

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

PAOLO VENEZIANO

The King of Brittany, father of Saint Ursula, in prayer

Tempera on wood panel, gold background, 8½ x 8⅞ in (21.5 x 25.5 cm)

1310 / 1320



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

PROVENANCE

Bisman auction, Hôtel des Ventes du Vieux Palais, Rouen, 18 June 2017, lot 16 (as Northern Italian School, 15th century); 2017, private collection.

This exquisite little panel represents an episode from the life of Saint Ursula, a young princess who probably lived between the fourth and fifth centuries and was martyred in Cologne by the Huns, under Attila. Daughter of a Breton king, she agreed to marry the son of the king of Britain, a pagan, on condition that he convert to Christianity. The scene depicted here, when Maurus, Ursula's father, pauses in prayer after the pagan king's request, reflects an intimate, deeply-felt moment for the protagonist, forced to choose between his daughter's wish to consecrate herself to God and the possibility of averting war being waged against his kingdom. Maurus kneels devoutly before an altar which bears a cross crosslet adorned with pearls and gold, and covered with a finely embroidered altar-cloth and a frontal decorated with colourful geometric motifs. The altar stands within a small apsidal structure, adjacent to a crenelated wall with an elegant frieze of foliate motifs, suspended arches, and classical piers with brackets. On the gold background, next to two slender trees, an inscription states "hic oravit pater sancte Ursule" ("Here the father of St Ursula prayed"). Dressed in a red robe and fur-lined mantle, the King has an energetic stance, leaning forward in religious fervour, and the folds of his dress follow the movement of the body with naturalness and ease.

The author of this painting is undoubtedly Paolo Veneziano in his youthful phase, in the period of the *Stories from the Life of the Virgin* of 1310/1320 in the Musei Civici, Pesaro (Sandberg Vavalà 1930, p. 177; Pallucchini 1964, figs. 19-23; Muraro 1969, p. 132, figs. 67-72; Alessandro Marchi, in *Il Trecento adriatico* 2002, pp. 146-147), with which one can make close comparisons, especially in the potently expressive faces and absence of Byzantine-inspired pictorial devices, which had by now been superseded by a gentler tonal fusion. Paolo was the most influential painter in Venice during the first half of the 1300s, but the identification of his early work remains open to debate, and owing to his use of the same figurative models, it is sometimes hard to distinguish his hand from those of other masters who worked close to him in the family-run workshop. Among these were his father Martino – perhaps identifiable as the Master of the Washington Coronation of 1324 – and his brother Marco, who may be the author of the fragmentary group of panels with the *Virgin and Child with Four Stories from Her Life*, now in the church of San Pantalon in Venice.

The panel studied here can almost be superimposed in spatial layout and compositional and decorative elements on the same scene from a dossal formerly in the Queroy collection (Paris, to 1907) and then the Volterra collection (Florence, 1949-1954), now in an unknown location (figs. 1, 2), with a variant featuring the presence of Ursula kneeling next to her father (fig. 1). But the Queroy dossal cannot be considered an autograph work by Paolo, and should be attributed to the Master of San Pantalon, a painter who was perhaps older, but also of notable quality, and capable of extraordinary compositional invention, as in the case of the second of the three episodes of Ursula's voyage, *Saint Ursula steering*

the ship while an exhausted companion falls asleep, in which the vessel is gripped by the fury of the waves, its sails billowing and mast bent to almost breaking point (fig. 2).

A panel in a private collection in Bergamo (Muraro 1969, p. 106, fig. 88; Flores d'Arcais, in *Il Trecento adriatico* 2002, pp. 150-151; Pedrocco 2003, pp. 168-169; Boskovits 2009, p. 89 note 21) corresponds to the first of the episodes of the voyage in the Queroy dossal, with *Saint Ursula on the ship instructing her companions*. The panel in question, wrote Rodolfo Pallucchini, "repeats its compositional motif, simplifying the structure of the vessel, and is also similar in style" (Pallucchini 1964, p. 27). Yet even if it features a single mast and a more rigid, almost starched sail, the Bergamo panel contains more analytically observed details such as the shrouds (rigging) or the more three-dimensional rendering of the stern castle.

Our panel and the one in Bergamo thus probably formed two fragments of a hagiographic work dedicated to Saint Ursula very similar to the Queroy dossal but chronologically earlier, executed by Paolo Veneziano during the 1310s and intended as a model for workshop replicas. Alongside the *Stories of the Life of the Virgin* in Pesaro, a very early work by Paolo and proof of how Giotto's Paduan work penetrated Venice, with the same lively narrative spirit and type of female faces (for example, the group of maidens in the *Marriage of the Virgin*, Pesaro), a similar style appears in the altarpiece of *Saint Donatus with the Podestà Donato Memo and his Wife* (Venice, Museo Diocesano), dated 1310 and originally in Santi Maria e Donato, Murano (Pallucchini 1964, figs. 16-18; Silvia Pichi, in Torcello 2009, pp. 174-175, cat. 61). The faces of the two donors, with their distinct and intensely expressive facial features, match the penetrating gaze of King Maurus.

The present panel therefore represents an important element in the definition of Paolo Veneziano's oeuvre in its still problematic early period, which is marked by energetic handling, great vitality, and more generally a rapprochement with the figurative influences of the Venetian *terra ferma*, and in particular Giotto's work in Padua. This oeuvre is not always readily distinguishable within the output of a complex workshop that comprised masters from significantly different figurative cultures, although they were united by the use of common prototypes and a shared iconographic repertoire.

Comparative literature

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