

# A new attribution to Giovanni Bellini: the 'Virgin and Child' in Pag

A fifteenth-century panel of the Virgin and Child in the convent of St Margaret on the Dalmatian island of Pag has escaped notice outside the Croatian art-historical literature. It is argued here that it can be attributed to Giovanni Bellini and dated c.1460.

by BEATRICE TANZI

**I**N THE SMALL MUSEUM recently set up in the Benedictine convent on the island of Pag, in the Dalmatian archipelago, there is a mid-fifteenth-century painting of the Virgin and Child (Fig.1). It was possibly formerly in the Chapel of St Nicholas in the convent church, which is dedicated officially to St Mary of the Annunciation but traditionally to St Margaret.<sup>1</sup> Although the panel presents serious conservation problems since it has suffered extensive paint loss, some parts, notably the Child, who is holding what appears to be a pomegranate, are relatively intact and of high quality. Despite its conspicuous abrasions, the panel is relatively unaffected by repainting, except for a few coarse *à rigatino* additions in the most damaged parts. It has been suggested that there are traces of a cusped frame on the painting, which could mean that it was originally part of a triptych or a polyptych, but fragments of paint in the upper corners of the panel refute this hypothesis.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to its secluded location, both in terms of geography and its setting in an enclosed convent, the painting has received very little attention outside Croatia. The purpose of the present article is to publish the painting for an English-speaking audience and to invite discussion of the ambitious attribution that will be proposed.

The panel has been the object of critical inquiry by Croatian art historians for forty years. In that time it has undergone two conservation

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*Adriatico* and the catalogue of the Jacquemart André exhibition *Giovanni Bellini: Influences croisées* were published in 2022 and 2023 respectively, and so the article does not take them into account. However, I am indebted to Professor Ballarin for all that I have learned from his outstanding scholarship and the impeccable methodology of his studies.

1 The church, reconstructed in the new urban centre of Pag around the middle of the century, was officially dedicated to St Mary of the Annunciation in 1473 but the nuns, who moved into the building in 1485 (in defiance of the bishop of Zadar), asked to keep the old dedication to St Margaret.  
2 K. Prijatelj: 'Juraj Čulinović i slikarska zbivanja u Šibeniku u doba

1. *Virgin and Child*, here attributed to Giovanni Bellini. c.1460. Tempera on panel, 54.5 by 44.5 cm. (Museum of the Benedictine monastery of St Margaret, Pag; photograph 123RF.com).

treatments, one carried out in the 1970s at the Croatian Conservation Institute (Hrvatski restauratorski zavod), Split, and a second in 2011 in advance of the panel being shown in an exhibition of Venetian painting in Zagreb.<sup>3</sup> The latter conservation seems to have consisted simply of a consolidation of the painted surface. All published photographs of the painting show it in the same state of preservation. The first scholar to study the panel was Kruno Prijatelj, an art historian from Split, who published an article on it in 1982.<sup>4</sup> Recognising its exceptional quality, he attributed it to the school of Squarcione, hesitating between the Dalmatian-born painter Andrea Schiavone (1510/15–1563), Carlo Crivelli (1435–95) and an unknown Paduan painter who may have had a close acquaintance with the early works of Andrea Mantegna as well as with paintings by Antonio and Bartolomeo Vivarini. The painting was discussed in several publications from the late 1980s onwards by Emil Hilje, a professor at the University of Zadar.<sup>5</sup> In a book published in 1999 he hinted at a general stylistic affinity with Giovanni Bellini, making him the first scholar to link the painting to the artist, but in the same publication (and all subsequent ones) he decided against the attribution, because 'a certain harshness of the drawing

Jurja Dalmatinca', *Radovi Instituta za povijest umjetnosti* 3–6 (1978–82), pp.238–48, at p.242; and G.S. Matejčić, entry in R. Tomić, ed.: exh. cat. *Tizian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Veliki majstori renesanse*, Zagreb (Galerija Klovičevi dvori) 2011–12, pp.70–72, at p.70, no.3.  
3 Matejčić, *op. cit.* (note 2); regarding the restoration interventions, see S. Šuštić: 'Djelovanje Cvite Fiskovića na zaštitu i restauraciji povijesnog slikarstva i skulpture na hrvatskoj obali', unpublished PhD thesis (University of Zagreb, 2016), pp.277–78, figs.65–66. There is no record of the painting having undergone any technical analysis.

4 Prijatelj, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.242–43.  
5 E. Hilje: *Gotičko slikarstvo u Zadru*, Zagreb 1999, pp.142–43; *idem*: entry in R. Tomić, ed.: *Slikarstvo: umjetnička*

*baština Zadarske Nadbiskupije*, Zadar 2006, pp.182–84, no.056; *idem*: 'Prihvatanje renesansnoga slikarstva u Zadru u drugoj polovini 15. stoljeća', in D. Premerl, M. Pelc and S. Cvetnić, eds: *Sic ars deprenditur arte: Zbornik u čast Vladimira Markovića*, Zagreb 2009, pp.255–64, at pp.257–58; *idem*: 'Srednjovjekovna umjetnička baština paških benediktinki', in M. Granić, ed.: *Crkva i samostan paških benediktinki – Zbornik radova sa znanstveno-stručnog skupa održanog u Pagu 25. rujna 2004. godine posvećen uspomeni opatice Gertrude Magaš*, Pag 2010, pp.163–76, at pp.169–70, figs.23–26; and *idem*: 'Srednjovjekovna umjetnička baština samostana sv. Margarite u Pagu', in M. Granić, ed.: *Umjetnička baština paških benediktinki*, Pag 2018, pp.7–97, at pp.17–19, figs.72–77.







A new attribution to Giovanni Bellini







Opposite, clockwise from top left

2. Detail of Fig.1.

3. *Virgin and Child (Fodor Madonna)*, by Giovanni Bellini. c.1457–58. Tempera on panel, 78 by 56 cm. (Private collection; photograph Studio Sébert / Culturespaces).

4. Detail of *Triptych with Virgin and Child*, by Giovanni Bellini. c.1462–64. Tempera on panel. (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice; Cameraphoto Arte Venezia; Bridgeman Images).

5. *Virgin and Child (Manin-Potenziani Madonna)*, by Giovanni Bellini. c.1450–52. Tempera on panel, 50 by 32 cm. (Pinacoteca Malaspina, Pavia).

6. *Virgin and Child*, by Giovanni Bellini. c.1455–60. Tempera on panel, 66.5 by 49 cm. (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

7. *Virgin and Child*, by Giovanni Bellini. c.1460. Tempera on panel, 66.3 by 48.6 cm. (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin; photograph Christoph Schmidt).

differentiates it from Bellini's work' (*Izvjesta tvrdoća crteža razlikuje ga od Bellinijevih radova*) and opting instead – with a cautious question mark – for Mantegna.<sup>6</sup> In his entry on the painting in the catalogue of the 2011 exhibition, Gordana Sobota Matejčić attributed it to Bartolomeo Vivarini.<sup>7</sup>

6 Hilje 1999, *op. cit.* (note 5).

7 Matejčić, *op. cit.* (note 2).

8 For the relationship between Giovanni Bellini and Andrea Mantegna, see most recently C. Campbell *et al.*, eds: exh. cat. *Mantegna and Bellini*, London (National Gallery) and Berlin (Gemäldegalerie) 2018–19.

9 For a sensitive and rigorous reconstruction of Bellini's early chronology and his relationships in the very early 1450s with not only Mantegna but also Donatello, which would diminish over the following decade: see L. Bellosi: 'Giovanni Bellini e Andrea Mantegna', in G. Agosti and D. Thiebaut, eds: exh. cat.

Although paintings by members of the Vivarini family were commissioned by patrons in Istria and Dalmatia, such as a polyptych of 1440 by Antonio in the Euphrasian Basilica, Poreč, and a polyptych painted in 1485 by Bartolomeo for St Andrew, Rab (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), on stylistic grounds the attribution is not convincing.

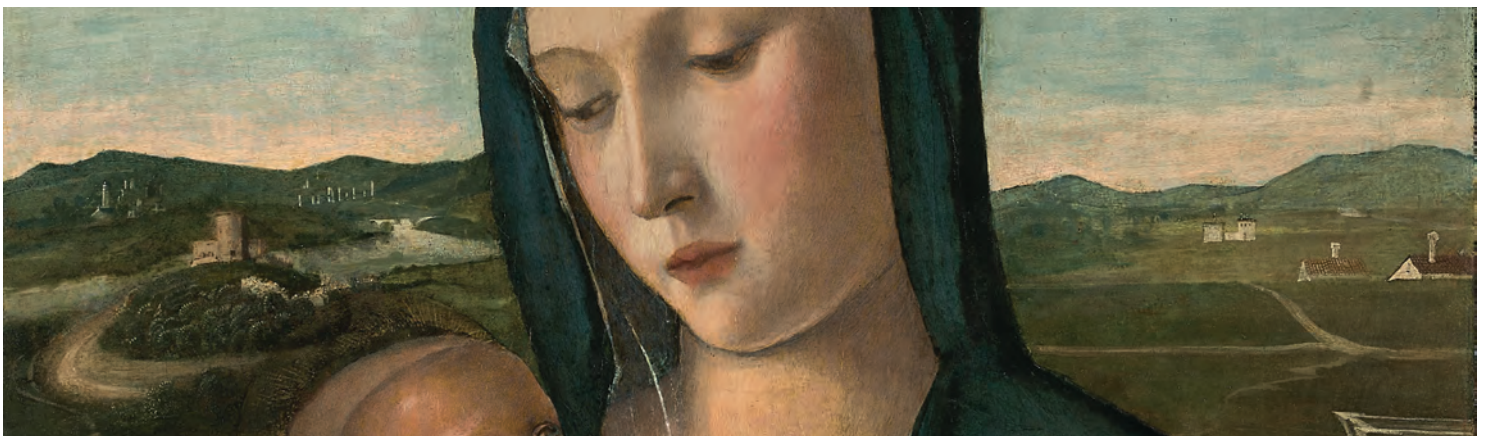
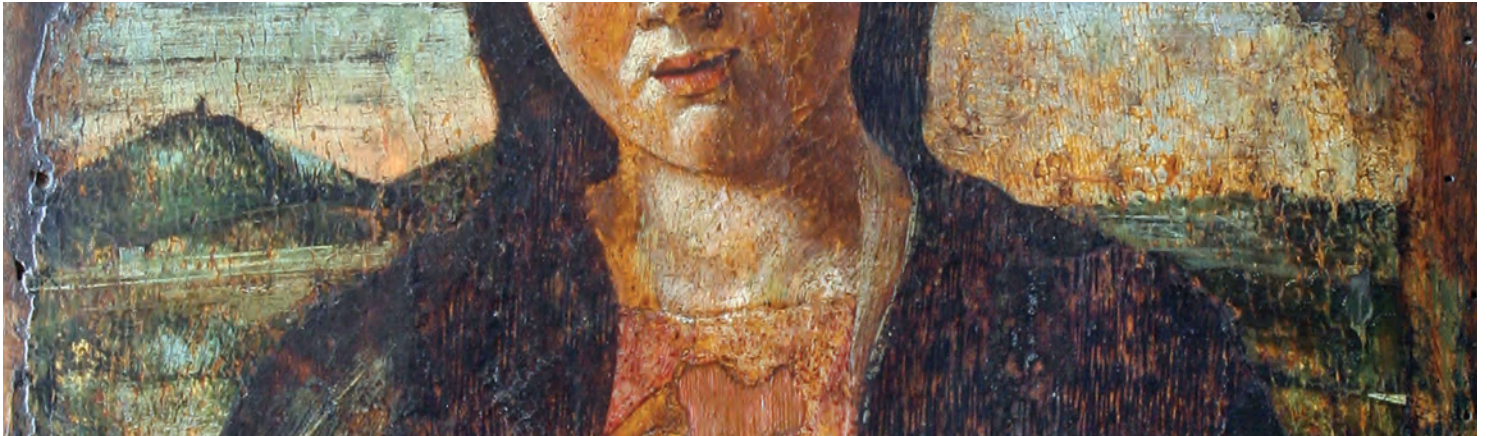
In the present author's opinion, the painting's quality and style support an attribution to Bellini, and it will be argued that it dates from the time of his complex and fascinating early relationship with Mantegna, his brother-in-law.<sup>8</sup> It can be compared with such works as the miniatures now almost unanimously attributed to Bellini in the manuscript of Strabo's *Geographia* in Albi, illuminated in 1459, at the peak of the relationship between Bellini and Mantegna, the damaged Fodor Madonna (Fig.3) and a number of other paintings of the Virgin and Child that will be discussed below. On the basis of these comparisons and the chronology of Bellini's career proposed by Luciano Bellosi, the Pag panel can be dated to the late 1450s or early 1460s, in the period leading up to the artist's first major commission, the polyptychs for S. Maria della Carità, Venice (Fig.4).<sup>9</sup>

*Mantegna 1431–1506*, Paris (Musée du Louvre) 2008–09, pp.103–09. The chronology of Bellini's early paintings is controversial, because his date of birth is disputed, which affects understanding of his relationship with Mantegna. See G.A. Calogero: 'A proposito di un nuovo libro su Giovanni Bellini', *Prospettiva*

183 (2021), pp.84–101 (in note 19 Calogero accepts without reservation the attribution of the Pag *Virgin and Child* to Bellini). For the latest developments in this controversy, see I. Brooke: 'Recent publications on Giovanni Bellini', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 164 (2022), pp.586–91.



A new attribution to Giovanni Bellini





Opposite

8. Detail of Fig.1, showing the landscape.

9. Detail of *Crucifixion*, by Giovanni Bellini, showing the landscape. c.1459. Tempera on panel. (Museo Correr, Venice; Photo Scala, Florence).

10. Detail of *Man of Sorrows*, by Giovanni Bellini, showing the landscape. c.1455–57. Tempera on panel. (Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan; Fine Art Images; Bridgeman Images).

11. Detail of Fig.3, showing the landscape.

12. *Virgin and Child (Davis Madonna)*, by Giovanni Bellini. c.1460. Tempera on panel 72.4 by 46.4 cm. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

An important element of the painting that supports an attribution to Bellini is the landscape, hilly rather than mountainous, in which vegetation and water are depicted in short, almost miniature, brushstrokes (Fig.8). This is comparable with the landscapes in the *Crucifixion* in the Museo Correr, Venice (Fig.9), painted in the late 1450s, and the *Man of Sorrows* in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan (Fig.10), in which the light of the sky softly fades from light blue to white and pink. An even closer comparison can be made with the landscape in the Fodor Madonna, usually dated at the end of the 1450s, which was revealed after the removal of overpaint (Fig.11).<sup>10</sup>

The chubby face of the Child in the painting under discussion recalls the large head and sulky expression of the Child in the Fodor Madonna. This is a type found in other paintings by Bellini, such as the Davis Madonna (Fig.12), the *Virgin and Child* in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Figs.6 and 16), and the one in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin (Fig.7). The most significant parallel, however, is the head of the cherub holding Christ on the right of the *Dead Christ supported by two cherubs* in the Museo Correr, Venice (Fig.17).<sup>11</sup>

The well-preserved Child in the Pag panel is painted using extremely short, light strokes, evident also in the folds of his shirt. This sophisticated technique is reminiscent of miniature painting, so a pertinent comparison can be made with the face of Jacopo Marcello in the Albi manuscript (Fig.18).<sup>12</sup> Although the face of the Virgin is more damaged (especially on the right side), the way its features are simplified can be compared with faces in paintings by Bellini of the 1450s, such as the *Nativity of the Virgin* (c.1450; Sabauda Gallery, Turin) or – if, its controversial attribution is accepted – *St Ursula and four saints* (1456?; Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice). Other comparable depictions of the Virgin's face include the *Virgin and Child* in the Pinacoteca Malaspina, Pavia (Fig.5), the Davis Madonna, the Johnson Madonna (c.1455; Philadelphia Museum of Art) and the *Madonna of the cherubim* (c.1455; Gallerie dell'Accademia), in which one can still recognise a connection with the mature work of Bellini's father, Jacopo.<sup>13</sup>

Although the centuries-long dissemination from Venice to the Istrian and Dalmatian coasts of works by artists ranging from Paolo Veneziano to Giuseppe Bernardino Bison is a long-standing subject of scholarly interest, the fact that the publications on the Pag painting have been overlooked by art historians outside Croatia is not surprising. The most recent Bellini catalogue raisonné, for example, does not mention



the *Virgin and Child* in St Matthew, Dobrota, Montenegro, a version – or, according to some, a copy – of Bellini's signed Huntington Madonna, formerly in the Lazzaroni Collection (c.1489; Huntington Art Museum, San Marino). The only paintings in Croatia mentioned in the catalogue are the *St Augustine* and *St Benedict* in the Strossmayer Gallery, Zagreb; yet the monograph also discusses the documentary evidence about an altarpiece that Bellini was commissioned by Donato Cievalelli to paint in 1497 for the church of the Benedictine convent in St Mary, Zadar, but never delivered.<sup>14</sup>

The route by which the painting under discussion may have reached the convent is uncertain. Construction began on a new planned town on Pag in 1443.<sup>15</sup> Over the remainder of the century, the island's civic and ecclesiastical institutions, as well as private dwellings, were moved from the old town – a sort of acropolis overlooking the salt mines – to

<sup>10</sup> For the critical and chronological interpretation, see A. Mazzotta: *Con Giovanni Bellini: Dodici esercizi di lettura*, Rome 2020, figs.41, 56 and 65; for the *Man of Sorrows*, see A. De Marchi: 'Im Laufe der Zeit: la "Pietà" di Giovanni Bellini', in *idem*, A. Di Lorenzo and L.M. Galli Michero, eds: *exh. cat. Giovanni Bellini: Dall'icona alla storia*, Milan (Museo Poldi Pezzoli) 2012–13, pp.17–31.

<sup>11</sup> For these paintings, see the entries

by M. Lucco, P. Humfrey and G.C.F. Villa in M. Lucco, ed.: *Giovanni Bellini: Catalogo Ragionato*, Treviso 2019, pp.297–300 and 322–23, nos.7, 8 and 20. <sup>12</sup> L. Bellosi: entries in Agosti and Thiebaut, *op. cit.* (note 9), pp.122–23, nos.31–32; and entry by G. Toscano in D. Banzato, A. De Nicolò Salmazo and A.M. Spiazzi, eds: *exh. cat. Mantegna e Padova: 1445–1460*, Padua (Musei Civici agli Eremitani) 2006–07, Milan 2006, pp.204–07, nos.31a–d.

<sup>13</sup> See Mazzotta, *op. cit.* (note 10), figs.2, 4–5, 9, 12, 15–16, 40, 42–43 and 48.

<sup>14</sup> On the Strossmayer paintings, see Lucco, Humfrey and Villa, *op. cit.* (note 11), pp.479–80, no.116; on the Cievalelli document, see *ibid.*, p.47, doc.59. On the Huntington Madonna, see *ibid.*, pp.455–56, note 94; on the version in Dobrota, Bay of Kotor, see entry by G. Fossaluzza in R. Tomić, ed.: *exh. cat. Blago Kotorske biskupije: Zagovori svetom Tripunu*.

<sup>15</sup> *Povodom 1200. Obilježnice prijenosa moći svetoga Tripuna u Kotor*, Zagreb (Galerija Klovičevi dvori) 2009–10, pp.267–68, note 127, which cautiously suggests that it may be a copy with variations; in the present author's opinion it is a studio work. <sup>16</sup> I. Fisković: 'Grad Pag – primjer "realnoga grada" iz 15. Stoljeća', *Prostor: znanstveni časopis za arhitekturu i urbanizam* 20 (2012), pp.23–45.



## A new attribution to Giovanni Bellini

the new town, built on a site chosen both to ensure a better control of the salt pans that fuelled the local economy and to facilitate the salt trade with Venice, which had held a monopoly on it since 1409, when the island passed into Venetian control. One of the earliest documents relating to the furnishings of the church and the Benedictine convent of St Margaret, constructed from the mid-fifteenth century onwards, is the record of a visitation in 1579 by the bishop of Verona, Agostino Valier, who had been entrusted by Gregory XIII to conduct the first post-Tridentine apostolic visitation of the dioceses under the civic jurisdiction of the Venetian Republic in Dalmatia and Istria.<sup>16</sup> It does

Clockwise, from top

13. Detail of Fig.1, showing the head of the Child.

14. Detail of Fig.3, showing the head of the Child.

15. Detail of Fig.12, showing the head of the Child rotated 90 degrees.

16. Detail of Fig.6, showing the head of the Child.

17. Detail of *Dead Christ supported by two cherubs*, by Giovanni Bellini, showing the head of the right-hand cherub. c.1460. Tempera on panel. (Museo Correr, Venice; photograph Luisa Ricciarini; Bridgeman Images).







18. Detail of *Jacopo Antonio Marcello consigns the manuscript to René of Anjou*, by Giovanni Bellini. 1459. Distemper on vellum. (Médiathèque municipale Pierre, Albi, Amalric, RES.MS 77, f.4r).

not mention an altarpiece in the convent church, but one should bear in mind the difficulty of recording works of art in the labyrinthine nature of a cloistered setting.<sup>17</sup>

Emil Hilje suggested that the painting might have been commissioned by Benedetto (Benedikt) Mišolić (1450–1509), who latinised his family name to De Missolis. This is supported by the fact that this noble family from Pag had strong connections with the convent: Katarina, one of Benedetto's aunts, and Milica, one of his sisters, were nuns there. Benedetto was a Franciscan who graduated in civic and canon law (*'in utroque iure'*) from the University of Padua in 1474. However, a 'Benedetto de Missolis' also served as a canon in Rome, where he achieved a high reputation (*'menò un gran rumore tra i canonisti di Roma'*);<sup>18</sup> worked as an astrologer and astronomer; almost became bishop of Pag in 1483; and commanded a galley against the Turks.<sup>19</sup> This diverse set of pursuits makes it clear that the family had more than one Benedetto, and the one who died in 1509 cannot have commissioned the painting.

If, however, the dating of the painting proposed here is accepted, the *Virgin and Child* could be connected with Benedetto's father, Giorgio De Missolis (d.1478). A nobleman and member of Pag's High Council, count palatine and galley captain, Giorgio was appointed in 1477 to settle questions regarding the sale of salt in Venice, where he is documented as having close

ties.<sup>20</sup> A person of his economic and intellectual calibre – for example, he summoned a teacher from Rome to serve the community of Pag – is likely to have been at home in advanced circles of artistic culture in Venice.

Circumstantial evidence connecting Giorgio De Missolis to the *Virgin and Child* is the fact that in 1467 he commissioned a design for the Chapel of St Nicholas from the Dalmatian-born architect and sculptor Giorgio da Sebenico (c.1410–73), with whom he had the previous year been in close contact about major work on the collegiate church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, Pag, of which De Missolis was procurator. The Chapel of St Nicholas was modelled on another Benedictine commission designed by Giorgio da Sebenico, the Chapel of St Ranier in the cloister of the convent of St Euphemia, Split, completed in 1444. This chapel houses a slab tomb bearing the insignia of the De Missolis family, and so may have been intended as a kind of family pantheon and a place of private worship for them. The family's coat of arms appears elsewhere throughout the church, which suggests that the construction of the building was largely commissioned by them.

In accordance with the contract for the Chapel of St Nicholas, within a year Giorgio da Sebenico sent his pupil Radmil Ratković to oversee its construction. Although it is difficult to be certain, since the church has been heavily remodelled, it is possible that by 1467 work on it was under way and that at least the apse and transept had been completed.<sup>21</sup> Although the pastoral and apostolic visitations provide no confirmation of the hypothesis,<sup>22</sup> this part of an otherwise mostly unadorned Benedictine church would have been an appropriate setting for the *Virgin and Child*. A work by the hand of an artist who was to become Venice's leading painter could therefore have been placed in a chapel designed by the most celebrated Dalmatian architect and sculptor.

Nonetheless, given the proposed dating of the painting to 1455–60, it is possible that as a result of Giorgio De Missolis's ties with Venice the painting came into the family's possession before the chapel was begun. It could possibly have been originally placed in the former convent in the old city. In that case the painting would, like a prestigious dowry, have accompanied the movements of the family's nuns. It would not be unusual for a painting such as the *Virgin and Child* to have originally been placed elsewhere before finding its permanent home. Another independent *Virgin and Child* by Bellini, formerly in a chapel in the church of Madonna dell'Orto, Venice (it was stolen in 1993), was originally purchased by Luca Navagero, the Venetian governor of Friuli, for his private residence. Only later was it placed on the altar of the chapel in Madonna dell'Orto that contained his tomb and those of his family; it was subsequently moved again, to the Valier Chapel.<sup>23</sup> It can be hypothesised, therefore, that the story of the *Virgin and Child* in Pag is a precedent to the history of the panel in the Madonna dell'Orto.

16 For Agostino Valier's apostolic visitation in Istria and Dalmatia (1579–80), see Vatican Apostolic Archive (hereafter AAV), 'Congregazione Vescovi e Regolari', Visita Ap.78, 79, 80 and 86, the Visitation is the subject of B. Tanzil: 'La visita apostolica di Agostino Valier (1579–1580): Una ricerca sulle emergenze architettoniche e artistiche rilevate in Dalmazia e in Istria dopo il Concilio di Trento', unpublished PhD thesis (Ca' Foscari University of Venice, yet to be defended). Valier's survey of the places under ecclesiastical jurisdiction on Pag – aimed, as usual, also at assessing the moral conduct of the clergy, worshippers and public and lay institutions – is in a separate envelope in the folder dedicated to the visitation of Dalmatian dioceses,

although it actually pertains to the archdiocese of Zadar. The island had made several unsuccessful attempts to free itself from Zadar's interference, not least in ecclesiastical matters.

17 AAV, 'Congregazione Vescovi e Regolari', Visita Ap.80/8, cc.10r–11r.

18 C.F. Bianchi: *Zara cristiana*, Zara 1880, II, p.27.

19 M. Granić: 'Tri soprakomita paške obitelji Mišolić', *Zadarska revija* 28 (1979), pp.283–90, at p.286; and J. Portada: *Rod Kamena*, Pag 1993, pp.23–26. See also Granić 2010, *op. cit.* (note 5), the proceedings of the important conference of 2004 on the convent of St Margaret, but regrettably difficult to find outside local libraries.

20 Granić 1979, *op. cit.* (note 19).

21 On this commission, see M.L. Ruić:

*Delle riflessioni storiche sopra l'antico stato civile ecclesiastico della città et isola di Pago o sia dell'antica Cissa*, Venice 1779, I, p.262 (manuscript preserved at HAZU archive, Zagreb), 'A.C. 1467. Per altra parte servendosi il favore dei zelanti, Georgio de Missolis si pose nell'animo di costruire una capella in onore di San Nicolo, di cui era divoto nella chiesa delle monache di Santa Margarita. Aveva perciò fatto accordo con maestro Georgio quondam Matteo di Sibenico il quale in quest'anno gli promette di spedire maestro Radmillo a compire la detta capella. Ell'è quella in cui al presente si venera la miracolosa Madonna della Pietà e che la sepultura della famiglia Missol'. See also P. Vežić: 'Kapela sv. Nikole Jurja Dalmatinca u crkvi Sv.

Margarite, Pag', *Peristol* 38 (1995), pp.37–42; the text was republished in Granić 2010, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp.177–84.

22 For the visitations of the archbishop Natale Venier in 1583, 1587 and 1589, Ottaviano Garzadori in 1626, Evangelista Parzaghi in 1670 and 1674 and Giuseppe Gregorio Scotti in 1810, see the Archiepiscopal Archive of Zadar, HR-AZDN-16/6, 'Zadarska nadbiskupija / metropolija'. Michele Priuli's apostolic visitation of 1603, AAV, Miscellanea Armadi VII, 101, does not mention the painting.

23 K. Christiansen: 'Giovanni Bellini and the practice of devotional painting', in *idem* and R. Kasl, eds: *exh. cat. Giovanni Bellini and the Art of Devotion*, Indianapolis (Museum of Art) 2004, pp.7–58, at p.11.