



A Double Anniversary: Venice (421) and the Scuola Dalmata (1451)

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THE SCUOLA DALMATA DEI SANTI GIORGIO E TRIFONE IN VENICE

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A Double Anniversary: Venice (421) and the Scuola Dalmata (1451)

In 2021, the city of Venice celebrates the 1600th anniversary of its legendary founding. Tradition has it that at noon on 25 March 421 three consuls from the Roman city of Patavium (Padua), who had fled from barbarian tribes raiding the mainland, founded a new settlement on a mudflat in the middle of the marshes of the Venetian lagoon.¹ That mudflat would eventually be known as the Rialto (that is, the “high shore/bank”) and would welcome many more refugees from towns and villages in the Veneto region—not only from Padua, but also Treviso, Aquileia, Altino, Concordia (today, Portogruaro), and more. Soon the refugees built a church (San Giacomo) on the Rialto and started to connect their original island to other mudflats in the lagoon, shoring up what was already there or creating new mudflats on which to erect their dwellings. The settlement’s demographic and physical expansion eventually led to the city we know today, with its network of over 100 islands joined by over 400 bridges, with about 200 churches, and innumerable palazzi. Throughout the early modern period, Venice had a population of more than 100,000; it reached its demographic peak in 1951 when it was home to 174,808 residents, but for a variety of reasons this peak was soon followed by a very rapid decline.² Today the city is home to about 55,000 permanent residents and is a “must see” for over 50,000 tourists every day.³

This year is also special for the Scuola Dalmata dei Santi Giorgio e Trifone, which celebrates the 570th anniversary of its official recognition, on 24 March 1451, by the Council of Ten, the select body that had jurisdiction over all state matters in Venice and its dominions.⁴ The Scuola takes its name from the lands that were the original home of its members (Dalmatia) and two saints who were venerated there. While the cities on the coast of the eastern Adriatic had, on the whole, a majority Latin/Italian

¹ This foundation myth is not the only one, but it is the most recognized one and the one the city itself celebrates. For discussions of the foundation myths of Venice, see, among others: Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 65–74; Crouzet-Pavan, *Venice Triumphant*, 158–159; Das, “The Disappearance.”

² For a discussion of this demographic collapse, its causes, and its consequences, see Settis, *If Venice Dies*; for the declining population statistics cited above, see p. 8.

³ For a discussion and charts of population and visitor statistics, see *OECD Studies in Tourism: Italy*, esp. p. 31.

⁴ For a recent brief history and description of the Scuola Dalmata, see Romanelli, *The Scuola Dalmata* (reviewed in this issue). See also, Vallery, *La Scuola Dalmata*; Perocco, *Guide*.

population, the hinterland was inhabited by a majority Slavic population, hence the Scuola's unofficial name, San Giorgio degli Schiavoni (from the Venetian word for Slav, *Schiavone*). At the Scuola, the *Dalmati* and *Schiavoni* pray, carry out their traditional devotions, maintain their culture and language, and provide assistance to each other as needed.

Like the Rialto, which in the fifth and sixth centuries provided a safe place for the Venetian mainlanders fleeing from advancing barbarian tribes, in the fifteenth and subsequent centuries the Scuola Dalmata provided a safe place for a displaced population of Dalmatians and Schiavoni who had left their homes, some for reasons of trade and commerce and some because they had fled from the Ottoman Empire advancing along the Balkans. At the Scuola, diasporic people from the eastern Adriatic were thus able to come together as a 'national' group and be part of a community that made them feel at home and, when necessary, could also assist them. Their contributions to the *Serenissima* were both varied and valuable, be they economic, military, artistic, or cultural. The importance of their presence (and business) in Venice was such that the city's main waterfront, running eastward from the Doge's palace, is called the Riva degli Schiavoni, the shore (*riva*) of the Slavs. To this day, ships from Istria and Dalmatia still dock here to unload their goods (which, *mutando mutandis*, now consist mostly of tourists).

It seemed fitting, therefore, to celebrate the two anniversaries with a special issue of *Confraternitas*. We do so by bringing together the Scuola Dalmata and one of the most important Venetian artists of the Renaissance, Vittore Carpaccio (ca. 1465–1525/26), whose works adorn the Scuola and draw thousands of tourists to it every year. The three contributions in this issue discuss the restoration program for the St George cycle of paintings currently underway at the Scuola under the sponsorship of Save Venice Inc., the significance of St George as a patron saint of the confraternity, and a new interpretation of the *St Matthew* painting that, in a way, brings us back to the Rialto.

While this special issue is art-historically focused, as much of the scholarship on the Scuola Dalmata has so far been, it does also point to other important aspects of the Scuola that merit further attention from scholars, be that the diasporic nature of its members, or the charitable work they carried out, or the social and cultural contributions expatriate Istrians, Dalmatians, and Slavs made, and are still making today in Venice.

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