

THE CHURCH OF SAN FANTIN IN VENICE: DIGITAL MODELING, ARCHIVAL RESEARCH, AND THE REUSE OF ANCIENT MARBLES

1. INTRODUCTION

The church of San Fantin in Venice stands as a testament to the city's rich architectural and historical evolution. While its origins in the High Middle Ages remain uncertain, the current structure reflects its Renaissance transformation, shaped by successive phases of construction and renovation. Despite the lack of definitive evidence regarding its earliest form, a multidisciplinary approach combining digital modeling, material analysis, and archival research has provided new insights into its development.

This article is structured into three sections, each offering a distinct perspective on the church's architectural history. The first section, by Carlotta Zaramella, presents a reconstruction of San Fantin's architectural phases through digital modeling and the creation of a Building Information Modeling (BIM) model, enabling a clearer understanding of its structural transformations over time. The project has been led at the University of Padua under the supervision of prof. Gianmario Guidarelli as part of a broader initiative funded by the European Social Fund (FSE), focused on the historical, urban, and architectural reconstruction of the San Fantin *insula* and its digital representation. The second section, by Myriam Pilutti Namer, examines the reuse of materials in Venetian architecture, with particular attention to the types of marble incorporated into the church's fabric. The third section, by Giulia A.B. Bordi, investigates medieval material evidence and archival sources related to two water basins, shedding light on their functional and historical significance.

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2. DIGITAL MODELING OF THE CHURCH OF SAN FANTIN: OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The study we present aims to explore the historical and architectural evolution of the church of San Fantin by developing a descriptive digital model. This research adopts an innovative approach that integrates traditional historical investigation with modern digital modeling technologies. The digital reconstruction seeks to make historical changes and developments more comprehensible through a scientific methodology, transposing historical views and cartographic sources into a digital system. This approach facilitates the analysis of urban transformations in relation to chronological progression.

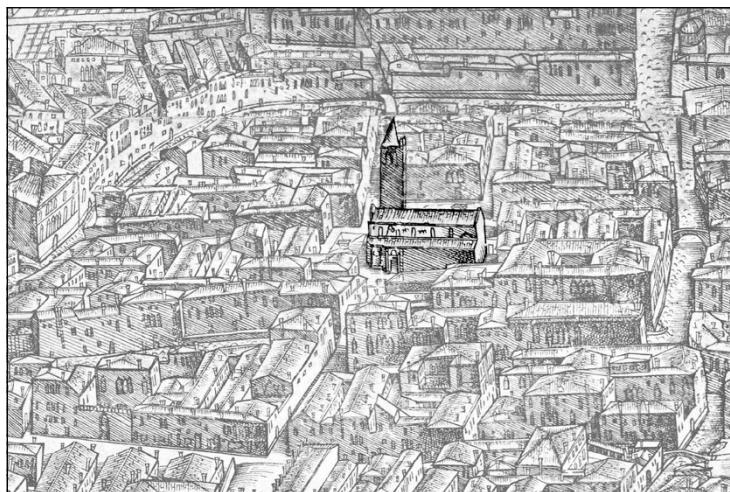


Fig. 1 – De Barbari's *Veduta* (1500) indicating the location of the church of San Fantin (reworked by C. Zaramella).

2.1 Cartographic sources

This study examines the period from 1500 to the present. To digitize the current state of the site, the regional technical map was utilized; however, this source provides only building boundary data without height information. Consequently, a detailed visual analysis and on-site photogrammetry of the church were necessary to complete the model. The study begins in the year 1500 with an analysis of the first primary source depicting Venice: De' Barbari's *Veduta*, which represents the city with remarkable precision through a bird's-eye view (Fig. 1). A perspective study revealed significant distortion along the E-W axis, while a geometric analysis, based on the alignment of buildings and streets, allowed for the delineation of the church in Revit. The second cartographic source selected is the Napoleonic Cadastre, the first of three cadastral maps produced for Venice, dating back to 1808. As a primary source used for taxation purposes, it was required to be highly accurate. The subsequent cadastral maps depict an urban configuration similar to that of today. While the Napoleonic Cadastre does not provide height data, it precisely represents building boundaries with continuous lines, and the pink shading indicates their surface area.

2.2 The church of San Fantin: the three architectural phases

For decades, scholars have debated the configuration of the earlier churches on this site. For the first time, through an innovative approach integrating

historical research and digital modeling, it has been possible to provide concrete answers. Over time, the building has evolved into three distinct churches. The first was founded and constructed in 996, financed by the Molin family (PIVA 1960, 86). Little information exists regarding this structure, but it was likely aligned along the same E-W axis as the present-day church, as was customary in Venice. However, no details about its architectural configuration have been preserved. The second church was built during the 12th century, funded by the wealthy Pisani family. Its architectural structure corresponds to the one depicted in Jacopo De' Barbari's *Veduta* of 1500. The third and final church is the one that stands today. Its construction was made possible through the generous bequest of Cardinal Zen.

2.3 A reconstruction hypothesis based on De' Barbari's Veduta

De' Barbari's perspectival *Veduta* depicts the second church, identifiable by the inscription 'Fantin' on its side. However, a definitive interpretation of this church remains challenging due to the way it is represented; the northern part is entirely obscured from view. Through geometric analysis, it is plausible to assume that the main façade of the 15th-century church was positioned exactly where the present façade stands. By examining the alignment of Calle de la Verona, despite perspectival distortions, it becomes evident that the façade in both *Veduta* and its current state is aligned with this street. A similar approach applied to Calle Minelli reveals that the church's enclosing wall extends slightly off-axis toward the east. This corresponds to the location where the presbytery and crypt were later added in the current structure. By observing the present position of the well located S of the vestibule and its alignment with Calle del Caffettier, it is possible to deduce that the lateral entrance was situated in the same location as today but on a wall positioned further forward toward the campo.

2.3.1 The third architectural phase

The second reconstruction of the church was financed by Cardinal Zen with a bequest of 10,000 ducats, as stipulated in his will dated 1501. Construction officially began on March 25, 1507, the 'zorno de la Madona' (SANUDO 1879-1903, 369), with the laying of the foundation stone during a ceremony attended by Doge Leonardo Loredan. The initial phase of construction was entrusted to «mistro Sebastian proto» (ASPV, San Fantin, 'Tomi' di atti diversi, XXXVIII, 160v, in VIO 1977, 226), identified as Sebastiano Mariani da Lugano. He worked on the project for approximately a decade (VIO 1977), though progress was slow, as he was also engaged in the fortification of Padua during this period (ZOVATTO 1970, 130). On August 14, 1522, records indicate the first appearance of Scarpagnino at the construction site, referred to as «mistro Antonio proto» (ASPV, San Fantin, 'Tomi' di atti

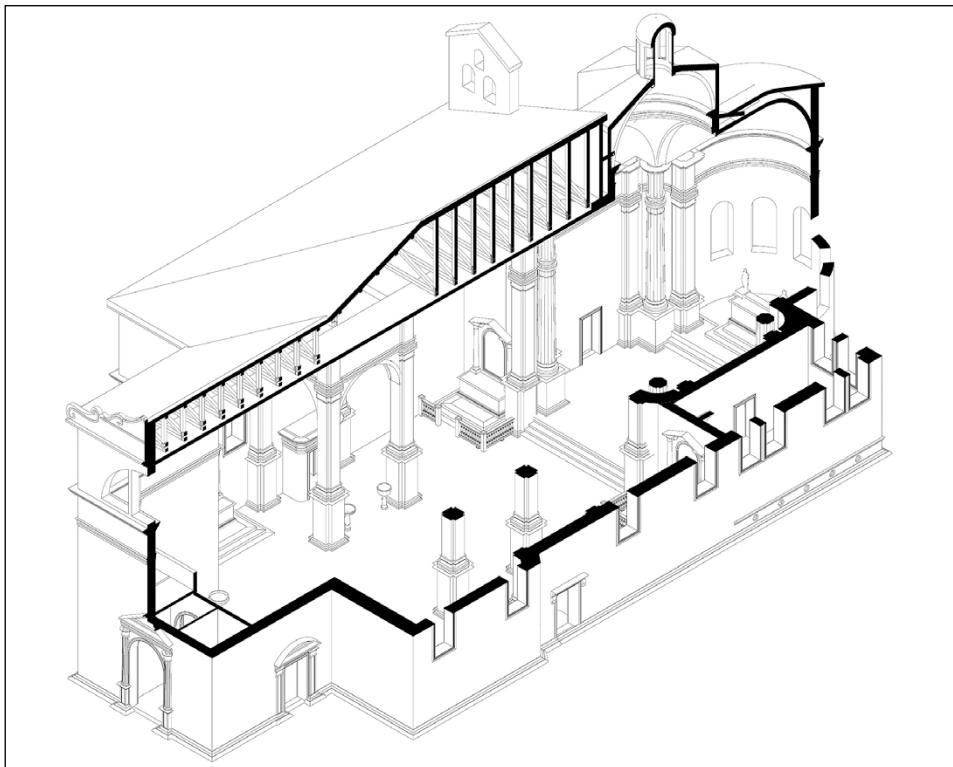


Fig. 2 – Axonometric section of the church of San Fantin (reworked by C. Zaramella).

diversi, XXXVIII, 172, in VIO 1977, 226). He worked on the project from 1522 until his death in 1549, and he is credited with erecting the church walls (PAOLETTI 1893, 298). In 1543, Antonio Sorella took over and completed the roofing. Scarpagnino did not live to see the final structure, leaving the project to another *proto*, possibly Jacopo Sansovino, who completed the church by constructing the presbytery. However, the authorship of this final phase remains uncertain, both historically and stylistically. The construction officially concluded in 1564, as evidenced by the presence of two marble *coretti* flanking the presbytery, dated 1562-1564 (ASPV, San Fantin, 'Tomi' di atti diversi, XXXIII, 166, in VIO 1977, 229).

2.3.2 The current architectural structure

The church consists of a central nave and two side aisles, characterized by alternating barrel and groin vaults, harmoniously following the Byzantine *quincunx* model (Fig. 2). The main nave is preceded by a square vestibule that



Fig. 3 – Interior view of the church of San Fantin (photo C. Zaramella; courtesy of the Patriarcato di Venezia, Ufficio Beni culturali ed edilizia di culto).

protrudes into the ‘campo’ toward La Fenice Theatre. Externally, the church is defined by simple, regular lines devoid of ornamentation. The interior maintains an overall austere appearance, free from excessive decoration (Fig. 3). The spacious square presbytery is covered by a dome, which ends in a lantern that softly illuminates the space. The dome rests on four monumental, fluted Corinthian columns with recessed panels, evoking the structure of a funerary monument. At the four corners of the floor beneath the presbytery, sections of the original terracotta pavement remain visible. A distinctive feature of the church is its semi-subterranean crypt, ventilated by 17 perimeter *oculi*, some of which have been partially sealed. These openings were likely once covered with grates, which may have been anchored to the eight holes still visible around each aperture.

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3. REUSE OF ANCIENT MATERIALS IN VENICE

The reuse of ancient materials in Venice was a fundamental practice that shaped the city’s architectural development from its early medieval

origins through the Renaissance and beyond. This phenomenon was largely influenced by the scarcity of natural stone in the Venetian lagoon, leading to the systematic recovery, transportation, and repurposing of materials from abandoned Roman sites in the *Venetia* and other Mediterranean regions. The practice was not merely a matter of economic necessity, but also reflected cultural attitudes toward the past, a pragmatic approach to construction, and Venice's evolving role as a major maritime power (LAZZARINI *et al.* 2024). The origins of material reuse in Venice date back to the early medieval period, when the settlement was expanding within the lagoon. With no local quarries available, Venetians turned to the nearby abandoned Roman city of *Altinum* and other mainland sites as sources of building materials. These materials, including marble and stone, were either repurposed directly or reworked into new architectural forms. Inscriptions and sculptural elements from earlier periods were frequently incorporated into new structures, demonstrating both a continuity with and a reinterpretation of the Classical tradition (LAZZARINI *et al.* 2024, 2-25).

From the 11th century onward, as Venice's wealth and technological capabilities grew, the city expanded its sources of reclaimed materials to include regions across the Adriatic and the broader Mediterranean. The conquest of Constantinople in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade played a crucial role in intensifying these practices. Large quantities of Proconnesian marble and other valuable stones were systematically looted from Byzantine buildings and transported to Venice, where they were integrated into civic and religious structures. The Basilica of St. Mark, one of the most emblematic examples of this phenomenon, features an extraordinary array of reused materials, including columns, capitals, and friezes of varied origins, demonstrating the craftsmen's ability to synthesize diverse artistic influences (LAZZARINI *et al.* 2024, 90-181). The organization of spoliation efforts in Venice suggests a high degree of coordination among merchants, patrons, and artisans. Unlike earlier, opportunistic reuse, which relied on nearby sources, the later medieval and Renaissance periods saw a more systematic approach to acquiring materials. Venetian merchants, who travelled extensively for trade, often brought back stone and architectural elements as ballast for their ships. This practice not only ensured a steady supply of building materials but also reinforced Venice's architectural grandeur by incorporating prestigious elements from across the Mediterranean world.

By the Renaissance, reuse remained a defining characteristic of Venetian architecture, though attitudes toward ancient materials evolved. The appreciation for classical antiquity led to more selective reuse, often emphasizing the aesthetic and symbolic value of spolia. The presence of ancient elements in Venetian buildings was not merely functional but became a marker of prestige and continuity with the classical past. This shift is evident in both

public monuments and private residences, where columns, reliefs, and decorative elements from earlier periods were deliberately displayed to emphasize historical depth (LAZZARINI *et al.* 2024, 30-65). Even into the 19th century, the reuse of materials remained an active practice, particularly in restoration projects. More than six hundred stonemasons were documented working in Venice during this period, involved in demolition, reuse, and reconstruction efforts that continued the city's long-standing tradition of material recycling. This ongoing reliance on *spolia* highlights the resilience of Venetian architectural strategies and the craftsmen's ability to adapt its built environment to changing economic and political circumstances (PILUTTI NAMER 2016).

3.1 Ancient marbles in the church of San Fantin

Among the various types of reused marbles in Venice, three stand out for their historical and symbolic importance: verde antico, red porphyry, and proconnesian marble. These materials, originating from different regions of the ancient Mediterranean, were often repurposed in Venetian churches and palaces, serving both decorative and ideological purposes. The Church of San Fantin in Venice is an important example of this practice. One notable element is the use in tondos of verde antico, a green-colored marble highly prized in antiquity for its rarity and beauty. This marble, originally sourced from Greece, was commonly employed in Byzantine and then Venetian architecture due to its appreciation from the emperors of Constantinople (LAZZARINI *et al.* 2024, 153, with further bibliography). Red porphyry, another highly significant stone in Venetian architecture that was often employed in the decoration of basilicas and palaces, is particularly notable in San Fantin for its use in the tondos placed under the tomb of Vinciguerra Dandolo. Red porphyry was among the most prestigious materials in antiquity, reserved for emperors and high-ranking officials due to its association with power and divinity. Quarried in Egypt, it was extensively used in Rome and Constantinople and since Medieval time it has been transported to Venice through trade and conquest (LAZZARINI *et al.* 2024, 150-151).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the Proconnesian marble, sourced from the island of Marmara in present-day Turkey, that was the most widely used marble in Venice. Unlike the rarer verde antico and red porphyry, Proconnesian marble was easily accessible and available in large quantities, making it the primary material for architectural elements such as columns, capitals, and facades. In San Fantin, the imitation of Proconnesian marble in wood panels plays a crucial role in the church's counter-facade, contributing to the structure's overall architectural composition (LAZZARINI *et al.* 2024, 67-88, 147-148).

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4. THE BAPTISMAL FONT AND THE HOLY WATER STOUP OF THE CHURCH OF SAN FANTIN

The church of San Fantin must have been adorned with precious marbles even in the *facies* preceding the reconstruction of 1507 (for which see ZARAMELLA, *supra*; on the history of the church: BALDINI *et al.* 2024, 63-78; PILUTTI NAMER, BORDI 2024, 79-90, with much more extensive references), since Marco Antonio Sabellico, in his *De situ urbis Venetae*, composed at the end of the 15th century, describes it as having «frons *ædis* nitida, candidoque saxo nuper instaurata» («chapel with a clear façade and recently restored with white stones») (SABELLICO 1722, II, 18; also quoted by CORNER 1749, 15, 319). In the second half of the 15th century, therefore, the building must have undergone renovations that must have added new marble to its decoration. In this regard, it cannot be ruled out that it was precisely during the renovation and then reconstruction of the sacred building that took place between the 15th and 16th centuries, or perhaps even with later acquisitions, that the two medieval works that are the subject of this section of the paper arrived. So far, in fact, it has not been possible to



Fig. 4 – Proconnesian marble baptismal font in the church of San Fantin (photo G.A.B. Bordi; courtesy of the Patriarcato di Venezia, Ufficio Beni culturali ed edilizia di culto).

find any evidence in the sources that could ensure their original provenance from the medieval church of San Fantin. These are, in particular, a baptismal font currently at mid-height of the right aisle (Fig. 4), and a holy water stoup (or possibly another baptismal font) at the foot of the left central pillar of the main nave of the church (Fig. 5).

The basin of the baptismal font (h ca. 34 cm, diam. ca. 64 cm, depth ca. 30 cm, thickness ca. 3.5 cm), made of Proconnesian marble, has smooth walls both internally and externally, with a double simple moulding with a rounded profile running just below the upper outer rim. The font is supported by a squat cylindrical shaft of the same marble. The artefact rests on a tripartite base articulated in torus, *scotia* and *torus* decorated with plain leaves at the four corners, placed on a high plinth of Istrian stone, perhaps not originally belonging to the artefact (Fig. 4) (ZARAMELLA 2022/2023, 91-92; AMODIO 2024/2025, 306, 310). On the left side of the nave of the church, at the foot of the central pillar, is a polylobate basin of a very fine-grained marble – perhaps Luni marble (h 37 cm, max. diam. 55 cm, depth 22 cm, thickness 2.5 cm) – supported by a fragment of a marble column (h 62 cm), characterised by an upward tapering that stands on an octagonal base (Fig.



Fig. 5 – Holy water stoup or baptismal font in the church of San Fantin (photo G.A.B. Bordi; courtesy of the Patriarcato di Venezia, Ufficio Beni culturali ed edilizia di culto).

5) (lastly: TIGLER 2009, 144; 2013, 234 note 553; CALUGI 2014, 25 note 53; AMODIO 2024/2025, 305-310, with previous bibliography).

The basin has a profile articulated in eight lobes of different lengths, along which sculpted reliefs of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures alternate. The high level of wear of these does not allow them to be easily read. If, therefore, for the zoomorphic elements it is possible to recognise the silhouettes of pairs of leaning back felines and small birds with intertwined tails and joined beaks, placed above what appear to be small basins, the identification of anthropomorphic subjects is much more difficult. In fact, there are four almost identical figures, placed in a frontal position, with arms stretched across the chest and faces too corroded to be able to specify their gender, characterised by smooth hair with a central parting and a length that almost reaches the shoulders, ending in curls. As already mentioned, one of the problematic aspects concerning this sculptural work is the lack of data regarding its origin (AMODIO 2024/2025, 306).

In the Apostolic Visitation of 1581 there is mention of a baptismal font «bene custoditus cum sua clavi» in the altar of Saint Jerome (ASPV, *Visitationes apostolicae*, 139r) that should have been removed for the liturgical adaptation of the altar (as ordered in ASPV, *Visitationes apostolicae*, 140r, where the furnishing is called «vas lapideum»). However, the order was not carried out immediately, since during the Pastoral Visit in 1593 the basin was still found at the sacred table. From the description it seems, moreover, that the font was in some way connected to the altar, since it is reported: «[...] proseguendo la Visita andò nella cappelletta di san Girolamo, et nella mensa dell'altare ritrovò il Battisterio molto indecente» (ASPV, *Visitationes ecclesiarum*, 457r).

In the current state of research, it is not possible to establish whether the furnishings mentioned in the ecclesiastical inspections can be identified with one of the two basins in the church today. However, considering that the above-mentioned reports would seem to indicate that the baptismal font was connected to the altar of Saint Jerome, one could reflect on this notation in relation to the singularly deep recesses at the base of four of the eight lobes of the figured holy water stoup, which would lead one to hypothesise its function as a housing for interlocking supports (Fig. 5). On the other hand, we should also consider the object's dimensions, which might have been too small for it to serve as a baptismal font. To attempt a preliminary interpretation of the iconography of the artefact, one can observe how the articulation of the basin could perhaps be read as a reference to the octagon that, in Christian symbolism, alludes to the Resurrection of Christ, in reference to the eighth day of Holy Week (BASSAN 1995, 283). Regarding the iconography, the animals represented in pairs along the shorter lobes of the basin, according to Christian exegesis, lend themselves to an ambivalent reading. The two felines,

in fact – but only hypothetically due to the heavily abraded surface – could be identified with a pair of lions or lionesses, which in the biblical text and in the interpretations of Christian writers are the expression of both mighty and courageous creatures, who bring their strength to bear against the wicked, and ferocious and cruel creatures, who unjustly persecute the weakest (CICCARESE 2007, 11-48).

So also the two birds joining in their beaks could be likened to the ‘sparrows’ of the biblical vocabulary. These animals, in the Holy Scriptures, sometimes symbolise defenceless creatures, easy prey to pitfalls, but also, at the same time, capable of rising up towards Heaven, thus away from the iniquities of earth, nesting in the Kingdom of God; at other times, on the other hand, the flight of the sparrow is an allegory of the lightness of an inconstant soul, of intemperance, pride and yielding to worldly flattery that lead these animals to fall into a trap. The sparrow may, however, also be the personification of the risen and ascended Christ (CICCARESE 2007, 125-145). Interesting, however, is what Maria Pia Ciccarese points out, namely that sometimes the symbolism of the sparrows is clarified by the number they are depicted. In particular, according to the scholar, the presence of the birds in the number of two would recall the passage from the Gospel of Matthew in which the example of two sparrows sold for a penny is given: «Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s knowledge» (Mt, 10, 29), representing, therefore, the soul redeemed by Christ (CICCARESE 2007, 128-129). This reading would therefore seem to be in keeping with the interpretation of the depiction of pairs of birds on a holy water stoup or baptismal font, as in our case.

As for the anthropomorphic sculptures, it is not possible to determine whether they were originally conceived as monstrous beings. What is noticeable, despite the state of wear and tear, is that the four figures appear to have their wrists restrained by something overlapping them, in a manner perhaps similar to what can be seen on the holy water stoup in the parish church of Santa Maria Assunta of Rubbiano, in the province of Parma – dated at the beginning of the 12th century –, where two figures with human features are restrained by the paws of the monstrous creatures that flank them (MORETTI 2019, 82, with previous bibliography). One could, therefore, perhaps hypothesise that in the San Fantin font, below the anthropomorphic figures, there were originally fantastic beings that would have been completely abraded.

Otherwise, our four figures could have been depicted in the pose of holding bifid-tailed mermaids with their hands; in that case, however, they would not have been depictions of sirens, who are almost always represented with bare chests and uncovered breasts, since it is quite clear that the figures in the San Fantin basin wear a sort of tunic with a circular cut at the base of the neck. In this regard, one might then recall – but only as a suggestion

that we intend to explore in a forthcoming study – the bifid tritons wearing a sort of cape from the baptismal font at Saint George's in Anstey, County Hertfordshire, dated between the late 12th and early 13th century (MORETTI 2019, 84, fig. 16; 86-87, fig. 19). However, it does not seem to be possible to go any further with the hypothesis at present, due to the complete removal of the decoration of the lower register of the bowl. As the areas of abrasion occur in the same register as the deep recesses, it cannot be ruled out that the chiselling of any parts emerging from the body of the basin and the creation of the recesses occurred at the same time, for the same reason.

In Venice or in Northern Italy, at least to the writer's current knowledge, there do not seem to be any other holy water fonts/baptismal fonts that could serve as a fitting comparison for San Fantin's work. A small holy water stoup with eight lobes, bearing on its four sides figures of archangels holding a globe, can be found in St. Mark's Basilica, but it is a much smaller one than San Fantin's basin, which has been hypothesised to have been readapted as a lustral font by reworking a small capital. The date, placed at the 11th century (POLACCO 1990), is also likely much earlier than that of the San Fantin bowl, which could perhaps be placed between the 12th and 13th centuries. An eight-lobed stoup in 'Greek marble', dated to the second half of the 13th century, is now preserved in the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Murano, although it has been hypothesised that it came from the monastery of San Lorenzo on the lagoon island of Ammiana, which was suppressed and incorporated into the aforementioned parish of Venice in 1438 (FANTONI 1990). However, the stoup, not much smaller in diameter than the one in San Fantin, has completely plain sides, devoid of decoration. Similarly articulated in eight lobes is the white Verona marble stoup placed along a wall of the church of San Benedetto in Gonzaga, in the province of Mantua, dated to a period after the construction of the building, i.e. after 1330. In this case, however, the lobes are uniformly decorated with vertical bullae interspersed along the upper margin with small ovoli, and there are no figured elements (MARCHI 1994).

An alternation of longer and shorter lobes, according to a scansion more similar to that found in the lustral pile of San Fantin, occurs, on the other hand, in the eight-valves basin from the Albertian temple of San Sebastiano in Mantua, built from the seventh decade of the 15th century. The presence on the artefact of the Gonzaga enterprise of Olympus, also depicted in Mantegna's Camera degli Sposi (1465-1474), would constitute a further clue for the chronological placement of the work in the late 15th century and, therefore, at too low a chronological height to constitute a term of comparison for the basin of the church of San Fantin (BAZZOTTI 1979).

What we can note in conclusion is that perhaps in the holy water stoup now preserved in San Fantin – the origin of which we still do not know –, the possible symbolic meaning alluding to eternal life through the Resurrection,

inherent in the choice of a polylobate form articulated in eight lobes, could have been reinforced by the subjects that were sculpted in it, which perhaps, in the overall representation, staged a contrast between symbols of Good (the animals?) and symbols of Evil (the potential monstrous beings) or depicted a series of figures alluding to the necessity, for access to Salvation, of purification, ensured by the blessed water that had to be contained in the lustral pile.

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Venezia, Archivio Storico del Patriarcato, Curia patriarcale di Venezia, Archivio "Segreto", Visite pastorali, b. 5, *Visitationes ecclesiarum. Liber primus. 1591*, 1591 maggio 19-1593 ottobre 14.

Venezia, Archivio Storico del Patriarcato, Parrocchia di San Moisè di Venezia, Parrocchia di San Fantin di Venezia, «Tomi» di atti diversi.

ABSTRACT

The church of San Fantin in Venice embodies the city's architectural and historical evolution, with its origins in the High Middle Ages still uncertain. This article explores the church's transformation through a multidisciplinary approach, combining digital modeling, material analysis, and archival research. Carlotta Zaramella reconstructs San Fantin's architectural phases using a Building Information Modeling (BIM) model. Myriam Pilutti Namer analyzes the phenomenon of reused materials in Venice, with particular focus on the types of ancient marbles incorporated into the church's fabric. Giulia A.B. Bordi investigates medieval material evidence and archival records of the baptismal font and the holy water stoup.