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*Marian Cult-sites along the Venetian sea-routes
to Holy Land in the Late Middle Ages*

**Michele Bacci, Gianvito Campobasso, Argyri Dermizaki,
Vesna Šćepanović, Angela Schiffhauer and Sofia Zoitou**
University of Fribourg

Abstract

The present paper discusses materials collected and analysed in the frame of a research project coordinated by Michele Bacci at Fribourg University and supported by the Swiss National Found. It focuses on the spread of Marian cultic phenomena along the maritime routes between Venice and the Holy Land, which corresponded to the major commercial itineraries among territories mainly belonging to the Venetian Stato da Mar. Relying on evidence provided by 14th to mid-16th century pilgrims' travelogues, this study lays emphasis on the dissemination of new holy sites and cultic attractions which took place in this intermediary space between Venice and Palestine, namely on the coasts of Istria, Dalmatia, Albania, Corfu, the Morea, Candia, Rhodes and Cyprus, during the Late Middle Ages.

In this respect, a number of holy objects found in such sites were regarded as especially attractive on account of their more or less direct association with the Gospel narratives. A key-role was played, in this context, by Marian mementoes, and more specifically by the images attributed to Saint Luke and perceived as authentic portraits of the Mother of God. An almost uninterrupted sequence of the Evangelist's autograph icons dotted the navigation routes. The famous Nicopea icon in San Marco was the first of such objects encountered by pilgrims during their trip, but more were to be found in many different places, including the Franciscan church in Korčula, the Dubrovnik Cathedral, a small chapel at Kassiopi, St. Dominic in Modone, the convents of St. Francis and St. Saviour in Candia, the shrine of Monte Filerimo in Rhodes, the orthodox cathedral in Nicosia and finally the monastery of Saint Sabas in Alexandria. All those shrines participated in shaping a holy topography of the eastern coasts connected to the maritime pilgrimage phenomena in which outstanding is the particular Marian devotion. Such places gave shape to a topographic network which was perceived by pilgrims as an anticipation of the religious experience they expected to have in the Holy Land.



Figure 1 The topographic network of the navigation routes to the Holy Land in the Middle Ages (Copyright: Thomas Kaffenberger)

Introduction

This paper will examine the ways in which cultic objects associated with the Virgin Mary came to be integrated into the network of new holy sites dotting the sea-routes to the Holy Land in the Late Middle Ages, basing on the evidence provided by Late Medieval pilgrims' travelogues.¹ From the 14th century onward, Venice exerted namely a sort of monopoly control over the organization of sea passenger transportation to the Eastern Mediterranean. Pilgrims became accustomed to embark in the lagoon and to access the Holy Land via ships sailing along the coasts of Istria, Dalmatia, Albania, Corfu, the Morea, Candia, Rhodes, and Cyprus, before approaching the ports of either Jaffa or Alexandria (Figure 1). This corresponded to a basically commercial route connecting territories belonging, in great part, to the Venetian *stato da mar*.

¹ Herewith we are summarizing some of the outcomes of the research project *Von Venedig zum Heiligen Land. Ausstattung und Wahrnehmung von Pilgerorten an der Mittelmeerküste (1300-1550)*, financed by the Swiss National Found and coordinated by Prof. Michele Bacci. The structure of the article reflects the different geographic areas being the object of a specific, still ongoing research work, namely Venice (Angela Schiffhauer), Dalmatia (Vesna Šćepanović), the Southern Adriatic and Albania (Gianvito Campobasso), the sea-routes between Corfu and Candia (Argyri Dermitzaki) and Rhodes (Sofia Zoitou).

A singular phenomenon of Late Medieval pilgrimage, which has hitherto been only scarcely investigated, was the tendency to invest the ports-of-call giving shape to this navigation route with cultic meanings and attractions which, in many respects, anticipated the religious experience pilgrims were expecting to have in the holy sites of Jerusalem. The latter stood out for their uniqueness: they were worshipped for their materiality, as segments of ground invested with memorial qualities and hallowed by contact with Christ's body. They could not be really translated or reproduced elsewhere, given that they were deemed to be directly grafted onto the soil. Nevertheless, in many of the places where pilgrims disembarked, they could see cultic objects, relics, and images used as synecdochical, mimetic or topomimetical evocations of the Holy Land, such as relics of saints and worship-worthy figures associated with the Gospel narratives and stone fragments from the Palestinian holy sites.

Pilgrims acknowledged the cultic importance of those relics which, in each of such places, were directly or indirectly connected with Christological meanings. Their worship could be understood as a first approach to the experience of the *loca sancta* where Christ had been physically present. For example, the multiple relics of Simeon the Priest to be seen in Venice, in Zadar and in Dubrovnik could be viewed not simply as remains of an important saint, but also as material proofs to Christ's incarnation, given that Simeon had been privileged to hold the Son of God in his arms. The dissemination of Marian cults, and especially of images deemed to be authentic portraits of the Virgin made by the Evangelist Luke, also contributed to enhance the religious experience of the intermediary, "liminal" space separating pilgrims from their final goal.

1. Venice as a Marian City

The city of Venice, chosen by most travellers in the Late Middle Ages as the point of departure for the long journey to the Holy Land, had from its origins a strong connection to the Virgin. The legendary founding of the lagoon city goes back to the 25 March 421, the feast day of the Annunciation of Mary. While waiting to embark for the Holy Land, a wait that could last several days or even months, pilgrims would visit many churches and religious attractions of the "Marian city". In his travelogue, Dom Loupvent, a French Benedictine of St. Mihiel Abbey in Lorraine who went on the perilous journey to Jerusalem in 1531, noted that during his stay in Venice he could do nothing other than get to know other pilgrims and visit the city, the churches and the holy sites². A lot of these Venetian churches were dedicated to the Virgin Mary, among others *S. Maria Formosa*, the first Marian church, and the Franciscan church *S. Maria Gloriosa*, dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin and one of the most important churches after St Mark. At the end of the 15th century, the cult of miraculous

² Bonnin, 1976, p. 16 (fol. 9v.): "Nous, estans audit lieu de Venise sans faire aultre chose synon visiter la ville et les esglises et saint lieux et prandre familiarité et compaignement a beaucoup de gens de bien et d'honneur questoyent pélerins du saint voayage comme nous [...]".



Figure 2 Venice. View towards the high altar with the miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary in the church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli, 1481-1494 (Copyright: Michele Bacci)

arrived by ship near *S. Maria della Cavanna* and caused a miraculous light. The convent and the site were subsequently renamed *S. Maria delle Grazie* (Crouzet-Pavan, 2015, p. 496). Miraculous Madonna icons are also linked to *S. Maria della Celestia* and the church of *S. Marziale*, among others.

³On the cult of this image and on other Marian images based on sources cf. the study by Crouzet-Pavan, 2015, pp. 479-521. On the church of *S. Maria dei Miracoli*, cf. Concina, 1996, pp. 232-237.

⁴Moretti, Niero, Rossi, 1994, chap. 1. See also the modern photograph of the statue (*idem*, p. 12) and the historical engraving that shows the Madonna vested (*idem*, p. 51, fig. 19). This engraving was originally published by Corner, 1761, opposite to p. 40.

images of the Virgin triggered a wave of construction and dedication of churches to Mary. The increasing veneration of the famous *Madonna dei Miracoli*, commissioned by Angelo Amadi and painted by Niccolò di Pietro, led to the construction of the church *S. Maria dei Miracoli* (Figure 2)³. The laying of the first stone was on 8 December 1481, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Due to the local veneration of another miraculous image of the Virgin with child - a statue made by Giovanni de Santi in 1377 - the old church of St Christopher became known as *Madonna dell'Orto* in the late 14th century (Figure 3). This led to a formal, additional dedication of the church to the Virgin in 1414⁴. In 1445, an icon from Constantinople ar-

During their stay in Venice, many pilgrims used the opportunity to go to Padua by boat, like the knight Sir Richard Guylforde. He reported that there was a “solemn procession, where many relics were borne” and that he “visited there many saints and relics, as St Luke and St Matthew, which both lye in the Abbey of Santa Giustina [...] there were two tables of our blessed Lady, which St Luke painted with his own hands at Padua”⁵. As another pilgrim describes almost at the same time, one image of the Madonna painted by Luke was preserved in the Benedictine Abbey of S. Giustina on the altar of St Luke, and the other in a chapel of the cathedral⁶. In Venice in contrast, it was primarily the



Figure 3 Venice. Church of Madonna dell'Orto, largely remodelled in the 15th century (Copyright: Michele Bacci)

abundance of relics that impressed the pilgrims⁷. The most impressive site, however, was the church of St Mark, which especially dazzled pilgrims with its

⁵ Ellis, 1851, p. 6: “There was the same daye a solempne processyon, where at were borne many relyques [...]. In the sayde processyon we vysyted there many seyntes and relyques, as seynt Luke and seynt Mathye, whiche bothe lye in the abbey of saynt Justyne vyrgyn, a place of Blake Monkes, ryght delectable, and also solytarye: there be two tables of our blessyd Lady, which seynt Luke paynted with his awne handes at Padowa.”

⁶ Meisner, Röhrich, 1978, pp. 114-115. On the Marian icons in Padua cf. Bacci, 2015, pp. 142-146, also with the sources.

⁷ Cf. for example Ellis, 1851, p. 7: “The relyques at Uenyce can not be noumbred”; Bonnin, 1976, p. 22 (fol. 13v): “Le corps dudit saint Zacharie et tant daultres dignités infinie, que

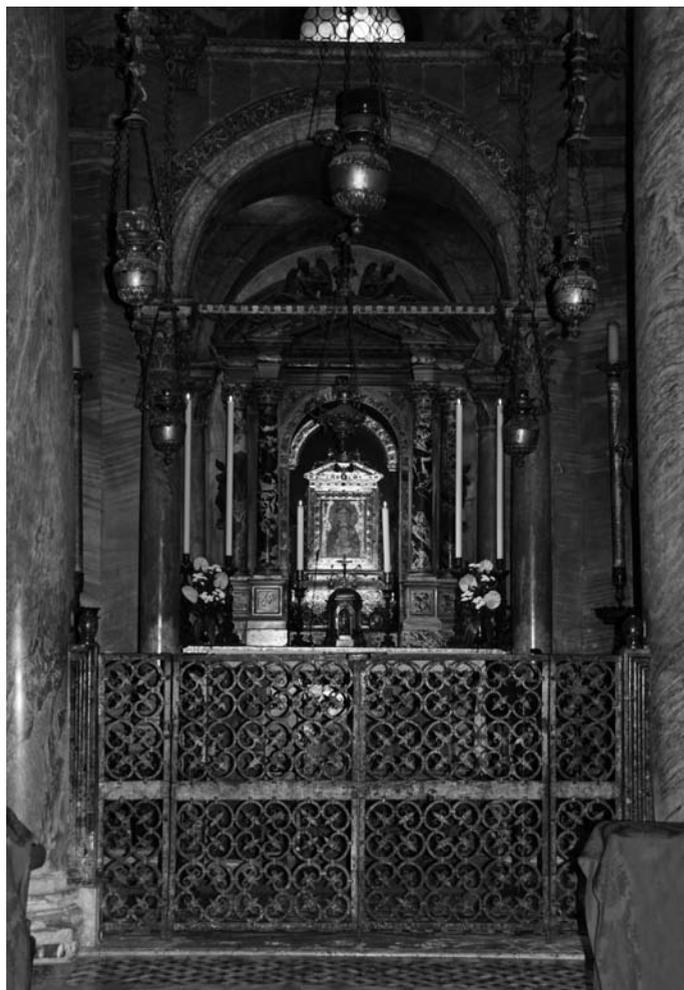


Figure 4 Venice. San Marco, altar of the *Madonna Nicopea* (icon, 11th century; altar, 1618) (Copyright: Michele Bacci)

according to Pierre Le Boucq in his travelogue, is a work of stone with the miraculous image of the Virgin made of the rock at Horeb from which water

golden mosaics and gorgeous decoration⁸. Many Medieval pilgrims from the 14th to the 16th century also listed the liturgical objects, including images, that were exhibited on the high altar on the feast of the Ascension and other principal feasts⁹. But, whereas the value of their material, such as gold and precious stones, as well as their beauty are always emphasised, the iconography of the described objects is mostly not specified. It seems that the cultic dimension became less important in view of the overwhelming aesthetic experience of such an abundance and costliness of decoration and objects. But in some cases, pilgrims referred to miraculous images in St Mark, among which two are linked to Mary. One of them,

impossible seroit les toutes rédiger par escript". Along with the bodies of St. Mark and St. Zacharias the bodies and relics of Sts. Helen, Simeon the Prophet, Barbara, Roch, Lucy and Nicolas are counted among the most important in the pilgrim accounts.

⁸ Cf. for example the descriptions of Dom Loupvent: Bonnin, 1976, pp. 21-25 (fol. 12v-14r).

⁹ Bourdin, 2016, p. 60: "Aux festez solemnelles le grant autel est parent du tresor quy est une chose presque inestimable[z]: dez imagez, angelez, calicez, platz, vasseaux, candelierz, toutz d'or massif, grandz et groz garnyz de pierrez precieusez de vailleurz inestimablez et de toute sorte de coulleurz".

poured out after Moses was striking it (Ex. 17,1-7)¹⁰. To enhance the authenticity of the stone, Jean de Tournai, who travelled in 1488 to the Holy Land, noted in his travelogue that the four holes from which the water flowed out could be seen (Blanchet-Broekaert, 2016)¹¹. This image can be identified as the Byzantine relief with the *Theotokos Aniketos* preserved in the Zen Chapel, the former “Chapel of Our Lady” of St Mark¹². The most famous and venerated icon in St Mark in the second half of the 15th century was the so-called *Madonna Nicopea*, a portrait of the Virgin made by the Evangelist Luke (Figure 4)¹³. Given that some travellers, coming from Rome, like the foresaid Jean de Tournai, also stopped over in Loreto, where the house of Mary’s birth and an image of St Luke is preserved, their religious experience of the holy sites at the beginning of the journey to the Holy Land was essentially marked by the devotion of Marian shrines.

2. Marian Cult-Sites Along the Istrian and Dalmatian Coasts

From the mid-15th century an abundance of references to Marian cults emerged in the accounts of pilgrims travelling between Poreč and Dubrovnik on their way to the Holy Land – often coinciding with stops at crucial points along the treacherous Istrian and Dalmatian coastlines. As they sailed out of the Venetian lagoon, travellers heard rumours about the legends associated with the city of Poreč, usually the first stop for ships heading for the Levant: they were said that a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary had been built by the hand of angels in a single night¹⁴. In its emphasis on the role played by angels, this account was probably reminiscent of the vicissitudes of the Holy House of Nazareth, which according to legend “resided” at nearby Trsat (Rijeka) for more than three and a half years before reaching the Italian coast. This is another point that did not escape the pilgrims’ attention. Whereas an anonymous English text only refers to four miraculous changes of location operated by the hands of the angels and the final arrival of the house in Italy (Brefeld, 1985, p.

¹⁰ Bourdin, 2016, p. 64: “En une aultre cappelle verz le portal grand a dextre est une imaigne de nostre Dame faicte de la pierre, de quoy Moïse fit saillier l’eawe pour [faire] boire lez enfantz d’Israël au desert, laquelle imaigne est fort bien ouvree et s’y font journellement miraclez”.

¹¹ “Dessoubz le portal d’icelle église y a une ymaige de Nostre Dame laquelle est faicte et taillée de la pierre où Moïse frappa de sa verge au désert d’out miraculeusement eawe en yssit, dont les enfantz d’Israël en furent rasasiés et yssoit ladict eawe par IIII lieux. Et si void on à présent en ladict ymaige les IIII trous par où ladict eawe issit”. Cf. also Péricard-Méa, 2012, p. 125.

¹² Bacci, 2015, pp. 134-135, also with the sources.

¹³ *Idem*, pp. 136-141, with listing of sources. The Lukan icon in St Mark is much less frequently mentioned in the travelogues than the icons in Padua.

¹⁴ References in the pilgrims’ texts to the dedication of the church and its peripheral location could possibly enable us to identify it as the suburban church of Our Lady of the Angels, which stood outside the Land Gate, and was demolished around the middle of the 18th century to make way for the new Dominican church. Cf. in particular: Tucoo-Chala, Pinzuti, 1974, p. 112; Bonnin, 1976, p. 188.

150), Dietrich von Schachten mentioned the latter's former presence in "Schafflonien" and stressed out that, due to lack of worship, it was transported across the sea, this time to Loreto (Röhricht, Meisner, 1880, pp. 236-237). Also reminiscent of Medieval topoi common in the Mediterranean area is Martin Wanner's 1507 testimony concerning the apparition of a Marian effigy inside a fig tree, which was interpreted as a sign of the Virgin Mary's special intercession, causing the plague afflicting the city of Pula to come quickly to an end. Wanner's source was an Augustinian friar who told him this story concerning an image preserved in the Church of our Lady of Mercy in the Istrian town, which was almost exclusively mentioned by pilgrims for its ancient remains¹⁵.

After crossing the Gulf of Quarnero the ships would drop anchor in Zadar, one of the major ports and home to the body of St Simeon, by far the most frequently mentioned cult object on the eastern Adriatic coast. Even though descriptions of the latter dominate pilgrims' accounts, records of Marian cults are also relatively frequent. Hans Lochner (1435) rather inexplicitly hints at the importance of Mary's worship in the Dalmatian town, even if it is not clear from his words whether the latter was associated with a specific object or image: his reference is included incidentally in his rather improbable telling about a most beautiful, bell-shaped church, marking the site where St George was rumoured to have slain the dragon (Geisheim, 1858, p. 209)¹⁶. Further evidence comes, once again, from the anonymous Englishman. Immediately after an excursus about the holiest objects having arrived to Rome from the Holy Land, he mentions the body of St Simeon and then describes an image deemed to be of extraordinary prestige by the people of Zadar: "And there is a peynted ymage of oure Ladi yn a table having v or iii strakis of blode comyng down over here face openli apperyng which, as I hirde there, itt was don bi the stroke of an unchristi man that ymmediatli affter that don drowned himself" (Brefeld, 1985, p. 154).

The next stretch of coastline housed a number of Franciscan settlements dedicated to the Virgin, places, as we learn from pilgrim texts, of great devotion for seafarers. On the small island of Prvić in the Gulf of Šibenik, which was not numbered among the ships' usual ports of call, the Church dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy of the Franciscan tertiaries was recorded by Bernhard von Breydenbach (1483) as a place where the Virgin Mary performed many miracles and where votive offerings were laid in thanksgiving for Mary's protection on the occasion of perilous situations¹⁷. The convent of Hvar island, greeted

¹⁵ Meisner, Röhricht, 1878, p. 116. He also states that the effigy once wept, claiming as proof that one could see the "drops" – probably the same tears as in the painting – referred to by Nicolò Manzuoli, about a century later in his description of Istria, as being preserved in a glass ampoule and kept in the convent. Cf. Pavanello, Walcher Casotti, 2001, p. 281.

¹⁶ The passage about St George has already been linked to the rotunda of San Donato, cf. Belamarić, 2014, p. 171; this connection appears to be supported by the reference to the round shape of the building (similar to a bell).

¹⁷ Mozer, 2010, p. 654; on this subject and more generally concerning reports by German pilgrims on the Croatian coast cf. also: Kužić, 2013, pp. 128-129.



Figure 5 Dubrovnik. View of the cathedral and the old city (Copyright: Vesna Šćepanović)

with honours due to the most eminent maritime shrines (Momigliano Lepschy, 1966, p. 56), proves to be the most commonly mentioned in Western travelogues. Georges Lengherand of Mons, in the 1480s, was the first to write about its foundation: “que ung marchand marenier a fait faire à ses despens” (Godefroy Ménilglaise, 1861, p. 90). In 1494 Pietro Casola confirmed and better specified the circumstances of its foundation: it was captain Soranzo to begin the construction of the church and the convent, after he had escaped wrecking in the nearby sea by making a vow to the Virgin Mary (Paoletti, 2001, p. 265). According to tradition, on that occasion the Venetian captain also offered the icon as a votive gift. Nevertheless, we find no explicit mentions of this story in pilgrims’ travelogues, which include only generic hints at the presence of a cult-phenomenon for the Virgin Mary¹⁸. On the other hand, concerning the Franciscan church on the small island of Badija in the Korčula archipelago, where “coruscant continue miracula per intercessionem beate Marie virginis”¹⁹, the Italian pilgrim Grassetto refers specifically to a “most beautiful” (*bellissima*) icon painted by St Luke and brought from Constantinople (Ceruti, 1886, pp. 10-11)²⁰.

Continuing on towards the Albanian coast, after a brief stretch of sea, another Marian effigy in the Cathedral of Dubrovnik was associated, again by

¹⁸ Cf. for example: Röhrich, Meisner, 1884, p. 43.

¹⁹ Quote from: Sollweck, 1892, pp. 257-258; cf. also Kužić, 2013, p. 138.

²⁰ On the icons of the islands of Hvar and Badija, cf. Demori Staničić, 2015, pp. 81-88.

Lochner, with Luke's pictorial practice (Geisheim, 1858, p. 210)²¹. Such a report may hint at the image known as Our Lady of the Porat – the icon seemingly referred to by Giovanni Francesco Sormano in his apostolic visitation from 1573: “dicitur picta a divo Luca” (Tomić, 2014, pp. 273-274). Also, later writers of the 17th century, hinted to the Evangelist's authorship: Julien Bordier in his report about the travels of Baron de Salignac (1604) (Belamarić, 2014, p. 178) and Gumpfenberg in his *Atlas Marianus* (1657-1659) (Knezović, 2005, p. 91). The Republic of Dubrovnik, apart from possession of Christological and other precious sacred relics, could as well claim to preserve one of the prestigious images attributed to St Luke; a religious attraction of great resonance for many Late Medieval pilgrims, who visited the city and its principal monuments in an apparently pre-established tour (Figure 5; Tav. XIII, 1).

3. In the Southern Adriatic

Albanian cult-sites dedicated to the Holy Virgin are less frequently mentioned by Late Medieval pilgrims. Nonetheless, a number of Marian shrines dotted the whole region and their history can be reconstructed by integrating textual sources with visual and archaeological evidence. As a port-city located along the Venetian route to Holy Land, Dürres could adequately contribute to suit the pilgrims' need to experience forms of worship which could anticipate what they expected to see in the Holy Land. The port was the right environment to locate shrines and miraculous images to entertain pilgrims in case of a stop. As it was since the Early Middle Ages with the so-called “Byzantine chapel of the Amphitheatre” whose main mosaic is mostly interpreted as a 6th-7th century image of *Maria Basilissa* between the angelic guard and donors (Figure 6)²².

A late 15th century source, describing the voyage of the Duke of Bavaria Alexander in 1496, records an icon labelled as *Sancta Maria de Miracula*²³. This was undoubtedly a holy image believed to work miracles, but it was not the only sacred image in the city. A Marian church known as *Sancta Maria (A)Malfitanorum*, is documented since the 13th century. There, the Italian community from Amalfi was used to assemble and address prayers to an icon, which was also carried in public processions (Gaglione, 2014, pp. 52-62).

Such examples are only scant traces of a widespread Late Medieval cult for the Virgin: evidence to its importance is provided, despite the lack of written

²¹ On the distribution along the Venetian routes of effigies attributed to St. Luke, cf. Bacci, 2012, pp. 185-186.

²² For this interpretation is important to remember: Nikolajević, 1980, pp. 59-71; Andaloro, 1986, pp. 103-112; Pace, 2003, pp. 93-128; Buschhausen, 2004, pp. 49-70.

²³ Feyerabend, 1584, p. 46: “Durazzo ist ein hübsche Statt / und Constantinus / S. Helene Son / hat sie lassen bawen / und daselbst vor dem hohen Stifft stehet Constantini form oder gestalt / auff einem grossen ehern Pferd / ubergüld / und hat in seiner Hand ein Zettel / lautend: Haec est via, etc. Ist auch daselbst ein Bild von unser lieben Frauwen / genant S. Maria de Miracula, die sehr fast gnädig ist”.



Figure 6 Dürres. Chapel of the amphitheatre, *Maria Basilissa among donors, angels and St Stephan*, mosaic, 6th-7th century, (Copyright: Gianvito Campobasso)

sources, also by the several icons of Mary preserved in Albanian museums, mostly belonging to the *Hodegetria-type*, even if only a small amount of them date from the Middle Ages. The importance of Marian worship is also testified by the many Greek monasteries preserving a dedication to the *Theotókos*, as Apollonia and Ardenica for example, midway between Dürres and Vlorë. Even the hitherto scarcely investigated toponymy reflects a larger panorama of Marian cult-sites: the name-site *Shën Mëry e Brarit*, for example, makes possible the identification with a church remembered until the 17th century “[...] S. Maria sopra la terra di Berrari anticamente chiesa famosissima di miracoli, e spasso dell’Arcivescovo di Durazzo, quasi distrutta i suoi sudditi tutti Turchi rinegati [...]” (Cordignano, 1934, p. 254)²⁴.

The famous litany known as *Sante Parole* testifies to the existence of a further Marian maritime shrine on the Albanian coast (Bacci, 2004, p. 244). The recorded site of *S. Maria della Suazia* has been recognized with the Island of Sazan (it.

²⁴ Report to the congregation of *Propaganda Fide* made by *Fra Marco Scura di Croja*, *Arcivescovo* (1640 ca.), in Cordignano, 1934, p. 254.

Saseno), listed after the famous and miraculous chapel of S. Maria de Casopoli in Corfu – whose image seems have been very much appreciated by seafarers²⁵ – and S. Maria de le Scanfarie (Strophades Islands), but before the “civic-shrine” of *San Biagio in Rangia* (St Blasius in Dubrovnik). The Tuscan form of the site-name (*Suazia*) and its mention in a mid-way location along the southern Adriatic sea-routes corroborates its identification with the small islet located at the entrance of the port of Vlorë, where it could work as a most suitable maritime shrine, protecting ships during the complex manoeuvres in that specific place.

It is noteworthy that the *Sante Parole* abound with hints at many maritime shrines located in the South Adriatic. Notable examples are S. Maria del Casale di Brandizio (Brindisi) and S. Maria delle Leque (S. Maria de Finibus Terrae in Leuca) at the very end of the Apulian peninsula. It is useful to remember that both shrines corresponded to sites located south of Bari, where pilgrims worshipped the famous basilica dedicated to St Nicolas, since 1087 a major place of worship in the whole Mediterranean for this much popular saint, being specialized in a large range of maritime miracles and viewed as protector of sailors and pilgrims.

This dissemination of mostly Marian cult-places associated with port-cities, harbours or small anchorages marked the crossing point from the Adriatic to the Ionian Sea, where different currents met and many difficulties were caused to seafarers. In fact, sources remarked that the sea-route along the Albanian coast was exceptionally dangerous²⁶: between the *colfo de Ludrino* (Drin Gulf) “[...] el quale è mal passo, et il più de le fiate li fa gran fortuna [...]” (Rossebastiano, Fenoglio, 2005, pp. 130-131) to Sazan²⁷ or the Butrint Strait, where many pilgrims faced sea-storms and contrary winds as well as the latter’s absence (*idem*, 2005, pp. 127-131); but also beyond, on the strait between the Ionian islands and the Epirus coastline, where the Italian pilgrim Nicola de Martoni experienced the risk of dying in a shipwreck (Le Grand, 1895, p. 664).

On account of its location in the middle of such a dangerous stretch of water, Sazan offered a most useful anchorage, which could be perceived as a liminal space not only in geographic, but also in cultural terms: “[...] Luni 26 zugno si trovessimo lo Sassino da 30 miglia, che è in la bocca del golfo di Venexia, longi da Corfù 100 miglia [...]” (Brandoli, 2007, p. 80). Often the island is described as the entrance to the Venetian Gulf, a sort of gate toward Latin Europe. Indeed, its location in front of Vlorë established a very strict visual contact with the latter, and it undoubtedly worked as an orientation mark for ships approaching the bay (Figure 7; Tav. XIII, 2).

That same liminal location provided also a perfect environment for the establishment of a religious community and contributed to enhance the latter’s reputation of holiness. It can be assumed that, by glancing at some monastic

²⁵ “[...] (Casoppo) dov’è una chiesa de Sancta Maria habitata per calogeri greci in devozione a marinari [...]” Momigliano Lepschy, 1966, p. 59.

²⁶ E.g. Gabriele Capodilista’s travelogue in 1458 and Roberto da Sanseverino’s travelogue in 1458-59. Cf. Momigliano Lepschy, 1966, pp. 170-171; Cavaglià, Rossebastiano, 1999, pp. 106-108.

²⁷ Lionardo Frescobaldi’s travelogue in 1384 in Lanza-Troncarelli, 1990, p. 173.

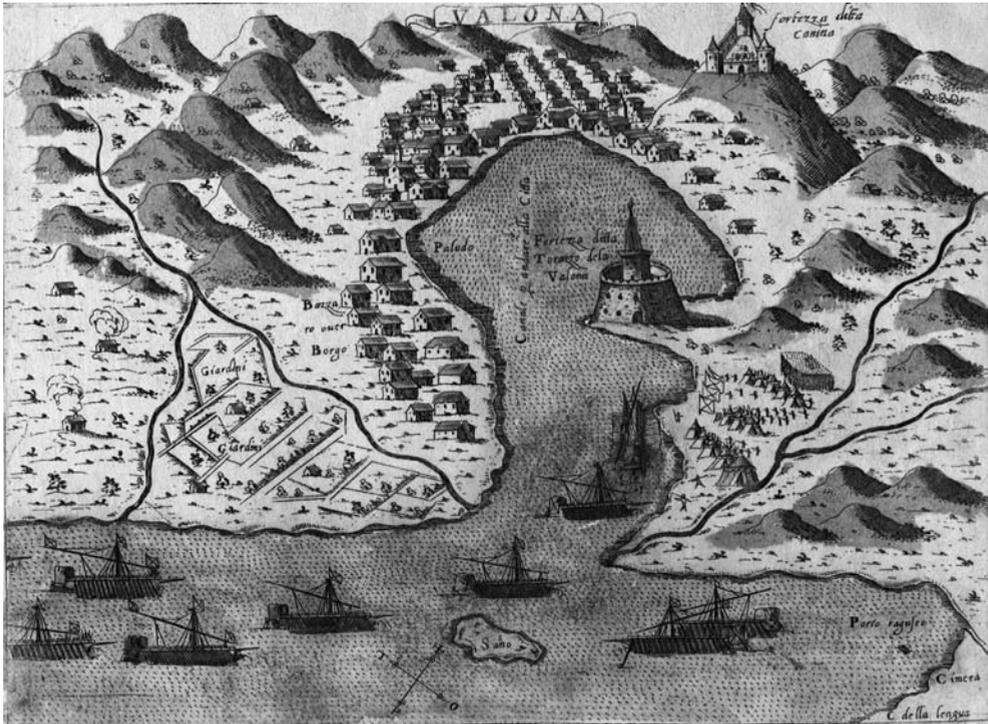


Figure 7 The city of Vlorë, 1573 (after S. Pinargenti, *Isole che son da Venezia nella Dalmazia et per tutto l'arcipelago sino a Costantinopoli*, 1573), source photo: wikimedia commons

building erected on the island and by addressing prayers to it or to its titular saint, sailors could ask for protection against storms and obtain the grace of escaping shipwrecks, inasmuch their ships could be sheltered in the bays or anchorages of Sazan.

Nevertheless the island is mentioned by a fair number of *itineraria*, but it is only at the end of the 15th century that a German pilgrim records the existence of two Greek chapels, one named Our Lady and the other St Nicholas: “[...] Von Durazzo nach Saseno segelten wir 70 Meilen in fünf Stunden. Da ist ein guter Seehafen. Dieses Saseno ist eine kleine Insel der Türken. Auf ihr befinden sich auch zwei kleine griechische Kapellen, die eine zu Unserer Lieben Frau, die andere zu St Nikolaus genannt. Zu dieser Zeit hatte der mächtige Herrscher der Türken sehr schöne Hengste auf dieser Insel auf der Weide gehen. Auf der linken Seite des Hafens liegt am Land ein sehr schönes großes Dorf mit Namen Valona [...]” (Brall-Tuchel, Reichert, 2007, p. 95). In fact it is worth remarking that the island’s main bay, looking toward Vlorë, is dedicated to St Nicholas.

J. M. Martin stresses that as contacts between both sides of the Adriatic passed through two main corridors (Martin, 1988, pp. 50-51), where *cabotaggio* shipping was abandoned: the northern one, dotted with islands, started from

the Gargano peninsula, proceeded across the Tremiti archipelago, protected by the Benedictine abbey of *S. Maria de Mare* on the islet named *San Nicola*, and reached the southern Dalmatian islands and the Dalmatian coast. On its turn, the southern route corresponded to the traditional Roman itinerary between Brindisi or Otranto and the Albanian ports of Dürres, Apollonia and Vlorë, being the main gates for the terrestrial *Via Egnatia* or for further navigation routes toward the *Mar di Levante*. For those going through the Strait of Otranto, the first anchorage was Sazan. The latter could be plausibly connected with the narrative about the translation of St Nicholas from Myra to Bari, on account of its location on a sort of obliged passage along the southern Adriatic sea-routes. As we will see below, something analogous happened with the association of the Strophades islands with the translation of St Mark from Alexandria to Venice. The frequent combination of cults associated with St Mary and St Nicholas is particularly evident on both sides of the same stretch of water (Elsie, 2000, pp. 35-57; Calò Mariani, 2015, pp. 3-31). Undoubtedly, the translation of St. Nicholas' remains and his specialisation in maritime miracles played a role in the sacralisation of those trafficked coasts, and, in the Late Middle Ages, was second only to worship for the Virgin Mary.

4. Along the Sea-Routes of Corfu, the Morea and Candia

Following the main sea-route leading from Venice to the Holy Land through the south-east Mediterranean, pilgrims would pass through the perilous straits between the island of Corfu and the mainland. At the end of these straits there is a natural harbour well known to sailors as a safe anchorage and referred to by most of the pilgrims²⁸, always in connection with a church situated “prope mare per jac-tum lapidis” (Le Grand, 1895, p. 666). The church is near the old port of the Kassiopi castle, which in the 14th century was uninhabited and in ruins, since, according to the legend, it had been destroyed by a dragon²⁹. As attested by the narratives, the church of Kassiopi had a “sleepless” lamp in front of an icon of the Virgin, whose oil miraculously cured fevers, when a piece of the bark of a fig tree found outside the chapel was dipped in it. The miraculous icon, of which we know very little, was not often mentioned by pilgrims; perhaps it was reproduced by a fresco dating from the late 16th century in the church nave (Figure 8) and in an icon offered as a gift by the famous painter Theodoros Poulakis in 1670 (Vocotopoulos, 1990, pp. 127-128). Its oldest mention dates back to 1394 (Le Grand, 1895, p. 666), and in the 15th century it was commonly said to be a work by the hand of St Luke (Hartmann, 2004, p. 48). This indicates that the church of Kassiopi was a well-known pilgrimage site, deemed to be especially worship-worthy. From 1398 onward, the site is described as a “moult grant pelegrinage” (Bonnardot, Longnon, 1878, p. 7) and the continuous stream of visitors kept growing along with the cult up until the end of the 16th century (Figure 9).

²⁸ More than 40 pilgrims mention Kassiopi, cf. Bacci, 2004, p. 235; Bayer, 2007, p. 8; Saletti, 2009, p. 16; Hassler, 1843-1849, p. 352.

²⁹ Many pilgrims report this legend, cf. Le Grand, 1895, p. 666; Brandoli, 2007, p. 43; Hartmann, 2004, p. 48.



Figure 8 Corfu. Kassiopi Church, *Virgin Kassopitra*, fresco, late 16th century (Copyright: Michele Bacci)



Figure 9 Church of Virgin Kassopitra, renovated in the 17th century, view from the west (Copyright: Argyri Dermitzaki)

Moving southward from Zante to Modon, pilgrims arrived at the small islands of Strophades, where there is a fortified Monastery dedicated to the Virgin. The most valuable relic of the monastery at the time was the miraculous icon of the *Virgin Thalassomachousa*, which according to legend travelled by sea from Constantinople during Iconoclasm (Acheimastou-Potamianou, 1997, pp. 46-49). The icon was said to have a lamp before it as well, from which oil was dripped in the sea before embarking on a journey, in order to beg God for journeys without storms. A significant number of pilgrims mention the monastery and admire the fact that its monks carried weapons for their own protection³⁰, while they record the legend that the two islet had been once a single island which was divided in two in order to make way for the ship carrying the relics of St Mark from Alexandria to Venice in 828³¹. No one, however, makes any mention of the *Thalassomachousa* icon.

³⁰ More than 20 pilgrims mention Strophades' monastery, cf. Bayer, 2007, p. 9; Hassler (1843-1849), p. 164; Gaspar, 1998, p. 391; Sollweck, 1892, pp. 47-48.

³¹ The oldest account of this miracle is in 1384 in Lanza, 1990, p. 174.

Modon, on the other hand, is mentioned by a great number of pilgrims; more than 110. Their interest is focused on St Leo, a 12th century pilgrim saint, whose relic was washed onto the shore and became a local cult. The German Gaudenz of Kirchberg records the worship of an icon of the Virgin which was said to be made by St Luke in the Dominican cloister (Röhricht, 1905, p. 109). This is a quite peculiar reference, since there is no other attestation of the icon by any source of the period until the 16th century, when the entire town was devastated by the Ottomans.

Arriving at Crete, pilgrims' narrative texts are filled with descriptions of everyday life in the important port of Candia and its ancient history³². Very few, however, make references to the local cults (Georgopoulou, 2014, pp. 133-157). The monastery of the Virgin of Fraskia, located in a natural harbour right outside Candia and mentioned in the *Sante Parole* (Bacci, 2004, p. 243; 2014, pp. 7-16), is referred to in only two narratives (Karbach, 1997, p. 58; Ceruti, 1886, p. 19). Among the many Marian cults that were known in the city of Candia, the pilgrims focus mostly on the *acheiropoietos* icon of the Virgin in the Dominican church (Schefer, 1882, pp. 49-50; Tucoo-Chala, Pinzuti, 1974, p. 123), the icon of the Virgin attributed to St Luke at the Franciscan monastery of St Francis (Karbach, 1997, p. 59; Meisner, Röhricht, 1878, p. 120), and an icon in the church of St Saviour which is mentioned as having allegedly come from Rhodes (Hemmerdinger-Iliadou, 1967, p. 597). Furthermore, from the end of the 15th century, we come across rather lengthy narratives of a small Orthodox chapel dedicated to the Virgin, which was miraculously saved when the entire area was flattened in order to build stronger ramparts for the city walls. The chapel, named *Madonnina dei Miracoli*, was said to have an "ymage de Nostre Dame en paincture" (Schefer, 1882, pp. 49-50; Tucoo-Chala, Pinzuti, 1974, p. 123), probably a wall-painting, which was believed to have performed a number of miracles. However, the palladium of Candia and most venerated icon by both Latins and Orthodox, the icon of the *Virgin Mesopanditissa*, housed in the Latin cathedral of St Titus, is almost never mentioned in the pilgrims' travelogues (Theocharis, 1961, pp. 270-282). This 13th century icon, which was carried to Venice after the Ottoman occupation of the island in 1669, was attributed to the hand of the Evangelist Luke and was said to have travelled by sea to Crete during Iconoclasm. A public procession in its honour took place through the city every Tuesday³³.

The fact that the pilgrims' narratives ignore the *Mesopanditissa* highlights the scarcity of hints at major cult-phenomena in these accounts. Most pilgrims writing about Strophades would mention various other details, but totally ignore the monastery's most revered icon, the *Thalassomachousa*. This leads to the larger question concerning the information provided in these narratives. Which were actually the material sources for the information given in these texts? It is known that pilgrims usually prepared their journey with the use of other trav-

³² Crete is mentioned in more than 140 narratives.

³³ On Candia, its convents, churches and icons, cf. Georgopoulou, 2001; 1995, pp. 479-496.

ellers' accounts and *itineraria*. These would obviously influence the experiences of each pilgrim, together with the recollections and experiences of the seafarers, a fact supported by the parallel mentions of particular icons or relics in pilgrims' accounts with those in the *Sante Parole*. Pilgrims refer to the icon and cult of the Virgin of Kassiopi and ignore the *Mesopanditissa* icon. Indeed, the *SanteParole* prayer includes invocations to *Santa Maria de Casopoli* (Kassiopi), but not to the aforementioned icon. Nevertheless, it is evident that the sea route from Corfu to Crete was dotted with a number of Marian cults being popular enough in each of the different ports-of-call, which attracted, to different degrees, the interest of the pilgrims who embarked on a journey to the Holy Land.

5. Marian Cult-Sites in Rhodes

Several Late Medieval pilgrims' travelogues shed light on religious life in Rhodes, the pilgrims' next port-of-call, during the rule of the Knights Hospitallers (1306-1522), a period of harmonious enough cohabitation of the different rites but also of recurring discrepancies (Luttrell, 1992, pp. 193-223), which had an impact on cultic practices as well. It is well-known that the Knights fostered worship for the Mother of God, their perpetual supporter and protectress (Luttrell, 1993, pp. 80-83; Zammit Gabarretta, 1983, pp. 249-266). During their stay in Rhodes, the most important cult-phenomenon was associated with the miraculous icon of Our Lady of Phileremos, whose advent on the castle of the same name – the ancient town of Ialyssos – was shrouded in the mist of legend (Figure 10)³⁴. Allegedly a work by the hand of St Luke³⁵, this Byzantine icon was also puzzlingly linked with John the Evangelist³⁶. Although its veneration existed prior to the Knights' arrival – and was shared by Greeks and Latins alike – (Buhagiar, 2009a, pp.13-15) it was only during their rule that it surpassed its regional character and became largely renowned, a fact in which the Western pilgrims' presence and writings seem to have played a crucial role. The visit to Mount Phileremos was an indispensable part of their stay in Rhodes, even more so as it was often the island's first mentioned site since its location up on the mountain made it visible from sea and recognizable to the sailing groups, making its mention in the seafarer's prayer known as *Sante Parole* only reasonable (Bacci, 2004, p. 243). Indicative of Our Lady of Phileremos' special association to the seafarers are the words by which it is described by the German Ulrich Leman: "[...] there is a church, named Our Lady of Phileremos,

³⁴ Concerning the legends, cf. Luttrell, 1989, p. 13; Sommi Picenardi, 1900, p. 215. For a basic bibliography on the icon, cf. Bacci, 2012, p. 186.

³⁵ Mentioned by Pierre Barbatre in 1480 and Wolfgang Zillenhart in 1495, Tucoo-Chala, Pinzuti, 1974, pp. 158-159; Gebele, 1932-1933, p. 114.

³⁶ William Wey, during his trip in 1462 reports about Phileremos "[...] ibi est ymago picta beatissime Marie, quam pertraxit sanctus Johannes Evangelista quando erat in Patmos insula cl. miliaria a Rodys, que postea erat ab aliis picta; et est prima ymago que facta erat ad honorem beatissime Marie, et facta sunt ibi multa miracula" (Williams, 1857, p. 99).



Figure 10 The Church of *Our Lady of Phileremos*, first built up in the 14th century, reconstructed in 1931, view from the south (Copyright: Michele Bacci)

on a mountain, where lies our dear Lady of Mercy that works big miracles and is a great help in times of need for the travelling ships at sea, and they pay great reverence to her during their navigation [...]” (Reininger, 2007, p. 30).

The site-specific experience of the miraculous icon was in keeping with Late Medieval patterns of image-worship: visitors would offer candles, celebrate Mass and marvel at the icon, its votive offerings³⁷ and, occasionally, at a collection of material indicators of the many miracles performed in the holy shrine³⁸. For the hopeful and pious visitors the cultic experience proved to be more than just a swift stop in their itinerary to the Holy Land: it could become incorporated in their belief system and be eventually even perceived as a crucial moment in the devotional experience associated with pilgrimage. Alessandro Rinuccini, in the stream of his detailed narrative, gives an unparalleled example. While visiting Mount Quarantania near Jericho an English pilgrim was brutally attacked by three men. In this dramatic instance, it was the Phileremos Madonna

³⁷ Calamai, 1993, p. 77: “La sua imagine, che in essa si truova dipinta in una tavola et poi addorna di drappo d’oro et molte ymagini et navi d’argento et torchi et diverse ymagini di cera [...]”.

³⁸ Greffin Affagart was shown three frogs that had come out from a possessed man, cf. Chavalon, 1902, p. 39. Information about the frogs is found also in Gumpfenberg, 1672, p. 890.

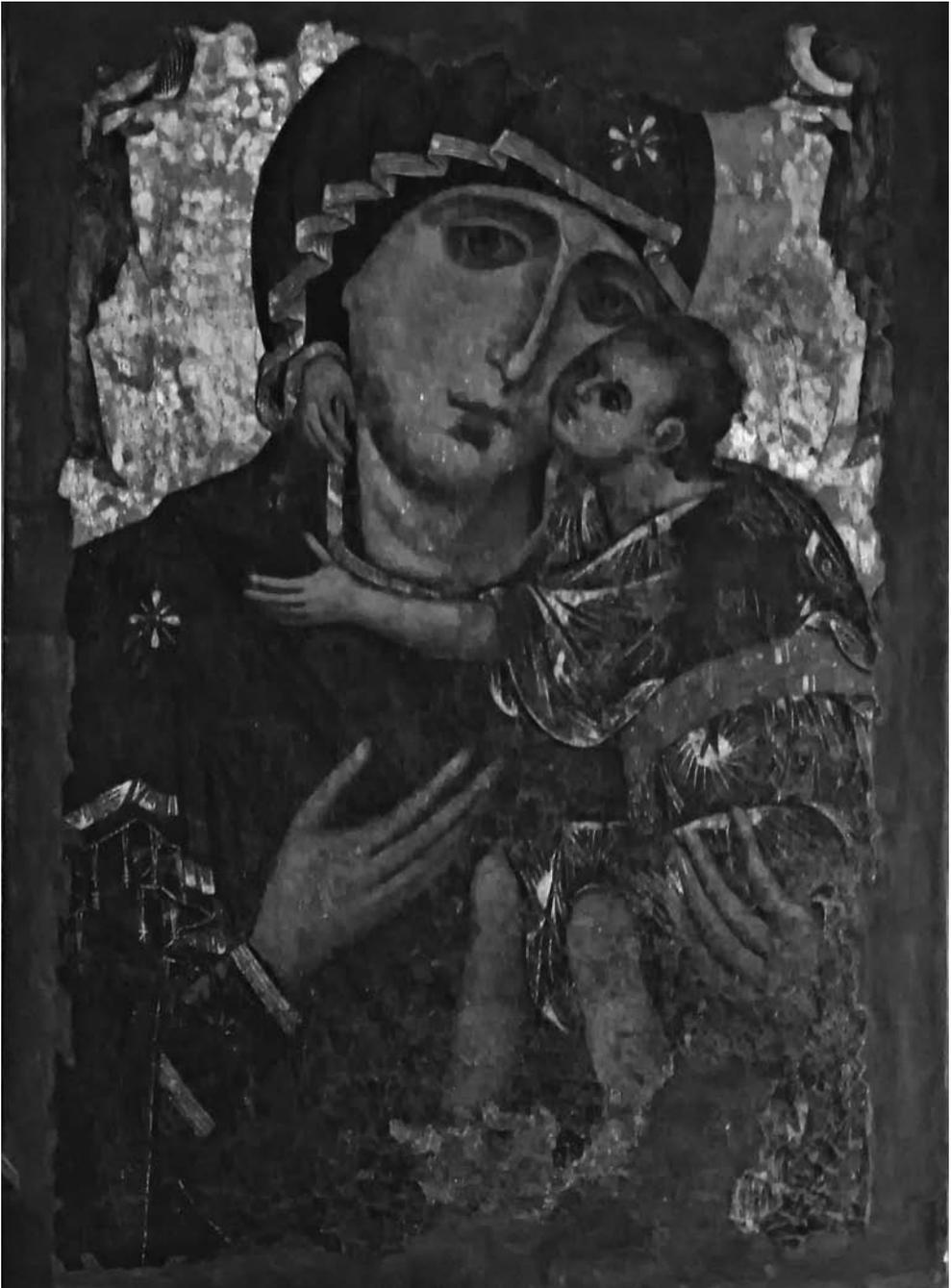


Figure 11 Valletta. Greek Catholic Church of the Virgin Damaskini, icon of the *Virgin Damaskini*, early 12th century (Copyright: Sofia Zoitou)



Figure 12 Valletta. Greek Catholic Church of the Virgin Damaskini, icon of the *Virgin Eileimonia*, 13th or 14th century (Copyright: Sofia Zoitou)

that he addressed to for help: “Costui iscampò facendo boto a sancta Maria di Filermo” (Calamai, 1993, p. 69).

The Virgin’s presence in the town of Rhodes was constant. Apart from Our Lady of the Castle that served as the Latin cathedral in the Collachium, Our Lady of the Burgh in the town and Our Lady of Victory next to St Catherine’s Gate, there is evidence for at least six more, no longer existing churches dedicated to the Mother of God³⁹. Two of them, belonging to the Greeks, housed the Byzantine miraculous icons of the *Virgin Damaskini* (Figure 11) and *Eleimonitria* (Figure 12), but the latter are never mentioned in pilgrims’ travelogues. However, they must have been the object of public devotion also on the part of the Latin population of Rhodes, as can be inferred from the care and interest the Order devoted to their safe keeping and handling when leaving from Rhodes and settling at Malta⁴⁰. Nevertheless, it would seem that the Western travellers’ interest was basically focused on –as well as directed to– the more popular and widespread known collection of holy relics kept in the Conventual Church⁴¹ and the miraculous Phileremos Madonna.

The Topographic Network of the Eastern Mediterranean: Some Concluding Remarks

Further Marian sites could be seen by pilgrims during their stay on Cyprus, their last stopping place before moving further to the Near Eastern coasts. In the port of Famagusta, they were accustomed to pay honour to an image preserved in the cave church of the *Panagia Chrysospilotissa*, or *Madonna della Cava* (Bacci, 2014, pp. 12-14). If they moved on to the island’s capital, Nicosia, they could contemplate yet another image by the hand of St Luke in the Greek Orthodox cathedral (Baião, 1927, p. 67). Finally, again a work by the Evangelist was shown to those pilgrims who, after leaving Cyprus, disembarked in Alexandria: another lifetime portrait was namely offered to their devotion in the Greek monastery of St Sabas (Moschonas, 1947, pp. 452–463; Meinardus, 1964, pp. 170–171).

To sum up: in the pilgrim’s experience, a site’s emergence as an authentic holy place, enhanced by its spatial mise-en-scène and its legendary pedigree, took place when it was included in the sacred topography of the sea-routes to the Holy Land. In this context the attribution to St Luke enabled its presentation as one of those evangelic memorials that pilgrims were eager to approach (cf. Bacci, 1998). Actually, the Virgin of Kassiopi on Corfu was just one of the

³⁹ Apart from the town, Cristoforo Buondelmonti also mentions the miraculous Virgin at the village Apollona that must have been an important cultic site. Source by Ch. Papachristodoulou, 1994, p. 38. Cf. also Phillips, 2013, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁰ Zacharias Tsirpanlis published a series of documents that shed light to the owners of the icons, their history, the transfer to Malta and their fate there. Cf. Tsirpanlis, 1988, pp. 197-236.

⁴¹ Concerning the presence of Marian relics, Luchino da Campo mentions “della veste di Nostro Donna” in the sacristy of the Conventual church, cf. Brandoli, 2007, p. 77. Perhaps this could be the relic later found in Malta, cf. Buhagiar, 2009b, p. 34.

many analogous images that dotted the principal ports along the Levantine sea-route. After worshipping the Nicopea in San Marco in Venice, pilgrims could honour other original icons by Luke in Korčula, Dubrovnik, and Kas-iopi. Further on, were the images in the Church of St Dominic in Modon, in the Franciscan convents of St Francis, and St Saviour in Candia, on the summit of Mount Philereimos in Rhodes, in the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Nicosia, and in the Monastery of St Sabas in Alexandria. It was an almost uninterrupted series of alleged autograph works by the Evangelist, marking the whole length of the sea corridor separating Christian Europe from the Mamluke- and Ottoman-ruled countries of the Middle East.

According to Western devotees, their common authorship was revealed by recurring compositional and stylistic features, those associated with Cretan icons, made according to Byzantine schemes. The pilgrim Felix Fabri, in 1480, contended that shopping in the icon ateliers of Candia was one of the most exciting experiences for a pious visitor to the Levant, given that there was very intensive production of “images of the Most Holy Virgin, which are being painted in a very lively way, according to the features used by St Luke to paint the icon of the Virgin Mary” (Hassler, 1843-1849, p. 289).

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