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Materials, Methods, and Motives: Female Scribal Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Italian Religious Houses

Abstract: Book production flourished in Italian female religious houses in the late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. Nun-scribes copied thousands of texts in urban production centres throughout the Italian peninsula. Though each convent needed books to fulfil devotional, liturgical, and administrative needs, the production of texts served a broader range of goals. Books were powerful tools, used to improve their communities' standing within commercial, religious, and socio-political networks. Creating manuscripts gave women agency over the texts they made, read, and used. Within the gendered confines of the place and period, life within a religious house offered women an opportunity to pursue an artistic and intellectual life rarely afforded to their secular sisters who were typically obliged to give up writing, painting, and similar pursuits after marriage. This essay explores how heads of religious houses and nuns used their scribal skills to further their religious, economic, social, and political agendas. In particular, it highlights how their intimate knowledge of the materials and techniques of book production allowed them to create products tailored to specific audiences inside and outside the convent walls.

1 Introduction: Overview of nuns' book production

Female scribes produced an astounding number of books in late medieval and early modern Italian convents[1], as scribes and painters involved in manuscript production. This labour, traditionally associated with men, was a part of female monastic life across Europe from the early centuries of the Middle Ages through the Early

1 I will use the term 'convent' to describe a nun's house. This is unlike the modern Italian usage, where the term '*convento*' is not gendered, but can refer to a male or female house connected to a mendicant order, such as Dominican, Franciscan, Augustinian, etc. (in contrast to non-mendicant orders, such as Benedictines, whose houses are called '*monasteri*'). In the medieval usage, nuns referred to their own houses variously as '*convento*', '*monastero*' or '*monasterio*', regardless of their religious order.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111382715-006

Modern Period, well past the advent of the printing press.[2] Though early medieval book production often took place in rural monastic centres on the Italian peninsula, this production shifted to urban centres as religious women found refuge within the walls of cities and on urban peripheries beginning in the 1200s.[3] As copyists, nuns across all religious orders created high-end liturgical manuscripts for royal patrons, copied personal and communal devotional texts for in-house use, and produced books for a variety of secular and religious audiences.[4] These are women who – because of the circumstances of their birth, the moral and religious strictures of the period, or because of a true spiritual vocation – were nuns. Their scribal production provided essential texts for their houses, and produced manuscripts used in high-stakes gift exchanges that strengthened socio-political alliances. Convent scribes often worked in close-knit teams within the convent and collaborated with secular male illuminators and manuscript painters to complete a commissioned book's border decoration and paintings. These collaborations broadened the range of books they were able to produce and, in turn, put these women in contact with a broad book-buying clientele including aristocratic and ecclesiastical patrons. In the premodern and Early Modern Period, female scribes had a tremendous knowledge of the materials they used and made conscious choices in selecting materials appropriate to the genre of text they were copying, the audience, and use. These choices were essential to their success and the success of their convents since book production, in many cases, was a lucrative industry that brought in much-needed funds to support their communities. This essay offers an overview of book production by Italian religious women living in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, discusses their motives for copying texts, the scribal methods they used to make books – both in the scriptorium and in solitary labour – and explores how nuns chose

2 For a broad survey of nuns' book production, see the three volumes devoted to *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe*, Blanton, O'Mara and Stoop (eds) 2013; 2015; 2017. Two important monographs on female monastic book production in the Germanic lands include Beach 2004 and Cyrus 2009. On Portuguese nun-scribes, see Cardoso 2017.

3 By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the traditional Benedictine houses in urban centres across the peninsula were joined by the new mendicant orders (Dominican, Franciscan, Augustinian, etc.) and these orders – often 'reformed' – would have a strong role in the production and dissemination of texts by female scribes.

4 On Italian nun-scribes, see Richardson 2020, 96–126; see also the bibliography by Miglio and Palma 2012, and their database *Donne e cultura scritta nel Medioevo* (<http://www.tramedivita.it/donne/index.html>, accessed on 21 November 2023) which identifies hundreds of female scribes in medieval Europe from the eighth through fifteenth centuries. For an overview of nun-scribes in Italy, see Moreton 2013.

materials and production practices that allowed them to further their communal and personal goals.

The current evidence of nuns' book production centres on northern Italy (especially Florence) in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and includes over two hundred and fifty manuscripts (devotional, theological, liturgical, administrative) from over one hundred nuns and miniaturists from approximately fifty convents across all orders: Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustinian, as well as Benedictine, Carmelite, and Bridgettine.[5] Though only a small percentage (probably less than 1%) of nun-scribed texts survive, the estimate of texts produced in the fourteenth and fifteenth century alone is in the tens of thousands, if one accounts for the average production of an established scriptorium based on evidence of writing desks and the need for a basic set of administrative, liturgical, paraliturgical, devotional, and theological texts, documentary evidence of personal and commercial book production, and the skills of female scribes attested in their surviving texts. Seeing even one single well-copied convent book can tell us that the same hand produced over a hundred manuscripts to achieve such a high level of mastery and skill.

The copying of texts demonstrates nuns' literacies in Italian, Latin, and even Greek, and allowed them to be involved in intellectual and artistic work as part of their *labora* or conventual work. Though it varied from house to house, the basic skill set for producing texts (literacy and penmanship) existed in most convents. The demand for books came out of the conventual need for texts, which increased as convent populations increased (imagine the number of devotional/theological texts needed by a house of one hundred nuns) and reform movements necessitated the production of new liturgical manuscripts. Aside from fulfilling an in-house need for texts, nuns also saw bookwork as a means to increase their financial base – whether books were sold to an increasingly literate clientele or gifted to build alliances with wealthy family members, ecclesiastical or secular patrons. The production of books provided a creative outlet for learned women who entered convent life – either voluntarily or by force.

5 This is not meant to paint a picture of production only in northern Italy – it may be that there was book production in central and southern Italian convents in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – such as in Rome, Naples and Sicily – but so far this evidence has not been demonstrated. In general, the evidence from Rome dates to a later period, especially the seventeenth century, which aligns with a shift in the centres of learning, flourishing of aristocratic court life, and changing convent demographics in Rome at that time which likely had the kind of impact on book production as it did in Florence and northern Italy in the fifteenth century. See Moreton 2013.

So, who were these women? Nun-scribes primarily came from merchant class families or were girls or women born into aristocratic families. Not necessarily wealthy, many of the most prolific scribes were from branches of merchant (new wealth) or aristocratic families (old family names, old wealth) who had fallen on hard times and given their daughters to the convent.[6] The concentration of female scribal activity during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries comes from the rise in convent population and the increase in literacy, education in writing, and the arts and many future scribes entered the convent as highly educated girls and women, who brought these skills to their houses.[7] The number of women and girls entering the convent increased dramatically in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In Venice, three of five patrician girls were nuns by 1581.[8] In Florence, as many as one in nineteen residents of the city was a nun by the mid fifteenth century.[9] Those given to the convent as toddlers could be fully educated within the house – tutored in languages and taught manuscript production and scribal work by the scriptorium's senior scribe. This is the case with 1-year-old Angela di Lionardo Rucellai, who entered the Dominican convent of San Jacopo in Ripoli in Florence in 1444, learned Latin and Italian writing from her older convent sisters, and became a prolific senior scribe and a powerful and influential prioress of the house.[10] Leadership within the convent and advanced work in the scriptorium were often aligned.

Whether tutored privately in the home by male and female tutors, in a Latin grammar school setting by female *magistrae* and/or in the convent schools by

6 Besides what can be gleaned from the manuscripts themselves, there are also a great range of documents produced within convents, including administrative documents and convent chronicles. Genealogies, diaries, family histories, and tax records provide vital information about nuns' families. For example, *catasto* records for cities like Florence (tax records that also provide census information) provide data on the size of a nuns' family of origin and household, their economic status, and where they lived within the city before entering the convent.

7 On Italian girls' and nuns' education in the period, see Richardson 2020, 97–99; Moreton 2017, 385–390; Strocchia 1999.

8 Brian Richardson also notes that convent populations in Milan increased fourfold and in Bologna eightfold over the course of the sixteenth century. Richardson 2020, 96–97.

9 Sharon Strocchia notes that before the Black Death in 1348, one in two hundred and fifty residents of Florence was a nun and by 1552, one in nineteen was. Strocchia 2009, xii. The rise in marriage dowry rates drove many families to place their younger daughters in religious houses. Nuns did come to the convent with dowries, but these cost much less than marriage dowries. On convent dowries, see Molho 1994; and Zarri 2000.

10 Florence, Archivio di Stato, San Jacopo di Ripoli, 23: Croniche, segnato A, 1508–1778, fols 121^{r}–122^{v}. This source, the necrology of San Jacopo di Ripoli, and Rucellai's biography have been examined by Strocchia 2007.

learned nuns, upper- and middle-class girls and young women received varying levels of education from vernacular reading, craftwork, and learning the virtues, to a broader humanist education in Latin grammar, studying vernacular and Latin texts (moral philosophy, grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry), writing in Latin and Italian, penmanship, and basic accounting. An ever-increasing number of these educated girls entered the convent from the mid fifteenth century onward. Choir nuns (those who took full vows, could vote within the convent, were obliged to attend all choir Offices, were generally from elite or wealthy families, and could read and write) were the most educated members of the convent, and by and large, were the scribes, secretaries, authors, composers, poets, playwrights, singers, artists, and savvy financial and political administrators of urban convent communities. Within the convent, literacy was necessary to work in the scriptorium, assume administrative positions, and rise through the ranks. 'Impara, impara a leggere: così diventerai badessa' ('Learn, learn to read: this is how you will become abbess') said Margherita da Faenza, thirteenth-century foundress of the Florentine convent of San Giovanni Evangelista.[11] Certainly by the late fourteenth-century, literacy and the convent were firmly linked in the minds of the secular public as the Florentine merchant Paolo da Certaldo demonstrated when he wrote that one should certainly educate one's sons, but there is no point in educating your daughter in reading unless she is destined for the convent.[12]

Work was regulated within the scriptorium, which could be defined as a formal space set aside for writing with numerous writing desks, but likely also included more informal spaces at houses where book production was not a primary activity. Fig. 1 illustrates a writing desk situated outdoors, under the arch of a loggia – placing the scribe, Saint Bridget of Sweden, in an imaginary space in keeping with the medieval practice of writing in the cloister, which was spacious, provided shelter, and excellent light.

11 Miglio 2008, 30.

12 'Lo fanciullo […] ne' sei o ne' sette anni, porlo a leggere […] e s'ell'è fanciulla femina, polla a cuscire e none a leggere, ché non istà troppo bene a una femina sapere leggere, se già no la volessi fare monaca' ('The child […] at six or seven years of age, teach him to read […] and if the child is a girl, teach her to sew and not to read, for it is not good for a woman to know how to read, unless you want her to become a nun'), Schiaffini (ed.) 1945, 126–127.

Fig. 1: This portrait of Saint Bridget at her writing desk may provide some information about the appearance and location of writing desks at the convent. Detail of a drawing by an anonymous nun of Santa Brigida al Paradiso, Florence (*c.* 1500); Florence, BNC, II.II.393, fol. 1^{r}; © Florence, BNC.

Most evidence of female monastic scriptoria, however, show that the nuns worked in a designated space set aside for writing.[13] At the Benedictine house of Santissima Annunziata delle Murate (Le Murate), the construction of writing desks was well documented in the convent's chronicle. The chronicle notes the establishment of the scriptorium in the early 1470s, and its reconstruction and enlargement after a fire, supported by the patronage of a powerful local family, the Medici, who funded the building of ten new writing desks. The convent eventually had an astounding twenty-six desks.[14] A scriptorium, as a physical space, could be quite simple – writing desks or *scrittoi* – equipped with the basic tools necessary for the production of texts: parchment or paper, straight edge and tools for ruling, awl, quill, ink, and a knife for trimming parchment, quill-cutting, and scraping away parchment if a mistake needed correcting. The tools and space (unlike those needed for printing) were quite low tech and basic. The greatest expense was in sheet materials (parchment and paper) and the investment of time needed to turn a nun into a proficient scribe. So, for a convent in need of books – which they all were – this was a wise venture that could pay off in supplying the communal library with texts, and if the scribes were talented enough, in supplying the convent with beautiful books that could be sold (supplementing the community's coffers) or given away as gifts, in exchange for the promise of patronage from wealthy donors. The choices they made in creating each book demonstrate that these women were savvy book producers, knowledgeable about how materials and methods impacted the products they were creating for audiences both inside and outside the convent walls.

13 Some conventual plans note a scriptorium space, generally situated facing the cloister or other open-air courtyard, to take advantage of the abundant natural light. In the case of Le Murate, there is evidence of a large number of writing desks being used within a prescribed space that faced east; the scriptorium at San Jacopo di Ripoli may have faced south-east; the Paradiso scriptorium may have had light from both the west and east. It is interesting to note that the planned scriptorium at the Venetian convent of Santa Croce della Giudecca places the scriptorium opening to the west. See Moreton 2013, 104–106.

14 The Murate convent chronicle states 'li scrittoi, che vi sono oggi di numero xxvi, divisi con li assiti' ('the writing desks, which today number twenty-six, divided by partitions'). Florence, BNC, II.II.509, fol. 88^{v}. For other references to scriptorium augmentation, see fols 42^{r}, 45^{r}, 67^{v}–68^{r}, 74^{v}, and 88^{v}. The chronicle has been transcribed and translated into English by Weddle (tr. and ed.) 2011. See also Weddle 1997.

2 Scribal training, production, and choice

Scribes used specific styles of scripts in their book production, which were suited to particular genres of texts (liturgical, devotional, theological, administrative). Each script was chosen for its speed (slow, fast), appearance (formal, informal), and the audience (personal, communal, for use inside the convent or for the public) and often said something about a nun's level of education and her motives for writing. Systems of partnership, mentorship, and training are visible within the manuscripts and noted within colophons. Divisions of labour in the scriptorium provided specialization in certain areas of work, giving them focused expertise in either scribal work or notation for choir books and other liturgical manuscripts. These partnerships allowed them to streamline their scriptorium practice and excel in liturgical manuscript production, raising the quality of these books for in-house use and increasing their value for sale to other religious communities, both male and female. The development and use of decorative penwork also had economic advantages (no need to outsource decoration to secular manuscript painters) and gave nuns more control over the decoration of their books.

2.1 The choice of script

Nuns' choice of script depended on the genre of text and the audience. A *littera textualis* (Gothic book hand) was the most common script used for liturgical, paraliturgical, devotional, and theological texts. Its long use for this conservative genre of manuscripts dictated that scribes continued to support the traditional use of this script with little variation. A central factor in nuns' loyalty to *littera textualis* was the scribal logistics of making a copy from an exemplar. If the source manuscript was written in *littera textualis*, then the copy was most often written out in the same script. To deviate from this and keep the same letters per line and lines per page would be extremely challenging and this contributed to the longevity of this script in the monastic context. In its varied forms, *littera textualis* was the visual lingua franca, the common scribal currency, of the monastic world in Europe used by their priest confessors, conventual overseers, and the Church as a whole. The script also provided a formal authenticity to the texts they copied, recalling the handwriting of early medieval patron saints, theologians, and spiritual exemplars dear to the convent community. This adherence to tradition and textual 'authenticity' was slow to change.

There are a wide number of variations within the *littera textualis* family. For large communal liturgical manuscripts, a southern *textualis* (Gothic rotunda) was

commonly used. Choir books were necessarily large (requiring several people to move them) and demanded a large, highly legible, script that could be seen from far away, important for reading communal liturgical books on a lectern from the distance by singers in the choir. By the sixteenth century, a bold and rounded Gothic script had fully developed on the Italian peninsula and the nuns adapted the elegant and modernized letterforms for use in their large communal music manuscripts.

Formal book hands, upright and regular, required more strokes to form each letter than a cursive script did. Though speed was not necessarily an issue for the early medieval monk, whose work in the scriptorium was part of his monastic *labora*, this was not necessarily true for nuns. Their book production varied widely across orders and within individual communities. Many houses produced books for sale, the proceeds of which were essential for maintaining the community financially. Others produced luxury manuscripts for gift exchange, important for building critical patronage bonds between the convent and wealthy supporters.

All houses with active scribes produced devotional texts for use within the house, for sale, and for exchange with other convents. For devotional books not requiring the full formality of a formal Gothic book hand, an abbreviated form of *littera textualis* was often used. As a formal script, requiring several penstrokes for each letter, *littera textualis* was a slow script to write and Italian nuns who were copying devotional books for use within the convent or for personal use were often less concerned about orthographic formality than about getting a manuscript copied out as quickly as possible. In these cases, the scribe may choose a *littera textualis semplificata*, the name Italian palaeographers use to describe a Gothic book hand with an abbreviated number of strokes. For example, a miniscule or lower case 's' in a formal *littera textualis* may require four strokes, but in its simplified form, could be accomplished in as little as one, thus saving time. Though speed was often a consideration when choosing a script, nuns also used this abbreviated script even when they were not in a hurry to finish a text. It was a relaxed book hand that was easy to write in and involved less concentration and rigid adherence to visual rules than a formal *textualis.* Comfort and familiarity with a style often outweighed the need for speed.

In one case, a nun tells us that she is copying out her devotional book 'by the light of an oil lamp', suggesting this was solo labour carried out in the dark and quiet hours in her monastic cell, between early morning prayers.[15] The colophon

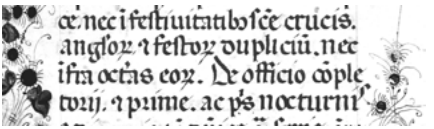
15 Florence, BNC, Conv. Soppr. G.II.1441, fol. 204^{r}. The 204-folio manuscript, containing Books III–IV of Simone da Cascia's *Esposizione dui Vangeli,* measures 291 × 212 mm and has an average of 29 lines per

tells us the book took almost two years to copy out, which translates as roughly 1.2 folios (a little over one page) per day, if she was working seven days a week – slow, by scribal workshop standards.[16] Even though this is a personal book which the nun is copying out as an act of meditation and devotion (not a race), the nun still uses a more efficient *littera textualis semplificata*. It is the script she is most comfortable with and the book is for her – no one else – so she makes that choice. This issue of 'scribal speed' is an underdeveloped area of study within female monastic production. Women had varied motives when deciding on a choice of script – decisions that were not always dictated by the economic demands that drove secular scribal workshops.

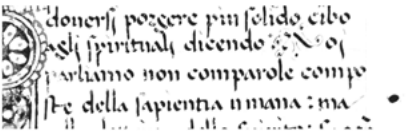
By the sixteenth century, a formalized and elegant chancery cursive (*cancellaresca corsiva*) had been adopted from the chancery scribes and was in use by an increasingly literate public – something the nuns would have been introduced to through the letter-writing and correspondence they engaged in with family members outside the convent walls. *Cancellaresca* went from a chancery script to a book hand, which was more formal and used by a wide public (and formed the basis of the new Italic type developed in Italy in the early sixteenth century). The script was used in the period by nuns for their devotional manuscripts, as well as a more formalized version used for presentation copies of convent chronicles, a popular genre of nun-authored writing by the mid sixteenth century. There are many examples of this script in use by Italian convent scribes in the sixteenth century (see details in Fig. 2).

page. Bridgettine scribe Cleofe (Ginevra di Lorenzo Lenzi) of Santa Brigida al Paradiso notes in her colophon that she began the book 12 November 1502 and finished it 28 October 1504, stating that it was 'written with extreme effort and great discomfort, the major part by the light of an oil lamp' ('Iscricti con grandissima faticha (et) disagio, la maggior parte a llume di lucerne'). Cleofe uses variations on this colophon phrase in several other devotional compilations she copied in the late 1400s, which contain Books I–II of Bridget of Sweden's *Rivelazioni* (Florence, BNC, MS II_130, fol. 154^{v}) and Books VII–VIII (Florence, BNC, MS II.III.270, fol. 137^{v}). Cleofe may have drawn part of the phrase ('faticha et disagio') from her scriptorium mentor, Raffaella di Arnolfo Bardi, who uses it in several devotional texts, including one written over the course of seven and a half years (Florence, BML, Acq. e doni 85, fol. 72^{r}). This practice of solo devotional writing is not unusual; it is simply rarely documented. Colophons provide unusual insight into scribal production practices, which are otherwise invisible or difficult to recover. On the Paradiso manuscripts, see Miriello 2007; on colophons, see Moreton 2014 and 2023.

16 In Johan Peter Gumbert's classic study on scribal speed (Gumbert 1995), he calculated the speed of a scribe working on a manuscript of similar size and number of lines would on average complete 3.2 folios per day. This is almost three times the speed of Cleofe, however, this is calculated on the work of secular scribes whose work sessions were not constrained by the demands of the monastic calendar and daily hours. Also, the style of script is not indicated in Gumbert's example. The speed of cursive scripts, of course, was very fast; formal book hands could be quite slow to write. Variations in between, such as a *littera textualis semplificata* would be a medium-paced script.

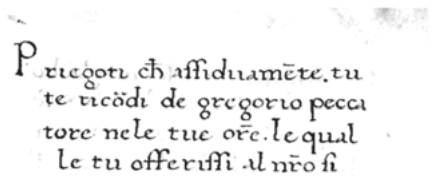


a: *Littera textualis* (Gothic book hand)

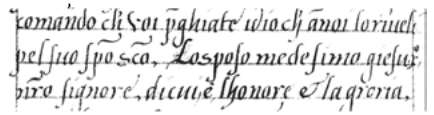


b: *Littera textualis semplificata*

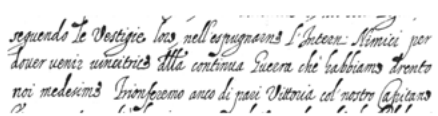
c: Southern *textualis* (Gothic rotunda)



d: Humanist



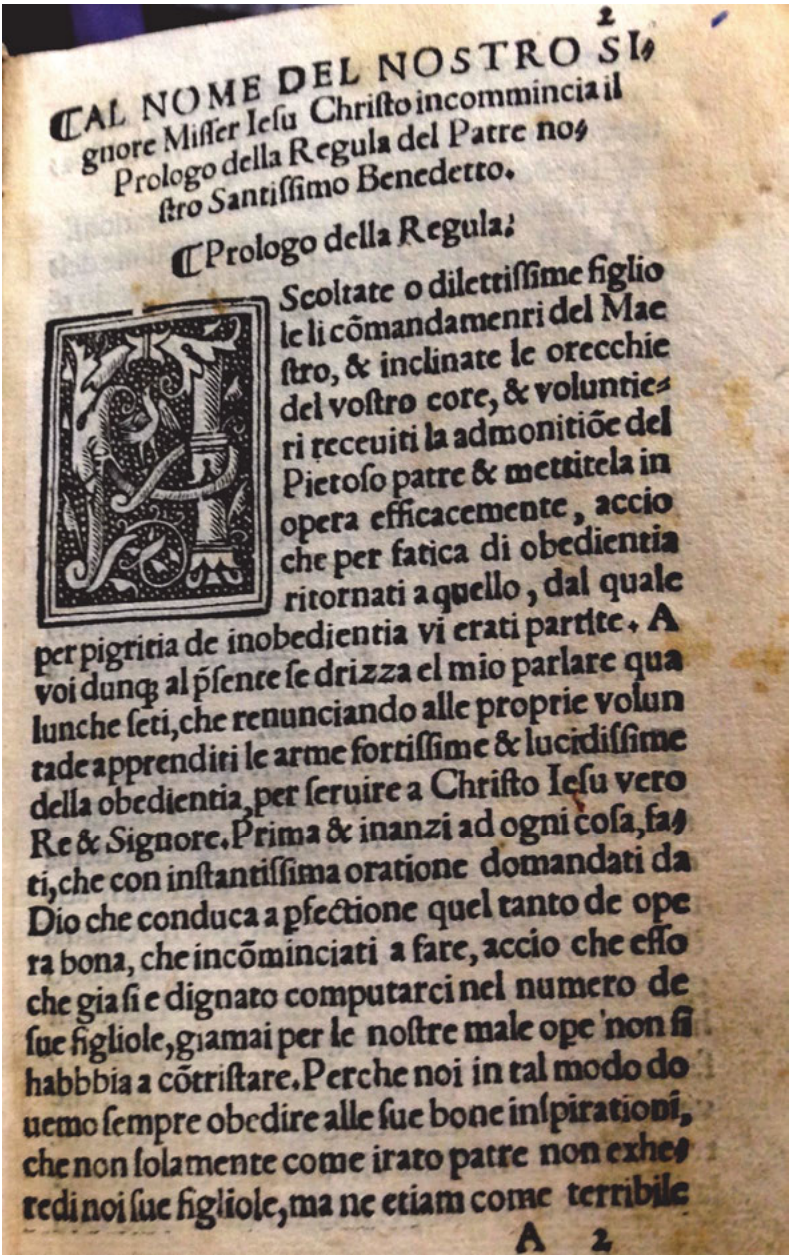
e: *Cancellaresca corsiva* (chancery cursive)



f: *Cancellaresca corsiva*

Figs 2a–f: The variety of scripts used by nuns in late medieval and early modern Italy. These were paired with specific genres of texts – and chosen for their speed, appearance, and the book's intended audience and use. (a) Florence, BML, Conv. Soppr. 459, fol. 7^{r}; (b) Florence, BML, Conv. Soppr. 469, fol. 1^{r}; (c) Florence, Museo di San Marco, 630 (unfoliated); (d) Verona, Biblioteca Civica, 1196, fol. 30^{v}; (e) Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 1794, fol. 98^{v}; (f) Florence, BNC, II.II.509, fol. 1^{r}, © Florence, BNC, BML, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Museo di San Marco; Verona, Biblioteca Civica.

One example of a nun's choice of cursive for speed is a copy of the *Regula del sanctissimo Benedetto* ('Rule of Saint Benedict'), a vernacular reissue made specifically for reformed Benedictine nuns in the period. We know the exemplar is from a new 1532 print edition of the text because the nun copied it out, including the printed colophon, in her personal manuscript copy (Figs 3a–b). She is moving here between reading the Roman typeface with abbreviations, set in thirty lines per page, to making her own copy with approximately twenty-two lines per page. The printed book, with eighty folios, becomes a 139-folio manuscript. She chose a fast script for the task – *cancellaresca* – and her version bounces between upright ascenders ('l' and 'd') and slanting capitals and descenders ('g'). She adds her own abbreviations, deviating regularly from those of the exemplar (she sometimes spells out the printed abbreviations and sometimes abbreviates words that are printed out in full), demonstrating her advanced reading and writing skills, literacy in the vernacular, and familiarity with Latin (Italian abbreviations are drawn from those used in Latin manuscripts). She is clearly in a rush to finish this job, judging by ink spills in the manuscript and her hurried cursive script – perhaps eager to return the popular and new print edition to whomever she borrowed it from.



2

CAL NOME DEL NOSTRO SI
gnore Misser Iesu Christo incommincia il
Prologo della Regula del Patre nos
stro Santissimo Benedetto.

CPrologo della Regula:

Scoltate o dilettissime figlio
le li cõmandamenri del Mae
stro, & inclinate le orecchie
del vostro core, & voluntie-
ri receuiti la admonitiõe del
Pietoso patre & mettitela in
opera efficacemente, accio
che per fatica di obedientia
ritornati a quello, dal quale
per pigritia de inobedientia vi erati partite. A
voi dunq; al pſente se drizza el mio parlare qua
lunche seti, che renunciando alle proprie volun
tade apprenditi le arme fortissime & lucidissime
della obedientia, per seruire a Christo Iesu vero
Re & Signore. Prima & inanzi ad ogni cosa, pa
ti, che con instantissima oratione domandati da
Dio che conduca a pfectione quel tanto de ope
ra bona, che incõminciati a fare, accio che esso
che gia si e dignato computarci nel numero de
sue figliole, giamai per le nostre male ope non si
habbbia a cõtristare. Perche noi in tal modo do
uemo sempre obedire alle sue bone inspirationi,
che non solamente come irato patre non exhe-
redi noi sue figliole, ma ne etiam come terribile

A 2

Fig. 3a: The 1532 print edition of the new *Regula del sanctissimo Benedetto* composed in Italian for reformed Benedictine nuns in Venice and printed in a Roman typeface by Francesco Bindoni and Maffeo Pasini; Pistoia, Biblioteca capitolare Fabroniana, p. 2; © Pistoia, Biblioteca capitolare Fabroniana.

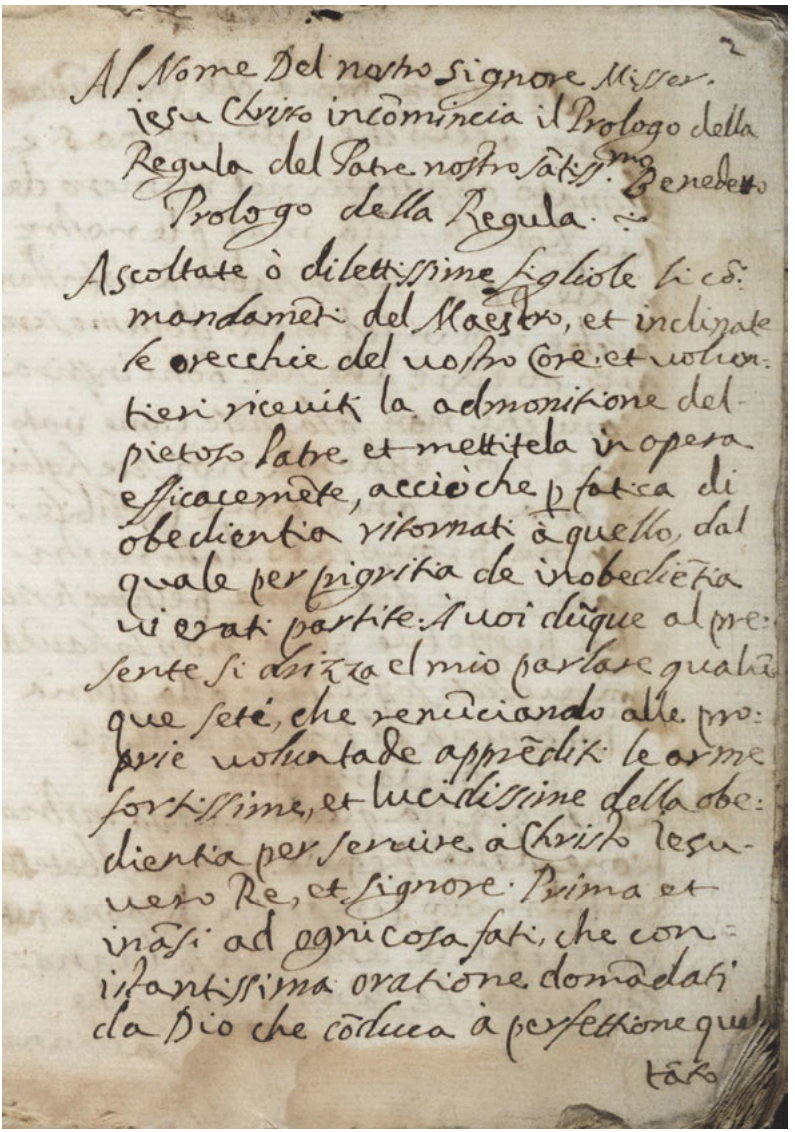


Fig. 3b: Venetian nun-scribe's copy of the printed book copied out in a hurried *cancellaresca*-related script, showing her command of abbreviations which do not follow those of the print edition; Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, MMS 01207, fol. 2ʳ; © Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library.

The most surprising choice of handwriting style might be the humanist script found in a late fifteenth-century theological text produced by northern Italian nun

Domitilla Bernabuzi (Fig. 2d). The text is a theological treatise translated into Italian by the nuns and Bernabuzi's use of a humanist miniscule in this manuscript is unique within the over two hundred and fifty nun-scribes' manuscripts consulted. The overwhelming majority of devotional and theological works copied by nuns in the fifteenth century were written out in a *littera textualis* and Bernabuzi is differentiating herself and her work through this choice of script, signalling to the reader that she was educated – possibly by a humanist scribe – within a secular aristocratic household before entering the convent. This messaging through the choice of script.[17]

Hands – the writing of an individual scribe within a given script – also vary widely. Some are quite practised, others more 'rough and ready' in style. But from this variety, we gain a lot of information about the motives for writing the text. Did the nun write in a hurried hand – to get the book copied out? Or did she take more time? The hand, if extremely well practised, can provide valuable information about where that scribe was in her career when she made the book. Even if we only have one known book from a scribe, but it is extremely accomplished, we know she is likely to have made at least one hundred manuscripts before she made this one. This is the case with a manuscript penned by Benedictine nun Battista Carducci from Le Murate (Fig. 4). The manuscript was expertly scribed in an elegant *littera textualis* in the early 1500s and exquisitely decorated by famed secular manuscript painter Attavante de Attavanti, becoming a gift for Pope Leo X, member of the illustrious Medici family of Florence. An important gift exchange was certainly not left to a new scribe! Carducci does not name herself in a colophon (not uncommon for liturgical manuscripts, especially high-end commissions). We learn her name only from the convent chronicle – as well as the story of the gift exchange. The nuns presented the manuscript to a powerful member of this important local patron family, and he gave them a bag of gold coins in return.[18]

17 The manuscript is Verona, Biblioteca Civica, 1196, a copy of Gregory Correr's epistle, *De commodis vitae regularis seu de contempt mundi,* which she copied out in 1474. On Domatilla Bernabuzi, her humanist education, and self-identification as a humanist-trained scribe, see Moreton 2014, 55–57, and Moreton 2023.

18 On Le Murate missal gifted to Pope Leo X, see Le Murate chronicle (Florence, BNC, II.II.509, fol. 76^{r}), and Lowe 1996. Other examples of high-end production from female scribes include a mid-fifteenth-century breviary by Augustinian nun Maria di Ormanno degli Albizzi of the Florentine convent of San Gaggio, and a missal of 1447 by scribe and abbess, Piera de' Medici, of the Vallombrosan monastery of Santa Verdiana in Florence. For more on Maria di Ormanno degli Albizzi's breviary (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 1923), see Arthur 2017 and Moreton 2023. Piera's missal is Florence, BML, Conv. Soppr., Vallombrosa codex 235. For more on Piera's manuscript and the creative leveraging of her Medici status, see Strocchia 2014.

Fig. 4: A 385-folio missal completed by Murate nun Battista Carducci in 1509 and illuminated by Attavante de Attavanti between 1509 and 1515 in Florence. The coat of arms of Pope Leo X was added at the bottom, once it was decided that the important Medici patron was to be the recipient. Paris, BnF, lat. 17323, fol. 13r; © Paris, BnF.

It is critical to analyse the hands within a manuscript as well as the choice of script. Both provide information about scribal agency, the motives for copying, the manuscript's audience, how the book was used, and allow us to construct a wider view of scriptorium training, partnerships, and practice.

2.2 Scribal practice, training, and teamwork in the scriptorium

Once a girl entered the convent and showed a vocation for scribal work, she was educated in copying within an informal system within the house where novices were mentored by senior scribes, worked in teams through many decades. We know this from the manuscript evidence where the 'hand' of a senior scribe was dominant in a manuscript; her apprentice taking on very little of the production and often left to scribe the middle section or a section of the manuscript that is not highly visible. Over time that relationship shifted and it was the novice that was the senior scribe, working on the majority of a text, and the elder scribe is only completing a small section of the manuscript. There are a number of documented examples of this mentoring from the Florentine scriptorium of the Bridgettine double monastery of Santa Brigida al Paradiso, occupied by friars and nuns from the early fifteenth through the mid sixteenth century.[19]

Raffaella di Arnolfo Bardi, a senior scribe at the Paradiso mentored a generation of nun-apprentices in the scriptorium, including Cleofe (Ginevra di Lorenzo Lenzi) who went on to mentor Cecilia (di Francesco Cattani da Diacceto) and several less prolific, but well-trained scribes. There are several known examples of Raffaella scribing the majority of a manuscript, and junior scribe Cleofe completing a smaller section. This pattern of mentorship continued once Rafaella retired from the scriptorium and Cleofe took over as senior scribe, mentoring younger scribes Cecilia, Margherita (Niccolini), and Maria (Matilde Chiavacci). One example of Cleofe and Cecilia's shared work at the Paradiso is a late fifteenth- / early sixteenth-century copy of Giovanni da Calvoli's *Meditazioni sulla vita di Gesù Cristo* (Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 1413) (Fig. 5).

19 The friars were the first to produce books (for a Franciscan book market) and by the early fifteenth century had begun teaching the nuns book production. By the mid fifteenth century the nuns had taken over scribal production, copying twice as many books with half as many scribes in the period they were active – and producing hundreds of books for their community. Under the guidelines of the Bridgettine order, the community was run under the leadership of the abbess with friars taking on the quotidian demands of maintaining the monastic complex, thus freeing the nuns to focus on spiritual perfection, prayer (meditation, chanting, solitary, and communal reading), sewing, embroidery, and for a select group, work in the scriptorium. On the nun-scribes of Santa Brigida al Paradiso, see Miriello 2007.

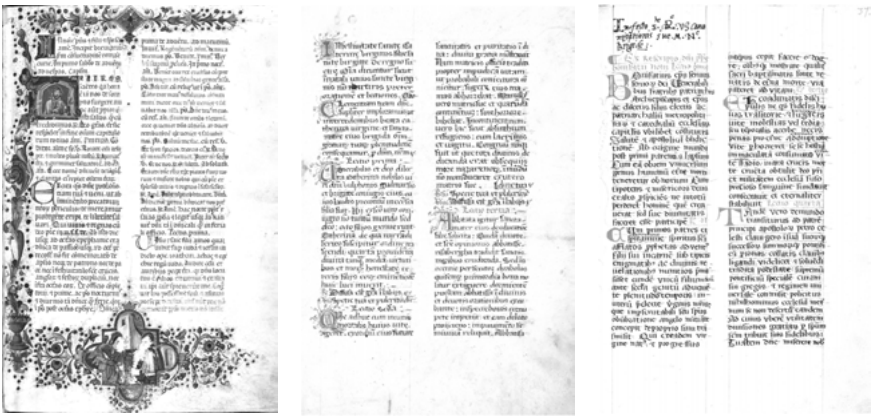
Senior scribe Cleofe is the main scribe (of Section 2 of the manuscript), completing fols 267^{r}–296^{v}. Cleofe allows Cecilia to complete a small text at the end of the manuscript, excerpts from the *Articoli della dottrina Cristiana* (fols 295^{r}–396^{r}).[20] Later, as a senior scribe, Cecilia would continue mentoring new novices in the same way. The surviving manuscripts from the Paradiso scriptorium allow scholars to study changes in a nun's hand over time, from uncertain apprentice and novice (completing small sections of manuscripts), to accomplished senior scribe with a strong hand (completing the majority of a text), to elder scribe whose hand is shaky (again completing small sections).

Nuns also often worked in teams on large communal liturgical manuscripts with one scribe completing the scribal work or lettering and the other copying out the musical notation. They tell us about this division of labour in their colophons. These teams included Angela di Leonardo Rucellai (lettering work) and Lucrezia Panciatichi (musical notation) of the Florentine Dominican convent of San Jacopo di Ripoli and Gostanza Cocchi (Nannina di Niccolo di Messer Donato Cocchi) who completed the lettering with Angela di Antonio da Rabatta (as miniaturist) at the convent of Sant'Ambrogio, Florence.[21]

The level of scribal production varied depending on the skill level of the scribe and her expertise in the scriptorium. Advanced scribes became proficient at many scripts. Mentorship over many hours, days, and years was essential to master a diverse range of scripts including the formal book hand (*littera textualis*) and its variants, used for most copying within the scriptorium. Not all scribes mastered this diversity of scripts. The most accomplished scribes, like Angela Rucellai, who were able to gracefully execute the large Gothic lettering needed for the massive communal choir books, could easily copy out devotional and other texts in an elegant *littera textualis* – whether those books were destined for sale or gifting to external patrons or for use by the sisters. However, even scribes with basic proficiency learned how to write in a decent *littera textualis* – a script needed for smaller liturgical and paraliturgical texts (communal processionals, rituals, etc.) and personal devotional manuscripts.

20 Florence, BML, Conv. Soppr. 459. The first section of the manuscript (fols 1–266) was completed by an unidentified scribe and contain various *commedia* and laudes; Section 2 was scribed by Cleofe and Cecilia. The book was used by a friar (Peter) of the house, who left his possession note in the manuscript's margins in the early sixteenth century (on fols 277^{r}, 332^{v}, 355^{r}, 396^{v}). On the Paradiso scribes, see Miriello 2007, 156–161.

21 On these scribe-notator teams, see Moreton 2023 and 2014. Rucellai and Panciatichi's teamwork survives in several manuscripts in the Museo di San Marco, Florence, including manuscripts Graduale 630 and 634 Corale P. The Sant'Ambrogio example is Florence, BML, Conv. Soppr. 90. On Rucellai, see Strocchia 2007; on the Sant'Ambrogio example, see Strocchia 2002.



a b c

Figs 5a–c: Italian Bridgettine nuns' late fifteenth- / early sixteenth-century work copying a breviary/prayer book, Florence, BML, Conv. Soppr. 459: (a) fol. 7^{r}, senior scribe Raffaella's formal *littera textualis*; (b) fol. 364^{r}, one of only a few folios at the end of the text by Cecilia (who worked in the scriptorium in the early 1500s); (c) fol. 375^{r}, another nun's scribal work on paper, dating to the early sixteenth century (perhaps Cecilia at a later date, or her student); © Florence, BML.

2.3 Decorative penwork as a mark of communal and self-identification

Penwork decoration – that is, decoration made entirely with the quill – could include simple or ornate ribbon initials, Roman capitals, borders, and drawings and show a tremendous range throughout the late medieval and Early Modern Period. Nuns did not always leave their names in their colophons, but instead found other ways of marking their presence within the manuscripts they produced. Within work traditionally bound by the expectation of pious anonymity, penwork provided an outlet for self-expression and self-identification ('I made this book!'). Scribes developed their own decorative flourishes, including elongated descenders and ascenders, stylized penwork initials, and distinctive and repeated patterns of marks surrounding their catchwords. These are ubiquitous (once you know to look for them) and include a range of personalized penwork that allowed nuns to create the hierarchy of script needed for reading and gave them artistic license over the decoration of their books.

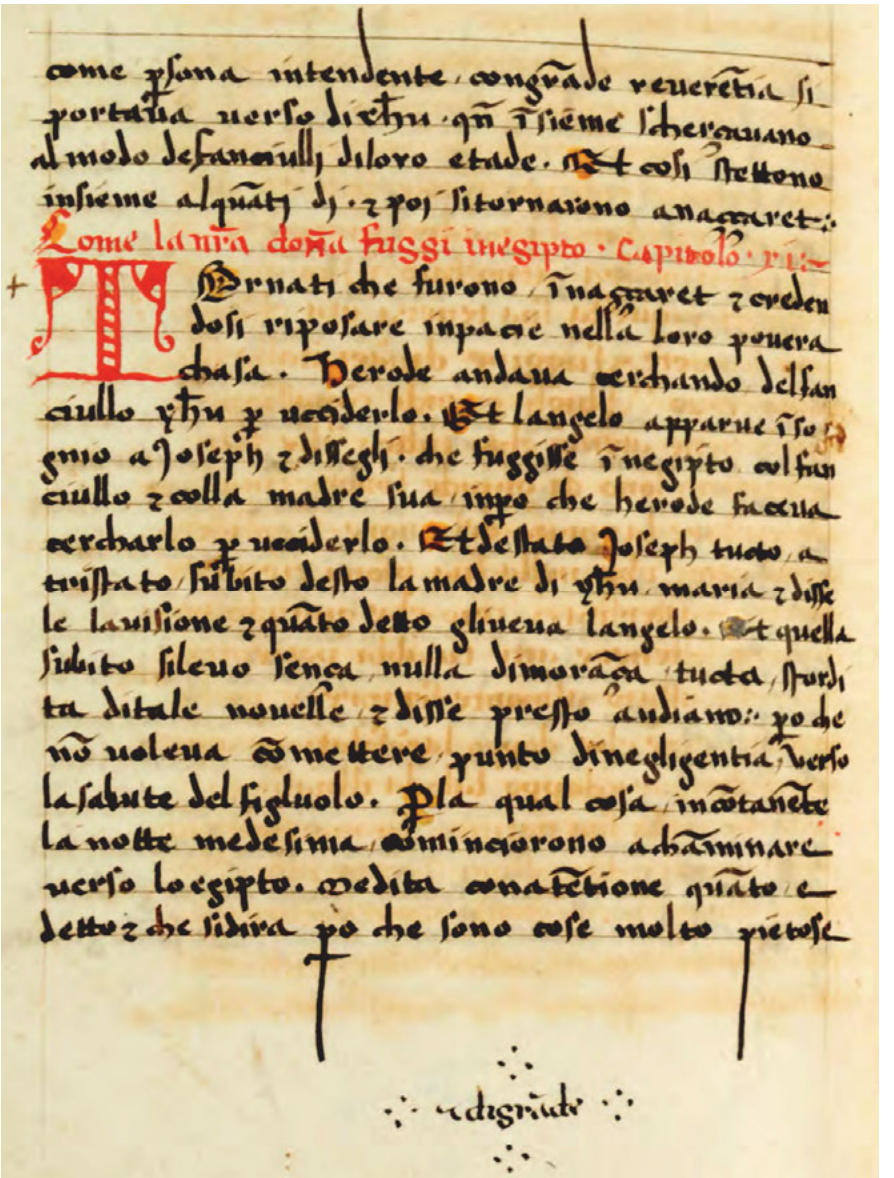
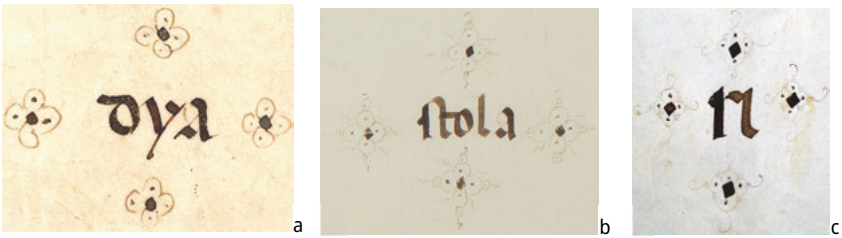


Fig. 6: Devotional manuscript by Cleofe of Santa Brigida al Paradiso written in a simplified *littera textualis* with a penwork initial in red and with the guide letter 't' in margin indicating which initial to draw. Above the 'T' is the rubricated chapter heading. Small ribbon initials begin each line, which are *toccata di giallo* ('touched with yellow' paint) in imitation of gilded letters. Late 1400s–early 1500s. Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 1413, fol. 296^{v}; © Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana.

Examples include Paradiso scribe Cleofe's devotional manuscript with small ribbon initials highlighted in yellow, her distinctive long ascenders and descenders, and catchwords surrounded by her characteristic four dot style, visible in the lower margin of this verso folio (Fig. 6) and Ripoli scribe Angela Rucellai's signature catchword decoration used in both small devotional and large liturgical manuscripts (Fig. 7). These flourishes are distinctive to each scribe and used across many decades. Decorative penwork is an underdeveloped method for identifying an unnamed scribe, identifying, and dating a known scribe's manuscripts. Once a number of examples are gathered, they may be used to create a chronology of a given scribe's work (something difficult to do if manuscripts are undated). Decorative penwork, such elongated and/or dashed descenders and catchwords with distinctive decorative motifs were one way in which scribes could leave self-identifying marks in their manuscripts. Without signing with her name, she is leaving her calling card within the books and connecting herself to her work in perpetuity.



Figs 7a–c: (a) Detail of Angela Rucellai's simple four-leafed flower design surrounding her catchword on the verso folio of a personal devotional *collectar* or collection of prayers; New York, Columbia University Libraries, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, MS Western 112. (b) A more decorative variation of Rucellai's catchword on the verso folio of another *collectar*, Florence, BNC, Conv. Soppr. D.7.344. (c) Detail of Rucellai's distinctive catchword with an extra flourish for a large communal choir book. Lower verso margin of a gradual, *c.* 1500; Florence, Museo di San Marco, Graduale 630. © New York, Columbia University Libraries; Florence, BNC, Museo di San Marco.

Penwork borders and decorative 'ribbon initials' – initials built entirely from penstrokes instead of painted with a brush and pigments – flourished throughout the sixteenth century in Italian convents. These built-up calligraphic initials provided nuns with another form of lettering within their expanding toolbox of decorative penwork and moved the production of large initials out of the miniaturist's workshop and into the hands of nun-scribes. It was economical to do this work in the monastic scriptorium, rather than outsource it to secular illuminators. Ribbon initials became popular for building a hierarchy of script, especially in communal liturgical manuscripts which required large initials visible to the singers at a distance.

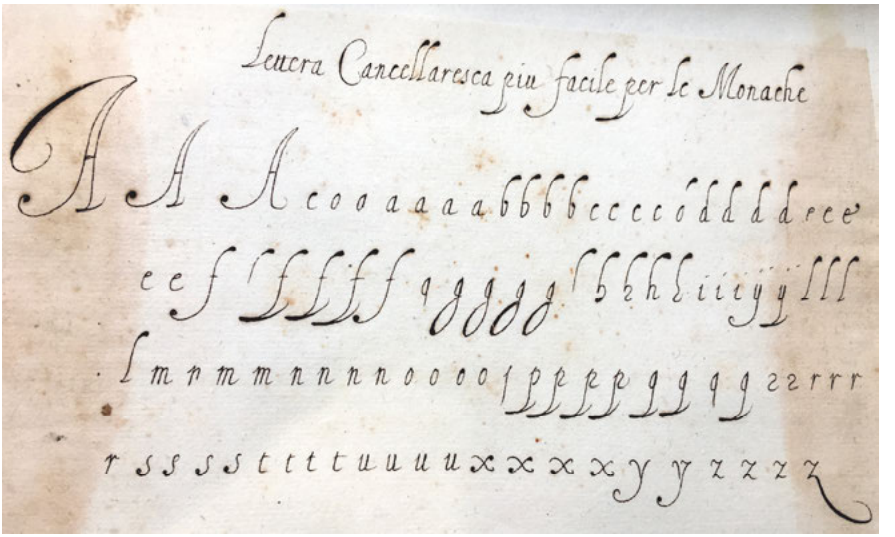
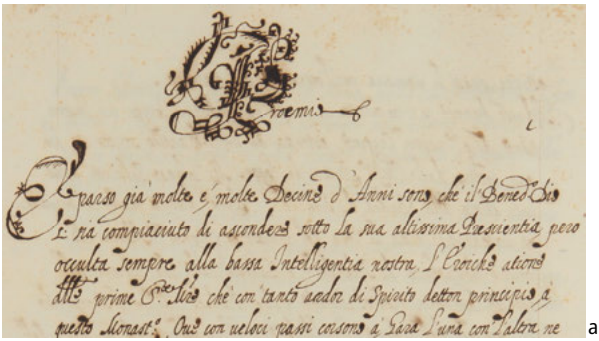


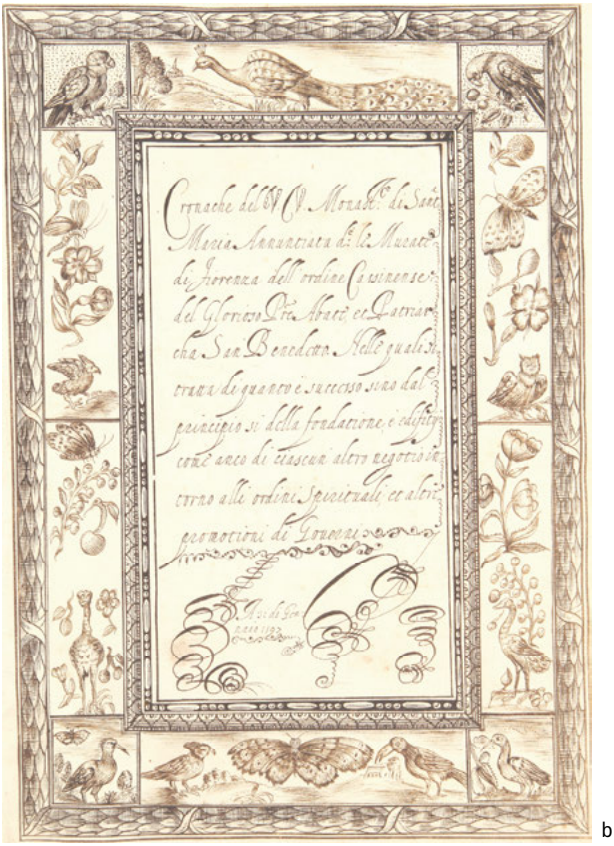
Fig. 8: 'Lettera Cancellaresca più facile per le Monache' / '*cancellaresca* script made easy for nuns'. A folio from an Italian handwriting sample book for nuns, demonstrating how to write an easy, simplified *cancellaresca* script. Late 1600s / early 1700s. Chicago, Newberry Library, Vault Wing MS ZW 735.C697 (unfoliated); © Chicago, Newberry Library.

Convent chronicles – authored and written out by the nuns – were also decorated with drawings and border designs in ink and constituted a type of communal self-identification. The source of this flourishing may be twofold. One, convents were filled with women who increasingly had graphic skills in writing and the calligraphic arts, influenced by the boom in the popularity of penmanship 'how to' sample books, which demonstrated how to write in the new stylized *cancellaresca corsiva*, build ribbon initials, and add decorative flourishes onto one's scribal work (see Fig. 8).[22] Two, the popularity of printed books and the development of the title page influenced the convent chronicle genre (see Fig. 9).

22 These books were common in the sixteenth century. A newly literate population was not only buying printed books, but also eager to learn how to write in the new handwriting style, to participate in letter writing and self-publishing manuscript copies of their own work. The Newberry Library, Chicago, has a large collection of Italian writing sample books from the period in their calligraphic collections.



a



b

Figs 9a–b: (a) A ribbon initial with elaborate flourishes in the 1598 convent chronicle of Le Murate, Florence, scribed by Suor Maria Benigna di Stiatta Cavalcanti. Florence, BNC, II.II.509, fol. 1ʳ. (b) The chronicle title page, with penwork drawings of animals and flora, decorative borders, and calligraphic flourishes filling the page. Florence, BNC, II.II.509, fol. IIIʳ; © Florence, BNC.

As a self-made product, the chronicles were produced for the nuns themselves and not for sale to an external audience – and this was the type of decoration they could complete in-house. High-end books made within the convent scriptorium and destined for sale or gift exchanges were most often painted and gilded by male secular decorators – a cost that was factored into the final cost–profit equation. However, most devotional and communal history books made for the convent could be decorated by the nuns themselves, with penwork initials and border designs or painted with simple initials. This reduced external production costs and provided an opportunity for artistic expression in books that were shared with the convent community for generations. These skills became increasingly important beginning in the seventeenth century, as secular illuminators and painters became less common in Italian cities. The nuns, who were active in book production well into the Early Modern Period, could no longer outsource decorative work and necessarily had to become more self-reliant, engaging artists within their own houses to embellish their manuscripts.

3 Knowledge of materials

Books were valuable commodities, and nuns carefully weighed the economics of material costs, a book's intended audience, and its use when deciding on sheet material, clasps, and covers. A knowledge of materials was critical, and analysing a book's materials – such as parchment, paper, and leather, can provide valuable information on the costs of production, who owned the book, and how it was used.

3.1 Sheet material: Paper vs parchment

Though it is difficult to analyse comparative prices – they change across time and place – it is safe to say that parchment was more expensive than paper and economics increasingly determined which sheet material was used for writing from the fifteenth century onward. Parchment prices varied depending on the time of year, type of animal skin, availability of hides and processing operations, and the quality of the finished sheet material which varied widely from maker to maker, region to region. With the advent of printing and the proliferation of mills meeting the demand for paper, costs of paper dropped substantially, and the choice of using parchment became much more deliberate. It is instructive to think of the pairing of certain materials with genre and several types of manuscripts written on parchment emerge from the sea of works on paper. The first are liturgical works large

and small for worship of the Mass and Office, which had to be durable and worthy of God. Next are paraliturgical texts, such as monastic rules, constitutions, etc., made on parchment because of their important spiritual, administrative, and legal role in communal life. Parchment was used well beyond the seventeenth century for these types of manuscripts, despite the costs.

The preference for parchment comes from two notions – one, that fine parchment was a godly material suitable for the word of God and two, that it was a superior sheet material able to withstand the type of use and abuse that functional liturgical manuscripts were subjected to. The latter reason was articulated in the treatise *De laude scriptorium manualium* ('In Praise of Scribes') written in 1492 by German abbot Johannes Trithemius. He states that books written on parchment are more durable, accurate, reliable, better edited and distributed than those printed on paper (he had issues with both paper and printing).[23] He also makes a point – that the scribe, unlike the printer, can reproduce whatever text he likes, without the constraints of censorship. Ideas about the durability and godliness of parchment persisted for centuries, but by the sixteenth century, parchment was increasingly selected only for works of high practical (instructional/liturgical), legal (administrative/archival), spiritual (patristic/hagiographic) or economic value (luxury manuscripts for sale or gift exchanges).

Monastic rules were commonly written on parchment, like the Monteluce copy made by Clarissan nun Maria di Bartolomeo da Perugia at Santa Maria di Monteluce in Sant'Erminio. This was a sacred text and one that – if all else was destroyed – would be a foundational document the nuns would need. Maria copied out this *Regola di Santa Chiara* in the vernacular, on *carta pecorina* (parchment).[24] They knew that parchment was more durable and used it judiciously for specific texts that warranted the extra cost because of their central importance to the life of the commu-

23 Chapter VII, 'Quod propter impressionem a scribendis voluminibus non sit desistendum' is cited in Petrucci 1995, 509–510.

24 The death record for Maria di Bartolomeo, memorializes her as a woman 'molto suffitiente [sic], docta de lectere et de scrivere' ('very learned in reading and writing') and notes that she wrote out 'doi Regule vulgare, cioé la Regula nostra: una in carta bambagina, la quale se usa in leggere ad la mensa; l'altra scripse in carta pecorina, la quale ne vulghariçò el sancto padre beato Bernardino da Feltro per nostra consolatione' ('two rules in the vernacular, that is, our rule: one on *carta bambagina*, which is used for reading during mealtimes: the other written on parchment, which was vulgarized by holy Father Beato Bernardino da Feltro for our consolation'). They are distinguishing between two different vernacular versions of the *Rule of Saint Claire*, and choosing parchment for one and paper for the everyday copy. Perugia, Monastero di Santa Maria di Monteluce in Sant'Erminio, *Memoriale*, fol. 51^{r} (cited in Umiker 2012, 115).

nity. However, we also learn that Maria made another copy of the *Regola* for reading at mealtimes. They note that she wrote this copy on '*carta bambagina*' (paper), a term that referred to a handmade paper made from high quality fibre. The nuns are making it clear that though it was not on parchment, this everyday copy was a quality item as well.[25]

The prestige of the scribe may have been another decision-making factor when choosing parchment. The well-born and aforementioned nun Domatilla Bernabuzi copied out a work on parchment in her humanist script in 1474 – a personal theological manuscript, Gregory Correr's *De commodis vitae regularis seu de contemptu mundi* (Verona, Biblioteca Civica, 1196). She was from an aristocratic family and likely came to the convent with scribal and language skills. She or her family may have bought the material for the book, a practice that was not uncommon. Writing materials, such as quills and parchment, were sometimes supplied in this way. It is clear from the Paradiso manuscripts on parchment, that only the most accomplished scribe, Suor Raffaella Bardi, had access to this expensive sheet material. Judging from the manuscripts she completed on parchment, she allowed the junior scribes in the scriptorium to pen only a few folios in the centre of the book. Mistakes were too costly, but she clearly wanted them to have the experience of writing on parchment.[26]

Parchment was produced in varying levels of quality and sold by grade. The most high-end Italian parchment sheets had no blemishes, were a uniform creamy white colour, and had no holes or uneven edges. When this level of quality is present in a manuscript, one can be sure the scribe or patron paid a high price from the *cartolaio* ('stationer') for such a material and the work was of great value to its owner. Information on the economic choices of scribes can also be gleaned from a manuscript produced on poor quality parchment, which may be discoloured, have holes either on the writing surface of the sheet or along the edge, have surface damage from some injury to the animal or a parchment-maker's tear, show parchment-maker's surgical repairs, or bear the scars from disease, insect bites, or wounds. This information can provide a basic guideline for understanding the economics of

25 Another exception to the use of parchment for monastic rule is the handwritten paper copy of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, discussed previously (Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, MSS 01207). This vernacular copy of the rule was a personal copy – so paper was affordable and an appropriate choice.

26 Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 2878 from the late quattrocento, containing Bridget's *Regola del Salvatore* and other writings by Saint Bridget completed by Suor Raffaella and Suor Cleofe. Similarly, Cleofe the less experienced scribe, completes only a small part (fols 57^{r}–61^{v}), the first ten folios of Pietro di Alvastra's *Additions to the Regola del Salvatore*. She stops in the middle of fol. 61^{v} and the text is picked up again by Raffaella who completes it.

the production of a work, and is especially instructive when looking at a particular scribe's work over time. This is the case with the work of aforementioned scribe Angela Rucellai, who produced a number of collectars, all generally dated to *c.* 1500 based on the known dates of her lifespan. Palaeographical evidence of her writing – from uncertain to confident scribe – gives us one indication of where to place each manuscript chronologically. But the quality of materials adds another layer to the understanding of how to date a scribe's work and place it within the timeline of her scribal career. Early in their scriptorium work, they may not have had access to high quality parchment. Only after they proved proficiency in writing would they be allowed to work on a finer grade of material and be able to purchase, or have provided to them, fine parchment of a higher quality.

In any case, scribes who learned on paper (as the evidence suggests most of them did in this period) would need some training in working with parchment, as it was now no longer the dominant sheet material used in the production of books. The pleasures must have been immense for these nun-scribes who finally got to work on parchment, especially if it was well prepared. Italian parchment was some of the finest and writing on it was like writing on a buttery, silky smooth surface that accepted the ink and made it part of its structure.

Timothy Barrett's studies of late medieval Italian papers have shown that papermakers, testing and adapting their product for the new incunable presses in the late fifteenth century, were intentionally trying to replicate the parchment sheet in surface quality, crispness, durability, colour and weight.[27] Part of this imitation involved sizing – dipping the handmade paper sheets into a dilute gelatine solution, then drying and burnishing them. This gave the paper a parchment-like surface suitable for writing on (something readers did in manuscripts and printed books alike). Parchment was too expensive and too difficult to print on (though they tried) and could not match the demand for the massive levels of production soon to be underway. Though the work of a burnisher or glazier was time- and labour-intensive, burnishing a well-made and well-sized sheet of paper succeeded in producing a product with characteristics similar to parchment.[28] For the scribe, nothing compared to a fine piece of parchment – but a well-burnished piece of paper was a close second.

27 Barrett 2013, 120.

28 Barrett 2021, 40.

3.2 Sheet material: Paper

The Monteluce *memoriale* is a large folio-size manuscript on paper and begins with a note about its production, dating to 1483. Incredibly, the note states 'Questo libro biancho segnato + di foglio Reale de charte 300' ('This white book marked with the symbol + [is made with] 300 sheets of Royal size paper') – valuable information for understanding the economics of book production at Monteluce, known for its prolific scribes and thriving scriptorium (Fig. 10).[29]

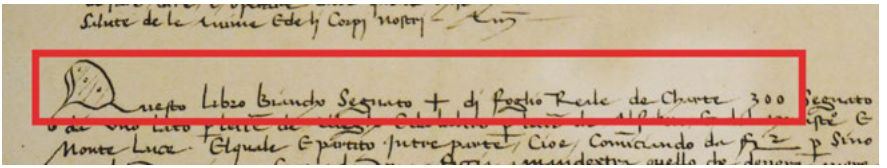


Fig. 10: Inscription from 1483 in the Monteluce *memoriale*, noting, 'Questo libro biancho segnato + di foglio Reale de charte 300'; Perugia, Monastero di Santa Maria di Monteluce in Sant'Erminio, *Memoriale*, fol. 1r; © Perugia, Monastero di Santa Maria di Monteluce in Sant'Erminio.

Royal or *Reale* paper measured approximately 44 × 61 centimetres.[30] This is large paper that would not have been readily available in Perugia, where papermakers produced smaller sheets for a local market. Instead, the paper came from Fabriano, north of Perugia, according to its watermarks – a *giglio* (*fleur-de-lis*), *eagle,* and *frecce decussate* ('crossed arrows'), and the telltale quality and spacing of the laid lines on the sheet. There was a continuous importation of Fabriano papers into Perugia, and Fabriano mills were known to have produced the finest papers keeping the quality high, even after many Italian mills began to produce thinner sheets to meet the demand of required by printing presses in the late fifteenth-century onward.[31] Both the large Royal-sized *memoriale* and many of Monteluce's smaller de-

29 Perugia, Monastero di Santa Maria di Monteluce in Sant'Erminio, *Memoriale*, fol. 1r.

30 Paper dimensions in medieval Italy were set to standard sizes. In cities like Bologna, the *comune* or civic government monitored production and set the dimensions of the sheet to protect both guild workers and consumers. The so-called 'Bologna stone' (a stone with carvings of the standardized paper sizes) indicates dimensions, including the second largest sheet size (*Reale*) and the largest (*Imperiale*). See Harris *s.a.*

31 On Fabriano, see Albro 2016.

votional manuscripts produced in the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth centuries are on Fabriano paper, some with the same *frecce decussate* watermark.[32] This suggests that large sheets were purchased for the massive *memoriale* and remaining sheets were later used for some of the devotional books. What is curious here is that the paper in the *memoriale* is *not* burnished or polished but the paper in the smaller devotional manuscripts is. Burnished paper – at least burnished to the level of shine seen in Monteluce's devotional manuscripts – is very rare (see Fig. 11). Were the nuns burnishing this paper by hand? Burnishing a sheet of paper that has been dipped in gelatine sizing produced a very parchment-like material and as experienced scribes, they knew that paper finished in this way was a superior sheet material to write on. Since this is only seen on the nuns' surviving devotional manuscripts, it may be a material that was desired for writing this genre of text – the mainstay of their production on paper.[33] A burnished sheet would certainly have raised the price of a book, and the nuns had a ready market for their devotional texts, which they sold to a wide clientele of secular noblewomen, religious laywomen, abbesses and friars buying books for female houses under their care.[34]

Materials were important and the nuns were well versed in how to describe the types of materials they chose for their book production. Within the *memoriale* there are a number of references to paper and parchment. In a note from 1508, the nuns record the obituary of one of the convent's nun-scribes, Maria di Bartolomeo da Perugia, who they memorialize as being 'well versed in reading and writing' and who copied a breviary, two rules in vernacular, one in '*carta bamagina*' (paper) used for reading at mealtimes and the other in '*carta pecorina*' (parchment). This is an incredible detail about the choice of materials. The rule of the order, which was often copied out in parchment because of its durability, here is also produced in (a high quality) paper, destined for communal use to be read in the refectory during

32 Many of Monteluce's surviving fifteenth- and sixteenth-century devotional manuscripts, which are smaller in format, are now in the Biblioteca Comunale Augusta in Perugia.

33 Some of the paper made in the Fabriano mills was sent to the central square in the town to be calendared or burnished to give it a smoother finish and make it more desirable for writing. However, it is unclear whether the sheets used in the devotional manuscripts were calendared in Fabriano – or burnished by hand by the nuns in Perugia. Since the paper in the large folio-size *memoriale* is not burnished – we know they ordered unburnished paper for the larger volumes and may have burnished smaller sheets by hand or purchased them burnished (at a higher price). The *memoriale*, begun in the fifteenth century was written in for several centuries, so it is conceivable that the three-hundred folios of Fabriano carta *Reale* (noted in the 1483 inscription on fol. 1^{r}) lasted until the early 1500s, when several of the smaller devotional manuscripts were made with the same watermarked paper.

34 On Monteluce, see Umiker 2012; Laniati 1983; and Niccolini 1971.

meals. We know the nuns had the choice between paper and parchment and those choices reflected their understanding of economics and the characteristics and quality of the material, as well as how the book would be used and by whom.

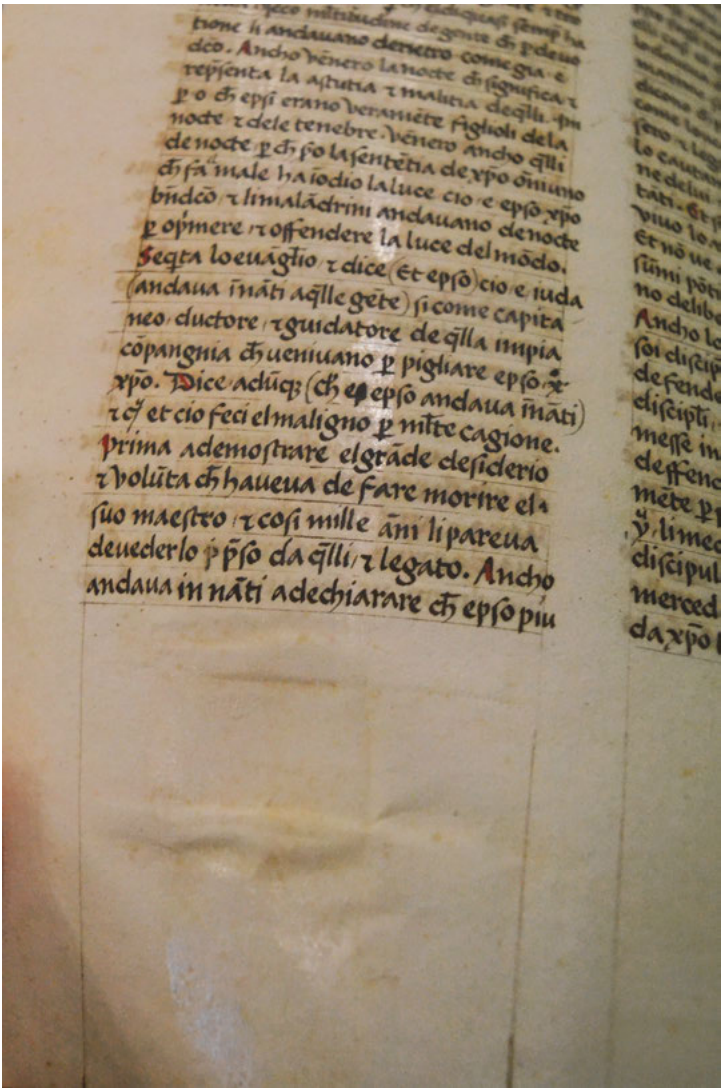


Fig. 11: The shiny surface of sized and burnished paper in a Monteluce devotional manuscript from 1512, containing Gabriele da Perugia's *Libro de vita*; Perugia, Biblioteca Comunale Augusta, 993; © Perugia, Biblioteca Comunale Augusta.

3.3 Book covers: Parchment *vs* leather and sheep *vs* goat

Returning briefly to the Venetian *Regula del sanctissimo Benedetto*, the book was bound in a utilitarian limp parchment cover, recut, refolded, and reused from the cover of an earlier, larger book. The *Regula*'s well-worn covers indicate that it was heavily used – and this evidence is confirmed by the numerous notes of possession written out in the margins of the paper manuscript.[35] Limp parchment covers were common on books for students and preachers – and anyone whose interest in the text outweighed their desire (or budget) for a more ostentatious tooled leather cover over boards. The binding was a common choice for booksellers, who would have books bound into a parchment covering, with the idea that the owner could have them rebound in leather and boards at a later date, if desired.[36] It was sometimes meant to be temporary, sometimes meant to be permanent, and sometimes meant to be temporary but became the final binding out of neglect or a lack of funds to slip it into a finer binding. Limp parchment, particularly when recycled from another book, was inexpensive and durable.

The book was sewn on supports, which were laced into holes in the covers, holding it in place. This covering may have been added by the nuns themselves. A mark up for the binder on the inner cover turn in notes the direction of the cover placement ('*Supra*' – basically 'this way up') and is in a hand not dissimilar to those of the possession notes (see Figs 12a–c). Whether bound by the nuns or by someone outside the convent, the nuns were making a statement in their choice of materials – one that demonstrates their interest in studying this new version of the *Regula,* rather than showing off its binding.

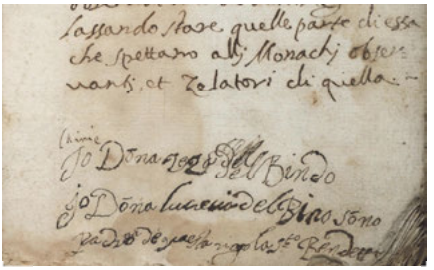
Choices were also made about leather used for book covers. The cheapest leather was sheepskin (followed by goat and then calf, which was generally the costliest). As an 'oily' skin, sheep has a layer of fat between the inner and outer epidermis, which, when it dries out over time causes the upper skin to delaminate easily and tear away. The telltale sign of sheep delamination can be seen in Fig. 13.

35 The possession notes, written by successive users of the manuscript, state the temporary owner's name followed by a variation on the phrase: 'Io sono padrona di questa regola' ('I am the owner of this rule'). Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, MMS 01207, fols 1^{r}, 139^{v}.

36 See Pickwoad 2016.

a

b



c

Figs 12a–c: (a) Exterior of the left-hand (upper) cover of the limp parchment binding on the *Regula del sanctissimo Benedetto*, made from recycled parchment and showing evidence of rodent damage (chew marks on right). (b) Inner cover showing bookbinder's notation of '*Supra*' ('above') on the turned in parchment, indicating 'this way up' for the placement of the cover on the book. (c) Possession notes in a hand similar to that of the bookbinder, bottom of fol. 1^{r}; Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, MMS 01207; © Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library.

Though a full-scale study of nuns' book bindings has yet to be carried out, evidence of selected case studies suggests that sheepskin is the most common leather seen on nuns' devotional manuscripts, at least on those books that remain in their early bindings.[37] The choice of sheepskin leather was an economic one. These books are all about the contents, not the covers, and the nuns are taking cost into consideration when paying for the covering material. In considering the economics of production, it is worth noting that the most high-end known surviving manuscript from the Benedictine nuns of Le Murate in Florence (the papal gift produced by Carducci and Attavante in Fig. 4) does not appear to be covered in sheepskin, but perhaps goat, a more costly skin which

37 In general, medieval books that retain their early or original covers have a low survival rate, since many books that survive have been rebound in subsequent bindings by collectors and libraries who wanted to upgrade whole collections to give them a uniform appearance. Nuns' books – of lesser interest to collectors – have often escaped this renewal process, preserving valuable information on the economics of book production.

is commensurate with the level of scribal production and illumination (eZooMs protein analysis has not been carried out on this skin to determine its animal origin but this would confirm the visual identification).[38]

Fig. 13: Detail of the left-hand (upper) cover of a *collectarium* written and used by the nuns of San Jacopo di Ripoli, Florence, showing delamination of the sheepskin leather. The areas where the upper epidermis have peeled off are lightest in colour; Florence, BNC, Conv. Soppr. C.S.D.7.344; © Florence, BNC.

It is generally assumed that the choice of covering or binding materials was made by the bookbinder at the stationer's shop, where the nuns sent their books to be bound (if it was not bound in a monastic context). However, new archival evidence

38 The manuscript is Paris, BnF, lat. 17323. The non-invasive method of testing proteins to determine the animal species of a skin has been pioneered by the Beast2Craft team of biocodicologists, and published in Fiddyment et al. 2019.

by Kathleen Arthur, on the nun-scribes of the Augustinian house of San Gaggio, Florence, demonstrates that the nuns did choose the leather and other materials for the books they made for nuns at their own house. As early as the 1430s the Florentine nuns of San Gaggio purchased parchment from *cartolai* for breviaries and missals.[39] Their account book also records the purchase of red '*pellicina cavretta*' or goatskin leather, and silver clasps for the book cover, for a breviary. Goat was more costly than sheep, the most durable skin used for leather, and created a high-quality covering material, with a cost that reflected this. The red goatskin was purchased by the convent for nun Andredea Rinuccini's breviary and costs were reimbursed by Andredea's brother when the book was finished.[40] Wealthy family members of nun-scribes also supplied materials, such as quills and parchment, directly to the nuns for their book production. There were presumably materials needed for special projects outside of their regular scriptorium work, for the making of extra books for themselves, their fellow sisters, and special family members.

4 Conclusions

Bookmaking did not require a great deal of space – however, materials such as parchment, paper, quills, and ink did require some investment of capital, not to mention the labour and time required to train a literate scribe or good miniaturist. If the space, scribal skills, and tools were available to produce books, there was potentially an excellent return on the investment. Savvy abbesses and prioresses, in charge of literate and graphically-gifted communities of women, saw this as an opportunity and developed scriptoria within their convents – an activity that involved cultivating and maintaining important connections with wealthy patrons. The scriptorium was at once a space requiring the support of patrons (for room construction and repairs, provision of writing supplies, etc.) and one that produced objects of patronage (the books that were sold or given away in gift exchanges with important patrons). Bookwork sustained the community financially – selling Books of Hours and paraliturgical texts to a range of patrons brought in much-needed income and offered vital diversification of the convent's income sources, stabilizing it financially.

39 Their account book shows the purchase of materials from a *cartolaio* named Bartolomeo, including parchment for quires. See Arthur 2017.

40 Arthur 2017, 273–274.

Aside from functioning as a source of income and patronage-building, producing books in-house provided the nuns with the liturgical, devotional, theological and archival books they needed to fulfil their obligations of communal prayer, private devotion, and study, as well as maintaining the community's history through the keeping of vital records such as chronicles, necrologies, account books, and books of profession. Nuns expressed scribal agency through the scripts they used and the manner in which they wrote. Though monastic life was in many ways governed by the virtue of piety, nuns' scribal work show us a different aspect of convent life, one in which cloistered women expressed self-identification in subtle (distinctive catchwords and decorative penwork) and sometimes overt ways (like naming themselves in colophons). These forms of self-identification were understood within their communities and increased nun-scribes' status within the convent, as well as providing a lasting presence within their houses after the nuns passed from their earthly to their heavenly home.

One of the most surprising aspects of nuns' bookwork concerns the material choices nuns made when reproducing texts. Materials were carefully chosen for specific jobs – high-end calligraphic work, fine parchment, and goatskin leather covers for liturgical manuscripts for the most prestigious patrons, a suitable handmade paper burnished to a smooth shine for communal devotional texts bound in sheepskin, and rough parchment for the beginners producing a personal theological or spiritual text. It is critical to assess the material aspects of these books, since it provides a great deal of information about the motives nuns had in creating them. Was this book meant for a wealthy client – for sale or gift exchange? Was it created for personal use (nuns kept their own books, even if those texts were technically owned communally)? Where did the materials come from? Was the paper (as in the Monteluce example) shipped in specially from a distant paper mill to provide the house with large-sized sheet materials, not available locally? How were these purchases made and which parties negotiated? Why did a nun choose parchment over paper (much more expensive, but the only choice for some texts)? Whether the choice was parchment or paper, what can the quality of the sheet material tell us about her skill level and stage of her writing career? The answers to these questions can tell us about the economic status of the scribe and her community, what level of priority she is giving to the production of each book, and her relationship to patrons, secular collaborators, and her fellow scribes within the scriptorium. Taken together, the evidence of scribal work and materials provide a wealth of information about nuns' deep knowledge of materials, as well as how those choices impacted their artistic and intellectual lives.

The copying of books did not spring spontaneously from nothing – *ex nihilo* – but was instead grounded in a wide-reaching culture of literacy and textual production in female religious communities across the Italian peninsula. Understanding the materials, methods, and motives employed by these religious women enlarges the framework for understanding the broader production of texts (both secular and religious) produced in the period. Women are part of this larger picture – as artists, makers, sellers, readers, and book users – and their bookwork tells a broader story about how they leveraged their scribal skill and knowledge of materials to support their communities and their own spiritual and intellectual ambitions.

Abbreviations

BML = Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (Florence)
BNC = Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale (Florence)
BnF = Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris)
Conv. Soppr. = Conventi Soppressi

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