

Who was St. Luke?



St. Luke was not, as many believe, one of the twelve apostles chosen by Jesus; rather he is mentioned and praised time and again by St. Paul as a faithful companion in the voyages he made to spread the gospel.

Luke wrote the *Gospel* bearing his name and the *Acts of the Apostles*: the two volumes are actually a single work (the longest in the New Testament) conceived from a common project: that of **relating**

the story of Jesus' life which continues in the Church through the aid of the Holy Spirit, and with the specific purpose of underlining that Jesus' message - as had been foretold by the prophets of Israel - was addressed to all nations and was to be expressed by each people in its own tongue and culture.

Old sources tell of Luke's profession as a *physician*, hence, doctors recognise Luke as their **patron**.

A widespread tradition presents Luke as a *painter*, an iconographer of the face of Christ and especially of the Virgin Mary. There are several Byzantine images all over the world that are attributed to him: authentic or not, these attributions witness a popular feeling that recognizes in St. Luke the very Evangelist who has sketched the most beautiful literary image of Jesus, Mary and so many other characters and situations of the Gospel and the Early Church. Hence, he has also become the patron saint of artists, and since 1300, of the corresponding sector of the University of Padua.

Among the 'Lucan' icons, one is present in the Basilica of St. Justina, precisely over the tomb of St. Luke: it represents the *Hodigitrian Madonna* ('the Madonna that indicates the Way' - in fact, Mary in the painting is shown pointing to Jesus). The Constantinopolitan origin and antiquity (XIth - XIIth century, circa) of the icon, restored around 1960, has recently been established.

St. Luke's feast day is celebrated on the 18th October, by both Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

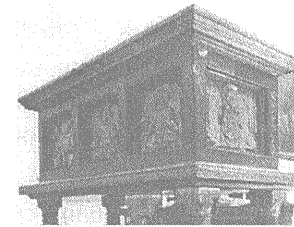
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The tomb of St. Luke the Evangelist

According to an old tradition, Luke the Evangelist, born in Antioch (Syria), died at a very advanced age (84 years) and was buried in the city of Thebes, capital of the

Greek region of Boeotia. From here - as is confirmed by St. Jerome - his remains were removed to Constantinople, and conserved in the Basilica of the Twelve Apostles, in the second half of the IVth century.

In the **Middle Ages**, more precisely in the XIth and XIIth centuries, in the cemetery area of *Prato della Valle* adjacent to the monastery of St. Justina, the remains of numerous saints were unearthed. Manuscripts dating back to the XIVth and XVth centuries, based on hagiographic texts of earlier date, relate a new discovery (*inventio*) that occurred **in 1177**: they speak of miraculous phenomena (fragrant smells associated with the remains, people having dreams within which apparitions linked to the discovery occurred), and also mention the identification of the *titulus* (i.e. the inscription bearing the name of the dead person) and of the symbol featuring three calves on the case containing the remains. All this spurred abbot Dominic and the bishop of Padua, Gerardo Offreducci, to travel to Ferrara in order to meet Pope Alexander III (who was currently stationed there), so that he would certify that the corpse belonged to St. Luke. But how come the remains were in Padua, and not in Constantinople? The manuscript mentions that the remains of St. Luke, together with the relics of St. Matthias, were removed from Constantinople in the times of the Emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363 AD); other sources suggest the VIIIth century iconoclast persecution as probable date for the transfer: actually, historians are still evaluating the plausibility of such hypotheses.

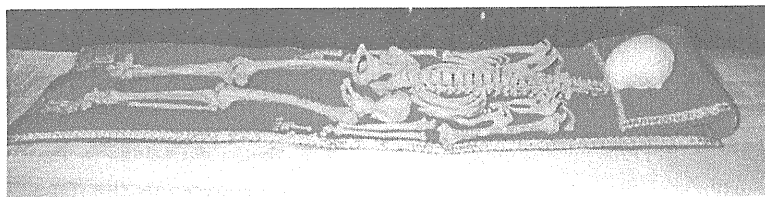
The Benedictine monks, who had established themselves in Padua in the Abbey of St. Justina before 1000 AD, started to venerate the remains of

the Evangelist with considerable care; **around the year 1313** they built a marble sarcophagus within which to place the remains encased in lead. Soon afterwards, **in 1354**, Emperor Charles IV of Luxemburg, king of Bohemia, acquired the skull, which ended up in the cathedral of St. Vitus in Prague, then capital city of the Empire: it has been conserved there till the present day. In our abbey, various literary texts were composed - some for liturgical use - intended to strengthen faith in the authenticity of the relics and to divulge the fame of St. Luke. **In 1436**, the painter Giovanni Storlato was commissioned to portray a series of scenes that relate the *life of the saint*, the *transfer of the relics from the East*, and *their resurfacing in Padua* on the walls of the chapel dedicated to St. Luke.

In 1463, a dispute arose with the Franciscans Minor of St. Job in Venice who contended that they possessed the body of the 'real' St. Luke, which was transferred to Venice from Bosnia following Ottoman aggression in the Balkans. A careful reconnaissance of both remains ensued, the conclusion of which conferred authenticity to the Paduan relics. A century later, **in 1562**, when the construction of the actual basilica was nearing completion, the marble sepulchre was transferred with great pomp to the left arm of the transept.

In 1992, Mons. Antonio MATTIAZZO, bishop of Padua, received an unexpected request from the Metropolitane (Orthodox bishop) of Thebes, HIERONYMOS. The latter visited Padua on a pilgrimage to venerate the remains of St. Luke, and asked that "a significant fragment of the relics" be donated to his Church, "so as to be deposited in the place where the holy sepulchre (empty) of the Evangelist is currently venerated". Metropolitane Hieronymos augured that such a gesture be understood as an ecumenical sign.

Thus, at the request of the Bishop of Padua and following the consent of the Benedictine monks, a detailed interdisciplinary inquiry was set up. The skull was brought over from Prague for a couple of days, and the marble sepulchre was opened on the **17th September 1998**: within a sealed lead case, a human skeleton was discovered that had been quite well preserved.



The *Scientific Research Committee*, led by prof. Vito TERRIBILE WIEL MARIN, established that:

1. **The skeleton, almost entirely preserved**, lacked the skull, the right ulna and a few of the smaller bones. Subsequently, it was further established that the skull brought over from Prague fits in with the top cervical vertebra (the *atlas*) of the Paduan skeleton, demonstrating that the parts belong to the same individual.
2. The anthropometric data suggest that the skeleton belonged to a **male human being, deceased in old age** (between 70 and 85 years), height c.163 cm.
3. *Paleopathological examination* revealed the presence of: a well spread *osteoporosis*; a very serious *arthrosis* of the spine (especially in the lumbar region); a *pulmonary emphysema* (evidence for which comes from the curvature of the ribs). **Such lesions are typical of a man who died in old age.**
4. The **careful preservation** of the bones through several centuries indicates that already in the past, the remains were considered important relics, worthy of being treated with all the care possible in order to ensure long lasting preservation.

The abundant 'complementary material' discovered at the bottom of the casing (shells, serpent bones, beads, plant fragments, drapery, etc.) required the intervention of other specialists. From a comparison of results, the antiquity of the remains and the Eastern origins of some of the objects (pollen grains, fabrics) was confirmed.

On the **17th September 2000**, a Catholic delegation, including the Bishop of Padua and a monk from the Abbey of St. Justina, donated part of the rib bone flanking the heart region to the Metropolitane Hieronymos of Thebes. The gesture was much appreciated by the Greek Church.

The final results of the research were presented in an **International Congress**, held in Padua in October 2000. *The scientific data - as has been upheld at the conclusion of the meeting - do not contradict the traditional claim that the remains are those of the Evangelist St. Luke. Rather, they stand as precise data, complementary to the manuscript sources, using which further historical investigation may proceed with better grounding. Of major historical interest, of course, is the issue regarding how, when and why the transfer of the body from Constantinople to Padua occurred.*
