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# FROM CIVIC HISTORY TO MYTH

The “Peace of Venice” in  
Texts and Images (1320–1370)

Ilaria Molteni  
Valeria Russo

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The collaboration between Romance Philology and Medieval Art History has always been highly productive. In this book, art historian Ilaria Molteni and philologist Valeria Russo examine the origin and development of one of the foundational narratives of the medieval myth of Venice. They focus on the text's consistency, as well as its iconography and how this evolved. The story concerns the peace that was brokered by Doge Sebastiano Ziani between Frederick Barbarossa and Pope Alexander III in 1177. It recounts legendary exploits involving all parties (including the German emperor's son, who was captured by the Venetians).

The encounter (not between the two powerful sovereigns, but between the two scholars who authored this essay) thus takes place within the field of study typically associated with a third discipline: Medieval History. This discipline is present in the form of a third scholar: the Austrian medievalist Margarete Merores, who is referenced throughout this study. Merores, a fascinating medieval historian, first mentioned the text published at the end of this book in 1915.<sup>1</sup>

As Alfredo Stussi observed, the form of the Venetian state prevented the development of literature comparable to that which flourished elsewhere in the thirteenth century. From the outset, Venice was a city-state whose functioning differed greatly from that of the apparently similar *Comuni* and *Signorie*

1 Margarete Merores was born in Vienna in 1881. She earned her doctorate there and published several studies on Italian and Venetian medieval history. According to Rando (2014, p. 148), following the *Anschluss* in 1938, all Jews with assets exceeding 5,000 (imperial marks) were required to report them. Margarete Merores was among the 43,629 Viennese who submitted such a notification, declaring herself to be Jewish, unmarried and retired. According to the Willa Cather Archive (<https://cather.unl.edu/writings/letters/let1150>), Merores received refugee status in England in 1939. She worked as a private tutor there and died in 1959.

scattered throughout central and northern Italy. This resulted in Venice lacking a court, unlike Treviso, Calañone-Este-Padova, and Sambonifacio-Verona. Once elected, the doge was subject to strict controls and certainly had no means of creating a circle of artists or men of letters around him, offering the kind of patronising hospitality that would attract exiled poets from Provence or Tuscany.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the scarcity of literature as it is conceived elsewhere does not prevent Venice from developing a different kind of literature. The ruling class encouraged this production in different ways with respect to princely patronage and client relations. It also did not prevent the languages that played a key role in medieval Western European literature – Provençal, French, and Italo-Romance vernaculars – from converging in distinctive forms of Venetian literature in the fourteenth century via unique paths that diverged from those seen elsewhere.

In Venice, a city where artistic creativity, both figurative and literary, was clearly linked to political function, written works not directly promoting and protecting the interests of the state (the “*intenzione della terra*,” as it was constantly referred to in the Maggior Consiglio and Senate deliberations) were simply incomprehensible. Clearly, the focus of Venetian literary and artistic spaces is not the celebration of a single prince or noble family, but the exaltation of the city-state and its ordinances. There is also a clear development of texts that reinforce and make the political and institutional exceptionalism of the republic identifiable, regardless of the individuals who embody it.

In a society where maintaining and strengthening the delicate institutional system is the primary concern, taking an uninterested approach to literature as a form of speculative reflection or as a means of promoting moral, cultural, or aesthetic values independently of civic life becomes irrelevant.

When viewed from this perspective, Venice’s situation in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries seems to contradict the

2 See Stussi 1993, p. 65.

image presented by Pietro Bembo, the prince of Renaissance literature and a Venetian by birth (though perhaps not by nature), in his *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525). This portrays a city that, while Tuscany produced its greatest poets and prose writers, appeared to Bembo to lack poets and be completely devoid of readable prose during the Middle Ages. In reality, however, medieval Venice was not a city without prose and with little poetry. Rather, it was a republic in which prose and poetry were only encouraged and enjoyed socially insofar as they could contribute to strengthening political institutions and the underlying economic order.

From this perspective, it is not surprising that the greatest Venetian poet of the thirteenth century was active outside Venice (specifically in Genoa, where he was a prisoner of war) and wrote in Provençal. He was Bertolomè Zorzi, who devoted a significant part of his small surviving songbook to political themes. As for prose, it is also notable that thirteenth-century Venice produced at least two significant works. One of these is Marco Polo's *Devisement dou monde* (the so-called *Milione*), which was dictated by a Venetian to a Pisan, again in Genoa.<sup>3</sup> It is written in French (or rather, Franco-Italian) and was largely overlooked by the Venetian state after Marco's return from Genoese captivity. The other is Martino da Canal's *Estoires de Venise*, which was probably written in Venice between 1267 and 1275. However, Martino too wrote in French, because the aim of the work, the most socially acceptable for a text written in the lagoon city, was to make the republic known and appreciated by an international audience.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the themes dealt with by Martino da Canal in his work can be traced, at least in part, to the themes – and thus the textes – of the manuscript that are the central focus of this volume, that is the Codex 1497 of the Biblioteca del Museo Correr,

3 A large number of studies on Marco Polo's work and the great explorer's Venetian period have been produced to mark the centenary in 2024. For an overview, the collection edited by Simion-Burgio (2024) is particularly valuable.

4 For a recent reinterpretation of Martino da Canal's work in the context of an anthology of literature in French from Italy, see Gambino/Beretta 2023, pp. 363–380.

and the manuscript currently conserved in the State Archives of Venice (*Miscellanea codici* I, s. v., 216). In particular, the so-called “Peace of Venice” constitutes one of the crucial passages of Molteni and Russo’s research, as well as being the oldest vernacular witness to the narrative, the edition of which is provided by Russo in this volume. This text freely translates *Hystoria de discordia et persecutione quam habuit Ecclesia cum imperator Federico Barbarossa tempore Alexandri tertii summi pontificis et demum de pace facta Veneciis et habita inter eos*, written by the chancellor Bonincontro dei Bovi.

In particular, the *Miscellanea codici* I, s. v., 216, drafted in the 1340s, contains various texts written in the two main languages of the Venetian chancellery and bureaucracy of that era: Latin and Venetian. Unlike Provençal, which Zorzi occasionally employed, and French, with which the Venetians were familiar when dealing with the public in their geographical areas of influence (essentially the Levant), Latin and Venetian were, by this time, two languages that usually coexisted in chancery documentation. One might even say that they coexisted in the daily lives of the magistracies and institutions of the Republic.

The chronicles, and the historical monographies like Bonincontro’s *Hystoria* were certainly encouraged, if not commissioned, by the Signoria within the ducal chancellery to record the past in an orderly manner, in line with the state apparatus’s expectations, for the construction, maintenance and relaunching of the city’s political action and the building of its civil identity.<sup>5</sup>

For obvious reasons, the narration of the *Hystoria* was written in Latin and entrusted to Bonincontro dei Bovi, a chancellor of Mantuan origin who was probably university-educated in Bologna. In recounting the “Peace of Venice” of 1177, an event where historical facts and legendary details intertwined, as was common in historical chronicles of that era, the *Hystoria* aimed

5 In a recent and valuable monograph on the lexicon of medieval Venetian chronicles, Cesena 2025, p. 12, speaks of works such as Bonincontro’s as monographs, contrasting them with the chronicles of the preceding era and productions from the second half of the fourteenth century onwards.

to establish Venice as an equal interlocutor with the Papacy and the Empire. It also highlighted the Republic's positive actions towards the pope, during a period still close to the conflict with Clement V. There may also have been a desire to emphasise its role in containing imperial encroachment, perhaps alluding to the conflicts that, at the time Bonincontro wrote his text, pitted Venice against the Ghibelline lordships of the Venetian Mainland.

The period in which Bonincontro dei Bovi worked also saw a qualitative leap in the production of city chronicles and a decisive advance of the written vernacular in chancery documents, epigraphy and Venetian civil production more generally.

Bonincontro, who was from Lombardy, could only have written his short chronicle in Latin. It was certainly the environment of the ducal chancellery that translated the text into Venetian. In the same period, various other texts connected with the life of Venetian institutions were being translated into Venetian, including the *Statuta Veneta*, which were promulgated in the previous century by Jacopo Tiepolo (1242) and subjected to various vernacular translations from the early fourteenth century onwards.

By the time the codex in question was compiled, the legend had been firmly established and deserved a place among the literary monuments intended to promote the institution. The story recounted in the text being returned here is therefore part of the ideal gallery of narratives and legends established as the civil canon of the Republic during that period. Other stories in the same series included the foundation of the city, the succession of the first dukes, and the translation of St Mark's remains from Alexandria to Venice, where the relic played a pivotal role in the consecration of the Doge's Chapel.

These are precisely the themes addressed by the other texts in *Miscellanea codici* I, S. V., 216. As with the *Festa delle Marie*, a traditional Venetian festival linked to an event in the city's history in the tenth century, the story of the meeting between the pope and the emperor in Venice is presented as the origin of the "Marriage of the Sea" (*Sposalizio del mare*) celebration, which takes place in Venice every year on Ascension Day.

Significantly, the only other vernacular text in the manuscript is a brief description of the doge of Venice's election mechanism, i.e., the system of voting and drawing lots designed to prevent conspiracies and coordinated actions, and ensure the commune's institutional stability. The text on the election of the doge, which was edited by Margarete Merores in 1915, aims to convey the idea of a state protected by numerous institutional filters and endowed with an efficient system of political self-defence.

In that brief account about the peace brokered by Doge Sebastiano Ziani between Frederick Barbarossa and Alexander III, Venetian prose emerges in a way that is similar to how Tuscan prose developed through the vulgarisation of religious works and the writings of classical Latin authors in ancient times.

The paratactic, rudimentary syntax is marked by recurring formulas (*et ello s'empensà* § 1, *et ello disse* § 2, *et ello li disse* § 15, *et ello li fese* § 16; or: *et facto questo* § 5, 7, 9, 13), and the reported discourse is generally unnatural, unwinding mostly in short, rigid exchanges ("O' è-llo? - A santa Maria de la Caridade" § 2), and only rarely opens up to less obvious formulations.<sup>6</sup> These flaws mirror those of the underlying Latin text and are not improved by the vernacular prose.

However, the entire story has the hallmarks of a true historical tale, with a series of interconnected facts that go beyond what Bonincontro wrote in his *Hystoria*, and with movements that differ greatly from those of a simple notarial account. Unlike certain translations of statutes or capitularies from these same decades in Venice, where the *volgarizzamento* seems to be a mere act of formal homage, being so word-to-word translated as to be incomprehensible, here we have a text that is genuinely readable and ambitious in its narrative.

Another version of this text, written in the vernacular, was included a few decades later in the official *Pacta* collection, which consists mostly of actual notarial documents written in the typical forms of diplomatic production. This collection

6 See Chapter v.



contains peace and alliance treaties concluded between Venice and foreign powers. This further demonstrates that, regardless of the form the texts take, their production is always directed towards a civil and political conception, which is the motive behind every operation conducted in the ducal scriptorium or its immediate vicinity.

Another version of the vernacular account of the “Peace of Venice,” which is the most important in the context of this work, was included in the 1370s in Codex 1497 of the Biblioteca del Museo Correr. This text is again in the company of others written in Venetian. In this case, these are Lives of Saints, i.e., a type of text in which the custom of importing medieval textual traditions from Latin into Romance had developed extensively by this time. By placing the legends of the pope, the emperor, and the doge alongside them, the civil and political tradition of state exaltation is combined with religious piety: a practice that, for that state, represented a decisive means of reinforcing political credibility and prestige. It is from the 1497 Codex that the historical, cultural, and artistic itinerary proposed by Molteni and Russo in this book begins.

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