

WOMEN IN THE
MEDIEVAL MONASTIC WORLD

MEDIEVAL MONASTIC STUDIES

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WOMEN IN THE
MEDIEVAL MONASTIC WORLD

Edited by

Janet Burton and Karen Stöber



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WOMEN AND MONASTICISM IN VENICE IN THE TENTH TO TWELFTH CENTURIES

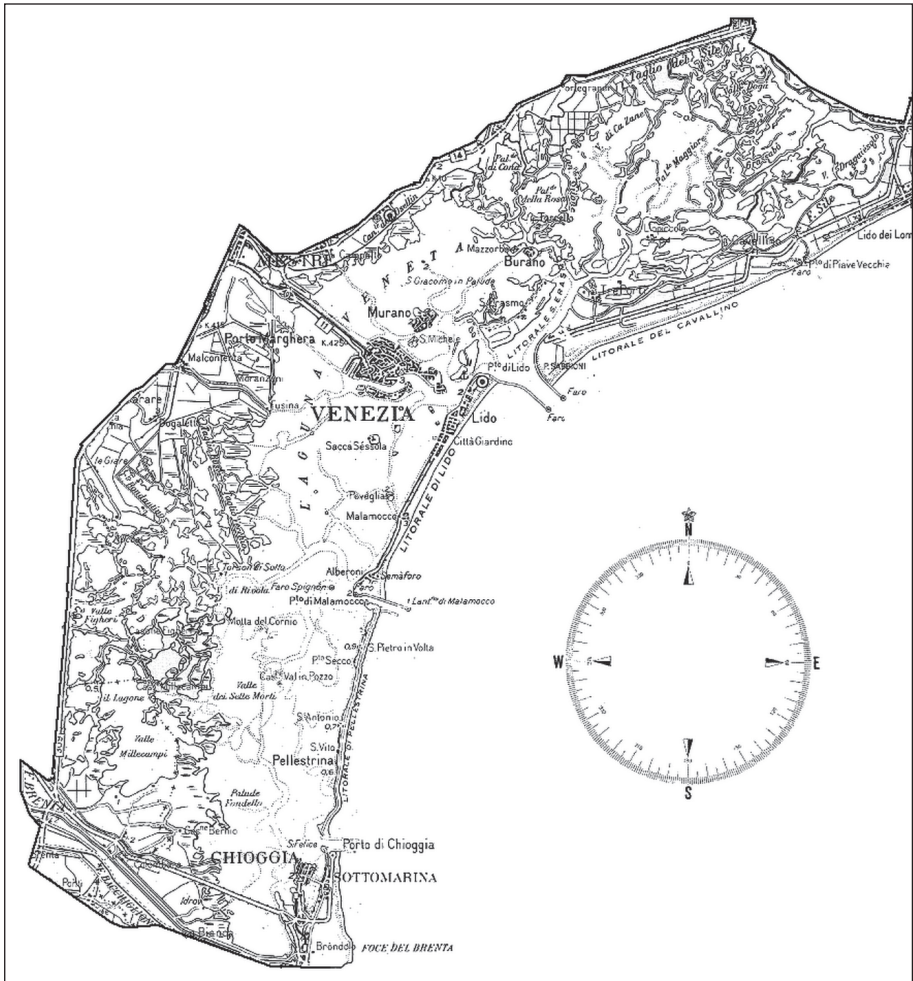
Anna Rapetti

A Historical Paradigm: Venice as a Case of her Own

The study of Venetian female monasticism during the high Middle Ages contributes to our understanding of the long and variegated processes of the formation of those communities which were to become important to the religious, as well as the social, political, and economic, life of the city. We know that there were some old and prestigious female monasteries, which were often intimately connected with the public authorities of the city,¹ but there were others that had an uncertain institutional profile. Both types, however, were original and dynamic as organizations, and it is instructive to assess their specific influence and relevance in the making of the history of the *Dogado*, or Duchy of Venice. In fact, a number of foundation documents of new female communities provide testimony to the great religious vitality of women from both aristocratic and mercantile backgrounds. Such records also suggest the extent of these women's courage when they had to make choices about their lives. Yet such considerations have not been sufficient to foster specific research and studies. Until now, historians have been mainly interested in the political and civic dimensions of monasticism in Venice. This approach is particularly deep seated where female monasticism is concerned: monasticism has been essentially, or even exclusively, studied as a social and economic phenomenon, a strong component of

¹ Among these was the ancient nunnery of San Zaccaria, near Piazza San Marco, suppressed in 1810.

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Map 6.1. Venice and its surroundings.

Source: Istituto geografico militare.

the very myth of Venice, grandly on display during the Renaissance, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries.² Religious institutions have for the most part been considered in their relations with the aristocracy, with the most illustrious and richest families sponsoring Venetian churches and monasteries. Such an approach has stemmed from the conviction that monasteries were consid-

² See Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice*, and Pavan, *Venice Triumphant*.

ered to be instrumental in consolidating the oldest families and in sustaining those making their fortunes. In brief, monasteries have been considered only as a fundamental basis of the Venetian state or, alternatively, as an indicator of social and political relationships — although clearly these two aspects are intertwined. As a result, Venetian monasticism has been neglected as a specific religious phenomenon.³ Scholars have neglected the institutional dimension which each monastery had individually, both with regard to the governance mechanisms of the *conventus*, the community of the nuns, and to the management of its properties, which did not necessarily coincide with the economic interests of the families and patrons of the monasteries themselves.

This essay aims to provide the first answers to such questions about female monastic life in a city during its making. In particular, it focuses on the topic of the *originality* of Venice in comparison with contemporary religious movements, and with the social dynamics pertaining to the city. The relative originality of the Venetian case has always been postulated but has not been properly investigated to date. There is still a dearth of systematic studies on medieval Venetian monasticism, both male and female, with no differentiation between the great Benedictine and mendicant monasteries, and the smaller and poorer ones in the Lagoon. The abundance of monastic studies from the last thirty years, with their different paths of research, is not rooted in the history of medieval Venice.⁴

The current state of research on female monasticism not only prevents a synthesis but also requires a pre-emptive verification of some research hypotheses, which is not always an easy task. This is, in part, due to a lack of case studies and to a historiographic tendency to regard everything that occurred in Venice, including monasticism (in medieval times and later), as exceptional to Venice alone. Such Venice-centric historiography *de facto* automatically precludes all confrontation and comparison with the same phenomenon in other cities or regions. Consequently, we have to verify whether there actually was a low presence of congregations and reformed monastic orders, whilst many monastic houses maintained their independence at an institutional level, and whether there actually was a prominence of ‘internal’ relationships (that is, between the

³ In fact, the erudite studies about the churches and monasteries in Venice and the Lagoon, published by Flaminio Corner in the late 1740s and in the 1750s, are still among the most well-known and useful tools amongst scholars, although their contents are largely still to be verified.

⁴ See Andenna, *Dove va la storiografia monastica in Europa*. On the Italian case in particular, see Albuzzi, ‘Il monachesimo femminile nell’Italia medioevale’.

monasteries and the *doge*, or the monasteries and the elite families), as opposed to 'external' relationships, above all, with their own orders and with the papacy.

In any case, we have to consider the geographical specificity: on the one hand, the frequent, or even very frequent, transference of communities from the Lagoon to the *Terra Ferma*, or *vice versa*; and, on the other, the transferences and amalgamations of communities within the Lagoon.

The period covered in this paper is one during which a profound change took place in Benedictine monasticism, and in female monasticism in particular, which occurred both in northern Italy and elsewhere, albeit with a rhythm of its own compared to other regions. Proprietary aristocratic monasteries of the eighth to the tenth centuries — conceived as refuges for widows and as a place for organizing both dynasties and estates — often suffered hard times or had a short lifespan. In a sharp contrast, many monasteries founded by kings and queens, with strong symbolic and political implications, witnessed remarkable growth that assured their prosperity for centuries to come, in some cases up to the thirteenth century. As one example, consider the monastery of San Salvatore or Santa Giulia in Brescia, founded in the year 753 by the Lombard queen Ansa for herself and her daughter Anselperga, who was its first abbess. This convent lasted until its suppression in 1798.⁵ From the eleventh century, monastic life underwent a profound renewal. The role played by women, both nuns and lay women, who actively took part in the general renewal of religious life, sometimes by modifying their relationships with religious practices, is well known. On the one hand, many female monastic communities, both old and new, tended to imitate customs which were similar to those of the male communities of eleventh-century reform: a renowned example is that of the nuns who asked to become Cistercian.⁶ On the other hand, the eagerness for renewal, not just of institutions but also of personal religious practices, was made apparent by many women in quite new, original, and informal ways (works of mercy, praying and penance, voluntary seclusion, for example).⁷ As a counterpoint to this fervour, we find the ecclesiastical hierarchies, which had for a long time been engaged in restoring these religious experiences to an institutional frame-

⁵ See Stella and others, *Santa Giulia di Brescia*; Andenna, *Culto e storia in Santa Giulia*; Andenna, *Arte cultura e religione in Santa Giulia di Brescia*; Wemple, 'S. Salvatore/S. Giulia: A Case-Study'.

⁶ See Cariboni, 'Cistercian Nuns in northern Italy: Variety of Foundations and Construction of an Identity', in this volume.

⁷ See Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*. The first Italian version, *Movimenti religiosi nel Medioevo*, was published forty years later.

work, which was to be both recognizable and rational from a regulatory point of view. It is no coincidence that the first female order was founded in the thirteenth century, with a decisive endorsement by the papacy.⁸

What significance may we perceive in this fervour emanating from these religious movements in Venice? There are no straightforward answers to this question. According to the available studies, there is very little we can perceive.⁹ In the twelfth century, the Gregorian reform, with its many novelties, determined a push, not a hard one but a gradual one, towards a standardization, a homologation of Venetian religious foundations, both secular and regular, to the other local churches.¹⁰ But with regard to other topics, we can, unfortunately, say very little. First of all, the development of lay religious movements, traces of which are preserved in many documents, is worth studying systematically. However, what we can say is that there were a number of female religious initiatives in Venice during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In part, they occurred within traditional institutional frameworks, and they expressed both ways of life and the rather particular relationships with certain monasteries. Clear evidence of this can be found in a large number of wills and testaments. These features had a profound influence on the development of medieval monasticism, so much so that a real Venetian ‘exceptionalism’ can be identified within the monastic panorama. This is especially true in the case of women, constrained by both the pressures and the limits imposed upon them from the world outside of the cloister. However, it is best to be cautious. Sometimes, historians have arbitrarily extended what we can verify for single foundations to monasteries in general, whilst the lack of information would recommend a good dose of scepticism.

Let us start with the single most apparent and unquestionable data. The geo-morphological phenomena and the ability of the inhabitants to control the Lagoon waters had a decisive importance for the evolution of several monasteries. From the first centuries of her history, Venice had experienced recurrent abandonments and moved from one island to another, and from the Lagoon to the *Terra Ferma*,¹¹ because of climate changes and flooding on its outskirts,

⁸ These points are quite well known thanks to a number of studies by Italian medievalists: see *Francesco d'Assisi e il primo secolo di storia francescana*, and, in particular, Alberzoni, *Chiara di Assisi e il francescanesimo femminile*, pp. 203–35; more recently, Alberzoni, “*Servus vestrum et ancillarum Christi omnium*”.

⁹ See Rando, *Una chiesa di frontiera*, pp. 135–48.

¹⁰ Rando, *Una chiesa di frontiera*, pp. 246–48.

¹¹ One of the most famous and ancient cases is that of the male monastery of San Servolo, located on the San Servolo island in the north-eastern lagoon. In 819 Abbot John asked

with the result that the ground often became uninhabitable marshland. Natural phenomena added to the process by which the Venetian economy became concentrated in Rialto and also provoked a depopulation of islands that had once been inhabited, as well as of the monasteries which had been built upon them.¹² This process is particularly apparent in the northern Lagoon, where a fair number of convents were constructed in the thirteenth century. These monasteries had a notable, albeit short-lived, success, and were abandoned within two or three centuries.¹³ The hydro-geological disorder and the resulting instability have often been considered by historians to be the ultimate cause of the abandonment of these monasteries, and indeed this would seem to be reinforced by the frequent complaints of both male and female communities to the public authorities as they sought more convenient locations. We may suggest that these complaints might have been exaggerated in order to achieve their aim, and it is accordingly difficult to assess the actual causes of these changes and disorders. Did uncontrollable flooding provoke the abandonment of these communities? Or did a lack of maintenance cause the flooding? If so, was a loss of interest in some areas of the Lagoon the reason for the lack of maintenance? The consequences of climate change for the islands differed: some were completely submerged, while others are still inhabited today: for example, Murano, Torcello, and Mazzorbo. Some moves may have seemed unavoidable because of the worsened environmental conditions, but there may also have been other motives. Moreover, some transfers did not involve the whole community, but only a part of it: for instance, the convent of Santi Leone and Basso asked for permission to leave the island of Metamauco in order to move to the island of San Servolo. But a church on Metamauco remained open, as it contained the relics of San Leone, which had previously been kept in the convent.¹⁴ Thus, geographical determinism is not the only issue here. The abandonment of monasteries and the construction of new ones were the result of a combination of factors, in which geography assumed a more important role in Venice than elsewhere but was certainly not the exclusive deciding factor.

One feature distinguishes the oldest Venetian nunneries, that is, the absence of proprietary monasteries. These were usually founded by kings, queens, and

Doge Giustiniano for permission to move to *Terra Ferma* because of the island's unfavourable climate; see Pozza, 'Per una storia dei monasteri veneziani'.

¹² A paradigmatic example of this process is represented by what happened in the island of Torcello: compare Pavan, *La Mort lente de Torcello*.

¹³ Moine, *I monasteri femminili della laguna nord di Venezia nel basso medioevo*.

¹⁴ Corner, *Ecclesiae Venetae*, VII, 98–109; Carraro, 'Tra sacro e quotidiano', pp. 11–12.

aristocratic families as instruments of dynastic consolidation, of political propaganda, for the organization of the family estate, and, last but not least, for the placement of family widows (but, as already stated, they were completely absent in the Duchy of Venice). However, *Doge* Giustiniano Partecipazio and Bishop Orso of Olivolo, the latter perhaps a relative of the former, created the two major early medieval foundations, San Zaccaria, not far from the *doge's* palace, and San Lorenzo near Rialto, as proprietary convents.¹⁵ On these nunneries they conferred a rich endowment and extensive exemptions. However, in a relatively short space of time both foundations freed themselves from the control of their patrons and their respective descendants.¹⁶ This process may have been hastened by the disappearance of the Partecipazio family from the political arena during the ninth century.¹⁷ San Zaccaria and San Lorenzo did not perform the functions for which they had been founded, and thus did not become the constitutive elements of a political lordship. In Venice, as is well known, the offices of public power were not fragmented or privatized. San Zaccaria, however, maintained close relations with all the families that rose to the office of *doge*, a fact worth emphasizing. It was more than a family monastery: it was the foundation of the *doge* and of the leading families closest to the apex of political power.

Traditional Monasticism in Rialto: San Zaccaria and San Lorenzo

Historical literature agrees that San Zaccaria was, from its foundation until its suppression, a convent of aristocratic Venetian women.¹⁸ This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that between the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, 70 per cent of the identifiable nuns, that is, those with a family name, belonged to the ranks of the aristocracy. Having said that, we clearly need to clarify what is meant by the term 'aristocracy' within the context of Venice, and who could be considered to have been a member of the nobility. In fact, social mobility in Venice was rather high, even after the *serrata*, or closing, of the Great Council, when membership was restricted to the descendants of those nobles who had been its members between the years 1293 and 1297. Following Gerhard Rösch's

¹⁵ San Zaccaria was founded in the year 829; San Lorenzo just some years later, in 853.

¹⁶ Carraro, 'Tra sacro quotidiano', pp. 13–26.

¹⁷ Ortalli, 'Il ducato e la "civitas Rivoalti" tra carolingi, bizantini e sassoni'; Rando, *Una chiesa di frontiera*, pp. 57–60.

¹⁸ Rösch, *Der venezianische Adel bis zur Schließung der Großen Rats*, pp. 200–03.

criterion,¹⁹ whoever acceded to public office in Venice could be assumed to be an aristocrat, although his rank would vary according to the frequency and the level of his office. Families whose members did not hold public office could not be considered aristocratic. To this first criterion, we might add the ability, or at least the ambition, of members of a family of the mercantile milieu to elevate themselves to higher ranks, that is, to ennoble themselves. Remarkable upward mobility was effectively encouraged by such ambitions, by the extinction of aristocratic families, and by the multiplication of the branches of their family tree in the different parishes of the city.²⁰ As many as 12 per cent of the nuns at San Zaccaria belonged to rich mercantile families, which, in some cases, succeeded in entering the ranks of the ruling classes — a process that may indeed have owed something to the presence of their daughters within this prestigious convent.

Another fundamental feature of San Zaccaria was that, from its inception, it was connected to the *doge's* court. In the city as it existed in the eleventh century, it was close to the residence of the *doge*. Moreover, the ground upon which the basilica was built to host the relics of San Marco, which had been stolen from Alexandria and brought to Venice in the year 828, belonged to the convent. Giustiniano Partecipazio granted a large endowment to the foundation, as he wanted his wife Felicita to build 'basilicam ad honorem Sancti Marci infra territorio Sancti Zacharie'.²¹ Again, around the year 1170, the nuns of San Zaccaria were obliged to hand over a large garden in order for Piazza San Marco to be enlarged, which is how it attained its current size.²² The direct link with the Partecipazio family ended in the ninth century with the extinction of the family. However, San Zaccaria maintained a central role in the political system of the city because of its intense and often personal relations with the *doge's* court. Over time, these relations were guaranteed by the recurrent election of abbesses from families of those who had been elected *doge*.²³ Above all, during its first centuries, and up until the twelfth century, the community of San Zaccaria was also a place where political conflicts were settled and where groups competing for power found a new equilibrium, thereby creating a different balance of power. Between the ninth and the eleventh centuries, eight *doges* requested

¹⁹ Rösch, *Der venezianische Adel bis zur Schließung der Großen Rats*, pp. 81–111.

²⁰ Chojnaki, 'La formazione della nobiltà dopo la Serrata'; on San Zaccaria, see Fees, *Le monache di San Zaccaria a Venezia*.

²¹ *Santi Ilario e Benedetto e San Gregorio*, ed. by Lanfranchi, no. 2, pp. 17–24.

²² Agazzi, *Platea Sancti Marci*, pp. 79–83.

²³ Fees, *Le monache di San Zaccaria a Venezia*, pp. 45–48.

burial in San Zaccaria, a clear sign of its function as a place for retaining the political memory of the city. Moreover, the convent also became a place where foreign policy was conceived and woven. In the eleventh century, many German emperors visited the convent not only to pray but also to form new pacts and consolidate old alliances. San Zaccaria held outstanding prestige even outside of Venice. At the same time, it was deeply embedded in the more elevated political and social *milieux* of Venice, and, as already mentioned, the abbesses in office were quite often from the families of those who had been elected *doge*. As they had obtained a host of privileges conceded to them from Emperor Otto I onwards, the abbesses took advantage of their position in order to obtain the renewal of their privileges and to ensure the emperor's protection.²⁴

The social and political importance of San Zaccaria within Venetian society was mirrored in its substantial endowment, which mostly comprised properties located in the city. The nunnery was the most important ecclesiastical owner of property in Venice and retained this primacy until its suppression in the early nineteenth century. In addition, it had property on the *Terra Ferma* in the areas of Treviso and Verona, even though the size of these properties as a whole was substantially less than that of the properties which it owned in Venice.²⁵ Rural rents and, in particular, rent from housing represented a considerable — indeed, decisive — proportion of the convent balance sheet. Nonetheless, all female monasteries, even the richest ones, had estates which, as a whole, were smaller and confined to specific geographic areas when compared to male monasteries: a comparison with San Giorgio Maggiore is probably the more telling example.²⁶

The monastery of San Lorenzo was founded in the year 853 by Bishop Orso of Olivolo (as mentioned above) and was donated by him to his sister Romana.²⁷ This also seems to have been a proprietary monastery; that is, Romana was granted the *potestas dominandi* over it, and the church that already existed close to the nunnery was given to Romana herself. But, like San Zaccaria, San

²⁴ *Heinrici III diplomata*, ed. by Bresslau and Kehr, no. 57 (2 July 1040), pp. 74–75; *Heinrici IV diplomata*, ed. by von Gladiss, no. 445 (June 1095), pp. 600–01.

²⁵ Masé, 'Les relations des monastères vénitiens'; Modzelewski, 'Le vicende della "pars dominica" nei beni fondiari del monastero'.

²⁶ A comparison between San Giorgio Maggiore's wealth and the wealth of other Venetian monasteries can be drawn by considering the last will of Petrus Encius, a member of an influential aristocratic family who was involved in the political life of the city; the document has been edited in *San Giorgio Maggiore*, ed. by Lanfranchi, II: *Documenti, 982–1159*, no. 132 (November 1123), pp. 295–303.

²⁷ *San Lorenzo*, ed. by Gaeta, no. 1, pp. 1–5.

Lorenzo evolved in quite a different way to other proprietary monasteries. Here, the percentage of nuns belonging to aristocratic families increased to 80 per cent from the ninth to the thirteenth century. There is also evidence there of some daughters from mercantile families and the lower ranks of the aristocracy. It should be noted that the recruitment of nuns to the convent of San Lorenzo — certainly, in the thirteenth century, but very probably also previously — seems to have been limited to the city of Venice alone; a few nuns came from outside of Venice, but none have surnames from the *Terra Ferma*.²⁸

In 1151, San Zaccaria announced its intention to embrace the Cluniac *consuetudines*. This came at the end of a long period of ten years during which this wealthy and prominent convent had been without an abbess because of the dispute between the *doge*, Pietro Polani, and the patriarch of Grado, Enrico Dandolo, and their families. After the death of Nella Michiel, abbess of San Zaccaria, in 1141, Polani had expected — as was customary — to nominate and invest the new abbess, but Dandolo opposed the *doge's* claim, insisting that the nuns themselves should hold a free election to choose their abbess without any lay interference. The patriarch's arguments were resonant of Gregorian reform, giving voice to *libertas ecclesiae*. This episode shows that some people, both lay and ecclesiastic, and some powerful families in Venice actively favoured and supported the ecclesiastical reform.²⁹ Despite this, modern scholarship usually maintains that the Venetians were not interested in introducing the reform of the clergy and the monasteries within the Lagoon.

Pope Eugenius III recognized the nuns' choice and took them 'sub Beati Petri et nostra protectione'. The powerful political connections of the convent allowed it to break off its subjection — which was, until then, very close — to the *doge*; at the same time, it remained independent from the direct authority of Cluny.³⁰ From then onwards, the abbesses of San Zaccaria were no longer drawn from the elite families of Venice, as had previously been the case on almost every occasion. However, or perhaps even because of this fracture, the abbesses started managing their vast properties personally, both in the city and on the *Terra Ferma*. The abbesses themselves selected and employed priests and lay brothers, who regularly looked after the management and the estates even in areas more distant from Venice.

²⁸ Carraro, 'Società e religione nella Venezia medievale', p. 39.

²⁹ Carraro, 'Tra sacro e quotidiano', pp. 51–55, and Madden, *Enrico Dandolo and the Rise of Venice*.

³⁰ Some interesting remarks about the autonomy of the Lombard Cluniac nuns from their brothers have been expressed by Andenna, 'Sanctimoniales cluniacenses'.

The first answer to one of my earlier questions is that one of the two oldest and most prestigious female foundations (San Lorenzo) did not enter any of the reformed monastic orders already existing in Venice (Cluny, Fruttuaria, Cîteaux), while the other one (San Zaccaria) embraced the customs of Cluny's monks ('Cluniacensium fratrum observantia'). Nevertheless, they both remained independent, preserving all their rights and privileges, as well as their relationships with society and the political authorities of the city. The phenomenon did not depend on the specific gender of the community, and it was not related to any presumed frailty on the part of female communities. In fact, the main Venetian male monasteries, Sant'Ilario and San Giorgio Maggiore, to cite just two of the oldest ones, also remained autonomous and continued to grow in wealth and power in traditional ways, increasing both their properties and their privileges, in particular, in the so-called *Romania*, which had been conquered in the Crusade of 1204.³¹ They continued to be indifferent to religious fervour and calls for the renewal of monastic life, which, in contrast, involved other monasteries in Venice. There are no traces of those difficulties, so often related to problems of internal discipline, which convinced other monasteries to adopt customs, frequently those of the Cistercian Order. This is what happened, for instance, in 1229 in the very ancient abbey of Brondolo, which had probably been founded by the Lombards in the diocese of Chioggia. It was obliged to adopt the Cistercian *instituta* because 'tam in spiritualibus quam in temporalibus enormiter deformata' (it was greatly corrupted both in spiritual and in temporal matters).³²

Female Monasticism in the Islands of the Northern Lagoon

In the early and high Middle Ages, the diocese of Torcello, which was part of the northern Lagoon, was an important economic area, sufficiently inhabited to have a number of parish churches and a socially diverse population: besides fishermen and hunters, there were inhabitants classified as 'antiquiores et nobiliores de Ammianis'.³³ However, it was an area particularly exposed to climate changes and the tide, which deeply modified its configuration from

³¹ Orlando, *Ad profectum patriae*.

³² *Santissima Trinità e San Michele Arcangelo di Brondolo*, ed. by Strina, III: *Documenti, 1200–1229 e notizie di documenti*, no. 686 (24 May 1229).

³³ Ammiana was one of the northern Lagoon islands; see *San Lorenzo di Ammiana*, ed. by Lanfranchi, no. 79 (1195), pp. 89–90.

the fourteenth century onwards. Some islands, such as Torcello, Murano, and Mazzorbo, did not suffer significant transformation, whilst others were almost completely submerged. Amongst the latter, Ammiana and Costanziano are uninhabited today, largely overrun by water and vegetation. San Giacomo in Paludo (in the marsh) is also almost uninhabited. In the high Middle Ages, female monasteries, established between the late twelfth and the thirteenth century, blossomed on these islands.³⁴ The significant number of these communities and higher proportion of female over male communities raises questions which are not easy to answer. For example, why was there such a concentration of female communities? Two hypotheses have been advanced in relation to this question. The first draws attention to the strong influence of the ideals of the apostolic life and a new initiative by women in religious life. However, the new female foundations normally belonged to the traditional orders, to the Benedictine or the Cistercian Orders, when the latter had lost its reforming character. Moreover, this in itself does not explain the high concentration of nunneries in this part of the Lagoon.³⁵ The second explanation, put forward by Élisabeth Crouzet-Pavan,³⁶ is that new foundations were a solution to islands which had become uninhabited due to environmental deterioration. However, other scholars maintain that nunneries were dependent on cities, and that they rarely emerged in isolated contexts.³⁷ It thus seems strange that settlements of women in Venice should favour areas which were becoming marginal. Given that the public authorities viewed monasteries as a means of control and organization — social, economic, and agrarian — and that they often favoured the establishment of a monastery in one place rather than another because particular locations could guarantee such control and protection, both symbolic and material, one must ask whether nuns would be likely to settle on islands which were on their way to being abandoned.

We may also argue a different origin for these convents on the periphery: namely, that they were founded by commoners, in comparison with the more ancient convents in Rialto, which had been established by aristocrats. This is another hypothesis which needs to be tested. Let us start with the more ancient communities. San Lorenzo of Ammiana (1185) was established by two women, Berta and Agnese, under the Benedictine Rule and under the control of the



³⁴ Moine, *I monasteri femminili della laguna nord di Venezia nel basso medioevo*, pp. 15–31.

³⁵ Carraro, 'Tra sacro e quotidiano', pp. 107–11.

³⁶ Crouzet-Pavan, *La Mort lente de Torcello*.

³⁷ Zarri, 'Monasteri femminili e città (secoli xv–xviii)', pp. 359–60.

bishop of Torcello. Sant'Angelo of Ammiana (1195), founded by Berta (the same woman) and Benvenuta, was dependent on San Lorenzo of Ammiana, and was always under the patronage of the bishop of Torcello.³⁸ The family names of these women are not known, which is perhaps proof, albeit weak, that they belonged to non-aristocratic families. It is possible that the latter monastery was an affiliation of the former.³⁹ In both cases, the bishop donated the parish church of San Lorenzo and the parish church of Sant'Angelo, which were already operating with their own clergy, to the women so that they could build the monasteries beside the churches. This tie with the church is a feature of many of the monasteries of Ammiana, which were built beside an already existing church, to which they were linked in various ways. We can understand why the bishops of Torcello played a determinant role in promoting new foundations and why they preserved certain control rights over the nuns: the payment of duties (*censi*), rendered in coins and wax candles; the right to appoint the abbess, for many years called *prelata* or *domina*; and the right to receive new nuns. At San Lorenzo, the bishop reserved for himself the right to appoint the parish clergy for the church, a fact that suggests that the parish was not completely uninhabited if the priests were required to provide *cura animarum*. They were always quite small groups, formed by two or three women who, perhaps, lived together spontaneously. At the beginning, even recruiting new nuns proved difficult: in 1193, eight years after its foundation, San Lorenzo only had Berta and Agnese, who had taken vows as nuns.⁴⁰ In 1195 they were joined by Engelmota, but the founder, Berta, left to establish the monastery of Sant'Angelo. The following year, Engelmota became abbess.⁴¹ In the founding records of Sant'Angelo, it was anticipated that the new monastery would not succeed in recruiting *fratres* or *sorores*. In the event of the death of the nuns, the net value and the chapel would be returned to San Lorenzo, along with some books, including the *Regula*.⁴² The founders themselves were conscious that these nunneries seemed to hold little attraction. It is quite possible that these houses recruited nuns only from the islands that were closest to them

³⁸ *San Lorenzo di Ammiana*, ed. by Lanfranchi, respectively, no. 71, pp. 81–83; no. 78, pp. 88–89; Moine, *I monasteri femminili della laguna nord di Venezia nel basso medioevo*, p. 31.

³⁹ Moine, *I monasteri femminili della laguna nord di Venezia nel basso medioevo*, p. 17.

⁴⁰ *San Lorenzo di Ammiana*, ed. by Lanfranchi, no. 74, pp. 84–85.

⁴¹ *San Lorenzo di Ammiana*, ed. by Lanfranchi, no. 80, pp. 90–91.

⁴² *San Lorenzo di Ammiana*, ed. by Lanfranchi, no. 78, pp. 88–89.

geographically, because of the difficulties in communicating with the city — difficulties which were further exacerbated with the *Terra Ferma*.

One of the most successful orders of the twelfth century, the Cistercian Order, had great difficulty establishing itself not only in the Lagoon but also in the Veneto. Only one male abbey was created in Venice, that of San Tommaso dei Borgognoni. It was established by a noble Venetian in 1206,⁴³ much later than the most important Cistercian monasteries of northern Italy, which were founded in the period from the 1120s to the 1140s. For most monastic historians, the reason for this partial failure is still unexplained. However, the influence of Cistercian customs was also apparent in the Lagoon, as is demonstrated by the large number of monasteries created for the female branch of the order. The activity of the latter in the duchy is also clear evidence of the remarkable success of the ideals of the Cistercian monks. If we consider the female communities, which were particularly numerous in the northern islands, it becomes more difficult to sustain the argument for the lack of influence of Cistercian monasticism. San Maffio (or Matteo) of Costanziano provides a good example. As with all Cistercian abbeys, it adopted the Benedictine Rule, even though the bishop maintained a certain amount of control over it, and the community had to pay tithes. When nuns asked, in 1229, to be incorporated into the Cistercian Order, an argument broke out with San Tommaso dei Borgognoni. This is a well-known phenomenon where relationships between Cistercian nuns and monks are concerned. In 1232 Pope Gregory IX confirmed the net value and the privileges granted to the abbey, and conceded juridical exemption by removing the local clergy's control of the community. Such an act created tension with the bishop of Torcello, who was deprived of his rights.⁴⁴

Foundations and Motivations

What significance may we attribute to the fact that a religious woman was defined as *Christi famula* or *ancilla Dei* in the founding act of San Zaccaria? One such woman was Agata, a daughter of the late Maurizio, 'magister militum qui fuit dux Venecie'.⁴⁵ Some other *ancillae* and *famulae Dei* are cited as being among those who gave the lands donated to the new foundation to Doge Giustiniano. It is difficult to say whether these women belonged to a



⁴³ Rigon, 'Présence cistercienne dans le Veneto médiéval'.

⁴⁴ Moine, *I monasteri femminili della laguna nord di Venezia nel basso medioevo*, pp. 27–29.

⁴⁵ *Santi Ilario e Benedetto e San Gregorio*, ed. by Lanfranchi, no. 2, pp. 17–24.

real monastic community, under an abbess and a rule. It seems more probable that they lived in an intermediate condition between that of a nun and that of a woman in a semi-religious state. Perhaps they lived in small communities devoted to penance and prayer, spontaneous, not institutionalized, or as hermits living in their own homes. These frail clues testify to the fact that *vivere religiose* ('to live a religious life'), in spontaneous forms, was a practice present both in Venice and on the islands. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there were women called *eremite* (hermits) and others who lived in *domicelle* (small houses or rooms) physically attached to city churches. These women found favour with the other citizens, who left them clothes and money in their wills.⁴⁶

Devout women founded, often with the support of the bishop, convents not only in the northern Lagoon islands but also in Chioggia and in Rialto. Others promoted the founding of monastic communities through the donation of property. They were women — some, perhaps, nuns, while others were certainly lay persons — who came from both aristocratic and non-aristocratic families, about which we have scanty information. The monastery of Sant'Adriano of Costanziaco was founded by Anna Michiel, the wife of *Doge* Niccolò Giustiniani, and the monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli of Murano (1187) by Ginevra Gradenigo: both of them were from the most prominent families in Venice.⁴⁷ Were Agnese, Berta, and Benvenuta devout lay women or nuns who had come from other monasteries, and to whom the bishop of Torcello had given permission to live together under Benedictine Rule? This small but dynamic group founded two communities on the island of Ammiana within the space of ten years, the convent of San Lorenzo in 1185 and that of Sant'Angelo in 1195.⁴⁸ Even though they were not from families which can be identified, it is clear that they came from a sufficiently well-off *milieu* that was able to provide for their education and give them the ability to read. In the founding acts, the books to bring to the new convent are cited, as are books belonging to one of them, Agnese ('illos libros quos habeo'), which were to be returned to San Lorenzo in the event that the community be dissolved. It is hard to define the legal status of the other three women — Maria da Canal, Richelda Zancarolo, and Maria da Zara — with any accuracy, although we do

⁴⁶ Carraro, 'Tra sacro e quotidiano', p. 95.

⁴⁷ On S. Maria degli Angeli, see Corner, *Ecclesie Torcellanae*, II, 261. A short, albeit hagiographic, biography of Niccolò Giustiniani and his wife Anna Michiel is provided by Musolino, Niero, and Tramontin, *Santi e beati veneziani*, pp. 133–36.

⁴⁸ *San Lorenzo di Ammiana*, ed. by Lanfranchi, no. 71, pp. 81–3, and no. 78, pp. 88–89.

know that they received, in the name of the Cistercian monastery of San Maffio of Costanziaco, a church from the bishop of Torcello in 1229.⁴⁹ However, we also know that the first two came from well-to-do families: the da Canal family were at the height of their economic ascendancy during the thirteenth century; whilst the Zancarolo family held public office.⁵⁰ It seems clear that in all of these cases the women showed their willingness to pass from the religious experience of a penitent and pious life, which was informal and spontaneous, to a formal recognition of their way of living in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. These women, independently of their education and social class, were very much aware of the necessity of institutionalizing their religious beliefs and were able to choose the most effective legal instruments, as well as which authorities to address. Usually, it was the bishop of Torcello who formalized such requests, even though they could ask the pope directly for the permission to found a community:⁵¹ this is a demonstration of the strength and initiative of these women.

Within the monasteries of the Lagoon, the abbesses had limited independence; that is, they seldom managed the community matters directly or personally.⁵² In order to handle these matters, and especially with regard to their properties on the *Terra Ferma*, they employed priests or lay representatives, who were always male. Nuns in Ammiana and Costanziaco appear more respectful of their vows of claustration in comparison with those at San Zaccaria and San Lorenzo. Nevertheless, in this regard, the dimension of insularity or isolation imposed by living on an island and the high concentration of incomes which originated within the Lagoon were crucial: the exploitation of their rights to water, fish, and the production of salt. This situation generated a strong tie with the local communities. Besides, there was the physical isolation which facilitated the physical stability of the nuns within the cloisters.⁵³ I would argue that seclusion played a lesser role than the physical isolation of living on an island in conditioning this behaviour, at least during the period considered here. Nor

⁴⁹ *San Maffio di Mazzorbo e Santa Margherita di Torcello*, ed. by Frizziero, no. 67 (1229).

⁵⁰ Rösch, *Der venezianische Adel bis zur Schließung der Großen Rats*, pp. 128–30.

⁵¹ Corner, *Ecclesiae Torcellanae*, II, 234: 1188. The nunnery of S. Maria degli Angeli, 'impetrata prius a Sede Apostolica expresse per bullam plumbeam erigendi monasterii facultate' (asked to have beforehand an explicit permission, via a lead bull [per bullam plumbeam], from the Holy See to establish a nunnery), was supported by the bishop of Torcello, 'ut ex eius assensu res ad sui perfectionem deduceretur' (so that from his assent the foundation should be completed and perfected).

⁵² *San Lorenzo di Ammiana*, ed. by Lanfranchi, no. 74 (1193), pp. 84–85.

⁵³ Moine, *I monasteri femminili della laguna nord di Venezia nel basso medioevo*, pp. 23–25.

should we think that these abbesses were incapable of, or not interested in, the management of their estates. On the contrary, we have just seen that they were clearly able to assert their rights. A partial exception can be found with regard to the Cistercian nunneries (San Maffio and San Giacomo in Paludo), whose abbesses were able to act more autonomously. In such cases, the key point was that of the belonging to an order which guaranteed their independence from the bishop and provided them with the above-mentioned juridical exemption privileges and close ties with other abbeys of the same order. At San Giacomo in Paludo, the *conventus* was quite often called upon to approve the acts taken by the abbess. Physical isolation continued to be a problem, as it forced them to assign the management of the properties on the *Terra Ferma* to representatives, who were almost certainly not lay-brothers.

With regard to the motivations for women to enter a convent as adults, it generally occurred when they became widows. We have the testimony of Bartolomea Riccoboni and her *Necrology of the Monastery of Corpus Domini*. In this text from the early fifteenth century, there are some interesting biographical profiles of nuns: there are those who entered the convent as children (as eleven- or twelve-year-olds) and those who entered as widows. These include the rich Franceschina da Noale, who entered Corpus Domini when she was forty-nine years old, together with her seven-year-old daughter; and Lucia Fagioli, a twenty-eight-year-old widow who lived in the monastery for a further twelve years. In the *Necrology*, the gifts of humility, patience, and religious zeal are remembered. But historians are more interested in observing that the act of entering a monastic community guaranteed both material and spiritual benefits, and, last but not least, good care and attention when they fell sick, sometimes with diseases which lasted for years, and the certainty of being administered the last rites on their deathbeds and being recalled in the prayers of the other nuns.

The necrology also cites lay-sister Ambrosina, who died at the age of thirty, after nine years at Corpus Domini. She had been ill for more than three years, and she passed away after receiving the Sacraments.⁵⁴ This woman, unique amongst those mentioned by Bartolomea, had the misfortune of seeing the devil on her deathbed, but she courageously succeeded in driving him away. It seems interesting, and not without significance, that the devil appeared to her, a laywoman, perhaps from a modest background, and with humbler religious virtues compared to her sisters. To other nuns on their deathbeds, angels

⁵⁴ Riccoboni, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent*, ed. by Bornstein, p. 70.

appeared, Sant'Orsola and her companions, or even St Dominic, St Peter the Martyr, and St Thomas Aquinas.⁵⁵ It is not clear whether Ambrosina was a widow, nor is she defined as a 'pure virgin', as the nuns who entered as children or adolescents were described. Probably her status as a lay-sister suggested a certain discretion in formulating her obituary, since she was given a lower status even from the point of view of spiritual perfection.

In conclusion, what answers can we offer to the questions formulated at the beginning of this essay? Remembering that our answers are only provisional — as must be the case for whomever studies history — we may say that the specificity of Venetian female monasticism was not exclusive to this city, as is often maintained. First, although it is often claimed that the Venetian experience exhibits 'originality' when these religious phenomena are examined in comparison with the simultaneous movements in nearby countries, it can be demonstrated that this is far from the case: a large number of Venetians participated in the most significant religious movements. In particular, it may be observed that the profound renewal in Benedictine monasticism, and in particular in female religious life, that occurred between the eleventh and the thirteenth century in northern Italy and elsewhere, was also apparent in the Duchy. Venetian women participated in this reform, sometimes in original and informal ways. Furthermore, a number of female religious initiatives occurred within an institutional framework: some older convents adhered to reform by embracing the Cluniac customs (San Zaccaria), whilst some others founded in the twelfth and thirteenth century in the northern Lagoon asked for permission to adopt the Cistercian customs (San Maffio of Costanziaco). As a result of this religious female involvement, small groups of nuns or lay women created many communities in the northern Lagoon islands that were strongly influenced by the ideals of the apostolic life, but they looked from the beginning for the support of the bishops of Torcello. The evidence suggests that these women were eager for the institutionalization of their religious experiences, and the intervention of bishops assured them a degree of success in this regard. On the contrary, the main Venetian male monasteries, like Sant'Ilario and San Giorgio Maggiore, remained indifferent to the fervour of religious renewal and to the main reform's principles.

The geographical specificity of a city founded between land and water, and the capacity of the inhabitants to control the Lagoon waters, held great importance for the evolution of several female communities. The abandonment of

⁵⁵ Riccoboni, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent*, ed. by Bornstein, pp. 70–72.

the islands, which became uninhabitable marshland, frequently forced nuns to transfer from one island to another and from the Lagoon to the *Terra Ferma*, but nevertheless, any geographical determinism should be avoided. The foundation and abandonment of monasteries depended on a combination of several factors: economic, political, social, religious, as well as geographic. The latter perhaps assumed a greater importance in Venice than elsewhere, but surely was not the deciding element. In other words, the emergence of female Venetian monasticism was the result of a mixture of different factors and elements. But all the forms of monasticism in the Middle Ages are intimately related to the conditions of the societies in which they are embedded, of which they are one of the most distinctive manifestations.

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