



# The Chapel of Santa Augusta

Serravalle - Vittorio Veneto



Parrocchia di S. Maria Nova  
di Serravalle

## THE LEGEND OF ST. AUGUSTA, A VIRGIN, A MARTYR AND THE PATRON SAINT OF SERRAVALLE

*St. Augusta lived where the sanctuary is now located, on the edge of Mount Marcantone, where she would later be tortured.*

*The events take place in the fifth century, when the Visigoths headed by Alarico invaded the Venetian region, after the Roman Empire had set.*

*According to tradition, a courageous visigothic warrior named Matrucco fortified this place, in order to control the narrow passage of Serravalle. He was Augusta's father.*

*The little girl was born in 410 A.D. approximately, but her mother died at childbirth and Augusta's custody was granted to Cita, her wet nurse, a Christian believer from a nearby village, who secretly Christianized her.*

*Augusta alternated between prayer and charity an, according to legend, it is said that a miracle occurred, which is commemorated by a sign on the path and a capital that stands on the climb towards the sanctuary.*

*Augusta used to collect the bread left at the table to give it to the poor, but one day she was stopped by her father, who asked her to show him what she was carrying inside her apron.*

*Augusta declared she had flowers, then the miracle happened: while she was opening her apron, the bread turned into flowers.*

*Augusta didn't exercise the pagan cult, she shunned the luxury of her court and she also obstinately refused all the offers of marriage: her behaviour put her father on alert and at last he found out about her Faith in Christ.*

*Matrucco asked her daughter to abjure but Augusta was unyielding in her ideas. She was imprisoned and fiercely tortured but she survived.*

*They pulled some of her teeth out, they condemned her to the stake but these tortures didn't hurt her. They also condemned her to the wheel, but the wheel broke without hurting her.*

*In the end Matrucco ordered the beheading of his own daughter.*

*It was 22nd August 425 A.D.*

*From then onwards, the life of St. Augusta is remembered by the people who live in Serravalle and by all the pilgrims who still climb Mount Marcantone.*

*Augusta is still solemnly celebrated every year on 22<sup>nd</sup> August.*



## THE CHAPEL OF ST. AUGUSTA

The Chapel was built after the recovery of the relics of the Saint, on March 27th, 1450, during the restoration works of the previous church placed inside the Castle of Matrucco.

Another two graves were found in addition to the cinerary urn of Saint Augusta: the first one, which was also perfumed, contained the dead body of St. Cita, the wet nurse and first evangelizer of Augusta, in the other one

the skulls of St. Biagio and St. Pellegrino were recovered.

These precious relics are now carefully kept in this gothic area, which represents important evidence of the fifteenth-century structure of this site.

The presbytery of the previous church was made up of the chapel that seemed to be set orthogonally with respect to the seventeenth-century building that included it.

Several changes have been introduced to this structure, such as the inclusion of clefts, the restoration of the base and the inclusion of a new altar.

However, these changes have not effaced the memory and the deeply sacred atmosphere of this Chapel.



## THE PICTORIAL ART

The Sanctuary is covered by a particular fresco cycle that puts together St. Lorenzo and St. Augusta, who are the two patron saints of the territory, Jesus on the Cross and also the Virgin on the Throne.

The paintings are well preserved thanks to the restoration work completed in 2006.

This cycle has recently been attributed to Andrea da Cividale, a painter from Belluno (1401-1482/83) best known as Andrea da Treviso (Fossaluzza, 2012).

This artist also worked on the decoration of the Doctors' Vault, in the oratory of St. Lawrence and St. Marcus, in Serravalle, the chapel of the local Beatens' Guild, a Christian-inspired laic association that worked on the construction of this Sanctuary, too.

Even if several ranges of colours have disappeared, in

particular the original sky-blue of the backgrounds, and repainting has only left out the portrait of Saint Sebastian in the intrados, this fresco cycle shows the painter's ability of narration, his clear technique, his elegant composition and also his attention to the detail and to the different materials in clothes, which make the scene plausible and convey the sacred atmosphere and the doctrinal aim.



### **THE TETRAMORPH AND THE MYSTIC LAMB**

On the keystone we can see the Mystic Lamb and, on the webs, framed by a geometric pattern, we identify the Tetramorph of the Apocalypse, in which the Four Evangelists are represented: Matteo is represented by the Angel, Marco by the Lion, Luca by the Ox and Giovanni by the Eagle.

The characters are represented in a very natural way and the colours are very bright;

we can guess that this brightness was more evident when the dark background was painted in light blue.



### **THE VIRGIN ENTHRONED BETWEEN ANGELS, DONORS AND BEATENS**

It's difficult to appreciate the scene in the upper register because of the wide blanks but, anyway, we can notice the Virgin between two Angels and two Donors.

An elegant halo placed at the Virgin's feet may represent either the Holy Child or St. Augusta on her knees, offering tributes to the Virgin, but we can't be sure about this, since

this piece of the fresco has been lost.

In the lower register we can notice two couples of Beatens on their knees; they can be identified because they are wearing white habits.

They carry a cartouche written with gothic letters, which provides evidence of the recovery of St. Augusta's dead body.



## JESUS ON THE CROSS AND THE SYMBOLS OF THE PASSION

The Crucifix is a direct reference to the martyrdom of St. Augusta and it's followed by the description of the Passion Symbols.

From the left side to the right side we can notice the following elements: the flagellation wands, the vestment and the dice, the whips, the sneering man who offends and pulls the beard, the stick used to break the legs, the lance, the sponge soaked in vinegar at the top of the staff, the flagellation column, the ladder for the Deposition, Veronica's veil, the nails and the pincers, the hammer and the striking hand.

This is a rare representation of the *Arma Christi*, the only weapons owned by Christ to fight Evil.

It is a sixteen-century iconography proposed by St. Gregory The Great, who wanted to encourage the participation to the Passion of Our Lord, a religious practice replaced by the *Via Crucis* in the eighteenth century.

## S. LAWRENCE PROTECTS THE CITIZENS OF SERRAVALLE AND PRESENTS THE BEATENS TO ST. AUGUSTA

The narrative scene on the wall is mutilated by a big window and a shrine made of stone built in 1626, where some ex votos are preserved.

St. Lawrence martyr stands in the middle of the painting, followed by a group of devotees on their knees. He's caught in the act of presenting the Beatens to St. Augusta. Augusta is portrayed as a late medieval princess, her mantle is fur-covered, she's fair-haired and has also got a crown on her head. Between the two Saints there's also the processional banner of the Beatens, which can be compared to the banner in the church of St. Andrew.



This is an explicit reference to the processional practices that constituted an important element for the public life of the Confraternity.



## THE ALTAR OF ST. AUGUSTA

The altar looks like a sarcophagus made of white and red marble, a lasting material, in order to keep St. Augusta's memory alive.

The dossal is constituted by three niches, the lateral ones show the relics of St. Augusta and other martyrs.

The stylistic unitariness of the fifteenth century was broken with the consecration of the altar by Arcangelo Zanette, a sculptor from Ceneda (1831-1911), which was placed there in 1889.

The artist demonstrates his ability of uniting elements from the eighteenth-

century with elements from the gothic period.

He doesn't want to emulate the pre-existent dossal but he also wants to propose the neo-gothic style that became popular between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.



## THE DOSSAL

The dossal of the previous altar, which is now placed behind the nineteenth-century altar, is a reproduction of sculptures out of stone which reinterprets the wooden polyptychs of the XIV century.

The dossal is made of different superimposed layers, but also made of different sections organized in niches

and spiral columns with floral patterns.

In the middle of the lower register we notice the figure of St. Augusta, between St. Helen with St. John the Baptist on the left side and St. Mary Magdalene with St. Andrew on the right side.

In the upper register the Magdalene stands between the Virgin and St John the Evangelist.

On the acroteres we recognize the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin, during the Annunciation.

In the centre of the fresco there's God the Father holding the open Book, in which we can read the following Latin sentence: "I'm the King of Heaven, the King of Earth and the King of the Sea".

A tombstone at the back shows that this stonework was opened on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1476; another description (*OPVS IOANNIIS ANTONI*) allows us to ascribe this work to Giovanni Antonio da Marcador, who was born in Belluno. He took an active part in the cultural life of his city and of Serravalle, too. In the middle of the fifteenth century he repropose in a simple way the gothic canons typical of the fourteenth century in Venice.

### **THE SARCOPHAGUS OF ST. AUGUSTA**

The quadrangular sarcophagus was made between 1450 and 1452 to contain the relics of St. Augusta.

The front is divided into three arches which contain the Virgin and Child, St. Augusta (on the right side) and her wet nurse Saint Cita (on the left side), respectively followed by two minor characters: the parish priest from Serravalle, Alvise from Ferrara, and the Mayor, Pietro Soranzo, the representatives of the



spiritual power and the temporal power in 1450 and witnesses to the relics' recovery.

On the right side we can see St. Leonard of Limoges and St. Faustino on the left side. The last one is a warrior Saint from Brescia, whose cult was spread by the Lombards; this saint is not an object of devotion in our territory.

The names of the Saints and the inscription on the lower edge, which

document the phases of the recovery are very didactic: a choice made by the sculptor himself.

The sarcophagus has been ascribed to the sculptor Giovanni Antonio da Marcador who is very didactic in inserting the names of the Saints and the inscription on the lower edge, which prove the phases of the discovery of Augusta's body.

The work is also well-preserved, as a matter of fact we can make out the original colours, which evidenced all the characters, the frames and the floral patterns.

The case is supported by columns, a distinction reserved to Saints.

According to an ancient devotional observance, believers should go through the columns to get rid of their backache.

### **THE SACELLUM OF THE URN**

A wrought iron railing bounds the left corner of the chapel and protects a small stone urn which, according to tradition, is the case where St. Augusta's mortal remains were found.

A sixteenth-century frame made of stone is inserted in the railing, surrounded by an oval made of red marble from France, in which believers, according to an ancient cult, through which people are used to put their heads in order to get recovery from headache from the Saint.

Above there's a bronze statue of St. Augusta and at her feet are the tools used for the martyrdom.

The statue has been ascribed to Paolo Possamai, from Solighetto (1851-1938). It was made in 1925 as a vow made by the population of Serravalle during the Austro-hungarian invasion of 1917-18. This event is recalled by the inscription on the base of the statue.

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