Persuasive Threads, Persistent Shadows: The Canonesses of Le Vergini and their Illuminated Chronicle

Claire E. LaRose
University of Colorado at Boulder, clarose369@gmail.com

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Persuasive Threads, Persistent Shadows: The Canonesses of Le Vergini and their Illuminated Chronicle

By

Claire E. LaRose

B.F.A., B.S., Bradley University, 2009
M.A., University of Colorado, 2013

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Persuasive Threads, Persistent Shadows: The Canonesses of Le Vergini and their
Illuminated Chronicle
Written by Claire E. LaRose
Has been approved for the Department of Art and Art History

Claire Farago
James Córdova
Kirk Ambrose
Lilian Armstrong

Date _________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Reforms enacted by the patriarch of Venice in the sixteenth century silenced the canonesses of Santa Maria delle Vergini, leaving only the words and images of their illuminated chronicle to articulate their thwarted resistance. The Latin text scrolling across the top of the chronicle’s architectural frontispiece proclaims the manuscripts intentions: “The original monastery of Santa Maria delle Vergini di Venezia begins:~ Whoever should plunder it, such that he destroys its honor, will be excommunicated.” Persuasive visual and textual threads weave a complex institutional history across the pages of the previously unpublished Cronica del Monastero Delle Vergini Di Venezia, giving material form to a highly politicized controversy. In an attempt to persuade Venice’s ruling men that the patrician convent and her elite inhabitants were sacred and indispensable components to the city’s superior moral and mercantile fabric, the Cronica warns that an attempt to reform or alter the institution will in turn ruin the leaders of Venice and threaten the city’s sanctity and power. A desperate fear laces the Cronica's venomous threats issued both implicitly and explicitly, while the historical habitual refusal to acknowledge the manuscript confirms and clarifies the threat posed by the illuminated chronicle.

I examine the Cronica’s written commentary as it converges with the vibrant narrative illustrations. Through this study I seek to understand how the visual aspects of the Cronica add weight to the women’s threats, and contribute to the manuscript’s exiled life in the shadows. I approach the Cronica through a comparative analysis, addressing Venetian women’s writing in the sixteenth century, the Venetian narrative painting tradition and the practice of illuminating manuscripts and printed books in early modern Venice. Through my analysis I conclude that by
inserting their foundation story and the figure of Abbess Giulia into one of the myths of Venice and conforming to sixteenth century Venetian literary and visual traditions, the *Cronica* created a relevant and “authentic” history that threatened to contradict the intentions of the Venetian church and state. Ultimately, though the convent appealed to multiple sources of authority the documents did not persuade the Pope or the ruling officials of Venice to interfere and save the convent from reform.
Acknowledgments

Many scholars have guided me along my journey, foremost being my advisor, Dr. Claire Farago and my committee members Dr. James Córdova, Dr. Kirk Ambrose. I thank them for allowing me the opportunity to find my own way. Dr. Lilian Armstrong, as a scholar who has devoted her life to the manuscripts of Venice, provided crucial contributions and enlightening possibilities for future research. Many others have gone out of their way to share their expertise with me, including Dr. Suzanne Magnanini and Dr. Anne Lester. I would also like to thank the individuals who aided my research in Italy including: Dr. Stephen Campbell, Dr. Bernard Aikema, and all of those who taught the Medici Archive Project Paleography and Archive Seminar, especially Dr. Elena Brizio.

Much of my research was made possible by the generous grants I received from the Neuman Family Fellowship, which allowed me to travel to Venice and see the manuscript that is the subject of this thesis. I would also like to thank the patient and extremely accommodating individuals at the Correr library in Venice who graciously provided the high quality scans of Le Vergini’s chronicle and helped me to navigate the library’s extensive collection.

I am indebted to the scholars who have provided the rich historical foundation of Le Vergini’s chronicle. When possible I use the partial translations of the Cronica published in earlier studies, however, a large amount of the Latin translations have been provided by Mitch Pentzer. I thank Mitch for his patience and enthusiasm.

Family and friends have been my support system throughout my time in Boulder, and I do hope they can all see their love and dedication in my final product. Without you, this project and all those who contributed would only live in my imagination.
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Introduction

My introduction to the canonesses of Santa Maria delle Vergini and their illustrated chronicle, *Cronica del Monastero Delle Vergini Di Venezia*, occurred entirely by chance. I was initially interested in investigating the artistic environment of Renaissance convents, specifically those on the Italian peninsula. The beginning stages of my research focused upon the art located in Italian Renaissance female religious institutions, both the art produced by the women themselves or commissioned for the women residing within the confined sacred space. Though it is tempting to imagine the shrouded women creating a uniquely ‘feminine’ environment, historical evidence suggests otherwise. As other scholars have pointed out, the belief that an exclusively feminine enclosure is capable of spawning art indicative of the feminine experience is inclined to articulate more about the “imaginers” than the “imagined.”

Detailed examinations of the Renaissance female religious experience are abundant, yet the body of historical scholarship specific to the visual arts presents little narrative coherency. As a result, my research process was arduous and scattered, for although scholars have been

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1 Venice, Biblioteca del Museo Correr (hereafter BMC), MS Correr 317. *Cronica del Monastero Delle Vergini Di Venezia*, ca. 1523; see Appendix. Subsequent references to this manuscript will be to “Cronica.”

2 “This focus on the female sphere serves to bring women’s domestic experience into the public realm... Yet his deep curiosity about a wholly female world also reflects an element of literary voyeurism, an outsider’s reimagining rather than a genuine investigation of female epistolarity.” Meredith K. Ray, *Writing Gender in Women’s Letter Collections of the Italian Renaissance*, Toronto Italian Studies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 214.

actively examining and analyzing the lives of religious women and their creative productions in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, the amount of easily accessible archival information remains limited. This archival evidence is crucial to an informed study of religious women, as very little physical evidence providing witness to their lives exists today. Most studies focus upon an individual group of women or a specific convent, as broader theses cannot be supported archivally, and each institution in each city has its own set of social and political circumstances.\(^4\) The vast majority of Renaissance convents in Italy were suppressed in the nineteenth century, dispersing artwork and leaving little record of this dispersal or the artworks’ final destinations. In many cases the actual structures of the cloisters and churches were destroyed as well, complicating the work of art historians even further. Realizing these obstacles, I turned to the creative productions that remained physically intact and closely tied to their original institutions.

Santa Maria delle Vergini’s *Cronica* continually resurfaces as a peculiar object of interest. Not only is it a meticulously written historical account of a convent, housing the daughters of Venice’s elite patrician class, but it also tells a compelling visual story. The large number of illustrations in the *Cronica* receive cursory acknowledgment by historians examining the chronicle, but are not emphasized or analyzed in the historians’ studies. As a result of this interpretive omission, questions regarding the images remained unanswered: Why did the patron choose to illustrate the chronicle, a genre that rarely received visual accompaniment, and why choose the scenes that they did? The notion that the canonesses of Le Vergini may have created

the illustrations themselves sparked my curiosity. Many case studies of nun’s creative productions exist, yet few are comprehensive despite scholarly interest. Thus, I contribute my case study of the *Cronica* as an addition to the existing body of scholarship in the hopes that someday a comprehensive approach to the creative productions of women may be possible and productive.

My study of the *Cronica* asks the reader to consider the notion of belief. Not only is the *Cronica* written by a Christian institution, but the foundation story woven throughout the *Cronica* relies upon an assumed belief in the civic myths of the larger Venetian community. David Morgan proposes that instead of asking “what does religion teach?” we should ask “what remains?” reducing the question to a matter of sacred delivery and material culture. Though Morgan is concerned with belief as understood through religion, his ideas can be successfully transposed to matters of secular belief or civic myth. Similar to the faith inherent in religious belief, faith is vital for civic or institutional foundation myths. The *Cronica* is a material object that speaks of belief as a shared imaginary. At times, the manuscript describes and illustrates the actions bespeaking this belief, constructing a visual culture rich with sensation and physical performance. Yet the *Cronica* also speaks of a shared belief in myth and the power of visual imagery to convince, persuade and define. As an object worthy of art historical investigation, it provides a glimpse into the visual imaginary of Venice.

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5 Kate Lowe suggests this notion in her book, K. J. P. Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). I have since concluded that this rather unlikely- though still not impossible.

6 I refer to the Myths of Venice as they would have been understood in the sixteenth century, as ‘istoria’ or as constructed narratives that defined the city’s history and ideology. This study considers the ‘myths’ and ‘history’ of Venice to inextricably connected, and, in the end, inseparable. See Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1981), 13–55; Donald E. Queller, *The Venetian Patriciate: Reality Versus Myth* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1986), 3–28 for an introduction to the historiography of the Myth of Venice.

The *Cronica* remains available for viewing at the Biblioteca del Museo Correr, and has left a traceable trail, however faint, yet is not mentioned with any frequency in art historical studies of illuminated manuscripts. This lack of art historical scholarship surrounding Le Vergini’s chronicle is an obvious indicator of the manuscript’s perceived status in the academic system. Contributing to this oversight is a lack of theoretical foundations or categorizations within which to discuss the manuscript. Under the assumption that religious women could not have produced or commissioned great works of art in the early modern period, critical eyes have not directed their gaze toward the remains of the now demolished convent, Le Vergini.

Suppressed convent archives are rarely the starting point for art historical research, as archives have traditionally provided art historians with source material, not the art itself. It is only recently that a theory of the archives has risen to the forefront of scholarship, questioning the archives’ passivity. Archives do not relay unbiased, unchanging facts, but are sculpted and formed dependent upon time and their human compilers. Constructed by historical actors towards purposeful ends, Le Vergini’s *Cronica* is a record of the past and an archive of information. This study considers Le Vergini’s chronicle as an archive within a network of other Venetian archives. All are in communication with one another, their boundaries continually in flux, actors arriving, departing and invoking change throughout the network. I am interested in this archive for what it can reveal about the manuscript’s moment of creation and the actions of

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8 However, this is not uncommon. Many Renaissance manuscripts remained unpublished and away from the public eye in private and public collections. I have not conducted an exhaustive search for studies referencing the manuscript, but detailed initial research has uncovered only one art historian who mentions the manuscript. Gary Radke mentions Le Vergini’s chronicle in Radke, “Nuns and Their Art,” but references the copy of the *Cronica*, not the original. Nor does he mention the illustrations.

the human participants. Yet I am also interested in what it can say about the current art historical discipline.

Forays into the field of “visual culture” or “visual studies” and the evolution of the “new art history” have opened doors for art historians interested in exploring the visual environment as a whole, as well as works not traditionally categorized as “art.” Visual culture studies raise difficult questions, asking art historians to reassess the discipline and reconsider traditional categorizations. Le Vergini’s illustrations are not attributed to a known master miniaturist, they do not exhibit superior technical skill, nor was the manuscript renowned at any point in its history for its visual prowess, yet these visual characteristics do not render the content of the manuscript any less significant. Renaissance studies has been more reluctant to embrace visual culture studies than other historical periods, for the aesthetic masterpieces from this period provided the foundation upon which art history began. This trend is not seen in all scholarship from the field, as many brilliant studies in recent years, inspired by Michael Baxandall’s seminal book *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Renaissance Italy*, have begun to explore the meaning and value of visual images through examinations of the nascent print culture, the social implications of the artistic climate and the material culture of the time. Approaching works of


art in this manner brings visual studies into close contact with methodologies often employed in literary studies including various strains of semiotic, deconstructive, new historicist and feminist theories. Peter Erickson and Clarke Hulse explain that while the essays in their volume, *Early Modern Visual Culture*, “explore the social context in which paintings, statues, textiles, maps and other artifacts are produced and consumed, they also explore how those artifacts, and the acts of creating, collecting and admiring them are themselves mechanisms for fashioning the body and identity, situating the self within a social order, defining the otherness of race, ethnicity and gender, and establishing relationships of power over others based on exploration, surveillance and insight.” Similarly, I will approach the illustrations in the *Cronica* from the perspective of visual culture studies, not as an aesthetic masterpiece, but as an indication of the visual experience in Venice for the women of Le Vergini and a mechanism for fashioning their collective identity.

The feminist movement of the 1960s allowed art historians an entrance into gender as an analytic category, first recovering the women of the past, and later critiquing the academic framework in which these freshly “discovered” women were forced to conform. Multiple studies have enthusiastically pursued this goal, inviting the world to admire and respect the accomplishments of women. However, simply inserting women into the existing framework

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13 Ibid., 2.

and noting the interpretive challenges in doing so, continues to provide women secondary status in relation to their male counterparts, even though they remain the subject of specific studies. The last decade has encountered resistance to feminist interpretations raising questions such as, “Does gender matter?” Many of these questions arise from the historically conservative field of Renaissance studies. They do not question the importance of earlier feminist studies, but ask if the analysis remains relevant today, implying that the pursuit of feminist analysis is complete. In a recent powerful and provocative article, Mary Sheriff asks if gender as a methodology will survive in the future, stating that “despite having influenced the practices and assumptions of art history, gender studies today are significantly less visible than they were a decade ago.” If all a gendered analysis can contribute is a disciplinary critique without setting forth a concrete method or avenue to reinterpretation, it will add nothing “new” to the discipline and as a result receive little funding and interest. Sheriff also notes that gender studies cannot stand on theoretical framework alone, but must be supported by substantial historical research as well. This point may seem simplistic enough to go unnoticed, but is essential to the framework of my study. I have devoted a significant amount this thesis to detailing the historical context of the


17 Sheriff, “Seeing Beyond the Norm: Interpreting Gender in the Visual Arts.” “A fair number of project proposals were focused on gender- although not nearly as many as positioned themselves in postcolonial studies. Panel members often judged harshly those projects that were primarily based on gender analysis, especially when the analysis took women as the object of study.”
Cronica in order for my theoretical claims to hold weight. This study will offer an initial interpretation of the images in the Cronica, and a subsequent reinterpretation of the manuscript as a whole. My approach briefly critiques previous individual and disciplinary frameworks, but does not exist solely to critique. I offer this study as a historical contribution, a disciplinary critique and a contemporary reinterpretation.

In contrast to some of the historians who have studied the Cronica, I am not interested in realizing the lost identity of the artist who painted the Cronica’s miniatures or the individual woman who may have composed the manuscript, nor will I pursue the illuminated manuscript as a literary composition. Recovering individual identities would not unveil the life of the object, merely single actors in a larger drama. Similarly, a detailed analysis of the text, though fruitful in another direction, is not crucial to the visual life of the Cronica. Instead, I will analyze the manuscript’s visual components, and assert an art historical interpretation of the Cronica. I intend to analyze the illuminations in relation to specific Venetian narrative painting cycles, but will not be drawing larger conclusions relative to monumental Venetian paintings. The actors in my analysis will be the patron, the artist, the author and the audience. I will consider these actors’ motivations whether personal, social, political, religious or economical, and how the visual and textual conversation speaks to these motivations. The Cronica is not an innocent document, passively representative of its time, but a living book, serving multiple purposes throughout its lifetime, and continuing to live and breathe today. Communicating in multiple languages, the Cronica is best understood in conversation, not as an isolated textual or visual specimen.

I begin my first chapter with a brief overview of the physical appearance of the manuscript, a description of the frontispiece and a summary of the plot. This is followed by the
textual trail left behind by the \textit{Cronica}, and a hypothesis as to why this trail is rather faint. I conclude the chapter with a brief scholarship review of work directly referencing the \textit{Cronica}. The second chapter introduces the narrative content of the \textit{Cronica}, both visual and textual, and its relationship to the Venetian narrative painting tradition. Chapter three will discuss the literary climate of Venice and the \textit{Cronica}'s connections to these different genres, situating the manuscript within a larger literary climate. Though the \textit{Cronica} closely aligns with the genre of Venetian civic chronicles, certain aspects of the manuscript warrant a comparative investigation into other literary genres. This chapter also compares the \textit{Cronica} to various manuscripts commissioned by the convent of Le Vergini. Finally, chapter four looks at the \textit{Cronica} through a religious and political lens, strongly implicating the motivations of the actors involved. Researching a manuscript and the group of women of which so few have ever heard of is a lonely business. It is my hope that the world is now ready to look and to see. The theoretical groundwork has been laid by the pioneering generation of feminist and visual culture theorists. May the stage now be set for the women and their book, both of which have lain for far too long in the shadows.
1. **Locating Le Vergini**

Encased in a wall of red brick, the Gothic *sopraporta* of Santa Maria delle Vergini, also known as Le Vergini, is today the only physical remnant of the elite Augustinian church and monastic complex (Fig. 1). Founded at the turn of the thirteenth century as the female counterpart to the ducal chapel of San Marco, Le Vergini housed an average of thirty patrician Augustinian canonesses of the order San Marco Evangelista di Mantova for nearly six centuries. Currently the *sopraporta* is mounted in the Arsenal wall opposite Campo San Daniele (Fig. 2).\(^{18}\) After the convent’s suppression in 1806, the Arsenal expanded its walls, enveloping the land occupied by the convent as well as the church of Le Vergini. This land is located in the far eastern Castello quarter of Venice across the canal from San Pietro di Castello. Physically separated from the loud and chaotic center of the island city, Le Vergini hovered on the more tranquil urban periphery.

As a common alternative to marriage, noble or aristocratic women in the medieval and early modern period entered canoness houses, which were the equivalent of seminaries or elegant boarding houses for young patrician women. Swearing no formal vows, wearing no habit, and not under the law of clausturation, canonesses were allowed to maintain their own property and servants and take meals in their own private apartments. Vows of obedience to the abbess and vows of chastity were the only vows pledged by the canonesses, while their only duties included singing the Hours and attending religious services. If the abbess permitted, the women could travel, visit relatives and forego their vows at any time to be married.\(^{19}\) The *Cronica* emphasizes

\(^{18}\) The convent complex would have resided on the piece of land that is now a walled in green space.  
strongly that the women of Le Vergini are first Canons Regular, and secondly of the order of Saint Augustine.\textsuperscript{20} To this point, the Cronica states:

First it must be asked from which man, or from which men, the rule of Saint Augustine has its beginning, and the order of the Canons Regular, and if one should claim ignorance, or say that it had its beginning immediately from Augustine, respond according to the commentator on the third book of Physics: if the beginning of anything is unknown, so too what follows is unknown; it is necessary to have and to recognize the first origins, because we know everything after the fact, and we believe through what happened earlier, so go and learn first from whom it began, and then I will answer you once you have come to me; if he should say that this rule has its beginning from the Apostles, you will answer that he answers best... the order of the Canons has its origins in the Apostles, therefore this rule has the greatness, its most powerful part, and its perfection from the Apostles; indeed, this rule constitutes in essence three vows, and these three vows the Apostles spoke, and all the clerics in the early church\textsuperscript{21}

Solidifying the argument, the Cronica later claims that Saint Augustine did not actually create a new order, but “reformed his own clerics according to the Apostolic institutions.”\textsuperscript{22} Intent on identifying their convent as a canoness house, and not an observant Augustinian institution, the chronicle devotes two entire folios to a justification of their apostolic rule, or the order of the Canons Regular, and the great examples of Canons throughout history.

Venice’s rich cartographic tradition proves an invaluable tool in the reimagining of Le Vergini’s structural existence and the physical space the canonesses inhabited. An 1846 plan from Nuova Planimetiae, (Fig. 3) details the layout of the complex, while Jacopo di’Barbari’s prodigious woodcut, View of Venice from 1500 provides a perspectival rendering of the space (Fig. 4). Engineer Giovanni Casoni, active in the nineteenth century, writes about his discovery of a Roman wall in the foundations of Le Vergini, accompanied by a plan of Le Vergini’s church

\textsuperscript{20} I refer to the women of Le Vergini as Conventual canonesses or nuns as opposed to nuns of the Observant order. Conventual nuns in this context were the women in Venice that did not take the strict vows of clausura, or poverty while those women in more Observant houses did.
\textsuperscript{21} Cronica, 21v.
\textsuperscript{22} Cronica, 22r.
Once again it is possible to see the basilica structure of the church along with the façade. All of these depictions of Le Vergini’s church reveal a basilica structure with a large apse, a high clerestory and a classicizing façade. Le Vergini’s façade was directly opposite the church of San Pietro di Castello, most visible in the detail from Nuova Planimetiai (Fig. 4). Separated by a wide canal, the two churches remained in direct visual communication with one another. This relationship between these two monastic institutions will be discussed below as not only a physical connection, but an ideological affiliation as well. The only direct access to the front entrance of Le Vergini’s church would have been by boat, for the land that the church and cloister rested upon was entirely surrounded by water. Two bridges connected the island monastic complex to the adjacent land, most visible in the Casoni plan (Fig. 5). One bridge provided access to the south side of the complex, and the other connected to the arsenal on the west side. Also noticeable in multiple maps of Venice is Le Vergini’s prominent, stocky campanile topped with a pyramidal roof. This vertical landmark would have marked the convent’s location in the city’s skyline, acknowledging her wealth and significance as well as possibly mimicking the campanile across the canal at San Pietro.

I. Framing the Cronica: A Noble Story

Making no attempt to disguise its high birth, the Cronica is bound in dark brown leather with remnants of silver clasps on three sides of the book. The delicate gold floral designs, present on the front and back covers, provide an illustrious and impressive initial impression (Fig. 7). Measuring a formidable 43 x 28.6 cm, the manuscript holds 63 folios of text flanked by several blank folios on either side. A steady humanistic script fills the pages, recorded in multiple

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distinct, yet anonymous, hands. Composed in both Latin and Italian, the first section, primarily in Latin, recounts the history of Pope Alexander III in Venice, while the second part, a record of the convent’s abbesses, is written primarily in Italian, with a strong Venetian dialect. As the elegant script and the author’s command of Latin indicate linguistic and scribal training, the thirty-nine illuminations, carefully rendered in predetermined sections of the text, denote formal artistic training. Though the artist has been thought by others to be self-taught and the artistic style characterized as ‘rather crude,’ the visual details tell a different story.

The magnificent full-page frontispiece marks the beginning of Le Vergini’s historical tale (Fig. 6). A careful consideration of the draftsmanship and composition reveals the artist’s familiarity with linear perspective. Protruding from a light-pink, stucco, two-story building, the classically domed entrance is perfectly centered and symmetrical. A gaping black doorway occupies the perfect center of the composition, seeming to offer the viewer an entrance into the convent itself, both visually and metaphorically. The strong orthogonals and square tile pattern in the foreground, reminiscent of Pietro Perugino’s Christ Handing the Keys to Saint Peter (Fig. 8) and Marriage of the Virgin, (Fig. 9) lead directly to the entrance of Le Vergini’s church. Following the direction of the orthogonals, the viewer must ascend a steep flight of gently curving stairs. The arched steps meet a set of flat stairs parallel to the stucco walls. Light enters from the left, throwing the right of the domed entranceway and steps into shadow. The columns at the top of the arched stairway also cast subtle shadows onto the wall behind. These attempts

25 There is a strange fold bisecting the illustration vertically. I have been unable to deduce any meaningful conclusions from this fold.
26 It is also interesting to the note the similarities to Raphael’s Marriage of the Virgin. The frontispiece appears to display obvious connections to the ‘marriage of the Virgin’ which could be pursued in greater detail, establishing a metaphorical relationship between the ‘marriage of the Virgin’ theme and the symbolic marriage of Le Vergini’s abbess and the Doge. There could also be a connection drawn between the architecture represented on the frontispiece and the architecture of the Holy Sepulchre, seeing as the convent established a strong connection with Jerusalem on the next folio.
by the artist to create three-dimensional form, in addition to the receding ground pattern, indicate the artist’s basic understanding of Renaissance visual techniques to create spatial depth in the picture plane. An untrained artist would not have had the technical skills or conceptual foundation to paint such an image.27

Generally accepted to have been completed around 1523, the Cronica exemplifies contemporaneous artistic techniques as seen in Perugino’s Christ Handing the Keys to Saint Peter (Fig. 7) painted in 1481-82 and Marriage of the Virgin (Fig. 8) painted in 1500-04. Without considering the appearance or style of the miniatures, historians have dated the manuscript based upon textual evidence: the last date mentioned in the chronicle is July 4, 1519,28 the last Doge mentioned, Andrea Gritti, was elected on May 20, 1523, and the last abbess, Madonna Clara Donato, died on December 22, 1523. Further Doges and abbesses were not recorded, though there remained blank pages. The year 1519 is significant, for it was the year that the patriarch, Antonio Contarini, made the decision to actively reform the convent of Le Vergini along with several other patrician convents. He ordered the implementation of the strict clausura, or the cloistering of the women, which had previously not been required of the canonesses. By 1537 all of the Conventual canonesses had departed from the convent, leaving Le Vergini an entirely Observant institution under the rule of the observant abbess Marina Barbaro.29 Through the process of reform, the patriarch, or the highest ranking bishop in Venice,

27 It is tempting to believe the façade to be the entrance to Le Vergini’s church. However the basilica, seen in Barbari’s View of Venice does not open onto the canal. The entrance to the basilica would have been on the west end, thus the frontispiece may illustrate a proposed façade as suggested by Dr. Lilian Armstrong.
28 Cronica, 57v.
29 See Chapter 4 for more details, specifically pg. 100-104.
wrestled complete control of the convent away from the elected secular leader of Venice, the Doge, which was not to be challenged until the end of the sixteenth century.\footnote{Further discussion on pg. 24-26.}

II. The Cronica’s Plot and Illustrations

In many ways the Cronica is a typical institutional chronicle, recording the convent’s foundation story, how it received its land, and an account of the holy leaders. However, there are details, most significantly the illustrations themselves, which set this chronicle apart from other similar documents. I begin here with a brief description of the Cronica’s plot and overview of the illustrations found embedded in the text. As the story unfolds in the following chapters, I will highlight the Cronica’s unique and strange eccentricities. Le Vergini’s chronicler did not include a separate title page for the Cronica, but printed the title of the manuscript “Cronica del Monastero Delle Vergini Di Venezia” at the top of the recto of the first folio, followed immediately by an elaborate initial marking the first sentence of the chronicle (Fig. 10). This initial is large, occupying fourteen lines of text and mimicking a human face. Filling one full and one partial folio, the brief opening passage begins with an introit stating the author’s intentions or motives for writing: “In order to satisfy all the readers and listeners (audienti) and out of necessity (de bisogno) [I write this so] that in this our book it is known how our most saintly Pope Alexander III came to Venice.”\footnote{Cronica, 1r. Translated in Lowe, Nuns’ Chronicles, 21.} Oddly, this introductory statement does not follow traditional models, but establishes the history of Pope Alexander III as the most important aspect of this work, and the reason for its creation.\footnote{Le Murate’s chronicle begins with the author discussing her conflicting emotions in deciding to write the convent’s history, citing her own ignorance and lack of ability signifying her own humility in the task. San Cosimato’s begins with a polite address to the readers and an elaborate simile about an elephant inspired to become}
identifies the audiences for this book, making certain they are the primary concern. What follows describes the aforementioned papal visit and an explanation of the sacred marriage ceremony between Le Vergini’s abbess and the doge. The following passage details the convent’s founding and subsequent ceremonial proceedings:

[The pope] said: O Ziano with my authority I will make the sea subject to you with this pawn [the golden ring with the incision of Saint Mark] … you and your successors shall marry the sea every year … as the wife to the husband, so the sea shall be subject to your dominion…. Then… the most holy pope together with the emperor and the Most Serene Prince Sebastiano Ziano laid the sacred stone in the church of Santa Maria delle Vergini in Jerusalem recently remade … After a few days he [the pope] dressed the most serene Julia, daughter of the emperor, as nun, and made her abbess and had the Most Serene Prince invest her with the possession [of the church and convent] and wished that the ring of Saint Mark’s likeness he married the abbess. Then… the Most Serene Prince… married her with Sapphire as is still observed today. Then the highest pontifex gave Prince Sebastiano Ziano the church of the Holy Mary of the Virgins and the abbess as brides. The pope said [when he gave him] the sapphire as a sign of the consecration of the marriage: O Ziano through my authority those two marriages of double faith are yours and those of your successors… perform this ceremony of taking possession with the ring of Saint Mark, in memory of the divine Evangelist Mark, who founded this blessed order and rule, [which was] confirmed by Saint Peter the Apostle.33

This short introduction is followed on folios 1v to 2v by a list of Popes (Alexander III through Adrian II) and doges (Sebastiano Ziano through Andrea Gritti) who abided by these ancient traditions. A short inscription on the recto of the third folio dedicates the following chronicle to the current doge, Andrea Gritti.34 The chronicle continues in the characteristic medieval and Humanistic historiographical tradition, constructing an illustrious genealogy over twelve folios, beginning on folio 4r with Adam and Eve, and continuing with that of the Virgin Mary, and

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33 Cronica, 1r-1v. Translated by Jutta Gisela Sperling, Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), note 6: 363. Also transcribed in Muir, Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice, 128.

34 Cronica, 3r,” In the year of our Lord 1523, on the 20th day of the month of May, Andrea Gritti was elected 77th Doge of Venice.”
certain Roman Emperor, concluding on folio 9v. Each name is enclosed in a perfect circle, connected by red, blue and green lines. Some family trees are more organic than others, as the connecting lines snake across the page in distinctly non-linear patterns (Fig. 11).

The chronicle’s foundation story commences with the colossal architectural frontispiece on folio 10r described above (Fig. 6). This image visually introduces the foundation of the temple house of the Virgin in Jerusalem by Solomon and the subsequent founding of the convent of the Virgin Mary in Jerusalem by the apostle Peter. Text scrolling across the top of the frontispiece reads: “The original monastery of Santa Maria delle Vergini di Venezia begins:~ Whoever should plunder it, such that he destroys its honor, will be excommunicated,” making clear from the beginning that this chronicle is composed as a warning to those who may seek to threaten the convent.\(^{35}\) Turning the page, the verso of folio 10 holds an illustration of Saint Peter sitting atop his throne accompanied by five additional male figures and a crowd of onlookers to the right precedes the text concerning the sanctity of St. Peter’s throne (Fig. 12). Choosing to begin with the throne of Saint Peter establishes a strong connection to Rome and the Pope.

The foundation of the order of canons and canonesses of Saint Mark the Evangelist is introduced on the recto of folio 11, accompanied by an image of St. Mark and two other saints consecrating a group of canons (Fig. 13). The next block of text on the verso of folio 11 recounts the story of St. Mark’s travels in Egypt and his rescue of Saint Ephygenia from the grasp of King Hyrtacus. The King wished to marry Ephygenia, though she was promised to Christ along with more than 200 virgins.\(^{36}\) As with the previous two stories, the tale of St. Mark

\(^{35}\) Cronica, 10r.

and St. Ephygenia is preceded by an illustration, this one most likely depicting St. Mark consecrating St. Ephygenia’s order of nuns (Fig. 14). As the first illustration and text block establishes a connection to the Papacy and the Holy Land, the next two images and stories establish a crucial line with the Canons of Saint Mark, the patron Saint of Venice.

Opposite the story of St. Mark and St. Ephygenia, the story of Pelagia, daughter of a king, and her bride-groom unfolds on folio 12r. Pelagia and her bridegroom were baptized by St. Thomas; the man, Diomixium, was made a bishop, and Pelagia a canoness of the Order of St. Mark. The image depicts St. Thomas blessing Pelagia along with four other women, while her royal parents look on (Fig. 15). Turning the page, Pope Clement occupies folio 12v, consecrating a number of virgins for the sacred veil of the canons of St. Mark, specifically the virgin Domicilla, niece of the Emperor Domitian as well as Theodora, the wife of Sisinus. In the image above the text for this narrative, Pope Clement, is depicted blessing one of the women (Domicilla or Theodora) along with six others, while two men converse in front of a doorway behind the women (Fig. 16). All of these women described and depicted above were descendent from royal lineage and were consecrated into the Order of St. Mark, the same characteristics that Le Vergini’s canonesses were attempting to reinforce throughout the Cronica.

Departing from the earlier pattern of male saints consecrating royal women into the order of St. Mark, the next section on the recto and verso of folio 13 describes the life of Abbess Aurea, a Parisian nun. These two pages are filled with text accompanied by a small portrait of

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37 See Baring-Gould, *The Lives of the Saints*, 11:169–177. The account in Baring-Gould’s volume does not match the account in the Cronica. Baring-Gould describes a courtesan who is converted in Antioch and moved to Jerusalem where she became a hermit. By the end of her life people knew her as Pelagius, but rejoiced after her death when they discovered she was a woman saying “Glory be to Thee, Lord Jesus Christ, who hast many hidden treasures on earth, not male only, but female also.” A similar account can be found in Jacobus, *The Golden Legend Readings on the Saints*, 617–619.
the nun at the beginning of the tale (Fig. 17). Though she appears to have no connection to the convent itself, it was not uncommon for convents to choose to reproduce the stories of specifics saints they regarded as role models.\textsuperscript{38} Aurea’s life also seems to have served as a platform to reinforce the qualities the reader should admire in nuns, specifically the women of Le Vergini.

The chronicler begins with a validation of Aurea’s heritage:

I hold that Aurea’s name was given to her most appropriately and surely we can say that she was born from golden stock… And although it is not agreed from which parent she was born, nevertheless the seeds of her origin were glorious, obviously, since her nature from childhood was prudent, and given her sharp and holy mind, she wished to always think and speak great things from birth.\textsuperscript{39}

The passage continues to emphasize Aurea’s desire to learn with her “sharp mind,” and refusal to embrace the vanities of the world. Aurea allowed “no leisure, no torpor, no laziness… In fact she always considered every interaction with others not only a good thing, but the best thing, such that even the hearts of the wicked were sometimes urged toward holy desire by the odor of her purity.” She was crowned the mother of the Parisian nuns and brought “the most perfect glory to her city, her lineage, and her faith.”\textsuperscript{40}

The \textit{Cronica} then switches to Italian, and relates the story of the foundation of Milan from the verso of folio 13 to the verso of folio 14, (Fig. 18-19) setting the stage for Emperor Fredrick Barbarossa’s military campaign at the end of the twelfth century. This military campaign is the impetus for the Peace of Venice in 1177, and the arrival of Pope Alexander III in Venice and into the narrative.\textsuperscript{41} A pair of images on folio 15r commences the account of the ‘Peace of Venice’ (Fig. 20-21). Textual explanations do not precede the images, leaving the

\textsuperscript{38} I would like to thank Dr. Anne Lester for this general piece of information.
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Cronica}, 13r.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Cronica}, 13v. Also see, Baring-Gould, \textit{The Lives of the Saints}, 11:66–68.
\textsuperscript{41} See Chapter 2, pgs. 44–48 for a full account of the Peace of Venice.
brief recount of the event on the first two folios to inform the reader of the narrative content. Short captions do accompany the illustrations at this point, but are limited, and have reverted back to Latin. The first image depicts the Doge of Venice kneeling before Pope Alexander III and receiving the Pope’s blessing, presumably at Santa Maria della Carità according to the written account of the events related later in the chronicle (Fig. 20). Directly below is an image of the doge accepting the surrender of Otto, the Emperor’s son (Fig. 20). The next illustration, filling nearly an entire page, depicts the Doge and Pope meeting as part of the peace process (Fig. 21).42

The chronicler continues the narrative, this time in written form, for another folio, and transitions into a description of the “rule of Saint Mary of the Virgins” and the transcript of a prayer.43 Liturgical and procedural texts fill the next two pages, interrupted by another full page illustration of the Emperor, Pope and Doge on the recto of folio 18 (Fig. 22). A short block of text prefaces the images on folio 17v and describes a meeting of the three men at the moment that the convent is established, and the land granted. Umbrellas are once again present as the men stand on steps that rise out of the water.44 A crowd of secular men with extravagant clothing grace the left side of the composition behind the Emperor while a crowd of monks occupy the right side, behind the Doge.45 Turning the page, the next image on folio 18v is also a full page

42 Jutta Sperling reproduces this image and titles it “The pope marries the doge to the Adriatic Sea,” though there is no ring or sea visible in the image. Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, 210. Kate Lowe reproduces the image under the title “Meeting of the pope, emperor and doge outside S. Marco in 1177 (‘the peace of Venice’) which is more accurate. Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 100.

43 According to Dr. Anne Lester, the prayer transcribed here could have been read aloud from the chronicle.

44 There is a strange rectangular white object in the lower left portion of the composition. The Pope may be pointing toward the object, but there is nothing in the text to indicate what it could be.

45 Gabrielle Zarri titles this work “Pope Alexander III confers dominion over the Adriatic sea to Doge Sebastiano Ziani.” This illustration is more like a marriage ceremony than the earlier meeting referred to as the marriage by Sperling, yet there remains no ring. Gabriella Zarri, “Venetian Convents and Civic Ritual,” in *Arcangela Tarabotti: A Literary Nun in Baroque Venice*, trans. Meredith Kennedy Ray, 2006, 53.
illustration titled, “Pope Alexander, Doge Sebastian Ziani, Most Serene Abbess Giulia, Daughter, in front of the Unconquered Emperor,” and marks the investiture of Abbess Giulia (Fig. 23). The three dignitaries, presumably the Emperor, Pope and Doge, rest in thrones at the center of the composition. In a white habit, Giulia kneels and receives a blessing from the Pope in the center, and a ring from the Doge on the right. A second woman in secular clothing is receiving a blessing from the Emperor on the left, while two other secular women stand further to the left. Several men observe the proceedings to the right of the composition.

After these final two narrative images, the chronicle launches into a detailed recalling of the early days of the convent with a listing of imperial privileges, land grants and ceremonies. The ‘Peace of Venice’ returns in the twenty-second folio, this time recorded in great detail, reinforcing the papal patronage and stating that “For the recreation, comfort, and visiting of the nuns the Pope granted their parents, neighbors, relatives, brothers, nephews, sisters, nieces, friends and well-wishers the right to spiritually enter the monastery, and the most serene prince, at least, with his most illustrious advisors would visit the church once a year, for the sake of the veneration and the observance of Saint Mary of the Virgins.”46 One of the nuns to follow Abbess Giulia was a woman named Sicambria, “from the royal family of King Priam of Troy” who brought the convent much pride.47 The death of the founding abbess Giulia is recorded in detail and accompanied by a speech and three different scenes from the burial ceremonies (Fig. 25-26). The text on folios 27v through 29r describes the three days of mourning and the funeral, as well as all of Giulia’s great deeds. A brief block of Italian text on folio 29r and two full page illustrations on facing folios, 29v and 30r, introduce the consecration of the newly elected

46 Cronica, 24r.
47 Cronica, 24v.
abbess, Maria Ziani and her symbolic marriage to the Doge Pietro Ziani (Fig. 27-28). This ceremony and the descriptive text that follows on folios 30v and 31r conclude the Latin history as recorded by Le Vergini’s chronicler.

The noble genealogy of the convent is documented by an account of each successive abbess at Le Vergini. Each abbess is documented with the date of her consecration, a transcription of the Latin oration delivered by a professed nun on the day of her consecration, and an illustration of the ceremony always depicting the Doge blessing the abbess (Fig. 29-47). Heraldic shields indicate the families of the Pope, Doge and abbess at the top of each folio containing the image. The chronicle concludes with the current events of 1519. Beneath the date “1519 die 26 mazo” is written:

Here commences a sad work entitled *luctus omnium monialium conventualium venetiarium*, began and invented by that cruel traitor Octaviam. He was born to a family of Britons on his father’s side, and his mother was of Jewish origin […] his father came to Ravenna and married a Jewess, who gave birth to this cursed and evil fruit, and, as far as one may conjecture, he was born of the seed of Judas the traitor […] First, with this shrewdness for making money he took up the art of witches and mages; whence he made an infinite amount of gold and produced every book and potion and also diabolical powders by his own hand […] Having finished with this infernal alchemy, this diabolical artificer managed with his talent and art to get the most Reverend Monsignor Patriarch to engage him as his vicar, and this evildoer was engaged in another kind of commerce and profit and simony and has stolen from God’s church and taken money from poor nuns, both conventual and observant.  

The chronicle continues in a passionate and, at times, venomous manner. The hand is more cramped and hurried, and there are no illustrations from this point on. Even the decorative initials from this point on are unfinished, possibly indicating a rushed endeavor.

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48 It could be productive to pursue the connections between the composition of the frontispiece and other Venetian images of the *Presentation of the Virgin*. The steps which hold such a prominent position in the frontispiece are a common trope in many Venetian *Presentation* images. I thank Dr. Lilian Armstrong for this insightful reference.  
49 The descriptive label is written in a different hand, with different ink beginning on folio 46r. It seems as if these labels were possibly added after the text was written.  
It must be acknowledged at this point that the *Cronica* is not an entirely unique composition. There may have been several versions of the Latin narrative of Pope Alexander III, at least one of which is held in the Biblioteca Correr.\(^{51}\) Additionally, a seventeenth century copy of the chronicle resides near the original in the Biblioteca Correr.\(^{52}\) The copy’s dimensions are slightly smaller than the original, measuring approximately 22 x 33 cm. The placement of the illustrations and the text are copied verbatim, yet the quality of the illustrations does not demonstrate the same skill as the original, and several are severely cropped. Though the artist corrects the original perspectival irregularities, the illustrations depicting the apostolic scenes and the Peace of Venice are extremely rushed, lacking detail and accuracy. However, the copyist exhibits considerably more skill and patience on the individual illustrations of the marriage ceremonies between the Abbesses and the Doges as well as their heraldic shields. The very presence of this seventeenth-century copy could imply that there was a need for a copy, whether due to the fame of the convent, a significant audience for the *Cronica*, or possibly a threat to the original.\(^{53}\) This notion will be expanded upon in the following chapters.

### III. Underappreciated and Misunderstood: Embracing the *Cronica*

Since the *Cronica’s* completion, the manuscript and the seventeenth century copy have received little recorded attention, rarely referenced or mentioned in historical documents.

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\(^{51}\) Venice, BMC, MS Cicogna 1825, pre-1r-36v. Described in the *schede* of the library as ‘cronaca latina del S. M. Vergini’ but a note inside the chronicle reads ‘Historia di Alessandro III.’ K. Lowe claims that the illustrations (some unfinished) are by the same illustrator as the main chronicle, and also states the “the precise relationship between these two version has not yet been systematically explored.” Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 80. I was unfortunately unable to see this manuscript while at the Biblioteca del Museo Correr.

\(^{52}\) Venice, BMC, MS Gradenigo 214 (formerly MS Gradenigo 61). Under the façade illustration on folio 13r are the words, ‘Padre Giuseppe Bald. Fecit.’ I have been unable to track down this individual, but could possibly be the man who commissioned the work, or to whom it was dedicated.

\(^{53}\) These are only a few of the possibilities forcommissioning a copy of a manuscript, and the exact reason for the existence of the *Cronica’s* copy is not known.
Historians from the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries unanimously report the foundation of Santa Maria delle Vergni to have occurred in 1222-24 under Doge Pietro Zianni. It is not until 1604 that Giovanni Stringa, a canon of the ducal chapel of Saint Mark first references the “false” claims of Le Vergini’s foundation in 1177. In his updated version of Sansovino’s *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare*, Stringa cites as proof of the foundation story of 1777 an inscription located above a portal inside the convent’s church. However, historian Jutta Sperling postulates that Stringa’s close association with the ducal chapel of St. Mark may have “made him neglect sterile historical accuracy in favor of meaningful deception.” The first noted reference to the *Cronica* occurs in a 1574 Florentine publication, *Breve trattato delle citta nobili del mondo*, in which passages of the foundation story of Milan and Venice recorded in the chronicle are copied almost verbatim. This publication however does not make any direct reference to the foundation story of the convent itself.

The most significant acknowledgement of the *Cronica* occurs during a jurisdictional dispute between the doge of Venice and the pope in the early seventeenth century. The conflict began with the election of Doge Marino Grimani in 1595. Grimani was passionate and aggressive about reclaiming his rightful republican privileges from the encroaching ecclesiastical authorities. In 1592 Patriarch Priuli began to actively attempt to wrestle the ducal chapel of St. Mark away from the control of the doge. Le Vergini, under the control of the patriarch since the reform of 1519, became entangled as the twin institution to St. Mark’s chapel. Upon the death of

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54 See note 2, in Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, 362.
56 Ibid.
57 Giovanni Botero, *Breve trattato delle citta nobili del mondo, et di tutta Italia, con la lunghezza, & larghezza di essa, confini, sito, & provincie, & il principio del Regno de’Longobardi* (Florence, 1574) no pagination. In Ibid.
Abbess Maria Benetti in 1598, Doge Grimani decided to reclaim his jurisdiction over the convent. The presence of patriarchal legates at the previous election of the new abbess, which were required by the Council of Trent, called the ancient privileges of the Doge at Le Vergini into question, thus Grimani plotted to eliminate the curia from the next abbess’s election, restoring the rightful balance of power and the ritual “marriage” of the doge to the convent’s abbess. Priuli did not renounce authority over St. Mark’s chapel and Santa Maria delle Vergini until 1599. After this jurisdictional dispute was settled, Ambassador Mocenigo wrote to Pope Clement VIII to negotiate for a bishop from the terraferma to substitute for Priuli as the nuns’ “in spiritualibus.” It is at this moment that the foundation legend of Le Vergini enters the “discourse of high diplomacy.” Mocenigo explains that the convent:

Represents a most esteemed deed by the republic: its victory over Fredrick Barbarossa, and having Pope Alexander III, who held in Ancona, reinstated in his pontifical see, who – after the daughter of the Emperor asked him to found a convent in Venice, and after our government donated this island [of Castello] for the purpose of constructing it – contented himself with founding it, and he consecrated the said daughter of the Emperor as its abbess, with the patronage belonging to our Most Serene Prince.

By restating this story, the Venetian government reminded the Pope that at one time the papacy was indebted to Venice, signifying the republic’s independence and state sovereignty.

In 1613, the Senate decreed that each year a governmental delegation must visit Santa Maria delle Vergini to receive the indulgence of Santa Maria della Porziuncula, ceremonially breaking the nun’s clausura. On the state visit of 1613, the nuns published an open letter to Doge Marc’Antonio Memmo in which they thanked the doge for the honor, and proclaimed their loyalty to the government. The nuns explained that though their chronicle served as “evident

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58 Ibid., 231.
59 Senate of Venice to Ambassador Mocenigo, 20 February 1598 (m.v.), Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Cancelleria Inferiore, Archivio del Doge, busta 203, reg. “Iuspatronato,” 55r, transcribed and translated in Ibid.
proof” of their ancient privileges as “the Doge’s predilected and first born daughters,” they were unable to read the Latin chronicle. The veracity of this statement could easily be questioned, as the Doge and the institution needed a reason to explain the lapse in ancient civic ritual. Questioning the women’s literacy could serve a dual purpose, for it could both explain the lapse in civic ritual, and subtly reinforced the women’s forced submission, presuming the letter was censored before publication. Regardless, this is the first concrete documentation that the nuns of Le Vergini were in possession of a Latin chronicle.

Venetian historians in the eighteenth and nineteenth century were familiar with the Cronica, for the manuscript is referenced as a source in several historical works from the period including that of Emmanuele Cicogna and Flaminio Cornaro. These male historians, however, afforded the Cronica little credence as a piece of historical writing, considering the foundation to be a purposeful falsification of the facts, or as Cornaro phrases it a “false tradition”. For this reason of supposed deception and insignificance, the Cronica, as well as many other chronicles from female religious institutions have remained in relative historical obscurity. The pervasive assumption that women were the weaker, more fragile sex, and not to be trusted, kept the female chronicles confined to the convent libraries. Chronicles authored by nuns did see circulation, but only after ‘stolen’ by a man, exemplified by the plagiarized copy of Le Murate’s chronicle.

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60 Lettura delle RR. Monache di S. Maria delle Vergini, referenced in Ibid., 232.
61 However, there is nothing to indicate that the chronicle referred to in the letter is the Cronica, but could be the earlier Latin History of Alexander III. These events that occurred at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century are important aspects in the life of Le Vergini and the Cronica, but are outside of the scope of this study, as I am most interested in the moment of creation, and will not be addressed in any further detail.
63 Cornaro, Notizie storiche delle chiese e monasteri di Venezia, e di Torcello, 98.
convent’s physician, Lorenzo Parigi, took the chronicle and published the work without mentioning the true author in an effort to gain favor with a patron, Alessandro Orsini.⁶⁴

The marginalization of female history writing and creative production was reinforced by the belief that women did not hold the qualifications to be historical writers. Before elaborating on this point, it is important to be reminded of Carolyn Walker Bynum’s perceptive statement that, “the stories men liked to tell about women reflected not so much what women did as what men admired or abhorred… It is crucial not to take as women’s own self-image the sentimentalizing or the castigation of the female in which medieval men indulged.”⁶⁵ Though it may have been said that women were incapable of composing histories, men did not admire this quality in women, and thus voiced the belief as a rule rather than a reality.⁶⁶ Natalie Zemon Davis reassesses the “reality” of female historical writing, stating that a female historian needed access to materials (printed, oral or written) about her subject, a familiarity with accepted works from the historical genre, as well as “a sense of connection, through some activity or deep concern of her own, with the areas of public life then considered suitable for historical writing- namely the political and religious.”⁶⁷ Access to historical materials was not difficult for nun chroniclers, as the convent libraries were rich with documentation. To the second point, it is generally believed that nuns did not have access to “accepted genres of historical writing,” but there is little explicit evidence to support this. However, I believe Le Vergini’s chronicle itself to be the evidence of

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⁶⁴ This scenario is mentioned in Lowe, Nuns’ Chronicles, 53.
⁶⁶ A similar statement could be made with regards to the visual arts and images: the images men liked to depict of women reflected not so much what women did as what men admired or abhorred. This can be paired with the idea that only men can write history, and thus shape ideas about women: see Moderata Fonte, The Worth of Women: Wherein Is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 76–77.
female exposure, familiarity, and presumed access to previous chronicles. Le Vergini’s chronicle in particular indicates a connection with visual narrative traditions, indicating that the women were exposed to Venetian historical methodology and capable of utilizing this knowledge, both visual and textual.

The last qualification for female historical writers, according to Zemon Davis, concerns the author’s connection to the public and current political events. It is easy to immediately disregard nuns as potential historians, for the women were cloistered, confined to a small area of land and denied access to the larger community and political activity. This quick dismissal of nuns’ intentions and interest in public life is being reconsidered by innumerable contemporary scholars. Translated and published for the English reader by Daniel Bornstein, Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni’s chronicle and necrology of Corpus Domini in Venice (1395-1436) serves as an example to oppose this assumption of complete seclusion. Bornstein asserts that “far from being closed in upon themselves and interested exclusively in their own spiritual lives, the sisters of Corpus Domini were deeply engaged in the world beyond their walls.”

Riccoboni narrates and assumes a strong stance on the schism in the Catholic Church that created the election of three Popes simultaneously.

Novelist Italo Calvino, writing in the mid-twentieth century, highlights this paradox. The narrator of his novella, Suor Teodora, claims that she must imagine what she does not know of the history of knight Raimbaut asking rhetorically: “Apart from religious ceremonies, triduums, novenas, gardening, harvesting, vintaging, whippings, slavery, incest, fires, hangings, invasion,

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68 Lowe asserts in her interpretation of female chroniclers that it does not matter because that is not what they were trying to do, Lowe, Nuns’ Chronicles, 54.
70 Ibid., 3.
sacking, rape and pestilence, we have had no experience. What can a poor nun know of the world?” 71 Female religious chroniclers also suffered from the stereotype that nuns were only capable of producing religious writing, largely mystical in nature. Numerous examples of female religious writings exist, but do not constitute the only form of female written expression. Mystical writings of women were, in part, promoted by the male authorities as politically convenient, an example of Bynum’s comment quoted above. All of these erroneous beliefs in the ignorance and passivity of women have contributed to the lack of interest in Le Vergini’s chronicle, and its presumed lack of importance.

A piece of archival evidence has surfaced that may indicate why the Cronica was never in the public eye. Unlike other works by literate Venetian women, the Cronica has rarely breeched the surface of historical notoriety at any level. An undated note of reminder (memoria) in the state archives of Le Vergini reveals that shortly after the Cronica’s completion it was placed into the hands of a certain M. Piero Nadal:

Madona Suor Franceschina Zustignan, conventual canoness in the convent of Le Vergini, gave a book to M. Piero Nadal in which was written the beginning and origin of all the affairs of the said convent up to the present. It was illustrated and written on parchment. M. Fra Marchantonio de San Zanepolo is confessor of the said canonesses, and knows everything about the said book, and el vesco Maser knows of and knows personally the said M. Piero Nadal; I believe that he will be able to give good information. 72

The Cronica’s exodus from the convent could actually reveal more about the political and social drama enveloping the convent than any explicit reference in the text of the Cronica. Composed

71 Italo Calvino and Archibald Colquhoun, The Non-Existent Knight (New York, 1962), 34.
72 ASVe, ACRS, SMDV, 38, loose papers, in Lowe, Nuns’ Chronicles, 81–82. Franceschina Zustignan, or Franceschina Giustiniani entered the convent between 1461 and 1483, but was never abbess. There were two women by this name at Le Vergini and one is recorded to have died on October 21, 1529. Both were present at an election in 1505, but only one was recorded in 1513, so it can be assumed that the other the Franceschina died before 1513, Lowe, Nun’s Chronicles, 85. See pg. 34-36 for a more in-depth discussion of the individuals mentioned in the note.
at a difficult time in Venetian history, when Conventual convents were being reformed and Venice was suffering severe political and economic setbacks, this manuscript was not meant as an innocent addition to history. It had a mission to persuade the Venetian government that the convent had a crucial role to play in Venetian society, and any change in this role would threaten Venice itself. The Cronica’s message was not a plea for mercy, but a strong assertion of power. If the government in turn viewed the Cronica as a threat to their power, it is not implausible that the government would have sought to see the manuscript destroyed. It is not unusual for manuscripts to go ‘missing’ or to lie ‘undiscovered’ for centuries. Many manuscripts, like the Cronica, maintained low profiles, in most cases, not because of their content, but simply because they remained ‘hidden’ in libraries around the world. In this study I suggest that Le Vergini’s chronicle was not a typical ‘lost’ manuscript or chronicle, but could have posed a threat, and purposefully not been circulated.

Fearing the destruction of the manuscript, the canonesses could have sent it away for safekeeping, knowing that they would soon have little control over their own possessions due to proposed reforms, a subject which will be addressed in greater detail in the last two chapters.73 This hypothetical situation would seem to indicate that the manuscript posed a significant threat to the individual or organization that would soon have control of the convent. What was this threat? And why did someone view a written and pictorial document as a threat? Fearing for the life of the Cronica and the information it held could also have inspired the complete copy of the manuscript. An alternate understanding could view the manuscript’s low profile as lack of critical interest in the subject, thus prompting its removal from the convent. However, this does not explain the seventeenth-century copy of the manuscript, the emotion invested in the last ten

73 See pg. 103 below for Sanudo’s mention of the nun’s fleeing the convents.
folios of text, nor the significant amount of effort and money that must have been invested in the detailed and visually rich manuscript. In addition, the memoria implies that someone was inquiring about the location of the Cronica, and presumably aware of manuscript’s value.

Considering the Cronica’s disappearance and subsequent dismissal from history from a theoretical perspective lends yet another hypothesis. If the manuscript was a unique, idiosyncratic document, it is possible that the people of Venice were uncertain of how to approach it, and thus simply ignored it. As will be elaborated upon below, the Cronica did not fit easily in a feminine ‘space’ because of its historical nature, nor did it entirely conform to the genre of history writing or the chronicle genre. If there is no comfortable categorical home for the Cronica, a new interpretive ‘space’ must be carved out amongst other Venetian literary and visual categories. Without the creation of this interpretive ‘space’ the Cronica floated, uncategorized and unrecognized for centuries.

In addition to the long list of explanations for the Cronica’s absence in art historical studies enumerated above, the illuminated manuscript as an academic category of study, suffers a similar prejudice. Illuminated manuscripts populate medieval art historical scholarship, yet Renaissance illuminated manuscripts receive little attention in comparison. With the invention of the printing press in 1450, and its arrival in Venice at the end of the fifteenth century, written manuscripts began their slow fall from favor. As with most monumental technological innovations, change did not occur immediately, but evolved slowly over time, a phenomenon not easily studied due to the persistent periodization that dominates the discipline. Contrary to

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74 This is not to say that Renaissance manuscripts have not received a significant amount of attention. The last two decades have yielded an increased number of art historical studies. See the following note for examples.

75 Some excellent studies of Renaissance manuscripts include: J. J. G. Alexander, ed., The Painted Page: Italian Renaissance Book Illumination, 1450-1550 (Munich ; New York, N.Y: Prestel, 1994); Giordana Mariani Canova,
early assumptions, manuscript production continued into the sixteenth century, as an indication of learning and status, while the printing industry catered to the larger public, its production process allowing for cheaper prices.\textsuperscript{76} This presupposition, largely questioned in recent decades, that the more efficient production of printed books immediately announced the death sentence of illustrious illuminated manuscripts has also contributed to the \textit{Cronica's} forced seclusion in the shadows of academia. Though recent scholarship has yielded many productive studies of Renaissance illuminated manuscripts, there are many more Renaissance manuscripts that remain unpublished and unstudied in the archives.

IV. A Historiography: Grounding the \textit{Cronica}

As mentioned above, nineteenth-century Venetian historians noted the existence of the \textit{Cronica} and the manuscript’s narrative content, while simultaneously dispelling its critical importance to the historical period. With the recent rise in scholarly interest in the lives of religious women, several historians have highlighted Le Vergini’s illustrated chronicle as a unique example of the civic role religious women held in history, specifically that of early modern Venice.\textsuperscript{77} The most in-depth studies have examined the \textit{Cronica} as a piece of evidence to support broader arguments including: the rich tradition of women’s history writing and chronicle production in religious institutions, the symbolic and economic value of Venetian

\textsuperscript{76} Brian Richardson, \textit{Manuscript Culture in Renaissance Italy} (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
convents, and the symbolic role Venetian convents played in the construction of Venetian civic identity.\textsuperscript{78} Each author utilizes and explores the Cronica to differing ends and extents, usually finding several illustrations worthy of reproduction.\textsuperscript{79} Though all of the studies mention the fascinating illustrations, I have been unsuccessful in identifying an art historian who has critically analyzed the Cronica’s miniatures, leaving much foundational research and analysis to be conducted.

The most thorough account of Le Vergini’s chronicle is undertaken by historian Kate Lowe in \textit{Nuns’ Chronicles and Convent Culture}. Conducting a comparative analysis of three chronicles written by nuns in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, including the chronicle of Le Vergini, along with the chronicles of the Florentine Benedictine convent Santa Maria Annunziata, and the Roman Clarissan convent Santi Cosma e Damiano, Lowe examines each of these chronicles in relation to their respective communities. For Lowe, the chronicles and their female authors are evidence of female agency in female religious communities. Many of Lowe’s studies, like \textit{Nuns’ Chronicles}, attempt to reverse the common assumption that religious women were puppets manipulated by the male patriarchy.\textsuperscript{80}


\textsuperscript{79} All have been black and white illustrations, and no larger than 4.5 x 6.5 inches.

Of the three chronicles studied by Lowe, Le Vergini’s is the only anonymous composition. Identifying a female author is crucial to Lowe’s argument and evidence of female agency. Consequently she devotes much of her research and writing to isolating a single author. She claims that the methodology of the manuscript is too personal to be accepted as two different people, though she does note that multiple scribes were involved in the production process.\(^{81}\) The only archival clue Lowe is able to point to in support of her assertion is a short note or reminder, or *memoria*, found in the state archives.\(^{82}\) The note states that “Madona Suor Franceschina Zustigana, Conventual canoness in the convent of Le Vergini, gave a book to M. Pieor Nadal…”\(^{83}\) Further description indicates that the book is one of the versions of the chronicle, leading to the question: is Franceschina Giustiniani the author of the chronicle? A notarial document for 1498 identifies Franceschina Giustiniani as bursar, a position which may have held the responsibility for chronicle writing.\(^{84}\) Complicating the situation is the fact that there were simultaneously two canonesses at Le Vergini with the name Franceschina Giustiniani at the time that the chronicle was written. Both entered between 1461 and 1483 and were present at the chapter meeting on October 2, 1483.\(^{85}\) One of the two was also named in trial records from October 17, 1486 and November 1503.\(^{86}\) It is difficult to track either woman to her paternal family without detailed tax records, detailed entrance records, wills or sheer luck. What can be known is that Franceschina Giustiniani and the Giustiniani family would have had ample

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\(^{81}\) Folios 20r-25r are definitely in a different hand, but she destabilizes her argument when she mentions that this tactic of proving authorship also simplifies the question. Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 80.

\(^{82}\) The note is reproduced on pg. 29.

\(^{83}\) Transcribed and translated by, Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 81–82.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 81.

\(^{85}\) *Cronica*, 47v-38r

motivation to attempt to “save” the convent from reform with the production of the *Cronica*.\(^ {87}\)
The Giustiniani family had many close ties to Le Vergini and may have felt that their destiny as a family was tied to the destiny of the convent. Lowe records multiple women from the Giustiniani family entering the convent, and though none were ever elected abbess, there were several Giustiniani prioresses.\(^ {88}\) Male members of the Giustiniani family also frequently served as the convent’s procurator.\(^ {89}\) Considered as a whole, this evidence does suggest that the Giustiniani family was involved in the production of the chronicle. However, all of the evidence is circumstantial, and no evidence has been uncovered to suggest that Franceschina Giustiniani did more than hand the chronicle to another person.

In addition to her investigation into the identity of the *Cronica’s* potential author, Lowe also asserts that the illustrations are “almost definitely by another canoness” possibly the scribe or the author herself. In support of this claim she notices that some of the legends are in the same script or hand as the text.\(^ {90}\) However, there is no indication of a scribal or artistic school or training tradition within Le Vergini’s walls which would have been necessary to train the miniaturist of this manuscript. Though artistic training at Le Vergini is not likely, the convent was known for the canoness’s musical abilities and Latin orations. Several orations are recorded in the chronicle itself, and many diarists and foreign dignitaries record the delights of the voices at Le Vergini.\(^ {91}\) Regardless of contradictory evidence, locating one potential female agent allows

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87 Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 85.
88 *Cronica*, 41r and 44v.
89 Girolamo di Marino Giustiniani was procurator in the first half of the sixteenth century, and others in the late fourteenth. *Cronica*, 41r.
90 Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 15, 94.
91 Marin Sanudo notes that Queen Anna of Hungary visited Venice in 1502 and “went to vespers at Celestia then to the Vergini to hear the nuns sing.” Marino Sanudo, *Venice, Città Excelentissima: Selections from the Renaissance Diaries of Marin Sanudo*, ed. Patricia H. Labalme and Laura Sanguineti White, trans. Linda L. Carroll (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 72. Also see Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 146–47.
Lowe to strongly proclaim female agency within female religious institutions. Unearthing evidence or focusing too intently on a strong male presence in the production of the manuscript would antagonize Lowe’s overarching theme.

In conducting her search for an individual artist or author, Lowe discusses the involvement of nuns’ familial relations, but does not highlight the role of the canonesses’ families in the production of the chronicle. By refusing a collective agency in preference to individual authorship, the values, motivations, and agency of the Venetian patrician class are overlooked. Though Le Vergini’s canonesses could not inherit their family patrimony and would never further their family lineage, the families’ honor was strongly tied to their daughters and the institution in which the women devoted their lives. Understood as a reciprocal relationship, the female religious institutions depended upon the families’ financial contributions, while the honor and prestige of the convents was a reflection upon the families themselves. Consequently, the canonesses of Le Vergini were not the only historical actors concerned with the preservation of the convent in chronicle form, and must be considered as potential contributors, whether ideologically or financially. The following chapters will not actively pursue the identity of the individual artist for the reasons discussed above, but will consider the motivations of all participants involved in the chronicle’s creation and construction.

Lowe also writes from the vantage point that the religious reform of female houses at the beginning of the fifteenth century was perceived by nuns’ as a consciously misogynistic act, establishing a male-female dichotomy, or a gender binary. In this context the chronicle becomes a representation of the Venetian nuns exerting their agency and speaking out against male oppression. In surveying a brief history of various motivations behind monastic reforms,

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92 Lowe, Nuns’ Chronicles, 193.
Lowe notes a pattern in which female houses were often reformed after a series of reported sex scandals while male houses only incurred reform when there was a significant decline in the house’s population.\textsuperscript{93} This observation does support Lowe’s assertion that the reform imposed upon Le Vergini was indeed a misogynistic act. However, according to Lowe, it was not the behavior, or sexual adventures of the canonesses that induced the patriarch’s desire for reform, but instead the balance of political allegiances. When secular and ecclesiastical powers joined forces there was no comparable institution to represent or protect the interests of Le Vergini, thus reform became inevitable. Remarkably, the \textit{Cronica’s} author does not blame the city, the patriarch or the government as a whole, but chooses to blame a “half-Jewish” scapegoat, Ottaviano Brittonio. This could indicate that the women were not in direct opposition to the entirety of Venetian society, but only one actor in a political drama, intricately intertwined with many different layers. When the canonesses’ fathers, uncles and brothers are considered as agents within the convent walls, it is difficult to view the \textit{Cronica} as a simple female reaction against a male patriarchy. If Le Vergini is considered as only one part of a larger social and political climate, answers become fuzzy and motivations less clear. In pursuing these vague answers, I will not frame the reform incurred by the inmates of Le Vergini as a consciously misogynistic act, but as part of a larger sociopolitical conflict that enveloped the entire city. I will remain conscious of gendered motivations, and constructed identities, but not as an essentialized contrast between ‘male’ and ‘female’ actions.

Jutta Sperling in \textit{Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice} approaches the inmates of Le Vergini and their chronicle from the perspective of Venetian state sovereignty. Emphasizing Le Vergini’s unique position as the only female convent under direct ducal

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
jurisdiction or *giuspatronato*, Sperling mentions the chronicle when it arises as a form of
evidence in support of Venetian ecclesiastical independence from Rome. The involvement of
Le Vergini in the jurisdictional conflict at the beginning of the seventeenth century illustrates the
important role female convents played in the social fabric and political negotiations of Venice.
Sperling describes the convents or nunneries as “battlegrounds of the aristocracy’s self-
destructive ‘war of conspicuous consumption’.” 94 According to Sperling, Venice’s elite chose to
“gift” their daughters to the city’s convents as a form of a reciprocal gift-giving ceremony, or
potlatch. In exchange for their daughters, families received the honor and prestige so vigorously
sought and displayed during this period of ‘conspicuous consumption.’ Sperling does agree
with Lowe that the chronicle was composed as a vindication of the convent’s prestige and an
assertion of the convent’s political significance in the aftermath of the 1519 reforms, but
emphasizes how politically convenient and influential the convent became later in the century.
These events that occurred at the end of the century affirm her argument that the status and
symbolic value of Venetian convents was a crucial aspect of the elite Venetian identity.

Gabrielle Zarri utilizes Le Vergini’s *Cronica* as an example of Venetian convents’
connection to the city’s civic rituals, and how this connection is characteristically “peculiar to the
city of Venice.” 95 Drawing a comparison to Arcangela Tarabotti, Zarri characterizes the
*Cronica* as an expression of deep rebellion and protest, a unique characteristic of Venetian
female religious writing. 96 Zarri argues that “the manuscript can be considered the product of a
cultured and refined monastic environment, to which the humanistic culture of Venice- mediated

by teachers and relatives of the nuns, all of whom came from noble families, had contributed.”

I am interested in Zarri’s interpretive framework positioning Le Vergini and the *Cronica* as a representation of the ritual web in which Venetian convents were a crucial link, yet I am also interested in understanding how the *Cronica* establishes these connections visually.

Though both Sperling and Zarri have utilized the *Cronica* as a form of evidence to support their larger argument concerning the civic identity of Venice, I will be approaching the *Cronica* as an object of study, not as a piece of evidence. The *Cronica* serves historians’ arguments as a remarkable piece of archival evidence to prove their broader theses concerning the city of Venice, but I wish to study this document as a living organism itself. Similarly to Lowe, I view the chronicle as a historical object which has a unique story to tell, and not a passive object illustrating a larger historical trend. In looking at the *Cronica* as the focus of my study as opposed to an argument for my study, I can give the *Cronica* an individual voice.

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2. Historical Narrativity: ‘History’, the Cronica and ‘Eyewitness Painting’

In the words of Dana Leibsohn, “history does not already exist elsewhere, in an ‘ancient time’ awaiting recollection, rather history comes into being in no small part through the tropes and contraptions that record it.”\(^98\) Though, as a trope or contraption, the Cronica’s story did not come to constitute a mainstream history, it remains a trope that intended to build a future and craft an accepted history. Its visual and rhetorical techniques are an indication of how historical memory was perceived in sixteenth century Venice, and the qualities and characteristics that constituted such a history. Leibsohn makes her claim with reference to a colonial Mexican manuscript known as the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, created in sixteenth-century colonial Mexico.\(^99\) Her study may seem unconnected to my own, for she is concerned with notions such as the construction of a Precolonial past, and the creation of a history where one did not exist by the modern definition. These profound differences of geographic and analytic aim disguise the connection between the Historia and the Cronica and the value in sharing analytic methods across cultures. Examining what may be considered a more traditional history, such as the Cronica, in the context of an alternative “history,” such as the Historia, allows unnoticed elements present in the former to rise to the surface.

One of the most profound assertions that Leibsohn makes concerning the Historia is that history can neither be contained by the book, nor produced apart from it, but exists in the field in between. People and their histories reside and fashion each other. This prompts the question in


\(^99\) The modern name for the manuscript is *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, and was commissioned by a man named don Alonso de Castañeda in the mid-sixteenth century as a testament to his noble ancestry. The manuscript is written in Nahuatl script and “filled with maps and glyphs, songs and prayers, landscape scenes and ancestral portraits,” narrating a Pre-Hispanic past. Ibid., xii.
relation to the *Cronica*, where is this ephemeral space? Where is the space that allows for people and history to interact and simultaneously create one another, and what does this space say?

The people of the *Cronica* are not contained by or entirely separated from the physical book. The ‘history’ exists somewhere in between. Negotiating this field informed by Leibsohn’s work on the *Historia* will propel my study. In the following chapter, I will review the value of myths or constructed narratives in the Venetian society as well as the narrative of the ‘Peace of Venice’ in relation to the scenes depicted in the *Cronica*. I will also explain specifically how the *Cronica* aligns with Venetian painting practices at the time, and conclude with a discussion of why the convent would choose to employ these visual strategies, and how these methods formed a ‘history’. The meanings I glean from the textual and visual assertions put forth by the *Cronica* are neither stated explicitly by the book itself, nor are they built from a separate, isolated source. The ‘history’ I relate exists in an interpretive field in between, difficult to define with certainty, but important to consider nonetheless.

**I. Venice and her Myths**

Unlike most Italian cities, Venice was not built upon ancient Roman foundations, leaving her a ‘self-made’ city, reliant upon other means of authentication. In their desperation, Venetians were even known to transport Roman stones from the mainland to the lagoon islands, lending Roman authority to the nascent community.\(^{100}\) If stones were unavailable or unrealistic, alternate forms of authentication were required, inspiring the tradition of civic myths. I use the

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term “myth” as “the fictions or half-truths forming part of the ideology of a society.”

Thus, Venice’s civic myths were not necessarily fictitious, but grounded in some form of reality. Regardless of their historical ‘truth’ or ‘reality,’ they defined a Venetian identity and this is where the ‘truth’ resided. Venice’s need for a legitimate ‘history’ not only inspired civic mythologies, but also the traditions of recording them in historical writings and narrative paintings. Venetian ‘history’ was an active organism, adapting to social and political change and continually strengthening the city’s foundations, allowing new narratives to ebb and flow as the times required.

Approaching Venice, the city appears to float upon the sea, defying nature. This unlikely urban existence, on a collection of small lagoon islands spurred many of Venice’s myths. Emerging from the water in the aftermath of the Roman Empire’s collapse, Venice saw herself as the origin or birthplace of the new liberated Christian era. As a city beloved by God, Venice was a new Jerusalem, and actively promoted her spiritual status as a site of pilgrimage and evidence of divinity on earth. March 25th was long believed to be Venice’s birthday, a day that also commemorated the Archangel Gabriel’s announcement to the Virgin Mary of the conception of the Savior who would redeem mankind. The feast of the Annunciation was celebrated concurrently with the birth of the miraculous city, which, by civic association, would save mankind as well. Gasparo Contarini explains that the city appears to be “framed rather by the hands of immortal gods, than in any way by the art, industry or invention of men.”

Not only was Venice understood spiritually as miracle on earth, but also a manifestation of the ideal form of government and political perfection. Petrarch in the fourteenth century hails the city as the

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“home of liberty, peace and justice.”

Nearly one hundred years later the myth is still alive, as Sabellicus states that the deeply pious noble men who founded the city of Venice:

Established a state whose justice was impartial to all and whose constitution was most sacred, since they wished to guarantee forever the freedom in which the city was born. All future generations from the very founding of the city onwards were so zealous in pursuing this pure aim, that it is clear to one and all that the Venetian Empire, which today spreads far and wide over land and sea, has grown more through these virtues through zeal in warfare; and for this reason it is right to judge that, if anything can escape mortal death, Venice shall never perish.

Three different governmental structures were a part of Venice’s political organization: serving for life the Doge’s office encompassed a form of monarchy, the Council of Ten, a form of oligarchy and the Great Council which elected members of the Senate, a form of democracy.

This idyllic mythical city did not arise by chance, but was actively maintained by the city itself and by the many foreigners who visited.

David Rosand writes about Venice’s ability to self-fashion a civic identity, but on a “monumental scale.”

The Venetia figurate displays a confident and calm self-portrait of statehood, incorporating several separate elements: the Virgin Mary, the cardinal virtue of Justice and the Roman goddess of love, Venus. These varying civic personifications depend upon different abstract concepts of state and ultimately come to represent the myth itself “as an artistic incarnation of a political ideal.” Justice, the Virgin and Venus eventually did not just stand for Venice, but fused with the fabric of the city. As Venice and her civic imagery become one, so the imagery of the Cronica cannot be separated from the identity of the canonesses.

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103 Francesco Petrach, Epistolae seniles, IV, 3. In Rosand, Myths of Venice, 7.
105 Only sons over the age of 25 from a small pool of aristocratic families were allowed to participate in the Great Council.
106 Rosand, Myths of Venice, 1.
One of the most oft repeated myths in the Venetian repertoire is the mythic coming of age story known as the ‘Peace of Venice,’ or the ‘Story of Alexander III.’ This landmark moment in 1177 signified the moment when Venice and her Doge could claim equality to the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. This particular narrative is the vehicle through which Le Vergini chose to make her dramatic entrance into the complex mythical environment of Venice. Introduced on the first folio of the *Cronica*, and illustrated beginning on the recto of the fifteenth folio, the full series of events retold by the *Cronica* begins midway down the recto of the twenty-first folio:

And so that every single devout Catholic and faithful servant of Christ may more clearly understand the foundation and origin of this devout monastery, and of the Abbess herself, and of the canonesses: in the time of his favorable donation, the highest priest Pope Alexander III was persecuted by the unconquerable emperor Frederick Barbarossa, and in the year 1177 most holy Alexander himself came into Venice in the trappings and garb of his own cook…

The *Cronica* is not the first or only manuscript to recount this defining story. Bonicaontra da Bovi, notary to the ducal chapel, composed the first comprehensive written account of the legend in 1320, bringing together various earlier fragments. The following one hundred and fifty years brought many renditions of the familiar theme, all containing their own unique additions, subtractions and alterations. Most accounts agree that Emperor Fredrick Barbarossa led an attack on the towns of Lombardy and Tuscany, and declared allegiance to the antipope. Pope Alexander III is then said to have fled to Venice in disguise, hiding in the convent of Santa Maria della Carità. Pilgrims recognized the Pope and reported his presence to the Doge Sebastiano Ziani, who, in turn, offered the Pope protection and mediation. As a gesture of thanks, the Pope offered the Doge the right to carry a white candle in processions on major feast days. This

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107 *Cronica*, 22r.


privilege was the first of many gifts or *trionfi* bestowed upon the Venetian Republic during this time period. Subsequent generations of Venetians viewed the *trionfi* as “triumphal insignia that would be used in ducal ritual until the end of the Republic.”\(^{110}\) The Doge was then instructed to send orders to Emperor Barbarossa in Pavia. In the process he acquired another *trionfi* from the Pope, the privilege to use the more dignified lead seals instead of wax, as an imitation of papal practice. The *Cronica* does not mention the papal gifts, but does describe subsequent events in vibrant and descriptive language:

> When news of the discovery of the Pope himself came to the most unconquerable emperor, and about the magnificent and very glorious veneration shown to the Pope by our most famous dominion, he groaned with the greatest grief, and was very troubled. He sent out messengers and his own orators to the aforesaid most illustrious nation, so that they would by all means send the most holy Pope to the imperial majesty. When these were heard, both sides with their fleets prepared themselves for war. And with God’s aid, and the prayers of Saint Mark the Evangelist, and of the Pope himself, the most excellent and noble Venetians overcame the emperor himself with a triumphant victory. In this battle, the most serene lord Sebastiano Ziani, the captain of the fleet, went out and fought, and the son of the emperor himself and the captain of the battle was captured by the magnificent and generous lord Laurus Mastropetrus, a noble Venetian, and the aforementioned noble gave the son, named Otho, in addition to his count in the fleet, to that most serene Venetian captain. And the victory was celebrated, and the nation gave Laurus Mastropetrus the name Maripetro, and put on his unassailable crest the talon of an eagle, and followed by hanging on him the greatest honors.\(^{111}\)

After the battle, and in thanks for the Doge’s service, the Pope presented the Doge with a gold ring and the right to marry the sea as a token of the Doge’s “lordship of the sea” and a sign of “perpetual domination.”\(^{112}\) Otto, or Otho, the son of the Emperor, implored the Pope to allow him to speak with his father on the Pope’s behalf. The Pope agreed to this, and Otto was able to persuade his father to sign a formal peace treaty. On Ascension Day in 1177, Emperor

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\(^{111}\) *Cronica*, 22r.

Barbarossa and Pope Alexander reconciled at the Basilica di San Marco, and the Emperor kissed the Pope’s feet. The party, including the Pope, Emperor and the Doge travelled to Rome, stopping at Ancona on the way. Here, the citizens appeared with two ceremonial umbrellas, signifying princely distinction. Pope Alexander III refused to accept his umbrella until a third was provided for the Doge. In addition to establishing political equality with the Pope and Emperor, the umbrella also metaphorically represented Venice’s unique setting: “showing just as the shadow is a place of quiet, peace, concord and tranquility, so is the place of Venice situated just so wonderfully.”\textsuperscript{113} The party then continued to Rome, and was greeted by city officials with nine banners and long silver trumpets. Pope Alexander III granted these final trionfi to the Doge, symbolizing divine protection and sovereignty. At Saint John Lateran in Rome the Pope “solemnly confirmed the privileges and honors he had bestowed on the basilica of San Marco, the commune of Venice and the Doge.”\textsuperscript{114} These culminating events are remembered in the Venetian historical memory as the moment in which Venice’s superior power was recognized, and her identity as a maritime power solidified.

The Cronica departs from this standard recounting of events in order to explain how the convent of Le Vergini relates to the civic narrative. Giulia, the daughter of Barbarossa, and sister to Otto, enters the drama as her father makes the decision to accept the terms of a treaty:

The emperor, inclined to the considerations of the most illustrious nation, and to the prayers of his son Otto and of his most beloved own daughter Julia, by the virtue of the Venetians, restored the most saintly Alexander into his former dignity and authority, with universal peace and tranquility. When the Peace was finished, and the holiest Pope, divinely inspired, together with the unconquerable Emperor Frederick and the most serene prince Sebastian, our Doge, took themselves to the Cathedral of Saint Peter, and when they had visited that place, and a certain apartment was seen which is near the

\textsuperscript{113} Brown, Venetian Narrative Painting, 38. The Cronica also mentions the umbrella metaphor, but with reference to the Pope’s “umbrella of protection,” 23v.

\textsuperscript{114} Muir, Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice, 106.
marsh by the church, the highest emperor himself asked from the special grace of the most serene prince the marsh or isle, and he benignly and graciously conceded this same isle to the Pope. When this was done, the unconquerable emperor asked the Pope his intentions regarding what would be done about the marsh, and the Pope in response said that he wished a monastery to be built and dedicated to the honor and reverence of Saint Mary of the Virgins of Jerusalem, subject to the Pope. The city had been destroyed in a sequence of tyrants, and finally by Saladin the greatest monastery of Saint Mary of the Virgins of Jerusalem was destroyed, and it was in our jurisdiction and patronage, and because of that the memory of this remained forever. When these things were heard, the unconquerable emperor praised the Pope for the such a great spiritual building, approved, and confirmed it, placing his own beloved daughter Giulia in the monastery to serve God, and keep her chastity and wisdom for Saint Mary the Virgin, and thus her will was fulfilled, and the monastery and church came under her title and name.  

As the text states, the monastery was established on a plot of marsh land near the Cathedral of St. Peter at the request of the Pope and in the memory of Saint Mary of the Virgins of Jerusalem. Barbarossa appointed his daughter Giulia as Le Vergini’s first abbess, fulfilling her will and placing the church and monastery “under her title and name.” Emphasis is placed upon the Emperor’s choice to “restore the most saintly Alexander into his former dignity and authority, with universal peace and tranquility,” preferring to ignore the “unconquerable” Emperor’s military defeat. The canonesses of Le Vergini had to walk a delicate line, so as not to slight the strength, power and honor of Venice and her Doge, but also maintaining the dignity of Venice’s defeated foe who was the father of the convent’s founding abbess. If comparisons were to be drawn metaphorically between the fathers of current canonesses, and the founding father and daughter, the patrician fathers of Venice most certainly would not like to be equated with a defeated and shamed ruler.

Not surprisingly, the actual events of 1177 unfolded slightly differently from any Venetian account of the event. There was no naval battle, no mention of the Emperor’s son Otto,  

\[115\] *Cronica*, 22v
no evidence for the existence of the Emperor’s daughter Giulia, and no indication that the Pope fled to Venice. Instead, in 1176 the Lombard League defeated the imperial army, a conflict in which Venice chose not to participate, thus Venice’s Basilica di San Marco was deemed a neutral location to conduct peace negotiations. The Doge’s role as mediator contributed significant prestige to the office, and thus the city of Venice herself. Venetian merchants were granted complete exemption from imperial tolls by the Emperor, while the Pope transferred ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Venice to the patriarch, removing the city’s religious institutions from the papal jurisdiction of Rome. Le Vergini and the ducal chapel of St. Mark later claimed an exception to this rule as they claimed to be founded directly by the Pope himself.

Venice did not construct her own version of events in 1177 without purpose. Around the time of the first written account of the ‘Peace of Venice’, the War of Ferrara in 1308 dealt Venice a devastating blow. Having become involved in Ferrara’s civil war, Venice found herself in opposition to the Pope, and was placed under an interdict, and may of her citizens were excommunicated. Serving as Venice’s ambassador to Rome, Francesco Dandolo was forced to plead for absolution in front of the Pope, prostrating himself on the floor. It is not pure coincidence that the emergence of the first written account of the mythic story arose only a decade after this embarrassing incident. The ‘Peace of Venice’ as told by Bovi, allowed Venice to reassert her loyalty to the Pope while also claiming sovereignty and independence as a respected Republic.

Furthering this investigation and delving deeper into an analysis of why the myth arose, it is also interesting to examine the supposed identities of the characters in the story, both the civic legend and the version set forth by Le Vergini. Giulia, the epicenter of the Cronica, and probable motivating factor for the chronicle’s creation, has no ‘history’ of her own. Against the
overwhelming evidence that Emperor Barbarossa did not have a daughter that founded a convent in Venice, there remains a strong possibility that she did indeed exist. Though Giulia is not acknowledged by German historians, and there is no record of a daughter accompanying the Emperor to Italy, the type of evidence and historical method used to make these assertions must be considered. First, Giulia would have had a different name in Germany, and only taken an Italian name upon arriving in Italy. Consequently, her German identity may have become separated from her future Italian self. Barbarossa is known to have had four daughters, all of whom are accounted for. However, as Kate Lowe explains, all four are known through records of their marriage or through the burial in the imperial monastery. Giulia was never married, nor was she buried in the imperial monastery, leaving no reason for her to have a written record in German history. On the other hand, Otto, the Emperor’s son, does exist in historical accounts, and his birth is recorded in 1168. Should Otto have been born in 1168, he would have only been nine years old when he fought the Venetians as he is said to have done in all recounts of the myth. If Otto is allowed to maintain his accepted role in the myth, there is no logical reason Giulia’s existence should be doubted more than Otto’s.

Regardless of either Giulia or Otto’s actual existence in history, their identity as characters in their respective myths should not be overlooked. They each were introduced for a purpose, idolized or vilified by the greater Republic of Venice. Similarly, the absolute veracity of the series of events in the myth is not as important as the purpose that they served the public. The myth was the accepted version of events, and the story that Venice and her citizens viewed themselves as a part of and descended from. Though nineteenth-century historians, such as Emmanuel Cicogna, dispel the chronicle’s version of events as a fallacy and claim that the

117 Giulia is said to be buried at Le Vergini. Cronica, 27v.
convent was actually founded in 1224 by a different Ziani Doge, the accuracy of the narrative is of little consequence if the community formed their identity around the narrative. Le Vergini’s women and their families considered themselves to be descended from imperial blood and participants in Venice’s moment of self-realization and validation. The validity of the claim is irrelevant if the belief is apparent.

II. Venetian Narrative Painting: the Tradition

It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the istorie, or history paintings, of Vittore Carpaccio from the visual fabric of Venice. Revered today for their “factual” attention to detail and replication of ritual events in the city, the paintings are also indications of a Venetian visual understanding in the fifteenth century. Carpaccio worked primarily for Venice’s religious confraternities, or scuole, two of his best-known series being the Life of Saint Ursula (Fig. 48) and the Miracles of the True Cross (Fig. 49). Responses to Carpaccio’s work continually highlight the accuracy of his paintings and their relationship to unedited records of life. These assessments do not focus upon artistic invention, but are fascinated with the amount of descriptive detail and sheer number of characters portrayed. Often the overwhelming details were seen as distraction from the formation of a clear and linear story line. Carlo Ridolfi complains of this ‘tedium’ in a comment about Mansueti’s St. Mark Healing Aniana (Fig. 50):

… [the painter] would introduce too much tedium in recounting minutely the friezes and the many carvings, with which the columns and the cornices of the palace [in the painting] are adorned; so that it seems that Manuseti would have no other intention than to make one see how much he would be accurate and diligent in similar labors.\footnote{118}  

Carpaccio and Mansueti’s paintings in fifteenth century Venice were not alone in their narrative objective or copious visual style. According to Patricia Fortini Brown, “At least ten programs of

painting istorie with similar formal qualities, of which seven survive in good part, can be documented in the city during a fifty year period beginning in the 1470’s.”

Brown, in her book, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, examines the role of narrativity in Venice through an analysis of Carpaccio’s work and that of other “eye-witness” painters, going to far as to say that “narratives are what keep societies sane.” The paintings act as mediating devices, creating a visual reality that reflects, but also contains, the chaos of the real world.

Often created for religious confraternities, these narrative cycles or istoria paintings identified the will of the collective, and resided at the heart of Venetian public taste, functioning as mediating devices between the people and indeterminacies and insufficiencies of the real word. In comparison to the untidy real events, the stories that are told, written or painted are less messy, and provide a certain amount of confidence and certainty to the beholder. Providing an authentic framework and an appeal to ‘truth’ is a crucial aspect to the successful communication of ‘real’ past events in a convincing an authoritative manner. For an event to be recorded, witnesses must be present to validate the experience, thus a form of painting, termed “eyewitness” style evolved in Venice. The eye witness paintings provided a slice of life in all of its fullness, alluding to an uncontrived “authenticity.”

According to Brown, the Venetian “eyewitness” or “inventory” style of painting can be linked to the Venetian tradition of chronicle writing and the travel writings of the viaggiatore.

While the chronicler seeks to record the illustrious deeds of the past, the viaggiatore writes with the intent to record the minitua of the present with a sense of immediacy and all-inclusiveness.

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120 Ibid., 3.
Though all-inclusive, simplicity and directness were also valued as characteristics indicative of reliability, claiming a degree of artlessness reinforced an account’s authenticity. As ambassador Ambrogio Contarini writes, “I might possibly have written in a more elegant style, but I preferred stating the truth in the way I have done to adorning falsehood in fine and elegant language.”

If an artist could create an atmosphere of happenstance or accident, as if the scene was unfolding before the viewer’s own eyes, not staged as so many other istoria paintings, the Venetian public was more inclined to value it as the “truth,” and as a reliable image. Venetians savored the odd details. According to Gaetano Cozzi, the famous Venetian diarist, Marin Sanudo:

> Registered everything, took count of everything, holding that completeness of information would be a presupposition of truth and that truth would be the indispensable element of history… For Marin Sanudo, the historic work is a moment of life that should be narrated in all its complexity.

Akin to the city’s diarists, viaggiatore and historians, the Venetian artist needed to capture the particularity of the moment through a rendering of architectural and topological features, as well as the details of costume, emphasizing comprehensive completeness as opposed to a hierarchical ordering of space.

Istoria paintings, or eyewitness paintings in Venice at this time strove to present a unified city and an illusion of Venice as a sancta città. Many istoria paintings depicted miraculous events (Miracle of the True Cross), thus if the artists could convince their audience that miracles could, and were known to take place in Venice, the city’s credibility as a sancta città

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significantly increased. To do so, artist’s employed additional visual strategies, not relying on a simple adherence to the ‘eyewitness’ style. The istoria paintings shared a similar color palette, preferring the warmer colors including rich reds, golds and ochers. All of the paintings shared a common structural consistency, always placing their vanishing point on a central vertical axis and centralizing the architecture. Though the istoria paintings made a conscious attempt to conform to accepted Renaissance techniques, they refused to utilize a common light source throughout the series or necessarily arrange the events in order. A possible explanation for the erratic lighting could be that the artists were trying to indicate different times of day, reinforcing historical accuracy.\textsuperscript{125} Another, less literal, interpretation suggests that the events are not “episodic or transient” but “eternal and emblematic.”\textsuperscript{126} The synchronic nature of the visual medium allowed the painters to communicate data all at once. As Brown states, “In sum, it would appear that the precise order and evolution of the miracles was not as important as the total effect of archival completeness, with each scene becoming a separate document which displayed a different quality of the relic.”\textsuperscript{127} Though meant to substitute for or replicate an official document, it is important to remember that these paintings were not magic mirrors of reality, but manipulated to the same degree as their textual counterparts. Just as the ‘Peace of Venice’ did not follow the historically recorded series of events, the painted istoria cycles were as ‘true’ as the audience chose to believe. Reality matters little when the myth was the foundation upon which people built their lives and defined their individual and communal identity. Myths were always fluctuating, continually reliant upon the desires and demands of the

\textsuperscript{125} See Brown discussion Ibid., 138–39.
\textsuperscript{127} Brown, \textit{Venetian Narrative Painting}, 139.
public, and their need to coalesce around a specific triumphal event or heroic figure. The painters were always editing and selecting dependent upon society’s current needs.

The earliest surviving example of a narrative *istoria* cycle picturing the events of 1177 is found in a mid-fourteenth century manuscript written in the Venetian dialect. Eleven miniatures depict events beginning with the initial discovery of Pope Alexander III in Venice and concluding with the welcoming of the Doge, Pope and Emperor in Rome (Fig. 53-59).

Miniatures in MS Correr I, 383 (=1497)\(^{128}\)

1. A Venetian citizen informs Doge Sebastiano Ziani of the presence of Pope Alexander III in Venice  
2. Doge Ziani kneels before the Pope in front of the Church of S. M. della Carità (Fig. 51)  
3. The Pope presents the white candle to the Doge  
4. The Venetian ambassadors plead the case of the Pope before the Emperor Frederick II Barbarossa (Fig. 52)  
5. The Pope presents the sword to the Doge (Fig. 53)  
6. The Battle of Salvore, between the naval forces of the Venetians and the Emperor  
7. The Pope presents the ring to the Doge (Fig. 54)  
8. Otto, having been captured by the Venetians, is sent back to treat for peace with his father, the Emperor  
9. The Pope and the Emperor make peace in front of the Basilica of San Marco (Fig. 55)  
10. The Pope presents the Doge with the umbrella in Ancona (Fig. 56)  
11. The Pope, the Doge and the Emperor are welcomed to Rome, and the Doge receives the trumpets and the ceremonial banners. (Fig. 57)

It is possible, though not certain, that this manuscript may reflect a fresco cycle from the Church of San Nicolò thought to be the first *istoria* cycle based upon Alexander III’s story.\(^{129}\) The Church of San Nicolò is thought to have been built by Doge Pietro Ziani (1205-29), the son of Doge Sebastiano Ziani (1172-78). San Nicolò in the thirteenth century is not to be confused with the Doge’s private chapel which burnt in 1483 and was restored in 1505-23. When the new

\(^{129}\) Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, 85.
private chapel was dedicated, it was given the name San Nicolò, and the old San Nicolò destroyed.

By the end of the fourteenth century work was underway on a new painting campaign in the new Great Council Hall. This cycle included twenty-two scenes based upon an expanded account of the legend.

The Great Council Hall in 1425:
(South Wall, toward the lagoon and the Isola di San Giorgio)

1. Coronation of Frederick Barbarossa by Hadrian IV in St. Peters in 1162
2. Attack by armed Romans on the Emperor’s troops near the Castel Sant’Angelo
3. Acknowledgement of Victor IV, the schismatic Pope, by Barbarossa in Pavia
4. The excommunication of Barbarossa by Alexander III
5. Battle of Spoleto
6. Alexander III with the King of France, who has decided to support him and is making preparations for his defense
7. The Pope flees incognito to Venice
9. The Presentation of the white candle to the Doge

(North Wall, toward the courtyard of the Ducal Palace)

10. The departure of the Venetian ambassadors to the court of the Emperor
11. The Ambassadors plead the Pope’s case before the Emperor
12. The consignment of the sword to the Doge
13. Battle of Salvore (Gentile da Fabriano)
14. The presentation of the ring to the Doge
15. Otto is released to treat for peace with Barbarossa
16. Otto before the Emperor (Pisanello)
17. The Emperor humbles himself before the Pope at the entrance to the Basilica of San Marco
18. Mass is celebrated in San Marco
19. The consignment of the umbrella to the Doge in Ancona

130 In December of 1340 the decision was made to create a new hall. The Council had grown from 317 in 1264 to 900 in 1310 and then to 1017 in 1340., Ibid., 261. See Chapter 4, specifically pgs. 95-100 for a discussion of the societal effects of this growth.

131 List is taken from Sansovino’s account and matches Sanudo’s, CAT. IV, Ibid., 263–265.
20. The entry into Rome of the Pope, the Doge and the Emperor
21. The Presentation of the eight standards and the trumpets to the Doge
22. The presentation of the sedia (ceremonial throne) to the Doge in the Lateran Palace

The scenes listed above were not a part of Bovi’s narrative in 1320, thus a different text must have inspired this painting campaign. Inaugurated in 1423, the frescos at this time were already in need of restoration. In 1474 Gentile Bellini was commissioned to replace the damaged frescos with paintings on canvas, replicating the subject matter on a one-to-one basis. Many other painters joined the project including Giovanni Bellini, Carpaccio, Vittore Billiniano, Alvise Vivarini and Titian. The first phase of the project appears to have been completed in 1523 with Titian’s *The Emperor humbles himself before the Pope*, while the second and final stage took another thirty years to finish. After nearly a century of work on the monumental *istoria* cycle, a devastating fire in 1577 gutted the Great Council Hall, destroying all of the paintings, and leaving no evidence of the work other than archival documents. Preparatory drawings for Carpaccio’s *Consignment of the Umbrella* (Fig. 58-59) have survived and give an indication of what the original paintings may have looked like. *The Story of Alexander III* was again repainted in the new Great Council Hall, but abridged to twelve scenes beginning with the Doge greeting the Pope at Santa Maria della Carità.

By the 1530s the ‘eye witness’ style began to fall out of favor, as the copiousness that encompassed the style began to be considered verbose and tended to foster confusion. In his treatise on painting from 1557, Ludovico Dolce voices his opinion of the painted *istorie* in the Great Council Hall:

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132 "9 July 1400. The paintings in the hall are already deteriorating, and [a conservator] is to be appointed at a salary of 100 ducats per year to keep them in good repair,” Doc. 6, CAT II, Ibid., 259.
133 See, Doc. 1a-b CAT XIII, Ibid., 272.
And since the truth ought not to be hushed up, I should not refrain from saying that, as regards the historia, the man who painted in the Sala... next to Titian’s battle picture, the history of the excommunication of the Emperor Federico Barbarossa by Pope Alexander, and included in his invention a representation of Rome, exceeded the bounds of propriety in a serious way – in my opinion – when he put in so many Venetian senators and showed them standing there and looking on without any real motivation. For the fact is there is no likelihood that all of them should have happened to be there simultaneously in quite this way, nor do they have anything to do with the subject.\(^{134}\)

Artists, following the principles set forth by Alberti, were instructed to focus upon the narrative, providing dramatic focus and establishing a hierarchy of narrative action. The eyewitness painters conformed to very few of these ideas, overwhelming the viewer with a large number of figures, without providing an obvious indication of the main characters. Monumental size was valued over an area of emphasis or dramatic focus, often overwhelming the sixteenth century audience. The Cronica came into existence as the narrative tradition began to subside, yet the original twenty two scenes from the Great Council Hall would still have featured prominently in the civic life of the patrician class. I now turn to a comparison of the Cronica’s narrative scenes with what is known of the Venetian cycles.

III. Scenes of Peace

Le Vergini’s chronicle is a curious document in that it does not rely solely on written historical evidence and the author’s words, but also visually tells a story following in the narrative Venetian painting tradition. Very few, if any, other monastic chronicles are illustrated to the degree of Le Vergini’s Cronica. The pages of the chronicle from Santi Cosma e Damiano in Rome are adorned with cut-out illustrations, mimicking those of a printed book, and Le

Murate’s with a single decorative frontispiece.\textsuperscript{135} Le Vergini’s manuscript on the other hand contains thirty-nine illustrations, several of which are full page narrative histories. By comparing the image in the Cronica to other Venetian images with the same theme, it may be possible to isolate the prototype for the Cronica’s illuminations and identify the intended audience for the work. In addition, by identifying the similarities and differences between various Venetian renditions of the ‘Peace of Venice’ and the miniatures in the Cronica, the methodology and intentions of the artist and patron, and the expectations of the audience become clearer.

\textit{The Meeting at Santa Maria della Carità}

A pair of illustrations on folio 15r depicting the events of the ‘Peace of Venice’ or the ‘Story (History) of Alexander III,’ marks the conclusion of the Italian narrative of the foundation of Milan and Venice filling folios 13v to 14v of the Cronica. Preceded by no introductory text, the images initiate the narrative (Fig. 20). The two illustrations are stacked, and are each followed by several lines of Latin text. Transpiring in the top image, a man dressed in white robes and donning a white cap to the far right of the composition greets a kneeling figure clad in the traditional garb of the doge, a gold cloak with a white fur collar. It can be assumed from the accepted series of events in the well-known legend that the two figures are Pope Alexander III blessing the Doge after the Pope is found hiding at and Santa Maria della Carità in Venice. The center of the picture plane is occupied by one large, covered boat with golden statues of Venetia at the stern and bow. A much smaller boat, guided by a gondolier, floats directly in front of the larger boat. Spectators fill all manner of windows and doorways, observing the scene from above and aboard the boats. Rising from the blue water in the foreground, the ground where the

\textsuperscript{135} See Lowe, \textit{Nuns’ Chronicles}, 17.
meeting takes place is the same square pattern similar to that of the frontispiece. However, perspective in this scene is not as accurate as it is in the frontispiece, as the orthogonal lines of the patterned foreground indicate that the vanishing point would be in the lower right corner as opposed to any point on the horizon line. Regardless, the fact that the artist attempts to communicate a perspectival rendering, and is conscious of the need for a vanishing point adds a certain amount of artistic, spatial awareness.

The steps rising out of the canal directly adjacent to the entrance of the church are consistent with the actual construction of S.M. della Carità’s convent and church, apparent in the rectangular entranceway, the red brick, and position in relation to the water (Fig. 60). Also adhering to the tradition of the eyewitness painters, the artist fills the boats and the building with human figures, observing the situation and lending authority and authenticity to the illustration and the event. Though the artist does enthusiastically depict a large number of people in the surrounding boats and windows, the human population is minute in comparison to the oil painting of the same scene now hanging in the Palazzo Ducale created by Carlo Caliari at the end of the sixteenth century (Fig. 61). Caliari creates an environment of chaos in the foreground, while the meeting of the Pope and the Doge occurs in the background before the church facade. Carliari’s version requires the viewer to wade through the distracting, superfluous action before arriving at the event itself. The artist of the manuscript on the other hand, grants the viewer a clear avenue to the main event and subject of the painting. Though the Cronica’s artist does include the necessary spectators, adhering to the Venetian ‘eyewitness’ tradition, the artist builds the composition in a structured manner, leaving no visual discord to distract from the narrative.

Easy comparisons exist between Carliari’s work and that of the Cronica, but the same cannot be said for the early miniatures in the fourteenth century manuscript. The early miniature
which depicts the Doge greeting, or kneeling, before the Pope, is highly schematic, composed
behind a row of arched columns that inhibit the viewer from participating in the scene and only
giving subtle hints as to the setting (Fig. 51). At some point between the mid-fourteenth century
and the beginning of the sixteenth, artists began to situate the action in an identifiable location
and add descriptive detail. This obvious disjunction between the early miniatures and the
Cronica would seem to suggest that the Cronica’s artist was not looking at these illustrations as
prototypes, but more likely gaining inspiration from earlier versions of the scene in the Great
Council Hall that burned in the fire of 1577.

The Battle of Salvore

Separated by a short block of text, the next illustration, similar in size to the first,
captures the moment of Otto’s surrender after the battle of Salvore (Fig. 20). The chaos of battle
has ceased and a host of armored men stand in ordered groups, witnessing the event. Here the
meeting occurs to the far left of the composition, complementing the action from the illustration
above. The standing figure accepting Otto’s surrender can be identified as the Doge by his
characteristic red hat, though he is clad in full armor. All of the action unfolds on a single ship.
The space is shallow, and the white sails against a blue sky fill the background. A strange duo to
the far right, removed from the armored party, seems to remain in an odd physical struggle,
while a prominent heraldic shield on a bright red background occupies the lower right. As with
the image above, the Cronica’s version of the Battle of Salvore is controlled in comparison to the
oil painting that now resides in the Palazzo Ducale, painted by Domenico Tintoretto (Fig. 62).
Tintoretto’s version is absolute chaos, extending from the foreground, all the way to the horizon.
The moment of surrender is difficult to locate on the prow of the nearest ship amongst the
multitude of battling figures. In contrast, order and calm welcome the viewer of the Cronica, as
the remnants of the unorganized battle are only visible with the odd fighting duo to the right.

The oars of the ship are parallel, and the men stand at attention. Only one ship is depicted which centralizes the narrative and directs the viewer’s attention to the narrative’s protagonists.\textsuperscript{136}

\textit{The Granting of Papal and Imperial Privileges}

Located on the verso of folio 15, the third and final image of the ‘Peace of Venice’ fills the majority of the page and depicts the meeting of the Doge, Pope and Emperor (Fig. 21). Papal trifoni have already been gifted and received, indicated by the nine standards and the umbrellas, thus this particular moment would seem to depict the trio after their arrival in Rome.\textsuperscript{137} Once again the figures stand upon a tiled ground, similar to the first illustration on the previous page, as well as the frontispiece. This distinctive ground does not signify a similar location, but could indicate a particular Venetian space, or may simply be the repetition of a prototype or previous template. Though the orthogonals of the ground create space in the picture, the meeting takes place in front of a large building, forcing the men to the foreground. The scene is presided over by a shining figure of Christ mounted in a concave golden dome, blessing the entourage.

Standing under three gold umbrellas, which seem to almost be floating over the men, the three primary figures appear in conversation. Mediating an exchange between the Emperor on the left and the Doge on the right, the Pope in the center directs his gaze towards the Emperor who gestures towards the Doge. The Doge directs his attention toward the Emperor, indicating through his gestures that he is accepting the Emperor’s offer, in this case possibly the trading privileges granted by the Emperor to Venice. Once again the two tightly packed groups of

\textsuperscript{136} The earlier fourteenth century manuscript version of the event is not published, so it cannot be analyzed in comparison here.

\textsuperscript{137} The scene is described as Ancona in several sources, but the standards would not have been at Ancona. See note 126.
spectators on either side of the foregrounded trio actively engage with one another and provide the obligatory “eyewitness” authentication for the scene. Carpaccio’s sketches organize the three main characters in the same order as the Cronica (Emperor, Pope, Doge) and depict the Emperor with long hair and a beard, exactly the same as the artist of the Cronica (Fig. 58-59). Based on the visual evidence at hand, the Cronica displays the most similarities to Carpaccio’s sketches, thus the Cronica’s artist was probably most familiar with the first cycle of painting in the Great Council Hall.

Adhering to a logical progression of events, one would place the scene in Rome after the gifting of the papal trionfi, however, the location documented visually by the artist seems to suggest otherwise. The prominent gold dome with the shining central figure that arches over the party is also evident in the early fourteenth-century manuscript illustrating the Peace in Front of San Marco (Fig. 55).138 San Marco’s main entrance does display a golden mosaic of Christ with rays of light shining behind his head (Fig. 63). Thus, the scene would seem to illustrate a meeting that occurred at San Marco in Venice, but after the visit to Rome. Nowhere is it recorded that such an event took place, suggesting that there must be another reason for the strange juxtaposition of time and place. As mentioned earlier, Venetian history paintings did not necessarily always follow in a logical order of events, but were considered to be synchronic or understood in their entirety, not individually. With this in mind, the final image in the Cronica’s Alexander III series could be understood as both representative of the Peace that was agreed upon at San Marco in Venice and the moment when the Pope bestowed upon Venice a number of papal privileges.

138 Lowe also titles the scene “Meeting of the pope, emperor and doge outside S. Marco in 1177 (‘the peace of Venice’) Lowe, Nuns’ Chronicles, 100. Sperling titles the scene, “The pope marries the doge to the Adriatic Sea,” Sperling, Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice, 210.
Each of the illustrations is followed by a few lines of text, and labeled the first, second and third account. None of the captions are particularly descriptive, only providing the very basic facts that transpire:

The first account: 1177, April 3rd, the most holy Pope Alexander III was found in the church of Charity in the city of Venice. The unconquered Emperor Frederick Barbarossa had pursued him. And this account is depicted there, more clearly and brightly.

The second account: the son of the Emperor Frederick was captured and wounded in a naval battle, and led before the Doge and dominion of Venice.

The third account, immediately after these two, is depicted lavishly. The emperor gave nine banners of different colors to the Doge; among these one of gold could be seen. And on this same day the emperor swore on his ring to give the Adriatic Sea, and he made our Doge master of the entire Adriatic.  

Curiously, two of the three text blocks reference the quality of the illustrations themselves. The first states that “this account is depicted there more clearly and brightly” while the third states that this account is “depicted lavishly.” The illustrations and their eyewitness accounts of the events narrate and authenticate the story, not just the text. Much like reproducing a notarial document, it was unnecessary to explain why the document, or in this case the image, should be trusted. In addition, the potential reader, assuming the individual was of the patrician class and male, would have been familiar with the Alexander III series in the Great Hall of the Ducal Palace and have made the visual connection automatically, making further explanation redundant and reductive. Also, if it is assumed that all with access to this manuscript would have been familiar with the Great Council Hall, this reinforces the hypothesis that the Cronica was created by and for a patrician audience.

Giulia’s Story

139 Cronica, 15r-15v.
After these three narrative images, the story is broken up by several folios of text. The text on folio 16r, directly facing the last illustration of the trio in Rome, introduces the Order of St. Mark of Mantua, and the naming of the convent, followed by a description of the accepted behavior for the sisters, and then by two pages of detailed liturgical procedures. A textual recount of the ‘Peace of Venice’ begins again a quarter of the way down folio 17v, three entire pages after the illustrations conclude the visual narrative. This particular section reproduces several speeches by Jerome, the Doge, the Pope and the Emperor at the moment of Le Vergini’s foundation:

Then the general went to our most holy Lord, and he immediately sent messengers to the unconquered emperor and the most serene prince; with the entire senate and Jerome bowing, he said: “I fear that, under the weight of praise which this brute has merited, I might reveal the stupidity of my nature more than any unspeakably divine virtues, as is fitting for one when he is the pastor of a flock which includes the unconquered emperor and the most serene prince and the most illustrious senate who may see and understand my work, and if my talent seems weak and slow in my manly soul, nevertheless they have escaped it, such that the strengths were fortified with a famous talent, an unbroken heart, and a conspicuous courage.” The holy lord Alexander, with the other listeners, rejoiced. It is difficult to compile and perfect histories from praises most lofty, to be sure, and flattering, and for this reason less deserved; still, from these histories and memories draw their material. And he and all his men approved and confirmed and established the holy and blessed rule of Saint Mary the Virgin of the Venetians, of the order of Saint Mark the Evangelist. With guards the general and the brothers of Saint Mark of Mantua went to instruct the nuns of this monastery and Mistress Giulia. … And they were asked by our most holy lord if they wish to keep these statutes and enter into this congregation in the name of the Lord and they all said with one voice: “We do.” And our lord said: “I am the pastor of these sheep. We look out for our flocks.” To him, the unconquered emperor said: “I have already told you to grant this monastery and to invest the place called Bagnacavallo with all its prerogatives and jurisdictions, and it is my will that it be in the general’s hands. And with our lord conceding, may it be an emperor’s privilege, who has such a course.

And so our lord the Doge, with the entire senate in one voice said: “Therefore, most serene prince, all of us with one heart will it, and we make a gift to the monastery of the land and water all the way to Saint Erasmus, with the privilege that no one else can take or steal them and that may always belong to this monastery.” And our most holy lord,
once the proposal of blessed Venice was heard, added that whoever attacked it would be excommunicated … When the speech was finished, on the spot the emperor broke in, saying: “O kind high priest, O your bountiful charity, O your famous grace, O what a unique honor you have chosen to grant to this city Venice, famous and glorious among the cities of the world.” Rites of the faith were conducted, and after many things were signed by the unconquered emperor, with an eager face he said to the general that he would go with him and show him what needed to be done quickly, and he went.\textsuperscript{140}

The images that follow have no precedent in any previous \textit{istoria} cycle, launching Le Vergini’s addition to “history.” Directly opposite this text, a full page illustration on folio 18r returns to the trio of characters from the Alexander III myth: the Doge, the Pope and the Emperor, and their three golden umbrellas (Fig. 22). As in the previous illustration of the trio on folio 15v, the Pope is framed by a dark doorway and arched entranceway overhead, though the location is not identifiable. The Emperor is to the left, the Doge to the right, yet this time the Pope is speaking exclusively to the Doge, while the Emperor merely observes. A group of monks, the canons regular of St. Mark, stand behind the Doge, and a number of patrician men in colorful costume stand behind the Emperor. Similar to the first illustration of the meeting at S.M della Carità, steps rise out of the water, and the reflective surface fills nearly one-third of the lower register. The watery landscape signifies the unique Venetian environment, leaving no question as to the location of the event.

Text and image interact directly as the text block reproduced above is directly opposite the illustration described. There are few visual indicators or symbols to identify a specific event, nor is the scene representative of a traditional Venetian narrative scene. Because of the readers’ lack of familiarity with the visual moment, text was necessary to place the illustration into the plot line. Many different actors speak in this passage, but the moment chosen for the illustration depicts the Pope in the act of speaking, the Pope as the active agent and the superior protagonist.\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Cronica}, 17v.
The Pope’s brief but powerful words proclaim: “I am the pastor of these sheep. We look out for our flocks.” This choice makes it clear that the women of Le Vergini were looking to the Pope as their protector and the embodiment of hope. By choosing this moment, they were relying on the Pope’s sense of responsibility to save the community from those who threatened them. This section also reinforces in the text that no one can take or steal what belongs to the monastery, and those who do try and attack the institution will be excommunicated. From the textual and visual evidence at hand, it would seem that the women were reminding the Pope of his responsibility, as pledged so many centuries ago, to excommunicate those individuals who threatened and stole from the sacred community. This suggests that the Pope, in addition to the patrician members of the Great Council mentioned earlier, was an intended recipient and reader of the manuscript.¹⁴¹

Turning the page reveals another full page illustration on folio 18v, though this time with a caption at the top “Pope Alexander, Doge Sebastian Ziani, Most Serene Abbess Julia, Daughter in front of the Unconquered Emperor” (Fig. 23). Below the heading, the trio of figures perch in their three elevated golden thrones seated in order from left to right: Emperor, Pope and then the Doge. The Pope places his hand upon a robed female figure, assumed to be the female protagonist, Giulia, while the Doge bestows the ceremonial ring to the woman. If the scene is viewed as a continuous narrative, the secular woman receiving a blessing from the Emperor could represent Giulia before she is consecrated as abbess, and the robed figure could then represent Giulia after her vows have been spoken.

The text on folio 19r opposite this scene does not narrate the event, but instead transcribes an imperial privilege. Though the illustration records the first symbolic marriage of

¹⁴¹ See Chapter 4, pg. 103 which references Le Vergini’s direct contact with the Pope.
the Doge and abbess, the ceremony is not specifically outlined in the Latin text of the Cronica. Instead, the text opposite the illustration of Giulia’s consecration and symbolic marriage reproduces an imperial privilege that reads:

We [the Holy Roman Empire] forbid any doge or marquis, archbishop or bishop, captain or vicar, ally, city, commune, university, in short any lofty person, either of this church or secular, to harass or disturb the aforementioned counts, our faithful subject, either with rash daring or deliberately contrary to the content of this our present privilege. Let him only dare to show anger toward them, and he will meet our throne, and pay fifty point of gold as fine.¹⁴²

If this image of Giulia’s consecration and ‘marriage’ speaks through the adjacent text, as I believe the earlier image does, it would seem that the author and illustrator wish to highlight the convent’s connection to the Holy Roman Empire and reinforce the threat strongly asserted by the Emperor. The image is then not about the ‘marriage’ of the Doge and Abbess, but about the gifting of Giulia to the convent by her father, the Emperor.

There are fewer witnesses to this scene: two patrician women stand, arms crossed, to the left of the ceremony in progress and another kneels in front of the Emperor. Behind the shoulder of the Pope stands one single monk, while a male figure moves from the foreground towards the ceremony. He is in proper proportion, larger in figural scale than the rest, and his gesture of walking is expertly rendered. The lower third of the page is occupied by three heraldic shields, the Emperor, Pope and Doge on a green background. This green field is oddly sprouting what could be blades of grass, lending a slightly pastoral element to the highly ceremonial scene.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Cronica, 19r.
¹⁴³ The “blades of grass” also appear to be covering a line of text that was omitted at some point in the manuscripts life. This scene receives little narrative attention, thus this line of text could have proved explanatory, and not to the liking of its readers. The heraldry apparent below the images is also interesting. On the left is the Holy Roman Emperor’s coat of arms, and to the right the coat of arms of the Ziani family representing the Doge. The central coat of arms with the papal tiara and keys is supposed to hold the arms of Alexander III, a Bandinelli from Siena. However, the coat of arms depicted is Piccolomini, of which there were only two, Pius II (1458-64) and Pius III (1503). The artist may have simply made a mistake, or there could be more significant motivations behind the error,
Though the text does not mention the symbolic union of the abbess and Doge, the illustration reminds the reader of the sacred tradition.

As Carpaccio’s *istoria* cycles visually control and pacify the great *scuole* of Venice, the series of illustrations depicting the narrative of the ‘Peace of Venice’ in the *Cronica* serve a similar purpose, though communicating through a different medium. Authentication was visually self-evident as the omniscient narrator became the eye-witness to the scene, validating the “truth” of the event. Multiple illustrations in the *Cronica* conform to this “eye-witness” style providing human witnesses to the events portrayed. For the author, compiler or patron of the *Cronica*, simply recording the foundation story of the convent and its connection to the famous ‘Peace of Venice’ myth in writing was not sufficient. The illustrations were not trivial additions meant to entertain the reader, but consciously commissioned and inserted with the intention to establish a connection between the *Cronica* and the visual environment of Venice at the turn of the sixteenth century. The illustrations in the *Cronica* conform to the Venetian narrative tradition as one method of authentication, furthering the convent’s mission to convince Venice of the “truth.” Textual and visual persuasive techniques worked in tandem, for if either method were to be employed in isolation, more room existed to question the strong assertions made by the convent. The first three narrative illustrations that have visual precedents are necessary to validate Le Vergini’s addition to the myth. Depicted consistently throughout all the scenes, the characters of the Doge, Pope and Emperor validate Giulia’s existence, and by association her sworn sisters.

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indicated by the erased line of text above the coats of arms. I thank Dr. Lilian Armstrong for this interesting observation. It is interesting to examine the condition of the heraldry throughout the manuscript, and a more thorough analysis could provide more information to the actors behind the production and life of the *Cronica.*
IV. A Need for a Visual History

After examining the Cronica’s narrative illustrations in relation to Venetian narrative painting cycles and specific examples of the Alexander III series, it is obvious that the Cronica, and by extension, the inmates of Le Vergini, are inextricably enmeshed within the social, political and historical environment of Venice. Consciously aligning and referencing the contemporary Venetian artistic tradition of historical ‘eye witness’ painting, the illustrations in the chronicle of Le Vergini are intended to actively interact with the larger urban artistic environment. Though often thought to be isolated and cut off from the community, the canonesses of Le Vergini and their illustrated chronicle are just one example that disproves the stereotype. Just as Venice invented her history from a series of mythological events, the author and the artist of the Cronica invented and adapted a history of their own.

Le Vergini was an institution like the Republic herself that sought a solid foundation in a city that was continually eroding at the mercy of the sea. When their way of life was threatened, the women and the patrons of Le Vergini turned to the illustrious istoria cycles located at the heart of the city for their salvation. The Alexander III paintings in the Great Council Hall served as documents to validate and confirm Venice’s right to rule the sea and her equality with the strongest powers in the Western world. The paintings in the Cronica became one of the chronicle’s supporting documents in her attempt to assert her own institutional equivalency with the Doge, Pope and Emperor, and called specifically upon the Pope to fulfill his duty to protect them. Yet the Cronica is much more than an inert example of female interaction within the city’s visual milieu, for not only do the illustrations rely upon the authority of established tradition, but also attempted to anticipate future traditions. Scenes are adapted, such as the final scene in the Alexander series (the meeting of Doge, Pope and Emperor outside San Marco), and
invented, as in the scenes concerning the founding of Le Vergini and Giulia’s consecration. Through the conscious manipulation of the mythical theme, it is evident that the Cronica was not meant as a repetition of previous depictions, but a reinterpretation and addition to the historical dialogue.

Though these narrative painting cycles discussed above are recreations of past events, it is important to note that they also “served as scripts for future action.”\textsuperscript{144} The narrative scenes on the pages of the Cronica were not created simply to passively record, but to act as well. Meant to preserve the dignity of Le Vergini’s inmates, the text and illustrations were intended to instruct and remind future women of their high birth and status in this world, both sacred and secular, to construct a ‘history’ of their own, and to remind the world’s supreme powers of their responsibility to the institution. The women fashioned their history and intended it to fashion generations to come. Unfortunately, though the convent appealed to multiple sources of authority, the creation of the document ultimately was not enough to persuade the Pope or any other civic or ecclesiastical authority to interfere and save the convent from the reform efforts.

\textsuperscript{144} Brown, \textit{Venetian Narrative Painting}, 4.
3. **The Cronica as Chronicle: A Consideration of Genre**

The *Cronica* calls itself a “chronicle”, thus one might assume that the canonesses’ motivations, inspirations and ultimately their final product could be predetermined by an understanding of the “chronicle” genre. This is not to say that all chronicles should be interpreted identically, as each composition obviously maintains its own geographical, chronological and sociopolitical specificities. However, literary compositions coined “chronicles” do adhere to general compositional and motivational similarities. When the *Cronica* is compared to this established genre, there are apparent similarities, but it is the slight irregularities that highlight the unique ‘space’ that the *Cronica* negotiates. By juxtaposing the *Cronica* with other genres written in varying voices, it is possible to interpret the textual content of the *Cronica*, its illustrations and the women it represents from a fresh perspective, unhindered by literary taxonomies and assumptions. With no noticeably similar manuscripts to study as a pair or a group in conjunction with the *Cronica*, I will compare the manuscript, visually, textually and functionally, to different genres of literature or writing from sixteenth century Venice including *mariegole*, *ducali*, chronicles, *epistolario* and convent poetry. Restricting the interpretation of the *Cronica* to a single genre flattens the work, and fails to provide answers to some of the manuscript’s most interesting questions.

In the following discussion, considerations of genre are framed around a discussion of women authors in the early modern period and the accompanying gendered associations made with respect to women’s literature. This methodology highlights the unique space that the female voice occupied in a primarily male dominated public society, and helps to uncover and clarify the *Cronica*’s intended audience, constructed message and probable motives. A brief examination of other manuscripts and paintings commissioned for and by the women of Le
Vergini concludes the chapter. Though not examples of a literary genre, the works are examples of a visual genre, throwing some of the Cronica’s unique visual characteristics into higher relief.

I. Negotiating a gendered ‘space’: Epistolarie and Lyric Poetry

A resoundingly female voice echoes from the pages of the Cronica, proclaiming her authority and offering no demurring excuses. Was this female voice unusual in early sixteenth century Venice? Would anyone have felt compelled to listen? Who was speaking to whom, and did this historical composition occupy a specific literary space? These questions spur an investigation into the literary works written by women in the early modern world, and their respective connections to the Cronica. Studying the negotiations of literary ‘space’ exposes the availability and acceptability of a specific genre while noting the societal tensions and restrictions that press and constrict this ‘space’. I will continually return to the manuscript’s audience, for how the Cronica was received ultimately determined its future.

Gender “equality,” as advocated for today, cannot rationally be applied or substituted for “equality” in historical social relationships in the early modern period. Thus the ‘female’ and ‘male’ experiences should not be equated in an attempt to provide women the historical attention they deserve, for in doing so value judgments are unintentionally imposed, hierarchies of experience inflicted, and the possibility of essentializing the female experience increases. Here I will consider the work of women as an independent problematic, not simply in relation to the work that men were producing simultaneously. I will also examine the metaphorical and ideological space the female voices occupy as they are negotiated by different genres, including that of the Cronica. Identifying the female voices, whether authored by a male or female, and the space that these voices occupied is a crucial step in successfully analyzing the women’s
actions in the period. Advocating for an inclusive history, I understand the Cronica as proffering a female voice regardless of the actual gender of the author. Identifying the female voice recognized in this manuscript, and exploring the negotiated space will enrich and problematize the gendered assumptions evident in the early modern paradigm.

Asking “What counts as literacy for whom and under what specific circumstances,” leads to multiple definitions of literacy in the early modern period, and evidence that literacy was a continual site of social contest. An analysis of female authored literary works presupposes the availability of a literary education, yet this education cannot be understood as standardized in any way. Women’s education was haphazard and relied upon the conditions of their families, tolerant fathers and brothers and perceptive, educated mothers. Documents written for and about women suggest that at the turn on the sixteenth century women were encouraged to receive and pursue an education which often enabled them to write in Latin, Italian and some Greek. Forming a new category of ‘women’ known as the ‘learned woman,’ many female humanists in the fifteenth century maintained written correspondences with their male counterparts, exchanging poetry and expository letters. Several texts written by men in the fifteenth century reveal a deep respect for female humanists, but also an obsessive fear. As Margaret King and Albert Rabil phrase it, “Intellectual women [were] perceived as fierce.” For this reason men

147 Antonio Loschi’s poem, “The Temple of Chastity” and following symbolic explanation written to Madalena Scrovigni in 1389 is the “earliest statement defining the figure of the learned woman during the Italian Renaissance.” Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, eds., *Her Immaculate Hand: Selected Works by and About the Women Humanists of Quattrocento Italy* (Binghamton, N.Y: Center for Medieval & Early Renaissance Studies, 1983), 11.
148 Ibid., 13.
habitually reinforced the need for women to remain chaste, neutralizing the “fierce” nature and threat they posed to male masculinity and superiority. In response, women were continually defending their role as humanists and relying upon their chaste virtuous nature to do so. Although Leonardo Bruni, writing in the early fifteenth century, supported a thorough humanist education for women, he expressed severe disdain at the thought of women advertising their learning in the public sphere, believing the practice to be impractical, as a woman would never have the opportunity to engage in public debate. Much like the emphasis on chastity, the disdain for public oratory could mask a palpable fear in response to a potential threat of female intellectual success and public competition. Regardless of their intellectual achievements, women in the fifteenth century did not continue pursuing their intellectual work after taking their vows, whether secular or religious. It is often thought that women were free to continue their intellectual pursuits if they chose a religious life, however, there is little evidence from the fifteenth century to support this claim as a reality. Margaret King explains that for women of the period intellectual freedom was “more apparent than real.” Upon entering the convent or a secular marriage, women were removed from the public discourse, and they inevitably “formed a cloister of their mind.”

The sixteenth century ushered in a new era, offering women more opportunities to publish, and a level of social flexibility that was not present in the previous century. It is no small coincidence that the sixteenth century also saw the emergence of the printing press, which arrived in Italy in the second half of the fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century Venice had

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become Europe’s center for publishing. The popularity of the printed book promoted vernacular literature to a level of respectability unknown in the fifteenth century. This development also opened the door a bit wider for women writers, eliminating the barrier of a Latin education. Publishers were actively seeking works to publish and provided a platform for women’s devotional prose, poetry and later, letter collections, gaining respect for the superior moral and spiritual example that they set. Three of the most well-known women poets of the sixteenth century, Vittoria Colonna, Gaspara Stampa and Veronica Franco, differed from the female humanists of the fifteenth century in that they were not “shackled to the bonds of matrimony… and did not accept the customary roles of women” continuing to write their entire lives. The women of the sixteenth century did remain subject to certain restrictions requiring them to maintain a high degree of moral decorum, but they were known to the greater Venetian public. Thus, the women of Le Vergini in the early sixteenth century would have been on the cusp of change, receiving support for their education, but not yet the public acceptance that occurred later in the century.

Though it is obvious that women received some form of education in the early modern period in order for such a range of female authored publications to exist, it is less obvious what this education consisted of and exactly how the women received their learning. It is generally believed that young girls in early modern Europe received their education either at home from their mothers and tutors, or were sent to convents to learn the womanly “virtues.” A study of thirty female pupils identified in a Venetian survey from 1587 found that, of the thirty girls, thirteen were destined for the convent and twenty were noble. The largest gathering of pupils

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151 King and Rabil, *Her Immaculate Hand*, 29.
took place at a private residence where ten girls received instruction from a single tutor.\textsuperscript{153}

Conclusions drawn from an analysis of examples, such as this survey, and the individual lives of female humanists would seem to indicate that a number of the women entering the convents in Venice, particularly those from the patrician class, would have received at least a basic education, possibly even capable of reading and composing Latin narratives such as the \textit{Cronica}. Although no evidence explicitly refers to a convent school operating within Le Vergini, it would not be a stretch to believe that one existed. Often convent schools only received attention and official documentation when the authorities were critical of their behavior.\textsuperscript{154}

Regardless of the access to education or opportunities to write, the practice of writing continued to be viewed as a distinctly male behavior, not to be exhibited publically by women.\textsuperscript{155} Consequently, literate women were often self-taught and restricted to certain avenues of written expression including devotional literature, chronicles, biographies, letters and poetry. The familiar letterbook, or \textit{epistolario}, provided women with an intimate form of private expression considered appropriate and unthreatening. This genre enters the public realm in force after Pietro Aretino’s first volume of letters was published in 1538.\textsuperscript{156} As Meredith Ray states, “the epistolary medium functioned as a unique literary space in which women writers in early modern Italy could position themselves as the protagonist of their narrative.”\textsuperscript{157} This “unique literary space” was not essentially feminine, but facilitated the entry of women into the public sphere in the early modern period. Following Aretino’s volume of letters, the ensuing popularity of the

\textsuperscript{153} Paul F. Grendler, \textit{Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300-1600} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 96.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{155} Strocchia, “Learning the Virtues: Convent Schools and Female Culture in Renaissance Florence,” 34.
\textsuperscript{156} Earlier publications include Catherine of Siena’s collection of letters, and humanists: Isotta Nogarola, Laura Cereta, Cassandra Fedele, Olimpia Morata of Ferrara, and Francesca Minutolo
\textsuperscript{157} Ray, \textit{Writing Gender in Women’s Letter Collections of the Italian Renaissance}, 214.
epistolary medium accepted a number of women and propelled them to the forefront of public attention. Even a few men were known to take advantage of the rising audience for female-authored letters, and published their own work under women’s names. Here, gender is performed in the genre as an act of ventriloquism, reenacting or imitating a real conversation. The voice speaking is not representative of the author’s own gender, thus highlighting how gender itself is an artificial category undergoing constant revision and reinvention with no original source.\(^\text{158}\) After the influx of epistolario publications in the sixteenth century, the genre quickly disintegrated throughout the seventeenth century and virtually disappeared by the end of the century.\(^\text{159}\)

Often in their letters and prose, female writers would supplement the official or male narrative with their own perspective, creating alternative histories. Lucrezia Gonzaga retells her husband’s story, but casts herself as main character, while Veronica Franco recreates the courtesan as a figure with cultural, literary and moral integrity. In a similar way the Cronica conforms to this feminine literary ‘space’, inserting herself into a male-centered dialogue, revising the accepted civic history to include the female protagonist, Giulia.

Similar to the unique literary space inhabited by female epistolario, lyrical poems composed by male family members for women’s vestition and profession ceremonies upon entrance into the convent occupied a space problematically situated on the threshold of secular

\(^{158}\) “Just as intertextuality suggest a transvestitism of voice in which there is no original, so too does this transvestitism of voice imply that gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.” Elizabeth D. Harvey, Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 10.

\(^{159}\) Literary nun, Arcangela Tarabotti’s Lettere familiari e di complimento (1650) serve as the last major collection of familiar letters written by women.
cultural practices and secluded devotional life.\textsuperscript{160} The ceremonies that accompanied the nun’s solemn vows mirrored the extravagant ceremonies of secular marriages, and encouraged family members to host lavish ceremonies for the occasion. The Council of Trent attempted to restrict these elaborate celebrations, but to little avail. In fact, the Trinitine reforms made the girl’s exit from the world more definitive, and thus only fortified the practice of public ceremony and celebration. However, the individual nuns and their future roles in the convent receive very little attention in the lyrical poetry recited at these ceremonies, insinuating that the poems were not composed in honor of the individual nuns but in honor of the occasion.\textsuperscript{161} Written for a diverse audience, the poems negotiated the fleeting space between the girls’ secular and sacred lives, conveniently permitting the soon-to-be nuns the ability to fulfill their familial role, forming alliances and building their family’s future, even as their exit from public life was memorialized. By publicly acknowledging their daughters’ marriage to Christ, the families of Venice formed public associations and possible alliances with those families whose daughter were already committed to the institution. More significantly, the families were publicly noted as gifting one of their daughters to God, a seemingly selfless gesture sure to ingratiate the family to God and ensure divine favor in return.

The Cronica occupies a similar space to this poetic verse, hovering over the threshold of the secular and the sacred worlds. Though the author of the Cronica is concerned with her audience, as she makes a point to mention it in the introductory sentence, it is never explicitly stated who this audience is. Conclusions may nonetheless be deduced from the Cronica’s content and supposed intention. The majority of events recounted in the Cronica are civic in


\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 1154.
nature. Unconcerned with a detailed recording of life in the convent, the author focuses on the intersection of the convent with civic iconography. For this reason, it can be assumed that members of the Venetian public, including church benefactors and civic officials, were meant to view this work, not just the women within Le Vergini’s walls. If the *Cronica* was indeed composed in order to save the convent from reform, as I believe it was, the saviors of the convent needed access to the document. In addition, the narrative illustrations described in chapter two would have resonated most powerfully with those men who frequented the Great Council hall where the painted *istoria* cycle resided. Thus, the *Cronica*, like the lyrical poetry written for nuns’ entrance ceremonies, was composed for a mixed audience consisting of the nuns, secular and sacred authorities and the larger Venetian patrician population. The *Cronica* meant to rhetorically and symbolically persuade the outside secular audience from within the sacred walls of the convent that the women of Le Vergini were essential sacred and civic entities, not to be threatened without due recourse. The *Cronica* does not sit on the metaphorical doorway of the Conventual space as the lyrical poetry so perfectly does, but metaphorically attempts to manipulate the secular world with their sacred beings. Not entirely secular, nor entirely sacred, the *Cronica* creates a challenging and complex space for the ensuing dialogue.

Framing gender through this feminized ‘space’ in the early modern period allows the *Cronica* to be interpreted as it would have been in sixteenth century Venice. A more nuanced understanding of this ‘space’ can hint at why the *Cronica* was never published or hailed as a great literary work, and was subsequently dismissed and forgotten by the Venetian public. The *Cronica* would not have been discounted on account of its feminine voice, nor for its reinterpretation of a traditional masculine-centered narrative, as I have detailed several female authors who obtained success with similar objectives. However, dismissal could have occurred
because the *Cronica* did not entirely conform to one of genres deemed appropriate for female authors. The *Cronica* is not a collection of letters, devotional writing or lyrical poetry; it is a history, and a history that does not relinquish power to Venetian authorities, but attempts to assert an independent authority, challenging the accepted male-centered narrative. This disjunction between voice, genre and message could have contributed to the *Cronica*’s dismissal, and to its exiled life in the shadows. Ultimately, Le Vergini’s story arose and perished within the pages of the *Cronica*.

II. The Chronicle and Humanist Histories

The chronicle genre is not specific to Venice, but has become synonymous with the city itself, evidenced by the survival of over 1000 chronicles from the Trecento alone. By the fifteenth century, the chronicle was a standard entry in the domestic inventory of Venetian patrician households. These chronicles of Venice commonly focused on civic affairs and the definition of family identity within the context of a larger community, often compared functionally to the Florentine *ricordanza*. More importantly, Venice’s obsession with the chronicle on a familial or personal level as opposed to exclusively a state responsibility, demonstrates that the “possession and preservation of civic history was a personal affair” experienced actively in the city.  

Sharing a common goal with the narrative painting tradition discussed in the previous chapter, the chronicle seeks to make the amorphous nature of history and contemporary life tolerable, by providing lineages and a structure to nebulous happenings.

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162 Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting*, 88–89.
Chronicles and narrative painting cycles lent “coherence, wholeness, closure and moral significance” to the events that cluttered the imperfect world.  

The chronicle as a genre arose in the sixth century, and by the eighth century was a common method of recording an institutional history. Chroniclers of monastic and civic institutions usually began their work at least three to four centuries after the initial settlement, seeking to establish a record of the foundation and donation of the estate and rights. Though distinctions in the Middle Ages were acknowledged between ‘histories’ (historiae), ‘annuls’ (annals), and ‘chronicles’ (cronicon), their respective definitions were never clear. According to Gervase of Canterbury, chronicles should contain a list of events (kings, prince porlents, miracles) in chronological order. Elisabeth Van Houts pins down a slightly more specific definition:

A chronicle of a monastery or a church describes the history of the place from its foundation, or refoundation, to the author’s own time. It normally covers the founding family, the first grants of land, relics and rights, and the abbots and monks and other officials. References to outside events or persons occur only if they are directly linked with the monastery or church.

The earliest events in the history of the religious institutions were almost invariably connected to a miracle, which signified that the creation of the institution was directly controlled by God, and the sacredness of the location established by divine legitimization. Van Houts continues to note that chroniclers were often motivated by present events rather than those in the past, such as political upheavals, natural disasters, or a dispute over the acquisition or loss of property, including land, relics or rights. Often in response to one of these crises, the chronicler would be

163 Ibid., 3.
164 Elisabeth M. C. Van Houts, Local and Regional Chronicles (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1995), 13.
165 Ibid., 27. In Van Houts’ preface she explains that the chronicle, “like other genres it is not altogether easy to define” and believes that her definition may prove controversial to some.
inspired to record the institution’s possessions, or stress that the property of the convent or monastery was rightfully acquired from the beginning.

In several obvious ways, the Cronica closely aligns with Van Houts’ definition of a chronicle. The manuscript is clearly a retelling or a recording of the convent’s foundation story, covering the founding family (the Emperor and his daughter) as well as the first grants of land and rights. The ‘Peace of Venice,’ the only historical events mentioned in detail, directly relate to the foundation myth. It can be stated with a degree of certainty that the creation of the Cronica was motivated by events that transpired in the present, most likely the threat of reform in 1519. However, worldly possessions are not listed, thus these items must not have been what that convent feared losing. They were concerned with a less tangible possession—honor and dignity.

A foundational miracle, legitimizing the convent by divine right is notably absent in the Cronica, for the canonesses and their families were not looking to God for legitimization, but the state, the patriarch and ultimately the Pope. As Van Houts stresses, a chronicle’s narrative must not be understood as dry fact, but as propaganda—slanted, unreliable and strategic. Chronicles’ authors or compilers were always writing with a goal in mind, but careful not to offend powerful or potential benefactors, thus avoiding direct reference to contemporary events whenever possible. The Cronica’s author or compiler was definitely writing from a perspective deeply ingrained in the convent and the canonesses’ way of life, and with a motive to rebuff reform initiatives. Where the Cronica departs from the nature of the chronicle genre is in the bluntness of the motive and the engagement of narrativity, both visually and textually. Very little effort is exerted in explaining any events that transpired between the foundation and the current troubles of the convent. A substantial section does record each abbess of the convent and their
contributions to the community, but little else with regards to social or political events. The author or compiler is single minded in their objective, and not interested necessarily in providing a comprehensive history as much as a persuasive history.

When the Cronica is set in comparison to humanistic writing of the period, it becomes obvious that there is a significant relationship to be drawn between the two that propels the Cronica out of the chronicle genre and into humanistic discourse. Simply recognizing the time period in which the Cronica was written should give an indication that the work is not of the variety of earlier Trecento chronicles. Arising in the fourteenth century as a philosophy centered on classical texts and the agency of the individual, humanism had gained wide acceptance across the Italian peninsula by the mid-fifteenth century. By the end of the fifteenth century prominent humanists such as Marcantio Sabellico were publishing Latin humanist histories in Venice.\textsuperscript{166} An excerpt of Sabellico’s work provides a justification for humanistic histories in stark contrast to earlier “clumsy” histories (implicating the chronicle):

\begin{quote}
As I embark upon the history of Venice from the founding of the city, I can claim both truly and honestly something that several other historians- not without a trace of ambition- have claimed; I begin a history that is not just colorful, and thereby of the greatest interest, but also very much to the public good; thus it should delight the reader through the very originality of its content, and also teach every civic virtue through a host of most worthy examples.

Since I was to venture into something in full public view, and could see that my subject had been so totally butchered, as it were, lying scattered limb [hacked] for limb, in various sketches, utterly clumsy, I thought I would at least so do something useful in, so to speak , venturing upon a desert never before inhabited by anyone.\textsuperscript{167}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{166} M. Sabellico, \textit{Rerum Venetarum ad Urbe Condita libri XXXIII}, 1489
Other earlier humanist histories include those written by Francesco Contarini, Anotion Donato, and Bernardo Giustiniani. All were celebrations of the city, militantly defending Venetian institutions and values. However, Venetian values contradicted certain aspects of humanism, especially the emphasis and value placed upon the individual freedom. As a result these philosophies were absent from Venetian humanism, categorizing it as a ‘conservative movement’. This “conservative” strain of humanism and humanistic writing in Venice has received little scholarly attention outside of a small circle of specialists. Frequently the blame for humanism’s “failure” in Venice is attributed the entrenched patrician class who preferred not to break from tradition, and to the Venetian societal tendency to focus upon practical matters as opposed to the theoretical and philosophical. Venetian humanism has been characterized as a “luxury” or amusement of the leisured elite and “hollow at its core.” However, Margaret King argues that though Venetian humanism did not foster the flamboyant characters that other cultural centers did during this period, humanism served its own purpose in Venice and should be studied for its peculiarities, not deficiencies.

Humanist culture in Venice was yet another avenue for the patrician class to express their identity, superiority and power. In this way, the Cronica is a manifestation of humanist culture evident in the innumerable classical references throughout the manuscript. The author employs this methodology when explaining the convent’s identification as canonesses of the order of St. Mark under the rule of St. Augustine. In this passage the author references Aristotle’s third, fifth and tenth books of Physics, stating:

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170 See n. 169.
According to the commentator on the third book of Physics: if the beginning of anything is unknown, so too what follows is unknown… Aristotle in the fifth of his topics says that the beginning is more than half of the whole; and this is confirmed by the commentator on the tenth book of Metaphysics.\textsuperscript{171}

The chronicler also recounts a speech given by a daughter of the “noble Lord Malatesta” which gives an astounding feminist history of learned women:

If anyone of you might perchance wonder at this, Mistress Abbess, the most chaste nuns, nobles, and present parents, that I who neither by sex, nor age, nor nature, nor skill should aspire to a speech of a higher position, not even with a bond of glory, but as a studious admirer of your praise; not by my own will, but at the bidding of my elders am thought to have come here, for when I see myself about to speak among you, this matter is of such dignity and excellence that it would discourage not only me, a girl, but even any other orator. I was not trained in letters as many other women were; Nicostrata gave us the Latin letters; Carmentis and Evandria were her co-conspirators, and she taught the sounds. Minerva invented numbers and figures for working in wood and clay. Cornelia the daughter of Scipio could write in the most elegant hand. Aspasia, the most learned woman, is said to have taught Socrates. The poetess Sappho was held in the highest honor by the Greeks. They called Amesia Androgenes on account of her manly soul, and she is said to have pled cases in court. Saia Afrania also, the wife of Lucius, was very frequently offered the chance to speak in front of the magistrates. Centonia, who was called godly by Jerome in verses of Virgil, almost entirely renewed the Old and New Testaments. Since, therefore, I recognize that I am unequal by far to the task, if I do not have worthy words about the hatred of the world, about my faith, about a plea of favor in proportion to the dignity of my rank, you will give pardon to me in accordance with your pious custom.\textsuperscript{172}

By inserting themselves within the Venetian humanistic culture, the women of Le Vergini were simultaneously asserting their elite patrician identity. Thus, the \textit{Cronica} negotiated the space between the chronicle genre and the humanist histories. The chronicle remained so crucial to the Venetian sense of self, while the humanistic culture reinforced the convent’s identification as an elite patrician institution equal in status and learning to all others. By constructing her message

\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Cronica}, 21v.

\textsuperscript{172} \textit{Cronica}, 25v. Though this list of female figures may seem astounding for the author of Le Vergini to know about, this is most likely a “borrowed” passage from a selve which contained long lists of references to classical figures. I thank Dr. Suzanne Magnanini for this observation.
to speak with the patrician class, it can also be assumed that the *Cronica* was intended to be read
by the patrician class, once again confirming the potential identity of the audience.

**III. Ducali and Mariegole**

The text of the *Cronica* aligns with tradition of the chronicle and humanist histories, yet
the illuminations remain a mystery. Why illustrate a history that has never traditionally required
visual accompaniment aside from decorative initials and the occasional decorated title page?
Even if the images were authenticating the textual message, as argued earlier, what mechanism
was in place to allow for this methodology to be possible? The answer lies outside the chronicle
genre, and *istoria* paintings, and within the realm of Venetian illuminated manuscripts, the most
common of which are known as *ducali* and *mariegole*.

*Ducali* or *dogali* are technically classified as any document signed by the Doge, however
in actuality the ducali have come to include any Venetian documents published by the Republic.
The most elaborate of these documents are the contracts of duty and conduct drawn up for
individual patrician elected officials, and can be divided into three groups- *promissione* for the
Doge, *giuramentol/ capitolare* for the procurators and *commissioni* for the numerous territorial
governors and captains of galleys. Governors were elected weekly by the Grand Council and
each held short twelve to thirty-six month terms, granting thousands of offices, and fueling the
production of the illuminated ducali.173 Marigole on the other hand were commissioned by
Venice’s’ *scuole*, the same scuole who commissioned the narrative painting cycles of the last
chapter, as well as by some smaller scuole and secular organizations. These bound volumes

Kallendorf (Venezia : New Castle, DE: La Musa Talia : Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana ; Oak Knoll Press, 2009),
31–54.
were written in the vernacular and contained the scuoles’ constitution or statues, and copies of laws or acts pertaining to the functioning of the corporation. The patrons of both mariegole and ducali employed the city’s miniaturists to illuminate several pages of their manuscripts.

The heyday for the production and illumination of ducali occurred in the sixteenth century, a century which also welcomed the flourishing of the print industry in Venice. Miniaturists were initially drawn to Venice at the end of the fifteenth century due to an increased demand for hand-painted printed books. By 1520 this practice had fallen out of favor. However, the illumination of printed books was not the only opportunity available for sixteenth-century miniaturists. Helen Szépe, in studying the proliferation of ducali in the sixteenth century, concludes that “although there was increasingly less demand for some forms of illumination … certain market and guild conditions nurtured the careers of talented miniaturists… nearly 100 years after the invention of printing.” Thus, systems were in place to inspire and support the canonesses’ desire for illuminations.

Illuminated manuscripts in Venice were not exported as a commodity like the prolific productions of the printing industry. These manuscripts, including the ducali and mariegole, were produced strictly for long-term Venetian residents, and exclusively for the patrician class. Financial and governmental records indicate that illuminated manuscripts, specifically ducali, became exceedingly expensive by the end of the sixteenth century, making them only available to those in the wealthy patrician class. By 1580 ducali were known to cost as much as 48 ducats, which, when set in comparison to the 60 ducats Tintoretto received around the same date for three paintings of procurators, gives an indication of the value and status of the Venetian

illuminated manuscripts.\textsuperscript{176} Szépe, in her collection and analysis of over 1500 ducali, has identified several standard schemes in the manuscript miniatures, suggesting a certain amount of uniformity in the genre. She asks if this uniformity could “have appealed to some Venetian patricians as [a] positive expression of the ideals of \textit{unanimitas} and \textit{mediocritas}, or is this privileged class conforming to a common goal of service to the state, and of subsuming signs of individual distinction as particularly promoted by Venetian humanists in the fifteenth century? Similarly, does an increasing number of anomalously elaborate \textit{Commissioni} in the second half of the \textit{cinquecento} reflect a shift in Venetian patrician ideology toward greater acceptance of those who wished to promote themselves and their families…?”\textsuperscript{177} Though these are only suggestions, and have not yet been proven, similarities can be seen between the trends noticed by Szépe and the intentions already apparent in the \textit{Cronica}. In making the comparison, I can say with certainty, that Le Vergini’s choice to create an illuminated manuscript aligned with a larger Venetian tradition of reinforcing patrician status through the production of illuminated manuscripts. Not only were practical, structural mechanisms in place to find and commission a suitable miniaturist for the illumination of the chronicle, but the very medium itself projected status, wealth and reinforced Venetian identity and duty.

Mariegole differed from ducali in that they were representative of a communal group or society as opposed to one man and his office, and scuole routinely prohibited nobles from joining the confraternities. The manuscripts, measuring an average of 30 x 20 cm, recorded inventories

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 35.

of possessions, copies of agreements with host churches, monasteries and priests as well as a list of members, hagiographical legends and liturgical texts. Often the scuole would also commission an artist to paint prefatory miniatures and a display page, or an illuminated first text folio. The quality of the miniatures rose in the thirteenth century, but by the fifteenth exhibited a range of artistic proficiency. Although many of the large scuole had the economic means to hire the best miniatures, they did not always do so. On the surface, these manuscripts may seem like standard productions, yet Lyle Humphrey’s dissertation indicates that these manuscripts were more than a sum of their contents. She points to evidence of the mariogle’s use as paraliturgical objects, the illuminations as devotional paintings and their participation in societal rituals to suggest that these books as physical objects became representative of the scuole as a whole.

A miniature from the mariegola of the weaver guild (Fig. 66) displays a similar tile ground reminiscent of multiple illustrations in the Cronica (Fig. 6, Fig. 20, Fig. 22,) with identical light beige and white color scheme. The architectural space is meticulously constructed, diminishing through doorways to the central vanishing point. A similar technique can be seen in several of the Cronica’s illustrations (Fig. 14, Fig. 15). Finally the arrangement of the composition with the Doge seated in profile on a gold throne and interacting with a kneeling figure on the right is the same standard composition of the Doge and abbess marriage portraits in the Cronica’s necrology (Fig. 35- Fig. 48). A similar simple color palette and application of paint further connect the illuminations of the Cronica with that of the mariegole. I am not

179 Humphrey, *The Illumination of Confraternity and Guild Statues*.
suggesting the works were painted by the same hand, only that works of similar quality to that of the *Cronica*. The *Cronica*’s artist could easily have been a miniaturist employed by the city’s scuole to illuminate their semi-sacred books of rules and regulations. The status associated with the ducali could have contributed to the canonesses’ choice of medium and their decision to commission illustrations. Though the scuoles’ habit of refusing entrance to patrician members would seem to counteract the argument that manuscripts were created for the patrician class as symbols of status, it is interesting to note that there was a scuola at Santa Maria delle Vergini which commissioned a mariegola dating from the second half of the fifteenth century.¹⁸¹ To what degree the canonesses would have been involved with this scuola, and what potential access they may have had to the mariegola, if any, is not known. However, through connections with this scuola, the women could have found their miniaturist.

IV. Conclusions: The *Cronica* and her sisters

The last space this study will explore is the space of the convent itself: what visual remnants remain and what trail do they leave? Within the category of illuminated manuscripts, the only items from Le Vergini that survive are liturgical manuscripts.¹⁸² Of these, the psalter supposedly commissioned by Madonna Pellegrina da Canal is one of the more elaborate and meticulously illuminated examples (Fig. 67). The manuscript was illuminated in the workshop of Benedetto Bordone by the second Grito Master, and displays an exquisite rendering of form, figure and vegetation with delicate *all’antica* motifs and intricate jeweled borders.¹⁸³ Though

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¹⁸¹ See the description of the scuole’s mariegola in Ibid., 62. The mariegola unfortunately did not contain any miniatures.  
¹⁸² Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 90.  
¹⁸³ For further information on the manuscript see, W. H. James Weale, *Psalterium et cantica: some account of an illuminated psalter for the use of the convent of Saint Mary of the Virgins at Venice executed by a Venetian artist of the sixteenth century* (London: Ellis and Scrutton, 1887); Wormsley Library, H. George Fletcher, and Pierpont...
visually this manuscript is not at all similar to the *Cronica*, the mere existence of the manuscript clarifies some questions. First, the women of Le Vergini were financially capable of commissioning the work of superior miniaturists, and second, the women were conscious of the choices available for the illumination of their chronicle. The reason for their choice may never be known, but hypothesizing can be beneficial. Assuming that the women would have attempted to get the most respected miniaturist that they could, possibly there was a reason artists such as Benedettto Bordone refused the project.\(^\text{184}\) Respected artists may have felt the *Cronica* to be too controversial or too brazen an undertaking considering the current political environment.

Another option is that the project was too dear to entrust to an individual outside of Le Vergini’s inner circle, thus the manuscript could have been illuminated by a close family member or acquaintance with experience illuminating other genres of manuscripts. The most controversial element of the Cronica is the presence of Barbarossa’s daughter, Giulia. The abbess is the connecting thread tying Le Vergini to the mythic fabric of Venice and the only physical reminder of the imperial privileges bestowed in the twelfth century. Giulia was an imperial gift who persisted with her sacred daughters of Le Vergini. Imperial power resided in this gift, and allowing the women of Le Vergini to keep this power threatened to upset the dominant power of the Church in Venice. Taking a moment to consider the presence of Giulia in Venetian visual

\(^{184}\) I use the example of Bordone not to suggest that he was asked to illuminate the *Cronica*, but as a reminder of the caliber of miniaturists Le Vergini was capable of employing. Bordone was contracted at a churn in Padua from 1523-25, thus would not have been considered for the *Cronica*’s illuminations.
discourse may illuminate Giulia’s accepted status in the city. Not surprisingly a brief survey uncovers very few appearances by the imperial abbess.

The only other mention of a visual depiction of abbess Giulia is recorded by Cicogna. According to Cicogna, two paintings from the convent church of Le Vergini illustrating the Emperor, Pope and Doge investing Giulia as abbess hung at the church of Santa Maria dell’Orto until 1840 when they were removed by the heirs of rector don Sante Farnato who apparently owned them.\(^{185}\) There is no date attached to the creation of these paintings nor a record of who commissioned the work, or if the work was originally meant for S.M. dell’Orto. It is known, however, that many of the paintings originally residing in Le Vergini were distributed after the convent’s suppression in 1805.\(^ {186}\) One image of Giulia does not exactly create an iconic figure. Venice as a political and moral entity did not need the imperial abbess, for they had numerous other female “role models’ and were gifted many other trionfi by the Pope in 1177. But what if Giulia’s absence from the artistic milieu of Venice signified more than a collective apathy? What if it signified a suppressed threat?

The only other painting that may have born the image of Giulia is a large history painting commissioned by the canonesses from Antonio Molinari in 1700. Hung above the choir, the painting measured 14/0 piedi high and 28/6 or 28/8 piedi wide, and depicted the ‘foundation’ of Le Vergini.\(^ {187}\) Unfortunately the painting is now lost and there is no further archival indication as to the subject matter. This ‘foundation’ could have included the figure of Giulia, but it also could simply have depicted the three men who founded the convent and donated the land, the

\(^ {185}\) Cicogna, Delle Inscrizioni Veneziane Raccole Ed Illustrate, 5:17–18.
\(^ {186}\) Eight panels that would have adorned the organ loft now reside in the church of Sant’Alvise and two larger panels which would have hung on either side of the organ are now in the Museo Correr in Venice. See Lowe, Nuns’ Chronicles, 279–288.
\(^ {187}\) Ibid., 93.
Pope, the Doge and Emperor. The symbolic marriage between the Doge and the abbess of Le Vergini was an important aspect of Venetian civic ritual linking the Doge to the purity of the Virgin, but Giulia’s role in the ‘Peace of Venice,’ and her role in the founding of the convent was an addendum to Venetian history. The city of Venice did not need Giulia specifically, they only needed the papal privilege to marry the abbess, the same process through which the Doge married the sea. Giulia was le Vergini’s invention. Venice stood little to gain from Giulia’s specific identity, nothing that they did not already have, but allowing Le Vergini to have Giulia gave the convent a source of power, the power of an imperial gift. Giulia is not Venetian. Le Vergini did not choose to rally behind the daughter of a Venetian Doge, proclaiming their status as an ideal Venetian institution. Instead they chose Giulia, a daughter of a foreign power and a gift to Venice. By threatening the women descendent from Giulia, Venice threatened the Gift and the peace between the Pope, Emperor and the Doge. In this way the manuscript could be seen as taking the patriarch’s threat of reform and throwing it back at Venice herself, as a form of blackmail. Without Le Vergini and the gift of Giulia, the peace that graced Venice since the twelfth century would crumble. Instead of caving into the pressure of Le Vergini’s message, Venice chose to suppress it. Giulia as an icon of peace remained on the pages of the Cronica and did not enter the vision of the greater Venetian public. Le Vergini’s attempt to carve a space for Giulia may have been so well executed that it induced fear and dismissal. Fear and dismissal are more final and emphatic than ignorance or apathy. The next chapter will explore the investment Venice and her leaders had in Le Vergini and her sisters, and why a powerful female institution could have invoked fear in the early sixteenth century.

By comparing the chronicle to multiple literary genres and categories of illuminated manuscripts, it is possible to begin to visualize the space the Cronica negotiated in sixteenth
century Venice. Through an analysis of the gendered literary ‘space’, it becomes apparent that the *Cronica* was unique in Venice as a form of female history writing in the sixteenth century intended for a public audience, specifically the elite patrician class. It negotiated its own gendered space similar to but separate from that of the epistolary and poetic medium. The *Cronica* as chronicle clarifies the manuscript’s mission to establish an institutional history while humanistic characteristics implicate a patrician audience. Considerations of illuminated manuscript production in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries reveal that the *Cronica* was reliant upon the social implications of status, ingrained in the tradition of manuscript illustration to once again reinforce the manuscript’s authority and lend honor and dignity to its message. Here, once again, the intent of the manuscript indicates the intended audience, elite and governmental. Finally, looking at the *Cronica* as one of the multiple possessions held by the convent of Le Vergini helps to elucidate the specific role the convent hoped their historical manuscript would fulfill. In contrast to the function of the illustrations in the convent’s liturgical manuscripts, the *Cronica*’s illustrations were not intended to increase the material value of the manuscript, but to narrate and validate the convent and its history. The *Cronica* was meant to create a ‘history,’ but it may have been too little, too late. A search for Le Vergini’s visual assertions in Venice’s visual culture came up with very little; Giulia, Le Vergini’s addition to Venetian history, did not make a successful leap from the pages of the *Cronica* into the visual history of the city’s myth, or the visual environment of Venice.
4. **Venetian Nunneries: “Battlegrounds of the Aristocracy”**

Venice reached the peak of her strength and power in the Quattrocento, and swiftly began her steady decline. The War of Cambrai (1509-17) was one of the crucial turning points at which time Venice began to lose territory and both military and mercantile strength. Convents may seem an odd place to see these tensions manifest, but a complex web of economic, political and social factors fashioned self-destructive battlefields out of the city’s nunneries. Sperling speaks of this battleground in reference to the aristocracy’s battle of conspicuous consumption, collecting the patrician daughters as a form of spiritual currency. By the mid-seventeenth century nearly 2,500 nuns resided in approximately thirty convents. This trend essentially reflected the situation in cities throughout Italy, but Venice was unique in its lack of alternatives, such as boarding schools or conservatories for semi-religious groups. Sperling estimates that 54% of patrician women lived in the city’s convents in 1581, and around 70% of Venetian nuns were from the patrician class.

The city’s nunneries also became the site of the city’s moral battle with itself. Believing their military defeats to be the work of God and his displeasure with Venice’s immorality, Venetians came to blame their collective immorality on the moral decline of the convents. Diarist Girolamo Priuli went so far as to accuse the city’s nuns with the ruin of Venice, claiming the convent to be common “bordellos and whorehouses.” His opinions were not unique, but echoed throughout the city. In holding the city’s virgins, the convents were meant to represent

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188 Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice.*
190 See Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice,* Tables 1 & 2: 27.28 and Appendix Table A2: 246–48.
the purity of the city itself. For centuries, Venice relied upon these aristocratic convents to serve the state through their piety, purity and prayer, but when they flouted or disregarded their religious duties, they caused severe spiritual harm to the city.

Venice was not alone in believing her convents and the enclosed women inside to be the embodiment of virginity and the metaphoric representation of the Virgin Mary. Many other cities and towns held similar sociopolitical ideologies, but Venice, more than other cities, was more intimately married to her convents. A strong communal belief in perfection and the unconquered nature of the virginal city that permeated the civic myth, as well as a pervasive political mythology linking the city’s birth to the Virgin’s Immaculate Conception, tethered Venice to her numerous convents. The fragility of a woman’s untouched body came to embody the city’s patrician or ruling class, and served as a line of defense against political corruption.

In recent years, portraits of Venetian religious women have risen to the forefront of early modern scholarship, either as case studies of the “involuntary nun” or the sensationalized “bad nun.” The oddities of both stereotyped groups are merely symptoms of a larger, more complicated social struggle to maintain power and control, and, in the end, a desperate attempt for survival. Gender roles contributed significantly to the political maneuverings in Venice at this time, but it was not as simple as men restricting women’s freedoms and agency in an effort to maintain a consistent, stable society. Here, I discuss gender with respect to familial frameworks and individuals’ identities as wives, husbands, sisters, brothers, mothers and fathers. Each role is gendered, but no role can be stereotyped by gender. As Stanley Chojnacki notes, it is difficult to “construct a typology of women’s networks because of the differences among the

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experiences of individual women. Those differences are a primary reason why the study of women- and for that matter the gender experiences of men, too- cannot be confined to the search for general tendencies but must take into account the varied ways in which women and men acted within, and against, rules and customs and norms in constructing their individual lives.”

This chapter examines the individual roles the women of Le Vergini performed, and the political climate which characterized and defined these roles. I conclude with a consideration of Le Vergini’s desire to gain or retain power, and the women’s exploitation of their founding abbess as more than a character in a drama, but a saint who became their metaphoric relic in an effort to assert the community’s civic authority.

I. The Convent Paradox

Venice’s convents encircled the city, both banished from the city center and forming a protective spiritual barrier. Though these convents and the women inside may have been viewed as “dead to the world” and “buried alive,” their institutions were nonetheless repositories of value, symbolically, politically and economically.

The patriciate, as it was manifest in the sixteenth century, came into being around 1297 with the first Serrata, or closing of the Grand Council. This formative moment in Venetian history officially limited entry into the elite ruling class. However definitive this first Serrata may appear, Venice continued to mold and amend the rules set forth in 1297 throughout the Republic’s lifetime. One of the more significant amendments occurred in the early Cinquecento, in part a reaction to Venice’s struggles and her heavy losses incurred during the War of Cambrai.

193 Chojnacki, Women and Men in Renaissance Venice, 14.
This war shattered Venetian self-confidence, sending the state in search of a way to restore the government’s strength and prestige. A new vocabulary of “purity” with respect to patrician lineage entered the legal discourse.\textsuperscript{195} The Grand Council had been growing exponentially in part due to the lack of commercial opportunities for the sons of elite families.\textsuperscript{196} The government could not support this growth financially, thus tighter restrictions were instituted for entrance into the Grand Council. Each man’s lineage had to be verified with great scrutiny placed on the mother of the applicant. In order to confirm the nobility of the mother, marriage became a very public transaction. Before this rule was established it was not uncommon for patrician men to find a place in the government for their illegitimate sons. Bastardy was on the rise in Venice, and threatened to “taint” the purity of the Grand Council and the city itself.

As a result of these new entrance restrictions to the Grand Council, patrician women became essential to the success of men’s careers and were highly valued in the marriage market. One logically would assume finding suitable husbands within the ruling elite class for these noble women would be an easy task; however, there were other factors at play. On an economic level, patrician families were concerned with preserving their family patrimony or wealth. In an effort to avoid dividing the wealth amongst multiple heirs, it became common for families to arrange marriages for only one son and one daughter, resulting in an entire population of unmarried youth. This unmarried male population fathered many illegitimate children, both from nuns and women of lower classes, populating the city with reminders of society’s immorality. Though it took many generations to suffer the ultimate consequence of such a


\textsuperscript{196} See pg. 55, n. 129 in for the statistics of the growing population of Council members.
limited reproductive practice, eventually the patrician class dwindled to the point that they were forced to let families outside of the nobility buy their way in.

With so few eligible men to marry, dowry prices began to rise to exorbitant amounts. It is for this reason that many scholars believe that convent enrollment began to rise simultaneously.\textsuperscript{197} Men could remain unmarried without causing significant societal tensions, but unmarried women and their “unrestrained” sexuality threatened to send society into moral ruin.\textsuperscript{198} Enclosing women behind God’s walls could also have been seen as spiritual gift giving, spiritually elevating the family of the new nun. In the end, regardless of why women were confined to convents, these institutions became acceptable repositories for errant noble women.

Thus far I have framed women’s roles in Venice as passive pawns at the mercy of their fathers, brothers and uncles, yet this depiction is not entirely accurate. As the cost of dowries rose, so did the wealth of the women who possessed them. According to Venetian law, women remained in control of their portion of the family patrimony, investing and gifting as they saw fit. Through a study of wills written by patrician women, Stanley Chojnacki reveals that women often utilized their dowry to invest in business opportunities, and often left large portions of their wealth to family relations, both male and female. For these reasons men had motivation to remain in good standing with their female relations “and this gave women a powerful means of influencing male activity.”\textsuperscript{199}

Though convents were a more economical option for patrician families with multiple daughters, convents did require a “spiritual dowry,” meaning girls often brought the convent a

\textsuperscript{198} Ruggiero, \textit{The Boundaries of Eros}.
\textsuperscript{199} Chojnacki, “Women in Early Renaissance Venice,” 200.
great deal of money and property upon entering. The patrician women also brought servants and
certain living expectations to their new lives in the convents. Widows often chose to enter a
convent instead of remarrying, in which case their dowries followed them. Thus, the women in
the patrician convents acquired significant wealth and influence in the community. Much of the
reform efforts during the period arose from the societal tensions spawned by the rising
population of nuns, and the economic and symbolic power they harbored as an institution. If it
was necessary for women to enter these all-female repositories for the economic safety of their
families, the families in turn needed the women, who remained active in the lives of their
familial relations, to remain content with their lives. The city, on the other hand, needed the
convents to serve their symbolic and spiritual purpose, remaining chaste, silent and invisible.
These two contradictory expectations of the women in the city’s convents refused to complement
one another, causing a great deal of social friction, and ultimately transforming the convents into
sites of moral and civic combat.

II. Nuns and Reform: The Pen of Marin Sanudo

Scandal riddled Venice at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Multiple pregnancies in
the city’s aristocratic convents were uncovered, and other nuns were discovered to be
romantically involved with clergy members and the city’s overwhelming young male patrician
population. Diarist Marin Sanudo reports certain events of a controversial nature emanating
from the convent of Ogni Santi: “In the last few days it was learned that the abbess of Ogni
Santi, who is no longer abbess, was made pregnant, along with other nuns by one Father
Francesco Persegin, who has been arrested. There upon, the patriarch, in a great uproar went to
the convent with state attorneys… the abbess was arrested, and I will report what comes of it.”  

Shortly after the Venetian defeat at the battle of Agnadello in 1509, the Senate proposed a new law that read “all those who traffic with nuns, within the convent or outside it, and likewise those who take nuns away from convents… shall, in addition to imprisonment and fines that the preceding laws imposed, be perpetually banished from Venice and its environs, and be prohibited from holding office and enjoying any benefit or emolument of our government in any of the territories.”  

Sanudo continues to outline the new law’s punishments for escaped nuns and those who harbored the women, as well as stipulations for Conventual nun’s servants.  

Some felt this law may follow the old Venetian proverbs which stated “A Venetian law lasts but a week” [parte Veneziana dura una sptimana], and this may have proved true if Antonio Contarini had not been elected patriarch of Venice on November 17, 1508. Contarini was set on pursuing drastic reforms of patrician convents. These initial reforms were delayed until 1513 due to the War of the League of Cambrai, Julius II’s excommunication of Venice in 1509 and a host of hostile armies on the Terraferma. In 1514 Sanudo records the beginning of the reform efforts as that the Council of Ten ordered grilles to be installed on the windows of San Zaccaria and sent the vicar of the patriarch to close the parlors. Like Le Vergini, San Zaccaria was a canoness house that did not observe clausura. The women of San Zaccaria supposedly “drew together [and defended themselves] with stones and forced the officials and vicar to leave against their will.”  

Reform did not proceed smoothly for Antonio Contarini and his vicar, for the

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201 Ibid., 382, (8:454–56) June 29, 1509.  
202 Ibid., 384, (18: 323) July 1, 1514.
families of the patrician nuns “actively defended the privileges of their daughters.”

According to Sanudo, reform at Santa Maria delle Vergini began in May of 1519:

Yesterday morning the patriarch, with ser Benedeto Zorzi, state attorney, and his vicar and other notaries, went to the convent of the Verzene, and he summoned the abbess and nuns to the chapter and said that the Signoria wished to cloister them and make them Observants, and he asked for their opinions. And first the abbess and then the others answered that they in no way wished to become Observants; they were Conventuals, and the ones who were misbehaving should be punished, etc. These convents are under the *jus patronatus* of the doge; they take no vows, nor is any prelate their superior, according to bulls that they have from the pope. And the doge sent Lorenzo Rocha, the secretary of the patriarch, to record and in his name give necessary authority [to the patriarch] to reform these monasteries through closure, etc.

Three days later the patrician family members of the women took their argument to the Collegio. “Certain relatives of the nuns of [Santa Maria delle] Vergini came into the Collegio to plead that these nuns did not want others to be placed there; it was enough that they be strictly enclosed and brought over to the observance. The Doge [Leonardo Loredan] dismissed them, saying that he did not want to hear them, and that the decrees of the Council of Ten should be obeyed.”

Protests failing, a dividing wall was installed in the convent a month later. State attorneys along with captains, official and masons “entered the convent by force having broken down the doors, and partitioned part of the convent.” The nuns promptly tore down the wall, and told the state attorneys that the patriarch who attempted to threaten them was not their superior, referring to their status as the Doge and Pope’s institution, and thus the patriarch had no right to invoke such threats. In addition, the nuns sought papal support and received a papal brief stating that the Pope wished the nuns to be reformed, but did not support the introduction of observant nuns into

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203 Ibid.
204 Ibid., 385, (27:317) May 21, 1519.
the convent. In celebration, the nuns rang their bells all night long, infuriating the patriarch who lived across the waterway at San Pietro. This incident along with the subsequent decision by the state is recorded by Sanudo on June 28, 1519:

This morning the Patriarch came into the Collegio and had audience there with the Heads of the Ten, the Avogadori and the Collegio, all other persons being sent outside. He complained that the nuns of the Vergini had, yesterday and throughout the night, rung bells to celebrate the arrival of a brief from the Pope addressed to his legate, to the effect that the nuns were to be reformed but that the no others were to be introduced into the convent. There was much discussion as to what was to be done about the matter. They noted that there was an earlier papal brief which gave faculties to the Patriarch to reform the said conventual nunneries and bring them to observance, taking what measures he chose, and it seemed to the Doge and Patriarch and to all the Collegio and the Heads of the Ten that they should not obey this second brief…

By August of 1519, the ambassador that the Doge and patriarch had sent to Rome, finally achieved his goal and received a bull from the Pope approving the patriarch’s reforms and affirming the patriarch’s right to complete reform even though several of the convents were outside of his jurisdiction. Sanudo records the nuns’ response recalling that the “Conventual nuns are in flight, sending their things away from the convent to their relatives.” Resistance continued, fueled by the death of Doge Loredan and the election of Doge Antonio Grimani on July 6, 1521. Grimani was much more responsive to the nuns’ plight as his son, Cardinal Domenico Grimani, was the official protector of the Conventual convent of Santa Chiara.

With a new hope, the abbesses from four Conventual convents including Le Vergini, San Zaccaria, La Celestia and Santa Marta visited the Collegio to make one more plea for help on August 21, 1521:

208 This could have been the moment at which the Cronica departed from Le Vergini. Sanudo, Venice, Cità Excelentissima, 388 (27:593) August 26, 1519.
209 Doge to which the chronicle is dedicated, Cronica, 3r.
These ladies fell to their knees before the Doge [Antonio Grimani] and the abbess of the Vergini talked Latin and made quite a speech. Then Sier Nicolò Michiel, son of Sier Francesco, who had sisters and daughters in San Zaccaria and had sat down among the Savii agli Ordini, spoke eloquently of the cruelty shown to noble persons. Our own gentle women had been ruined and dispersed, and all on account of a certain Vicar General to the Patriarch, a Romagnol who had been banished from Rome with a price on his head; he had made great difficulties for these nuns, that he might rob them or have his wicked way with anyone he pleased. [Sier Nicolò] added that at San Zaccaria, where all used to be noble, there were now installed nuns of another order, following a different rule and wearing a different habit - base-born women, Greeks and plebeians to boot. What had stood for 760 years had now been taken from them, when they had spent 46,000 ducats on the church, the convent and the magnificent refectory…

A Decree from the Council of Ten and Zonata, issued on September 17, 1521, established a magistracy responsible for the city’s convents. The three men elected to this council were responsible for the oversight of the nuns’ lives and their provisions. “All matters concerning the nun’s livelihood shall be determined and resolved by a majority, and their decisions shall be as firmly established as if they were acts of this Council.” However, troubles with the convents continued. Sex scandals within the convents continued to populate court documents into the seventeenth century, regardless of reform efforts. Bad behavior continued, but Le Vergini did not win her fight, even after appealing to the new Doge. After Abbess Clara Donato’s oration at the Collegio, Le Vergini began to fade from Sanudo’s diaries, as well as public view. By 1537, the convent was entirely Observant, all of the earlier Conventual canonesses having departed or died. The Cronica failed as a persuasive technique, as did all other forms of resistance.

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212 Ibid.
213 See ‘The misconduct of nun’s servants 1528’ at San Zaccaria and ‘An Illicit liaison between a nobleman and nun, 1585. In Ibid, 204-6.
III. Relics: The Nun’s Body and Sources of Power

The reform efforts pursued above threatened the independent power of female institutions, indicated by the extreme resistance nuns and the families exhibited in an effort to counter the patriarchy. As retainers of immense spiritual power, the relics of female convents came under threat as well. Helen Hills has recently argued that relics may have functioned as the nuns’ spiritual counterparts, utilizing the currency of power held within the relic to establish authority where other forums were denied them. A relic’s holiness could then be directly associated with the nuns’ body. As the nun’s body could metaphorically represent the sanctity of a city, or as intercessors on behalf of the city, a convent’s relic could metonymically represent the nuns’ bodies in their absence. It is no far stretch to see the connection between the presence of nuns and the holy remnants of saints. Saints were often literally martyred while nuns were martyred metaphorically. A sign of a saintly body was the non-putrification of the physical remains, closely related the crucial role of virginity to female sanctity. However, a relic’s authenticity depended on the social recognition of its origin and power. Without this cult of belief, the relic was just a bone. The presence of this belief transformed the bone as a passive object into a “site,” possessing holy authority, and the ultimate success of a convent often depended upon their ability to successfully promote their relics.

Spiritual capital was not only held in the bodies of the nuns, but also in the formation of the city itself, as a form of sacred geography. Venice viewed herself as a new Jerusalem, however, she was also the launching point for many pilgrims making their way to the Holy Land. A circuit of votive churches in Venice allowed these pilgrims to venerate the city’s relics.

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reinforcing Venice’s connection to Jerusalem. Since the ‘transaltio’ of St. Marks’ relic, Venice became obsessed with importing Christian relics, and consequently became more aware and conscious of the relics’ power.²¹⁵

San Zaccaria, Venice’s wealthiest and most prestigious convent, at one time possessed more full body relics than any other institution other than San Marco. The convent was believed to have been founded in the fifth century after the foundation of Venice’s first church San Giacomo al Rialto. It is also believed that the church served as the ducal chapel until San Marco was built in the ninth century. According to tradition, the women of San Zaccaria donated a portion of their property in the twelfth century to the Doge in order to enlarge the Piazza San Marco. They also provided the city with the extremely large sum of 80,000 ducats in the fifteenth century to subsidize the war with Padua.²¹⁶ It is said that to express their sincere gratitude for the convent’s generosity, the Doge and Senate attended Easter Sunday vespers at the convent on a yearly basis. A document dating from 827 lists several relics gifted to the convent by the Byzantine Emperor Leo the Armenian (813-820) by way of Doge Giustiniano Partecipazio.²¹⁷ San Zaccaria obtained her other relics from Pope Benedict III in 855. According to Andrea Dandolo, the nuns became close friends with the Pope when he sought refuge in the city for a brief time. When he returned to Rome he thanked the nuns by sending them the bodies of Saints Pancratius, Nerens, Achilleus, and Sabin from the Roman catacombs, all Early Christian martyrs. The nuns themselves remained the direct custodians of the relics until the

²¹⁷ The text can be found in Roberto Cessi, *Documenti relative all a storia di Venezia anteriori al mille, Secoli V-IX*. See Ibid., 181, n. 17.
sixteenth century when they were removed from the nuns’ choir and transported to the newly constructed convent church, which had been sealed off from the nuns’ church.\textsuperscript{218}

The similarities between San Zaccaria and Le Vergini are remarkable. By comparing the two convents and their stories, it is possible to achieve a clearer idea of the motivations behind Le Vergini’s illustrated chronicle. Both institutions promoted their strong connection to Byzantium with San Zaccaria’s link to Emperor Leo the Armenian in the ninth century and Le Vergini’s link to Emperor Frederick Barbarossa in the eleventh century. Both Le Vergini and San Zaccaria also claimed a certain intimacy with the Doge, and a connection to the ducal chapel, whether as a sister institution (Le Vergini) or actually serving as the chapel in Venice’s early history (San Zaccaria). Both institutions were patrician convents and both were the subject of Antonio Contarini’s reforms in 1519. They would have been aware of each other’s tactics or resistance and may have attempted to benefit from the strength in each other’s prestigious histories.

Le Vergini did not claim to possess a relic in her chronicle which is odd for a city fascinated with the power and authority of relics. Less than three decades after their supposed foundation, the year 1204 marked the sack of Constantinople in the fourth crusade, of which Venice arose a victor and returned with innumerable ancient relics and Byzantine treasures. Even as a newly founded convent, it is odd that Le Vergini would not have received a relic from the plunder. I have uncovered no evidence to answer this question, but it does throw an interesting light on Giulia’s story and her representation in the chronicle. Could Le Vergini have attempted to fabricate a relic as well as a history? Knowing that San Zaccaria’s possession of holy relics gave them a measure of authority that Le Vergini did not possess, could Le Vergini

\textsuperscript{218} Innocenzo Giuliani, “Genesi e primo secolo di vita del magistrato sopra monasteri: Venezia 1519-1620” (1963).
have tried to compensate and fabricate? All they needed was a body and a cult to believe. The *Cronica* could sow the seeds for both.

**IV. The Funeral of Giulia Barbarossa**

After lying in bed with the “gravest illness for nearly six days,” the *Cronica* records the last words of abbess Giulia, said to have died in “the year of the lord 1204, when the most illustrious Lord Pietro Ziani was reigning,” leaving her example so others “may follow in her footsteps.”

Directly beneath these words, the first of three funeral images depicts Giulia’s body lying in a bed made with rich red cloth atop a bier surrounded by many women in white vestments (Fig. 25). A black canopied structure crowned with lit candles and emblazoned in gold with the initials S.M.V. encases Giulia’s body lying on the bed, creating a microenvironment of death. This scene represents the first of three days of mourning described in the following text. Each of the successive funerary images, which occupy the facing page of the manuscript, zoom out, forcing Giulia further and further into the background. The second image of the funeral illustrates a new day and a new gathering of mourners (Fig. 26). Implicated in the text, the ten men in white robes are assumed to be the “preaching brothers” or the Canon’s Regular of St. Mark. Subtle architectural features such as the steps marking entrance to the scene as well as the doorway to the right indicate that the Giulia’s body has processed to a new location.

Below the second image, the third and final representation of Giulia’s funeral reveals a secular audience presided over by the Doge and numerous other men in while, black and red robes (Fig. 26). Once again, Giulia’s body has processed to a new location indicated by a

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219 *Cronica*, 26r-v.
different set of stairs at the entrance to the scene, white columns on either side of the bier, and a small white doorway opening to the right. The Cronica records that “on the third day, the Canons proceeded with every cleric, including the most serene prince, with his most illustrious dominion, and on this day the funeral was held, and a funerary speech was recited.” The following speech praises Giulia for her heritage, modesty, virginity and ability to “author peace”:

Although being famous first for her most illustrious heritage, born from such a great Roman emperor, most appealing in her body, she was most famous for her righteousness and true wisdom. Even from her youngest years, she suckled modesty and divine elegance with her milk; with this fate, I say, she was born so that she would be the author of peace, no differently from Caesar, for the Pope and the whole of Italy. How much virtue there was in her soul; how graceful and angelic was her visible virginity, evident in her clear proofs, discerned easily by prophecies; she always spurned every allurement of pleasure and earthly temptation. And she acquitted herself of human fragility from every lip. From this she was suitably dedicated as guardian and manager of the virgins.\(^{220}\)

The orator continues, comparing Giulia to the saintly nuns of other cities: “We are able to glory in you no differently than the many nations glory in the saintly nuns; Alexandria boasts her Catherine, Antioch their Margaret, Cappadocia in Dorothy, Sicily in Agatha, Ireland her Brigit; Syracuse rejoices in Lucia, Milan in Eusemia, Assisi in Clara, and other nations exult in other virgins, whom it would take too long to recall.”\(^{221}\) This text implies that Giulia was held in saintly status, even if she never became a saint in the Church. The entirety of Le Vergini’s foundation story is built on a myth, requiring the reader to believe. Is it such a far stretch to ask the reader and the city to believe in Giulia, as the founding abbess, saint and relic? Though it is not unusual for chronicles or convents to focus upon the death of their founding abbess, the unique combination of time, place and motivation evident in Le Vergini’s chronicle provides an exception. Focusing upon the crusading period, Giulia dies the same year that crusaders were

\(^{220}\) Cronica, 27v.

\(^{221}\) Cronica, 28r.
returning from the conquered eastern lands with powerful and cherished relics. Venice, and specifically Le Vergini, were believed to be reincarnations of the Jerusalem, holy sites in and of themselves. And finally, when considering the manuscript as a whole and the forceful, persuasive tone of power and authenticity lacing the words and images, all aspects of the narrative should be considered for what they can contribute to the overall argument. Giulia as the leader of the Holy Virgins emblematic of the Virgin Mary in Jerusalem, becomes a holy body, a holy relic, representative of the women behind Le Vergini’s walls and the words of the *Cronica*.

I have outlined the climate of reform that Le Vergini found herself operating within at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and the strong impulse to self-preserve, recorded by Marin Sanudo. All historical evidence points to the *Cronica* serving as yet another weapon in Le Vergini’s arsenal to combat reform. Understanding the spiritual currency relics held in early modern Venice and their close symbolic associations with the nun’s body, opens the door to another possible interpretive facet of the *Cronica*. Instead of simply constructing and recording the foundation of the convent, the illuminated manuscript may have also sought to construct a cult centered around the legendary nun Giulia.

Finally, it is important to remember who would have seen and read the *Cronica*, and how the manuscript would have been interpreted by those who viewed it. As elucidated above in Chapter two, the artist and patron’s choice to include a narrative *istoria* cycle in the series of miniatures indicates that the reader was most likely familiar with the paintings in the Great Council Hall, insinuating that at least a portion of the intended audience were the patrician men of the Great Council. Yet, the *Cronica* does not specifically address this group men, but instead speaks to the Pope. Appeals had been made to the Collegio by the women of Le Vergini and
their families, and these appeals had failed, thus the Pope’s intercession was Le Vergini’s last hope.

In contrast to Venice’s large istoria paintings, illuminated manuscripts were not a public medium, thus the Cronica must have been created knowing it was destined for a life in the private realm, with personal, intimate viewings. The Cronica was not publically “presented” to ruling officials, but may have been “presented” to those same men in private, when persuasive techniques could prove more individualized and potentially fruitful. Giulia entered the discourse of history as a private and persuasive icon in a private and persuasive manuscript. However, this should not diminish the Cronica’s ability to threaten the stability of society and the power of the government. This chapter has sought to reveal what the city of Venice and her ruling officials stood to lose if the convents were not reformed. Allowing Le Vergini to keep the illustrious history described in the Cronica, and the imperial gift of Giulia, threatened to discourage all of the reform efforts. The women of Le Vergini did not seek to advertise their history without a cause; they sought to reverse the reform. Accepting Le Vergini’s foundation, Abbess Giulia, and the convent’s role in the ‘Peace of Venice’ meant accepting Le Vergini’s freedom to ignore the patriarch’s and Council’s orders. These social factors, in combination with the Cronica’s message, are why the Cronica may have been seen as a threat to social order and ultimately suppressed.
Conclusion

The construction of ‘history’ is one method to psychologically destroy an enemy, but ‘history’ does not win wars. History’s power lies after the event has concluded in the reimagining and restructuring of the past. The history constructed by Le Vergini and manifest in the Cronica, provided little aid in the Venetian nunnery’s battle for power. Time was of the essence for the women of Le Vergini, and history is unconcerned with efficiency; it develops and forms its rich layers over long stretches of time. Unfortunately for the women, their illustrious civic history as related in the Cronica lacked the solid foundation of time, and failed in its goal of authenticating the convent’s power and vital civic importance. Struggles for power in the end are about fear, the fear of losing power, of losing control, and of losing independence. Both sides, the community in the convent and the individuals who ruled the city, were desperately clinging to power, utterly fearful of what they might lose.

The document produced in the environment of fear is unique in what it reveals about the visual and textual methods of persuasion in the sixteenth century. What alters public and personal opinion, and how one forms and constructs an argument to persuade, can offer a glimpse into the historical psyche, a glimpse I hope to have provided. The motivation behind the Cronica was not typical, thus the product was atypical as well and relied upon multiple authorities in its attempt to succeed. In large part what makes the Cronica the odd object that it is has to do with a combination of audience, message and motivations. The Cronica negotiated a literary and artistic space fraught with gendered expectations and stipulations. Ultimately, the Cronica could never conform to fit the space that the Venetian public was willing to accept, nor could it forge its own. I have sought throughout my visual analysis of this manuscript to interpret the book as an active organism, each of its folios providing visual and textual evidence.
to support its assertions. It is in this evidence that it becomes possible to reconstruct a history of a history.

My study of Le Vergini and the *Cronica* has only just skimmed the surface of analytic possibilities. Much more work is needed to investigate the nuances of the visual and textual relationships that unfold across the manuscripts folios. I hope that future studies will thoroughly investigate the interaction between the miniatures and Venetian painting, surpassing my initial analysis of the images in relation to Venetian narrative painting, as well as the manuscript’s relationship to the Fourth Crusade and the holy city of Jerusalem. In the end, this thesis asks more questions than it answers, as it should.
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Appendix

Biblioteca del Museo Correr, Venice (M.S. Correr, 317) ca. 1523.

Gouache and gold leaf on paper; 63 folios; page size, 43 x 28.7 cm. Brown leather binding, 45 x 30 cm.

Folio 10r, *Frontispiece*, 40.2 x 27.7 cm. (Fig. 6)

Folio 10v, *Saint Peter sitting on his throne*, 11.7 x 21.7 cm. (Fig. 12)

Folio 11r, *St. Mark blesses a group of Canons*, 13.9 x 20 cm. (Fig. 13)

Folio 11v, *St. Mark blesses St. Ephygenia’s order of nuns*, 13.5 x 20 cm. (Fig 14.)

Folio 12r, *St. Thomas blesses Pelagia*, 14 x 20 cm. (Fig. 15)

Folio 12v, *Pope Clement blesses seven women veiled in white*, 14 x 20.1 cm. (Fig. 16)

Folio 13r, *Portrait of Abbess Aurea*, 6.2 x 6.6 cm. (Fig. 17)

Folio 13v, *History of Milan*, 4 x 5.7 cm. (Fig. 18)

Folio 14v, *History of Milan*, 10.2 x 20 cm. (Fig. 19)

Folio 15r, *Pope Alexander III blessing Doge Sebastiano Ziani at Santa Maria della Carita* (above), 12.2 x 19.5 cm; and *Doge Sebastiano Ziano accepting the surrender of Otto, son of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa* (below), 12.2 x 19.5 cm. (Fig. 20)

Folio 15v, *Peace ceremony between Emperor Barbarossa, Pope Alexander III and Doge Sebastiano Ziani at San Marco*, 26.2 x 19.5 cm. (Fig 21)

Folio, 18r, *The founding of Le Vergini by Emperor Barbarossa, Pope Alexander III and Doge Sebastiano Ziani* (?), 31.3 x 20.1, cm. (Fig. 22)

Folio, 18v, *The consecration of Abbess Giulia and her ‘marriage’ to Doge Sebastiano Ziani*, 30.7 x 20.8 cm. (Fig. 23)

Folio 20r, *Portrait of Christ*, 5.2 x 6.7 cm. (Fig. 24)

Folio 26v, *First day of Abbess Giulia’s funeral*, 17.3 x 20 cm. (Fig. 25)

Folio 27r, *Second day of Abbess Giulia’s funeral* (above) 15 x 20.3 cm, *Third day of Abbess Giulia’s funeral* (below), 15 x 20.3 cm. (Fig. 26)

Folio 29v, *The consecration of Abbess Maria Ziani*, 30.6 x 20 cm. (Fig. 27)
Folio 30r, The symbolic marriage of Doge Pietro Ziani to Abbess Maria Ziani during the reign of Pope Innocent III, 30.8 x 20.2 cm. (Fig. 28)

Folio 33r, The symbolic marriage of Doge Marino Morosini to Abbess [Zitia?] Ziani during the reign of Pope Innocent IV, 12.1 x 10.5 cm (Fig. 29)

Folio 34r, The symbolic marriage of Doge Reniero Zeno to Abbess Polisena Corner during the reign of Pope Urban IV, 12.1 x 11 cm. (Fig. 30)

Folio 35r, The symbolic marriage of Doge Pietro Gradenigo to Abbess Euphemia [Mastelici?] during the reign of Pope Gregory X, 11.9 x 11.6 cm. (Fig. 31)

Folio 36r, The symbolic marriage of Doge Marino Faliero to Abbess Jacobina [Canalis?] during the reign of Pope Boniface VIII, 12.3 x 11.7 cm. (Fig. 32)

Folio 37r, The symbolic marriage of Doge Giovanni Soranzo to Abbess Maria [Venezia?] during the reign of Pope John XII, 11 x 11.8 cm. (Fig. 33)

Folio 38r, The symbolic marriage of Doge Francesco Dandolo to Abbess Nicoleta Zorzi during the reign of Pope Benedict XII, 11.5 x 11.8 cm. (Fig. 34)

Folio 38v, The symbolic marriage of Doge Andrea Dandolo to Abbess Agnese Canal during the reign of Pope Clement VI, 11.7 x 11.3 cm. (Fig. 35)

Folio 39v, The symbolic marriage of Doge Andrea Contarini to Abbess Elisabet Querini during the reign of Pope Urban V, 11.7 x 10.7 cm. (Fig. 36)

Folio 40r, The symbolic marriage of Doge Tommaso Mocenigo to Abbess Marina Dandolo during the reign of Pope Boniface IX, 12.7 x 13 cm. (Fig. 37)

Folio 40v, The symbolic marriage of Doge [Tommaso Mocenigo?] to Abbess Agnese Loredan during the reign of Pope Martin V, 11.7 x 12 cm. (Fig. 38)

Folio 41v, The symbolic marriage of Doge Francesco Foscari to Abbess Francesca Zorzi during the reign of Pope Gregory XII, 12 x 12.7 cm. (Fig. 39)

Folio 43v, The symbolic marriage of Doge Francesco Foscari to Abbess Ellena Contarini during the reign of Pope Eugene IV, 11 x 10.6 cm. (Fig. 40)

Folio 44v, The symbolic marriage of Doge Francesco Foscari to Abbess [Soradamor?] Morosini during the reign of Pope Eugene IV, 12 x 20 cm. (Fig. 41)

Folio 46r, The symbolic marriage of Doge Pasquale Malipiero to Abbess [Pantasilea?] Contar[ini] during the reign of Pope Callixtus III, 12.6 x 11.6 cm. (Fig. 42)
Folio 47v, The symbolic marriage of Doge Christoforo Moro to Abbess Franceschina [Z...?] during the reign of Pope (Pietro Barbo) Paul II, 11.5 x 11.2 cm. (Fig. 43)

Folio 48v, The symbolic marriage of Doge Giovanni Mocenigo to Abbess Elisabetta Bragadin during the reign of Pope Sixtus IV, 12 x 12 cm. (Fig. 44)

Folio 52v, The symbolic marriage of Doge Agostino Bargarigo to Abbess Angele Marcello during the reign of Pope Innocent VIII, 11.7 x 11.7 cm. (Fig. 45)

Folio 54r, The symbolic marriage of Doge Leonardo Loredan to Abbess Margarita [Ba...?] during the reign of Pope Alexander VI, 11.8 x 11.8 cm. (Fig. 46)

Folio 54v, The symbolic marriage of Doge Leonardo Loredan to Abbess Clara Donado during the reign of Pope Leo X, 15 x 14.2 cm. (Fig. 47)
Figures

Figure 1. Gothic *sopraporta* from Santa Maria delle Vergini, now in wall of Arsenale, opposite Campo S. Daniele, Venice

Figure 2. Current map of Castello quarter and San Pietro, Venice. Google maps.
Figure 3. Venice, Santa Maria delle Vergini, plan, from *Nuova Planimetria*, 1846.

Figure 4. Venice, Santa Maria delle Vergini, detail from Jacopo de’Barbari’s *View of Venice*, 1500.
Figure 5. Giovanni Casoni, Nineteenth-century plan of Le Vergini, appended to the back of the copy of E. A. Cicogna, *Delle inscrizioni veneziane raccolte ed illustrate* (6 vols., Venice, 1824-53), (1842) in Venice, Biblioteca del Museo Correr
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