

Jürgen Bay

## Why a relief of a man with a turban in S.Michele in Isola, Venice?

(See the photographs on the next page)

After having entered the main portal and when passing through the middle arcade of the barco one sees a relief of a head over each of the pillars on both sides. On the right there is a relief of a man with a mitre, most probably showing the abbot Pietro Doná who initiated the construction of the church and in fact was entitled to wear a mitre. Over the left pillar there is a relief of a man with a turban, a mustache and a beard, evidently showing someone living in the Ottoman empire. In reliefs of about the same time showing S.Marco healing the shoemaker Anianus the latter wears a turban because the miracle took place in Alexandria. (The reliefs are over the portal of the Scuola di Calegheri dated 1479 and on the facade of the Scuola Grande di S.Marco of about 1490.)

Vittorino Meneghin, a monk in the convent of S.Michele, identified the relief of the man with the turban as a „ritratto (idealizzato) dell'architetto Mauro Codussi“ (1). This I find highly implausible. Why should Codussi, born near Bergamo, have been „idealized“ as a muslim? Furthermore, it was quite impossible for an architect to be portrayed opposite his patron, even more so the patron being an abbot. The relief of a man wearing a cap which is over the last pillar against the left wall might be a portrait of Codussi because of all the ten heads over the pillars it is the only one looking into the church.

Vittorio Polli thought the man with the turban to be a „mecenate“, but did not mention who this person was (2). Anyway, it is hardly imaginable that a muslim gave money for building a christian church. Or should a christian sponsor have looked like a muslim or been portrayed like one? One could think of Giovanni Dario whose palazzo on the Canal Grande is famous for its incrustation. In April 1479, some months prior to the consecration of S.Michele, Giovanni Dario, who had been born in Crete and was familiar with the Ottoman world, returned from Istanbul after having negotiated on behalf of the Serenissima a peace treaty with Sultan Mehmed II (3). However, that the man with the turban might be Giovanni Dario is not only far-fetched but also improbable because he was buried in the (no longer existing) church of S.Maria delle Grazie on the isle of La Grazia (4). If he would have given such a huge amount of money for the construction of S.Michele to justify being portrayed opposite the abbot in a way that he could be identified as the man who had negotiated for Venice a vitally important peace treaty with the mighty and belligerent Sultan, then, one would assume, he would have been buried in the church he had sponsored and not elsewhere.

In the Cappella Badoer-Giustinian in S.Francesco della Vigna there is a relief of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century showing the prophet Micah who wears a turban and has a mustache and a beard. Could the man with the turban in S.Michele also be a prophet? I do not think so as he seems to look rather down-to-earth and does not have the long curls of hair falling down on both sides of the face as Micah has.

Therefore the question remains: Why is there a relief of a man with a turban in a church of a christian convent just opposite the portrait of its abbot?

(1) S.Michele in Isola S.Michele di Venezia, 1962, ill.43

(2) Mauro Codussi, 1993, p.9

(3) Franz Babinger, Johannes Darius (1414-1494), Sachwalter Venedigs im Morgenland,

Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, München 1991, pp. 84/85

(4) Babinger, p.103

