

THE TWO MEDIAEVAL CHURCHES OF CAMPOROSSO IN VALCANALE, ITALY

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Around the year 1007, the village of Camporosso,¹ along with the rest of the Canale Valley,² became the property of the bishops of the newly-founded Diocese of Bamberg thanks to its founder, Emperor Henry II. Sometime after this, it also became the local ecclesiastical centre.³ Its main church, dedicated to St Giles (Sant'Egidio), was, according to written sources, built by Otto I, bishop of Bamberg, who ruled between 1106 and 1139, and was elevated to the status of mother church for the entire Canale Valley.⁴ Today, the village has two churches; therefore, it also has two patron saints – St Giles and St Dorothy. The small church of Saint Dorothy is located on a steep hill in the west, the traditionally older part of the village (Fig. 1), while the much bigger church of Saint

¹ Its full name is Camporosso in Valcanale. The village is called Žabnice in Slovene, Saifnitz in German, and Cjamparos in Friulian.

² It is called Valcanale in Italian, Kanalska dolina in Slovene, Kanaltal in German, and Val Cjanâl in Friulian. The Valley is located in the tri-border area between Italy, Austria, and Slovenia. Today, the entire valley belongs to Italy, but in the Mediaeval period, it was formally a part of the Duchy of Carinthia and predominantly Slavic in terms of population. Cf. HÖFLER 2016, pp. 117–118.

³ The nearby and later dominant town of Tarvisio only came into existence in the 14th century. It was first mentioned in 1310 (RESMAN 1999, p. 316). Only in 1399 were the Friulian inhabitants of Tarvisio allowed to build their own church. Up to that point, their parish church was still the Camporosso mother church of St Giles. Cf. DOMENIG 2014, p. 29; HÖFLER 2016, p. 118.

⁴ The year when the Camporosso parish was established is not known. From an ecclesiastical perspective, its territory originally belonged to the mother parish of St Johann unter dem Dobratsch in the Gail Valley. However, probably in the 13th century it was assigned to the Hospital of the Holy Spirit, a branch of the Roman Hospital of Santo Spirito in Saxia founded in Gemona. At that time, the church in Camporosso must have already been a parish church. Cf. HÖFLER 2016, p. 118. It is unlikely that the parish was founded by the Bamberg bishop Otto I, who built the church sometime between 1106–1139, as often claimed, because he was only the owner of the domain, while the church rights belonged to the Patriarch of Aquileia and he alone could establish a parish.

Despite the exact year of the founding of the mother parish being unknown, it is often incorrectly dated to 1106. Cf. MENIS 1991, p. 51; PASCHINGER 1995; BUFON 2001.



1. Camporosso in Valcanale, the church of St Dorothy, view from the north (Photo: Katarina Richter)



2. Camporosso in Valcanale, the church of St Giles, view from the east (Photo: Katarina Richter)



3. Camporosso in Valcanale, the interior of the church of St Giles including two frescoes by Thomas of Villach (Photo: Katarina Richter)

Giles lies in the northeast part (Fig. 2).⁵ The architecture of both churches is typically Carinthian Gothic because the entire valley was part of the Duchy of Carinthia in mediaeval times.⁶

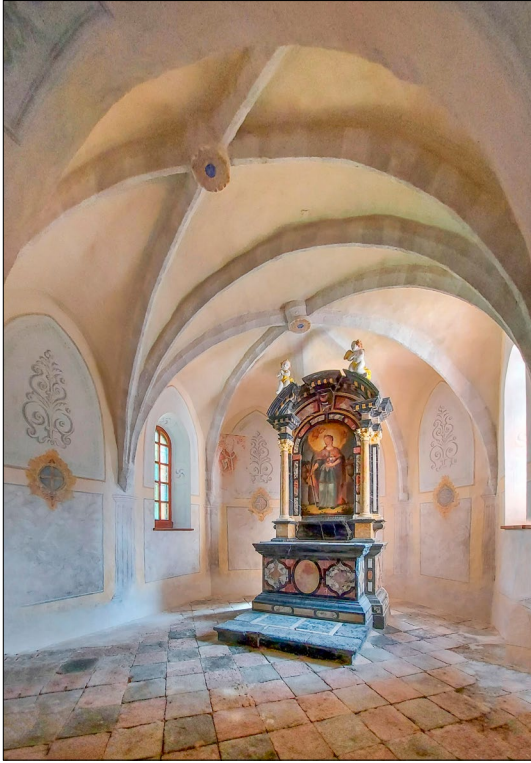
The parish church of St Giles is surrounded by a graveyard. The rather large mid-15th-century building⁷ has a central nave, a typical Gothic presbytery (Fig. 3) with external buttresses, and a Late Gothic complex ribbed vault. Its two side naves are a 17th-century addition.⁸ Its patron saint matches that of the original mother parish from the 12th century, while the age of the actual church building does not. The much smaller and simpler church of St Dorothy consists of a porch, a simple and slender pointed-arch-shaped portal, a single nave with a flat plastered ceiling and a Gothic

⁵ The west part of the village, also known as Filja, is allegedly named after its Roman predecessor (from the Latin word villa). The east part of the village is called Vesa. Cf. *Kunst-Topographie* 1889, p. 302; GLIHA KOMAC 2014, p. 31.

⁶ The entire valley is a distinctly Carinthian area in terms of Mediaeval artistic influences. Not only architecture but other artworks and particularly frescoes have been preserved in several churches as well. The most widely known Mediaeval artwork in the valley is the high-quality winged altarpiece from the village of Pontebba, produced by the Villach Carving Workshop in 1517. Cf. DEMUS 1991, pp. 330–343; DEMUS 1995, p. 168; HÖFLER 1998, pp. 153–161.

⁷ A record of the consecration of the church of St Giles has been preserved (BERGAMINI 1991, p. 435): */.../ 1471 il vescovo di Ferentillo potè solennente consacrare la nuova chiesa in villa Sappniz de Camporubeo cum tribus in ea altaribus et cimiterio /.../.*

⁸ CEVC 2001.



4. Camporosso in Valcanale, the church of St Dorothy, the presbytery interior (Photo: Katarina Richter)



5. Camporosso in Valcanale, the church of St Dorothy, the presbytery exterior (Photo: Katarina Richter)

presbytery. There is also a later-built bell tower next to it with a sacristy on the ground floor. A thick triumphal arch wall with a pointed arch-shaped opening separates the nave from the presbytery, which has simple ribbed vaulting and four massive buttresses supporting its walls from the outside (Figs. 4–5). The church has been modified and its walls painted over several times, but its original form is still clearly recognisable. The church of St Dorothy is sometimes dated to the 11th or 12th century, which roughly corresponds to the founding of the mother parish, but no tangible evidence for this claim is available.⁹

In the accessible sources, there is considerable confusion regarding the Camporosso churches, sometimes even about the basic distinction between the two of them.¹⁰ In addition, the church

⁹ This confusion is profound, and even on the fairly new information plaque outside the church from 2021 or 2022, there are two conflicting pieces of information regarding the church's origin, mentioning both the 11th and the 14th centuries as the possible centuries of construction.

¹⁰ In MIGGLAUTSCH 1995, p. 206, the patronages of the Camporosso churches are listed the wrong way round and as a result the buildings are incorrectly dated. While the church of St Dorothy was supposedly built in

of St Dorothy is often not even mentioned. Some sources describe it superficially, but the questions of its age and function are never discussed or answered.¹¹ However, the available sources are rarely backed up by professional opinions, and in some cases, no sources are cited at all. The majority of the uncited information most likely comes from the “Saifnitz” entry of the *Kunst-Topographie des Herzogthums Kärnten* from 1889.¹² Most texts only provide a few basic facts regarding the church of St Giles, while the smaller and at first sight much less interesting church of St Dorothy is barely mentioned. It appears that the authors of some of the older sources might not even have been aware of the existence of two churches in Camporosso, and simply attributed all the available data to the one they knew about – the parish church of St Giles. However, it is difficult to assign criticism in this situation due to the lack of academic attention given to both buildings, and particularly to the church of St Dorothy. Therefore, we will shift our focus to it in order to explore its potential significance further.

After all the confusion regarding the available data, the question that arises is “which church is which?” What is the relationship between the two church buildings and what is the significance of the smaller one? Is there a chance that the modern-day St Dorothy is in fact the original parish church,¹³ as is claimed in some sources and might be a possibility according to the Austrian art historian Otto Demus?¹⁴ The answer is no. The claim was never supported by reliable evidence but only by more circumstantial arguments such as, for instance, that the smaller church resides in the older part of the village and is believed to be considerably older than the church

the 16th century, the seat of the parish is correctly attributed to the church of St Giles. The church of St Giles is more correctly dated to the 12th century as the seat of the mother parish in PASCHINGER 1995, p. 52. In the descriptions on the website of Le Chiese delle Diocesi Italiane (<http://www.chieseitaliane.chiesacattolica.it/chieseitaliane/index.jsp>), both Camporosso churches are indicated as possible locations of the original mother parish church, which, of course, can only apply to one of them. There is also a record (https://www.dom.it/sv-doroteja-v-zabnicah_santa-dorotea-a-camporosso/) that says that the church of St Dorothy was enlarged between the 15th and 17th centuries, which is unlikely as the small building would originally have been even smaller than it is today. However, the description is applicable to the side naves of the church of St Giles. Some of the accessible sources regarding the Camporosso churches are problematic because they do not cite their sources of information, which in turn makes them less reliable. In some cases, there is no confusion, and the churches and their ages appear to be more accurately discernible (e.g. DEMUS 1995).

¹¹ Cf. BERGAMINI 1991, p. 436. The church is not mentioned in Mateja Poljšak’s diploma thesis (POLJŠAK 1997), which includes the Late Gothic churches in the area of the Canale Valley among other areas. St Dorothy was most likely not considered a Late Gothic building.

¹² *Kunst-Topographie* 1889, pp. 302–304.

¹³ If true, this claim would mean that a change of patronage would have to have taken place at some point in the Middle Ages. Such an occurrence is not unheard of. Regarding the question of patron saints, Janez Höfler (HÖFLER 2016, p. 373; translated by Katarina Richter), wrote the following: “When researching the history of patronages, we must be aware that the documented patronage of a church, if it is a fairly late one, is not necessarily its original patronage. However, researchers of this topic warn against hasty conclusions. Nevertheless, it appears that patronages did not change very often in the Middle Ages.”

¹⁴ DEMUS 1995, p. 172.

of St Giles.¹⁵ The modern-day situation regarding the church's location in the older part of the settlement is hardly relevant as today both churches are situated inside the village. Furthermore, a mother church was not tied to a single settlement as a mother parish commonly covered an extensive territory and belonged to the patriarch. It makes sense that such a church would have originally been positioned outside a settlement.¹⁶ For example, the cadastral map of the First Military Survey of the Habsburg Empire from the 18th century¹⁷ clearly shows that both Camporosso churches were even at that time still located outside the village or at best at its periphery, and that in the following centuries the village spread closer to them. Additionally, a notable limitation of the church of St Dorothy is the lack of a cemetery in its vicinity. In mediaeval times, a (mother) parish church had baptismal and funeral rights, and therefore its own cemetery. In our case, the cemetery surrounds the Church of St Giles and not that of St Dorothy. Thus, it is evident that the founding church of the mother parish was indeed a predecessor of the current church of St Giles.¹⁸

The Camporosso parish has been dedicated to the same saint from the very beginning. This is a documented fact¹⁹ and comes as no surprise as St Giles was already an established church patron in the Slovene lands in the 12th century, and it was Otto I,²⁰ bishop of Bamberg, who built several churches dedicated to this very saint.²¹ The Camporosso church of St Giles was not built in the mid-15th century, but merely rebuilt due to the poor condition of its predecessor, and then consecrated in 1471.²² On the other hand, more tangible information regarding the origins of the church of St Dorothy has yet to be found.

¹⁵ One source even claims that the foundations of the church of St Dorothy were laid in 1007 or 1017, but no original source is provided for this information. See GLIHA KOMAC 2014, p. 31.

¹⁶ The original positioning of mother churches outside settlements does not come as a surprise. The fact that mother churches covered extensive and at the time of their establishment often still scarcely populated or uninhabited areas, is only starting to gain importance. Cf. HÖFLER 2015, p. 12.

¹⁷ The First Military Survey of the Habsburg Empire was carried out between 1763 and 1786. Several Habsburg cadastral and military maps are available at arcanum.com (<https://maps.arcanum.com/en/map/firstsurvey-inner-austria/?bbox=1504729.1214417631%2C5861928.52089057%2C1507915.872900063%2C5862995.817697269&map-list=1&layers=138>).

¹⁸ *Stato personale* 1977, p. 199; BURBA 1998, pp. 16–17.

¹⁹ The following information regarding the founding of the mother parish is provided in HÖFLER 2016, p. 118: *.../ in montanis Chanol 2 capellas, unam in honorem sancte Gertrudis Virginis et alteram in honore sancti Egidii /.../*.

²⁰ This information might prove relevant because the Canale Valley area, along with the nearby Carinthian town of Villach, was part of the domain of the Bishops of Bamberg at that time. Cf. GRAFENAUER 1990, p. 394.

²¹ MENIS 1991, p. 51; HÖFLER 2016, pp. 118, 413–414.

²² The year of consecration matches the creation time of two frescoes on the north nave wall, right next to the presbytery. The scenes of the *Flagellation* and the *Crucifixion of Christ* were painted by Thomas of Villach, the most prominent Carinthian fresco painter of the late 15th century. Both scenes match his most famous fresco cycle in the church of St Andrew in nearby Thörl (Carinthia) quite well. Cf. BERGAMINI 2014, p. 92; RICHTER 2021–2022, p. 122.

What, then, is the role and age of the Church of St Dorothy? According to a 16th-century census, there were four parishes in the Canale Valley at the time, and three sacral buildings are listed in the village and parish of Camporosso – the church of St Giles, the sanctuary on the peak of Monte Lussari, and the church of St Dorothy.²³ In contrast to the other two churches, the significance of the small church of St Dorothy continued to diminish throughout the centuries. Records of several canonical visitations to the Camporosso parish between 1751–1777²⁴ attest that St Dorothy had seen better days. While most of these reports diligently describe the other two churches in the Camporosso parish – St Giles as the parish church and the Monte Lussari one as a notable pilgrimage site – the church of St Dorothy is hardly mentioned²⁵ or omitted entirely. Regardless of the reasons for this lack of information, it still hints at the insignificance of the small church. One record, however, is somewhat longer and provides the following description: “Filialis S[anctae] Dorotheae V[irginis et] M[artyris] ut dicitur cons[ecrata] h[a]bet aras 3, 1 h[uius]. t[ituli]., 2 B[eatae] V[irginis], 3 s[ancti] Wolfgangi, deest ubique cerata, arae miserae et misere instructae, sacristia modica, unicum h[a]bet calicem, paramenta 4, albas 3, campanas 2 coemeterium nullum, dotem nullam, nisi forte cum dote matricis confusam.”²⁶ The text describes the altars of the church as “miserae et misere instructae,” or miserable and poorly equipped. The church had in fact been richly endowed, but its dowry was taken over by the parish church.

The rather scarce mentions, or complete lack thereof, of the church of St Dorothy mirror the contemporary lack of interest in the church. However, this has changed as both the interior and exterior of the inconspicuous church were fairly recently stripped of their coats of yellow paint,²⁷ revealing several layers of mediaeval frescoes. They adorn the north and west walls of the nave (Fig. 6) and there are indications that the wall paintings also extended to the south nave wall. Now that their uncovering and conservation process has been completed,²⁸ it has at last been possible for them to be properly studied, dated and attributed. The north wall is adorned with the scenes of *The Journey of the Magi* along with the *Adoration of the Magi*, while the scenes painted on the east wall include Biblical scenes and images of saints, including the *Martyrdom of St Acacius*. This excellent and rather well-preserved fresco cycle was undoubtedly painted by

²³ MENIS 1991, p. 42.

²⁴ Historical Archive of the Archdiocesan Curia, Gorizia, Atti delle visite pastorali di Carlo Michele d’Attems (1751–1777).

²⁵ For example, one of the descriptions only acknowledges the church’s existence and states that it has three altars. In: Historical Archive of the Archdiocesan Curia, Gorizia, Atti delle visite pastorali di Carlo Michele d’Attems, 16 (1762), fol. 55v.

²⁶ Historical Archive of the Archdiocesan Curia, Gorizia, Atti delle visite pastorali di Carlo Michele d’Attems, 6 (1751), p. 149.

²⁷ The outside of the church was renovated in 2019 and the inside in the periods of 2018–2019 and 2020–2021. Information provided by fresco restorer Angela Cecon.

²⁸ The frescoes were found in 2013 but not uncovered immediately.

the Older Villach Painting Workshop of Master Friedrich of Villach,²⁹ the major exponent of fresco painting in Carinthia of his time.³⁰ The frescoes were created in the mid-15th century, roughly the same period as the Workshop's other most extensive fresco cycles, such as the one in St Gandolf (Carinthia, Austria).

The fresco layer painted by Master Friedrich and his workshop is not the only one preserved inside the church. There are at least two more, which are even older. On the north nave wall, a partially preserved section of a fresco with its decorative border is visible just below the edge of the *Magi* scenes. Although not easily discernible, it likely depicts another scene portraying the *Martydrom of St Acacius*. Fortunately, this layer is dated as well – to 1401. On the south side of the east nave wall, a section of the “Villach” fresco layer is missing, revealing an even older scene, a fine figure of St Florian.³¹

The multiple fresco layers which include works of considerable quality provide us with some new though circumstantial evidence. It is intriguing that two of these layers – the one from 1401 and Master Friedrich's cycle – were painted within the span of just a few decades. At the time, a fresco cycle produced by Friedrich of Villach himself was likely the best that money could buy locally and thus represented the epitome of artistic investment in this part of Carinthia. Circumstances such as these are more likely to be associated with a prominent parish church, such as St Giles, or a significant pilgrimage site, such as the one on Monte Lussari, rather than in an insignificant filial church. As the church of St Dorothy was neither, and considering its lack of



6. Camporosso in Valcanale, the church of St Dorothy, view of the 15th century wall paintings from the choir loft (Photo: Katarina Richter)

²⁹ Master Friedrich was an accomplished painter and a representative of the Late Soft Style. He was active in the middle of the 15th century. Cf. HÖFLER 1981–1982.

³⁰ The medieval wall paintings in the Camporosso church of St Dorothy were described, attributed and dated for the first time in RICHTER 2021–2022.

³¹ A figure of an unidentifiable bishop has been uncovered on one of the presbytery walls. In terms of style it belongs to the same layer of wall paintings as the depiction of St Florian. Cf. RICHTER 2021–2022, pp. 126–128.

prominence in later centuries, we can deduce that it must have had a prosperous patron in the late Middle Ages. Although his identity remains unknown, some clues regarding the patron's status and the church's age can be discerned from the building itself.

A very important clue may be the choice of St Dorothy as the church's patron saint. On examining Janez Höfler's book *On the First Churches and Parishes in the Slovene Lands*,³² we can see that, according to the available evidence, church patron saints in these lands up to and including the 13th century were more often than not male. Practically the only exception were churches, dedicated to Mary, and the late Middle Ages, especially from the second half of the 14th century onward, is precisely the period when St Dorothy was a particularly popular saint.³³

The church was most likely connected to a member of the clergy. Although St Dorothy is not typically regarded as a patroness of the clergy, some indications have been found and a possible connection established, once again by Janez Höfler. He noted St Dorothy's presence in some other (otherwise unconnected) locations with depictions of clergy members, more precisely canons, praying directly to the saint or having a basket, the attribute of St Dorothy, painted in their coat of arms. Two such examples can be seen in frescoes inside the pilgrimage church at Ptujška Gora, Slovenia (painted in 1424–1426) and in the cloister of Brixen cathedral, Italy (painted around 1410–1420).³⁴

There are indirect clues that would appear to validate such an interpretation in the case of Camporosso as well. The fresco cycle painted by Master Friedrich of Villach is unfortunately not preserved in its entirety and the potential original presence of any depictions of a canon, a basket or St Dorothy remains unknown. However, there is a curious detail in the scene that shows the motif of Mary, Virgin of Mercy. Although the scene is not preserved in its entirety, the people kneeling whom Mary is providing shelter for under her cloak clearly represent a specific homogeneous group. Clad uniformly in white, they could be identified as members of the clergy.

For one last bit of information, we must once again return to the 18th century visitations of the parish. One record relays the following information regarding the church: "Altera Filialis Ecclesia S. Dorotheae V. et M. in colle Domui canonico vicino."³⁵ It provides evidence that a canon's house stood in the vicinity of the church at the time, leading us to speculate that this situation may date back to the Middle Ages, which would support the claim that the church of St Dorothy was the establishment of some church dignitary at the time.

³² HÖFLER 2016; title translated by Katarina Richter.

³³ The cult of saints was a key part of Christianity in medieval times and St Dorothy belongs to a rather distinct group of saints. She is one of the *Virgines Captales* along with St Barbara, St Catherine, and St Margaret. In mediaeval times, these Virgin Martyrs were far more widely known and venerated than they are today. While their cult was strongest in central Europe and the Germanic lands, St Dorothy was immensely popular on her own as well. See WEED 2010, pp. 1066, 1072.

³⁴ The suggested connection between St Dorothy and canons is further discussed in HÖFLER 2011, pp. 150–153.

³⁵ Historical Archive of the Archdiocesan Curia, Gorizia, *Atti delle visite pastorali di Carlo Michele d'Attems*, 23 (1769), p. 306.

The presence of frescoes of rather high quality painted by Master Friedrich and his Older Villach Workshop definitely puts the church of St Dorothy on the map. The frescoes themselves provide us with the currently most precise clue regarding the identity of the patron and the age of the actual church building. The fresco layer painted in 1401 is only the second oldest, and the oldest visible layer of frescoes, the one featuring the image of St Florian, suggests that the church must have been built at the latest in the 14th century. The church of St Dorothy in Campososso was thus most likely built as an ex-voto establishment with significant financial resources at its disposal during the High Middle Ages.

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SREDNJEVEŠKI CERKVI V ŽABNICAH (CAMPOROSSO IN VALCANALE)

Povzetek

Žabnice so vas v danes italijanski Kanalski dolini, ki je v srednjem veku formalno v celoti pripadala vojvodini Koroški, etnično pa je bila pretežno slovenska. Tako ni presenetljivo, da je dolina, kar zadeva srednjeveško umetnost, območje z močnimi koroškimi vplivi. Danes je najpomembnejši kraj v Kanalski dolini mesto Trbiž, pred njegovim nastankom pa so bile najpomembnejše Žabnice, ki so bile s cerkvijo sv. Egidija cerkveno središče celotne Kanalske doline.

V vasi stojita dve cerkvi. Manjša in preprosta cerkev sv. Doroteje stoji na griču nad zahodnim delom vasi, večja župnijska cerkev sv. Egidija pa v vzhodnem delu. Glede starosti prve nimamo zanesljivih podatkov, patrocinij druge pa se ujema s patrocinijem ustanovne cerkve pražupnije iz 12. stoletja, medtem ko je sama zgradba nastala v 15. stoletju. V dostopni literaturi je glede žabniških cerkva precej zmede. Mestoma se celo zdi, da se pisci niso dobro zavedali obstoja dveh cerkva v vasi in so vse obstoječe podatke pripisali cerkvi sv. Egidija, cerkev sv. Doroteje pa je pogosto komaj omenjena ali pa kar izpuščena. Nerazjasnjeno ostaja predvsem vprašanje njene resnične starosti in funkcije.

Župnijska cerkev v Žabnicah, naslednica prvotne cerkve iz zgodnjega 12. stoletja, je v jedru poznosrednjeveška zgradba. Delne odgovore glede cerkve sv. Doroteje ponuja nedavno odkritje več plasti srednjeveških stenskih poslikav, med katerimi je tudi kvalitetno delo delavnice mojstra Friderika Beljaškega iz sredine 15. stoletja. Kvaliteta poslikav namiguje, da cerkev v srednjem veku ni bila le nepomembna podružnica, ampak je bila dobro podprta s strani neznanega naročnika, ki je verjetno prihajal iz duhovniških vrst, kar potrjujejo tudi vse prijemljivejše povezave kanonikov oziroma korarjev s sv. Dorotejo kot njihovo zavetnico.