

Citation style

Mercedes Pérez Vidal: Rezension von: Gianmario Guidarelli / Chiara Ponchia / Helena K. Szépe et. al. (a cura di): Il monastero femminile di Santa Croce alla Giudecca. Spazi, libri e immagini a Venezia tra medioevo ed età moderna, Roma: Viella 2023, in *sehepunkte* 24 (2024), Nr. 10 [15.10.2024], URL: <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2024/10/39241.html>



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

Gianmario Guidarelli / Chiara Ponchia / Helena K. Szépe (a cura di): Il monastero femminile di Santa Croce alla Giudecca

This book presents the first comprehensive transdisciplinary study of the Benedictine monastery of Santa Croce alla Giudecca. The approach taken, which encompasses the examination of monastic spaces, book collections and visual culture, is consistent with international research focused on a single monastery. Examples of this can be found in the workshops organised by Jeffrey Hamburger and Eva Schotheuber in Medingen (2018), Klosterneuburg (2022) or Prague (2022), or in the ongoing project led by Catarina Barreira on the Cistercian nunnery of Lorvão.

The present volume provides a complementary perspective to that of a conference held at the University of Padua in 2017: "Lo spazio nei monasteri femminili medievali. Società, cultura, arte e liturgia". While both shared a multidisciplinary approach and a structure that moves from the urban environment to monastic spaces and books, the volume on Santa Croce offers an in-depth analysis of a very circumscribed micro-landscape, while the conference aimed to promote comparative studies in a broad geographical area. The two initiatives, when considered together, serve to underscore the necessity for further investigation at the intersection of micro and macro levels in the field of monastic studies.

The initial impetus for this volume was the identification by Szépe and Toniolo of Santa Croce as the provenance of a large, illuminated breviary in two volumes, which is now held at the Biblioteca del Museo Correr in Venice (Ms. Cl. V n. 155 and n. 156). However, this volume does not commence with the breviary, but rather proceeds from the general to the specific.

The first part engages with the "spatial turn", beginning with an acute examination of the urban fabric (Galeazzo). It then moves on to an architectural analysis of the monastic buildings (Guidarelli; Radke), before concluding with an account of their fate after the Napoleonic suppressions and up to the present day (De Vivo). The second part shifts focus to the books and documents that were once kept in these spaces (Viero; Szépe / Toniolo; Bürgel / Troiano; Ponchia; Zorzi; Paglia).

Books were kept and used in different spaces, studied in the first section, with particular attention to the renovations planned and carried out between the mid-15th and early-16th centuries (Guidarelli; Radke).

Valuable and little-studied sources are discussed, such as the Catastico (1692), essential for reconstructing the altered topography of Santa Croce, the altars, images and sacred ornaments. Another extraordinary source is a rare series of drawings from the mid-15th century (ASVe), corresponding to an unbuilt project, already studied and partially reproduced by Maria Pia Pedani in 1983, and here fully re-examined (Radke). The meticulous reconstruction of the monastic spaces would certainly have benefited from a more contextualised analysis of the architectural solutions

employed in Santa Croce and other Venetian monasteries. For instance, the presence of multifunctional lateral spaces is extensively documented in female monasteries across diverse regions and religious orders. This volume makes a significant contribution to the recovery and reinterpretation of the altered monastic spaces, as well as to the reassembly of the dispersed written sources produced or used in Santa Croce. The latter include the Correr Breviary mentioned above, a rare testimony to the typology of large breviaries for use in the choir, other liturgical and normative books such as two 15th-century rules, several ordines for the reception of novices, the profession and consecration of nuns, printed officina and psalters, and several letters of profession (Paglia). Particular attention is given to the dossier of hagiographic and liturgical texts related to Athanasius, created after the translatio of the saint's body to Santa Croce in 1455. Ponchia and Zorzi provide a detailed and complementary analysis of both the vernacular (BMCVe, PD b7) and the later Latin version by Ermolao Barbaro (Vat. Barb. Lat. 422; BMCVe, Cicogna, 1143; BNM, Lat. II 123 (=10383)).

Bürgel and Troiano's chapter presents a vernacular copy of Cavalca's *Specchio di Croce*, bound together with two other texts attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux (BNM, ms. It. Z. 10 (=4741)). Cavalca's works circulated widely among nuns. Although not mentioned here, Cavalca's translation of the *Epistola ad Eustochium* was copied in a miscellaneous volume from the benedictine nuns of Santa Maria in Porciglia in Padua (Biblioteca Civica, Padua, B.P. 893). This volume also contains rules from the Benedictine nuns of Santa Catalina in Vicenza, providing added proof of the circulation of manuscripts between different monasteries. Further evidence can be found in the Correr Breviary, which clearly mentions the adoption of the liturgy of the "*congregationis sancte Iustine*" (Szépe / Toniolo), or in ms. Cicogna 1143 (Ponchia). Still, these scholars remain reluctant to acknowledge the permeability of the convent walls.

Conversely, Galeazzo's chapter, in the first part of the volume, adds to the growing body of scholarship that has provided compelling evidence of the fluidity of enclosure and the interactions between women's convents and the social milieu. It also highlights women's agency, as does Radke's chapter, which examines the evidence for collaboration between nuns and architects provided by the mentioned set of architectural drawings. Additions to the vernacular dossier of Athanasius (Zorzi) show the agency of some abbesses in the "remaking" of the saint's reliquary casket (140-141 and 224).

Eufemia Giustinian, abbess between 1444 and 1487, is considered one of the most important figures in the history of this convent. However, despite the considerable evidence available, her contribution to the extensive material and liturgical renovation of Santa Croce in the 15th century is not sufficiently recognised here. A comparative analysis with other female leaders of religious communities could help to better assess Eufemia's role and overcome some assumptions about women's agency and authority. Moreover, beyond exceptionality, authority and authorship were often shared. Collaborative work is documented not only by the architectural drawings (Radke), but also by several "scrivane" (Paglia, 250), or by the

use of plural forms in the early modern additions to the vernacular dossier of Athanasius (Zorzi, 224). Therefore, the possibility of collaborative work in the production of other books cannot be ruled out (Szépe / Toniolo, 157).

Another added value of this volume is the wealth of graphic material provided, ranging from the reproduction of manuscripts, a catalogue of which is included in the appendix, to the projects of Santa Croce in the ASVe, and multiple plans, sections and photogrammetric restitutions of architectural elements.

Architectural and urban historians, art historians, philologists, librarians and curators have joined forces to offer a multifaceted and diachronic reconstruction of the artistic and material culture of this religious community, the life and afterlife of book collections and monastic buildings. It is hoped that this volume will encourage further transdisciplinary and in-depth research on women religious in Italy and other less researched regions. To conclude, as the final paragraph of Gabriele Paglia's essay suggests, many of the questions raised by the wealth of material studied in this volume will only be answered by combining this detailed microanalysis with a broader comparative perspective.