

Power and Institutional Identity in Renaissance Venice: The Female Convents of S. M. delle Vergini and S. Zaccaria¹

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S. M. delle Vergini and S. Zaccaria were the two most important and successful female convents in Renaissance Venice. Although rather different in many respects, this essay suggests that many useful insights about the reasons for their success can be gained from their redesignation and analysis as fields of power (rather than viewing them primarily as religious institutions). Even though inmates of convents were the most regulated group in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Europe, canonesses and nuns at these two convents were able to generate and harness multiple sorts of power in a variety of ways. For example, their strategies of empowerment included making the most of their convent traditions and privileged patrician backgrounds to forge special relationships with a succession of doges and emperors. The women raised awareness of their convents by making them “attractive” in a variety of ways, and presented them to the outside world as hierarchical institutions with female heads, and distinctive and powerful identities. When convents were reformed in Venice after 1519, the two institutions tried to assert their authority and autonomy but were crushed by the imposition of enclosure and enforced religion, with the result that their configuration as significant fields of power was severely curtailed.

Convents as fields of power

In this essay I shall investigate the two most important and successful female convents² in Renaissance Venice – S. M. delle Vergini (which I shall refer to as Le Vergini from now on) and S. Zaccaria – to see how they managed to maintain their

¹ A small part of this paper was presented at the conference “Arte, storia e restauro al convento di San Zaccaria, Venezia”, in Venice, on 2–3 December 2002. I am very grateful to the organiser, Gary Radke, for his support and for the opportunity to participate. I should also like to acknowledge with gratitude the support of the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation.

² I am using the word “convent” here in its English usage, to mean a female (as opposed to a male) institution, rather than its technically correct religious usage, where the words monastery and convent denote male and female institutions belonging to different orders.

position in a city full of greater and lesser female “religious” houses, amid a barrage of other institutions and bodies vying for attention at all levels. The focus here is on successful, all-female institutions, but the intention is that this investigation will facilitate interesting comparisons to secular and non-institutional women’s attempts to generate and harness power in early modern Europe. I am using power here to encompass the whole spectrum of possibilities: from power related to an ability to “govern” and exert authority over others, to the more diffuse agency-related power that was available in a wide variety of situations. An interest in agency-related power – at one level the ability to make a decision or choose between alternatives – is a continuation of previous work I have carried out on the notion and exercising of choice in the Renaissance.³

Noble or patrician convents and their inhabitants in Renaissance Italy were in a rather paradoxical position: even before the Council of Trent, they constituted the most policed and regulated group in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Europe, and in some ways they were uniquely dependent on men and male institutions. At the same time, however, convents were famous institutions in their own right, with their own sources of wealth, buildings, art and artefacts, histories and traditions, and their inmates in Italy’s major urban centres were often very close relatives (daughters, sisters and aunts) of the male rulers of their locality.

The situation in Venice with regard to convents was even more particular. In 1298 Pope Boniface VIII’s decree *Periculoso* required the strict enclosure of all professed nuns of whatever order in Western Christendom.⁴ Venice was the only state on the Italian peninsula where the decree was never implemented.⁵ Although there was still considerable diversity of female convent experience in Venice, life without *Periculoso* was one of the primary causes of the relative freedom enjoyed by Venetian nuns in conventual (that is, unreformed and non-Observant) convents. Most importantly, the fact that enclosure was not enforced enabled convents to be economically stable and self-sufficient, to form significant patronage relationships and to choose whatever ties they liked to other communities in Venice and elsewhere. In other words, it allowed Venetian conventual convents to exercise authority, choice and autonomy.

In this essay, I should like to suggest that Venetian conventual convents in the Renaissance should not be viewed wholly, or even primarily, as religious institutions, but instead should be conceptualised as distinctive institutions of power, albeit power with severe limitations. In Venice prior to the reform of convents effected in 1519 – which on a local level anticipated some of the later moves at Trent – girls were most often deposited in convents before puberty. The great majority of

3 See, e.g., Kate Lowe 1998. Nuns and Choice: Artistic Decision-Making in Medicean Florence. In Eckart Marchand & Alison Wright (eds.) *With and Without the Medici: Art and Patronage in Florence, 1434–1530*. Basingstoke: Ashgate, 129–153.

4 Elizabeth Makowski 1997. *Canon Law and Cloistered Women: Periculoso and its Commentators, 1298–1545*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, appendix 1, 135–136.

5 Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women*, 80.

girls entering convents had not chosen to enter, but had been placed in convents by their fathers or other male relatives, for economic reasons (because it was considerably cheaper to provide the so-called dotal alms required by convents than the dowries required by the families of prospective grooms). Given that girls without especially religious inclinations, let alone vocations, were sent to convents, and that all meaningful consent was absent, it makes no sense to continue with the pretence that these institutions were composed of “religious” women; nuns during these years were very often secular women forced to live in an externally imposed, religious context. Occasional religious women surfaced in Venetian convents before 1519, and occasionally groups of religious women banded together to set in train a new foundation, but they were exceptions rather than the norm. Many Venetian patrician nuns in this period retained highly secular interests and *mores*, as will be seen below, and these secular patterns of thought and behaviour permeated the ways in which they thought about themselves and their convents, perhaps most importantly in relation to power.

So conventual convents here will be redefined as fields of power, and this new way of viewing these institutions should enable a more fruitful analysis of the whole range of their activities. As will be seen, convents as institutions in Renaissance Venice were not powerless or devoid of autonomy; rather, their reality was more complex, and they were deeply and fatally involved in the great game of manipulating and being manipulated by power: they exercised it as well as being on the receiving end of moves and manoeuvres against them by even more powerful organs of church and state. Women in convents worked ceaselessly to keep their institutions uppermost in the minds of the doges and their governments as well as of Venetian patriarchs and popes, by projecting them as brilliant cultural, social, economic, political and “religious” centres worthy of attention and patronage, that were part and parcel of the Venetian social and architectural fabric, and umbilically linked to more obvious political centres. But ultimately the fate of these convents, however powerful they were in themselves, lay in the hands of the church and government of Venice. Collusion between these two most powerful of male bodies – which normally acted against one another – spelt ruin for convents.

Convents were conglomerations of individuals as well as institutions, and I am encouraged to think of individual nuns in terms of power by the great mass of information relating to their lives in Renaissance Venice that indicates supremely secular concerns connected to displays of power, completely at odds with the emphasis on all-pervasive “religious” lives promulgated by the church. The defiant emphasis on the worldly and non-religious is not only indicative of resistance to enforced religion, but is in itself also power-enhancing. Two examples that are personal favourites of mine, unearthed recently in the Venetian archives by fellow scholars, and deliberately chosen from Venetian convents other than the two under discussion, relate to S. Caterina and S. Giuseppe. Both date from the period after the reforms of 1519 and so highlight nuns’ continuing opposition to prescribed convent behaviour. In the 1530s, Ursia Condulmer, the sister of the

famous courtesan Elisabetta, is an inmate in the convent of S. Caterina. It emerges in Elisabetta's will of 1538 that she has lent her nun sister a range of spectacular clothes and furnishings:

four door curtains of scarlet cloth decorated with arms and foliage; a green and yellow striped satin cape lined with squirrel skins; a ten-piece bed ensemble of green and orange ormesino silk [...] and five figured *spallieri* wall hangings, decorated with arms.⁶

These goods must have been used by Ursia to proclaim her wealth and status, as their quality was superb and two items even sported coats of arms, yet they should have had no place in a convent. A slightly different example of power play emerges from S. Giuseppe, which in 1571 housed a nun who was widely known as a fashioner of spectacular hats embroidered with gold and silver, pearls and jewels; her unique skill enabled her to resist the oppressive, religious milieu that surrounded her, and to carve an economic niche for herself in the secular world.⁷

Communities of nuns could be categorised in a variety of ways, and were often grouped at the time, and subsequently, in relation to their lifestyle and outward religious affiliation. According to Marin Sanudo, the late fifteenth-century and early sixteenth-century Venetian diarist and encyclopaedic compiler of information, there were ten conventual convents in Venice in 1500,⁸ and it is now thought that there were eight female Franciscan convents.⁹ Contemporaries were keenly aware of power flows and power relations, and so convents in the Renaissance were also assessed and categorised according to their perceived status and wealth, and the success of their performance as institutions. In one sense, this essay is an attempt to address the issue of constructing a plausible categorisation based on these, rather than on religious, criteria, and to consider how best they might be evaluated. Analysing the behaviour and resources of the convents in terms of strategies of empowerment allows aspects of what has previously been considered as religious power to be assessed alongside more secular and usual manipulation of advantage, aligning power with prestige, influence, attraction and authority.

Just as some convents, such as Le Vergini and S. Zaccaria, were winners, many others – the small and poor – were losers. Convents as institutions understood that the law of nature decreeing the cyclical rise and fall of all institutions also had applicability for them, which to some extent explains their insistence on holding onto precedent (clinging onto their unstable position). Staying at the top meant

6 Patricia Fortini Brown 2004. *Private Lives in Renaissance Venice: Art, Architecture and the Family*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 174–179.

7 Jutta Sperling 1999. *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 351, n. 41.

8 Marin Sanudo 1980. *De origine, situ et magistratibus urbis Venetae, ovvero la città di Venetia, 1493–1530*. Ed. A. Caracciolo Aricò. Milan: Cisalpino-La Goliardico, 43–45.

9 John R. H. Moorman 1983. *Medieval Franciscan Houses*. St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, 681–682.

paying year-round, constant attention to Venetian political and social realities, as convents could not just sit back and be assured of success. Le Vergini and S. Zaccaria manoeuvred all the time both to hold onto the power they already possessed and to devise ways of acquiring more prestige and influence. They had to keep themselves in the eye of the doge, on the right side of the bishop of Castello (who was responsible for convent discipline)¹⁰ and the patriarch, and when an opportunity arose, in good odour with the emperor and the pope.

S. Zaccaria (named after the father of St. John the Baptist) (figs. 1 & 2) is now usually placed at the top of any table of Venetian convents across a range of indicators connected to power,¹¹ from uniqueness to social status to closeness of relationship to the doge. Given what is now known about Le Vergini, the position awarded to S. Zaccaria appears to require reconsideration on many counts,¹² in the same way that the straightforward notion of competition between the two convents requires problematisation. Both Le Vergini and S. Zaccaria were indeed competing for the attention and patronage of the doge, the church, patrons, parents of prospective inmates and congregations, yet relatively friendly relations rather than cut-throat competition seem to have been the norm.

Just as Patricia Fortini Brown has posited a model of Venetian fifteenth-century confraternities that emphasises their desire to “copy and better” through non-adversarial relations, it might be possible to see Venetian fifteenth and sixteenth-century convents in the same light. Fortini Brown uses words and expressions such as “emulation”, “spurred”, “looked jealously”, “not to be outdone”, and “responded in turn” to describe the effects that adoption of a successful strategy by one confraternity had upon the others.¹³ There are, of course, many different levels and types of competition and the two top convents may have vacillated between friendliness with each other when they were not under threat, to rivalry and war when they were in competition for scarce resources. The reason why the convents employed strategies of empowerment was precisely in order to maintain their pre-eminence as notable Venetian institutions. The most famous, powerful and prestigious Venetian convents attracted relationships with the most important Venetian families, both in terms of entrants and in terms of financial and artistic patronage.

10 Guido Ruggiero 1985. *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 82.

11 See, e.g., Gary M. Radke 2001. Nuns and Their Art: The Case of San Zaccaria in Renaissance Venice. *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, 445, where he describes S. Zaccaria as “the oldest and most prestigious female monastic house in Venice”. I have worked considerably more on Le Vergini than on S. Zaccaria, so I am particularly indebted to recent scholars of S. Zaccaria, especially Susan Connell, Vicky Primhak and Gary Radke.

12 Although in the past I too accorded S. Zaccaria this honour: see Kate Lowe 2001. Elections of Abbesses and Notions of Identity in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Italy, with Special Reference to Venice. *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, 396: “the richest and most important female convent in Renaissance Venice”.

13 Patricia Fortini Brown 1988. *Venetian Narrative Painting in the Age of Carpaccio*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 42–43, 45, 46 and 47.



Figure 1. The convent of San Zaccaria, Venice, second courtyard.



Figure 2. View towards the convent of San Zaccaria, Venice, from Riva degli Schiavoni.

Once redefined as fields of power, successful convents in Renaissance Venice have to be reconsidered in all their glory, both as institutions and as spaces for individuals. Their power resided in their sites and wealth, their place in the history of the city, their cultural capital and traditions, their architecture and art works, and in the kinship relations of their nuns. There were obvious connections between many of these, and the influence and reach of the two convents was felt all over Venice, and even beyond.

Two hugely important areas in this analysis are art and wealth, both of which would also have been fundamental to any strategies of empowerment. The two convents' respective performances in these areas seesaw across all other considerations.

There are two discrete levels to this issue of strategies of empowerment, corresponding respectively to the self-perception of convent inmates, and the perception of Venetians and onlookers. The first is an insider view, what the canonesses¹⁴ and nuns said themselves about power relations and ways of enhancing their power, and some sense of this is provided by short narratives and longer chronicles written by canonesses and nuns inside the relevant convents. The second relates to external ways in which the convents are categorised and judged in terms of power relations and possession of power, both in the Renaissance and now; the source material for these views includes contemporary diaries, letters, descriptions of Venice, inventories, and government records.

Special relationships: dogal and imperial connections

The first line of investigation I should like to pursue on strategies of empowerment relates to the two convents' consciousness of identity as institutions. The histories, real and imagined or invented, of the two convents were different, but there were also similarities. Both convents adverted to a distant or misty past in which their institutions had been founded by the most prestigious characters imaginable, who had then placed a close female relative at their head. S. Zaccaria was founded in the ninth century (before 829) by Doge Giustiniano Participazio,¹⁵ and his sister became abbess.¹⁶ Le Vergini (according to its female, early sixteenth-century, in-house chronicler) was allegedly founded in the twelfth century (in 1177) by the unbeatable trio of Doge Sebastiano Ziani, Pope Alexander III and the emperor Frederick Barbarossa, and Barbarossa's daughter, Giulia, was appointed abbess. Whether or not these two foundation scenarios ever happened, by the Renaissance the tradition that they had was what mattered. Even if untrue, conscious manipulation of the circulation of information had been successful, and both convents thereby had an intimate and time-honoured link to the doge that allowed them to label him as their founder, and to claim a special relationship to any future doge, linking them firmly to the most powerful office and office-holder in Venice. These two putative lines of descent thereby guaranteed strong identities to the institutions.

S. Zaccaria's status as the first such Benedictine foundation in Venice, and both convents' appropriation of such long histories, only intensified their claims.

¹⁴ Inmates at Le Vergini were technically canonesses rather than nuns.

¹⁵ Roberto Cessi (ed.) 1940–1942. *Documenti relativi alla storia di Venezia anteriori al mille*, 2 vols. Padua: Gregoriana, I, 94–96, and John the Deacon's "Chronicle" in Giovanni Monticcolo (ed.) 1890. *Cronache veneziane antichissimi*, I. Rome: Forzani e c., 109.

¹⁶ Victoria J. Primhak 1991. *Women in Religious Communities: The Benedictine Convents in Venice, 1400–1550*, Ph. D. Thesis, Warburg Institute, University of London, 12. Or maybe it was Doge Giustiniano Participazio's daughter (see Radke, *Nuns and their Art*, 445).

S. Zaccaria's foundation "history" placed it firmly in a secular, Venetian mould, whereas Le Vergini's admitted of a mixture of secular and religious, Venetian and non-Venetian elements, and was more complicated and theoretically more difficult to ignore (although easier to attack because of its "foreign" basis or its papal connections). Of course, it also suited the doge to have special relationships with various elevated female convents (for example, to provide him with automatic access to some of the "best" and most efficacious prayer in Venice) so the conduits of power and benefits were reciprocal and flowed in both directions, but as all-female institutions, the convents had more need of a friendly doge than the doge had of friendly convents.

S. Zaccaria also had the advantage of having a "story" in circulation to the effect that St. Mark's – or maybe just St. Mark's square¹⁷ – had been built on land that had previously belonged to S. Zaccaria, and another urban myth doing the rounds that the convent church had served as the doge's chapel before the construction of S. Marco.¹⁸ Whatever the reality, the crypt beneath the choir of the nuns' church at S. Zaccaria contained seven or eight tombs – the number is disputed – of the early doges of Venice, a clear-cut and vital manifestation of S. Zaccaria's standing in the city. It was even rumoured by some Venetian chroniclers that an abbess of S. Zaccaria in the ninth century had embroidered the very first dogal coronation hat, for Pietro Tribuno (doge between 888 and 912), and that the doge's yearly Easter Day visit to S. Zaccaria was in recompense for this obligation.¹⁹ The fact that this was enshrined in legend as a possibility shows how close the relationship was between the convent and the doge, and how much power accrued to the convent by virtue of this link. The reciprocal and swirling nature of the flows of power between convents and doges is well-illustrated here: the choice of the abbess as embroiderer of the most famous piece of dogal regalia, replete with all the power of the doge's office, allows her (and by implication also her institution) to partake in this power.

The choice of orders for the two convents carries this theme of identity a little further. The antiquity of S. Zaccaria's foundation meant that it could only be Benedictine; in the context of the fifteenth century, a liberal or conventual Benedictine set of behaviours constituted a very distinct identity for its nuns. However, there were other conventual Benedictine houses in Venice whereas Le Vergini was unique. It was attached to the rather obscure canons of S. Marco Evangelista di Mantova and its canonesses followed the Augustinian "rule" (essentially a light framework for living rather than a full-blown, prescriptive rule). In effect, they were not bound by the same kinds of vows or of regulation as even conventual nuns (they did not

17 See Radke, *Nuns and their Art*, 447.

18 Radke, *Nuns and their Art*, 445, citing a chronicle of the convent (not by a nun): Venice, Biblioteca del Museo Correr, cod. Gradenigo 45, fols. 1r-2v.

19 Radke, *Nuns and their Art*, 446 and for further information on doges' hats, Agostino Pertusi 1965. "Quedam regalia insignia": ricerche sulle insigne del potere ducale a Venezia durante il medioevo. *Studi veneziani* 7, 84.

profess vows of poverty, obedience or chastity),²⁰ for they could leave the convent at will and even, theoretically, marry. According to Le Vergini's chronicler, Barbarossa had favoured making the recently-founded order of the Humiliati responsible for the convent, but Pope Alexander III was opposed as he did not want to see the Humiliati as successful in Italy as they were in German-speaking lands,²¹ and the canons' suit won.

The set of behaviours instituted by the canonesses at Le Vergini allowed them considerable freedoms and increased autonomy. One manifestation of this was in the area of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. S. Zaccaria, for all its dogal links, lay (like the other Benedictine convents) under the jurisdiction of the patriarch of Venice; Le Vergini's sole ecclesiastical superior was the pope, and it remained outside the jurisdiction of the patriarch. In contradistinction to S. Zaccaria, Le Vergini's primary patron and master was the doge who had *ius patronatus* at the convent. This anomaly must have been common knowledge amongst Venetians at the end of the fifteenth century as it was commented on by Sanudo.²² Thus S. Zaccaria acquired part of its sense of identity from its position as the premier Benedictine establishment in the city, whereas Le Vergini played on the uniqueness of its status.

Both convents converged in making the most of their non-Venetian links – institutional, personal, iconographical and ceremonial – to the Byzantine emperor and to the Holy Roman emperor. This strategy of empowerment was employed on different occasions and in different ways by the two convents, but to similar effect. According to a ninth-century document discussed by Susan Connell in her 1976 Ph. D., S. Zaccaria was founded “under the patronage of the Byzantine emperor, Leo V” and Leo sent craftsmen from Byzantium to build the convent, where they sculpted eagles on the capitals of the columns in the old nuns' church.²³ In the 1470s the nuns caused versions of the old eagle capitals to be copied onto capitals in their new church, presumably to preserve the memory of the imperial link and imperial patronage. Unfortunately, there are no sculptural records left of the emperor Barbarossa's involvement with Le Vergini, although supposedly the tomb of his alleged daughter Giulia (which would have mentioned him by name) lay in the convent church.²⁴ In the nineteenth century, the historian and epigrapher Emmanuele Cicogna cited two inscriptions from Le Vergini alluding to Giulia and to her father Barbarossa, the first dated 1581 and the other without a date but deemed to have

20 See the letter of 10 May 1488 from three canonesses in Le Vergini to Pope Innocent VIII published in Flaminio Cornelio 1749. *Ecclesiae Venetae antiquae monumentis nunc etiam primum editis illustratae ac in decades distributae*. 16 decades. Venice, IV, decas sexta, 107–108.

21 Venice, Biblioteca del Museo Correr, cod. Correr 317, fol. 16r.

22 Marino Sanuto, [*Cronachetta*] [Venice, 1880], 54–55.

23 Susan Connell 1988. *The Employment of Sculptors and Stonemasons in Venice in the Fifteenth Century*. New York and London: Garland, 175.

24 Venice, Biblioteca del Museo Correr, cod. Correr 317, fol. 27v.

been sculpted in the seventeenth century.²⁵ However, Barbarossa's involvement is featured both in the text and in a series of illustrations in the sixteenth-century convent chronicle.

Written descriptions of imperial visits to Le Vergini and S. Zaccaria reinforce the power flows inherent in the patronal links, and suggest that at both convents imperial identification on the part of the nuns was very pronounced. In 1469, the emperor Frederick III spent nearly two weeks in Venice, from 7 to 19 February.²⁶ Descriptions of the emperor's visit written by men, whether in the form of chronicles or letters, occasionally mentioned his penchant for visiting churches and monasteries, often to attend mass, and his desire to see to saints' bodies, and other relics and convent possessions. For instance, Giuliano Confalonieri, a Milanese accompanying the emperor, wrote to Cicco Simonetta, the first secretary of the ruler of Milan, Galeazzo Maria Sforza, on 9 February, that the day before the emperor had been to hear mass at S. Barbara, collected many indulgences and seen saints' bodies.²⁷ Michele Colli wrote to Galeazzo Maria Sforza on 11 February, reporting that the emperor on 8 February had visited some unnamed churches and monasteries, where he had also taken communion.²⁸

But there is a difference in emphasis between these descriptions and an eye-witness account by one of S. Zaccaria's own nuns of the emperor's two visits to S. Zaccaria, on Wednesday 8 February and Saturday 11 February, mirroring the divergent perspectives and loyalties of the authors. In diplomatic circles, visits to convents were accepted stops on itineraries, whereas from the point of view of the institutions concerned, these visits were charged with much more meaning and significance. In what may be a fragment of a longer chronicle or a freestanding short narrative, the anonymous nun described in fine detail what ensued in these exceedingly important strategic occasions for the convent,²⁹ when one of the most powerful figures in Western Europe was acclaimed both as a guest on convent soil and as a long-absent head of house returning home.

It is worth examining with care how the subjects of power and power flows are addressed in this unpublished account. The description of the visit occurs in a manuscript with the title "Memoria del monastero di S. Zaccaria" ("Memorial of

25 E. A. Cicogna 1824–1853. *Delle iscrizioni veneziane raccolte ed illustrate*, 6 vols. Venice: Giuseppe Orlandelli, V, 17 and 93.

26 P. Ghinzoni 1889. Federico III imperatore a Venezia (7 al 19 febbraio 1469). *Archivio veneto*, 37, 133–144.

27 Ghinzoni, Federico III, 137.

28 Ghinzoni, Federico III, 138.

29 Gary Radke discussed the emperor Frederick III's visit to S. Zaccaria in his paper at the conference "Arte, storia e restauro al convento di San Zaccaria, Venezia", 2–3 December 2002; he had previously included an analysis of it in Radke, Nuns and their Art, 433, 451–453. In 1997 I had found a copy of this nun's description in Rome, Archivio di stato (hereafter ASR), Congregazioni religiose femminili (CRF) 4226/4 (Miscellanea), fascicolo containing discrete pieces, including one entitled "Memoria del monasterio di S. Zaccaria". In this copy, the year of the emperor's visit has been mistranscribed as 1478 (instead of 1469).

the convent of S. Zaccaria”), that begins with the dark days of Attila the Hun, and then fast-forwards to the imperial visit. According to the eye-witness account, the emperor’s first ports of call in Venice on the day after his arrival, that is Wednesday 8 February, were two famous convents, both containing saints’ relics: Sant’Elena, where he went to see the body of the emperor Constantine’s mother, and S. Zaccaria, the “imperial” convent (neither of which had been named in the letters cited above). Frederick was allegedly accompanied on his visit to S. Zaccaria by more than 500 people.³⁰ The nun narrator noted that after the fanfare of bell-ringing at S. Zaccaria, and after Frederick had been given holy water and the pax to kiss, and incense had been expended, the nuns specifically recited in his honour the prayer “Pro imperatore nostro” (“For our emperor”),³¹ a prayer they must often have recited in his absence to sharpen their sense of imperial belonging.

Because he knew no Italian, Frederick spoke to the abbess, Madonna Maria Barbarigo, through his translator (*turcimano*). According to the nun narrator, the abbess was a very elegant woman, but what most strikes the twenty-first century reader is the way in which she had the confidence to seize her one moment of opportunity, purportedly telling the emperor that the convent was under his jurisdiction (“sotto l’imperio”), and that it would please the nuns if they could do something for him, to which the emperor parried that he would grant whatever they asked of him. Some of the nobles in the emperor’s retinue asked the nuns to sing for his sacred majesty,³² and the sung psalms and lauds so delighted him that he arranged to return the following Saturday to hear mass, and before leaving went to see the S. Zaccaria’s collection of holy bodies.³³ In terms of empowerment, the significant retinues, imperial and Venetian, accompanying the emperor must additionally have readily lent themselves to the formation of further patronage relations.

The emperor’s return visit to S. Zaccaria on 11 February is mentioned in passing in Michele Colli’s letter to the duke of Milan (“On Saturday the emperor went to S. Zaccaria to see [“vedere”] mass”),³⁴ but is described in a blow-by-blow fashion by the nun. Elements of the interaction revealed in this account that are particularly relevant to a discussion of strategies of empowerment include the nun’s discussion of the chair that was specially decorated for the emperor’s use, and positioned next to the abbess’ usual seat. Both the chair and the stool designated for the emperor’s use were completely covered with cloth of gold.³⁵ However much this cost, the expense would have been worthwhile, as the capital outlay would have been recouped many times over in the following years. After the emperor had used this

30 ASR, CRF 4226/4 (Miscellanea), “Memoria del monasterio di S. Zaccaria”, fol. 1v.

31 ASR, CRF 4226/4 (Miscellanea), “Memoria del monasterio di S. Zaccaria”, fol. 1v.

32 ASR, CRF 4226/4 (Miscellanea), “Memoria del monasterio di S. Zaccaria”, fol. 1v.

33 ASR, CRF 4226/4 (Miscellanea), “Memoria del monasterio di S. Zaccaria”, fol. 2r.

34 Ghinzoni, Federico III, 139.

35 ASR, CRF 4226/4 (Miscellanea), “Memoria del monasterio di S. Zaccaria”, fol. 2r: “la sedia per lo imperator tutta coperta di panni d’oro, et similmente il scabello ornato di panni d’oro”.

chair, it would have been labelled and become known as “the emperor’s chair”. It would from then on have been accorded a privileged place as one of the convent’s most valuable possessions, a visible manifestation of the emperor’s past presence in the convent and a tangible link to the person of his imperial majesty.³⁶

Of great relevance too is the nun narrator’s insistence on the crowds of people trying to catch a glimpse of the emperor, crowds that had to be kept out of the church and campo S. Zaccaria by the guards of the Signori di notte, the Venetian magistracy that controlled all after-dark activity, for their presence testified to the crowd-pulling power of the imperial presence at S. Zaccaria, and to an appreciation of the emperor’s public affirmation of the value of visiting the convent.³⁷ After mass, the emperor, purportedly “to please the women [i.e. the nuns]” (“per far piacer alle donne”), enacted a series of chivalric ennoblements just on the other side of the grate, bringing his secular, imperial power inside the precincts of the church and tantalisingly within sight of the nuns.³⁸ Yet another strategy of empowerment unfolded in the convent parlour (*parlatorio*), related to the alleged power associated with the emperor’s touch. When the emperor took the hand of the abbess, he found that each individual nun wanted to touch his hand too.³⁹

After a splendid reception of wine and sweetmeats in the chapel of the Virgin Mary, a final important and power-laden exchange took place between the emperor and the abbess. He thanked her for the visit and said that if she ever needed anything, she had only to ask him, because he felt under a great obligation to the convent on account of the way he had been received. The abbess “most wisely” (“sapiantissimamente”) constructed her reply in such a way as to make indistinguishable the honour and interests of the emperor, Venice and the convent, and ended on the historical high-ground by adverting to Frederick’s predecessors who had been involved in initiating the construction of the convent.⁴⁰ Not content with these descriptions of imperial and convent power relations, the nun narrator felt compelled to magnify their closeness by imagining fictive kin relationships of the most intimate kind. She claimed that the emperor treated the abbess as though she were his mother, and behaved towards the nuns as though they were his sisters.⁴¹

Imperial involvement at Le Vergini is highlighted textually and visually in the convent chronicle, but it is involvement by emperor Frederick I Barbarossa in the twelfth century. It seems likely that the canoness chronicler of Le Vergini, writing in

36 See K. J. P. Lowe 2003. *Nuns’ Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 128, for a comparable reference to a “pope’s seat”, used by Giuliano della Rovere, later Pope Julius II, at the Clarissan convent of SS. Cosma e Damiano in Rome.

37 ASR, CRF 4226/4 (Miscellanea), “Memoria del monasterio di S. Zaccaria”, fol. 2r.

38 ASR, CRF 4226/4 (Miscellanea), “Memoria del monasterio di S. Zaccaria”, fol. 2r.

39 ASR, CRF 4226/4 (Miscellanea), “Memoria del monasterio di S. Zaccaria”, fol. 2r.

40 ASR, CRF 4226/4 (Miscellanea), “Memoria del monasterio di S. Zaccaria”, fol. 2r-v.

41 ASR, CRF 4226/4 (Miscellanea), “Memoria del monasterio di S. Zaccaria”, fol. 2v.

the 1520s, would have included a description of a visit by Frederick III to Le Vergini in 1469 if one had occurred, and that its absence means that the emperor did not go there. This does appear rather a strange omission for a man who was heavily involved in convent visits, but it might conceivably be related to the fact that Le Vergini apparently possessed no saints' relics (see below). If indeed Frederick III did not visit Le Vergini in 1469, but did go twice to S. Zaccaria, the latter convent must have been substantially validated in its claim to be the most important and powerful convent at the time.

Painted depictions of visits to the two convents by various emperors were probably a further weapon of empowerment, echoing the sculptural records and written narratives, but the only surviving examples of this genre of history painting date from later centuries. For example, one of the six big lunettes above the altar at S. Zaccaria is a late seventeenth-century or very early eighteenth-century work by Gianantonio Fumiani (1643–1710), representing either the visit of the emperor Otto II accompanied by doge Pietro Orseolo II in 1000 or 1001,⁴² or the visit of the emperor Frederick III accompanied by doge Cristoforo Moro in 1469.⁴³ At Le Vergini, two separate attempts at historical representation chronicling the role of the emperor are known, and there could easily be others. The first was a pair of paintings representing the emperor, pope and doge investing Giulia as abbess, of unknown date, originally in Le Vergini, then hanging in S. M. dell'Orto in Venice, from whence they had been removed before 1840 by the heirs of the rector "to whom they belonged", according to Cicogna.⁴⁴ The second was the now missing, very large canvas painting by Antonio Molinari of *The Foundation of S. M. delle Vergini*, dated 1700.⁴⁵ At one level, these paintings are evidence of Le Vergini's preoccupation with its own glorious past and its special relationship with the emperor; at another, they (and the one at S. Zaccaria) are part of a larger Venetian tradition of commemorating important historical events pictorially.

The power of attraction

At a slightly less exalted level, both convents became famous sites for famous visitors to see, and both orchestrated these visits for all they were worth. Far from presenting themselves as humble and poor, the canonesses and nuns presented themselves as noble and rich, demanding to be accorded the same – or even greater – status than they had enjoyed in the secular world. In terms of agency-related power, these women realised that raising awareness of their convents and

42 Bruno Bertoli & Annalisa Perissa 1994. *Chiesa di S. Zaccaria: arte e devozione*. Venice: Marsilio, 29 (illustration on 28).

43 Silvio Tramontin 1980. *San Zaccaria*. Venice: Luigi Salvano, 50 and 55.

44 Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni veneziane*, V, 17 and 18.

45 Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni veneziane*, V, 15 and Venice, Archivio di stato (ASVe), Archivio delle corporazioni religiose soppresse (ACRS), S. M. delle Vergini 30, filza GGG, unfoliated.

themselves, through publicity and display, was all important for institutional identity and success. In this area, too, even though Le Vergini was less convenient (because further from the centre of Venice) to visit, it seems to have been viewed on a par with S. Zaccaria as a worthy site. In a list of twelve “notable things to show *signori* visiting Venice”, alongside the doge’s special barge, the *bucintoro*, that carried him down the Grand Canal, and the basilica and piazza of S. Marco, was the singing of the nuns at Le Vergini or S. Zaccaria (note the order, with Le Vergini first).⁴⁶

In addition to emperors, other groups such as pilgrims, like Canon Pietro Casola in 1494,⁴⁷ and foreign royalty, such as Queen Anna of Hungary in 1502,⁴⁸ visited one or both convents. Often these visitors attended a service in the convent church (ostensibly out of devotion, but in reality more likely out of a sense of prurience at the usually forbidden pleasure of observing and listening to nuns)⁴⁹ and sometimes (if they were female) they also toured the rest of the convent complex. When Isabella d’Este and Elisabetta Gonzaga visited Venice in March 1502, Isabella wrote to her husband Francesco Gonzaga, duke of Urbino, that the two women had very much enjoyed seeing the canonesses’ quarters at Le Vergini, and hearing two of the canonesses sing.⁵⁰ Visits to convents by the rich and famous were greatly beneficial to the institutions in their constant search for affirmation of their power and identity.

The possession of religious artefacts and religious paraphernalia exerted a pull on tourists and locals alike. The management and exploitation of these material remains and manifestations of religious power was a further important weapon in a convent armoury. For example, other draws at these convents were the relics they owned and displayed. In this respect, S. Zaccaria was at a decided advantage, as in addition to many separate body parts, it possessed several alleged entire bodies of saints, a particular type of relic that Gary Radke believes was especially beloved by Venetians, who possessed at least 49 of them.⁵¹ The precise list of saints’ bodies housed at S. Zaccaria varies from author to author, but undoubtedly included the body of the eponymous convent saint, which apparently had been donated by the Byzantine emperor Leo V (d. 820) at the foundation of the convent.⁵² Four additional

46 Sanudo, *De origine, situ et magistratibus urbis Venetae*, 62.

47 *Viaggio di Pietro Casola a Gerusalemme*. 1855. Ed. Conte Giulio Porro. Milan, 11, and *Canon Pietro Casola’s Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Year 1494*. 1907. Ed. M. Margaret Newett. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 136; Casola visited both convents.

48 *I diarii di Marino Sanuto*. 1879–1903. Ed. R. Fulin *et al.* 58 vols. Venice: F. Visentini, IV, col. 298; on 7 August 1502, Anna went to vespers at La Celestia, and then to Le Vergini “a udir cantar monache”.

49 *Canon Pietro Casola’s Pilgrimage*. Ed. Newett, 136 commented that the nuns of S. Zaccaria “let themselves be seen very willingly”.

50 Alessandro Luzio & Rodolfo Renier 1893. *Mantova e Urbino. Isabella d’Este ed Elisabetta Gonzaga nelle relazioni familiari e nelle vicende politiche*. Turin and Rome: L. Roux e c., 312.

51 Rodolfo Gallo 1934. Reliquie e reliquiari veneziani. *Rivista di Venezia* 13, 191.

52 Radke, *Nuns and their Art*, 445.

saints (Tarasio, Lizerio, Atanasio and Sabina), according to some,⁵³ or maybe five (Pancrazio, Lizerio, Atanasio, Tomaso and Teodoro di Samo),⁵⁴ or possibly even eight further ones, according to others,⁵⁵ were also preserved in their entirety in the convent. Le Vergini, on the other hand, appears not to have possessed any relics, which is unusual in the Venetian context, and therefore could not empower itself in the same fashion.

However, when saintly or beatific defunct members of the convent communities are analysed, it will be seen that Le Vergini possessed more than S. Zaccaria. Included in Andrea de' Vescovi's 1698 catalogue of Venetian saints and *beati* are 5 from Le Vergini (not all of whom were abbesses) and only 2 from S. Zaccaria, both of whom were abbesses: Agnese Morosini, who died in 880 and Maddalena Morosini, who died in 1527.⁵⁶ Miraculous Madonnas could be a further attraction at a convent, and a locus of power, and ownership of them was certainly beneficial. According to Le Vergini's canoness chronicler, Le Vergini owned two, both with connections to the Ziani family, one of which seems to have originated in Venice and the other of which was reputedly brought by Carlo da Diem from Jerusalem in the thirteenth century.⁵⁷ The first hung in the convent church and would have been accessible to the public, whereas the second was not normally accessible. Slightly surprisingly, S. Zaccaria appears not to have possessed similar miracle-working images. At least Flaminio Corner was unaware of any, and S. Zaccaria is omitted from the roll call of places where Miraculous Madonnas were to be found in Venice.⁵⁸

Even if they failed to acquire a Miraculous Madonna, S. Zaccaria's nuns in the first half of the fifteenth century commissioned a whole array of expensive and cutting-edge art, both frescoes and altarpieces,⁵⁹ to adorn their convent, which acts should surely be interpreted as enduring gestures of empowerment. Altarpieces commissioned by abbesses and other nun officials of the convent in 1443 that, pointedly and personally, contained overt references to their name saints, and inscriptions marking their patronage in perpetuity by memorialising their names, are very clear indicators of these women's identification with, and investment in, the

53 S. Tramontin, A. Niero, G. Musolino & L. Candiani 1965. *Culto dei santi a Venezia*. Venice: Edizioni Studium cattolico veneziano, e.g. 312, 314, 316, 297.

54 Gallo, *Reliquie e reliquari veneziani*, 191.

55 Radke, *Nuns and their Art*, 445, refers to a typescript entitled "Corpi di santi venerati nella chiesa di S. Zaccaria", in Venice, Archivio parrocchiale di San Zaccaria, Miscellanea 216.22.1.

56 G. Musolino, A. Niero & S. Tramontin 1963. *Santi e beati veneziani: quaranta profili*. Venice: Edizioni Studium cattolico veneziano, 34–35, 36–37, 46–47, 52–53 (Le Vergini) and 28–29, 44–45 (S. Zaccaria).

57 Venice, Biblioteca del Museo Correr, cod. Correr 317, fol. 33v. See also Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture*, 334–337.

58 [Flaminio Corner] 1761. *Notizie storiche delle apparizioni e delle immagini più celebri di Maria Vergine santissima nella città e dominio di Venezia*. Venice, 15–16.

59 On these, see Pietro Paoletti 1893–1897. *L'architettura e la scultura del Rinascimento in Venezia*, 2 vols. Venice: Ongania-Naya, I, 63.

power of themselves, their lineages and their institutions. The main altarpiece was publicly claimed by the abbess, Elena Foscari (it is no coincidence that she was the sister of the doge, Francesco Foscari) and her second-in-command, Marina Donato, while the side altar of Santa Sabina was paid for by one *camerlenga*, Margherita Donato, and the side altar of Corpus Domini was commissioned by the second *camerlenga*, Agnesina Giustinian.⁶⁰ All three altarpieces, which are now in the chapel of San Tarasio in S. Zaccaria, were the work of Antonio Vivarini, Giovanni d'Alemagna and Ludovico da Forlì.⁶¹

The canonesses at Le Vergini took a different turn on their road to empowerment through art. According to the canoness chronicler, a tradition started early there of portraits of the canonesses themselves. In the thirteenth century, the convent had deliberated whether to sculpt representation of the four Mastelizi girls, all canonesses, who together with their father were great patrons, on top of a marble column, and in an oration of 1366 reference was made to a portrait of the abbess, Isabeta Querini.⁶² Le Vergini's chronicle is further distinguished by its inclusion of illustrations, many of which include depictions of canonesses and abbesses, yet they are schematic rather than individualised. Two representations of abbesses from Le Vergini do, however, reinforce in various ways the notion of strategies of individual empowerment. The first is a tomb slab of the abbess Francesca Zorzi who died in 1428. In the nineteenth century the slab still bore two legible inscriptions, one of which alluded to the length and quality of her rule, and the other which appealed to canonesses and anyone else who read the inscription to pray for her,⁶³ thus revealing that a larger audience than convent inmates was expected. The second is a marble handbasin that includes a bas-relief of the Virgin and Child and two donor abbesses, whose initials are included (allowing them to be identified several centuries later).⁶⁴ Representing these women with these inscriptions or markers was a deliberate choice, and the convent must have been aware of the beneficial effects that this form of everlasting publicity would have on their abbesses' posthumous reputations.

In a similar fashion, lists of convent treasures contained in sacristies, usually commissioned or donated by the canonesses or nuns, can be seen as an outward manifestation of convent power, and they too should be included in this investigation. There are three known lists of sacristy treasures from Le Vergini, and at least

60 See R. Pallucchini 1961. *I Vivarini (Antonio, Bartolomeo, Alvise)*. Venice: N. Pozza, 99–100; Peter Humfrey 1993. Co-ordinated Altarpieces in Renaissance Venice: The Progress of an Ideal. In Peter Humfrey & Martin Kemp *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 199–201; and Radke, Nuns and their Art, 442–443 and figs. 3–5.

61 Radke, Nuns and their Art, 442, nn. 27 and 28. The costs of the three were as follows: high altarpiece, 180 ducats, altarpiece of Santa Sabina, 83 ducats, and altarpiece of Corpus Domini, 106 ducats.

62 Venice, Biblioteca del Museo Correr, cod. Correr 317, fols. 32v and 39v; see also Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture*, 377.

63 The tomb slab is now in the Seminario patriarcale in Venice. See Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture*, 378–379 and fig. 18.

64 Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture*, 380 and figs. 20 and 42.

one dating from 1525, and probably many more, for S. Zaccaria.⁶⁵ An analysis of the quality of convent “sacred treasure” (gold, silver, jewellery and textiles used for decoration of the church and in liturgical ceremonies) allows another kind of calibration of the potency of convent ownership, acquisition and display. Because these kinds of objects had a high monetary value, the possession of a valuable treasury was double-edged, and was a burden as well as a blessing, because the belongings could be eyed covetously not only by the state or different sections of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but even by opportunist or calculating thieves.

For instance, during the night of 27 December 1489 one or more unknown people entered the church of S. Zaccaria and despoiled the image of San Zaccaria, the angels in front of it, and the (presumably non miracle-working) image of the Virgin Mary, and stole some of the Virgin’s jewel-encrusted clothes and the *biretta* studded with gold and pearls of San Zaccaria.⁶⁶ These accoutrements are most likely to have adorned statues of the convent’s name saint and the Virgin, and the San Zaccaria could conceivably have been the life-size wooden statue commissioned by the nuns in 1451.⁶⁷ The sacristy was also broken into, but the previous evening nuns had removed all the chalices, vestments and other precious items. Expensive objects were material embodiments of power, acknowledged as such by convents, governments and the populace at large, possession of which was also contested on that basis; and in this case, convent treasures in the sacristy, and the precious metals and jewels used to embellish and augment paintings and sculptures, unhappily acted in addition as a magnet for thieves. Convents as fields of power were potent sites for other types of crime and deviant activity, as they were symbolic spaces containing women which were out of bounds to secular men. One example is provided by a break-in to Le Vergini on 7 August 1430 of a group of six (probably drunken) nobles, a group that included Lorenzo Foscari, the son of the doge. These men were attracted to Le Vergini because it was a famous and powerful institution, on a day when Le Vergini’s institutional identity was on display as a new abbess was being consecrated. The convent site both amplified and rendered more visible their bad behaviour (they spat at the custodians of the host), but they were saved from heavy sentences by Lorenzo Foscari’s presence.⁶⁸

The power of authority

Consciousness of distinctive convent identity additionally permeated everything to do with the office of abbess (as the previous example has just shown), and

65 ASR, CRF 4226/4 (Miscellanea), fascicolo containing discrete pieces, including one entitled “Inventario dele cose del monastero di S. Zaccaria. 1525”.

66 ASVe, Quarantia criminale, reg. 20, fol. 10v.

67 Radke, Nuns and their Art, 442, n. 28.

68 ASVe, Avogaria di comun, Raspe 3648, fols. 39v and 40r. See also Romano Canosa 1991. *Il velo e il cappuccio: monacazioni forzate e sessualità nei conventi femminili in Italia tra Quattrocento e Settecento*. Rome: Sapere, 38, and Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles and Convent Culture*, 169–170.

the third line of investigation will centre on this office. Convent ceremony revolved around the notion of displaying and accruing power. The women who were elected abbess had the most direct responsibility for maintaining the convent's position and prestige, and this expectation of behaviour was enshrined in all the ceremonials and trappings of the office. A fifteenth-century manuscript describing the liturgical rituals associated with becoming a nun at S. Zaccaria was written for a nun there in 1437 and noted the consecration of Elena Foscari as abbess; it contained later additions of 1505.⁶⁹ The book of ceremonial detailing how an abbess should be elected (and in fact the right way to manage her death and funeral) also still exists for S. Zaccaria⁷⁰ and has been worked on by Vicky Primhak, who rightly states that "The importance of S. Zaccaria in the city can be seen from the pomp and display of its rituals".⁷¹ In addition, in this particular instance, practice can be compared to theory. The full import of the election process at S. Zaccaria is detailed in an anonymous nun's anatomy of the election of 1509.⁷² Three aspects of this process deserve particular attention: the enormous interest shown in this contested election by those outside the convent (discussions on it earned the displeasure of the patriarch), the ceremony of possession of the new abbess presided over by the patriarch, and the inclusion of many outsiders in parties within the convent connected to the election and possession. All of these show that the internal affairs of S. Zaccaria had considerable resonance at the highest levels of Venetian society.

The same is true of elections at Le Vergini. Here influential relatives and friends celebrated the consecration of the new abbess at her so-called marriage with the doge. Having an abbess' consecration ceremony that was routinely attended by the doge marked out the pre-eminence of Le Vergini and shows once again Le Vergini trumping S. Zaccaria (which was only able to summon the patriarch). The attendance at a female convent of the doge and senate for the consecration of the new abbess was indeed a spectacular coup for Le Vergini, constantly linking it to the centre of governmental power, and linking the abbess as its representative and figurehead to the head of the Venetian republic. But S. Zaccaria was the beneficiary of its own visit from the doge and senate on an annual basis, initially on 13 September, but later during the Easter celebrations.⁷³ However, the tenor of this visit was slightly different: it was one of many visits to churches and convents made

69 Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, MS Lat (=2172). See G. Valentinelli 1868–1873. *Biblioteca Manuscripta ad S. Marci Venetiarum*, 6 tomes in 2 vols. Venice, II, 322. The date of 1437 appears on fol. 28r and that of 1505 on fol. 34v.

70 ASVe, ACRS, S. Zaccaria, b. 5: the section on election is on fols. 6r–12r.

71 V. Primhak 2000. *Benedictine Communities in Venetian Society: The Convent of S. Zaccaria*. In Letizia Panizza (ed.) *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*. Oxford: European Humanities Research Centre, 97.

72 ASR, CRF 4226/4 (Miscellanea), unfoliated and untitled. For context and analysis, see Lowe, *Elections of Abbesses*, 389–429.

73 Umberto Franzoi & Dina di Stefano 1976. *Le chiese di Venezia*. Venice: Alfieri, 392 and 394. See also Radke, *Nuns and their Art*, 446.

by the doge, and was a sign of his favour, but its main objective was the celebration of the governor and government of Venice rather than the nuns. The doge went first to vespers at the church, then to visit the tombs of his predecessors in the crypt under the nuns' church, and only afterwards to a social event at the convent.

The most obvious reason for both convents' resonance at the highest levels is that both sets of inmates came from precisely those elites that governed the political and ecclesiastical life of the city. What is not known (and which is crucial) is why one person would be placed in Le Vergini and another in S. Zaccaria, and it would also be immensely helpful to know how many nuns in Le Vergini had relatives, especially sisters, in S. Zaccaria. As both were noble or patrician houses, it must have been relatively common, although the numbers of canonesses at Le Vergini (roughly between 25 and 55 in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, but normally at the lower end) remained a little lower than those at S. Zaccaria.

Occasionally abbesses at both convents were chosen in order to cash in on their powerful connections. So Maria Ziani was elected at Le Vergini in 1204, according to the chronicler, because the canonesses wanted to please the doge, Pietro Ziani: Maria was the daughter of Zilio Ziani and the doge's cousin.⁷⁴ The claims of a rich patron were recognised at Le Vergini in 1280 when Euphemia Mastelizi was elected abbess: her family's patronage had been responsible for much of the building works at the convent.⁷⁵ Suor'Elena Foscari, the sister of the doge Francesco Foscari, was elected at S. Zaccaria in May 1437 while her brother was in office, which must have been useful.⁷⁶ These examples of political connections and wealthy patronage show that abbesses could be chosen for a variety of reasons, and that elections could thus become moments of great empowerment.

One particular custom associated with Le Vergini and unknown at S. Zaccaria – of a canoness composing and reciting an oration in Latin in front of the doge at the consecration of the new abbess – offers an example of the empowering force of Latin rhetorical expertise. Latin was the language of the educated elite, associated with male scholars, churchmen and public officials; rhetorical skill too was usually a male preserve. The canonesses at Le Vergini were usurpers in a double sense, and by their usurpation they challenged not only a normative male monopoly but also the discourses surrounding female inferiority. Once again, therefore, Le Vergini canonesses had claimed the high-ground of uniqueness, coupled here with evidence of female learning and achievement.

Empowerment of the convent through the figure of the abbess continued after the election and its attendant ceremonies, and took a variety of forms. Some of these could be symbolic. It is unfortunate that there is no record of the iconographical configuration or decoration of the abbess' staff/crozier at Le Vergini, and equally

⁷⁴ Venice, Biblioteca del Museo Correr, cod. Correr 317, fol. 28r.

⁷⁵ Venice, Biblioteca del Museo Correr, cod. Correr 317, fol. 34v.

⁷⁶ Radke, *Nuns and their Art*, 440.

unfortunate that we do not know what was represented on the convent seal.⁷⁷ Nor is anything known about the crozier or seal at S. Zaccaria, but these abbesses' accessories were surely indicators of convent identity and potency. Additionally, at Le Vergini, the creation of portraits (some extant and some now lost) of several abbesses in various media (panel painting, sculpture) points to their importance as leaders of their communities and as individuals. Consciousness of the identities both of individual convents and of individual nuns must also have contributed to the writing of convent histories or chronicles by nuns and canonesses, and even by outside male clergy. Le Vergini's chronicle, written in the early sixteenth century by an anonymous canoness, has already been mentioned several times. There is no comparable, complete female chronicle of S. Zaccaria, although the two short narratives of single events mentioned above exist and may have been fragments of longer chronicles, and, in addition, there is a chronicle of the convent written by a man in the seventeenth century.

The limits of power: fear of falling?

My fourth line of enquiry concerns the strategies of empowerment used at the two convents when they were under threat of reform from 1519 onwards, and reveals the limits of their power. In brief, the 1519 reform by the patriarch oversaw the imposition of enclosure on Venice's conventual convents,⁷⁸ including both Le Vergini and S. Zaccaria. The canonesses and nuns were not consulted; the majority were utterly opposed to such a move. In the case of Le Vergini, enclosure and observance were imposed, the convent was rebuilt and re-secured in line with its new purpose, Observant Augustinian nuns were introduced from the convent of S. Giustina, and authority was transferred from the pope to the patriarch.

It is interesting to consider the practical steps taken by the convents and their inmates in order to try to evade obeying the patriarch, Antonio Contarini, and to preserve their independence and autonomy. I shall concentrate on any interesting strategy or strategies used by one convent and not the other; some strategies (for example, enlisting the help of famous relatives) were employed at both. But, according to Sanuto, the nuns of S. Zaccaria decided that a sophisticated legal solution was their best chance of success, and they took a case against the patriarch to the Roman Rota.⁷⁹ The ins and outs of this case are not known, but it was a clever and daring move. The canonesses at Le Vergini tried a different approach, more multi-faceted, and mobilising all sorts of resources. For example, at a crucial moment in June 1519 they caused the wall that had been built as a partition in their

⁷⁷ For an interesting discussion of abbesses' seals as transmitters of authority, see Giovanni Maria del Basso 1996. *Il sigillo delle monache: autorità e modello*. In Gabriella Zarri (ed.) *Donna, disciplina, creanza cristiana dal XV al XVII secolo*. Rome, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, e.g. at 364: "Il sigillo è una insegna di potere".

⁷⁸ See, e.g., Maria Pia Pedani 1995. *L'osservanza imposta: i monasteri conventuali femminili a Venezia nei primi anni del Cinquecento*. *Archivio veneto*, 144, 113–125.

⁷⁹ *I diarii di Marin Sanudo*, XXVII, col. 450.

convent – to allow the introduction of alien, reforming nuns from S. Giustina – to be knocked down,⁸⁰ and Clara Donato, the abbess, also sent two lay sisters to lobby the papal legate, Altobello Averoldo, but again the effect is unknown.⁸¹

Finally, and very famously, abbesses from both institutions were included in a delegation from four convents who appeared, with their male relatives, in front of the doge in the Collegio in June 1521 to register their protest.⁸² Once again, the order of the convents should be noted: Sanuto mentions Le Vergini before S. Zaccaria. And true to form, the abbess of Le Vergini was singled out by Sanuto because she gave “almost an oration” (“quasi un oratione”) in Latin (all the canonesses at Le Vergini could give Latin orations) that rightly caused a stir. S. Zaccaria was defended not by its abbess but by Nicolò Michiel “who had sisters and daughters in S. Zaccaria”. As a strategy of empowerment, therefore, Clara Donato's stunt was very successful at one level; but in the overall context, the abbess had reached the limits of her power and was unable to stop the implementation of reform.

An unintended consequence of the 1519 reforms was the writing of the chronicle of Le Vergini by an early sixteenth-century canoness, which was undoubtedly a conscious strategy to retrieve the authority and autonomy recently lost by the convent due to enforced enclosure, by memorialising its glorious and unique traditions and past.

A final point focuses on intention. It is worth considering how consciously the convents pursued these policies that resulted in empowerment, and whether they were so widespread among the generality of convents as to be commonplace. Intention is always very difficult to prove but I believe it is reasonable to infer that all the evidence presented above points to a conscious deployment of strategies on the part of both convents. Many Venetian patrician nuns seem to have inherited or imbibed political awareness and know-how from their fathers and families, and even in the repressive spaces of their convent to have held onto a belief that they were capable of exercising power and exerting agency through decision-making. In this relatively relaxed period, their institutions were shaped by and benefited from their inmates' understanding of the essentially political nature of nearly all Venetian life. Although the two convents under discussion were the most important and best-known in Venice, there was a sizeable number of other conventual convents with nuns from the same or similar backgrounds who operated in the same or similar ways.

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Considering successful female convents as fields of power, rather than exclusively as religious entities, permits them to be seen in a more rounded fashion, because political, social, economic, religious and cultural aspects can all be included.

80 *I diarii di Marin Sanudo*, XXVII, col. 407.

81 Venice, Biblioteca del Museo Correr, cod. Correr 317, fols. 58v and 60v.

82 *I diarii di Marin Sanudo*, XXXI, col. 276: the other two convents represented were La Celestia and Santa Marta.

This renaming also avoids accepting the parameters of the issue laid down by the Catholic church, and colluded with by Venetian fathers of a certain income group and status, which sanctioned the removal from secular society of female children and young girls before an age of possible consent, and their subsequent “imprisonment” in “religious” institutions. By the fifteenth century, these two convents were long-established and socially acceptable repositories for educated, secular, patrician women, whom their fathers or male guardians had decided it was too expensive to allow to be married. These convents operated behind religious facades, and possessed much accumulated religious paraphernalia, but in fact they were distinguished by their all-female character, and their identity and success as institutions, rather than by their religious intent, which was for many of the women an external imposition. Clever nuns and canonesses learnt to harness the power that could accrue to them through “religious” channels (for example, the acquisition of saints’ relics) in exactly the same way as other types of power, such as the cultural power emanating from portraits of past abbesses, and to harness it to their advantage. As with other successful institutions, their strategies of empowerment had to keep pace with political and social change, and they learnt new tactics in response to new threats. So at certain points empowerment through a close relationship with a doge was more rewarding than adverting to significant patronage from an absent emperor, or vice versa. But these Venetian solutions for unmarried and institutionalised patrician women that allowed collective and individual generation and harnessing of power were shattered completely by the reform movements of the Catholic church in the sixteenth century, that reclaimed all canonesses’ and nuns’ lives for the church, and enforced upon them the most rigid forms of religious repression. Not only was widespread quasi-secular living at an end for all but the most dedicatedly non-religious nuns, but also the convent as a female field of power had passed its heyday in Venice.

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