. Past, Present and Future*, ed. Benoit Cushman-Roisin et al. (Dordrecht: Springer-Science-Business-Media 2001), 1.

In antiquity, the sea known to the Greeks as *ὁ Ἀδρία* and subsequently referred to by the Romans as *Mare Adriaticum* (*Hadriaticum*) or *Superum*, distinguishing it from *Inferum* (the Tyrrhenian Sea), often served as an interchangeable term for the Ionian Sea.⁴ The sea encompassed the waters between the Balkan Peninsula and Italy, occasionally extending to the eastern side of Sicily.⁵ Historically, scholars contend that the sea derived its name from the city of Adria, located in the present-day province of Rovigo in the Veneto region.⁶ For the Greeks, this Venetian, Etruscan, and later Syracusan colony marked the northern terminus of the Adriatic. It also served as a pivotal point for essential trade routes from the Baltic, the Brenner, and the Black Sea, traversing through the Danube and the Drava, and establishing commercial connections between the Mediterranean and these regions.⁷

The initial human settlements along the Adriatic coast go back to the Neolithic era, with seafarers from the southern regions establishing communities around the Gulf of Valona at the Adriatic entrance.⁸ In classical antiquity, the eastern part of the coast was inhabited by the Illyrians,⁹ while the western coast, predating the ascendancy of the Roman Empire, saw occupancy by diverse peoples of the Apennine Peninsula, including the Etruscans.¹⁰ The Greek colonization of the Adriatic, primarily directed from Corinth and Corcyra, commenced in the 7th and 6th centuries BC. Subsequently, additional Greek colonies emerged in the northern territories, encompassing cities such as Epidaurus, Corcyra Nigra, and Issa.¹¹

⁴ The question of ancient names of the Adriatic Sea and their meaning is very complex. More on this, with literary sources, can be found in Beaumont, "Greek Influence," 203–4, and Alessandra Coppola, "I nomi dell'Adriatico," in *I Greci in Adriatico*, vol. 1, ed. Lorenzo Braccisi and Mario Luni (Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider 2002), 101–6.

⁵ Max Cary and William M. Murray, "Adriatic Sea," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed., ed. Simon Hornblower and Tony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 14–15.

⁶ More on the origin of the name and its understanding in Fairbank Jr., "A Dividing Sea," 24–26.

⁷ Lorenzo Braccisi, *Hellenikòs Kolpos: Supplemento a Grecità adriatica*, Hesperia 13, ed. B. Rossignoli (Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 2001), 12.

⁸ Cary and Murray, "Adriatic Sea," 14–15.

⁹ On Illyrians in the Adriatic Sea region, see, e.g., Maja Gori, "Illyrians across the Adriatic: A Cultural History of an Archaeological Culture," in *In Search of Pre-Classical Antiquity*, ed. Alessandro De Francesco (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 119–45.

¹⁰ On Etruscans and their influences in the Adriatic Sea, see, e.g., Jean-Paul Morel, "Les Grecs entre l'Adriatique et la Tyrrhénienne," in *L'Adriatico, i greci e l'Europa: atti dell'incontro di Studio, Venezia-Adria, 22-23 febbraio 2000*, ed. Lorenzo Braccisi, Luigi Malnati, and Flavio Raviola (Padova: Esedra, 2001), 73–76.

¹¹ On Greek colonization and the influence of Greek culture in the area, see Lorenzo Braccisi, *Grecità Adriatica: un capitol della colonizzazione greca in occidente*, 2nd ed. (Bologna: Pàtron,

By the 4th century BC, Romans in the Adriatic area successfully resisted the Gauls, establishing colonies from Rimini (*Ariminum*) to Atri (*Hadria*). However, their influence in the region significantly expanded with the establishment of a significant naval center at Brindisi (*Brundisium*) in 246 BC. Over the ensuing centuries, after triumphing over adversaries like the Illyrians and the Veneti, the Romans founded numerous economic, cultural, and military centers along the Adriatic coast, including Aquileia and Ravenna.¹² The significance of the latter city soared during the Roman era, evolving into a pivotal naval base in the Mediterranean. In 402 AD, due to recurrent invasions by Germanic tribes, the capital of the Western Roman Empire shifted from Mediolanum to Ravenna, deemed a more secure location that allowed inhabitants to escape by sea if needed. Following the Western Roman Empire's collapse, Ravenna became the Ostrogothic Kingdom's capital, elevating the region's importance and extending its influence to distant territories.¹³

In the Early Middle Ages, the coasts of the Adriatic were governed by the Lombards and the Byzantine Empire, formidable powers engaged in a prolonged competition, particularly for influence over the Apennine Peninsula territory.¹⁴ To this dynamic, a significant cultural force, the flourishing Venetian

1977); Morel, "Les Grecs," 53–77; Lorenzo Braccesi and Mario Luni, eds., *I Greci in Adriatico*, vols. 1–2 (Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 2002, 2004); Maria C. D'Ercole, "The Adriatic Sea and Region," in *A Companion to Greeks across the Ancient World*, ed. Franco De Angelis (Wiley and Sons, 2020), 317–37.

¹² On the activities and impact of the Romans in the Adriatic Sea area, see, e.g., Nikola Časule, "In Part a Roman Sea: Rome and the Adriatic in the Third Century BC," in *Imperialism, Cultural Politics, and Polybius*, ed. Chris Smith and Liv M. Yarrow (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2012), 205–29, <https://academic.oup.com/book/11570/chapter/160401416>; Roberto Perna, Riccardo Carmenati, and Marzia Giuliodori, eds., *Roma e il mondo adriatico. Dalla ricerca archeologica alla pianificazione del territorio*, vols. 1–2 (Roma: Quasar, 2020, 2022); Francesco Belfiori, *Romani latini e l'Italia adriatica di mezzo (sviluppi culturali e fenomenologia religiosa, secoli III-I a.C.)* (Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 2022).

¹³ On the role of Ravenna in the context of the Adriatic Sea, see, e.g., Massimiliano David, *Eternal Ravenna: From the Etruscans to the Venetians*, trans. Christina Cawthra and Jo-Ann Titmarsh (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013); Federica Boschi, ed., *Ravenna e l'Adriatico dalle origini all'età romana* (Bologna: Ante Quem, 2013).

¹⁴ For more on Lombard historical and cultural influences in the Peninsula, see Stefano Gasparri, *Italia longobarda: Il regno, i Franchi, il papato* (Bari: GLF editori Laterza, 2016). On Lombards and Byzantine influences in the Adriatic Sea, see, e.g., Antonio Carile, "La presenza bizantina nell'Alto Adriatico fra VII e IX secolo," *Antichità Altoadriatiche* 27 (1985): 107–9; Thomas S. Brown, "The Interplay between Roman and Byzantine Traditions and Local Sentiment in the Exarchate of Ravenna," in *Bisanzio, Roma e l'Italia nell'alto Medioevo* (Spoleto: n.p., 1988): 127–60; Francesco Borri, "L'Adriatico tra Bizantini, Longobardi e Franchi: dalla conquista di Ravenna alla pace di Aquisgrana (751-812)," *Bullettino dell'Istituto storico italiano per*

Republic, emerged, gaining substantial strength in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and expanding its territorial reach and influence.¹⁵

The vibrant interplay of various cultural traditions, especially Roman/Latin and Greek/Byzantine impacts, was understandably pronounced in this region. From the concise historical overview provided, it becomes evident that in this relatively compact territory, persistent conflicts and political disputes facilitated cross-fertilization and interplay of influential powers transmitted through various peoples and civilizations, including the Greeks and Romans themselves, Ostrogoths, Lombards, Byzantines, the Carolingian Empire, and then, of course, the Republic of Venice. A detailed examination of the medieval cultural legacy of Torcello, a small island in the Venetian Lagoon, is warranted to elucidate how these powers directly shaped the evolution of art and architecture.

2. TORCELLO AND THE BASILICA OF SANTA MARIA ASSUNTA

Currently, Torcello has only twelve residents,¹⁶ yet it contains several significant structures, including a complex of religious buildings such as the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta, the Church of Santa Fosca, an adjacent bell tower, remnants of the Baptistry of John the Baptist, the Oratory of St. Mark, and two petite palaces from the 14th century, which accommodate the museum and the municipal archive (Figure 1).

il Medioevo 112 (2010): 1–56. In general, on the intermingling of influences in the early medieval period in the northern Adriatic area see Thomas S. Brown, “Ravenna and Other Early Rivals of Venice. Comparative Urban and Economic Development in the Upper Adriatic c. 751–1050,” in Skoblar, *Byzantium, Venice and the Medieval Adriatic*, 173–87; Stefano Gasparri, “The Origins of Venice. Between Italy, Byzantium and the Adriatic,” in Skoblar, *Byzantium, Venice and the Medieval Adriatic*, 98–110; Sauro Gelichi, “The Northern Adriatic Area between the Eighth and the Ninth Century. New Landscapes, New Cities,” in Skoblar, *Byzantium, Venice and the Medieval Adriatic*, 111–32.

¹⁵ On the birth of Venice’s power and the influences that have shaped it, see Brown, *Ravenna and Other Early Rivals of Venice*, 173–87; Gasparri, *The Origins of Venice*, 98–110. As for the development of Venetian political and cultural influence in the 11th and 12th centuries, see Michael Angold, “Venice in the Twelfth Century. Between the Adriatic and the Aegean,” in Skoblar, *Byzantium, Venice and the Medieval Adriatic*, 296–315.

¹⁶ Based on the data from Statistiche di Comune di Venezia; accessed June 30, 2024, <http://portale.comune.venezia.it/millefoglie/statistiche/home>.

Historically, Torcello held meaningful prominence, shaped by the cultural influences of Rome, Byzantium, Ravenna, and Venice.¹⁷ In the era of the Roman Empire, as indicated by archaeological excavations,¹⁸ the island was inhabited by notable dignitaries. In the 5th and 6th centuries AD, a substantial influx of settlers from the mainland and the Venetian Lagoon sought refuge on Torcello, fleeing from the incursions of barbarian tribes. In the subsequent century, Torcello emerged as the episcopal seat and a constituent of the exarchate of Ravenna.¹⁹ From that point onward, the island's significance grew continuously, driven not only by the vigorous expansion of trade with the Byzantine Empire and other regions in the Adriatic Sea (mainly from the 10th century) but also by the flourishing production of salt and wool.

Furthermore, Torcello was politically independent from nearby Venice. Unfortunately, the island became an inaccessible swamp when the lagoon gradually dried up. The situation became worse because of a malaria outbreak. As a result, most inhabitants moved to nearby Rialto, Burano, and Murano islands, and the bishopric's seat was transferred to Murano Island.

It should be noted that the position of Torcello Island, between the East and the West, together with strongly developed and long-lasting trade contacts with various urban centers, especially with the Byzantine Empire and an area of the northern Adriatic Sea, brought about the cumulation of both Latin and Byzantine cultural influences. The impact of this heritage is visible in the preserved monuments.²⁰

The most monumental building still standing on the island is the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta. According to the remaining foundation inscription,

¹⁷ On the island's history, see, e.g., Nicolò Battaglini, *Torcello antica e moderna* (Venezia: Tipografia del Commercio di Marco Visentini 1871; Giulio Lorenzetti, *Torcello: la sua storia, i suoi monumenti* (Venezia: Ferrari, 1939), 5–24; Elizabeth Crouzet-Pavan, *Torcello: storia di una città scomparsa* (Roma: Jouvence, 2001); Gherardo Ortalli, "Torcello e la genesi di Venezia," in *Torcello alle origini di Venezia tra Occidente e Oriente*, ed. Gianmateo Caputo and Giovanni Gentili (Venezia: Marsilio 2009), 24–31.

¹⁸ On excavations of the Roman remains, see, e.g., Lech Leciejewicz, Eleonora Tabaczyńska, and Stanisław Tabaczyński, *Torcello. Scavi 1961-1962* (Roma: Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell'arte, 1997).

¹⁹ Marco Molin, "Introduzione alla Storia Torcellana," *Quaderni Torcellani* 1 (2008): 15. On the process of creating the seats of a bishopric in the Lagoon area, see Giuseppe Cuscito, "L'alto Adriatico paleocristiano," in Caputo and Gentili, *Torcello*, 32–49.

²⁰ On these influences in other buildings on the island, see, e.g., Maurizia Vecchi, "Santa Maria Assunta di Torcello: un importante rifacimento posteriore al 1008," *Aquileia Nostra* 47 (1977): 290–95; Clementina Rizzardi, "La decorazione musiva: Torcello e la cultura artistica medievale," in Caputo and Gentili, *Torcello*, 60–85.

the church's construction, founded by the exarch of Ravenna, Isaac, began in 639 AD under Emperor Heraclius.²¹ Although the church was rebuilt many times,²² the outline of its original, Roman basilica plan is still clearly visible. The interior of the church is primarily adorned with decorative sculptural elements and fragments of wall frescoes, both those situated in the central apse, below the mosaic decoration, and those above the southern apse, dating back to the 9th century recently discovered in 2020, together with painted epigraphs, during restoration and archaeological monitoring works financed by Save Venice, directed by Paolo Tocchi, in coordination with the Patriarchate, under the supervision of the Superintendency and with the scientific collaboration of University Ca' Foscari and Diego Calaon.²³ However, the

²¹ On the inscription, see Vittorio Lazzarini, "Un'iscrizione Torcellana del secolo VII," in *Scritti di paleografia e diplomatica* (Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1969), 123–32; Agostino Pertusi, "L'iscrizione torcellana dei tempi di Eraclio," Estratto dal *Bollettino dell'Istituto di Storia della Società e dello Stato* 4 (1962): 9–38; Flavia De Rubeis, "L'iscrizione del 639 di Santa Maria Assunta di Torcello tra miti e realtà," in *Lezioni Marciane. 2017-2018. Venezia prima di Venezia. Torcello e dintorni* (Roma: "L'erma" di Bretschneider, 2020), 101–9. The full text of the foundation inscription is available and analyzed in Lazzarini, *Un'iscrizione Torcellana del secolo VII*, 124.

²² On reconstructions of the Basilica, see, among others, Vecchi, "Santa Maria Assunta di Torcello," 290–95; Irina Andreescu and Bruno Tarantola, "Modifiche alla Cattedrale di Torcello nel restauro del 1854-58," *Bollettino d'Arte* 69 (1984): 89–122; Maurizia Vecchi, "Modifiche alla Cattedrale di Torcello nel restauro del 1854-1858," *Rivista di archeologia* 9 (1985): 46–55; Renato Polacco, "Note sulla *recreatio* orseoliana della cattedrale di Torcello," *Venezia Arti* 13 (1999): 111–14.

²³ During the conservation-restoration of the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta, exceptional fragments of the decoration that predated the 11th-century mosaics were uncovered. The decoration is probably related to the restoration measures promoted by Bishop Deusdedit II (died 864), as reported in the famous chronicle of Deacon John. The walls at the time were decorated with fresco panels, which, in keeping with early medieval tradition, developed through overlapping panels in several registers, telling stories of particular religious value. Although the fragments discovered in the summer of 2020 are limited to only a few square meters of decoration (fragment showing St. Martin, who can be recognized by the inscription next to his head, together with another lower unidentifiable figure, and a fragment of a scene described by the explorers as the Annunciation, because showing part of the head of Virgin Mary, positioned within an architecturally defined space, with another figure behind her pulling the curtain) are heavily damaged by later construction activities and traces of a strong earthquake from the 12th century, they clearly show their stylistic correspondence to Carolingian art. For the description and photos, see Jovan Dordevic, "Virtual Restoration Proposals for the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello," (MA thesis, Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia, 2020–2021), 115–17, accessed June 30, 2024, <http://dspace.unive.it/handle/10579/20993>; more on the discovery in Diego Calaon et al., "La scoperta degli affreschi di Torcello," July 24, 2020, CafoscariNEWS, accessed June 30, 2024, https://www.unive.it/pag/14024/?tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=9235&cHash=5083a549eb7d3be36da411d0ffb18dd3. On the technical analysis of the pigments used in the discovered wall paintings, see Piña C. E. Torres, *The Wall*

mosaic decorations, which emerged in their ultimate form during the 11th and 12th centuries, constitute the church's most significant decorative ensemble.²⁴

The mosaic decoration of the Basilica nowadays includes the representation of Mary *Theotokos* with twelve apostles in the central apse, the Annunciation scene on both sides of the triumphal arch,²⁵ angels assisting the Lamb of God alongside Christ, positioned among archangels and saintly bishops in the right apse, as well as a content-expanded mosaic decoration of the western wall (figure 2).

This last decoration is described commonly in the literature as the representation of the Last Judgement. The creation date of this mosaic complex provoked many discussions among scholars.²⁶ Recent study indicates that the mosaic was likely produced as a result of the Basilica's reconstruction around the beginning of the 11th century, during the Orseolo family's rule on Torcello Island.²⁷ The larger part of the mosaic dates back to this period.²⁸ The rest comes from the period of the later restoration of the Basilica, destroyed by an earthquake in 1117.²⁹

The composition contains six horizontal registers which show different scenes. Above the center, the Crucifixion of Christ is depicted with Mary and Saint John flanking either side. The scene dominates the entire composition. Below is the scene of *Anastasis* (Resurrection of Christ) between two archangels, Michael and Gabriel. Another register below shows Christ in the

Painting in Santa Maria Assunta Basilica Crypt: New Insight on Non-Invasive Analytical Techniques for the Analyses of Traditional Pigments (MA thesis, Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia, 2020–2021), accessed June 30, 2024, <http://dspace.unive.it/handle/10579/20892>.

²⁴ On the mosaic decoration of the Basilica in general, see, e.g., Renato Polacco, *La cattedrale di Torcello* (Venezia: L'Altra Riva; Treviso: Edizioni Canova, 1984), 47–104.

²⁵ Initially, the decoration of the church also included the scene located above the central part of the triumphal arch. The scene showed the Lamb of God in *chryseus* sustained by angels. Unfortunately, it has not survived until today. Renato Polacco describes the scene directly as a representation of the Ascension—cf. Renato Polacco, *La cattedrale di Torcello: il giudizio universale* (Treviso: Edizioni Canova, 1986), 12. This scene is present in a 1827 print in the Museo Correr in Venice and in the 1845 painting by C. W. E. Fink kept in the Museum on Torcello Island.

²⁶ Various scholars dated the mosaic differently depending on different criteria. For details, see Aleksandra Krauze-Kołodziej, *The Mosaic Complex on the West Wall* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2019), 61–65.

²⁷ Cf. Irina Andreescu, "Torcello III. La Chronologie relative des mosaïques pariétales," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 30 (1976): 260ff.

²⁸ Rizzardi, "La decorazione musiva," 62ff.

²⁹ Cf., e.g., Polacco, *La cattedrale di Torcello*, 26; Andreescu, *Torcello III*, 250–52; Rizzardi, "La decorazione musiva," 67. For details about the history of conservation of the mosaic complex on the western wall of the Basilica, see Krauze-Kołodziej, *The Mosaic Complex on the West Wall*, 69–78.

oval frame in the center, with Mary and Saint John the Baptist on both sides. They are surrounded by twelve apostles and saints, depicting the scene of *Deesis*. In the center of the following register, we can see *Etimasia* (the preparation of the Throne for Christ), with angels blowing trumpets and the Resurrection of the dead from lands and seas on both sides. Below, under the Throne, we can see the scene of *Psychostasis* (the archangel Michael and the devil weighing human souls). To Michael's side, we can see the representation of the blessed in paradise. The other side of the register shows the scene of the damned pushed down by two angels to hell. Mary is shown in the orant pose in the lowest register that surrounds the door. Then, on the left, under the blessed, we can see Abraham accepting souls, Mary, the Good Thief, the gates of paradise, and Saint Peter. At the same time, on the right, there is a scene showing six different parts of hell with dismembered corpses of the condemned suffering for their sins. So, the whole representation of hell is formed by two scenes in the fifth and sixth register from below (including seven sections).

3. ELEMENTS OF LATIN AND BYZANTINE TRADITION IN THE BASILICA

The mosaic complex in question constitutes a theological and iconographic whole and a harmonious conglomerate of influences from various Latin and Byzantine traditions.³⁰ Such cultural impacts are also evident in other

³⁰ On the influences of Latin tradition on this territory, see, e.g., Lino Lazzarini, "La tradizione classica nella cultura veneziana dei secoli XIII e XIV," in *Componenti storico-artistiche e culturali a Venezia nei secoli XIII e XIV*, ed. Michelangelo Muraro (Venezia: Ateneo Veneto, 1981), 22–36; Giuseppe Cuscito, ed., *Aspetti e problemi della romanizzazione: Venetia, Histria e arco alpino orientale* (Trieste: Editreg, 2009); Hélène Papastavrou, "Classical Trends in Byzantine and Western Art in the 13th and 14th centuries," in *Byzanz – das Römerreich im Mittelalter*, ed. Falko Daim and Jörg Drauschke, part 1, *Welt der Ideen, Welt der Dinge* (Mainz: Verlag des Romisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, 2010), 183–209. On the influences of Byzantine tradition on this territory, see, e.g., André Grabar, "Byzance et Venice. Introduction," in *Venezia e l'Europa. Atti del XVIII Congresso, Internazionale di Storia dell'Arte, Venezia 12-18 settembre 1955*, ed. Lionello Venturi (Venezia: Casa Ed. Arte Veneta, 1956), 45–55; Agostino Pertusi, "L'Impero Bizantino e l'evolvere dei suoi interessi nell'alto Adriatico," in *Le origini di Venezia, Storia della civiltà veneziana* 9 (Firenze: Sansoni, 1964), 57–93; Pertusi, "Venezia e Bisanzio nel secolo XI," in *La Venezia del mille, Storia della civiltà veneziana* 10 (Firenze: Sansoni, 1965), 117–60; Italo Furlan, "Aspetti di cultura greca a Venezia nell'XI secolo: la scuola di Salonicco e lo stile monumentale protocommuno," *Arte veneta* 29 (1975): 28–37; Agostino Pertusi, "Venezia e Bisanzio 1000–1204," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33

decorative elements of the Basilica, making it a remarkable example of a monument located at the intersection of two great traditions – East and West. The following will discuss selected artistic elements that highlight the intermingling of these two traditions.

3.1 THE POWER OF WORDS

The coexistence of both cultural influences in the mosaic decoration is visible in the simultaneous occurrence of Latin and Greek inscriptions accompanying the images.

In the eastern part of the church, there are almost only Latin inscriptions (figure 3). The exceptions here are the Greek monograms of the names of Mary *Theotokos* in the central apse—MP and ΘV—meaning MHTEP ΘEOY (Mother of God) placed respectively on the left and right side of the nimbus surrounding the head of the figure occupying the central part of the conch. Greek letters also appear in the representation of Christ Pantocrator (IC XC that is IHΣOYΣ XPIΣTOΣ—*Jesus Christ*) in the southern apse (Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, *diaconicon*).³¹ Other inscriptions of the eastern part of the church are in Latin. First of all, Latin are abbreviations of the names of the figures of the Apostles in the central apse (from the left: Thomas—SCS THOMAS, Thaddeus—SCS TADEVS, Bartholome—SCS BARTHOLOMEVS, James—SCS IACOBVS, John—SCS IOHS, Peter—SCS PETRVS, Paul—SCS PAVLUS, Matthew—SCS MATHEVS, Andrew—SCS ANDREAS, James the Great—SCS IACOBVS), Simon—S SYMON, and Philip—S PHYLIPPVS. Between the representation of Peter and Paul is a figure of St. Heliodorus, the first bishop of Altino. He is identified by an inscription on either side of the nimbus SCS ELIO DORVS (from left). The figures depicted in the southern apse, excluding Christ, are also identified by abbreviations in Latin

(1979): 1–22; Bruna Forlati Tamaro, Luisa Bertacchi, and Luigi Beschi, *Da Aquileia a Venezia: una mediazione tra l'Europa e l'Oriente dal II secolo a.C. al VI secolo d.C.* (Milano: Scheiwiller, 1980); Clementina Rizzardi, *Mosaici altoadriatici. Il rapporto artistico Venezia-Bisanzio-Ravenna in età medievale* (Ravenna: Mario Lapucci – Edizioni del Girasole, 1985); Clementina Rizzardi, “Bisanzio da Ravenna a Venezia,” in *Venezia e Bisanzio. Aspetti della cultura artistica bizantina da Ravenna a Venezia (V-XIV secolo)*, ed. Clementina Rizzardi (Venezia: Istituto veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 2005), 3–11; Rizzardi, “La decorazione musiva,” 60–85.

³¹ On the monogram of the name of Mary and Christ, see Wolfgang Kemp, “Name Jesu,” in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, vol. 3 ed. Wolfgang Braunfels (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1971), coll. 311–13; Kemp, “Name Mariens,” in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, vol. 3, coll. 313–14.

(figure 4). Lower, on either side of the central window, there are holy bishops (Gregory—SC GREGORIVS and Martin—SC MARTINVS on the left, and Ambrose—SC AMBROSIVS and Augustine—SC AGVSTINVS on the right).³² Above, on both sides of Pantocrator, are two Archangels: Michael—SCS MICHAEL and Gabriel—SCS GABRIEL).

In the case of the decoration of the two apses and the triumphal arch on the eastern side of the church, we also have several longer inscriptions in Latin, which are meaningful complements to the scenes depicted. The register depicting the Apostles is demarcated laterally and at its base by an ornate mosaic border featuring floral motifs. Above this border, an inscription reads: “FORMULA VIRTUTIS / MARIS ASTRVM PORTA SALVTIS / PROLE MARIA LEVAT / QUOS CONIVGE SUBDIDIT EVA” (Symbol of virtue, star of the sea, gate of Salvation, Mary through her Son raises those whom Eve surrendered through her spouse). This inscription, positioned strategically within the artistic composition of the whole Basilica, encapsulates

³² Saint Martin likely replaced Saint Jerome, who usually appears in this context due to the growing veneration of Martin I, pope and martyr (d. 655), in the Venetian Lagoon. This shift highlights the significant evolution of local devotional practices. The presence of Saint Martin in the mosaic of the southern apse, depicted alongside the other three Doctors of the Western Church, reflects this transition. For insights into the veneration of this Saint Martin in the Lagoon, as well as his presence in the mosaic, see Ann M. Damigella, “Problemi della cattedrale di Torcello: I. I mosaici dell’abside destra,” *Commentari* 17 (1966): 7, notes 18 and 19; Polacco, *La cattedrale di Torcello*, 57; and Polacco, *La cattedrale di Torcello: il giudizio universale*, 12. However, Antonio Niero proposes that the figure in question is not Pope Martin I but Saint Martin of Tours, the revered bishop. This interpretation finds support in earlier studies, see Lorenzetti, *Torcello*, 45, 48; Marco Brunetti, “Torcello,” in *Storia di Venezia*, vol. 2, *Dalle origini del Ducato alla IV crociata*, edited by Luigi Lanfranchi et al. (Venezia: Centro internazionale delle arti e del costume, 1957–1958), 608; and Giovanni Musolino, *Torcello, la perla della laguna* (Venezia: Istituto Tipografico Editoriale, 1964), 29; it is also elaborated upon in Antonio Niero’s “Osservazioni epigrafiche e iconografiche su mosaici e considerazioni sull’intitolazione Sancta Maria della Cattedrale Torcellana,” *Studi Veneziani* 17–18 (1975–76), 1, note 6; as well as Élodie Guilhem’s detailed discussion “Un saint inattendu dans le diakonikon de l’église Santa Maria Assunta de Torcello. Saint Martin, Pcre de l’Église latine?” in *Melanges Catherine Jolivet-Levy*, ed. Sulamith Brodbeck et al. (Paris: Association des Amis du Centre d’Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, 2016), particularly 176–87. The shift from Jerome to Martin of Tours, if accepted, underscores the increasing importance of Carolingian devotion in the Lagoon, as Saint Martin of Tours was a pivotal figure in Frankish spirituality and served as a bridge between local and Western Latin traditions. More on the importance of Saint Martin for the Eastern and Western traditions—see Trpimir Vedriš, “‘Frankish’ or ‘Byzantine’ Saint? The Origins of the Cult of Saint Martin in Dalmatia,” in *Papers from the First and Second Postgraduate Forums in Byzantine Studies: Sailing to Byzantium*, ed. Savvas Neocleous (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 221.

profound theological truths, emphasizing the crucial role of the Virgin Mary as an embodiment of virtue and Salvation, drawing a parallel between her role as the Mother of the Savior who took away Adam's sin.

Positioned at the central apse's periphery, just above the representation of *Theotokos*, an inscription unfolds: "SVM DEVS ATQUE CARO / PATRIS ET SVM MATRIS IMAGO / NON PIGER AD LAP SVM / SET [i.e. SED] FLENTI PROXIMUS ADSVM" (I am God and body, the image of the Father and the Mother; I do not tolerate sin, but I am closest to those who cry). This inscription, residing strategically within the ecclesiastical context, communicates a theological perspective, asserting the divine nature and corporeal manifestation while emphasizing a profound stance against sin, juxtaposed with a compassionate proximity to those in lamentation.²⁶

Latin inscriptions also appear in the Annunciation scene above the central apse, on either side of the triumphal arch. On the left is Archangel Gabriel with an inscription above him: GABRIEL ARCHANGELUS / VIRGO DI NATUM / PARIES EX TE CARO FACT (UM) (Archangel Gabriel: "Virgin, you will give birth to the son of God who will become flesh through you"). On the other side of the arch, above the figure of Mary, there is an inscription: STA MARIA VIRGO / FIAT ET ANCILLAE QUID PROMISIT ILLE (Saint Virgin Mary: "Let there be to the servant what He promised"). These words within the ecclesiastical context of the Annunciation scene carry profound theological implications. They reflect Mary's acquiescence to the divine will and her role as a willing servant in realizing of God's promise. The inscription captures the pivotal moment of the Annunciation, where Mary, as the Virgin, accepts her divine calling and acknowledges the promise made to her. This succinct yet powerful message encapsulates the theological underpinnings of Mary's pivotal role in the narrative, highlighting themes of obedience, humility, and the fulfillment of divine promises within the sacred context of the church's visual and symbolic language.

Another longer inscription in Latin is part of the decoration of the southern chapel. It is located in the bordure between the lower register showing the bishops and the upper register with a representation of Christ Pantocrator between the Archangels (figure 4). The inscription states: PERSONIS TRIPLEX DEVS EST ET NVMINE SIMPLEX / HERBIDAT HIC TERRAM, MARE FVNDIT, LVMINAT AETHRAM (God in three persons and the only one in divinity He covers the land with green, pours the sea, brightens the air). The text delves into the essence of the divine nature. It begins by affirming the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity—the Father, the Son, and

the Holy Spirit. Simultaneously, it emphasizes the singular unity of the divine essence. This theological tension encapsulates the mystery and complexity of understanding God's nature, inviting contemplation on the divine's simultaneous multiplicity and unity. The subsequent lines of the inscription employ vivid imagery to portray God's creative and nurturing actions. The sentence "He covers the land with green, pours the sea, brightens the air" symbolically depicts God's benevolent providence in sustaining and illuminating the natural world. Covering the land with green signifies the flourishing of life, while the pouring of the sea and brightening of the air evoke images of creation and enlightenment. The inscription enriches the viewer's experience by intertwining theological depth with the visual narrative, encouraging reflection on the mysteries of faith and the divine presence in the earthly and celestial realms.

In the case of the mosaic decoration of the west wall, inscriptions appear much less. They are mainly Greek abbreviated signatures identifying the scene and monograms identifying the figures. They are present in the scene of *Anastasis*. On the right side of Christ's head, next to the nimbus, on the golden background, there is a Greek inscription H ANAS(TASIS) meaning ἡ ἀνάστασις, -εως (resurrection, elevation, rising). Another Greek monogram is present in the same scene next to the nimbus of Archangel Michael: OAR MI that is O APXATTEΛOΣ MIXAH—ὁ ἀρχάγγελος Μιχαήλ (Archangel Michael). In the *Deesis* scene in the register below, there is only the monogram of Christ located in the central oval frame we read IC XC, which stands for IHΣΟΥΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟ—Jesus Christ. More Greek letters appear in a representation decorating the center of the last register of the mosaic complex, in the tympanum above the main entrance door to the Basilica where Mary is shown *en face* in the pose of Orant (figure 5). On both sides of her head there are the letters MHP and ΘV.

The same scene features the only longer Latin inscription in the entire show adorning the frame of the arch above the Basilica's entrance: VIRGO DI NATVM PRECE PVLSA TERGE REATVM (Virgin of God, through ardent prayer purify the faults conceived). This inscription unveils a heartfelt plea to the Virgin of God, capturing devotion and a profound sense of spiritual aspiration. It reflects a deep reverence for the Virgin Mary, acknowledging her role and imploring her intercession on behalf of those seeking spiritual cleansing. The invocation of the Virgin as "DI NATVM" emphasizes her connection to the divine, recognizing her role as the Mother of God. The term "VIRGO" underscores her purity and immaculate nature. The plea for

purification through “ardent prayer” suggests a recognition of human imperfection and a sincere desire for spiritual renewal. Acknowledging “faults conceived” conveys an awareness of the inherent human tendency towards sin and the need for divine intervention in redemption and purification. In the broader context of the religious imagery within the Basilica, this inscription serves as a poignant reminder of the role of prayer and devotion in seeking spiritual purification and forgiveness. It encapsulates the essence of Marian devotion, calling upon the Virgin Mary as an intercessor and emphasizing the transformative power of fervent prayer in the journey toward spiritual renewal and reconciliation with the divine.

The coexistence of Latin and Byzantine traditions is evident in the interplay of inscriptions accompanying various images. In the eastern part of the church, Latin inscriptions dominate, identifying the Apostles and bishops, and contributing significantly to the ecclesiastical narrative. The only exceptions are the Greek monograms of Mary Theotokos in the central apse and Christ Pantocrator in the southern apse.

Significant Latin inscriptions in the central apse and triumphal arch ensure theological depth. One inscription emphasizes the role of the Virgin Mary as a symbol of virtue, the star of the sea, and the gate of salvation, drawing parallels with Eve’s surrender. Another, near *Theotokos*, underscores Christ’s dual nature, proclaiming divinity and corporeal manifestation juxtaposed with compassionate proximity to those in lamentation.

In the Annunciation scene, Latin inscriptions emphasize Mary’s role as a willing servant and the fulfillment of God’s promise. The southern chapel features a Latin inscription affirming the Holy Trinity and emphasizing God’s creative and nurturing actions.

The western wall mosaic predominantly features Greek signatures and monograms, showcasing the *Anastasis* and the *Deesis* scenes. The only longer Latin inscription on the central entrance arch calls upon the Virgin Mary for intercession, recognizing her divine connection and purity. It serves as a poignant reminder within the broader context of the Basilica, emphasizing the transformative power of fervent prayer in seeking spiritual renewal and reconciliation with the divine.

3.2 THE CHOICE OF TECHNOLOGY

Before moving from the word to the image (iconography), it is worth considering the very technique and technology of the decoration of the Basilica of

Santa Maria Assunta together with its stylistic character. The choices made by the founders and the creators of the mosaics, indeed, were not accidental.

The incorporation of mosaics markedly elevates the intricate and emblematic nature of the decorations. Blending the artistic traditions of both the East and West, the artists choose a technique commonly used in early Christian and medieval churches. Its selection emphasizes the island's pivotal position between Latin and Byzantine civilizations. Proximity to the renowned glass workshops in Ravenna,³³ combined with the advanced mosaic tradition from Byzantium, where the technique reached its peak,³⁴ resulted in the production of exceptionally high-quality works on Torcello.³⁵

Mosaics consist of small, uniform *tesserae* made from various decorative materials like stones, glass paste, terracotta, and shells. These tesserae are affixed to a prepared surface, and the choice of color, size, and placement directly affects the final composition.³⁶ Although the origins of this technique date back to ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures, it flourished in Greece in the 5th century BC, as documented by Pliny the Elder, and later spread across the Roman Empire. By late antiquity, glass tesserae

³³ More on glass workshops in Ravenna can be found in, e.g., Cesare Fiori, Mariangela Vandini, and Valentina Mazzotti, "Tecnologia e colore del vetro dei mosaici di S. Vitale a Ravenna," in *Ravenna da capitale imperiale a capitale esarcale. Atti del XVII Congresso Internazionale di Studio sull'Alto Medioevo, Ravenna 6-12 giugno 2005* (Spoleto: n.p., 2005), 915–41; Fiori, "Mosaic Tesserae from the Basilica of San Severo and Glass Production in Classe, Ravenna, Italy," in *New Light on Old Glass. Recent Research on Byzantine Mosaics and Glass*, ed. Chris Entwistle and Liz James (London: The British Museum, 2013), 33–41.

³⁴ On Byzantine glass workshops, see, e.g., Cesare Fiori, *I colori del vetro antico: il vetro musivo bizantino* (Saonara: Il prato, 2004).

³⁵ For relevant details, see, e.g., Irina Andreescu-Treatgold, Julian Henderson, and Martin Roe, "Glass from the Mosaics on the West Wall of Torcello's Basilica," *Arte Medievale* 5, no. 2 (2006): 93.

³⁶ More on the technology of making the mosaic and the materials used for it in, e.g., Isotta Fiorentini Roncuzzi, *Arte e tecnologia nel mosaico* (Ravenna: Longo, 1971), 43ff.; Leo Biek and Justine Bayley, "Glass and Other Vitreous Materials," in "Early Chemical Technology," *World Archaeology* 11, no. 1 (1979): 1–25; Marja Mendera, "Produzione vitrea medievale in Italia e fabbricazione di tessere musive," in *Medieval mosaics. Light, colour, materials*, ed. Eve Borsook, Fiorella Gioffredi Superbi, and Giovanni Pagliarulo (Milano: Silvana Editoriale 2000), 97–138; Daniela Stiaffini, "Ricette e ricettari medievali: fonti per una storia delle tecniche di produzione delle tessere musive vitree," in Borsook, Gioffredi Superbi, and Pagliarulo, *Medieval mosaics*, 65–96; Marco Verità, "Tecniche di fabbricazione dei materiali musivi vitrei: indagini chimiche e mineralogiche," in Borsook, Gioffredi Superbi, and Pagliarulo, *Medieval mosaics*, 47–64; Ferdinando Rossi, *La pittura di pietra: dall'arte del mosaico allo splendore delle pietre dure* (Firenze: Giunti, 2002), 10.

had become a dominant medium for decorating floors, walls, and vaults. Mosaics became even more intricate in early Christian and medieval contexts, incorporating shimmering glass tesserae to create striking visual and symbolic effects. Technological developments let artists use metal oxides for vivid hues and insert precious metal flakes—especially gold—into glass tesserae, therefore augmenting their aesthetic impact. This combination of colors, lights, and textures contributed to a dynamic aesthetic, suggesting movement and illuminating theological meanings.³⁷

Byzantium played a pivotal role in refining gilded mosaics and adjusting them to architectural settings with amazing symbolic resonance and accuracy.³⁸ This technique spread westward, mostly to areas including the Venetian Lagoon, Palermo, Rome, and Palermo. Following this tradition, the mosaics at the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta combine gilded glass arranged to provide a dynamic interaction of light and shadow with tesserae created from glass paste. The whole impression is constant movement, accentuated by strong, opposing colors set against a brilliant gold background.

The superior quality of these mosaics, along with the substantial financial expenditures on their production, indicates the involvement of highly experienced artisans. Scholars have extensively debated the provenance of the glass utilized in the 11th-century mosaics. While earlier research suggested a local source, specifically a glass workshop discovered on Torcello in the 1960s,³⁹ more recent studies, together with a chemical examination, have considered the possibility that the glass originated from the Middle East and

³⁷ For more detailed information, see Krauze-Kołodziej, *The Mosaic Complex on the West Wall*, 65–69.

³⁸ For more on mosaics in the Byzantine period, see, e.g., Otto Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953); Liz James, *Light and Colour in Byzantine art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Per Jonas Nordhagen, “Splendori di Bizantio,” in *Il mosaico*, ed. Carlo Bertelli (Milano: A. Mondadori, 1996), 101–63; Liz James, “What Colours Were Byzantine Mosaics?”, in Borsook, Gioffredi Superbi, and Pagliarulo, *Medieval mosaics*, 35–46.

³⁹ Lech Leciejewicz, “A proposito della cronologia dell’officina vetraria scoperta a Torcello,” *Quaderni Torcellani* 2 (2009), 11. For more on the Torcello glass workshop, see, among others, Astone Gasparetto, “A proposito dell’officina vetraria torcellana: Forni e Sistemi Di Fusione Antichi,” *Journal of Glass Studies* 9 (1967), 50–75; Lech Leciejewicz, Eleonora Tabaczyńska, and Stanisław Tabaczyński, *Torcello. Scavi 1961-1962* (Roma: Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell’arte, 1977), 63–73; Eleonora Tabaczyńska, “Wczesnośredniowieczna huta szkła na wyspie Torcello Laguny Weneckiej: interpretacje technologiczne,” in “Archeologia szkła,” *Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici, Archeologia* XII 2 (1987), 63–88.

then was transported to Byzantium for coloring and tesserae production. Afterwards, it was brought to Torcello to create mosaic decorations.⁴⁰

This careful use of the mosaic technique as the primary type of decoration not only emphasizes the junction of Latin and Byzantine artistic traditions but also illustrates Torcello's function as a cross-cultural location in the northern Adriatic region.

3.3 THE STYLISTIC JUXTAPOSITION

The Basilica's complex mosaic decoration vividly reflects the socio-cultural context of its creation, mixing Latin and Byzantine traditions to reveal both local and broader European influences. The decorations were significantly shaped by the history of the island and its religious institutions, particularly the monasteries of Torcello, which became crucial centers of spiritual development during the 12th century.⁴¹ The Cluniac reforms, emerging from the Benedictine monastery in Cluny, contributed to revitalizing religious life also on Torcello Island. Together with the Benedictine and Cistercian miniature traditions, these changes clearly affected the mosaic iconographic program of the Basilica. The way Christ's body is shown in the Crucifixion scene on the western wall is a perfect illustration of these cultural influences. The pronounced musculature and tendons of the represented figure emphasize his corporeality, suggesting a direct link to Benedictine-Cistercian spirituality where the physicality of Christ was underlined to

⁴⁰ Andreescu-Treatgold, Henderson, and Roe, *Glass from the Mosaics on the West Wall*, 120, 137.

⁴¹ On the Torcello monasteries, see, e.g., Maurizia Vecchi, "Torcello: chiese e monasteri scomparsi," *Rivista di Archeologia* 2 (1978): 106–8; Maurizia Vecchi, *Torcello: ricerche e contributi* (Roma: "Erma" di Bretschneider, 1979), 37–40; Vecchi, *Chiese e monasteri medioevali scomparsi della Laguna Superiore di Venezia: ricerche storico-archeologiche* (Roma: "Erma" di Bretschneider, 1983); Michela Agazzi, "Monasteri veneziani da Castello a Torcello al Lido," *Hor-tus artium medievalium* 19 (2013): 155–65; Diego Calaon, *Quando Torcello era abitata* (Venezia: La Tipografica, Regione del Veneto 2013), 83ff.

On Benedictine monasteries on the island, see, e.g., Angelo Pantoni, "Opinioni, valutazioni critiche e dati di fatto sull' arte benedettina in Italia," *Benedictina* 13, nos. 2–3 (1959): 111–58; Gabriele Mazzucco, ed., *Monasteri benedettini della laguna veneziana. Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali: Catalogo di mostra* (Venezia: Arsenale Editrice, 1983): 46ff., 66–68, 80, 82–84; Giovanni Spinelli, "I monasteri benedettini tra 1000 e 1300," in *La chiesa di Venezia nei secoli XI-XIII*, ed. Franco Tonon (Venezia: Studium Cattolico Veneziano 1988), 109–34.

underscore humanity.⁴² This focus on the palpable suffering Christ highlights his direct connection with the faithful, offering both a divine and a human Savior who shares in the suffering of humankind. The viewers who contemplated the image of Christ on the cross would have recognized God and man in this representation, which was to underline the victory over death and the redemption of humankind.

The stylistic juxtaposition of Latin and Byzantine traditions extends the representation mentioned above to the broader visual program of the Basilica. The Latin tradition is evident in the slender, elongated figures that populate the eastern and western walls, evoking comparisons, for example, to the figures in the Last Judgment scene from the Basilica of Sant'Angelo in Formis.⁴³ With their verticality and stylized proportions, these characters underscore a classical Latin approach to human form, particularly in their spiritualized, idealized appearance. However, the arrangement of the overall representation, as in the case of the scene from Torcello Island, is an unmistakable reference to Byzantine iconography.

Furthermore, the representation of light and shadow, along with the intricate folds of the garments, shows clear inspiration from the early Christian mosaics of Ravenna. The use of chiaroscuro, though subtle, adds depth and realism to the figures, reflecting the artistic developments of the period. In addition, the vegetal motifs seen beneath the feet of the Apostles in the central apse recall similar representations in Ravenna, where nature is often incorporated into religious iconography to symbolize the divine order and the harmony of creation.

Byzantine elements are equally prominent within the Basilica's decorative scheme. The ornamentation framing the scenes, particularly visible in the southern apse, exhibits distinct Oriental influences, characterized by intricate geometric and floral patterns. These motifs likely originated from

⁴² Dariusz Tabor, "Cielesność człowieka jako istotny czynnik duchowości cystersów i centralna rzeczywistość cysterskich obrazów. Analiza i interpretacja wybranych przykładów w miniaturstwie cysterskim XII i XIII wieku," in *Studia anthropologica: pogranicza historii sztuki i kultury*, ed. Urszula Mazurczak (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2013), 30.

⁴³ For a reproduction, see Yves Christe, *Il Giudizio universale nell'arte del Medioevo* (Milano: Jaca Book, 2000), fig. 169. More on the Basilica and its decorations, see Ottavio Morisani, *Gli affreschi di Sant'Angelo in Formis* (Napoli: Di Mauro, 1962); Anita Moppert-Schmidt, *Die Fresken von S. Angelo in Formis* (Zürich: Keller, 1967). On the elements of Byzantine tradition in the decoration of the Basilica Sant'Angelo in Formis, see Jean-Pierre Caillet, "Sant'Angelo in Formis: ritorno a due aspetti della 'questione bizantina'," in *Domus sapienter staurata. Scritti di storia dell'arte per Marina Righetti* (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2021), 506–14.

Eastern traditions, reflecting the influence of Byzantine art on the region. Simultaneously, the bold, vibrant colors used throughout the mosaics evoke the stylistic qualities of Byzantine icons, particularly those depicting the Last Judgment.⁴⁴ Such intense colors heighten the scenes' drama and align them with the Byzantine tradition of symbolic color usage, where shades of various shades are imbued with complex theological meaning.⁴⁵

Combining these diverse stylistic elements, Latin and Byzantine, creates a unique artistic dialogue within the Basilica's decoration. The mosaics, through their integration of cultural traditions, form a cohesive whole that bridges the gap between East and West while celebrating the spiritual and artistic heritage of both.

3.4 THE SELECTION OF SCENES AND ICONOGRAPHY

The choice of iconographic themes within the Basilica's mosaic decoration most clearly shows the interaction between Byzantine and Latin traditions. Though distant at first glance, these two great cultural traditions are woven together to produce a harmonic but lively artistic dialogue throughout the temple. The mosaics on the western wall, in particular, serve as a counterbalance to the eastern decoration, where Latin stylistic influences, especially those reminiscent of the iconography from Ravenna, are prominent.

In the eastern part of the Basilica, particularly in the central apse, there are explicit references to the Latin tradition. Previously mentioned fragments of original wall paintings, today visible above the synthronon, which show saints or bishops,⁴⁶ and more recent discoveries from 2020, together with the mosaic representation of Saint Martin among Father of the Church in the southern apse, reveal as it seems, the importance of this saint closely associated with Frankish devotion. One of the newly discovered fragments of frescoes relates to a hagiographic cycle dedicated to this saint. These paintings, dated to the mid-9th century, likely originated during the episcopacy of

⁴⁴ It is worth mentioning here examples of two well-known Sinai icons depicting scenes of the Last Judgment; see Valentino Pace, ed., *Alfa e omega: il giudizio universale tra Oriente e Occidente* (Castel Bolognese: Itaca, 2006), 58ff.

⁴⁵ On the symbolic meaning of colors in Byzantium, see, e.g., James, *Light and Colour in Byzantine art*; James, "Color and meaning in Byzantium," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2003): 223–33.

⁴⁶ More on this wall painting, former decoration of the central apse, partly visible today, see Krauze-Kołodziej, *The Mosaic Complex on the West Wall*, 54–55.

Bishop Deusdedit II as part of a decorative program described in the *Chronicon Gradense* by John the Deacon. Organized in overlapping registers, these wall decorations match early medieval traditions of narrative storytelling, which had special religious and didactic value.

The iconography in these fragments reflects the Basilica's cultural and artistic ties to the northern Apennine Peninsula and Alpine Europe, regions deeply influenced by Carolingian art. Especially significant is Saint Martin's representation, marked by an inscription next to his head. It grounds the Basilica solidly in the religious networks of the Frankish society, where Martin was revered as a political and spiritual symbol. According to Krisztina Ilko, the painting probably shows a rare scene, such as Saint Martin being blessed or ordained by Saint Hilary, therefore suggesting a greater cycle describing his life and highlighting his significance as a spiritual and cultural figure.⁴⁷ This emphasizes the Basilica's role as a cultural bridge between the Venetian tradition and the Latin West. Another fresco fragment on the opposite wall shows the Virgin Mary inside an architecturally defined space, maybe flanked by a handmaiden dragging a curtain—a detail consistent with Carolingian artistic standards that highlight Mary's noble stature. Though damaged by later construction and seismic activity, these paintings demonstrate clear stylistic correspondence with Carolingian art, challenging the prevailing notion that early Venetian art predominantly favored mosaics due to climatic constraints and vivid Byzantine tradition.⁴⁸

The central nave of the Basilica, although virtually dominated by an Eastern-origin representation of *Theotokos* set against a golden background, gains a distinctly Latin character through these new discoveries. The stylistic details in the mosaics, such as the floral and ornamental elements accompanying the Apostles' representation in the apse, together with the uncovered fresco fragments, suggest a blend of artistic influences. The presence of Saint Martin, a figure seldom venerated in Byzantine tradition, further strengthens the Basilica's connection to the Latin West, proving its dual role as a site of local devotion and a reflection of broader Carolingian influence in the Venetian lagoon.

⁴⁷ See Krisztina Ilko, "Extra murals – On the Discovery of Medieval Wall Paintings on Torcello," September 3, 2020, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/discovery-medieval-wall-paintings-torcello-venice-lagoon>.

⁴⁸ More on these newly discovered wall paintings in Diego Calaon et al., "La scoperta degli affreschi di Torcello."

Moreover, the selection of Apostolic colleges in both the eastern and western parts of the church illustrates the coexistence and interweaving of Latin and Byzantine traditions. In the central apse, the Apostles are represented following the Latin tradition, as described in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 10:2–4). This listing includes Paul but excludes Judas and Matthias, underscoring the influence of Western iconography. In contrast, on the western wall in the *Deesis* scene, the Apostles are shown according to Greek tradition, including evangelists Mark and Luke and other Apostles such as Thomas, Bartholomew, and James the Elder, reflecting a distinctly Byzantine arrangement. This juxtaposition of the two Apostolic representations highlights the dual influence of East and West within the iconographic program of the Basilica.

The western wall is a prime example of how Byzantine and Latin iconographic motifs coexist and even complement each other in a single composition. The scene of Christ's Descent into the Abyss (*Anastasis*), a prominent Byzantine motif symbolizing Christ's triumph over death, is presented alongside the scene of *Deesis*—a common representation in Byzantine Judgment scenes where Christ intercedes on behalf of humanity. Below this, the *Etimasia*, the preparation of the Throne of Judgment, further reinforces the Eastern theological narrative of divine authority and justice. However, these Byzantine in origin themes are juxtaposed with a Crucifixion scene that reflects the influence of Latin iconography. Christ's physical suffering is emphasized through the realistic portrayal of his body, inviting meditation on his humanity and sacrifice. This blending of iconographic elements from both traditions demonstrates a carefully considered integration of theological perspectives from the Eastern and Western Christian worlds.

Further evidence of the intermingling of Greek and Roman iconography can be found in the representation of Hades as the king of the Underworld and the personification of the sea in the Resurrection of the Dead scene. These motifs, drawn from ancient mythological models, are incorporated into the Christian narrative of the Last Judgment, where their original meanings are transformed to serve a new theological purpose. The figure of Hades is shown twice throughout the Judgment composition, the first time in the depths of Hell as its infamous ruler, and the second time in the scene of *Anastasis*, where the Risen Christ tramples the Gates of Hell and the shackled Hades beneath them, is reinterpreted as a symbol of death's defeat

through Christ's resurrection. At the same time, the personification of the sea might underline the forces of nature yielding to divine authority.⁴⁹ These ancient iconographic motifs, repurposed in a Christian context, add depth and complexity to the theological message of the mosaics.

Although the blending of these traditions is evident, the scenes in the Basilica often reflect a complex interplay of Byzantine and Latin influences rather than a clear distinction between the two. In some cases, Byzantine and Latin elements appear separately, but they are intricately woven together within a single composition in many instances. This dynamic creates a rich, interconnected narrative where, depending on the criteria used—whether iconographic, compositional, or stylistic—the two traditions can be seen working together, sometimes inseparable within the same scene. This combination of religious and artistic aspects shows how the Latin and Byzantine traditions not only coexist but also often improve and complement each other in the design of the Basilica, therefore including the observer in a deeper knowledge of the represented images.

CONCLUSION

The Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta on Torcello Island is a perfect example of the coexistence and interaction of Byzantine and Latin influences. As depicted in the mosaic decoration, the artistic value and theological narrative of the analyzed works of art demonstrate a sophisticated integration of two European cultural traditions, resulting in a complex iconographic and symbolic whole.

Selected iconographic motifs of theological and artistic expressions from both traditions clearly show the coexistence of Byzantine and Latin elements. The scenes expose a precise mixing of Eastern and Western influences. Byzantine theological profundity, emphasizing heavenly authority, is gently combined with the Latin emphasis on corporeal suffering and human

⁴⁹ For more on the figure of Hades, see Aleksandra Krauze-Kołodziej, "Hades as the Ruler of the Damned in the Mosaic Complex on the West Wall of Basilica Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello, Italy," in *Sapiens ubique Civis. Proceedings of the International Conference on Classical Studies (Szeged, Hungary, 2013)*, *Antiquitas, Byzantium, Renascentia* 13, ed. János Nagyillés et al. (Budapest: ELTE Eötvös József Collegium, 2015), 379–95. On personification of the sea, see Krauze-Kołodziej, *The Mosaic Complex on the West Wall*, 125ff.

experience to produce a multifarious story reflecting the theological issues of both traditions.

The examined Greek and Latin inscriptions, primarily illustrating the religious and cultural duality of the iconographic program, bring attention to the cultural junction even more. This coexistence of languages demonstrates a significant mixing of Eastern and Western Christian ideas inside the analyzed area.

Moreover, the stylistic features of mosaic decoration, such as vibrant colors, geometric patterns, and naturalistic ornamentation, underline the presence of Eastern and Western cultural influences. Although some aspects are aligned with one tradition, they often cooperate with or complement each other to provide harmonic and dynamic values.

In conclusion, the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta is a significant example of the cross-cultural exchange between the Byzantine East and the Latin West. The mosaic decoration especially integrates two great European historical traditions, reflecting the broader cultural and theological interplay that characterized the medieval Christian world, particularly in the northern Adriatic region.

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FIGURES



Figure 1. Torcello Island (photo from Diego Calaon, *Quando Torcello era abitata* (Venezia: La Tipografica srl, Regione del Veneto, 2013))



Figure 2. The mosaic complex of the western wall in the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello (photo by Author)



Figure 3. The decoration of the central apse and the triumphal arch in the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello (photo by Author)



Figure 4. The decoration of the southern apse in the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello (photo by Author)



Figure 5. Mary as Orant. A fragment of the mosaic complex of the western wall in the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello (photo by Author)