



## SIENA, AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN EAST AND WEST IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY.

by *Camillo Tarozzi*

The Middle Ages – age “in the middle” of ancient times and modern age - often linked up to the idea of “dark Ages”- is instead a moment of flourishing relations and exchanges among different worlds and cultures.

In the thirteenth century both Europe and Mediterranean were an “open” reality, whose political, social and trade relations were very close. In spite of battles and wars the sea was more often a channel than an obstacle for the contacts: coastal cities were in need of establishing contact with the opposite shore. At those times while in western Europe flourished Costantinople, the ancient, educated, rich and powerful capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire instead was a point of reference even for the other shore. At the beginning of the century, in 1204 during the fourth Crusade, a “diversionary manoeuvre” overall promoted by the Venetian doge Enrico Dandolo led firstly to the capture of the city that remained subjugated until 1261 and secondly to the subdivision of the ancient Empire in little states, partly ruled by “Latin” people, especially Venetians and French one – partly by Greek “Byzantine” princes.



The conflict didn't stop, on the contrary it magnified the contact cultural reasons. A lot of travelling shops of Art in the Byzantine capitals that were in search of opportunity, worked for eastern and western clients, while western artists worked in the East Latin States in a profitable exchange...

During the dramatic years when the Empire was split in two parts, between 1220 and 1270, the Byzantine cultural “revival” of the thirteenth century was at its highest peak.



In confirmation of their identity and for reconquering their lost grandeur, “Greek” States made use of the art too, favouring classical styles inspired by the models of the ancient times, making an exception towards the traditional and conventional image.

In a moment of the Empire vulnerability some areas of the near Balkans, that until that point were dependent on the Empire, were able to escape

from the ancient control. One of those area was Serbia, a region between what we call today the coast of Montenegro and the inner regions: at the political, religious and social border between East and West facing the Adriatic Sea with important cities as Cattaro, Antivari, Scutari, the new State remained bounded both to the culture of Costantinople and to the orthodox Christianity maintaining strong relations with the deep-rooted Catholicism on the coastline and western States also through marriage agreements. So Stephen, the first crowned king of Serbia, married the Venetian Anne Dandolo, niece of the conqueror of Costantinople and in 1217 he received the crown directly from the Pope Honorius III. In the middle of the century one of his descendant Uros I get married to Helen. She was related to the French Angevin dynasty that ruled in the southern of Italy and protected papacy, guelf cities and the Franciscan order increasing his power in the Balkans and Hungary. Since the beginning this new reign, just for its geographic and political position in Europe, had a function of handing over ideas and suggestions between East and West.

The great monasteries– religious, political and social centres – put up by the representatives of the dynasty and the orthodox Church, among them stands out Mileseva (1222- 1228) and Sopocani (1263- 1268), were built by architects that probably came from the coast and well knew the Romanesque architecture so widespread in Italy, while the inner wonderful paintings remind to the most high art of the “revival” in the major Byzantine centres revised by the cultured Serbian clients. Even if often ignored by a long western historiographical tradition, guilty of having ascribed to the term “Byzantine” only a negative meaning neglecting its great values, many are the examples that confirm the existence of these suggestions in Italy. Its “central” position in the Mediterranean created a direct comparison with that reality.

Recent researches allow to read again from this perspective (even if in the sphere of a renewed language) various moments of the thirteenth century Tuscan art. These “passages” are confirmed by the rediscovering of important paintings dated around 1260, under the crypt of the Siena Cathedral made public in 2003 in the occasion of the art exhibition on Duccio and the beginning of the artistic school of Siena.

Extraordinary for their good preservation are the iconographies of Byzantine origins “The Crucifixion”, “Lamentation over The Dead Christ”. These types of themes were very widespread in frescoes and in the oriental icons and in the west revival too. But here there is something more. Some paintings such as “Deposition”, “Pious Women” and “Nicodemus” highlight a pure formal loan (as if it is about of an identical drawing) coming from a famous “oriental” prototype of nearly 50 years back: the “ Descent From the Cross” was painted by a great master in Serbia, at Mileseva.



The painting of the Duomo surely is not a Byzantine work of art. Besides the conservative condition (in Mileseva painting a part of the scene is lost), as regards the prototype, there are differences regarding the line used, that here is prone to the “gothic” movement, and to the chromatic layout. On the Serbian painting (where traditionally subjects were painted on a brilliant golden colour base) are prevailing the intense blue colours of the Virgin dress that it is dramatic regarding the immobility of the body. In the painting of Siena, instead, on a blue base prevail the warm colours: red clothes are worn both by the Virgin Mary and by the last subject on the right; the golden colour light up only the Christ loincloth. Also in comparison with a different culture the modern “artist” wants to adapt himself to the stylistic and constituent harmony of the great model whose the painting of Mileseva remains a refined witness.

After 1261 when the Paleologhi Greek dynasty returned in Costantinople the exchanges didn't interrupt but their level lost of strength. The new Byzantine revival named “Paleologue”, between the end of thirteenth century and the first ten years of the fourteenth century, assumed other styles and the Oriental Art, even if sublime, was divided more and more from the western one, also for the increasing break in the Christianity, aiming at the absolute spiritualization according to the theological vision that triumphed in Costantinople in the middle of the century. In Italy instead, thanks to the cities development, at the beginning of the fourteenth century the art starts to increase towards a greater contact with the “reality”, finding in Giotto his most extraordinary representative.

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*The pictures refer to frescoes of the Monastery of Mileseva, preceding to 1230*