



*The Artists of Michelozzo's Circle in Dubrovnik
and the Reflections of their Activity in Dalmatia*

The scholars of Renaissance art in Dalmatia are certainly more than familiar with the name of the Slovenian medievalist Janez Höfler. Over the last three decades he has written a conspicuous number of scholarly papers which illuminate one of the most interesting and most important chapters of art in Dalmatia – the one related to the first signs of the new Renaissance style on the eastern coast of the Adriatic in mid-15th century, i.e. the key period of transition in the late 1450s and 1460s, when the architecture and architectural decoration of the broader Adriatic area – from Padua and Šibenik to Trogir, from Rimini and Venice to Dubrovnik – marked the first decisive signs of the transition towards the Renaissance.¹ Intrigued by the appearance of the Florentine master Maso di Bartolomeo in Dubrovnik, and then by the need to delineate the circumstances which led to the appearance of certain Renaissance motifs on the apses of St James' Cathedral in Šibenik, in the so-called »transitional period between Giorgio da Sebenico and Niccolo Fiorentino«, his research interests soon expanded to Šibenik and Pag, another two centres of Early Renaissance in the 1460s and another two cities which, not by chance, were connected by the activity of Giorgio da Sebenico. Despite the fact that, considering the multiplicity and complexity of the problems arisen, he might have not solved all open questions, especially the issues of style and chronology related to the construction of St James' Cathedral, it can be asserted that his valuable contributions offered solutions to certain problems and resolved numerous controversial issues.² What is more, his open and above all prudent approach to Renaissance art in Dalmatia provided the guidelines for further research and attracted his younger colleagues Stanko Kokole and Samo Štefanac, still students at the time. Since the mid-1980s the three Slovenian art historians have produced a number of works which have had a profound influence on further studies of not only Dalmatian, but also »Adriatic *Quattrocento*«, especially on the interpretation of the role of the two most important artistic figures of 15th-century Dalmatia – Giorgio da Sebenico and Niccolò di Giovanni Fiorentino. From today's perspective, Prof. Höfler created a »Höfler's circle« of researchers of Dalmatian Renaissance, a complement of »Michelozzo's circle« of Florentine masters in Dubrovnik.

Although assessing the importance of Prof. Höfler's single works is not an easy task, I believe that the most renown and perhaps most influential among his studies are the ones discussing the appearance of the Early Renaissance in Dubrovnik and its relation to »Michelozzo's circle« of local masters. This fact is due primarily to Prof. Höfler's book on the Ducal Palace in Urbino, which was the crown of two

1 Cf. 'Bibliografija 1964–2012' in this volume, nr. 76, 80, 82, 83, 87, 92, 103, 107, 135, 200, 223.

2 An important contribution to the interpretation of the appearance of Early Renaissance elements on St James' Cathedral is the identification of the activity of painters and sculptors of »Donatello's circle« from Padua, the source of numerous freely-composed decorative motifs *all'antica*, as well as the detection of the intermediary role of the painter Giorgio Schiavone. Cf. P. MARKOVIĆ: *Katedrala sv. Jakova u Šibeniku: Prvih 105 godina*, Zagreb 2010, pp. 82–85, 290–308.



1. Šibenik, St James' Cathedral, main apse windows (1468–1473).

decades of research and study of this fairly brief but significant Dubrovnik episode of the activity of Florentine masters on the eastern coast of the Adriatic.³

Needles to say, the results of his research found response among Croatian art historians as well. Although the archival data documenting the activity of Florentine masters in Dubrovnik were known from mid-19th century, the significance of their sojourn in Dubrovnik was accentuated only through the identification of the single motifs on Dubrovnik monuments and their connection to their sources in Florence and the monuments in Urbino. The identification of these prominent artistic centres across the Adriatic Sea and the masters who brought direct foreign influences opened a new chapter in the study of the sources of the Gothic-Renaissance style, the specific peripheral idiom which would mark the sculptural production of both Dubrovnik and the entire South Dalmatia over the period of more than a century, as well as the pure Renaissance style in early 16th century. Further studies of the artistic heritage of 15th- and 16th-century Dubrovnik have recognized the far-

3 The book was first published in German, J. HÖFLER: *Der Palazzo ducale in Urbino unter den Montefeltro (1376–1508): neue Forschungen zur Bau- und Ausstattungsgeschichte*, Regensburg 2004, and then in Italian, *Il Palazzo Ducale di Urbino sotto i Montefeltro (1376–1508): nuove ricerche sulla storia dell'edificio e delle sue decorazioni interne*, Urbino 2006 (here cited according to the Italian edition). An important contribution to the reception of Dalmatian artistic heritage in Europe was given by his earlier overview of art in Dalmatia (*Die Kunst Dalmatiens vom Mittelalter bis zur Renaissance (800–1520)*, Graz 1989), with almost half of the book dedicated to the Renaissance period.

reaching implications of the Renaissance component of pure Florentine roots, not only in the context of the most significant monuments such as the Rector's Palace which included direct participation of Florentine masters, but also in relation to a variety of other sacral, public and private monuments and smaller sculptural works produced by numerous architectural and sculptural workshops from Korčula and Dubrovnik in the two centuries known as the »Golden Age of Dubrovnik«. The search for individual characteristic decorative motifs – such as the dolphin capitals – has encouraged many scholars to address the issues of reception and dissemination of Early-Renaissance style along the eastern coast of the Adriatic;⁴ however, it was only Nada Grujić who in her article »Antikizirajući kapiteli oko godine 1520. u Dubrovniku« (»Imitation Classical Capitals in Dubrovnik about 1520«) addressed the problem of the heritage of the masters of »Michelozzo's circle« in a systematic and exhaustive manner.⁵ This significant and in many aspects breakthrough contribution defined the importance and the role of the new architectural decoration, i.e. decorative sculpture introduced by the designs of Michelozzo di Bartolomeo and his associates during their stay in Dubrovnik – Maso di Bartolomeo (1455-1456), Michele di Giovanni da Fiesole known as Il Greco (1457–1480) and Salvi di Michele (1468).⁶ Through both broader theoretical approach and a more detailed insight into the processes which preceded the identification of the classical architectural orders in Italy during the 15th century, Prof. Grujić set firmer and steadier grounds for the understanding of the reception and the dissemination of not only classical capitals, but also of the Renaissance style in general on the eastern coast of the Adriatic.⁷

In conclusion to this somewhat extensive, but not merely apposite introduction, it must be pointed out that the writings of Prof. Höfler have had a profound influence on the author of this text as well. While solving the problem of the enigmatic »Transitional stage between Giorgio da Sebenico and Niccolò Fiorentino«, I can assert to have followed the footsteps of Giorgio da Sebenico himself, and, encouraged by the ideas of Prof. Höfler, sought the origin of certain unexpectedly mature Renaissance elements not only in Padua, but also in Dubrovnik. In July 1464, only three years after the reactivation of the construction site of Šibenik Cathedral, its master builder Giorgio da Sebenico suddenly ceased the construction of the apse walls and, apparently attracted by the good salary, accepted the post of the chief engineer and fort builder of the Republic of Dubrovnik (*Ingeniario Comunis*), replacing Michelozzo di Bartolomeo who held that very post over the preceding three years (from May 1461 to June 1464). Although the diligent master from Zadar did not stay in Dubrovnik for a long time – he was already in Šibenik in July 1465 – his brief sojourn in Dubrovnik certainly affected the construction site of St James' Cathedral. The appearance of new decorative motifs such as the wide,

4 On the problems of origin of dolphin capitals cf. G. NIČKIĆ: 'Andrijići u Dubrovniku', *Renescansa i renesanse u umjetnosti Hrvatske (Zbornik Dana Cvita Fiskovića 2)*, Zagreb 2008, pp. 140–143.

5 N. GRUJIĆ: 'Antikizirajući kapiteli oko 1520. godine u Dubrovniku', *Radovi Instituta za povijest umjetnosti*, 21 (1999), pp. 6–21.

6 On the sojourn of Florentine masters in Dubrovnik cf. J. HÖFLER: 'Florentine Masters in Early Renaissance Dubrovnik: Maso di Bartolomeo, Michele di Giovanni, Michelozzo and Salvi di Michele', *Quattrocento Adriatico: Fifteenth-Century art of the Adriatic Rim*, (Papers from a Colloquium held at the Villa Spelman, Florence, 1994), ed. Charles Dempsey, Firenze 1996, pp. 89, 90.

7 The influences of this work, as well as of the earlier research of Prof. Höfler, are denoted in: P. MARKOVIĆ: 'L' architecture en Croatie', exh. cat. *La Renaissance en Croatie*, Chateau d'Ecouen – Val-d'Oise (Musée national de la Renaissance) and Zagreb (Galerie Klovičevi Dvori) 2004, pp. 71–110; M. PELC: *Renescansa*, Zagreb 2007, pp. 100–104.



2. Šibenik, St James' Cathedral, main apse windows (1468–1473), detail.

softly modelled acanthus leaf with deep pipe-like dents and sharply serrated almond-shaped fringes, according to M. Gosebruch connected with Michelozzo's capitals,⁸ and the palmette motif with bean-like sprouts (Gk. *anthemion*, It. *lupiniere*), enabled the recognition of the second Renaissance layer of the chancel datable in the last years of Giorgio's supervision of the building. Apart from the pair of large capitals of the eastern pillars of the crossing and the corresponding decorative inserts on apse junctions, the stylistically purest Renaissance realization of the entire Giorgio's building phase was realized during this final period (1465–1473) – a series of five large rectangular paired windows forming a row on the main apse (figs. 1, 2). Structural maturity, good proportioning and consistent use of Early-Renaissance morphology pertinent to the capitals of slender fluted columns reveal not only the skilled application of the latest decorative repertoire, but also the knowledge of contemporary theoretical principles and corresponding aesthetic categories such as the diversity of new forms (*varietas*).⁹ Combined with a certain dynamics and elasticity pertaining more to metal

8 M. GOSEBRUCH: 'Florentinische Kapitelle von Brunelleschi bis zum Tempio Malatestiano und der Eigenstil der Frührenaissance', *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 8 (1958), p. 141.

9 N. GRUJIĆ, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp. 8, 9.



3. Kotor, Drago Palace, corbel under the passage vault.



4. Kotor, Drago Palace, corbel under the passage vault.



5. Urbino, Ducal Palace, Appartamento della Jole, vault corbel.

than the stone of these columns, I believe that their design can be ascribed to one of the aforementioned Florentine masters of Michelozzo's circle, equally skilled as *scarpellini* and as bronze casters. The arguments for this attribution are found not only in the characteristic rendering of the acanthus leaf, present in other Giorgio's architectural and sculptural works in Pag in the same period, but also in the very appearance of the classically conceived fluted columns, similar to the ones on the portal of S. Domenico in Urbino.¹⁰ However, there is an even more indicative detail – the geometric design of their stone tracery. The diverse, still somewhat Gothic tracery reveals the elements of intersecting circles and semicircles – a motif realized by Maso di Bartolomeo between 1448 and 1452 on the bronze doors of the chapel-»Tempietto« of SS. Annunziata in the homonymous church in Florence.¹¹ A similar geometrical pattern was noted by Prof. Höfler on the oculi above the arcades of the south portico of the Dominican cloister in Dubrovnik, undoubtedly realized according to the design of the same Florentine master between 1456 and 1459.¹² However, since the contract allowed the local masters to alter Maso's design – to embellish the circular openings above the arcades and make the columns more round, and apparently to modify the capitals which were realized in an entirely Gothic fashion – one cannot but wonder if the fluted columns of the large windows of Šibenik Cathedral reflect the original design by Maso di Bartolomeo? Even without this attractive assumption, the importance of this work lies in the fact that it remains the first exhaustive and mature application of Early-Renaissance architectural decoration on the eastern coast of the Adriatic.¹³

Apart from this partially known, but still insufficiently valorised emersion of the transferral of Florentine Early Renaissance along the eastern coast of the Adriatic, on this occasion I will mention only two other minor, but significant sculptural works which demonstrate more profound influences of the activity of Michelozzo's circle. The first is the series of richly decorated corbels under the vault of the passage of the Drago Palace in Kotor, and second an aedicula with a niche situated above the Pile Gate in Dubrovnik. The Drago Palace corbels basically adopt the form of the freely composed or combined capitals (*a fantasia*) (figs. 3, 4). Besides being characterized by an extremely diverse Renaissance repertoire of motifs, they display an entire range of specifically rendered details which undoubtedly reflect their Florentine-Ragusan origin – strip-like volutes decorated with miniature shells and with scrolls sometimes covered with rosettes; upright and overlapped acanthus leaves with almond-shaped fringes; fluted shaft (*khalatos*); abacus with miniature vertical channels and rope-shaped astragal with a bundle of strip-bound leaves underneath – a whole range of motifs also found in the Dominican monastery in Dubrovnik. More precisely, an identical compositional scheme, as well as some single details, can be noticed on somewhat larger corbels of the vault of the walled-in matroneum of St Dominic's church, situated in the passage next to the church of St Sebastian. The

10 By 1466 Giorgio da Sebenico had already realized the portico of Rector's Palace in Pag with Corinthian capitals and fluted shafts (*khalatos*), and a year earlier he had signed a contract for St Nicholas' chapel in the church of St Margaret which includes the characteristic acanthus leaves. Cf. P. MARKOVIĆ, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 321, 322. The portal of S. Domenico in Urbino was realized according to the designs of Maso di Bartolomeo between 1449 and 1454. Cf. J. HÖFLER, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp. 84–89.

11 J. HÖFLER, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 90 (fig. 4).

12 J. HÖFLER, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 90 (fig. 3). A year earlier, in October 1455, Maso di Bartolomeo was assigned a post of the cannon founder of the Republic of Dubrovnik, but died in April or May 1456 while testing one of the cannons. The contract for the construction of the south wing was published in: C. FISKOVIĆ: *Dokumenti o radu naših graditelja i kipara XV. i XVI. stoljeća u Dubrovniku*, Split 1947, pp. 5, 15, 16.

13 P. MARKOVIĆ, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 320–329.

execution of these rougher and rather damaged corbels is ascribed to Radonja Grubačević and dated 1468-1469.¹⁴ However, certain similarities found in the morphology of the corbels in Kotor and the ones realized in the Appartamento della Jole in the Ducal Palace in Urbino by Michele di Giovanni da Fiesole, known as Il Greco, suggest that the designs for their execution might have originated directly from him (fig. 5).¹⁵ In 1457 Michele di Giovanni replaced the unfortunately deceased Maso di Bartolomeo on the post of the cannon founder, and a year later he was granted an official post as a sculptor (*pro magistro ad faciednum bombardas et pro magistro ad laborandum de scharpello*). He spent the rest of his life until his death in 1480 in Dubrovnik, where he realized several significant works.¹⁶ More affinities with the works in Kotor can be discerned on the four corbels of St Vincent's chapel situated within the sacristy of the same church, according to the 1470 contract built and decorated by the Florentine sculptor Barolomeus Grazianus (figs. 6, 7).¹⁷

Both Florentine masters, Michele di Giovanni and Bartolomeus Grazianus, can be credited with the realization of the aforementioned beautifully decorated aedicula framing the niche with the statue of St Blaise, situated on the projecting bulwark of the western town entrance – the Pile Gate (fig. 8). A semi-circular niche with a shell on top is enclosed within the simple architectural frame consisting of two fluted pilasters crowned by the relief-decorated lintel and accentuated Renaissance cornice. The dimensions and certain iconographic elements, as well as its lower quality, indicate that the statue of St Blaise within the niche was not originally destined to its present setting.¹⁸ The circumstances regarding the realization of this aedicule have not been discussed in detail, but it can be assumed that it was constructed contemporarily to the building of this projecting part of the city walls (1471–1474).¹⁹ The mature and purified Renaissance composition of the whole and especially the regularly shaped motifs of dentils and large ovuli on the cornice, indisputably reveal a clearly conceived design which differs in many aspects from similar hybrid Gothic-Renaissance examples of local sculptural production, although the »non-canonical« details – a flower in full leaf in the centre of the capital – still define it as a work adapted to the local taste. The aedicula is very close to the one realized for the allegorical angelic figure *Sacra Mens* situated in the atrium of the Rector's Palace, more precisely

14 C. FISKOVIĆ: *Naši graditelji i kipari XV. i XVI. stoljeća u Dubrovniku*, Zagreb 1947, p. 124.

15 J. HÖFLER, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp. 104–106. Especially revealing is the unusual, »Donatellesque shape« of the shield with the coat of arms of the Drago family, not pertinent to the heraldic tradition of Dalmatia, but found on the fireplace mantel in the Appartamento della Jole of the Ducal Palace in Urbino. Cf. J. HÖFLER, *op. cit.* (note 3), Tav. 8b.

16 For all relevant data on his Dubrovnik activity, see: J. HÖFLER, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 11–32.

17 Bartolomeus Grazianus signed a contract for carving the coats of arms of the patron, the Siracuse merchant Giovanni Sparterius, on the corbels (»laboreria scarpeli insignis«), and four years later the builder Andrija Marković from Korčula promised to realize two columns and an arch for the same chapel, probably according to his designs, since this fairly unknown Florentine master was still present in Dubrovnik in 1475. C. FISKOVIĆ, *op. cit.* (note 14), pp. 146, 147. The sacristy houses the tombstone of a Jacobus (?) de Florentia realized in 1457 and situated at the very entrance to the chapel, according to J. Höfler executed by Michele di Giovanni. J. HÖFLER: 'Novità sull'attività di Michele di Giovanni da Fiesole a Dubrovnik (Ragusa) e la paternità artistica dell'Appartamento della Jole nel Palazzo Ducale di Urbino', *Territori e contesti d'Arte*, 3/4 (1999), p. 13.

18 Although the statue displays certain Renaissance features and it might have been executed contemporarily with the niche, the crown held by two hovering *putti* can by no means be related to the cult of St Blaise.

19 L. BERITIĆ: *Utvrdjenja grada Dubrovnika*, Zagreb 1955, pp. 100, 101. The bulwark can indirectly be dated 1474, since in that year Andrija Marković signed a contract for the execution of certain parts of the bridge in front of it.



6. Dubrovnik, Church of St Dominic, sacristy, St Vincent's chapel (1470–1474).



7. Dubrovnik, Church of St Dominic, sacristy, St Vincent's chapel (1470–1474).

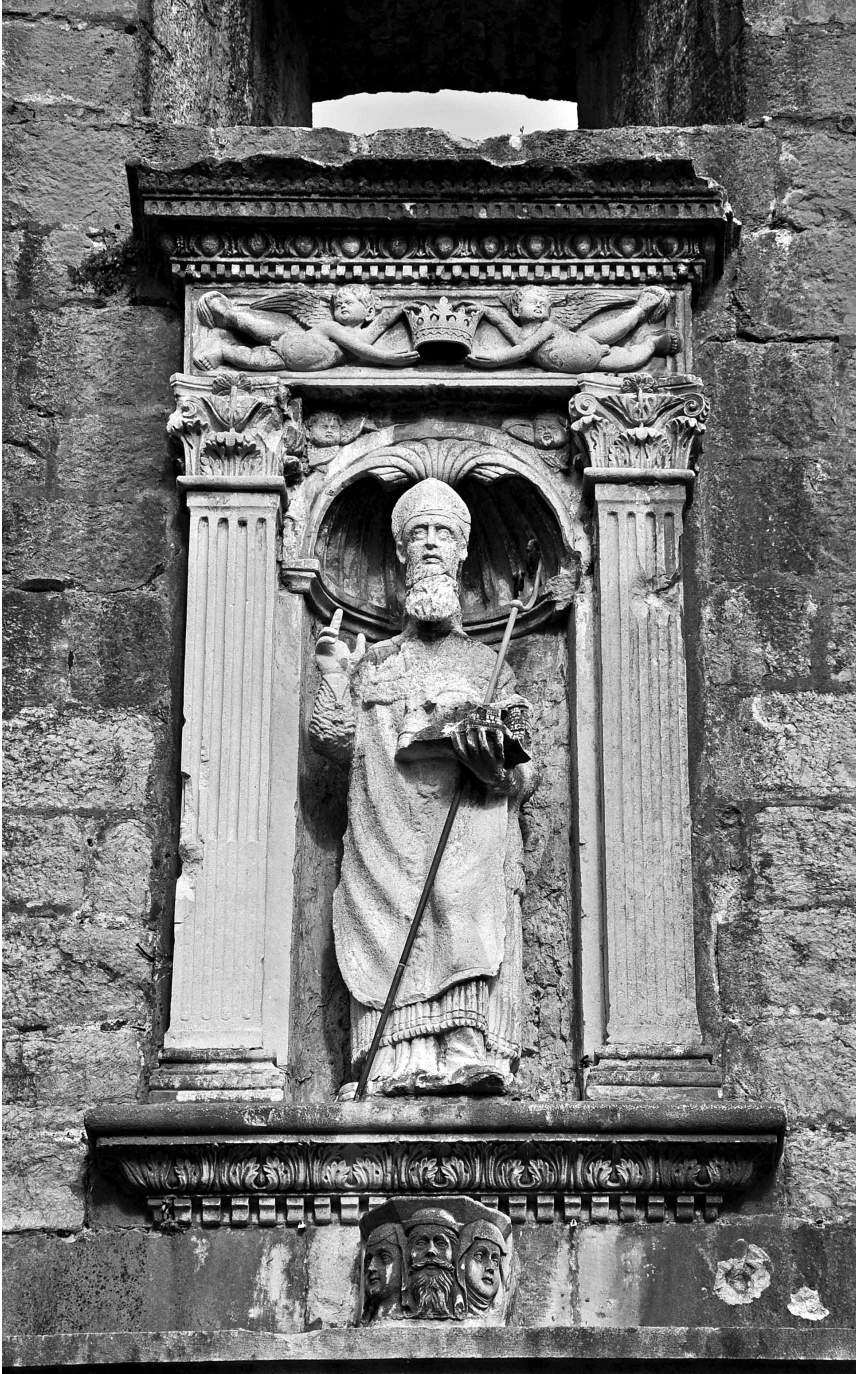
above the entrance to the north wing leading to the Great Council hall.²⁰ It contains the same capital type with characteristic broad acanthus leaves, so it can be assumed that both niches were realized in close dependency, or that the one in the Rector's Palace, simpler and more purified, was executed several years earlier.²¹ The key argument for assigning the niche above the Pile Gate to Michele di Giovanni is its basic disposition – the pilasters bear an architrave, actually a smooth stone lintel decorated with low relief and carrying an accentuated *all'antica* cornice. Such a layout was frequently applied in the decorative repertoire of the Appartamento della Jole, on its portals and fireplaces while the very motif of symmetrically arranged *putti* can be found within the gable of the north portal of the main hall, as well as on the fireplace of the adjoining room.²² Although the north portal was executed by Michele di Giovanni, a more significant example is provided by the relief of the two *putti* on the fireplace of the adjoining room, where the paired figures appear in a variant closer to their Classical source – with a wreath in their hands. This originally antique sepulchral motif is widely spread in Renaissance sculpture, and can be found in different decorative variants and combinations over the entire 15th century, but it probably originates not from Donatello, but from Michelozzo.²³ The motif frequently appears in the works ascribed to Michelozzo and his circle, with perhaps the most indicative example being the portal of Banco Mediceo in Milan which also displays small nude *putti*

20 S. KOKOLE: 'Cyriacus of Ancona and the Revival of Two Forgotten Ancient Personifications in the Rector's Palace of Dubrovnik', *Renaissance Quarterly* 49 (1996), pp. 225–267, especially 232–234.

21 Considering that Giorgio's works in Šibenik and Pag containing this type of capitals can be dated 1466, the Rector's Palace aedicula could have been realized immediately after the explosion in 1463. However, the possibility of an earlier date of execution, between 1458 and 1463, remains open, in the period when Michele di Giovanni realized the window on the north-western tower and the first two northern capitals of the porch. J. HÖFLER, *op. cit.* (note 14), pp. 22–25.

22 C. KENNEDY: 'Il Greco aus Fiesole', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 4, H.1 (1932–34), pp. 329–33, abb. 4, 5.

23 Clarence Kennedy marks the hovering *putti* as Donatello's motif found on one of the Orsanmichele niches, C. KENNEDY, *op. cit.* (note 18), p. 31.



8. Dubrovnik, Pile Gate bulwark, aedicula with the niche of St Blaise.

with a significant detail – fibrous »clouds« under their feet, present on the Urbino fireplace as well.²⁴ The arrival of this motif to Dubrovnik through Michele di Giovanni, or perhaps Michelozzo himself, is attested by the subsequent reflections of this »Classical variant« in Dubrovnik and Kotor.²⁵ The type of the crown held by the angels is almost identical to the crown on the half-columns in St Vincent's chapel in the Dominican sacristy, while the small *putti* by B. Grazianus in the same chapel display a range of formal analogies with the hovering *putti* of the aedicula – round heads and plump cheeks; tiny slightly pointed noses and small mouth; pronounced eyelid borders and pupils shaped as small holes. Considering that both examples represent quality sculptural realizations with no parallels in the works of other masters from Dubrovnik or Korčula of the period, including the demanding tasks of decoration of the Rector's Palace, and that, on the other hand, they differ from the known sculptural works of Michele di Giovanni, I believe that they could be ascribed to the fairly unknown Florentine sculptor Bartolomeus Grazianus, or, what is more likely, to one of the local masters.²⁶ Among them Radivoje Bogosalić has the most chance. Between 1469 and 1472 together with his relative Nikola Marković he was supposed to realize eleven paired windows for the Rector's Palace, and the capital zone of the sixth window from the north contains a plump head similar to the ones in St Vincent's chapel and of the hovering *putti* of the aedicula. Worth pointing out that in 1486 Radivoje Bogosalić was supposed to realize a fireplace with two *putti* in the renaissance wreath with coat of arms in their hands. Probably he was familiar with this motive.

The discussed works obviously confirm that the designs for certain monuments in Dubrovnik made by Florentine masters, as well as the drawings they must have brought along or left after their departure, soon became a part of the decorative repertoire of numerous sculptural workshops in Dubrovnik and its surroundings. Along with the mediatory role of Giorgio da Sebenico in the transference of Renaissance motifs to northern Dalmatia, the most significant contribution to the study of the influence of Florentine masters is the recognition of another master within the broader range of »Michelozzo's circle«, the enigmatic Bartolomeus Grazianus. On the other hand, solid and clearly conceived aediculae in the Rector's Palace and above the Pile Gate, differing from the miniaturized, gentle decoration applied by the sculptors and decorators of Michelozzo's circle, and especially the relief with two hovering *putti*, give enough proof to re-actualize the suggestion of Ljubo Karaman that Michelozzo had left the designs for the reconstruction of the Rector's Palace, and that his activity in Dubrovnik was not limited solely to military architecture.²⁷

24 The only preserved part of the Palazzo Medici, or bank, is a portal now displayed in Museo d'arte antica in Castello Sforzesco, but the building itself is known from Filarete's drawing. Michelozzo's authorship of the project for Banco Mediceo is therefore disputed and the design is sometimes assigned to Antonio Avelino Filarete. R. MARTINIS: 'Il Palazzo di Banco Mediceo: edilizia e arte della diplomazia a Milano nel XV. secolo', *Annali di Architettura*, 15 (2003), pp. 37–57.

25 The motif of two hovering *putti* with a wreath and clouds beneath is found on a 1506 lavabo on the third floor of the Ranjina house in Dubrovnik and on the portal of Pima palace in Kotor. N. GRUJIĆ: 'Zidni umivaonici XV. i XVI. st. u stambenoj arhitekturi dubrovačkog područja', *Radovi Instituta za povijest umjetnosti*, 23 (1999), pp. 69–70; S. KORDIĆ: *Kotor – Vodič kroz grad*, Kotor 2004, p. 12.

26 There is, naturally, another possibility, that the corbels in the Dominican sacristy as well as the aedicula on the Pile Gate bulwark could be ascribed to Andrija Marković, directly documented in relation to the former work – St Vincent's chapel, and only indirectly in relation to the latter – the Pile Gate bulwark. However, the lack of the master's preserved works leaves no firm ground for such an assumption.

27 This hypothesis is also discussed by J. HÖFLER, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 99, 100.