

The *Staurotheke* of the Empress Maria in Venice: a Renaissance replica of a lost Byzantine Cross reliquary in the Treasury of St. Mark's

In 1517, a most peculiar artefact was manufactured in Venice or the Veneto (Fig. 1a–g) which has thus far not received the scholarly attention it deserves.¹ The object is – or at least pretends to be – a reliquary, firstly of the True Cross and secondly of the Blood of Christ. This *staurotheke* was named after a Byzantine Empress (*basilis*) Maria, who is mentioned in the Greek inscription of the rectangular container. The piece is certainly not one of the most beautiful artefacts in the Treasury of St. Mark's, but it could be described with some justification as one of the most curious. I shall argue here that the so-called *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* should be regarded as a copy of a now lost Byzantine Cross reliquary that was commissioned in Constantinople in the eleventh or twelfth century for a female member of the court.

Altogether, this imposing artefact measures seventy-one centimeters in height. On top of the rectangular case, the *staurotheke*, flanked by two kneeling angels, is fixed a small golden vessel of the Holy Blood (Fig. 1f–g).² An image of a bust of Christ adorns its lid and a Greek inscription has been engraved on its back. The golden receptacle is firmly enclosed in a capsule made of glass and supplied with a metal ring. As we shall see, the Renaissance artefact conveniently combines – or, to be more cautious, appears to combine – two of Venice's most venerated relics.³

The *staurotheke* as the dominating part of the artefact rests on an elaborate pedestal which is skilfully decorated with floral patterns and which possesses two branch-like extensions, the latter providing additional support for the rather heavy container. The gilded surface of the artefact has suffered much over the centuries. On its back the reliquary bears a contemporary inscription (Fig. 1c) which reads as follows:

„Servatis ex media flamma divinitus cum salut.[is] ann.[o] MCCXXX reliqua conflagrassent et in augustiorem postea formam restitutis monimentum⁴ ann.[o] MDXVII.“

“Saved from the midst of the flames by Divine Providence, when in the year of our salvation 1230 the other [relics] were destroyed in the fire, and later, in the year 1517, restored to their dignified status as a memorial.”

The wording of this brief text is of great interest for several reasons: Firstly, because as late as 1517 it alludes to a miracle involving relics and held to have taken place in the Treasury of St. Mark's almost three centuries earlier. Secondly, the object is presented as a memorial – a “monimentum” – to adequately commemorate this supernatural event and the relics associated with it. I shall return to this below. The inscription refers to a miracle in St. Mark's first mentioned in a letter which the Doge Ranieri Zen addressed

¹ Il tesoro di San Marco (ed. H.R. HAHNLOSER), vol. II: Il tesoro e il museo. Florence 1971, no. 192; A. FROLOW, La relique de la Vraie Croix. Recherches sur le développement d'un culte. Paris 1961, no. 273; IDEM, Notes sur les reliques et les reliquaires byzantins de Saint-Marc de Venise. *DChAE* IV 4 (1964/65) 213–214 and 223–224; E. FOLLIERI, L'ordine dei versi in alcuni epigrammi bizantini. *Byz* 34 (1964) 453–454; A. GUILLOU, Recueil des inscriptions grecques médiévales d'Italie. Rome 1996, 84f., no. 80; M. DONEGA, I reliquiari del Sangue di Cristo del Tesoro di San Marco. *Arte documento* 11 (1997) 70.

² The rectangular piece measures 23,6 × 31,8 cm while the round receptacle of the Holy Blood has a diameter of 2,1 cm.

³ The Holy Blood receptacle placed on top of the *staurotheke* will be discussed below. It is one of several Blood relics documented in San Marco from the 13th century onward. See on this piece Il tesoro di San Marco, no. 192; FROLOW, Notes 219–222 and 223; R. POLACCO, I reliquiari del sangue di Cristo nel tesoro di San Marco, in: *De Lapidibus Sententiae. Scritti di Storia dell'arte per Giovanni Lorenzoni* (ed. T. FRANCO – G. VALENZANO). Padova 2002, 310, 317 and 319; GUILLOU, Recueil, no. 81; DONEGA, I reliquiari 70.

⁴ *monumentum*; see also E.A. CICOGLA, Corpus delle iscrizioni di Venezia e delle isole della laguna veneta. Opera compilata da P. PAZZI con il contributo di S. BERGAMASCO. Venezia 2001, II 1237, no. 41.

to the Pope on 30 May 1265. Ranieri's purpose was to inform Clement IV about a devastating fire that had taken place about thirty years earlier inside the Treasury of St. Mark's, on the day after Epiphany, 1230 (1231⁵).⁶ In this fire the whole treasure of the church is described as having been reduced to ashes, with the exception of three venerable relics: a reliquary cross composed of remnants from the True Cross, a crystal flask containing the Holy Blood of Christ and a relic of the Skull of Saint John the Baptist. It was important to the Doge to emphasize that it was by divine will that these relics had been transferred first by Helena from Jerusalem to Constantinople and, immediately after the Latin conquest, from Constantinople to Venice.⁷ Ranieri Zen's account of the miracle was frequently repeated in later official Venetian writings well into modern times.⁸ Of the three relics singled out by Ranieri the Cross relic and that of the Holy Blood are of particular interest in the present study.

Apparently the Cross relic associated with the alleged fire in the Treasury of 1230 was still in existence in 1325. It is described in the second inventory of the Treasury of St. Mark's drawn up in that year as cross-shaped and being stored in a reliquary (*icona*) of gilded silver, displaying the figures of Constantine and Helena.⁹ All of these details are confirmed in the first known inventory of relics in St. Mark's composed in 1283. In this earlier inventory, however, we find additional information stating that the reliquary possessed a lid.¹⁰ As we shall see, all of these details are crucial for the interpretation of the Renaissance *staurotheke*'s as a "copy", a replica, of a Byzantine Cross reliquary.

In spite of the inscription that clearly dates the object's manufacture to the year 1517, scholars, almost without exception, have not questioned the Byzantine origin of the rectangular *staurotheke* and have suggested varying dates for its manufacture ranging from the eleventh to the thirteenth century.¹¹ Only Anatole Frolov, in an early study, argued that the object be regarded as a copy of a lost Byzantine *staurotheke*, one which had possibly reached Venice during the Latin occupation of Constantinople and was later damaged in the Treasury fire.¹² Later, however, Frolov seemed to no longer hold this view and did not even refer to the argument in the catalogue entry of *Il tesoro di San Marco*. There the *staurotheke* is presented as an artefact produced in Byzantium in the thirteenth century and then merely embellished in the

⁵ The year, 1230, is provided *more veneto*, the 1st of March being the traditional beginning of the new year in Venice. Therefore, according to our present calendar the event would have taken place in the year 1231.

⁶ For the most recent study of the document see D. PINCUS, Christian Relics and the Body Politic. A Thirteenth-Century Relief Plaque in the Church of San Marco, in: *Interpretazioni veneziane. Studi di Storia dell'Arte in onore di Michelangelo Muraro* (ed. D. ROSAND). Venice 1984, 39–57.

⁷ "... dictae sanctae reliquiae de Jerusalem, per operam Sanctae Helenae, in Constantinopolim fuerant deportatae, et qualiter Dominus noster Jesus Christus ipsas in civitate Venetiae, cum corpore beati Marci, Euangelistae sui voluit collocari ...; Andreae Danduli ducis Venetiarum Chronica per extensum descripta aa. 46–1280 d. C. (ed. E. PASTORELLO). Bologna 1938–1958, 393, 30–33.

⁸ Ranieri's letter was first copied in the 14th century, most likely in the circle of Doge Andrea Dandolo; Andreae Danduli Chronica (ed. PASTORELLO), 342–343 and 393–394. At an uncertain date a Latin inscription commemorating the fire of 1230 was set up inside the Treasury. It has not survived but was recorded in the late 15th century by Marin Sanudo; see R. GALLO, *Il tesoro di S. Marco e la sua storia*. Venice 1967, 15.

⁹ "Crucem unam Christi de ligno Domini, quae fuit in igne, et est in una icona cooperta argento deaurato, in qua sunt imagines S. Constantini et S. Helenae"; GALLO, *Il tesoro* 23 and 276, item no. 5. For "icon" as a term referring to reliquaries see J. BRAUN, *Die Reliquiare des christlichen Kults und ihre Entwicklung*. Freiburg 1940, 46; H. BELTING, *Die Reaktion des 13. Jahrhunderts auf den Import von Reliquien und Ikonen*, in: *Ornamenta ecclesiae*, exhibition catalogue. Cologne 1985, III 177–178.

¹⁰ "Crux Christi quae fuit in igne in una ycona cum coperclo coperta argento deaurato, in qua est imago S. Constantini et Sanctae Helenae"; GALLO, *Il tesoro* 20 and 273, item no. 2.

¹¹ Since early modern times, the reliquary was believed to be a genuine Byzantine piece by numerous authors, see for example F. CORNER, *Ecclesiae Venetae Antiquis Monumentis Nunc Etiam Primum Editis Illustratae Ac In Decades Distributae Authorae Flaminio Cornelio Senatore Veneto, Decadis Decimae Tertiae Pars Prior*. Venice 1749, 152–153; IDEM, *Notizie storiche delle chiese e monasteri di Venezia e di Torcello, Introduzione* di U. STEFANUTTI. Venice 1758 (Reprint Venice 1990), 194. Corner included in his publications etchings of the Cross reliquary (*Ecclesiae Venetae*, pl. opposite page 153; *Notizie*, pl. 2); L. SERRA, *A stauroteca at Urbino*. *The Burlington Magazine* 35 (July – Dec. 1919) 106; IDEM, *L'arte nelle Marche dalle origini cristiane alla fine del gotico*. Pesaro 1929, 170; GUILLOU, loc. cit., no. 80, 84–85, esp. 85 (see also the references in note 13).

¹² FROLOW, *Notes* 213–214 and 223–224; IDEM, *Reliquie orientali e reliquiari bizantini*, in: *Il tesoro di San Marco* 32; IDEM, *La relique*, no. 273, esp. page 297: "Le tableau même semble avoir été entièrement refait en 1517." On page 296, however, the piece is dated to the 11th – 12th centuries; see also FOLLIERI, *L'ordine dei versi* 454, with reference to Frolov.

Renaissance. It is here, as elsewhere, held to be *identical* to the reliquary of the miraculous Cross relic.¹³ Thus, apparently, the sixteenth-century designer who intended to closely imitate a medieval reliquary from Byzantium may claim some success.

The rectangular *staurotheke* shall now be discussed in detail in order to establish the way in which it might or might not be related to the miraculous Cross relic subjected to the “ordeal of fire”. To a considerable degree, the piece must be regarded as a Renaissance copy of this relic’s medieval container which did not survive.

A close examination of the original artefact reveals, in fact, what its photographs had already suggested – namely that the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria*, in all its parts, is the result of a homogeneous design and manufacture dating to the early sixteenth century.¹⁴ Nothing in the style of the piece would contradict the Renaissance date of execution conveyed in the Latin inscription.

The wooden core of the Cross reliquary is furnished with a profiled ornamental base and a monumental cornice covered on all sides with gilded silver. Its front displays the relic compartments and, in addition, contains figural decoration and a lengthy Greek inscription (Fig. 1b). The skilfully engraved text frames the reliquary’s front on three sides. From a palaeographic point of view, it imitates quite successfully – there are only a few minor deviations – an especially distinguished majuscule script to which Herbert HUNGER has given the term *Epigraphische Auszeichnungsmajuskel*. This script is frequently encountered in Byzantine luxury manuscripts from the late ninth century on, and flourished as a lavish book script between the tenth and twelfth centuries.¹⁵ It was likewise employed for the inscriptions on many works of art of different genres. The distribution of the script on the reliquary’s vertical borders, varying between one and three letters, similarly corresponds closely to Byzantine usage. The verses read as follows:

Ὅν οἱ σταλαγμοὶ τοῦ Θεοῦ τῶν αἱμάτων
 Δόξαν θεϊκὴν ἐστόλισαν καὶ κράτος,
 Πῶς δοξάσουσι μαργαρίται καὶ λίθοι;
 Σὸς κόσμος ἐστὶ, σ[ταυ]ρέ, πίστις καὶ πόθος.
 Οὕτως σε κοσμεῖ καὶ βασιλὶς Μαρία.¹⁶

“[Cross] that the drops of the Blood of the Lord
 adorned with Divine glory and power,
 how could pearls and gems glorify you?
 Your adornment, oh Cross, are faith and love.
 Thus also the Empress Maria adorns you.”

Given the fact that precious materials are a key feature of medieval religious art, the argument that the donor’s pious love proffered to the Cross is an “ornament” more adequate than pearls and precious stones seems, at first reading, ironical. The same thought, however, is occasionally encountered elsewhere. The

¹³ Il tesoro di San Marco, no. 192. No explanation has been offered for the supposed 13th-century date. Previously also A. PASINI, Il tesoro di San Marco in Venezia. Venice 1886, no. 4, 27; GALLO, Il tesoro 23–24; more recently POLACCO, I reliquiari 316. Only DONEGA, I reliquiari 70 supports Frolov’s earlier interpretation of the piece as a copy of a Byzantine *staurotheke*.

¹⁴ I wish to express my gratitude to Mons. Antonio Meneguolo (Delegato patriarcale) and to Dr Maria Da Villa Urbani (Procuratoria di San Marco) for their generous permission to examine and photograph the reliquary.

¹⁵ H. HUNGER, Epigraphische Auszeichnungsmajuskel. Beitrag zu einem bisher kaum beachteten Kapitel der griechischen Paläographie. *JÖB* 26 (1977) 193–210; IDEM, Minuskel und Auszeichnungsschriften im 10.–12. Jahrhundert, in: La paléographie grecque et byzantine, Colloques internationaux du centre national de la recherche scientifique, no. 559, Paris, 21–25 octobre 1974. Paris 1977, 207–208. Some traits of the script, however, show that it is actually of post-medieval, western origin. For example, the shape of the letter *xi*, which appears twice in the left text column, finds no parallel in Byzantine examples of this script. The letter *alpha* is rendered in two different ways. One of them resembles a minuscule letter, which is not unusual for this type of script. In Byzantium, however, the letter is never shown with the upper horizontal stroke, which in this case is a feature of both *alphas*. The circumflexes on the *staurotheke* are rendered in waves, while in the original script they are generally crescent-shaped. In Byzantium the letters of the *Epigraphische Auszeichnungsmajuskel* are normally elongated, but the more compact form is also encountered (HUNGER, Epigraphische Auszeichnungsmajuskel 198).

¹⁶ After GUILLOU, loc. cit., 85.

meaning is expressed more clearly in the thirteenth-century epigram composed for the Byzantine icon of the Virgin Mary preserved today in Freising: in a down-to-earth manner the donor states that the silver and gold which frame the icon are of only secondary importance for the Virgin's veneration. Being perishable materials they easily become tarnished while, in contrast, his soul's devoted love is eternal.¹⁷ Together with "faith and love" the Venetian inscription considers the drops of Christ's blood a more adequate "embellishment" for the Cross than precious materials could possibly be. The salutary significance of the relics is thus contrasted here with the mere material value of "pearls and gems". Regarding relics and their containers in general, this is an ancient as well as common notion which also found expression in a number of epigrams.¹⁸ I shall return to the epigram of the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* and the distribution of its text further below.

The central panel of the front is separated from the epigram by a frame decorated with *repoussé* pearls. In the middle, flanked by the relief figures of Constantine and Helena, there is a large compartment housing a reliquary cross which, when compared to medieval examples, displays several unusual features. Given the relic's miraculous history it is striking that the *staurotheke* possesses no fewer than *three* cross-shaped relic compartments, the other two flanking the large cross in the upper corners. In order to protect the wooden fragments they are covered with glass, a feature never encountered in Byzantine *staurothekai*.¹⁹ The glass, together with the high pedestal, is, however, a significant feature of ostensories, which were popular objects for displaying relics in western Europe (and not in Byzantium) from the late fourteenth century on.²⁰ In the Renaissance *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* the characteristic features of a box-shaped relic container and an ostensory were quite extravagantly combined, the result being a singular artefact that evades easy classification.²¹ The sixteenth century *staurotheke*, along with the superimposed container of the Holy Blood,

¹⁷ Ψυχῆς πόθος, ἄργυρος καὶ χρυσὸς τρίτος / σοὶ τῇ καθαρᾷ προσφέρονται Παρθένω· / ἄργυρος μέντοι καὶ χρυσοῦ φύσις ὄντως / δέξαιτο ῥύπον ὡς ἐν φθαρτῇ οὐσίᾳ· / ἐκ δὲ ψυχῆς ὁ πόθος ὦν ἀθανάτου, / οὐτ' ἂν σπῖλον δέξαιτο, οὔτε μὴν τέλος· (...); after C. WOLTERS, Beobachtungen am Freisinger Lukasbild. *Kunstchronik* 17 (1964) 86, with German translation; see also Rom & Byzanz. Schatzkammerstücke aus bayerischen Sammlungen, exhibition catalogue (ed. R. BAUMSTARK). Munich 1998, no. 84, esp. page 246.

¹⁸ See, for instance, the epigram that accompanies the drawing of a cross in Ms Garrett 16 of the University Library in Princeton (dated 1081): Ἄλλοις μὲν ἐστὶ δῶρον ὁ χρυσὸς μέγα / καὶ κτήμα σελτῶν ἄργυρος καὶ πορφύρα / ἕλη ῥέουσα καὶ φθορᾶς πεπλημένη· / τοῖς τοῦ Χριστοῦ δὲ καὶ λατρευταῖς καὶ φίλοις / δῶρον μέγιστόν ἐστιν ὁ σταυρὸς μόνος / πλοῦτος τε καὶ καύχημα καὶ θεῖον κράτος; fol. 194r, transcription after W. HÖRANDNER, Das byzantinische Epigramm und das heilige Kreuz: einige Beobachtungen zu Motiven und Typen, in: La Croce. Iconografia e interpretazione (secoli I – inizio XVI). Atti del convegno internazionale di studi (Napoli, 6–11 dicembre 1999). A cura di B. ULIANICH con la collaborazione di U. PARENTE. Naples – Rome 2007, III 107–125, 116, with German translation. I wish to thank W. Hörandner for letting me consult his article before its publication. On Ms Garrett 16 see J.R. MARTIN, The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus. Princeton 1954, 24–47 and no. 20. Another example is the epigram adorning the 10th-century reliquary cross of Montecassino: Ἐύλον τὸ λῦσαν τὴν φθορὰν τὴν ἐκ ξύλου / κοσμεῖ Ῥωμανὸς εὐπρεπῶς τῷ χρυσίῳ· / Χριστὸς γὰρ αὐτῷ κόσμος, οὐ τὸ χρυσίον; transcription after HÖRANDNER, Das byzantinische Epigramm und das heilige Kreuz 121, with German translation; see also GUILLOU, loc. cit., no. 25, with French translation. The estimation that relics are more valuable than gems and precious metal is as old as the cult of the saints itself; e. g. A. ANGENENDT, Reliquien in Kunst und Kult zwischen Antike und Aufklärung. Darmstadt 1995, 7; IDEM, Figur und Bildnis, in: Hagiographie und Kunst. Der Heiligenkult in Schrift, Bild und Architektur (ed. G. KERSCHNER). Berlin 1993, 112; in a broader context recently B. BUETTNER, From Bones to Stones – Reflections on Jewelled Reliquaries, in: Reliquiare im Mittelalter (ed. B. REUDENBACH – G. TOUSSAINT). Berlin 2005, 43–59, esp. 46–48.

¹⁹ H.A. KLEIN, Byzanz, der Westen und das „wahre“ Kreuz. Die Geschichte einer Reliquie und ihrer künstlerischen Fassung in Byzanz und im Abendland. Wiesbaden 2004, 114.

²⁰ BRAUN, Die Reliquiare 301–380, esp. 301–302 and 327–330.

²¹ One of the rare items that offer themselves for comparison is a *staurotheke* in the Treasury of Cologne Cathedral that comes from the church of St. Mariengraden and is dated to the late 13th century. Here, it is a shrine-shaped reliquary with wings that was set on top of a high pedestal. The artefact houses a reliquary cross and parts of a Byzantine Cross reliquary, a θήκη; see on this piece recently KLEIN, Byzanz 266–269. In the Treasury of St. Mark's two more artefacts display similar characteristics. The first to mention is a rectangular *staurotheke* from the late 14th century that houses a number of different relics and was set onto a pedestal by a Baroque artist; Il tesoro di San Marco, no. 259. The second item is the reliquary of the Nail from the Cross that was claimed to have come from Byzantium. Likewise in the 16th century, it was displayed in the middle of a rectangular box and placed onto a high pedestal (ibidem, no. 143).

was never meant to be opened. The relics it appears to contain, therefore, were not intended to be touched or removed, but rather only to be regarded.

The large cross in the center is most uncommon. It is composed of no fewer than thirteen evenly cut pieces of wood which are held in place underneath the glass by a gilded metallic frame. In addition to the unparalleled number of wooden fragments, the shape of the cross is also curious. There are two superimposed horizontal bars: the lower one indicates the transversal cross bar and the upper one the *titulus* of the cross. The double bar is a feature frequently encountered in Byzantine crosses, and it was well known also in the West, where the shape of the so-called patriarchal cross was often imitated.²² There are, in the lower part of the vertical bar, two rectangular openings. The lower one certainly represents the footrest of the crucified Christ, yet no plausible explanation can be provided for the upper one. Each of the upper three intersections is decorated with two diagonal golden bars fixed onto the metal setting of the cross. Such metallic crosses are a characteristic feature of many reliquary crosses originating in the Greek East.²³ Yet it is highly unusual to find, as in the case of the Renaissance *staurotheke*, three of them. It is impossible to tell if Venetians thought that all thirteen of the regularly shaped wooden pieces forming the cross in the center of the *staurotheke* were fragments of the True Cross. Nor can we know whence these remnants might have come. It is also difficult to see why this peculiar wooden “puzzle” was employed at all to fill the cross-shaped compartment. It resembles a much exaggerated variant of Byzantine reliquary crosses, which are often composed of a small number of such wooden pieces.²⁴ Because of the numerous odd features evident in the large cross, the following can be established with certainty: it is by no means of Byzantine origin but was certainly created in 1517, along with the replica of the original Byzantine container. Thus, it cannot be identical with the miraculous reliquary cross described in the medieval sources. Might it be possible that, originally, *none* of the many fragments of the large cross were considered to be a particle of the True Cross? Given the history of the miraculous Cross relic in Venice, it is difficult to explain the presence of the *three* cross-shaped compartments containing, or at least seemingly containing, remnants of the Holy Wood. Scholars have thus far not considered this problem. The larger of the two upper compartments contains fragments of wood which do not completely fill the cross-shaped niche provided for them. The compartment on the right houses a small wooden cross that is quite elaborately carved in three layers. By means of the extension below its vertical bar the cross was originally attached to another object. In both cases, the origin of the relics – if they were considered as relics at all – is unclear.

Judging from the surviving or documented material, *staurothekai* containing more than one particle of the True Cross in cross-shaped compartments were highly unusual in Byzantium. Another example is a container of exceptionally large dimensions that had been preserved in Paris until the French Revolution (Fig. 2). Around the year 1240 it arrived from Constantinople, most likely from the imperial Pharos Chapel, as is documented in the thirteenth-century inventories of the Sainte-Chapelle. A rectangular case that measured more than eighty centimeters in height, it was covered with gilded silver and was furnished with a sliding lid. Before the reliquary’s destruction its interior was depicted in an etching published by S.-J. Morand in 1790.²⁵ As in the case of the reliquary in Venice, though arranged differently, there are three cross-shaped compartments of varying dimensions and the figures of Constantine and Helena stand flanking the largest one in the middle. In addition, the upper part of the container displays bust images of the archangels. An exceptional *staurotheke* from Constantinople, with no less than five cross shaped compartments, was preserved until the French Revolution in the monastery of Mont-Saint-Quentin.²⁶

²² On the origins of this type of cross see KLEIN, loc. cit., esp. 52–54.

²³ See for examples and possible functions of these crosses recently J. DURAND, *La relique impériale de la Vraie Croix d’après le typikon de Sainte-Sophie et la relique de la Vraie Croix du Trésor de Notre-Dame de Paris*, in: *Byzance et les reliques du Christ* (ed. J. DURAND – B. FLUSIN). Paris 2004, 98–100.

²⁴ For example the *Cross of Henry of Flanders* in Venice; *Il tesoro di San Marco*, no. 140; *Der Schatz von San Marco in Venedig* (ed. H. HELLENKEMPER). Cologne 1984, no. 33, 252. See also the recent remarks on different types of assembly observed in Byzantine reliquary crosses by DURAND, *La relique impériale* 95–96.

²⁵ *Le trésor de la Sainte-Chapelle*. Paris 2001, no. 17, 63–64; DURAND, *La relique impériale*, esp. 100–105.

²⁶ *Le reliquaire byzantin du moine Timothée à l’Abbaye du Mont-Saint-Quentin*, in: *Études d’Histoire de l’Art offertes à Jacques Thirion. Des premiers temps chrétiens au XX^e siècle* (ed. A. ERLANDE-BRANDENBURG – J.-M. LENIAUD). Paris 2001, 51–65.

I suggest that the three-compartment arrangement of the Renaissance reliquary in Venice is a specific feature copied from its Byzantine predecessor. Because it was provided with as many as three fragments of the True Cross, this reliquary must have been an object of considerable importance in Byzantium.

In the Venetian *staurotheke*, the relief figures of a royal couple are flanking the lower parts of the large cross compartment (Fig. 1d–e). The figures display several characteristics altogether uncommon in Byzantine depictions of the kind. Standing on low pedestals and with their hands raised in a gesture of veneration or prayer, the figures turn towards the cross. Both are rendered in a rather crude manner, with unrefined faces and in an “unnatural” posture. The inferior quality of the figures is on first sight astonishing, as the artefact is otherwise skilfully done and made of costly material. Its goldsmith, after all, was given, according to the Latin inscription, the noble task of creating a memorial, a “monimentum” in honor of the miraculous relics of the year 1230. Therefore, the crudeness of the figures is almost certainly the result of the artist’s intention to emphasize, by means of a deliberately archaizing style, the (original) relic’s venerable age and origin. The portraits are without inscriptions. However, considering the attested decoration on the medieval container housing the miraculous relic, it would seem beyond doubt that they are meant to represent Constantine the Great and Helena.²⁷ The images of the first Christian ruler and his mother are frequently encountered on Byzantine Cross reliquaries and their western imitations from the tenth century on (e. g. Figs. 2, 9–12).²⁸ Both portraits are reminiscent of the early history of the Cross relic, while, at the same time, functioning as a guarantee for the authenticity of the particle(s) contained inside the respective reliquary. Upon first sight, the dress in which the two figures on the Venetian piece are represented indicates that this *staurotheke* is a non-Byzantine, post-medieval artefact. Both figures are wearing a rather generalized costume, consisting of a cape and some kind of tunic underneath, as well as indented crowns. While Constantine’s crown has crossing bands and is surmounted by a large cross, Helena’s crown, oddly, is placed over her veil. The most unusual feature, when confronted with imperial portraits of Byzantine origin, is that both figures are shown wearing sandals. In Byzantine depictions (and in medieval western imitations) Constantine and Helena, as is the case also with other rulers²⁹, are normally represented in Byzantine court costume. This is evident in numerous examples (cf. Figs. 2, 9–12).³⁰ The figures’ dress in the Venetian reliquary is not even remotely reminiscent of Byzantine imperial costume. Constantine usually wears the *loros* over a long-sleeved tunic. Helena is normally depicted in a tunic, covered either with a *chlamys* decorated with a *tablion* or, as appears more frequently, a *loros*. Her *loros* is typically adorned with a distinctive feature of female imperial dress, the *thorakion*, which is a shield-like item that falls down from the waist. The various parts of the courtly dress in Byzantium, unlike the clothing depicted on the Venetian container, are decorated with elaborate patterns, in part consisting of applications of valuable materials. Byzantine rulers are regularly portrayed wearing shoes that are usually pointed and sometimes embellished with precious stones or pearls. Middle Byzantine crowns, the *stemmata*, are shaped rather differently than those appearing in the Venetian artefact, and they never possess indentations.³¹ Last but not least, in Byzantine artefacts the imperial couple is solely represented frontally, never in the unusual three-quarter view in which Constantine and Helena are shown on the Venetian reliquary. The two figures in Byzantine depictions are rendered with varying gestures. However, they are *never* shown, as in the Venetian artefact, with both hands brought together and raised in prayer, a gesture first encountered in the late (western) Middle Ages.³²

²⁷ Il tesoro di San Marco 192; PASINI, Il tesoro di San Marco 27.

²⁸ KLEIN, loc. cit., esp. 127–130.

²⁹ Helena was honoured by Constantine with the title of *Augusta* in the fall of 324; J.W. DRIJVERS, Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross. Leiden 1992, 39, 43 and 53.

³⁰ For the garb of Byzantine rulers see E. PILTZ, Middle Byzantine Court Costume, in: Byzantine Court Culture from 829 – 1204 (ed. H. MAGUIRE). Washington, D.C. 1997, 39–51.

³¹ Ibidem, esp. 40–41.

³² G.B. LADNER, The Gestures of Prayer in Papal Iconography of the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries, in: IDEM, Images and Ideas in the Middle Ages. Selected Studies in History and Art. Rome 1983, I 210.

The Greek inscription that frames the reliquary and refers to the Empress Maria needs explanation. Why is it encountered on the container of a relic whose history was well known in sixteenth-century Venice and did *not* involve a Byzantine Empress of that name? The most probable explanation is that the original Byzantine *staurotheke* had been either donated or owned by the Empress. The verses lack specificity so that it is impossible to identify the *basilis* with absolute certainty. In the probable period of the original reliquary's production (10th–12th centuries), there were two empresses with this name.³³ The first is Maria of "Alania" who died some time after 1103. In 1071/3 she married Michael VII and later became the spouse of his successor, Nikephoros III Botaneiates, who ruled from 1078 to 1081. After her husband's abdication she continued to be politically influential for several years, and apparently held court at the Mangana Palace. At an uncertain date (after 1094?) Maria took the monastic veil.³⁴ So the *staurotheke* might have been commissioned some time during the last quarter of the eleventh or, at the latest, in the very beginning of the twelfth century for Maria of "Alania". In this case the artefact would have been another representative of an especially large number of Cross reliquaries that were produced in the decades around the year 1100 as imperial commissions.³⁵ Alternatively, the *staurotheke* was manufactured several decades later for her namesake, Maria of Antioch, who was married to Manuel I Komnenos between 1161 and 1180 and died but few years later, in 1182/83.³⁶

The fact that nothing in the history of the miraculous relic points to either empress seems to further support the hypothesis, expressed earlier, that Doge Ranieri in 1265 most likely attached the miracle account to the reliquary cross of an existing Byzantine *staurotheke* of St. Mark's. The original artefact had probably come to Venice from Constantinople during the Latin occupation of the Byzantine capital and was originally manufactured for either one of the two empresses called Maria. As is suggested by the first inventory of the Treasury of St. Mark's, the original container was provided with a lid, most likely a sliding top, which is a characteristic feature of many Byzantine *staurothekai*.³⁷ The lower margin of the Renaissance *staurotheke* appears strangely "blank", and it can safely be assumed that it was usually covered with the sliding lid. This lid might already have been lost centuries before 1517 as it is no longer mentioned in the inventory of 1325.³⁸ It is, however, difficult to ascertain if the Greek inscription had continued in the lower border of the original reliquary, or, rather, on its cover, as, for instance, is the case in the tenth-century *Limburg Staurotheke* (Figs. 3 a–b).³⁹ Enrica Follieri has pointed out that the prevalent reading order of framing verses, distributed along the four sides of a rectangle, is (1) top – (2) right – (3) left – (4) bottom.⁴⁰ However, exceptions to this rule do exist.⁴¹ While epigrams distributed on all four sides are encountered in the majority of the artefacts (e. g. reliquaries, icons, miniatures⁴²), the *pyle*-shaped distribution as on the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* appears to have been a rarity in Byzantium. It was, however, employed occasionally, for instance on the so-called *Philotheos Staurotheke* in the Moscow Kremlin (Fig. 4). The rectangular container belongs in all likelihood to the eleventh or twelfth century and, as with the Venetian *Staurotheke of the*

³³ The earliest reliquaries which are comparable in terms of iconography and style do not antedate the 10th century; see the artefacts discussed in KLEIN, loc. cit., esp. 127–130.

³⁴ *ODB* 2, 1298; esp. M. MULLET, The "Disgrace" of the Ex-Basilissa Maria. *BSI* 45 (1984) 202–211. For the uncertain date of Maria's monastic retreat see the discussion *ibidem* 207–210, esp. 209.

³⁵ Johannes Koder has termed this period, especially the period of the Comnenian emperors Alexios I and John II, a „Blütezeit“ for the manufacture of *staurothekai* adorned with epigrams naming rulers as their donors; J. KODER, Zu den Versinschriften der Limburger Staurothek. *Archiv für mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte* 37 (1985), note 52.

³⁶ *ODB* 2, 1298 (with references).

³⁷ See the examples in KLEIN, loc. cit. 104–127, and the entry in the inventory of 1283 quoted above in note 10.

³⁸ See above, note 9.

³⁹ On the *Limburg Staurotheke* see recently KLEIN, loc. cit. 105–112 (with the older bibliography).

⁴⁰ FOLLIERI, loc. cit. 450–453.

⁴¹ Follieri's view (recently supported by M.D. LAUXTERMANN, Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres [WBS XXIV/1]. Vienna 2003, 343, no. 52) that the verses of the *Limburg Staurotheke* are an exemplary case for this reading order was rejected by KODER, Zu den Versinschriften 18–25.

⁴² E. g. the examples in FOLLIERI, loc. cit. 452.

Empress Maria, its sliding lid was introduced from the lower end of the reliquary.⁴³ The reading sequence of the Kremlin *staurotheke*'s four dodecasyllabic verses appears somewhat odd: (verse 1) top – (verse 2) upper left – (verse 3) upper right – (verse 4) lower left to lower right.

Ζωηφόρον πέφυκε τοῦ στ[αυ]ροῦ ξύλ[ο]ν
 ἐν ᾧπερ αὐτὸς προσπαγεῖς Χ[ριστὸ]ς θέλων
 ἄπασιν ἐβράβευσε τὴν σ[ωτη]ρίαν·
 θήκην Ἰω[άννης] δὲ τεύχει νῦν πόθῳ.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, here as well, the reliquary's original sliding lid, the design of which might provide some clue as to the container's peculiar verse distribution, is lost.

There has been some dispute in scholarship regarding the reading order of the five dodecasyllabic verses inscribed on the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria*, and all three possible sequences have been brought forward in the past.⁴⁵ However, the above-quoted sequence of the epigram (top – left – right), originally suggested by Antonio Pasini, is the one that appears most appropriate regarding the sense of the message conveyed.⁴⁶ Regardless of the division of verse 4 on the sides of the *Philotheos Staurotheke*, the general reading order there corresponds to that of the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria*. If this was the most common sequence in case of *pyle*-shaped inscriptions, however, remains open to debate. In the Athos Protaton there is a rectangular reliquary discussed by Anatole Frolov.⁴⁷ The container, subject to later interventions, most likely dates from the tenth or eleventh century. Its sliding lid, adorned with a metal plaque depicting the Crucifixion (Fig. 5), equally belongs to this period. The image is framed by a *pyle*-shaped inscription consisting of three dodecasyllabic verses that connect the reliquary and its contents (stones from holy sites and a Cross relic) with a monk named Zosimas and a certain Nicholas. Interestingly, similar to most four-sided epigrams, the sequence of the reading here is top – right – left. As with the epigram of the Venetian *staurotheke* faith and love are presented as an appropriate “adornment” for the relics:

Τοὺς ζωοποιοῦς ἐκ τόπων σεβασμίων
 πίστει ζεούση Ζωσιμᾶς πλουτεῖ λίθους,
 κοσμεῖ δὲ Νικόλαος τὴν θήκην πόθῳ.⁴⁸

The reliquaries in Moscow and on Mount Athos demonstrate clearly that epigrams framing a rectangle only on three, instead of all four sides, did exist in Byzantine art. However, in the case of *pyle*-shaped inscriptions a “regular” way of distributing the verses can not be determined on the grounds of the few surviving examples. It is therefore possible that the Renaissance artefact quotes the complete version of the original epigram. At the same time one might legitimately postulate that the last verse of the Venetian *staurotheke*'s poem was lost together with the Byzantine container's sliding lid.⁴⁹ In this case, however, the reading order would have deviated from established custom regarding four-sided epigrams, which makes this

⁴³ The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843–1261 (ed. H.C. EVANS – W. WIXOM). New York 1997, no. 39, 80–81; KLEIN, loc. cit., 124–126. I thank W. Hörandner for referring me to this artefact for comparison.

⁴⁴ Transcription after I. KALAVREZOU, in: The Glory of Byzantium, no. 39, with English translation; see also FROLOW, La relique 512; HÖRANDNER, Das byzantinische Epigramm und das heilige Kreuz 119. Verse 4 is elsewhere (KLEIN, loc. cit., note 155) (wrongly) transcribed as δὲ τεύχει νῦν πόθῳ θήκεν Ἰωάννης. The version as rendered above follows the reading order of the vertical verses two and three, left – right, and is, therefore, more logical.

⁴⁵ See the references in FOLLIERI, loc. cit. 453–454.

⁴⁶ PASINI, loc. cit., 28; FOLLIERI, loc. cit. 454.

⁴⁷ FROLOW, La relique, no. 1120; IDEM, Les reliquaires de la Vraie Croix. Paris 1965, Figs. 45 and 46. More recently on this reliquary Treasures of Mount Athos (ed. A.A. KARAKATSANIS). Thessaloniki 1997, no. 9.18.

⁴⁸ FROLOW, La relique, no. 1120, transcription and French translation of the verses on p. 652. On the plaque, at the feet of the Virgin, the prostrate figure of the monk Zosimas is depicted and accompanied by the inscription Κ[ύρι]ε βόηθει Ζωσιμᾶ μοναχῶ (ibidem).

⁴⁹ To assume one lost verse, instead of more, appears logical from the fact that the upper horizontal border houses one verse as well.

alternative somewhat unlikely. Given the engraver's fidelity to the original inscription's palaeographic characteristics it is unlikely that he changed the order of the verses.

What should be commented upon, however, is the fact that the distribution of the verses on the three sides of the rectangle is rather uneven. The first verse covers only the center of the upper border, with blank spaces before and after the text, while the left and right borders accommodate two verses each, consequently appearing more "crowded". The unequal allocation of the verses on the horizontal and vertical margins is not uncommon and can be observed on other artefacts as well: for instance, on the *Limburg Staurotheke* the top and bottom of the container's frame contain one verse each while the vertical borders accommodate three verses respectively (Fig. 3a–b).⁵⁰ Still, the blank spaces flanking verse one of the Venetian *staurotheke* remain a problem. A plausible, albeit hypothetical, explanation could be that the dimensions of the Renaissance artefact were enlarged in relation to those of the original reliquary.

It was perhaps because the ancient reliquary showed signs of wear, and possibly in order to protect this highly prestigious piece from further decay through usage, that a completely new artefact was created as a replica in the early sixteenth century. That many reliquaries of St. Mark's were in a desolate state at the time the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* was commissioned is clear from the inventory drawn up in 1507 which lists the most prestigious relics of the *Santuario*.⁵¹ Almost a third of the containers, or the relics themselves, are explicitly described as damaged by fire.⁵² It deserves mention that of the twenty-eight items listed, at least twelve are reliquaries of the Cross, many of them apparently in a fragmentary condition.⁵³ Because of the brevity of the entries it is difficult to determine beyond doubt which one of them describes the ancient *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria*, or if it is listed at all.⁵⁴ What can be concluded, however, is that, given the lamentable state of St. Mark's most precious reliquaries around 1500, the need for presentable substitutes, such as the new *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria*, appears even more plausible.

It is a little studied phenomenon that many "Byzantine" artefacts which are admired in today's Treasury of St. Mark's are the result of later interventions, or rather they must be considered Venetian fabrications re-employing materials stemming from different contexts and times. For instance the large *Icon of the Crucifixion (Tesoro 4)* is a modern assembly that displays, along with other items of Byzantine and Venetian provenance, an enamelled plaque with a Greek epigram which most likely came from a medieval Byzantine *staurotheke*.⁵⁵ An originally Byzantine Cross reliquary with a sliding lid and enamels in the same Treasury (*Santuario 75*) was significantly altered on several occasions from the Middle Ages on.⁵⁶ For the manufacture of the Late Renaissance *Reliquary of the Holy Nail (Santuario 58)*, fragments of medieval *repoussé* work were re-employed (Fig. 6a–b).⁵⁷ These and other artefacts seem to corroborate the documented state of disrepair of many objects and the need for "new", presentable artefacts in the Treasury of St. Mark's.

It is neither possible to establish what happened to the ancient *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* nor the date until which it was preserved. If it had been kept in Saint Mark's after 1517, the most likely period for its loss is the late eighteenth or nineteenth century, when the Treasury was in a state of severe decay and many items were sold or otherwise lost.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ KODER, loc. cit., esp. 18–19 and 22.

⁵¹ GALLO, loc. cit. 288–290; see esp. 288 for specifications concerning what exactly was inventorized.

⁵² *Ibidem*, nos. 3, 6, 8, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27 and 28.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, nos. 3, 5, 6 (?), 8, 10, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 24, 26 and 27.

⁵⁴ Only in one case (item no. 15) are the figures of Constantine and Helena explicitly mentioned: "Uno quadreto cum certe lame d'ariento cum figure del q. Re Constantino et Helena cum una croxe dentro, in la qual è del legno della croxe de ms. Jesu Xpo. Fo disfatto" (*ibidem*). It is likewise possible that the entry describes the now lost *Staurotheke of Constantine Patrikios* discussed further below. Other items (nos. 3, 6, 8, 13, 19, 20 and 26) would equally conform to the original *staurotheke*'s general characteristics.

⁵⁵ Il tesoro di San Marco, no. 18, esp. page 28; GUILLLOU, loc. cit., no. 92, where the inscription is dated to the 12th century.

⁵⁶ Il tesoro di San Marco, no. 24; recently KLEIN, loc. cit. 113–115.

⁵⁷ Il tesoro di San Marco, no. 143. I shall return to this reliquary below.

⁵⁸ For the fate of the treasure in this period see esp. GALLO, loc. cit. 69–93.

It would not seem unlikely that the Renaissance replica was made primarily for reasons of improved ceremonial usage: it seems significant that the Blood of Christ was added to the *staurotheke* so that two of Venice's most important relics could be displayed and venerated together. Again, however, it must be asked whether or not the artefact was really intended to be perceived as a reliquary by its sixteenth-century designer or its patron. The same question ought to be asked regarding the small container of the Holy Blood set on top.

The two aforementioned early inventories make it clear that the miraculous Blood that had supposedly survived the fire of 1230 was preserved in medieval Venice *separately* from the miraculous Cross relic, namely inside a crystal flask.⁵⁹ This item is identical with the Fatimid flask containing the Holy Blood that is still existent in the Treasury of St. Mark's (*Santuario* 63) (Fig. 7).⁶⁰ The physical combination of the relic of the Holy Blood with a Cross reliquary is therefore a new design, one that was first introduced in the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* of 1517. The arrangement was possibly inspired by the original *staurotheke's* Greek inscription ("Cross that the drops of the Blood of the Lord adorned with Divine glory and power ..."). The idea, that the True Cross and, consequently, all its particles were sanctified through the physical contact with the Blood of Christ was a common notion, pronounced at an early date by John of Damascus.⁶¹

The small golden container of the Holy Blood has a short Greek epigram, consisting of a single dodecasyllabic verse which is engraved on the back (Fig. 1g):

Ἔχεις με Χ[ριστὸ]ν αἷμα σαρκός μου φέρων.⁶²

"You possess me, Christ, you who are carrying the blood of my flesh."

What is expressed here is the general notion of the relic as *pars pro toto* for the complete body, in this case that of Christ.⁶³ What is quite remarkable is the fact that the verse addresses the relic's owner in direct speech. Considering the reliquary's alleged content, the verse might ultimately have been inspired by Eucharistic formulas, also inscribed on numerous liturgical chalices and patens.⁶⁴

The inscription was – most likely in 1517 – copied from another, Byzantine, reliquary of the Holy Blood, a *pyxis* carved out of rock crystal preserved still in the Treasury of St. Mark's (*Santuario* 68) (Fig. 8) (EXIC ME XPICTON EMA CAPKOC MOY ΦΕΡΟΝ [sic]).⁶⁵ In this case, too, the original epigram's palaeographic traits were closely imitated in the Renaissance replica where, interestingly, misspellings present in the original inscription were corrected. The quotation proves that the Byzantine *pyxis* in Venice had, at least from the Renaissance onwards – wrongly – been identified with the miraculous relic of the Holy Blood associated with the fire of 1230.⁶⁶ The golden container now fixed on top of the Renaissance *staurotheke* had, as a separate item, already been in the Treasury of St. Mark's before it was placed on top of

⁵⁹ GALLO, loc. cit., 20 and 273 (no. 1), 23 and 276 (no. 23).

⁶⁰ Il tesoro di San Marco, no. 128. The reliquary of the Holy Blood involved in the miracle was described by Ranieri Zen as follows: "ampullam crystallinam, ubi erat de uero Sanguine Domini, cum cartulina ligata in collo ubi scriptum erat "Sanguis Christi"; Andreae Danduli Chronica (ed. PASTORELLO) 394, 17–18.

⁶¹ Αὐτὸ μὲν οὖν τὸ τίμιον ξύλον ὡς ἀληθῶς καὶ σεβάσιμον, ἐν ᾧ ἑαυτὸν εἰς θυσίαν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν Χριστὸς προσενήνοχεν, ὡς ἁγιασθὲν τῇ ἀφῆ τῷ ἁγίου σώματος καὶ αἵματος εἰκότως προσκυνητέον ...; *Expositio Fidei*, IV, 11; Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos, vol. II, besorgt von P. Bonifatius KOTTER, Berlin/New York 1973, 188, 49–51.

⁶² After GUILLOU, loc. cit., no. 81. Il tesoro di San Marco 192 and Pl. 196.

⁶³ The same idea is encountered, for instance, in the inscription of the reliquary housing a particle of the Stone from the Tomb of Christ that ended up in Paris: Ἴδε ὁ τόπος ὅπου ἔθηκαν αὐτόν; Le trésor de la Sainte-Chapelle, no. 20; Byzance. L'art byzantin dans les collections publiques françaises. Paris 1992, no. 248.

⁶⁴ See, for instance, a paten in the Treasury of St. Mark's whose inscription reads Λάβετε φάγετε τοῦτο μ[οῦ] ἐστὶ τὸ σ[ῶμα] (Il tesoro di San Marco, no. 67; GUILLOU, loc. cit., no. 68), or the inscriptions added to chalices in the same collection, for instance Πίετε ἐξ αὐτοῦ πάντες ἡ τοῦτο ἐστὶ τὸ αἷμά μου (Il tesoro di San Marco, no. 46; GUILLOU, loc. cit. 68; cf. ibidem, nos. 64, 66, 69, 70, 73).

⁶⁵ Il tesoro di San Marco, no. 172; GUILLOU, loc. cit., no. 78.

⁶⁶ In Giovanni Tiepolo's treatise composed in 1617, it is clearly the *pyxis* of the Holy Blood, no longer the flask, that is identified with the reliquary that survived the "ordeal of fire" of 1230; see G. TIEPOLO [THIEPOLO], Trattato delle santissime reliquie ultimamente ritrovate nel Santuario della Chiesa di San Marco. Venice 1617, esp. 36–39.

the Renaissance *staurotheke* in 1517. In the inventory of 1507 it is listed as an “Agnus Dei d’oro”.⁶⁷ It is, however, far from clear what was kept inside. Nothing, in fact, contradicts a medieval, perhaps Byzantine origin of the golden receptacle (without the epigram on its reverse).⁶⁸ But what exactly does this small reliquary contain? Does it house part of the “main” relic identified as the miraculous Blood, or is the container entirely empty? This question is also of crucial importance in relationship to the miraculous Cross relic. Is it logical to suppose that the relic described in the early documents as having the shape of a cross and being adorned with “little ornament”⁶⁹ was ever actually included in the Renaissance *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria*? After all that has been said, it is difficult to identify this reliquary cross with any item of this *staurotheke*. Consequently it must again be asked: was this Renaissance artefact manufactured as a genuine reliquary, or rather should it be seen as a “memorial” honouring the “ordeal of fire” of the year 1230? If one takes the Latin inscription at face value, it seems even more likely that the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* was intended and designed as a “monimentum” and *not* as a reliquary. Nothing in the wording suggests that the original relics associated with the venerable event were actually stored in the unusual artefact of 1517.

Strangely, in spite of its size, material value and supposed significance, the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* is usually not mentioned in the inventories drawn up in the decades following its execution, between 1524 and 1606.⁷⁰ An exception is the inventory of 1580 that mentions the *Cross of Constantine* (*i. e.* the Great) which, found intact after the Treasury fire, was enclosed in a silver reliquary, according to the inscription on its back (“Similmente la Croce di Costantino sopradetto fu presservata nell’istesso fuoco, et dopo trovata fu fatto l’adornamento d’Argento sicome adietro di quella appar scritto”).⁷¹ Interestingly, the Renaissance *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* which, in 1580, was only a few decades old, is considered in this inventory a *medieval Venetian* product. Given the claim of the treasure’s practically complete destruction by the fire in the Venetian sources, this assumption is even rather logical. Even though the *staurotheke* itself is only briefly mentioned, the inventory of 1580 clearly proves that its content – or rather the great cross in the middle – was considered a relic, and an especially important one in addition.⁷² This notion is likewise evident exactly a century after the *staurotheke*’s manufacture: in 1617, the *Primicerio* and later patriarch of Venice Giovanni Tiepolo composed a treatise dedicated to the most venerable relics of St. Mark’s, especially to the Holy Blood.⁷³ In this text he describes the cross of the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* (*i. e.* the great one in the middle) as one of the “best-known relics” of St. Mark’s.⁷⁴ In the same year Andrea Suriano, secretary of the Treasury, in his own treatise on the relics in St. Mark’s briefly refers to the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* when dealing with the Holy Blood container on its top: “... nominandosi anche un bossolletto d’oro, che ultimamente si è pur avvertito, esser collocato fra due cristalli nella sommità

⁶⁷ GALLO, loc. cit. 101, 289 and 317; TIEPOLO, Trattato 38 and 40; A. SURIANO, Breve descrizione del sacro thesoro delle reliquie ritrovate nel Santuario della Chiesa Ducale di San Marco, & honorate con solenne processione à 28. di Maggio nel 1617. Venice 1617, 9; POLACCO, loc. cit. 316–317. On the term *Agnus Dei* referring to reliquaries see BRAUN, loc. cit. 73–74, esp. 74.

⁶⁸ Il tesoro di San Marco 191 and 192–193 (Byzantium, 11th cent.).

⁶⁹ Cf. notes 9 and 10. Ranieri Zen, in his letter of 1265 likewise described the piece as cross-shaped and added the information that it was decorated “with little ornament” (“Crucem Sanctissimam de Ligno Domini cum paruo ornamento”; Andreae Danduli Chronica [ed. PASTORELLO] 394, 16).

⁷⁰ The piece is not listed among the 58 precious items recorded as inventory of the sacristy on 23 July, 1524; see GALLO, loc. cit. 290–293. It is especially remarkable that the artefact does not appear in the great inventory of St. Mark’s and the *Procuratia* listing 138 objects and drawn up over several weeks in late 1571 (ibidem 290–301). However, neither of these two inventories records the most prominent relics of the Church, especially those of Constantinopolitan provenance that survived the alleged fire of 1230. For editions of the inventories drawn up between 1524 and 1606 see ibidem 290–309.

⁷¹ Ibidem 303.

⁷² Interestingly, the document of 1580 makes no mention of the two smaller crosses displayed in the Renaissance artefact which, as I have argued above, are difficult to explain on the basis of the documents related to the alleged Treasury miracle of 1230.

⁷³ TIEPOLO, Trattato. Tiepolo became Patriarch in 1619. On Tiepolo and his writings see esp. O. LOGAN, The Venetian upper clergy in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. A study in religious culture. Salzburg 1995, II 332–374.

⁷⁴ “Trovasi nelle più conosciute reliquie di essa Chiesa in un gran quadro di finissimo argento dorato fatto con molto lavoro & maestria gran pezzo della vera Croce di Cristo, che illesa uscì dall’incendio ...”; TIEPOLO, loc. cit. 37, followed by a lengthy discussion of the piece; ibidem 37–39.

del quadro della santissima Croce, che si mostra il giovedì santo”.⁷⁵ The wording – “che ultimamente si è pur avvertito” – seems to suggest that the Renaissance *staurotheke* was an object with which even the officials of St. Mark’s were rather unfamiliar and that it was, most likely, locked away somewhere when not in use. Regarding the question of display however, the treatise does convey the important notice that the *staurotheke* was regularly exhibited for veneration on Maundy Thursday. This information is confirmed by a document of 1634, titled “Catastico delle Reliquie esistenti in Venezia e Dogato”.⁷⁶ The sources clearly demonstrate that, whatever was enclosed inside the Renaissance *staurotheke* in 1517, its contents were, at least a few decades later, regarded as relics and venerated accordingly by the faithful. Interestingly, in the description of the lavish procession and public display of St. Mark’s relics on 28 May 1617 composed soon after the occasion by the master of ceremonies, Giulio Cesare Vergaro, the *staurotheke* is mentioned only in passing. Apparently the author does not quite know what to make of the contents of the two smaller cross-shaped compartments when he describes the artefact as “Un reliquiario d’oro, che nel mezo havea un gran pezo del legno della santissima Croce, & nelli anguli diverse reliquie, cioè”.⁷⁷

The sources seem to indicate that the significance assigned to the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* in the centuries following its production largely depended on personal opinion and interest. By no means did the *staurotheke* hold an undisputed place among the most prominent relics of St. Mark’s, those that were of Constantinopolitan origin and associated with the alleged Treasury miracle of 1230. The questions concerning the artefact’s exact contents that impose themselves from today’s perspective were, as Vergaro’s note implies, already apparent a century after its creation.

Regarding the reliquary’s contents there are several possible explanations: the *staurotheke* accommodates “substitute” relics of the True Cross and Holy Blood of different origins, but nonetheless regarded as authentic, or, alternatively it preserved “secondary” relics (*brandea*) sanctified by having been brought into physical contact with the original ones. A third possibility that also needs to be considered is that originally, in 1517, “fake” relics were displayed in the “monument”. If this were the case, it was not necessarily done out of a desire to deliberately deceive; the Latin inscription, after all, does not suggest this. Even if the artefact had been initially created not as a reliquary but rather as a memorial (“monimentum”) to commemorate and honor a miraculous event in Venice’s past, it would not be surprising that, after a few decades had passed, one was no longer aware of this and, consequently, did not question that the container enshrined genuine relics.

What seems especially noteworthy about the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* is the fact that the artist who engraved the letters of the Greek epigram onto the new artefact did this with much fidelity towards the original inscription’s palaeographic features. This precision is even more remarkable in comparison with the apparent liberality guiding the rendering of the original reliquary’s iconography, especially regarding the dress and postures of the imperial couple. The priority assigned to the close imitation of the original inscription is likewise evident in the small container of the Holy Blood. Here, too, the engraver took care to imitate as closely as possible the shape of his model’s letters, in this case the epigram adorning the still existing Byzantine crystal *pyxis* with the Holy Blood. The special attention paid to the Greek inscriptions evident in the replica of 1517 demonstrates clearly that contemporaries understood these as “hallmarks” for the age and provenance of the relics involved.

The *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* was not the only artefact created as a replica of a Byzantine work in Early Modern Venice. Another *staurotheke*, associated by its Greek epigram with a commander of the fleet named Constantine *patrikios*, was apparently also manufactured in imitation of a Byzantine original. In 1617 Giovanni Tiepolo included a detailed description of the reliquary in his aforementioned treatise.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ SURIANO, Breve descrizione 9.

⁷⁶ “... quadro della Santissima Croce che si mostra il giovedì Santo”; GALLO, loc. cit. 317; the entry is chiefly concerned with the Holy Blood placed on top of the *staurotheke*; ibidem 317–318.

⁷⁷ G.G. VERGARO, Racconto dell’apparato et solennità fatta nella ducal chiesa de San Marco di Venetia. Venice 1617, 5.

⁷⁸ TIEPOLO, loc. cit. 48 and 49–52.

Tiepolo was also the first to publish the artefact's Greek epigram consisting of four dodecasyllabic verses that read thus:⁷⁹

Ὡς οἶα ποιεῖ πίστις ἡ Κωνσταντίνου
 Τοῦ πατρικίου καὶ τριηράρχου ξένα·
 Χρυσάργυρον γὰρ τὸν Γολγωθᾶ δεικνύει,
 Γολγωθᾶ τοῦτον, καὶ γὰρ ὁ σταυροῦ τόπος.⁸⁰

The exact identification of the donor, the patrician Constantine *trierarch*, is problematic. He has been identified by most modern authors with the court official and admiral (*droungarios*) Constantine Lips, which would place the original *staurotheke*'s production before Constantine's death in 917, a date that, however, appears to be too early on the grounds of iconography.⁸¹ More likely, the donor should be identified with the patrician Constantine Dalassenos, who was *droungarios* of the fleet directed against Tzachas during the reign of Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118).⁸²

The *staurotheke*, along with the *Reliquary of the Holy Nail* mentioned above and other relics, was allegedly rediscovered on August 24, 1468 in the *Santuario* of the Treasury. This is first reported by Marin Sanudo the younger (1466–1536) who also recorded that on September 14 of the same year a solemn procession was organized in honor of these relics.⁸³ Given the fact that Sanudo was a small child at the supposed time of the reliquaries' rediscovery, his report is clearly not a first-hand account. The historian specified that two papal lead bulls, of Gregory IX (1227–41) and Gregory X (1271–76), were discovered along with the relics.⁸⁴ These bulls, however, can no longer be traced.⁸⁵ If the information can be relied upon at all it would show that the original *staurotheke* was in St. Mark's already in the thirteenth century and that it would have been hidden in the *Santuario* some time after 1276.

Like the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* the *staurotheke* associated with Constantine the patrician and *trierarch* has been dealt with only in passing and its Byzantine origin has hitherto never been questioned. Unfortunately, the piece, or rather its replica, was lost some time between 1825 and 1845.⁸⁶ Its appearance was documented, however, in two reproductions of the mid-eighteenth century. The first is an etching published in 1749 by Flaminio Corner (Fig. 9).⁸⁷ The other is a watercolor executed in 1755 by Jan Grevembroch and included in the first volume of his collection titled "Varie venete curiosità sacre e profane" (Fig. 10).⁸⁸ Grevembroch's design is very close to the etching included in Corner's earlier publication so that we have to consider the possibility that the former merely added colors and shades to a drawing copied directly from Corner's book.

⁷⁹ Ibidem, loc. cit. 50.

⁸⁰ Here quoted with minor changes after GUILLOU, loc. cit., no. 77, with French translation. TIEPOLO (loc. cit. 50) transcribed the last word as τόπος, which makes more sense than GUILLOU's version that is based on the editions of previous authors.

⁸¹ FROLOW, Notes 205–206; GUILLOU, loc. cit., no. 77, esp. page 81; LAUXTERMANN, Byzantine Poetry 345, no. 64. On extant reliquaries, the figures of Constantine and Helena are not encountered before the second half of the 10th century and, as figures flanking the relic compartment, they become standard iconography only in the 11th and 12th centuries (KLEIN, loc. cit. 127 and 129). It is therefore unlikely that Constantine Lips was the patron of the original *staurotheke*.

⁸² Anna Komnene, Alexias. Übersetzt, eingeleitet und mit Anmerkungen versehen von Diether Roderich REINSCH. Berlin/New York 2001, index, 587; see also the text edition Annae Comnenae Alexias (ed. D.R. REINSCH – A. KAMBYLIS). Berlin/New York 2001, 188,35; 223,94 etc.

⁸³ Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Mss. It., Cl. VII, no. 125, colloc. 7460, c. 328r [88r] and 328v [88v]; TIEPOLO, loc. cit. 51–52, esp. 51; GALLO, loc. cit. 36–37 and note 4 on page 36; FROLOW, La relique, no. 528.

⁸⁴ Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Mss. It., Cl. VII, no. 125, colloc. 7460, c. 328r [88r] and 328v [88v]; TIEPOLO, loc. cit. 51 and 52.

⁸⁵ GALLO, loc. cit. 37.

⁸⁶ GALLO, loc. cit. 39; PASINI, loc. cit. 12.

⁸⁷ CORNER, Ecclesiae (Decadis Decimae Tertiae Pars Prior) 154–158, Pl. opposite page 155. The etching was also included in Corner's later publication Notizie (1758) Pl. III

⁸⁸ This compilation, comprising three volumes created between 1755 and 1764, was commissioned by the Venetian Senator Pietro Gradenigo (1695–1776). It is today housed in the library of the Museo Civico Correr (*Varie venete curiosità sacre e profane*, Ms. Gradenigo Dolfin 219 I–III / Collocamento 65), Pl. I, 4. On the same plate there is a watercolor depicting the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* (Pl. I, 2). I wish to thank Dr Barbara Vanin for her generous permission to consult the original manuscripts.

The reliquary measured about 46 centimeters⁸⁹ in height, and with regard to its alleged Byzantine origin it presents many unusual features. What is depicted in the two eighteenth-century images is reminiscent of the interior of a rectangular Cross reliquary from Byzantium. This is framed on its left and right by an ornamental border, consisting of interlacing and a floral pattern, while, curiously, the upper and lower edge lack decoration. The center contains a huge patriarchal cross that, though it was apparently made to resemble a Byzantine reliquary cross, presents several characteristics which exclude an origin in the Greek East. The most atypical trait, evident in both images, is that the wooden bars of which the cross is composed are rounded instead of square. The cross's two transversal bars and the top of the vertical bar are decorated with rounded caps, each of which is embellished with a pearl on its peak. This type of decoration finds no parallels in medieval Byzantine reliquary crosses. Pearls were also applied onto the ten gilded rings that surround the wooden bars and thus onto the rectangular "frame" that curiously singles out the upper cross section.⁹⁰ Both cross sections were adorned by diagonal crosses, in an obvious attempt to imitate a typical feature of original Byzantine reliquary crosses mentioned above. The lower end of the cross's vertical bar is likewise encased in metal and pointed so that the cross might be displayed or carried on a staff. Again, as in the case of the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria*, it must be asked whether this cross was in early modern Venice considered a true reliquary cross, and if so, where its wood might have come from. The colouring of Grevembroch's watercolor – if the painter actually saw the reliquary himself is somewhat dubious – suggests that the container's surface was covered with partly gilded silver. At least the silver plate conforms to Tiepolo's description of the reliquary being a "theca foderata d'argento".⁹¹ Accordingly, the inventory of 1634 describes the reliquary as "un quadro d'argento".⁹² Thin sheets of silver were applied to the surface of the four compartments flanking the reliquary cross depicting figures, which is in keeping with the same inventory mentioning "figure in lame d'argento".⁹³ The two applications in the upper half are roundels with the busts of the archangels Michael and Gabriel, the two below are of rectangular shape and depict the frontally standing figures of Constantine and Helena gesturing towards the Cross in adoration. The shading in the watercolor suggests that all figures seem to have been executed in silver *repoussé*. Grevembroch's rendering is, however, probably misleading: in the inventory of the Treasury drawn up in 1820, a detailed entry regarding the reliquary explicitly describes the figures as being executed in "lavoro di niello" and Sanudo, too, referred to "figure di santi lavorate ad nielo".⁹⁴ This technique is also suggested by the rendering of the figures in the etching published in 1749 (Fig. 9). Given the reliquary's alleged middle Byzantine date of origin, figures in niello would be a rather uncommon feature while the *repoussé* technique is characteristic of many Byzantine *staurothekai*.

There is, in both images, a misspelling in Constantine's epithet *hagios* as "ATIOC". This type of orthographical error is unlikely to have occurred were the artist a Greek, but it is impossible to know if it had been present in the *staurotheke* itself or if it occurred during the preparation of the etching.⁹⁵ What especially betrays the *Staurotheke of Constantine Patrikios* as a piece of post-medieval western, most likely Venetian, origin is the fact that Helena is depicted in the same type of male imperial costume as her son. A mistake of this kind would be highly atypical for a Byzantine artist employed by the court. Likewise remarkable is the crown that Helena is wearing, because this feature marks another misunderstanding of her typical attire. The crown that is depicted in both images is reminiscent, not of the *stemmata* worn by Byzantine empresses, but rather of the crowns typical for town personifications in various medieval depictions.

Given the two pictorial renderings of Constantine's *staurotheke* it is entirely questionable where the Greek epigram referring to the patron might have been located. As discussed above, inscriptions framing a

⁸⁹ GALLO, loc. cit. 38 and 39.

⁹⁰ Possibly this frame indicates the place where a particle of the True Cross was integrated into the ensemble.

⁹¹ TIEPOLO, loc. cit. 50.

⁹² GALLO, loc. cit. 316, no. VIII, 25.

⁹³ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem* 385, no. 21; Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Mss. It., Cl. VII, no. 125, colloc. 7460, c. 328v [88v] (TIEPOLO, loc. cit. 52 wrongly transcribed "ad nidò").

⁹⁵ In addition Grevembroch, being clearly unfamiliar with the Greek language, rendered Gabriel's name as ΓΑΒΡΗΗΛ (Fig. 10).

rectangle on all four or, less frequently, on three sides are a common feature of many Byzantine artefacts. In the surviving *thekai* the framing inscription is normally also visible, at least in part, when the reliquary is presented without its lid. The fact that the Greek epigram was not included in the etching (nor in Grevembroch's watercolor) seems to indicate that it was located somewhere else on the container. The only explicit reference to the position of the inscription is found in Tiepolo's treatise: "... una theca foderata d'argento sotto la quale si leggono nel Greco queste parole (...)." ⁹⁶ This seems to indicate that the epigram was either – like the Latin inscription of the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* – written onto the reverse or, were the reliquary seen standing upright, on the lower narrow side.

As I have pointed out, much in the former reliquary's appearance contradicts an origin in the Greek East, and nothing even suggests a medieval date of execution. On the contrary, the many unusual features present in the two depictions seem to point to a post-medieval creation some time before the mid-eighteenth century, and most likely before Tiepolo published his description in 1617. Therefore, the *staurotheke* depicted in the two images can not be identical to the Byzantine *staurotheke* which was claimed to have been rediscovered in 1468.

The first inventory, among whose entries the *staurotheke* of the patrician Constantine can be identified beyond doubt, is that of 1634 which also includes a reference to the Greek epigram. ⁹⁷ The reliquary is *perhaps* already listed in the inventory of 1507 which describes "Uno quadroto cum certe lame d'arzeno cum figure del q. Re Constantino et Helena cum un croxe dentro, in la qual è del legno de la croxe de ms. Jesu Xpo". ⁹⁸ In any case, given the brevity of such entries, it is impossible to determine if the supposed original container is described or rather its modern replica.

What does shed some light on the question of the date of origin, however, is the aforementioned *Reliquary of the Holy Nail* (Fig. 6a–b), said to have been discovered along with Constantine the patrician's *staurotheke* in 1468. The nail is today preserved in a Renaissance ostensory dated to the sixteenth century by Hahnloser who studied the original work of art. ⁹⁹ Interestingly, *repoussé* fragments of medieval origin were reused on the frame of the artefact. ¹⁰⁰ This was most likely done to stress the age of the relic contained therein. If these pieces stem from the original Nail reliquary, which is likely, their re-use is an important document of the esteem in early modern Venice for the relic's supposed Byzantine origin. What seems possible is that both the *Reliquary of the Holy Nail* and the *Staurotheke of Constantine Patrikios* were in poor condition when found in 1468 and that it was decided to create new and presentable reliquaries. Given the fact that both the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* and the *Reliquary of the Holy Nail* were commissioned in the Late Renaissance, it appears not unlikely that the *Staurotheke of Constantine Patrikios*, as documented in the two images, originated from roughly the same time.

In general terms the artefact is evocative of *staurothekai* typical for the middle Byzantine era, for instance the Byzantine *staurotheke* which was preserved until the early nineteenth century at the Camaldulensian monastery on the island of San Michele in the Venetian lagoon (Fig. 11 and 12). ¹⁰¹ The piece, which has suffered much from restorations, is today preserved in the monastery of Santa Croce at Fonte Avellana. As with the Venetian *Staurotheke of Constantine Patrikios* it is decorated with the figures of Constantine and Helena who are shown flanking the relic compartment. In the upper part are similarly bust images of two angels, four of which also adorned the aforementioned great *staurotheke* that ended up in Paris (Fig. 2). The way Constantine and Helena on the *Staurotheke of Constantine Patrikios* hold up their hands towards the

⁹⁶ TIEPOLO, loc. cit. 50.

⁹⁷ GALLO, loc. cit. 316, no. VIII, 25.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem* 289, no. 15. As stated above (note 54) the entry may as well refer to the original *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria*.

⁹⁹ It should be noted that the pedestal of the *Reliquary of the Holy Nail* is identical in material, size and shape to that added in the early 16th century to the Byzantine *Reliquary Cross of the Empress Irene Dukaina* (Il tesoro di S. Marco, no. 25; PASINI, loc. cit., 28, Pl. XXV and XXVI). It can, therefore, safely be assumed that the new *Reliquary of the Holy Nail* was made at the same time.

¹⁰⁰ Il tesoro di San Marco, no. 143.

¹⁰¹ The most recent studies dealing with the piece are: M.S. BELTRAME, La stauroteca bizantina del venerando eremo di Fonte Avellana. *Patavium* 15 (2000) 81–109; KLEIN, loc. cit. 131–133. While the *staurotheke* was still in S. Michele, Grevembroch depicted it in one of his watercolors (Pl. II, 5; see above, note 88, and Fig. 12).

cross in adoration is identical to that often displayed in Byzantine depictions of the couple.¹⁰² This detail as well as the general layout and iconography of the replica make it likely that the artist who manufactured it did indeed rely on a middle Byzantine original.

There is no way of knowing, however, to what extent the artist who created the Cross reliquary first depicted in Corner's publication respected the features of the original. Nor do we know if, as in the case of the *Reliquary of the Holy Nail*, parts of the decoration of the ancient container were integrated into the new design. Marin Sanudo who – possibly – referred to the original *staurotheke*, apart from mentioning “figures and saints rendered in niello”¹⁰³, does not offer any clues regarding its iconography and it is doubtful if he actually saw the reliquary himself. While he obviously cares little about the figural decoration, Sanudo does repeatedly refer to the Greek inscriptions present on the recently discovered receptacles. In his report he also includes the first translation, into Latin, of the *staurotheke*'s epigram.¹⁰⁴ For him, as later on for Giovanni Tiepolo, the Greek inscriptions clearly function as indisputable proofs that the relics along with their containers were “*antiquitus ... condotte da Constantinopoli*”.¹⁰⁵

Given the frequent confusion of relics and their reliquaries in Venice one should take into account the possibility that, perhaps, it was not the original *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* but that of Constantine, the Byzantine patrician and admiral, that was, in medieval Venice, believed to contain the reliquary cross associated with the miraculous “ordeal of fire” first recorded by the Doge Ranieri Zen. After all, the design of Constantine's *staurotheke* is also in keeping with the two earliest inventories that mention the images of Constantine and Helena. It must be said, however, that nothing in the two reproductions made of the *Staurotheke of Constantine Patrikios* in the mid-eighteenth century compels the supposition that the original reliquary possessed a lid. This is explicitly referred to in the inventory of 1283¹⁰⁶ and, as I have argued above, left its trace in the design of the early modern replica of the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria*. Furthermore, the modern descriptions of the *staurotheke* donated by Constantine, suggest that it was made of silver, rather than *gilded* silver. In contrast, the Renaissance copy of the *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* was completely covered with gilded silver, perfectly in keeping with the inventories which specify that the original reliquary was “*co(ho)perta argento deaurato*”.¹⁰⁷ In all likelihood, therefore, it was indeed the Byzantine *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria*, and not the one donated by Constantine, the patrician and admiral, which the Venetians already in the thirteenth century believed to contain the miraculous reliquary cross claimed to have survived the devastating Treasury fire in 1230.¹⁰⁸

What can be established on the basis of the arguments put forward in this article is that the so-called *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* designed in early sixteenth-century Venice is a replica of a now lost and particularly lavish Byzantine Cross reliquary that had been created on an imperial commission either in the late eleventh or in the twelfth century. The reliquary's original cover – almost certainly a sliding lid – documented in the earliest inventory of the Treasury can no longer be traced. It was possibly already lost by

¹⁰² For instance the *Esztergom Staurotheke*; Byzanz, die Macht der Bilder (ed. M. BRANDT – A. EFFENBERGER). Hildesheim 1998, Fig. 66.

¹⁰³ Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Mss. It., Cl. VII, no. 125, colloc. 7460, c. 328v [88v]; TIEPOLO, loc. cit. 52.

¹⁰⁴ Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Mss. It., Cl. VII, no. 125, colloc. 7460, c. 328v [88v]; TIEPOLO, loc. cit. 52.

¹⁰⁵ TIEPOLO, loc. cit. 52 (“*antiquamente furno condote da Costantinopoli*”; Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Mss. It., Cl. VII, no. 125, colloc. 7460, c. 328v [88v]).

¹⁰⁶ See above, note 10.

¹⁰⁷ See the quotations above, notes 9 and 10.

¹⁰⁸ The reliquary cross held to be miraculous was certainly *not* the *Cross of Henry of Flanders* preserved in the Treasury of St. Mark's (see the references above in note 24). The wrong identification is already apparent in the early modern sources (e.g. VERGARO, *Racconto* 4) and still current in modern scholarship (esp. PINCUS, loc. cit. 40 and 42–44). In the second Treasury inventory, of 1325, Henry's cross is, however, listed as an item *separate* from the cross “that was in the fire” (cf. the quotations above in notes 9 and 10); see GALLO, loc. cit. 23 and 276, item no. 3. It is highly probable that the reliquary cross claimed to have survived the fire of 1230 is identical with the one donated between 1118 and 1123 by the Empress Irene Doukaina that ended up in the Treasury of St. Mark's (*Santuario* 75; *Il tesoro di S. Marco*, no. 25; *ODB* 2, 1009). I will discuss this question within the broader context of the veneration of St. Mark's Constantinopolitan relics in the Middle Ages in an article due to appear in the proceedings of a conference held at the University of Erlangen in November 2006 (“*Aspekte interkulturellen Zusammenlebens im Mittelmeerraum des Spätmittelalters*”).

1517, when the new *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* was made, and possibly already by 1325 as it is no longer mentioned in the second Treasury inventory.¹⁰⁹

There is good reason to consider the possibility that the Renaissance *staurotheke* was originally not designed as a reliquary but intended primarily as a memorial of the famous miracle of the “ordeal of fire” said to have taken place in 1230 and simultaneously to honor the relics that were involved. At the same time it “commemorates” a now lost imperial Byzantine *staurotheke*, which, because of the three reliquary crosses contained therein, must have been extraordinarily important in Constantinople. The Byzantine *Staurotheke of the Empress Maria* would probably not have left a trace, had it not contained a relic held by the Venetians to be especially prestigious and miraculous.

The reliquary’s original Greek epigram was considered significant enough that not only its wording but also its palaeographic characteristics were copied onto the new artefact. The same procedure, as we have seen, is also evident in the case of the Holy Blood reliquary placed on top of the Renaissance *staurotheke*. Likewise, the Greek epigram that adorned the original *Staurotheke of Constantine Patrikios* was quoted on this reliquary’s early modern replica, though it is impossible to tell if here, too, the copy preserved the palaeographic traits of the original inscription. In any case, these faithfully quoted Greek epigrams quite obviously were regarded as “hallmarks”, *Made in Byzantium*, unequivocally signalling to the beholder the venerable provenance of some of St. Mark’s most prominent relics.

¹⁰⁹ See above, note 9.

