

BYZANTIUM AND ISTRIA: SOME ASPECTS OF BYZANTINE  
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## ABSTRACT

*The Byzantine presence in Istria from 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century is confirmed in documents, archeological findings, art works and has influenced one of the most prolific periods in Istrian art history. There are many aspects of Byzantine influence in all segments of life of the peninsula some of which are presented and discussed in the article: correspondence between the art of the center and the art of the province, implement of the elements of Byzantine aesthetic and its reception in the art, the ways of transmission of iconographic schemes, media, techniques and material and liturgization of the society.*

*Key words: Istria, Byzantium, Justinian, 6<sup>th</sup> century, Adriatic, Eufrasius basilica, Poreč, Pula, early Byzantine art, early Byzantine iconography, liturgy*

BISANZIO E L'ISTRIA: ALCUNI ASPETTI DELLA PRESENZA BIZANTINA  
IN ISTRIA

## SINTESI

*La presenza di Bisanzio in Istria dal VI al VIII secolo viene confermata da documenti, da reperti archeologici, da opere artistiche e ha influenzato uno dei periodi più prolifici nella storia dell'arte istriana. Molti elementi dell'influenza bizantina si riflettono in tutti gli aspetti della vita sulla penisola, alcuni di questi vengono presentati e discussi nell'articolo: la corrispondenza tra l'arte nei grandi centri e l'arte in provincia, uso degli elementi propri dell'estetica bizantina e la sua ricezione dell'arte, il modo in cui si trasmettevano gli schemi iconografici, strumenti, tecniche e materiali e la diffusione della liturgia nella società.*

*Parole chiave: Istria, Giustiniano, VI secolo, Adriatico, basilica di Eufrazio, Parenzo, Pola, arte del primo periodo bizantino, iconografia del primo periodo bizantino, liturgia*

After Belisarius' victory over Ravenna in 540, Istria had formally become part of the Byzantine Empire together with the rest of coastal part of the North Adriatic (Az-zara, 1994, 57–62). The changes that followed were numerous and important evidencing that the mid 6<sup>th</sup> century was one of the peaks in the historical development of the Istrian peninsula. Those changes would strongly determine the profile of the area in the next few centuries. Archeological findings and monuments testify to a fruitful and active period of the Justinianic reconquest, whereas historical documents and sources are scarce, often inconsistent and insufficient for a complete reconstruction of the historical background. Emperor Justinian, a devoted Catholic, gave his ecclesiastic executives moral, political and economic support (Cameron, 1996). Finances came more easily in provinces, for a short time though, giving way to more welcome beneficiaries and patronage. In the theocentric society of Byzantium, religious foundations were a primary focus of both individual and communal pride (Wharton, 1988, 9). Therefore, these monuments attracted patronage and artists and craftsmen of skill levels.

Although Byzantine ideology was universal and uniformly spread through the empire, the essence of Byzantine presence in the provinces differed from the center and among provinces as well. Each of the regions had a specific history, some of which is difficult to reconstruct for the lack of written sources (Goldstein, 1998, 7–14). The 6<sup>th</sup> century art of the Byzantine provinces is of utmost importance since most surviving Byzantine monuments are situated not in Constantinople but in its provinces. In dealing with that art it is always the problem of establishing relations between "provincial" and "central". Art historians have often labeled high-quality works in the provinces metropolitan and those of lesser aesthetic interest provincial, which in the most cases was a rule, using the term provincial in a derogatory sense. The importance of the context in the hinterlands of the Empire that affected the making of the art was not much of an interest. Works of art that exhibit a direct or indirect reaction to metropolitan impetus respond as well to identifiable local circumstances or traditions, whether they be social, political, geographic or cultural. Local tradition makes marks on all structures, especially architectural.

Artistic production under the Byzantine influence in Istria should be recognized in three phases:

Period of the potent Justinian's state organization in the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century; period of the intense building campaign and reconstruction of public and religious monuments along with the overtaking of complete control in the civil and ecclesiastic authority.

Post-Justinianic period that goes from the papacy of Gregory the Great to the end of the Three Chapter controversy and monotheistic dispute 8 century, up to the Lombards' invasion and Frankish occupation of the territory; period that can easily be considered *seculum obscurum* both in historical and artistic testimonies.



*Fig. 1: Pula, church of Santa Maria Formosa.  
Sl. 1: Pulj, cerkev Svete Marije Formose.*

The first phase is abundant with artefacts and represents one of the most productive and important periods of the Istrian art history. It is demonstrated by monumental building and decoration, such as Santa Maria Formosa in Pula (Fig. 1) and Eufra-sius' basilica in Poreč (Fig. 2), as well as by the smaller edifices. By the rule, the

monumental works constructed in the provinces served to reinforce the Byzantine hegemony by introducing and affirming specific influence through art. In a largely oral culture like that of Byzantium the importance of the figurative arts as means of reinforcing the worldview of those in power is great (Wharton, 1988). It was often connected with import - of the material, forms or iconography – associated with elite patronage which in Istrian case (but also in other regions ) was closely related to the centers, Constantinople and Ravenna. On the other hand, the smaller and more mod-



*Fig. 2: Poreč, Basilica of Eufradius.*

*Sl. 2: Poreč, Eufrazijeva Bazilika.*

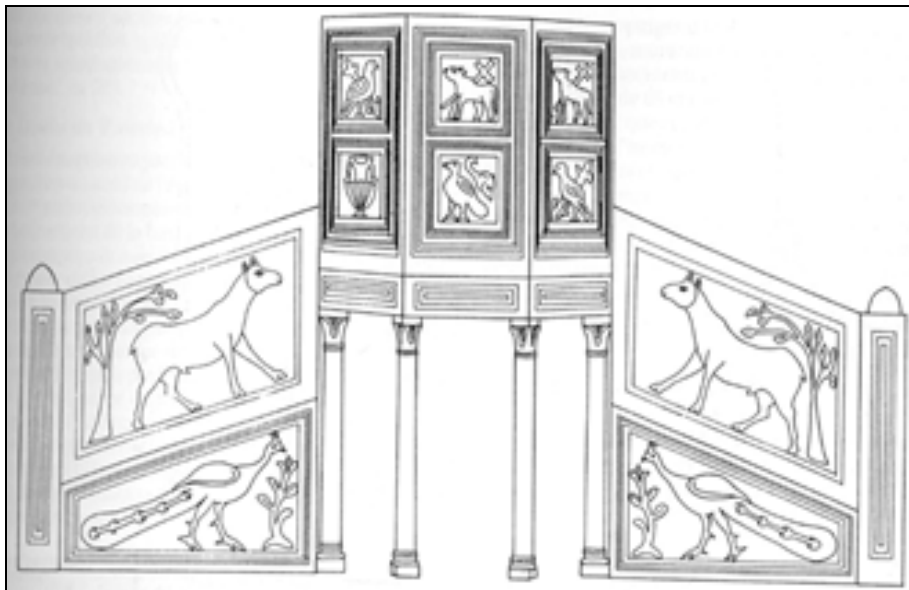


Fig. 3: Poreč, Eufrasius basilica, reconstruction of ambo after P. Chevalier.

Sl. 3: Poreč, Evfrazijeva Bazilika, obnova ambona po P. Chevalier.

est building proves of local artistic production often in extra urban communities. Local artisans, either working with foreign skilled masters or impressed by their work, reformulated their own artistic vocabulary in attempt to reach the quality of models. The assimilation of metropolitan forms in provinces is much more clearly articulated in sculpture and painting than in architecture, where the preservation of tradition in techniques, forms and function is largely perceived (Wharton, A. J, 1988).<sup>1</sup> The stylistic and iconographic features of that art represent a strong influence of the Early Byzantine aesthetic conception. The church topography and liturgical furnishing underwent some changes that can be observed within the wider range of Byzantine presence on the West such as the enlargement of the presbitery, larger and higher chancel enclosure, new forms and function of the ambo and possible erecting ciboria above altars (Chevalier, 1999; Cuscito, 1999). One of the possible reconstructions of the Poreč ambo (Fig. 4) shows its strong eastern influence (Chevalier, 1995), while the fragments of ambo found in the cathedral of Pula reveal a tower-shaped type with animal decoration and its direct link with Ravenna (Vicelja, 1998).<sup>2</sup> Also the parts of

<sup>1</sup> The interesting study of the reception of the Byzantine forms and iconography, as well as the change in the social functioning of art in medieval Cyprus, but as a case study for the Byzantine provinces, is given in Wharton A, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> The reconstruction determines the existence of ambo with two flights of steps in the Eufrasiana which

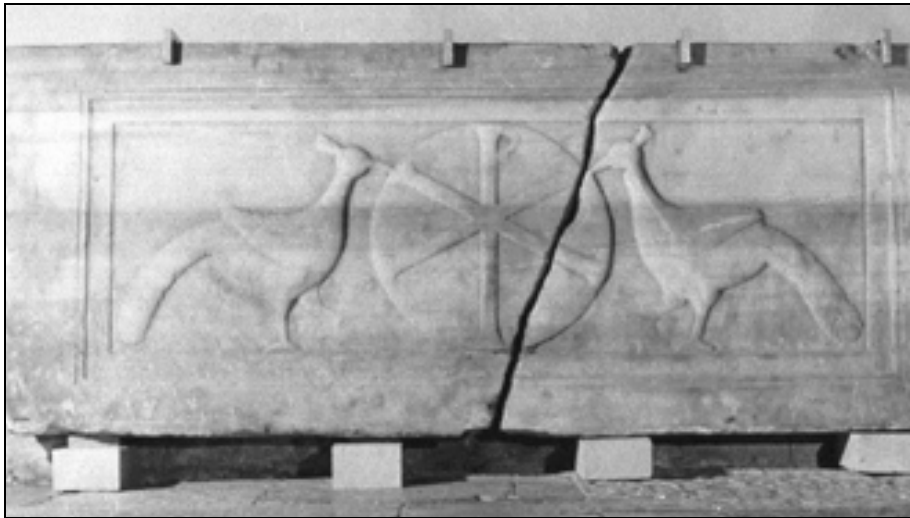
the chancel enclosure, with the high columns, specific iconographic program, import marble of Proconesus and techniques of carving connect it with the center and its workshops (Terry, 1988; Russo, 1991; Vicelja, 1999).

There is also a straight principle in defining function of image within the church interior, both in iconography and media. Therefore, floor mosaics will continue to reflect popular culture while wall mosaics convey expressions of official ideology and dogma. Relation between the function of the medium and the new conceptions is best observed in liturgical sculpture, parts of the different furnishing. Stone sculpture in Istria demonstrates clear and strong continuity from the ancient times through the middle ages and enables us to follow the changes and principles of the development of different styles. The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries are the period of the weak production, according to the archeological material (Šonje, 1972). But with the Byzantine presence the impetus was given to stone carving mostly by importing sculpture from the centers for the two most important sites in Pula and Poreč (Figs. 5–6). From there the influence was spread in their outskirts and countryside where we find elements of the



*Fig. 4: Pula, Cathedral, Chancel enclosure slab.  
Sl. 4: Pulj, Katedrala, Kamnita plošča pred oltarjem.*

is hardly supported by the sculptural fragments as well as their dimensions. It is more likely that the church had a monumental ambo with a single stairway, on the high platform supported by piers or colonnettes and with polygonal parapet. The other possible reconstructions, together with the iconographic program, refer to the eastern origins. The problem of the form is still to be discussed.



*Fig. 5: Pula, Cathedral, Chancel enclosure slab.  
Sl. 5: Pulj, Katedrala, Kamnita plošča pred oltarjem.*

6<sup>th</sup> century locally produced sculpture that is copying forms and iconography of the imported pieces, or to say that is introducing the Byzantine aesthetic norms in presentation. It is primarily the reception of the concepts of representation: centric, symmetrical composition with limited choice of motifs that are to be repeated in the whole of the Byzantine koine. The function of that art is clearly presented and based on the Byzantine aesthetic canon, a link to religious dogma, liturgy and philosophy of the Justinianic time (Mathew, 1963; MacCormac, 1981).

The clearly defined function of the image in the church is probably best expressed in the program of the mosaics in the Eufrasius' basilica in Poreč (Fig. 7). The entire decoration of the church: mosaics, opus sectile, stucco decoration, stone sculpture, reveals the most elaborate and distinctive ideological program, very complex and with different layers of meaning. Regarding the mosaic decoration as a whole, or in its segments, we can conclude that it does not illustrate any particular text but a solicitous choice of biblical and symbolical scenes in attempt to elaborate a certain program. The center of the mosaic decoration (Fig. 8) which is the center of the iconographic scheme underlines Mary as Theotocos, together with other scenes, especially those of Annunciation (Fig. 9) and Visitation, accentuates the acceptance of the Calcedonian orthodoxy and the idea of incarnation. Such uniquely survived program has attracted lot of attention and there is an impressive bibliography on the subject (Kastelic, 1962; Maksimović, 1964; Mirković, 1967; Tavano, 1975; Šonje, 1982–83; Milinović, 1999–2000). Most of the articles, though, concentrate on and



*Fig. 6: Poreč, Interior of the Basilica of Eufrazius.*

*Sl. 6: Poreč, Notranjost Eufrazijeve Bazilike.*





*Fig. 7: Poreč, Basilica of Eufrosius, mosaic in the apse.*

*Sl. 7: Poreč, Evfrazijeva Bazilika, mozaik v apsidi.*

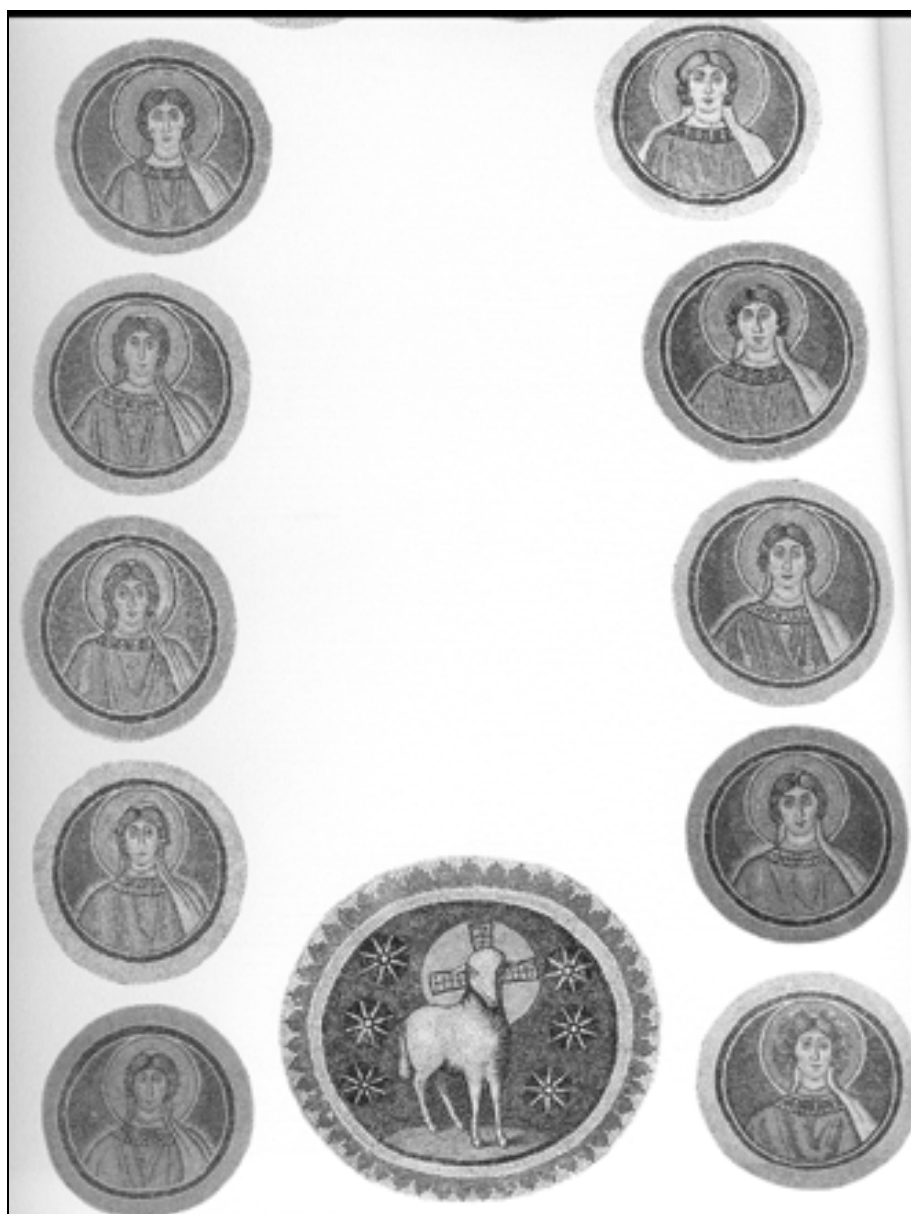
convey the symbolism of incarnation and acceptance of orthodoxy according to the doctrinal controversies and the role of emperor in the promotion of the cult of Theotokos. But, there are other elements and symbolic concepts suggested within the program like the role of children and familiar piety in the representation of little Eufrosius offering candles to the Virgin Mary (Fig. 10; Hennessy, 2003) or the intermediary role of saints and their connection to the liturgy. In all the elements we recognize the refined and elaborated iconographic concept directed from Constantinople where, from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, a distinctive development of the cult of the Theotokos was taking place (Graef, 1963). The rise of the Virgin's cult was largely encouraged and institutionalized by the authorities and the emperor himself which would evoke the development of Marian feasts, religious attitudes in the homily and prayers and church consecrations during the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The triumphal iconography of the Virgin that represents her enthroned receiving homage of the saints, martyrs, prophets, patriarchs and bishops became one of the dominant themes in the visual arts. The authorities of Constantinople in the cult of Mary also recognized divine help and protection that started with Justinian but was highly developed in the second half of



*Fig. 8: Poreč, Basilica of Eurasius, mosaic in the apse, Annunciation.  
Sl. 8: Poreč, Evfrazijeva Bazilika, mozaik v apsidi, Oznanjenje.*



*Fig. 9: Poreč, Basilica of Eufrazius, mosaic in the apse, detail.*  
*Sl. 9: Poreč, Eufrazijeva Bazilika, mozaik v apsidi, detajl.*



*Fig. 10: Poreč, Basilica of Eufrasius, Medallions with female saints in the apse.  
Sl. 10: Poreč, Evfrazijeva Bazilika, Medaljon s svetnicami v apsidi.*

the 6<sup>th</sup> century in the Constantinople as well as the distant provinces where the threat of external invasions was largely felt (Warner, 1976; Kitzing, 1977; Cameron, 1984). Increase in Marian devotion should certainly be seen within the wider context of the rise of icons and veneration of relics, where those associated with the Virgin became particularly potent (Baynes, 1955; Brown, 1992).<sup>3</sup> Byzantine emperors followed the public religious feelings about Mary that started primarily as urban or metropolitan cult not of the elite but of the ordinary people<sup>4</sup> that easily and quickly turned in the manifestation of her protection over the whole empire. Therefore, the whole empire accepted her support, protection and intermediary towards God's grace transforming her in the symbol of the unity of the Byzantine world. The widely used iconographic scheme of Mary on a throne, with Christ on her lap, flanked by angels, saints and donors, convey the idea of her being the most potent intercessor before God. Her virginity, seen as the absolute purity, was the powerful mean of intercession (Cameron, 1981, 106). So the images that communicate that idea spread throughout the empire in different media and techniques. Very often they are found in provinces especially north Africa, Syria, Palestine and Cyprus (Delatre, 1907; Tavano, 1974; Cameron, 1984; Michaelides, 1987, 67; Nasrallah, 1987).<sup>5</sup> Mosaics in Poreč primarily deal with the concept of incarnation but in the second layer express the idea of Theotocos as protectress and relates to the political and social circumstances of the territory and of the time. Their importance is in introducing the cult of Theotocos in Istria in the monumental form, opening up question of its acceptance and development. Also, they introduced cult of some other saints the dispersion of which we have some documents and traces, such as Euphemia, Thecla, Andrew, Cosma and Damien and other. The list of saints appearing in the medallions and other images in the church of Eufrasius could indicate that the saints were honoured with a public cult in the mid 6<sup>th</sup> century in Poreč, although no written sources can

<sup>3</sup> The relics of Virgin's garments were specially venerated like her robe and girdle that became the common place of the devotion in Constantinople.

<sup>4</sup> It has been an ongoing debate about popular religion, its concept and manifestations. For that see: Brown, 1971.

<sup>5</sup> E. Male wrote in his book "La fin du paganisme en Gaul" (Paris, 1950) that only after the council in Ephesus in 431 churches started to be dedicated to the Virgin. This opinion has been widely used in the literature but there are elements that testify that the cult of Virgin was very strong in different parts of christian East even before the Council from which time we have written documents that evidence the dedication of churches to Mary like the sanctuary in Syria from 390. The more intensive building and decorating of churches dedicated to the Virgin in Syria and Antiochia, of which we have both archaeological and written evidence, goes to the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century (basilica in Ruweidi, inscription from the church of Hama that mentions the construction of the basilica of the Virgin, Cosma and Damien and other). See in: Nasrallah, 1987.



*Fig. 11: Brijuni island, Stone slab.*  
*Sl. 11: Otok Brijuni, Kamnita plošča.*

back up the thesis.<sup>6</sup> The images of twelve female saints in medallion (Fig. 11), dressed in a rich attire, with diadems, refer to the mystery of the liturgical drama, a heavenly wedding on the feast of a virgin. Thus, the group of the saints, from the canon of the Mass, adorns the space above the altar where the Eucharist is celebrated, and is present as members of celestial court who had "seen" the Lord (Simpson, 1948). The image of Santa Euphemia, a celebrated martyr of Calcedon, is placed in the center of the composition, enforcing the doctrines proclaimed at the Council.

<sup>6</sup> Little we know of the church history and the liturgy used by the church in Istria during the Byzantine presence. It probably continued to develop and minister within the Aquileian rite. There are little evidence of the dispersion of the cult of different saints and the possible influence from the Byzantine world as well as their commemoration within the canon of the Mass. At the time of Pope Gelasius (492–496) some notable changes were introduced in Roman rite that affected other rites of Western Church. One of the novelties was the recital of the names of the saints with the possible aim to invoke aid of those whose names were read. We know that the list of the names was changing during the course of the sixth century. See more in: Kennedy, 1938.

After the triumph of Justinian we observe the so called "liturgification" in the society, both in the centre and its provinces. It is a process that determined almost rigid functions and roles which, to an extent, abrogated differences between secular and religious, the process that attempted to establish uniformly religious approach to life with a bishop in its center as a supreme protector and arbiter in both civil and religious suits (Brown, 1992, 146–152; Brown, 2002, 67; Cracco Ruggini, 1999).<sup>7</sup> Bishop also played a role of a moderator in the ways artistic language was introduced and developed through the programmed function of art. Byzantine ceremonial was introduced in almost all spheres of civic and religious life. In a paragraph of *Rižana Placitum* we read the spoken words of one representative of the municipium of Pula: in time of Greeks, when a patriarch would come to our town, together with the imperial emissaries (*missi imperiales*), or if an assembly (*placitum*) would take place, he (the patriarch, op. aut) would be greeted by a bishop followed by the clergy all dressed in liturgical vestments, carrying crosses, candelabra and incense, singing as it is appropriate and rightful for a patriarch's visit. After them, members of civil authority would join together with people paying them great honor. At the entrance of a bishop's palace bishop himself would lean and place the keys of his house at the patriarch's feet who would then rule, for three days". This paragraph clearly demonstrates the infiltration of elaborate Byzantine ceremonial in the 6<sup>th</sup> century that continued to be practised since the "speaker" refers to it as something of a recent history. The *Rižana Placitum* gives valuable information about certain practices in public and church sphere, as the example just mentioned. It may define some of many indeterminate aspects and problems regarding life in Istria in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. Justinian's earlier period had turned into deep crisis, facing wars, weakened army, shortage of money, plague, heresies. Still, we can not perceive the period with a catastrophic consequences since the life on the coastal line and maritime limes and trade continued to bound two worlds, the East and the West. However, Byzantine administrative rule in Istria weakened as well as political and cultural influence from the capital. The end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century faced a turning point in the imperial policy towards western provinces (for all well known reasons) and, in the period that followed, Byzantine historians and chroniclers showed drastic loss of interest in the events on the Adriatic, church disputes excluded.<sup>8</sup> As it happened in the whole area of north Adri-

<sup>7</sup> That was tradition set up in Constantinian times that enabled the emperor to demonstrate respect for bishops as well as supreme authority (Brown, 2002, 67). Especially in the provinces and smaller cities and their surroundings, the questions of law and order and the maintenance and control of civic pride devolved strongly on the figure of bishop. By the fourth century the bishops could and would interfere in the secular world, by the sixth century this had become the norm. This was a fundamental change in the society with far reaching effects. The Emperor remained the embodiment of power but the Church, represented by bishops, became the most accessible institution of authority (Brown, 1992, 146–152).

<sup>8</sup> The problem of the Three Chapters and the crisis of the Oikoumene that failed quest for unity in Mediterranean in the 6<sup>th</sup> century is a non finished task primarily defining its possible political

atic, the building activity and artistic production was scarce, imitating the forms and iconographic schemes of the previous period. The persisting sculptural material demonstrates that the tradition of stone sculpture continued and is characterized by the production of replicas in local limestone and by local craftsmen. The pronounced reduction of building activity and the closure of quarries as well as the scarcity of sculpture was a fact for the period in all the Byzantine provinces. Best preserved pieces in Istria belong mainly to the liturgical sculpture, fragments of sanctuary enclosure slabs, ambos, altars and some architectural sculpture pieces (Fig. 12). Decorated sculpture carries simple design with a central motif: cross or monogram flanked by lateral crosses or confronted animal figures, or the field may be covered with plant ornament. The relief is shallow, composition often irregular with a notable concern for abundance and decorating the whole of the surface.

Istria in the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century defined itself within the historical frame of the Upper Adriatic region which experienced intensely from the presence of Byzantium. The sources of Byzantine influence in the provinces were various and were certainly not pure and simple. Therefore, we have to analyze it not as case but as different aspects that evolved during that period and that could be testified in sources, documents and works of art. As for the latter, we should underline that the changes traced do not manifest the emergence of new style nor the development of the specific or authentic artistic production. Stylistically, the art continued the late Antique language of visibility, but interpreted within the elaborate iconographic program. Iconographic models are of outermost importance not only for the transmission of subject matters but also for the question of format, material, media, composition as well as the ideological message. In a broader sense monumental 6<sup>th</sup> century art in Istria composed formational frame for the development and transmission of artistic vocabulary in the centuries that followed.

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connotations. The church hierarchy in the north Adriatic region refused to support Justinian's condemnation of the Three Chapters which resulted in the long schism of the church. The participating of Istrian bishops has been regarded but it is still observed in more general context with some references that are to be reinterpreted. On the schism see: Straw, 1996.





*Fig. 12: Pula, Cathedral, Chancel enclosure slab.  
Sl. 12: Pulj, Katedrala, Kamnita plošča pred oltarjem.*

#### BIZANC IN ISTRA: NEKATERI VIDIKI BIZANTINSKE PRISOTNOSTI V ISTRI

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#### **POVZETEK**

Glavna tema tega besedila se nanaša na vpliv in na spremembe, ki so se uveljavile po letu 540 po padcu Ravenne in po vključitvi Istre v Bizantinsko cesarstvo. Splošna raziskava o razvoju umetnosti na Istrskem polotoku v Justinijanskem in po-justinijanskem obdobju pa ni popolna, saj večina materiala se ni ohranila ali pa je nepopolna. Naša znanja nam dovoljujejo, da sklepamo, da je skupina istrskih spomenikov vključena v splošnen tok umetnostnega razvoja, ki je zajel celotno območje Jadrana. Posebno nas zanimajo spomeniki tega obdobja, ki se nahajajo v mestnih središčih na obali, kot sta na primer Evfrazijeva bazilika v Poreču ali cerkev Marije Formose v Pulju s svojo arhitekturo, s kipi in okrasitvami, s svojo visoko kakovostjo

*izdelanosti in še posebno sta zanimivi zaradi ikonografije, ki razkriva uvedbo Bizantinske umetnosti v šestem stoletju v Istri. Bizantinski kriterij, kot naprimer temeljno estetično pojmovanje verske dogme, liturgije in ikonografske topografije, so razvidni v kipih in v mozaikih. Opazimo lahko polisemantično razčlenjene teme in tudi splošna pravila zgodnjega Bizantinskega prikazovanja, geometrije in abstrakcije. Po-Justinijanovo obdobje od poznega 6. stoletja do sredine 8. stoletja, odraža značilnosti, ki pripadajo Sredozemskemu območju in so posledica posebnega zgodovinskega položaja, ki ni bil naklonjen razvoju umetnosti. Večina spomenikov je tako ohranila stile in vzorce iz prejšnjega obdobja in je zavestno izbirala motive in načela prikazovanja. Stilistične posebnosti se bodo spremenile proti koncu 8. stoletja pod vplivom novih političnih sprememb in umetnostnih vplivov.*

*Prisotnost Bizanca v Istri moramo razumeti tudi iz zornega kota močne podpore za širitev in razvoj Krščanstva in krščanske umetnosti, ki je prinesla materialno podlago za grajenje in okraševanje cerkev, zajamčila je potrebno politično in socialno podlago tako, da je polotok odprla in ga povezala z vodilnimi centri cesarstva, poleg tega pa je ohranjala vse vrste tradicij pozne Antike.*

*Ključne besede: Istra, Bizanc, Justinijan, 6. stoletje, Jadran, Evfrazijeva bazilika, Poreč, Pulj, zgodnja bizantinska umetnost, zgodnja bizantinska ikonografija, liturgija*

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