



Saint George as Cultural Unifier: Visual Clues in Carpaccio's Cycle at the Scuola Dalmata in Venice

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Article abstract

Late medieval Venetians had an established tradition of visualising Saint George and venerating him in many ways and for differing purposes, but he was also celebrated by non-Venetians living in the city. The diasporic community of the Schiavoni chose the saint to be the patron of their confraternity (Scuola), and so he features prominently in the decorative programmes they commissioned for their building; this decision had its origins in their provenance, occupations, and local affinity with the Venetians. This article has two aims: first, to chart the backgrounds of the Schiavoni confratelli, and second, to examine the visual clues within Carpaccio's narrative cycle at the Scuola Dalmata to explore themes of unity, mobility, and otherness. It will conclude that the confratelli's background of home-displacement, and their military, mercantile, and artisan occupations led to their selection of Saint George as patron; and that their attempts to integrate into the Venetian community can be understood in conversation with the iconography of the Saint George narrative on the walls of their Scuola.

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Summary: Late medieval Venetians had an established tradition of visualising Saint George and venerating him in many ways and for differing purposes, but he was also celebrated by non-Venetians living in the city. The diasporic community of the Schiavoni chose the saint to be the patron of their confraternity (*Scuola*), and so he features prominently in the decorative programmes they commissioned for their building; this decision had its origins in their provenance, occupations, and local affinity with the Venetians. This article has two aims: first, to chart the backgrounds of the Schiavoni *confratelli*, and second, to examine the visual clues within Carpaccio's narrative cycle at the Scuola Dalmata to explore themes of unity, mobility, and otherness. It will conclude that the *confratelli*'s background of home-displacement, and their military, mercantile, and artisan occupations led to their selection of Saint George as patron; and that their attempts to integrate into the Venetian community can be understood in conversation with the iconography of the Saint George narrative on the walls of their Scuola.

Around 1451, soon after the founding in Venice of the Scuola Dalmata dei Santi Giorgio e Trifone, also known as San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, that served the needs of the diasporic community of people from the Dalmatian coastline and interior (*Schiavoni*), a wooden relief roundel of Saint George slaying the dragon was installed in the centre of the ceiling of their newly appropriated meeting hall. The saint's long and prominent leg strains in the stirrups, while he thrusts the lance, which he holds with his right arm, into the creature's open mouth. The princess kneels in prayer to the right while her parents watch from the castle wall on the left-hand side. Bones litter the ground beneath the rearing horse and there seems to be a cave in the rocky background. The red of the saint's lance, saddle, and his horse's bridle contrasts with the white of the horse and the blue-grey armour of the rider. There is gilding on the dragon, the princess, and St George's halo, making the relief come alive in what would have been the flickering candlelight of the meeting hall. This fifteenth-century relief was later removed from the ceiling, inserted into an altarpiece, and given the addition of an *Annunciation* in the upper corners, and Saints Tryphon and Jerome in the lower corners. It was then framed with gilt Corinthian columns, giving it an entirely different appearance and providing a new

viewing experience for its audience (fig. 1).¹ Although the commissioners were immigrants to Venice, the anonymous artist used an iconography that would have been familiar to both the Schiavoni and the Venetians—that of Saint George slaying the dragon. Fifty years later the Schiavoni again chose Saint George as subject for the decoration of their meeting hall, this time commissioning Vittore Carpaccio (1465–1520) to create a painted narrative cycle depicting the saint’s deeds. This article will look at the reasons for their choice and examine the visual clues within Carpaccio’s three *teleri* to show how Saint George acted as both identifier of their group and cultural connector between Schiavoni and their Venetian neighbours.

The role of Saint George as cultural unifier can be seen not only in the common iconography of the repurposed relief roundel, but also through Carpaccio’s 1502 decoration of the Scuola and the diasporic nature of the Schiavoni themselves.² Cultural unification here can be understood to mean a combining of purposes, a common devotion, a cooperation between and unification of diverse ethnicities. To understand the way that Saint George—specifically the images of him within the Scuola—forged unity between the Schiavoni and the Venetians, this discussion will examine first the issues surrounding the confraternity’s choice of George as their titular saint, and second, the visual evidence in Carpaccio’s three canvases. I argue that it was by allying themselves with Saint George through the ‘othering’ of their enemy, the Turks—whom they cast as the defeated dragon in their Scuola imagery—that the Schiavoni were able to unite with their Venetian neighbours. Although both the Schiavoni and Carpaccio’s paintings have been the subject of much scholarly work over the last six decades, the particular unifying role that Saint George’s image played for the confraternity has not been fully explored. This article addresses this lacuna both by distinguishing Saint George’s part in the creation of the Schiavoni identity through the dragon-othering narrative, and by showing how his image enabled common bonds to be forged with peoples of different cultures and ethnicities.

George: Patron Saint of Choice

The three main reasons for the Schiavoni’s choice of a patron saint, gleaned from the evidence and explained here, are their origins, vocations, and identification with the Venetians around them. Their group was composed of disparate immigrants who had fled Turkish invaders threatening their homeland on the east coast of the Adriatic Sea. The term ‘Schiavoni’

¹ Perocco, *Guide*, 47–48.

² Marinković calls this “the most important among the artistic commissions for the Scuola”; Marinković, “Saints’ Relics,” 29.

was used at the time by Venetian authorities to identify Southern Slavs, Dalmatians, Illyrians, Serbians, and Croatians.³ It is, therefore, a complex and multi-layered term, a collective noun that does not allow for the distinctions of race, nationality, language, or cultural background that existed within this group of peoples. In this article I will use the term ‘Schiavoni’ because it was used at that time even by members of this group; at the same time, I use it with an understanding of the differing identities within the group that remained a real part of who these people were.

The actual make-up of the Scuola’s founding members sheds light on the various nationalities of the immigrants: 47% came from the towns of Cattaro (modern-day Kotor) and Antivari (modern-day Bar) in Venetian Albania; 34% from Dalmatia; and the remaining 19% from Schiavonia, Croatia and Ragusa (modern-day Dubrovnik).⁴ As these statistics show, efforts to define the community are both challenging and still incomplete, merging people from different places under one umbrella term. The Scuola’s own *mariegola* is the source for these statistics that relate to the testamentary legations of the individuals.⁵ It shows that there were more members from Antivari in the earlier life of the Scuola, but that this shifted over time to people coming from Dalmatia.⁶ This is important for understanding why Saint George was chosen as one of three titular saints for the Scuola, with Tryphon and Jerome being the other two. The key reason for the choice of Saint George was that he was the patron saint of the coastal town of Antivari in what was then Venetian-owned Albania and is today part of Montenegro. The Albanian inhabitants, fleeing the Turks, took their saint with them for protection and set him up in their new community in Venice.⁷ Although this mobility from one place to another occurred because of reasons beyond their control, it highlights one of the ways in which both the cult and the image of Saint George travelled and were disseminated throughout the region.

³ Blass-Simmen, *Sankt Georg*, 45; also see Šlenc, “Le Migrazioni degli Slavi in Italia,” 264.

⁴ Marinković, “Saints’ Relics,” 27 n. 3.

⁵ Scuola di San Giorgio, *Mariiegola*; the text of the *Mariiegola* is published by the Confraternity in installments in their annual periodical, *Scuola Dalmata dei SS. Giorgio e Trifone*; see Čoralčić, “La Scuola Dalmata dei SS. Giorgio e Trifone,” 13–26; Diotallevi, “Documenti,” 40–47.

⁶ Čoralčić, “The Ragusans in Venice,” 13–40; Marinković, “Saints’ Relics,” 27 n. 3. The documents relating to the foundation of the Scuola can be found in the *Mariiegola* and *Catastico*, located in the Scuola building in Venice; Perocco, *Carpaccio*, 209–214; Ludwig and Molmenti, *The Life and Works of Vittorio Carpaccio*, 112.

⁷ The same is true of Saint Tryphon, who was the patron saint of Cattaro, the other Albanian town from where most of the founding members came: Marinković “Saints’ Relics” 27, n. 3; Marinković, “Saints’ Relics,” 27.

Provenance, therefore, was the first major factor in the choice of a titular saint for the Scuola Dalmata.⁸ The second is closely related and is connected to the immigrants' military occupation, that of *stradioti*. These 'light cavalymen' and sailors were recruited by the Venetians to help fight their wars, particularly against Turkish incursions.⁹ Not all were soldiers, some had a maritime occupation, while others were artisans involved in shipbuilding.¹⁰ These diverse ethnic groups were not simply refugees running from their threatened homes, but valued, skilled soldiers, paid to work and fight for Venice and to protect the very homes from which they had fled.¹¹

In responding to the immigrants' petition to found a Scuola in Venice, the Republic's authorities were indeed swayed by this fact: fighting for the *Serenissima* gave official privileges, one being the right to settle and establish communities in the city. The Schiavoni wanted to create a confraternity in Venice to provide for their social and religious needs so, to this end, on 19 May 1451 they petitioned the Council of Ten.¹² Their application was met with an immediate decision to confirm the new confraternity.¹³ The members' subsequent choice of Saint George as heavenly protector for their Scuola gains a further resonance when seen against their military and chivalric background. These ideals are visualised in the ceiling relief roundel and later altarpiece (fig. 1): as a warrior saint who protected the princess and her home from a noxious, evil threat, Saint George would fit closely with the aims of the Schiavoni *stradioti*, who would easily have identified themselves with him as they fought the Ottoman Turkish invasion.

The members' provenance from Antivari and other towns in Dalmatia, combined with their military occupation as *stradioti* go some way towards accounting for the Schiavoni's choice of Saint George in the

⁸ Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice*, 33–62; MacKenney, "The Scuole Piccole of Venice," 172–189; Humfrey and MacKenney, "The Venetian Trade Guilds," 317–330.

⁹ Mallett and Rigby Hale, *The Military Organisation of a Renaissance State*, 73; Babinger, "Albanische Stradioten," 95–105; Petta, *Stradioti*, 67–71; Barbarich, "Gli Stradioti nell'arte militare italiana," *Rivista di Cavalleria*, 52–72.

¹⁰ Marinković, "Saints' Relics," 28.

¹¹ My argument here, that the Schiavoni should be seen as active agents, is backed up by how the Schiavoni saw themselves. Jasenka Gudelj, argues that immigrants to Italy wanted to be seen as 'good citizens' rather than 'unwanted immigrant', and they tried to do this through investing in their buildings. Gudelj, "Visualising Past," 14.

¹² Gudelj, "Visualising Past," 11.

¹³ "Che possa fare una schuola, secondo la condicione dele altre schuole pizole, de questa nostra gloriosa citade, la qual i diti supplicanti intende de fare ad honer de miser san Zorzi, et miser san Trifon, nella chixia de miser san Zane del tempio" (19 May 1451); Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV), *Consiglio dei Dieci*, Deliberazioni miste XIV, fol. 47^r, see Marinković, "Saints' Relics," 27, n. 1.

founding of their Scuola. The third factor in this decision is the local affinity with the Venetians who also revered Saint George.¹⁴ This common heritage created a sense of belonging for an immigrant community displaced from home and culture, and enabled ties of friendship and brotherhood to be forged with the host community. This affinity can be seen to some extent in the choice of artist to decorate their Scuola.

Carpaccio: Artist of Choice for Venetian Scuole

When choosing an artist to depict the stories of their patron saint, the members of the Scuola Dalmata selected Vittore Carpaccio (1465–1520), a Venetian, rather than one of their own artists. This choice can be seen as a further demonstration of kinship with their adopted home.¹⁵ Carpaccio was also a logical and prudent choice for such a commission, given his recent work with other Venetian confraternities: between 1490 and 1496 he had created narrative cycles for the Scuola di Sant’Orsola at the church of San Giovanni e Paolo, and the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista at its own site.¹⁶ Not only was he well known and proven, but he could also be relied upon to deliver exactly what the brothers wanted.

Their choice can also be understood as a way of ‘fitting in’ with other diasporic communities in Venice, or even as evidence of a competitive aspect to their patronage.¹⁷ In fact, Saint George was a popular choice for other diasporic communities, such as the Greeks who had a church dedicated to him in the city—the Chiesa di San Giorgio dei Greci—and displayed images of the saint in their church, its courtyard, and belltower (fig. 2). The saint’s image also adorned houses within Venice (fig. 3). Saint George was part of the visual fabric of the city so having him as one’s patron saint meant belonging in the city: a shared faith, a shared purpose, and a shared heritage.

The Saint George Cycle: Constructing Identity

We can gain further insight into Saint George’s role as a cultural unifier for the Schiavoni by looking closely at the three *teleri* that decorated the walls

¹⁴ David Perry connects the cult of Saint George with Venice in Robinson et al., *Matter of Faith*, 15–16.

¹⁵ The Scuola degli Schiavoni did not call upon Schiavoni artists to decorate its site either because they were not yet available, or perhaps because they were not yet considered good enough to do the work; Borić, “A Forgotten Schiavone,” 120.

¹⁶ Blass-Simmen, “Povero Giopo,” 111–128.

¹⁷ Two years into his work for the Scuola degli Schiavoni, Carpaccio began, in 1504, to simultaneously create a hagiographic cycle for the Scuola degli Albanesi, this time on the *Life of the Virgin*.

of their Scuola. Carpaccio's hagiographic cycle included the most famous scenes from the saint's *vita*: his slaying of the dragon and the subsequent baptism of the Selenites.¹⁸ At first glance, the iconography of Carpaccio's painting of *Saint George Slaying the Dragon* (fig. 4) appears familiar, sharing many commonalities with other depictions of the same subject, including the ceiling relief roundel (fig. 1). In both painting and roundel, George is shown mounted and piercing the dragon through its throat. The lance point emerges from the back of the creature's head and great quantities of blood spill on the ground where dismembered bodies and skeletal remains litter the scene. To the right stands the princess, hands clasped in an attitude of prayer, and in the background to the left, rise lakeside buildings and a walled city on a hill. Although the composition and iconography of this scene and the remaining two canvases, *The Triumph of Saint George* (fig. 5), and *Saint George Baptises the Selenites* (fig. 6), are similar to other Italian images, Carpaccio incorporates different features that would have had a particular meaning to the Schiavoni. I will discuss the iconography of George's story, along with these additional visual elements—a musical band, the urban landscape, and oriental figures—that made visible the cultural unity that the Schiavoni shared with their Venetian neighbours.

In what remains of this article, I shall argue that in Carpaccio's Saint George cycle, the identity of the Schiavoni as immigrants, soldiers, merchants, and devout members was constructed on the basis of a recognised 'other'—the 'rampaging', 'ferocious' Turk. The themes of unity, mobility, and otherness will be investigated through an examination of the tensions between the Turk as enemy, George as Christian knight, the Schiavoni as viewers, and the oriental motifs in the urban landscape and figures of the three Saint George canvases. These themes will also emerge in conversation with several events of 1502 that had a profound effect on the decoration of the Scuola: the granting of a papal indulgence; the decision to renovate the Scuola, and, perhaps most significantly, the donation of a relic of Saint George to the Scuola.¹⁹ The specific order in which the donation and indulgence happened may also shed further light on the issue under discussion. The relic was donated in April 1502 by the patrician admiral

¹⁸ Six of Carpaccio's canvases depict scenes from the lives of the Schiavoni's three patron saints—Tryphon, Jerome, and George; one canvas is devoted to Saint Augustine in his study; and two additional canvases illustrate scenes from the life of Christ. This article will look at the Saint George cycle, but for discussions of the remaining six canvases see Mason, *Carpaccio*, 110–113; Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, 69–70; Ambrosini, "Victor Carpathius Fingebat," 47–96; Ceriana and Mueller, "Radicalamento delle comunità straniere a Venezia," 299–331.

¹⁹ ASV, Matricola, cap. 66, fols. 595^v–596^r. Marinković, "Saints' Relics," 29, n. 13. Perocco, *Carpaccio*, 215–216; the Indulgence is dated 22 June 1502. See Marinković, "Saints' Relics," 29, nn. 13 and 14; Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, 288.

Paolo Valaresso but it was not until 22 June, just under two months later, that the indulgence was granted²⁰. It may indeed be that the arrival of the relic at the Scuola prompted the issuing of the indulgence, in which case, the decorative scheme was also commissioned directly as a result of the donation. Both instances flow from the relic's translation to the Scuola and are enshrined together in the text of the indulgence.

Turk, Ottoman, Oriental—A Matter of Terminology

At this point it is necessary to provide some qualification of the terms used in the following discussion. 'Turk', 'Ottoman', and 'Oriental' are all problematic terms that are often used inaccurately and interchangeably, causing confusion and misunderstanding. Furthermore, they have been used in varying ways during different periods of time and by diverse groups, and their meaning has subsequently altered.²¹ Carpaccio's 'Turks', 'Ottomans', and 'oriental' motifs will thus be considered within a contextual framework, after a working definition of each term is given.

The Turk was the enemy of both the Venetians and the Schiavoni—the foreign 'other' against which the two groups united under the protection of Saint George. A Turk, or more accurately, a Turcoman, was in origin an Anatolian peasant, tied to the land, Moslem-born, and part of the *reaya* or 'subject' class. He spoke Turkish, was poor, illiterate, and numerous, born a free man who paid taxes but had no power, and was looked down upon by Ottomans. In contrast, the Ottoman was part of the ruling elite and came from the *askeri*, or military class. He was European by race, Christian-born but compulsorily converted to Islam as a child.²² He was highly educated, exempt from paying taxes, and spoke Osmanli. He was also a slave, taken as a boy from his family through the *Devshirme* system of taxation, and brought up to serve the Sultan.²³ Thus, most Turks were not Ottomans but were simply peasants scratching a living from the land, and most Ottomans were not Turks, but European Christians taken as child slaves to be indoctrinated, converted, and taught to fight against the

²⁰ For the *Mariégola* record describing the donation, see Perocco, *Carpaccio*, 215–216. See also Marinković, "Saints' Relics," 29, nn. 13 and 14; Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, 288.

²¹ Many contemporary European languages do not have the capacity to distinguish between such terms, adding a further layer of imprecision and contributing to the ambiguity of these figures; Rothman, "Narrating Conversion"; also see Rothman, "Between Venice and Istanbul," 38–39, 390.

²² See Geraldine Heng's work, particularly, Heng, "Reinventing Race "The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages I," "The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages II."

²³ Rothman, *The Dragoman Renaissance*, 21–22. Miović-Perić, "Dragomans of the Dubrovnik Republic," 81–94, 2001; Miović-Perić, "Diplomatic Relations," 187–208.

faith that had once been theirs. It is important to remember these origins when looking at images of so-called ‘Ottoman Turks’.

The term ‘oriental’ also has a controversial and deeply problematic history. In the fifteenth century the Orient referred only to India and to the lands mentioned in the Bible.²⁴ This is key for Carpaccio’s *Saint George* cycle in the Scuola which contains elements from Jerusalem’s urban landscape and includes figures distinguished by their turban head-coverings. There was also the idea of a collective notion of Europeans who regarded themselves as superior to anyone who was not European, in particular the foreign ‘other’.²⁵ The perceived shortcomings or ‘pagan’ values of the ‘other’ were used to highlight rightness and Christian values in the Europeans, who could then impose their own values, thoughts, ideas, and understanding on the Orient. This definition of the Orient and Turk as ‘other’ was part of the Schiavoni’s self-fashioning and enabled them to connect with the Venetians; a further significant element in their identity creation was the ownership of a Saint George relic—something that provided not only an important devotional focus, but also a deep impression of belonging.

In her introduction to *The Invention of Race*, Geraldine Heng gives a definition that is helpful in this discussion of the term ‘oriental’ because it enables us to differentiate between the Schiavoni who had emigrated to Venice and the Venetians themselves. Heng says that

‘Race’ is one of the primary names we have—a name we retain for the strategic, epistemological, and political commitments it recognizes—that is attached to a repeating tendency, of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups.²⁶

‘Demarcating [...] through differences’ is a visual strategy present in the Scuola’s *Saint George* cycle that Carpaccio uses to distinguish his figures; thus Selenite/Ottomans are presented in an oriental ambient of a recognizable Jerusalem.

The Relic Donation and Translation

When the Scuola Dalmata was founded in 1451 it did not possess a relic of its patron Saint George, but had to wait some fifty years for this to be rectified through an important gift. At the centre of the donation of the

²⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 4; Fedalto, “Le minoranze straniere a Venezia,” 143–162.

²⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

²⁶ Heng, *The Invention of Race*, 4

Saint George relic to the Schiavoni is a forged sense of unity and camaraderie; this can be linked to the identity of the donor and its recipients. The Scuola's *Mariegola* records that Admiral Paolo Valaresso had received the relic through a deathbed bequest from a Patriarch of Jerusalem.²⁷ Valaresso was a Venetian aristocrat who in 1499 had led forces against the Turks.²⁸ He was, therefore, a military commander with direct experience of fighting the Schiavoni's nemesis. Valaresso not only shared a military background and a common enemy with the Schiavoni, but also a veneration of Saint George. On receiving the relic from the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Valaresso at once determined to donate it to the Schiavoni because of their shared devotion to George. He received permission from both the pope's legate and the Patriarch of Venice to remove the relic from its temporary home in the church of Sant'Angelo and bring it to the Scuola.²⁹

The connection between the Schiavoni and Valaresso, prompted by the donation of George's relic, was strengthened by the translation of the relic across the city. The *confratelli* themselves, along with their priests, travelled from their Scuola to church of Sant'Angelo to collect the relic and carry it back in procession with Valaresso to its new home.³⁰ Although the exact route of the translation is not recorded in the *Mariegola*, the starting and finishing points are both stated. Both sites can be clearly seen on Jacopo de' Barbari's map of Venice in 1500. The procession consisted not only of Valaresso, the *confratelli*, and their priests, but also of a group of musicians who played trumpets and pipes throughout the journey.³¹ The group is likely to have wound its way east from the Campo Sant'Angelo through the *calle* and *campi* of the *sestiere* of San Marco, perhaps passing beneath reliefs of Saint George and emerging into the Piazza di San Marco—the processional heart of the city. It then might have passed in front of the Doge's Palace, crossing the Ponte della Paglia and taking the wide Riva degli Schiavoni, which lent itself to processional ceremonies. A left turn into the *sestiere* of Castello along Calle di Dose and into Campo Bandiera e Moro, would have led to the Campo di San Antonino. At the north west corner of this *campo* was the Fondamenta dei Furlani which led directly to the Scuola Dalmata—the new home of the precious relic.

Walking side by side, the Schiavoni community, their benefactor, and Venetian patricians were performing a unifying act that was imbued

²⁷ ASV, Matricola, cap. 66, fols. 595^v–596^r; published in Perocco, *Carpaccio*, 215–216, and Giadrossi 1984, 11–12.

²⁸ Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, 288.

²⁹ ASV, *Mariegola*, cap. 66, fols. 595^v–596^r; published in Perocco, *Carpaccio*, 215–216.

³⁰ A processional cross may also have been carried during the translation, as one is known to have existed, see Longo, "Committenza, Iconografia e Stile," 295–302.

³¹ ASV, Matricola, cap. 66, fols. 595^v–596^r; published in Perocco, *Carpaccio*, 215–216.

with symbolic and devotional meaning. The military connections between the participants were symbolised by the relic of the saintly warrior who had fought, like them, for freedom against an evil destructive force. Through the mediating presence of Saint George, the Venetian Paolo Valaresso became deeply united to the Schiavoni brotherhood. After the shared procession, and on account of the donation, Valaresso was accepted into the confraternity as a member, along with several members of his family. The patrician saw this as a high privilege and remembered it in his will, asking that 125 brothers from the Scuola accompany his funeral procession.³² Two cultures were thus unified through the shared devotion of Saint George and the performative act of transporting his relic through the urban landscape of Venice.

Urban Landscape

Saint George's relic had thus travelled from Jerusalem to the Scuola Dalmata, via the streets of Venice. In his canvases Carpaccio alludes to Jerusalem by including specific visual references to some of its monuments. For example, the buildings in the background of *The Triumph* (fig. 5) have been firmly identified as being modelled on specific ones in Jerusalem.³³ In his preparatory drawing, now in the Uffizi (fig. 7), Carpaccio gave centre place to a building modelled on the Dome of the Rock. In the final canvas it has been moved slightly to the right, but it still dominates the background and draws the eye. Carpaccio had not been to Jerusalem, but he was drawing upon Erhard Reeuwich's woodcut illustrations in Bernard von Breydenbach's 1486 *Peregrinationes* (fig. 8).³⁴ Breydenbach had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and taken the Dutch artist with him to record the journey. Carpaccio has adapted Reeuwich's bird's-eye view of the Dome to create something seen from the ground. He has also squashed the dome itself creating a form that is closer to the original than Reeuwich's illustration.³⁵

³² Valaresso was also a member of the Scuola Grande di San Marco and asked for 250 brothers from that company to also join his funeral procession; see Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, 70.

³³ Sidney Colvin was the first to point out, in 1897, that Breydenbach's *Peregrinationes* had been the source of inspiration for Carpaccio's paintings, see Colvin "Über einige eichnungen des Carpaccio in England"; See also Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, 210–214; Mason, *Carpaccio*, 21.

³⁴ See the Bibliography for the three editions that I consulted.

³⁵ Gilles de la Tourette (1924, 140) states that this is a closer rendering; see Fortini Brown, 1988, 256 n. 46.

The other buildings in the background of *The Triumph*, particularly those on the left, have also been taken directly from the *Peregrinationes*.³⁶ The tall, tiered tower with ribbed dome and castellations has been modelled on the entrance to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, but Carpaccio has taken only part of the building. He also adapted Reeuwich's mosque in Rama (today's Al-Ram) for his minareted building behind the figures playing musical instruments. The image of the Rama mosque is found just below the central image of Reeuwich's Dome of the Rock. The entire woodcut is printed as a long, fold-out sheet and shows the city of Jerusalem and its environs in a complete picture (fig. 8). Carpaccio would, therefore, have been able to study these images of the Holy Land and to pick the parts he wanted to use.

Although no specific buildings from Reeuwich's woodcuts can be seen in Carpaccio's third canvas *Saint George Baptises the Selenites* (fig. 6), he has undoubtedly drawn ideas from there and amalgamated them into the orientalisising backdrop. The circular, domed, four-tiered building in the centre and the delicate towers to its right all contain elements gleaned from the Jerusalem woodcut. Carpaccio's borrowings enhance and develop the Saint George narrative for a new audience, giving a different kind of meaning within the familiar iconography of the walled town and transferring the image of George into a distinct context—that of the Holy Land.

While the presence of recognisable buildings from Jerusalem in the Scuola canvases may be part of Carpaccio's orientalisising of the scene, it also resonates with the provenance of the relic and its translation to the Schiavoni's meeting place. The previous owner of the relic was the Patriarch of Jerusalem and that city is where the deathbed bequest was made. The presence of the Dome of the Rock, the Holy Sepulchre, and some hybridised structures, all with their origins in Reeuwich's Holy Land illustrations, point firmly to the city of Jerusalem and serve as a reminder to the brothers of the provenance and authenticity of their relic. Saint George's shrine and the original resting place of his body were believed to be in Lydda (modern-day Lod) a town about 50 km west of Jerusalem. A relic originating in Jerusalem so near to the place of the saint's tomb, would have been regarded as unquestionably genuine. The buildings in the background of the three canvases, although a common method for depicting the town of Silene, have been given particular meaning by Carpaccio due to their verisimilitude to known landmarks in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is thus translated into the scene of the saint's triumph and his baptism of the pagan Selenites, thereby constructing an 'oriental' backdrop that further authenticates the Scuola's prized relic.

³⁶ Colvin, "Über einige Zeichnungen," 193–204; Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, 194.

There is also a visual filiation in *The Slaying* (fig. 4) between the relic as object and the profusion of every type of human bone that covers the ground beneath the dragon and George's rearing horse. The skulls in particular are heaped in a pile on the left of the composition and shown from a variety of angles; one is depicted from beneath and foreshortened with great skill. The representation of human skeletal remains is an iconographic commonality present in a number of narrative images depicting the saint slaying the dragon, for example, in Pisanello's fresco on the walls of the Pellegrini Chapel in Sant'Anastasia in Verona. Carpaccio's gruesome profusion, however, is shocking and palpably present, not least because it would have been nearest to the viewers' eye level. The presence of bones in this image provides a deeper and more poignant meaning for the *Schiavoni confratelli*, that of the real, physical presence in their Scuola of a bone of Saint George. This is not the first time that the presence of a relic may have "shaped the viewing experience."³⁷ In her assessment of Ghirlandajo's *Massacre of the Innocents* fresco in Santa Maria Novella, Diana Bullen Presciutti considers how the depiction of body parts "fostered a 'reliquary mode of seeing' by juxtaposing formal features characteristic of reliquaries with the representation of relic-like body fragments."³⁸ As with the Scuola Dalmata, Santa Maria Novella housed a relic directly linked with the visual depiction.

Othering the Turk

Saint George's narrative thus provided the opportunity to create an image not only filled with edifices reminiscent of the Holy Land and foreshortened skeletal remains as a visual reminder of the saint's relic, but also a scene peopled by the Turkish 'other', brought into vivid life by oriental motifs such as turbans, patterned robes, and flowing veils. Both Carpaccio's orientalisising and his borrowings can be clearly seen, for example, in the two women in unusual headdresses at the left of his compositional drawing for *The Triumph* (fig. 7). These women have been taken directly from one of Reeuwich's woodcut illustrations in Breydenbach's *Peregrinationes* (fig. 9) and have become members of the crowd.³⁹ The figure on the right wears a square topped veil that falls around her shoulders almost to the ground and a covering that completely hides her face. This woman was also included in Carpaccio's final painting but there she appears even more mysterious because she is almost obscured by the crowd and seems to look out at the viewer. The second figure is represented in the same pose as

³⁷ Bullen Presciutti, "A Most Beautiful Brawl," 65.

³⁸ Bullen Presciutti, "A Most Beautiful Brawl," 65.

³⁹ Colvin "Über einige Zeichnungen des Carpaccio in England," 193–204.

the woodcut, in profile, her hands gathering her skirt and one foot almost stepping out of her sandal. Carpaccio has altered her headdress, reaffirming the point that it was his “manipulation and responsive adjustment of figures” rather than a slavish copying of motifs that created the orientalis-ing atmosphere.⁴⁰

Carpaccio’s manipulation and adaptation is echoed in his inclusion of a figure known as “the Saracen”. Again, this can be clearly seen in the Uffizi drawing (fig. 7) where the pose, dress, and distinctive head covering are identifiable as having been taken from Reeuwich’s woodcut (fig. 10). In this illustration, the man is seen in conversation with an old, barefooted woman, and both figures gesture towards each other as if in animated speech. In the final painting, Carpaccio, has moved the ‘Saracen’ to the right side of the composition, balancing out the crowd on the left (fig. 5). His gesture and stance are the same, but his head has been angled down to look at the dying dragon, echoing that of the figure in red to his right. Carpaccio has kept the details of the costume with the puffed sleeves, high necked collar and rope-like sash below the waist. However, he has also given the man shoes that curl upwards at the toes, an invention of his own not seen in Reeuwich’s work, that provides a further element of ‘otherness’ and difference to the figure.

The next instance of Carpaccio’s orientalis-ing can be seen in the figures of the King and Queen. The Princess’s parents are often shown in the background of depictions of the *George Killing the Dragon* narrative as they watch helplessly from their palace battlements.⁴¹ Carpaccio, however, has omitted them from his first canvas, choosing instead to give them greater prominence in both his *Triumph* and *Baptism* scenes (figs. 2.5 and 2.6). In the *Triumph* they are seen mounted and riding towards Saint George who holds the dragon’s leash in the centre of the city square. The Queen gazes sideways and down towards her daughter while the King looks straight ahead. In the *Baptism* we see the King and Queen kneeling in front of Saint George in the act of being baptised (fig. 6). Their demeanour is one of quiet dignity and reverence. They still wear their luxurious clothes, but without their outer robes and head coverings. This is significant and creates a tension between the figures both as oriental ‘other’, and simultaneously as Christian brother.

Further orientalis-ing within Carpaccio’s work is seen, perhaps more ambiguously, in the figure of the princess. Carpaccio has omitted the princess from one of his canvases; she does not appear in the *Baptism* alongside

⁴⁰ Fortini Brown, *Narrative Venetian Painting*, 214

⁴¹ Examples include, Altichiero’s 1378–84 fresco in the Oratory of San Giorgio in Padua; the anonymous mid-fifteenth-century roundel in the Scuola degli Schiavoni (Fig. 1); Carlo Crivelli’s predella of *La Madonna della Rondine*, c. 1490, National Gallery, London.

her parents, likely because her starring role occurs earlier. In *Saint George Slaying the Dragon* the princess is seen at far right (fig. 4), swathed in a red robe over a garment that has almost armour-like qualities, echoing Saint George himself in the *Baptism* scene. It is grey with rigid cuffs and has a metallic shine at the arms. An enclosed, turban-style crown with flowing golden veil highlights her royal status. She clasps her hands, watching the scene before her with a calm serenity befitting her rank. In the *Triumph* she is recognisable in the same red robe and turban crown, tightly grasping her father's hand as he leads her back into town (fig. 5). Although the princess's dress marks her as 'other' in both scenes, she could also be understood as bridging the divide between the Christianity of Saint George and the Paganism of her parents and her city. Her clasped hands in the *Slaying* could be interpreted as a gesture of supplication or prayer, perhaps suggesting that she has already seen the truth of God in the victory over evil being played out before her.

A key racial signifier for Carpaccio is the turban, which abounds in both *The Triumph* and *The Baptism* and even in *Saint George Slaying the Dragon*, although it may not at first be obvious.⁴² In his first canvas, Carpaccio peopled his minarets and towers with tiny turbaned Selenites, all watching the scene from the city walls (fig. 4). In the city itself turbans become more profuse and varied. There are spherical ones, wound round in bandage-like strips; a multi-pointed style with criss-crossed strips to hold it in place; and a circular white turban with a red conical top. The King wears one of the angular pointed turbans that is knotted at the back and has a piece trailing down behind him. The men in the group facing the King's entourage and to the right of Saint George wear turbans of diverse styles, shapes, and colours. There are tassels, gold material, neck cloths, furry red ones, and some with feathers. Carpaccio is using the turban in a variety of ways to demonstrate his abilities as a painter, as a visual feast for the eye, as a link to the Venetian trade in fine materials, and, above all, to stand for the Turk, the oriental 'other', the enemy of Christianity and the enemy of the Schiavoni.

Carpaccio may again have used Reeuwich's woodcuts as inspirations for images of men wearing turbans, such as those standing with the veiled lady (fig. 9) or the cavalcade of mounted figures labelled 'turci' and wearing a great assortment of hats and turbans. Carpaccio may also have known Gentile Bellini's portrait of Sultan Mehmet II, in which the sitter wears a turban wound horizontally around the ribbed red cap, or *taj*, of the Ottomans. Fortini Brown suggests a further source, that of the *Saint Mark* cycle of the *Arte dei Setaiuoli* or Guild of the Silk Weavers, painted between 1495 and 1499. This cycle was for the apsidal chapel in the Church of

⁴² Heng, *The Invention of Race*, 4

the Crociferi in the Venetian *sestiere* of Cannaregio and would have been known to Carpaccio.⁴³ The figures in these paintings are in fact Mamluks from Syria and Egypt who wore particularly distinctive head gear that marked them as distinct from Ottomans.⁴⁴

This exploration of the use of the turban in Carpaccio's *Saint George* cycle and its identification with the oriental 'other' underscores my argument that Saint George was being used as a vehicle to communicate ideas of identity, belonging, cultural difference, and Christian victory over the heathen 'other'. This begs the question: how were his canvases received by his audience of Schiavoni in the Scuola and with whom did they identify within those images? It may seem obvious at first glance that the *confratelli* would have identified clearly with Saint George himself—the Christian vanquisher of evil, the saviour of a pagan town, and baptiser of its inhabitants. As indicated earlier, the translation of the Saint George relic to the Scuola was a moment of great celebration for the *confratelli* and an important moment in their acceptance by Venetian authorities. The Venetian cult of Saint George stemmed from the presence of his skull relic in the city, so the fact that the Schiavoni had their own relic gave them a certain status and connection to their adopted home.⁴⁵ With connection and acceptance came the desire for a clear identity; although still by birth a mix of Albanians, Dalmatians, and Slavs, the *confratelli* now identified with the Venetians for whom they fought and with whom they traded. Their religion was Christian and they venerated the same saint, giving them familial and cultural ties to their adopted city.

The identity of the Schiavoni was constructed on the basis of a recognised 'other', their enemy, the invader of their homelands, the Turk. In Carpaccio's paintings the 'other' is clearly identified by the turban and oriental dress of the townspeople. This identification is, however, problematic and the reason for this is found not only in the legend of Saint George, but also in the story of the Schiavoni. As described by Jacobus de Voragine and in other sources for George's *vita*, the Selenites were a pagan society that had resorted to child sacrifice to appease a plague-breathing dragon. When a Christian knight rescued them in the name of the God he honours, they converted to his faith and were baptised. They were transformed from heathen enemy 'other' into Christian friend and sibling. From the symbolically distant Selenites in the dragon slaying canvas, the turbaned figures are brought near, both to the picture plane and to spiritual truth in

⁴³ Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, 197–198, 286.

⁴⁴ In Mansueti's *Arrest of Saint Mark*, Fortini Brown identifies four types of turban distinguishing three different classes within Mamluk society, see Fortini Brown, *Narrative Venetian Painting*, 197. See also Raby, *Venice, Dürer and the Oriental Mode*, 43–53.

⁴⁵ The skull relic resided at San Giorgio Maggiore, see Setton, "Saint George's Head," 1–12.

the *Triumph* and *Baptism* scenes. It is a gradual awakening, a journey from death to life, and mirrors the journey of the Schiavoni and their complex identification with, and reception of, these images.

This morphing of the Selenites from ‘other’ to ‘brother’ continues in the *Baptism*, where the figures are shown as the pagan, oriental, Turk, but also appear in the very moment of being converted to Christianity by Saint George. Although they still wear their oriental garb, they are about to symbolically, and in reality, put it aside, as the neophytes divest themselves of their clothes in preparation for baptism. A turban sits on the steps, discarded but prominent, representing this change in status as the sacrament of baptism is received. One group stands literally and figuratively at this cusp of this identity change: directly behind the kneeling, bareheaded figures, a group of turbaned onlookers stands, deep in conversation, perhaps wrestling with the decision of whether to take off their turbans and be baptised. This creates a tension between the identity of the figures represented and the identity of the Schiavoni as spectator, as they are simultaneously Christian, Venetian citizens, and Slav immigrants.

The Schiavoni Identity and Ethnicity

The complex nature of both the Schiavoni’s identity and the way they may have received these images is further complicated by their troubled heritage and their own ambiguous ethnicity. The Ottomans who had fought and conquered their lands, causing them to flee to Venice, were, for the most part, originally Slavs who had been taken forcibly, as children, from their Christian families living in the area known as the Balkans.⁴⁶ Once grown up and trained as Ottoman soldiers, these originally Slavic men would end up fighting their Schiavoni counterparts, the *stradioti*. Therefore, although it may appear obvious to state that the Schiavoni *confratelli* identified with the figure of Saint George in their newly decorated Scuola, they may plausibly have found resonances in the sympathetically portrayed Selenites—a conversion narrative to redeem a lost generation.

Saint George is mediator of this cultural exchange. This is evident in the fact that he is the only common denominator in each canvas. Carpaccio uses three strategies to visually point towards Saint George’s role as cultural unifier. First is the way Carpaccio forges the saint’s dominance in the *Slaying* scene by making him the largest human figure and causing the profile of his black armoured torso to stand out dramatically against the skyline. Second is his symbolic centrality within the *Triumph*, where he stands as a connecting figure between the two groups of Selenites and is about to despatch the dragon. Finally, in the *Baptism*, Saint George

⁴⁶ de Rosa, “The Balkan Minorities,” 249–269; Fedalto, “Le minoranze straniere,” 143–162.

is depicted as the destination point of the forward motion of the other figures in the scene. He baptises the Selenites at far right, and he is their focus and the culmination of the narrative. Through these visual strategies, Carpaccio draws attention to Saint George's role as unifier; his relic, which was housed at the Scuola; and the Christian faith of his audience. It was thus George and his image that united not only the Schiavoni with each other, but also with their Ottoman enemies.

Conclusion

Through close observation and careful analysis of each Saint George scene, this article has charted the 'oriental' and 'Ottoman' visual instances in Carpaccio's landscapes and figures and found a myriad of them. The sympathetic and sensitive rendering of the figures, their gestures and demeanour, the calm submission of the King and Queen to baptism, would all tend to suggest that they are not the enemy at all. They may be depicted as 'Turk' through their oriental dress, especially the turban, but they are not the foreign 'other' to be despised. The hypothesis that the Schiavoni could have found themselves identifying with the Selenites fits with this evidence. Rather than being the enemy, they were potential Christian *confratelli*.

The real enemy in the *Saint George* cycle was not the Selenite (read Turkish) 'other', but the dragon. The pagan Selenites were simply misguided in their beliefs and had not understood the truth and power of the Christian God until Saint George had come to their town and demonstrated it by vanquishing the dragon. In Revelation, the dragon is equated with the devil:

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. / The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray [...] / When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child [...] / Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus. (Rev. 12:7–9, 13, 17; 13:1)

These verses, which describe the fall of the devil-dragon from heaven, also advanced the view that he still fights against God's chosen people—the offspring of the woman—that is, Christians who are defending their faith. During the medieval and early modern period, this language illustrated the attacks Christians suffered from the hands of the Muslim 'other', and was used by kings and popes to encourage Christians to launch Crusades.

In contemporary textual sources of various kinds, the Muslim Turks were often likened to the dragon of Revelation, a great evil sweeping across the land that had to be stopped. For example, a 1483 woodcut from Roberto Valturio's treatise, *De re Militari*, depicts an Ottoman war machine in the shape of a dragon shooting missiles from its mouth. This may well have been an actual war machine used by the Ottomans to terrify and subdue their enemy. Similarly, Francesco degli Allegri's 1501 song from *La summa gloria di Venetia*, likens the Turks to a ravenous dragon who consumes colonial strongholds.⁴⁷ This symbolism matches the legend of the dragon eating the Selenites' sheep and children. A more formal reference to this was given by the Venetian Archbishop Stefano Taleazzi in his speech of 4 May 1515 at the Tenth Lateran Council, when he described the Ottoman Empire as, "a savage dragon [that] pushes forward and hurries to devour us."⁴⁸ In light of these contemporary allusions to the Turkish-dragon-devil triangle, it is reasonable to view the dragon in Carpaccio's canvases, and not the Selenites, as the Turk. In which case, the turban, rather than having overtones of the foreign 'other' in a derogatory sense, served instead to convey the oriental ambience of Jerusalem, the erstwhile home of the relic of Saint George that the Schiavoni held and prized.

Saint George is thus seen as cultural intermediary between the Schiavoni, the Venetians and, ironically, the Ottomans. The contact zone of the Scuola as devotional institution became a place where oriental motifs, gleaned from a wide variety of eye-witness accounts would combine with a proliferation of bones and a formal procession to remind the spectators of a highly important moment in their history. The dragon-devil lay defeated and the victorious spread of the gospel, in the figures of the converted and baptised Selenites, marched on under the protective auspices of their warrior and patron, Saint George. For the Schiavoni—displaced from their home—this was a different conversion narrative to that experienced by the child slave of the Slavic peasant; it was a redemptive story intended to honour Saint George and tell the Schiavoni that there was hope—the dragon will ultimately be defeated. The Schiavoni were thus united with their Venetian neighbours and integrated into the community through their patron Saint George and the shared visual references of his image around the city and within their Scuola.

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⁴⁷ Gentili, *Le Storie di Carpaccio*, 80.

⁴⁸ Gentili, *Le Storie di Carpaccio*, 61, 79–80.

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1. Anonymous, *Saint George Slaying the Dragon*. Tondo relief shown within the altarpiece, polychromed wood and gilt. Scuola Dalmata di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice (Photo: Alison Barker).



2. Anonymous, *Saint George and the Dragon*. Well head carving, courtyard of the Chiesa dei Greci, Castello, Venice (Photo: Alison Barker).



3. Anonymous, *Saint George and the Dragon*. Relief sculpture placed above an opening beneath a building that spans a tunnel through to another alleyway, Venice (Photo: Alison Barker).



4. Vittore Carpaccio, *Saint George Slaying the Dragon*, ca. 1507. Oil on canvas, 141 x 360 cm. Scuola Dalmata di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice (Photo: Alison Barker).



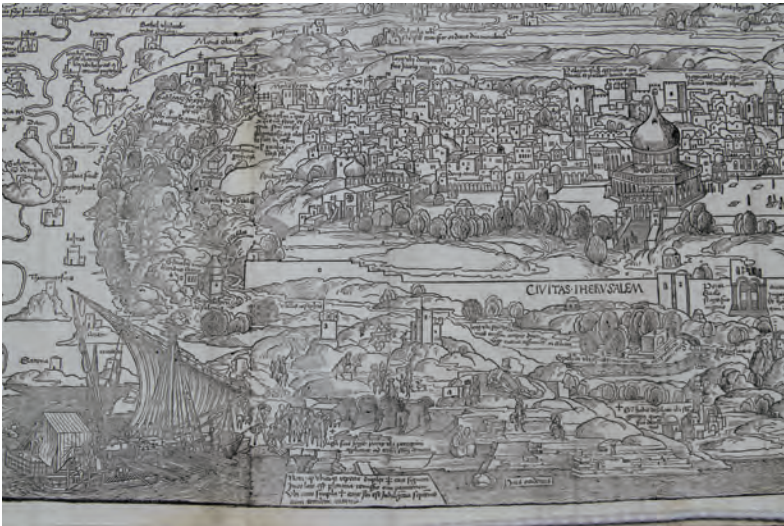
5. Vittore Carpaccio, *The Triumph of Saint George*, ca. 1507. Oil on canvas, 141 x 360 cm. Scuola Dalmata di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice (Photo: Alison Barker).



6. Vittore Carpaccio, *Saint George Baptises the Selenites*, ca. 1507–08. Oil on canvas, 141 x 285 cm, Inscription with signature and date: VICTOR CARPA[TUS]/ MDVII [?], Scuola Dalmata di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice (Photo: Alison Barker).



7. Vittore Carpaccio, *Preparatory Drawing for The Triumph of Saint George*, before 1507. Red chalk and ink, 23.5 x 41.4 cm. Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, Uffizi, Florence, inv.1287E recto (Photo: Alison Barker).



8. Erhard Reuwich, fold-out section of the *City of Jerusalem*, February–June 1486. Woodcut, 126 x 30 cm. In Bernhard von Breydenbach, *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam*, British Museum, London (Photo: Alison Barker).



9. Erhard Reeuwich, *A group of figures in oriental costume*, 1486. Woodcut, 8 x 12 cm. In Bernhard von Breydenbach, *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam*, British Museum, London (Photo: Alison Barker).



10. Erhard Reeuwich, *An old woman and a Saracen*, 1486. Woodcut, 8.5 x 11.5 cm. In Bernhard von Breydenbach, *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam*, British Museum, London (Photo: Alison Barker).