

# Prophetic Theology: The Santa Brigida da Paradiso in Florence

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Is there a connection between women, prophecy, and theology? We might approach this question by looking at one historical case: the choice of spiritual and devotional literature in the women's monastery of Santa Brigida al Paradiso in Florence.

## Alberti and the Founding of Paradiso

On 26 January 1392 Pope Boniface IX granted Antonio di Niccolò Alberti the privilege of founding a male and female monastery dedicated to Saint Birgitta of Sweden, who had been canonised the year before, in 1391.<sup>1</sup> Antonio's father, Niccolò di Antonio Alberti, was an extremely influential man in Florence at that time. His family was part of the city's *élite*, managing a considerable estate and an impressive volume of business dealings. The Alberti were merchants of French and English cloth and had branches of their business scattered all over Italy, Europe, and the Mediterranean. In fact, they carried on commerce in Genoa, Bologna, Rome, Venice, Rhodes, Syria, Greece, Hungary, Valencia, Barcelona, Paris, Bruges, Avignon, Ghent, Brussels, London, and Cologne. Besides this, the Alberti were also bankers for the pope, and thanks to their prudent dealings were able to avoid investment failures; even when the Bardi bank, with whom they partnered, sank into insolvency in the mid-14th century, the Alberti family managed to avoid suffering the repercussions.<sup>2</sup> They owned a considerable number of properties both in the city and in the country, including a villa called "del Paradiso" near Florence. This was such a remarkable place, both from an architectural standpoint and due to the intellectual

1 Anna Benvenuti Papi, "Donne religiose nella Firenze del Due-Trecento; appunti per una ricerca in corso," in *Le mouvement confraternel au Moyen Âge. France, Italie, Suisse. Actes de la table ronde de Lausanne (9–11 mai 1985)*, (Rome: 1987), 41–82, 8.

2 Maria Elisa Soldani, *Uomini d'affari e mercanti toscani nella Barcellona del Quattrocento* (Barcelona: 2010), 329–69.

activities which took place there, that it inspired a contemporary literary work by Giovanni di Gherardo da Prato, entitled *Il Paradiso degli Alberti*.<sup>3</sup>

Niccolò's son Antonio transformed the villa into a vibrant cultural circle, where the humanist intellectuals of the day met together for debates as well as musical and poetic events. Antonio was himself a man of letters, composing poetry along the lines of Petrarch and Fazio degli Uberti, and his contacts were among the most eminent intellectuals of early 15th-century Florence.<sup>4</sup> The cultural debates, refined amusements, and scholarly discussions which took place in the Alberti's home, with the musician Francesco Landini, the mathematician Biagio Pelacani, the humanist Coluccio Salutati and the philosopher Pietro dell'Antella nearly always in attendance,<sup>5</sup> are recorded in the book *Il Paradiso degli Alberti* by Giovanni Gherardi da Prato.<sup>6</sup> During the same period, Antonio degli Alberti was elected to office (in 1400) in the Florentine commune as a "Gonfaloniere di Compagnia", one of the most prominent positions of authority in the city. Following in his father's footsteps, as early as the 1390s, he showed great sensitivity to religious experiences of conversion.

Alberti set aside a plot of land and probably some buildings just outside the walls of Florence, in the Piano di Ripoli near the so-called "Paradise of the Alberti", devoting it to the construction of the new convent. Thus, the monastery of Santa Brigida al Paradiso was inaugurated – the first of the Birgittine order in Italy and second in the Catholic world, since the Florentine community came after the mother house, which was consecrated in Vadstena (Sweden) in 1384. "Paradiso" precedes both the Birgittine convent at Gdansk, dedicated to Birgitta and Mary Magdalene (1394), and Santa Maria di Scala Coeli, in Genoa (1403).

We do not know exactly what the reasons were that led Antonio degli Alberti to choose to found a convent of Birgitta's order – an order that was only confirmed by Pope Urban v with great difficulty.<sup>7</sup> However, we do know that Birgitta was well known in Florence: her relations with some of the most influential family units in the city are documented, namely Lapo Acciaiuoli's family

3 Luigi Passerini, *Gli Alberti di Firenze. Genealogia, storia e documenti* (Firenze: 1870); Alessandro Wesselofsky (ed.), *Il Paradiso degli Alberti. Ritrovi e ragionamenti del 1389. Romanzo di Giovanni da Prato dal codice autografo e anonimo della Riccardiana* (Bologna: 1867).

4 Cfr. Giovanni Borriero, "La tradizione delle Rime di Antonio degli Alberti (1)," *Medioevo letterario d'Italia* (2004), 141–70. Also see Gabriella Zarri, *Figure di donne in Età Moderna. Modelli e storie* (Roma: 2017), x, 21 and 45.

5 Arnaldo D'Addario, "Alberti Antonio," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, volume 1 (Roma: 1960), online version <[6 Wesselofsky \(ed.\), \*Il Paradiso degli Alberti\*.](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-alberti_(Dizionario-Biografico)/></a>.</p>
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7 His life and memoirs in Borriero, "La tradizione delle Rime di Antonio degli Alberti," 141–70.

and that of Niccolò Soderini and his wife Costanza.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Florentine memoirs and other literary sources preserve the memory of her very deep spiritual friendship with Madonna Lapa Acciaioli, wife of Manente Buondelmonti and sister of Nicola Acciaioli, grand Siniscalco of the Kingdom of Naples. Nicola and Lapa Acciaioli may have introduced Birgitta to the Florentine upper class of the time, because as we know, Birgitta was very close to Joanna, Queen of Naples.<sup>9</sup> In Florence, perhaps through the network of social contacts of the Acciaioli and Buondelmonti families, she was approached by Antonio degli Alberti.<sup>10</sup> Antonio himself asked Pope Boniface IX to allow him to found a monastery according to Birgitta's rule and the pope gave his consent. The pope's letter to the bishop of Florence approving the construction of the monastery clearly mentions the request addressed by Antonio degli Alberti to the Roman Curia, adding that he had a special devotion to Birgitta.<sup>11</sup>

It is impossible to comment further on this decision, because no sources have been found to explain why this cultured businessman developed such a strong inclination towards Birgitta that he was even persuaded to found a

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- 8 Giuseppina Bacarelli, "Storia del monastero di Santa Maria e Brigida al Paradiso: 1392–1776," in *Il Paradiso in Pian di Ripoli. Studi e ricerche su un antico monastero*, ed. Mina Gregori, Giuseppe Rocchi (Florence: 1985), 18–29, 18, see also Sharon T. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: 2009), 131–40, about the economic activities of the monastery in general.
- 9 Bridget Morris, "Birgitta of Sweden and Giovanna of Naples: an unlikely friendship," in *Santa Brigida, Napoli, l'Italia: atti del convegno di studi italo-svedese, Santa Maria Capua Vetere, 10–11 maggio 2006*, ed. Olle Ferm, Alessandra Perriccioli Saggese, Marcello Rotili (Naples: 2007), 23–24; see also Riccardo Francovich, "Buondelmonti Manente," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, volume 15 (Rome: 1972), online version <[A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden and Her Legacy in the Later Middle Ages, ed. Maria Husabø Oen \(Leiden: 2019\), 223–46, 224–25, 240–42.](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/manente-buondelmonti_(Dizionario-Biografico)/></a>. The tomb of Lapa is in the Church of Certosa del Galluzzo, Cappella di Tobia. See also Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby, )
- 10 Domenico Moreni, *Notizie istoriche dei contorni di Firenze, Parte Quinta. Dalla Porta a San Niccolò fino alla Pieve di S. Piero a Ripoli* (Florence: 1794), 128–29; see also the source in Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Diplomatico*, 1401, dicembre, 9.
- 11 "Exhibita siquidem nobis nuper pro parte dilecti filii nobilis viri Antonii de Albertis Militis Florentini petitio continebat, quod ipse de propria salute recogitans, et cupiens terrena in celestia, et transitoria in eterna felici commercia commutare, de bonis sibi a Deo collatis ad laudem Omnipotentis Dei et ob reverentiam B. Brigide de Suetia, ad quam gerit specialis devotionis affectum, in Comitatu Florentino, in loco ad id congruo, et honesto unum Monasterium Monialium sub vocabulo B. Brigide supradicte, que sub perpetua Clausura commorentur [...] fundari et construi facere et illud sufficienter dotare proponit", Moreni, *Notizie istoriche*, 130.

monastery, endowing it with his own property.<sup>12</sup> It is true that his family of origin was involved in charitable works and in the building of religious sites – his father had built a hospice for the poor in 1372,<sup>13</sup> Iacopo and Giovanni Alberti had founded a church dedicated to Saint Catherine in the parish of Antella, and Iacopo di Carroccio had erected a church dedicated to Santa Maria sul Ponte in Rubaconte.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the choice made by Antonio is so unusual that, perhaps, invoking a generic family custom towards works of charity and devotion does not fully explain it. Yet in the absence of sources that can give an answer, we can only formulate questions and hypotheses.

As well as being a man of letters and a writer, Antonio was also known in the city as a talented astrologer. Or at least, his famous descendant Leon Battista Alberti presents him as such.<sup>15</sup> Is it possible that it was Birgitta's prophetic power that convinced Antonio of the advisability of founding a convent with Birgitta's rule in Florence? We know for certain that, probably after meeting her,<sup>16</sup> in 1392 he obtained from Boniface IX the privilege of establishing a Birgittine religious community within the Benedictine monastery, by then abandoned by the monks, which was located near his villa. Although there is no documentary evidence testifying to a meeting between Antonio degli Alberti and Birgitta of Sweden, many scholars believe they must have met since, as mentioned above, Birgitta was in his social circle, and having met her personally could explain Alberti's decision to found a monastery according to her rule. We do know for certain that only a year later, in 1393, he helped another group of religious women with particularly strict customs: the Jesuati followers of Giovanni Colombini.<sup>17</sup>

12 “È questo monastero della Vergine Maria e di Santa Brigida detto Paradiso per rispetto della bellezza et ornamento degl' ediftii, e giardini che ci erano, e de' dilette corporali quali i secolari ci pigliavano prima che ci fusse il monastero, et essendo poi trasferito ad uso religioso si è ritenuto il nome”, Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Bonifazio, 10 gennaio 1395; Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Archivi dello Spedale di S. Maria Nuova, Monastero del Paradiso I, fols. 190–101; Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Archivi dello Spedale di S. Maria Nuova, Monastero del Paradiso, 222, s.n., Florence, Archivio Innocenti, serie I, n. 10, fols. 4v–11r.

13 See Isabelle Chabot, “Messer Niccolò degli Alberti, ‘pater pauperum’. Lettura del testamento,” in *L'ospedale dell'Orbatello. Carità e arte a Firenze*, ed. Cristina De Benedictis and Carla Milloschi (Florence: 2015), 73–81.

14 Passerini, *Gli Alberti di Firenze*, 23–25.

15 Ruggero Romano and Alberto Tenenti (eds.), *Leon Battista Alberti i libri della famiglia* (1969; repr. Turin: 1994), 84.

16 Ottavio Gigli (ed.), *Prose di Feo Belcari edite ed inedite sopra autografi e testi a penna raccolte e pubblicate da Ottavio Gigli* (Rome: 1843), 9, footnote n. 1.

17 Passerini, *Gli Alberti di Firenze*, 85, 26.

Alberti donated two houses to the Jesuati women, where they could conduct their *forma vitae* undisturbed, under the custody of the bishop and the Jesuati friars who had recently moved to Florence. In 1395, Brother Manno of Sweden received from Antonio the dowry necessary for the monastic institution under Birgitta's rule, and the Alberti family chapel, dedicated to St. Mary and St. Zenobius al Fabrero, was transformed into the monastic church. It was frescoed with an iconographic programme of enormous interest: entirely dedicated to the figure of Christ from the *Washing of the Feet* episode to the *Transfiguration*, it culminated in a very unusual *Last Judgement* in which Hell was completely missing.<sup>18</sup> The monastery was already prepared to welcome the community of Birgittine nuns and monks when things became complicated: the Bishop of Fiesole was against the erection of a double monastery, as envisaged by Birgitta's rule, and Boniface IX went along with him.<sup>19</sup> Antonio aligned himself with this decision and interrupted the process necessary for the constitution of the Birgittine community. The interruption was short, however, and by 1401 the monks had already returned to the Paradiso abbey.

The choice to help religious people such as the followers of Birgitta and Giovanni Colombini, who strove for the reform of the church, is consistent with the type of religiosity shown in the iconography of the monastic church. This, in turn, fits in well with what little we know of Alberti's religiosity and which we struggle to recover by reading his remaining writings. In Alberti's *Rime*, in fact, verses appear declaring his expectation of divine intervention to renew the church whose corruption was stigmatized.<sup>20</sup> Nor should we forget that, in those years, there was a strong sense of eschatological expectation: between 1399 and 1400, there were numerous processions of the Bianchi (the Whites), penitents who scourged themselves, walking great distances between one city

18 Francesca Goggioli, "Il Paradiso ritrovato. Novità sul ciclo pittorico del monastero di Santa Maria e Brigida a Pian di Ripoli," *Arte Cristiana* 111 (2014), 201–17.

19 The papal bull dated 31 October 1396: see Passerini, *Gli Alberti di Firenze*, 204–205. The revocation of the bull, again signed by Boniface IX on 15 March 1402, *ibid.*, 216–18.

20 "O giustizia di Dio, quanto tu peni/a punir Simon mago e la sua setta,/ c'hanno a mal far la tua Chiesa costretta/allargando a le legge i primi freni/. La colpa è tua omai, se tu sostieni/ che la rinovazion, ch'l mondo aspetta,/ non venga già, com'è stata predetta;/ a rinfrescar gli antichi e santi beni./ Non tardar dunque a risanar la piaga,/ sì che'l disordinato tuo collegio/ non dia di sé fra noi più malo esempio./ L'avara Babilonia atterra e paga,/ sì ch'a l'opere tue non metta pregio,/ e gli suoi venditor caccia dal tempio", in *Poesia italiana del Trecento*, ed. Piero Cudini (Milan: 1978), 142; Borriero, "La tradizione delle Rime di Antonio degli Alberti (111)," *Medioevo letterario d'Italia* 5 (2008), 45–100; Emilio Pasquini, *Fra Due e Quattrocento. Cronotipi letterari in Italia* (Milan: 2012), 206 (see also note 109 for Antonio's date of birth); Antonio Lanza, "Il giardino tardogotico del *Paradiso degli Alberti*," *Italies, Revue d'études italiennes* 8 (2004), 135–50.

and another and asking God for peace and mercy. In 1399, a Dominican friar called Giovanni Dominici was expelled from Venice because he had authorised a procession of the Bianchi in the city. He did this despite the fact that the government of the Serenissima had forbidden the Whites from entering the city for fear of plague. Dominici, a Florentine by birth, returned to Florence after being expelled from Venice and there he formed a close spiritual friendship with Bartolomea degli Alberti, Antonio's wife. At the moment, research has only been able to yield an indirect contact between Giovanni Dominici and the community of Birgittines in Florence.

There is mention of a contact between Luca Jacobi and the friar Leonardo di Giovanni "che stae con frate Giovanni Domenichi", i.e., who was closest to Giovanni Dominici in Florence, from whom the monks bought a breviary in 1401.<sup>21</sup> But in 1400, the fortunes of Antonio and Bartolomea took a turn for the worse: a conspiracy against Maso degli Albizzi and the major members of his faction was denounced by some exiles stationed in Bologna, which inspired the Albizzi to demand a reform of the government, then in the hands of the Ricci, Alberti, Medici and other *cives* connected to them. Sanminiato dei Ricci and Francesco Davizzi, who were closely linked to the Alberti, were condemned as traitors and executed, while the other Alberti were declared guilty and condemned to exile, with the exception of Antonio who seemed to be protected by the prestige of his father, by his reputation for integrity and mildness, and by the fact that he was in office as Gonfalonier of Justice and therefore enjoyed immunity.<sup>22</sup>

Yet his fame could not save him: a Camaldolese monk who was among the conspirators confessed that Antonio was guilty of treason, so as soon as his government post was over, he too was banished from the city of Florence. For his part, Dominici preached fiery sermons, invoking universal judgement and denouncing the opacity and injustices that were daily committed in the government palace. The *reportatio* of these sermons does not directly mention the Florentine political turmoil of 1400–1401 that personally affected Antonio degli Alberti, but they seem to allude to it. Antonio was thus banished, then exiled, from Florence, where he left his wife Bartolomea and his four children:

21 Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Archivi dello Spedale di S. Maria Nuova, Monastero del Paradiso, 277, fol. 12v. In the monastery library, there was an abstract of Giovanni Dominici, *Regola del governo di cura familiare*, copied by Sister Raffaella. The text in Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi, E. v. 1882, fol. 92v.

22 On Niccolò Alberti: Passerini, *Gli Alberti di Firenze*, 23–24; 74–79; 155–85; Chabot, "Messer Niccolò degli Alberti, 'pater pauperum', Lettura del testamento"; and Maddalena Modesti, "Il testamento del nobilis miles dominus Niccolò del fu Iacopo degli Alberti. Edizione critica," in *Lospedale dell'Orbatello. Carità e arte a Firenze*, 45–72.

Brigida, whose name underlined his devotion to the Swedish saint, Bionda, Francesco and Maria.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile the new Birgittine convent had been inhabited since 1394, when at Alberti's request, a group of friars from the mother house of Vadstena arrived in Florence, led by the confessor general Magnus Petri, or Blessed Manno, as he was later to be called in Italy, and the Spaniard Lucas Jacobi.<sup>24</sup> The first nuns entered later than the friars, but were already in residence on 2 March 1395, when the first abbess of Paradiso was elected. Documents report that at this date there were fourteen nuns.<sup>25</sup> In 1396, the founder of Paradiso decided to abandon the undertaking, perhaps because of confrontations with the new superior of the convent, Lucas Jacobi, who had succeeded Blessed Manno in 1396. By 9 December 1401 the tensions between them had eased, after captains of the Guelph Party had been appointed defenders of the convent. From 1401 onwards, there was a progressive consolidation of the monastery for the rest of the century: numerous privileges were granted by popes; numerous donations and bequests were made by private devotees; numerous unions and incorporations with other monasteries increased its income.<sup>26</sup> Since it descended from

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- 23 D'Addario, "Alberti Antonio", online <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-alberti\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/>](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-alberti_(Dizionario-Biografico)/>); see also Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby, "Political Views in the Preaching of Giovanni Dominici in Renaissance Florence, 1400–1406," *Renaissance Quarterly* 55 (2002), 19–48; On the relationship between Bartolomea and Giovanni Dominici, see Isabella Gagliardi, "Giovanni Dominici e Bartolomea degli Alberti: divergenti convergenze tra un frate domenicano e un'aristocratica a Firenze nel primo Quattrocento," *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà* 29 (2019), 241–68, and also Isabella Gagliardi, "Il 'Libro d'amor di carità' di Giovanni Dominici: alcune tracce per una lettura," in *Verso Savonarola. Misticismo, profezia, empiti riformistici fra Medioevo ed Età Moderna*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini, Giuseppe Picone (Florence: 1999), 47–48.
- 24 Pietro Dazzi (ed.), *Vita del Beato Manno di Svezia primo padre del Monastero di Santa Brigida presso a Firenze, scritta da una monaca fiorentina nel secolo xv, né mai stampata* (Florence: 1864), 162; Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Carte Stroziane, III, 233, fol. 9r.
- 25 Moreni, *Notizie storiche dei contorni di Firenze*, 132; Florence, Archivio Innocenti, serie I, n. 10, fol. 5r.
- 26 Bacarelli, "Storia del monastero di Santa Maria e Brigida al Paradiso," 18–29; when Alberti was condemned to exile for thirty years, all his properties were confiscated by the municipal authorities, including the donations he had made to the Paradiso: Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Capitani di Parte, Numeri Rossi, 50, fol. 146v. The properties of Paradiso were returned to the monks in a deed dated 9 December 1401, in which the Captains of the Guelph Party were appointed defenders of the convent: Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Archivi dello Spedale di S. Maria Nuova, Monastero del Paradiso, 145, fols. 27v–28r; 277, fols. 3r, 5v. Frate Luca conducted negotiations with the Florentine government to acquire the property again, Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Diplomatico, Bonifazio, 9 dicembre 1401.

their splendid 14th-century villa, the Alberti's Paradiso village belonged to the parish of St. Peter's, which was under the pastoral care of the Vallombrosans from the abbey of St. Bartholomew in Ripoli.<sup>27</sup>

Even in absence of a really probative document in this regard, in my opinion the historical evidence highlighted above leads us to believe that the very choice of founding a Birgittine monastery on the part of Antonio degli Alberti should not be separated from a sort of climate of expectation, with regard to reform and renewal in the church and society, which in those years animated radical religious experiences, such as those of the Jesuati or the Whites. Last but not least, the political *coté* of Birgitta's message could well meet the interests of a large section of the Florentine aristocracy and, in particular, of Antonio degli Alberti.<sup>28</sup> So, the foundation of the Paradiso convent may also have been under the sign of prophecy, so to speak.<sup>29</sup>

### Paradiso's Role in Florence

After investigating the events that led to the foundation of the monastery, it is useful to try to understand how the monastic community was able to manage and conduct its relations with civic society, as well as how it organised itself internally.

Sister Marta dei Casali was elected abbess on 2 March 1395; she had previously been mother superior at the Clarian monastery of Saint Mary in Targia, outside the walls of Cortona. The preaching friar Giovanni Dominici, spiritual father to Antonio degli Alberti's wife Bartolomea, wrote his *Regola del governo familiare* right at Birgitta's: the book was dedicated to Bartolomea to help her manage her family after Antonio was banished from Florence by the powerful Albizzi faction.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps it is significant that the notary Ser Lapo

27 Carlo Celso Calzolari, "Linee generali di storia ecclesiastica del territorio," in *Chiese, monasteri, ospedali del piano e delle colline di Ripoli* (Florence: 1983), 1–21, 8. On the history of the monastery and its (tortuous) fortunes, Ben-Aryeh Debby, "Reshaping Birgitta of Sweden in Tuscan art and Sermons," 223–46.

28 See Unn Falkeid, "The Political Discourse of Birgitta of Sweden," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 80–101; Unn Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested: An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena* (Cambridge, Mass.: 2017), 121–45.

29 See also the conclusions formed in Michele Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana. Volgare e riscritture profetiche," *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* LXXIII (2019), 69–84.

30 Gagliardi, "Giovanni Dominici e Bartolomea degli Alberti."

Mazzei of Florence called the Dominican friar a disciple of St. Francis, or even St. "Brisida".<sup>31</sup>

In 1408, Ser Pietro di ser Mino da Montevarchi, Chancellor of the Florentine Republic from 1406 to 1410, and two of his brothers, Paolo and Giovanni, entered the male section of the monastery. Thanks to Ser Pietro, the Signoria took the convent under its protection in 1408, first exempting it from the payment of taxes, then from the payment of the *gabelle* at the gates of the city. The cultural life inside the monastery was quite lively. Renato Piattoli has shown that the friars of the convent had altar panels made for a number of Franciscan churches in Corsica, thus assuming the role of intermediary between the actual patrons and the artists. They also arranged to have numerous codices copied and illuminated for Franciscan convents in Tuscany and other regions, as well as for illustrious men such as Bernardino of Siena.<sup>32</sup> In the 15th and 16th centuries, young women from important Florentine families all took the veil: girls from the Belcari, Peruzzi, Corbinelli, Ginori, Ridolfi, Acciaoli, and Gambacorta families.<sup>33</sup> The aristocratic background of the girls is historically significant. First, it reveals that these girls probably had families in a position to pay for their studies, so the cultural level of these girls was by no means low. Second, we can assume it was relatively easier for these girls than others to have contact with people of a medium to high cultural level even after entering the monastery. They would in fact have been able to use relationships and ties of family origin to the advantage of the monastic community as well. Their social networks, therefore, constituted the first level of monastic sociability, a level that was also very useful in terms of the economic and cultural activities that took place in the convent.

The Paradiso monastery played a very interesting role in the production of manuscript books in Florence, especially but not solely as an intermediary between clients and copyists.<sup>34</sup> From the second quarter of the 15th century the activity of copying intensified, in part to increase the number of volumes in the internal library. In the beginning, this work was only taken up by monks, but from the end of the 15th century onwards it was mainly the work of the nuns. The growing diffusion of printed books, more to the point, did not affect the work of copying itself, which nevertheless continued to be carried out regularly. The fact that the nuns continued copying books even after the printing

31 Undated letter, but after 1399. Cesare Guasti (ed.), *Ser Lapo Mazzei, Lettere di un notaro a un mercante del secolo XIV* (Florence: 1880), 228.

32 Renato Piattoli, "Il monastero del Paradiso presso Firenze nella storia dell'arte del primo Quattrocento," *Studi Francescani* 18 (1936), 1–21, especially 19–20.

33 Roberta Miriello, *I manoscritti del monastero del Paradiso di Firenze* (Florence: 2007), 12.

34 Miriello, *I manoscritti del monastero del Paradiso di Firenze*, 10–11.

press was well established is not an insignificant detail. Part of the reason for this was that the act of manually copying a text was considered a “pious” activity because it was done with sacrifice and effort, and was therefore an instrument of penance and a means to praise God.<sup>35</sup>

In 1492 Giovanni Tritemio, the author of *De laude scriptorum*, extolled the art of the copyist inasmuch as it was noble and refined, and because his effort had great spiritual value. It was a “holy” endeavour, which could sanctify the copyist.<sup>36</sup> According to the writer, the following episode was no chance occurrence: the corpse of a copyist, exhumed many years after his death, had three fingers still intact, and they were the very ones that had been dedicated to writing.<sup>37</sup> The nuns also copied for economic reasons: they could acquire books for their library while only paying for the paper and ink, while the time and art of copying were their freewill offering to God and to the community. Thus, a considerable library could be built up at a very low cost. This shows that Paradiso had a *scriptorium* of women who supplied the library with the books necessary for communal reading, as well as presumably for individual and meditative purposes.

The Paradiso monastery thus created a library of manuscripts copied mainly by nuns. Their *scriptorium* was comparable to other important female monastic *scriptoria*, particularly to that of the Clarisse in Monteluce and the *Corpus Domini* monastery in Bologna, where the famous St. Caterina Vigri lived and

35 “Mater mea omne tempus suum tribus distinxit temporibus: uno quo laudavit Deum ore suo, aliud pro manibus suis ei serviebat, tertium quo corporis infirmitati compatiens necessaria tribuit ei iuxta modum. Sic sorores omni tempore quo divinis non intersunt vel lectioni et tale tempus fuerit, etiam manibus suis laborent, ut sicut mi serviunt ore sic servient et reliquis membris. Et iste labor non sit ad aliquam mundi vanitatem, non ad aliquid proprium lucrum, sed sicut labor mee pro onore Dei et Ecclesiarum, vel pro pauperum utilitate [...] Illos autem libros habeant quotquot voluerint in quibus addiscendum est vel studendum,” *Regula*, Capit. xxx, in Renato Piattoli, “Capitolo di storia dell’arte libraria. Rapporti tra il Monastero fiorentino del Paradiso e l’Ordine francescano,” *Studi Francescani* 29 (1932), 1–21, especially 16; Miriello, *I manoscritti del monastero del Paradiso di Firenze*, 17. See also Isabella Gagliardi, “Circolazione di scritti edificanti nei monasteri e nei circoli devoti femminili in Toscana nel Basso Medioevo,” *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome – Moyen Âge* 131–2 (2019), 311–23: <<http://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/6227>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/mefrm.6227>>.

36 Gianna Pomata and Gabriella Zarri (eds.), *I monasteri femminili come centri di cultura fra Rinascimento e Barocco. Atti del convegno storico internazionale (Bologna 8–10 dicembre 2000)* (Rome: 2005).

37 Attilio Bartoli Langelì, Massimiliano Bassetti, “I tres digiti, quasi una canonizzazione,” in *All’incrocio dei saperi: la mano. Atti del convegno di studi (Padova, 29–30 settembre 2000)*, ed. Achille Olivieri (Padua: 2004), 49–57, in particular 54–55.

worked.<sup>38,39</sup> Thanks to Rosanna Miriello's thorough study of Paradiso's book production, one hundred codices of the old monastic library were identified and catalogued. Most of them are compilations of passages from other devotional works useful for the nuns' meditation. One miscellaneous codex in paper that exemplifies the situation was compiled in 1479 and contains copies of numerous sermons by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, passages from works of other church scholars and philosophers together with sayings of saints: it was handwritten by an anonymous nun at Paradiso. After the ownership note – "*questo libro è delle monache del Paradiso*" – it reads "*scripto per mano di una di quelle nel MCCCCLXX9*" (sic)<sup>40</sup> The choice of texts is significant because it represents a conscious decision.

Those texts contained wisdom which was most likely useful for the nuns' "apostolate" at the grate, for stimulating conversation with laymen and laywomen who would come to the monastery.<sup>41</sup> The ways in which these exchanges took place are not easy to discover, but details of a few cases are known because they involved figures who later became famous, leaving traces of these contacts in archive documents. One such case is Domenica al Paradiso or Domenica Narducci, who became a famous Florentine mystic and prophetess (1474–1554) connected to the memory of Girolamo Savonarola, and founder of a large urban monastery called "della Crocetta".<sup>42</sup>

In what follows, I will elaborate on the relationship between Domenica and the nuns of Paradiso as a significant example. In fact, in the absence of

<sup>38</sup> Mario Sensi, "I monasteri e bizzocaggi dell'Osservanza francescana nel secolo xv a Foligno," in *All'ombra della chiara luce*, ed. Aleksander Horowski (Rome: 2005), 87–115; Pietro Messa, Angela Emmanuela Scandella, Mario Sensi (eds.), *Il richiamo delle origini. Le clarisse dell'osservanza e le fonti clariane* (Assisi: 2009); Patrizia Bertini Malgarini and Ugo Vignuzzi, "Ancora sul volgarizzamento umbro del Liber specialis gratiae," *Contributi di Filologia dell'Italia Mediana*, 19 (2005), 1–23; Miriello, *I manoscritti del monastero del Paradiso di Firenze*.

<sup>39</sup> Miriello, *I manoscritti del monastero del Paradiso di Firenze*, 17.

<sup>40</sup> This book belongs to the nuns of Paradiso, handwritten by one of them in 1479, Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conv. Soppr., D. 1. 1326, fol. 121r see Claudia Borgia, "Non per passatempo ma solo per consolazione ...": la scrittura delle religiose nei fondi della Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze," in *Carte di donne. Per un censimento regionale della scrittura delle donne dal XVI al XX secolo, Vol. II, Atti della giornata di studio, Firenze, Archivio di Stato, 3 febbraio 2005*, Alessandra Contini e Anna Scattigno ed. (Roma: 2007), 161–90; 437–43, online version <[https://www.archiviodistato.firenze.it/memoriadonne/cartedidonne/cdd\\_14\\_borgia.pdf](https://www.archiviodistato.firenze.it/memoriadonne/cartedidonne/cdd_14_borgia.pdf)>, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Rendered "apostolate of the window" in Simon Tugwell, *Early Dominicans. Selected writings* (Mahwah: 1982), 429.

<sup>42</sup> For further information about Domenica Narducci, see Clara Stella's chapter in this volume.

other sources about the cultural impact of the nuns over lay women, by reconstructing this relationship we can form an idea of how the nuns of Paradise fulfilled their cultural role as wise teachers even for people outside the monastic community. When Domenica Narducci was a child, she lived quite near Paradiso, which also explains the toponym “da Paradiso” that follows her name. Her earliest spiritual instruction came from contact with the nuns and their confessor. The information which can be recovered today, thanks to documentation regarding Domenica’s canonisation, allows a peek at how “divine” knowledge was spread by the Paradiso nuns.<sup>43</sup>

Domenica Narducci came from a lowly family and her father had died; she was self-taught from a religious point of view, thanks to support from the Paradiso monastery. For a time, she lived as a recluse in her mother’s home in a tiny enclosure made near the latrine. Here she prayed and did penance, leaving her cell only to help the nearby sick and poor and to visit the St. Birgitta monastery church. The historical significance of the relationship between Domenica and the nuns is difficult to grasp, but sworn testimonies given during her canonisation process (1623–1624) yield precious elements of interest. Sister Maria Maddalena de Bonsi and Sister Maria di Bartolomeo Fortini, professed nuns in Saint Birgitta’s monastery, together with their abbess were called upon to answer questions posed by the archbishop’s delegate. Even though 80 years had gone by since the death of Sister Domenica (1554), and even though the monastery was no longer under the pastoral care of the Birgittine male clergy but now followed the Augustinian rule, the nuns testified that Sister Domenica was well remembered by the older members of their community as a true example of Christian virtue. Many old nuns bore witness to the holiness of Domenica: Raffaella Federighi, Ippolita Benvoglianti, Costanza Canigiani, Dorotea Cacciaponti, Filippa Bonsi and Cornelia Puccini. These women held onto Domenica’s memory, having heard about her from superiors and spiritual fathers who had known her personally.<sup>44</sup> Their stories had painted a clear picture, and the abbess of Paradiso, Sister Porzia Fabbroni, a well-educated woman, expressed her regret at never having found time to write the life story of Domenica based on those accounts. In particular, she testified that Domenica used to come to the monastery grate and talk with the

43 See the reconstruction of this part of Domenica’s biography in Isabella Gagliardi, *Sola con Dio. La missione di Domenica da Paradiso nella Firenze del primo Cinquecento* (Florence: 2007), 3–22.

44 Also preserved in Sister Domenica’s *Epistolario* are numerous letters sent to the prioress and nuns of the Paradiso monastery. Some of these are published in Gerardo Antignani (ed.), *Scritti spirituali della Ven. Suor Domenica dal Paradiso, prima edizione I*, (Poggibonsi: 1985), 183–87.

nuns about the “things of God”, and how she eagerly listened to the life story of Saint Birgitta and the rule of the monastery.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, she recounted that when Domenica had a prophetic vision about Florence, she ran to talk about it with a monk of Paradiso, Bartolomeo da Selvioli, who was the nuns’ confessor. He accepted her prophesy as reliable, and after examining it, he encouraged her to share it publicly.<sup>46</sup>

These episodes are very significant for two reasons: first, because they show how the Birgittine nuns and their confessor were willing to impart spiritual teaching to a humble and devout girl like Domenica; second, because the latter episode shows how the gift of prophesy was received at the end of the 15th century in this monastic context. It was not rejected, but rather weighed, and if it was judged to be a product of divine inspiration, it was welcomed and legitimated. Furthermore, once Domenica da Paradiso had founded her own monastery, she wrote several letters of edification in response to requests from the abbess and community at Paradiso: their disciple had ultimately become their instructor.<sup>47</sup>

To learn more about the network of relationships and contacts that the monastic community at Paradiso was able to utilise, we can explore its link to the Jesuati friars. Since the Jesuati congregation is not very well-known, it is useful to present it briefly, summarising the salient points of its formation and historical identity while stressing the contact points with the Birgittine community.

## The Jesuati

The Jesuati, who are referred to in the above-mentioned memoirs relating to the Paradiso monastery, took up residence in their Florence convents around the

45 Florence, Archivio Arcivescovile di Firenze, 1624. *Processus super vita et miraculis serve Dei Venerabilis sororis Dominice Monasterii Sancte Crucis in Civitate Florentie fundatricis*, Archive not inventoried, Volume 1, fols. 185r–185v; Isabella Gagliardi, “Domenica da Paradiso: fama di santità e processi di canonizzazione,” *Hagiographica*, 13 (2006), 217–90.

46 Positio 67 in the remissorial *Processus* of 1630. Florence, Archivio Arcivescovile di Firenze, Florentia, Sacra Rituum Congregatione Canonizationis Beate Serve Dei Sororis Dominice Paradisiae Monialium Sancte Crucis fundatricis *Processus remissorialis* [30 October 1630] Archive not inventoried; Gagliardi, “Domenica da Paradiso: fama di santità e processi di canonizzazione,” 220–75.

47 Isabella Gagliardi, “Quare sermones faceret, cum mulieribus predicare non liceret: suor Domenica da Paradiso una ‘predicatrice’ nella Firenze del XVI secolo,” in *Caterina da Siena e la vita religiosa femminile. Un percorso domenicano*, ed. Pierantonio Piatti (Rome: 2020) 315–48.

same time as the monastery was founded. These monks and nuns were followers of Giovanni Colombini and Francesco di Mino Vincenti of Siena, a Siennese merchant and an aristocrat, who had forsaken the world to follow Christ in the mid-14th century. After their sudden conversion, Colombini and Vincenti gathered a group of followers resolved on sharing their lifestyle. They did penance, visibly humbled themselves in places in the city where they had formerly been honoured and publicly praised the name of Jesus with brief litanies in the streets and squares of Siena (and thus were called “Jesuati”).

Due to their popularity with those belonging to the political faction expelled from the city government in 1355, these men were banished from Siena around 1363. But before their exile, Giovanni’s cousin followed his example and founded a circle of devout women, who became known as female Jesuati.<sup>48</sup> These groups flowed into one movement, which was orally recognised in Viterbo by Pope Urban V in 1367 – the year Colombini died – and which underwent a long and complicated institutionalisation procedure, first becoming a congregation and finally an actual order.<sup>49</sup>

The Jesuati practised a very distinctive form of piety, based on Augustinian ideas but open to influences from the Order of Preachers and the Order of Friars Minor: it was intimist, and exceedingly strict and austere. For humility’s sake, they refused priesthood until the end of the 16th century, after which time they underwent a series of changes, becoming a mendicant order following the Augustinian rule. At this point they accepted priesthood, but their order was later suppressed by the pope in 1668. Meanwhile the Jesuati had spread throughout the centre-north area of Italy and in Toulouse, mainly in cities, but they also oversaw notable shrines, such as the Sanctuary of Montenero in the hills of Livorno. The Jesuati women’s movement took the same avenues, but during the 16th century left the pastoral care of their male counterparts, instead coming under direct jurisdiction of the bishop. Their order lasted until the second half of the 20th century, when the last Jesuati women merged into the Camillian Ministers of the Infirm.

48 Paolo Nardi, “Caterina Colombini e le origini della congregazione delle gesuate,” in *Le Vestigia dei Gesuati. L’eredità culturale di Colombini e dei suoi seguaci*, ed. Isabella Gagliardi (Florence: 2020), 41–56, <<https://fupress.com/capitoli/caterina-colombini-e-le-origini-della-congregazione-delle-gesuate/7209>>.

49 The extremely convoluted story is illustrated in Isabella Gagliardi, *I “Pauperes Yesuati” tra esperienze religiose e conflitti istituzionali* (Rome: 2004); see also Georg Dufner, *Geschichte der Jesuaten* (Rome: 1975), 58–79; partially rediscussed in Isabella Gagliardi, “Le vestigia dei gesuati,” *Le Vestigia dei Gesuati. L’eredità culturale di Colombini e dei suoi seguaci*, 13–38, <<https://media.fupress.com/files/pdf/24/4349/19357>>.

Tracing the movement's beginnings, it was actually the Jesuati women who arrived first in Florence: in 1382, the founder of the women's group, Caterina di Tommaso Colombini, together with her companions Niccolosa di Nastagio Neri of Florence and Agnolina del fu Torello of Prato, were granted a charitable donation to found the first Florentine house. By 1395, they were living in two houses in the Renaio area and were commonly known as the "Poverine" (the poor ones). Indeed, Antonio degli Alberti personally came to the aid of the Jesuati women. In Venice, in 1383, the Florentine Bartolomeo Ridolfi was already a Jesuat and made a will leaving his fellow friars about 600 ducats to found a convent in the city or county of Florence. Thus, it can be seen that the male Jesuati did not yet have their own base in Florence, while the women already did. However, the legacy donation did not settle the matter. It was not until after 1384 that they finally took up residence in Florence, in the San Giuliano hospital outside the San Frediano gate. Only in 1409 did the friars finally find a place within the city walls, when they purchased the Santa Trinità monastery, referred to as "Trinità vecchia", which belonged to the parish of San Lorenzo. They remained there until 1438, when they moved to the San Giusto convent near the city walls.<sup>50</sup>

The activities that busied the men's division of the congregation are more pertinent to Paradiso and the Birgittines: from the days of their earliest mentor Giovanni Colombini, the Jesuati men were involved in translating classical texts into the vernacular. In Colombini's *Epistolario*, compiled after his death, there is an interesting exchange of letters with a notary called Domenico da Monticchiello, who may have been part of the group which put together this *Epistolario*. Domenico had become part of a group known as the "Brigata de' povari" – this is how the men of Colombini and Vincenti's group defined themselves – and the matters referred to in the letters likely date back to 1361–63.<sup>51</sup> Colombini had asked Domenico to vernacularise the significant and complex text *De Theologia Mystica* by Hugh of Balma. His association with

50 Giovan Battista Uccelli, *il Convento di S. Giusto alle mura e i Gesuati. Aggiungonsi i capitoli della loro regola. Testo di lingua* (Florence: 1865), 60–61, 67; Gagliardi, *1 "Pauperes Yesuati"*, 134. The Trinità vecchia convent actually consisted of a few houses located in the present Via Guelfa.

51 Giuseppe Pardi, "Sulla vita e sugli scritti di Domenico da Monticchiello," *Bullettino Senese di Storia Patria*, 3 (1896), 22–42, the dating of the letters is according to Pardi's estimate. On Domenico da Monticchiello, see the paper by Ezio Levi, "Un rimatore senese alla corte dei Visconti, messer Domenico da Monticchiello," *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, 9 (1908), 5–33 on the latter period of the notary's life, and which has the merit of distinguishing him from a jurist by the same name, cfr. Liana Cellerino, "Domenico da Montecchiello," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, volume 40 (Rome: 1991), for the digital version <[Isabella Gagliardi - 9789004540040  
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both male and female followers of Saint Birgitta, together with the fact that this text ideally connects with a whole constellation of other writings, makes it worthwhile to take a deeper look at his approach to this translation.

Colombini was likely introduced to *De Theologia Mystica* by his own spiritual father, the Carthusian Pietro (or Petrone) de' Petroni.<sup>52</sup> Domenico undertook the translation of Hugh of Balma's text, but when he encountered difficulty in understanding, he wrote to his spiritual guide Giovanni Colombini, reaching out for help. He reveals that the translation had become an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of many teachings that had been imparted to him orally when the two used to keep company together, but that were too difficult for him at the time.<sup>53</sup> He called upon Giovanni for help, convinced that his advisor had direct experience with what Domenico was only reading about, and he asked Giovanni for explanations regarding a commentary on one of St. Paul's letters to Timothy, quoted by Hugh of Balma. Domenico was working on a literal translation of *De Theologia Mystica*, and in his letter, he wrote his translation instead of the Latin text, which Colombini would not have understood. He was not competent enough in Latin to be able to express an opinion on the original text, as his knowledge probably did not go much beyond liturgical Latin. Just the same, since he had experienced the presence of God in day-to-day living, he could help the translator in his arduous task. It is interesting to follow the exchange of ideas between the two correspondents, which was necessary to grasp the true spirit of the original text and ensure an accurate translation. Just as interesting is the mention of numerous other texts used by Domenico to produce a good vernacular version, from the *Vite dei Padri* to the *Horologium Sapientie* by Suso.

The Jesuati were authors of many vernacular translations, most of which were very old, but they also translated contemporary texts, such as *De disciplina et perfectionis vitae monasticae* by Lawrence Justinian. The most significant translations produced by the Jesuati were *Collazioni* by John Cassian, *De consolatione philosophiae* by Boethius, the ascetic treatises authored by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (or at least ascribed to him), Henry Suso's *Horologium*

52 See Gagliardi, *I Pauperes Yesuati*, 107, 187, 501.

53 Adolfo Bartoli (ed.), *Le lettere del B. Giovanni Colombini da Siena pubblicate per cura di Adolfo Bartoli* (Lucca: 1856), 40. Ildefonso Tassi states as follows: "un'opera uscita dalla Certosa da segnalare per il grande influsso da essa esercitato nello sviluppo della metodizzazione della preghiera e della vita spirituale, è la *Mistica Theologia* [...] di Ugo da Balma. Questi fu uno dei primi scrittori metodici sulle vie spirituali; e la sua distinzione divenne l'usuale del linguaggio ascetico: via purgativa, via illuminativa, e via unitiva. Contemporaneo a S. Bonaventura, egli si incontrò nella trattazione delle stesse dottrine col grande dottore mistico," Ildefonso Tassi, *Ludovico Barbo (1381-1443)* (Rome: 1952), 108.

*Sapientiae, I trenta gradi della scala celestiale* and exposition of the *Pater Noster* by St. Jerome, Gregory the Great's *Moralia* (or *Moralium libri*), *Regula pastoralis* also by St. Gregory, the seven penitential psalms, *Esposizioni del Vangelo* by Simon of Cascia, Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermoni*, *Prato spirituale* by John Moschus, St. Augustine's *Monte dell'orazione* and *Sermoni*, John Chrysostom's *Sermoni*, the *Epistole* and *Vita* of St. Jerome, St. Isaac the Syrian's *Vita*, together with numerous other hagiographies.<sup>54</sup> These writings, both old and contemporary, shared an austere view of what authentic Christianity truly was. Some of these texts later found their place in the Paradiso library.

The presence of these same books in the monastery library is not accidental. First, we must consider their cultural content: these were books that extolled the ancient, austere, and rigorous model of life, a type of spiritual manifesto of the monastic community. Secondly, those books reveal the social connections of the monastic community and thus the relationship with the Jesuats, translators, and "friends" of the monastery. It was a library carefully built by the community and its composition reveals other valuable information: above all, that concerning the copyist nuns.

### Presentation of the Library

Ultimately, the monastery of Santa Brigida al Paradiso in Florence would come to have a library which comprised manuscripts copied mainly by nuns. Was this extremely unusual for the era? Sadly, we do not have enough research material to be able to make a realistic comparison. However, it is perhaps helpful to remember that in his *Book of Good Practice*, Paolo di Messer Pace of Certaldo (ca. 1320–1370) stated that the girl destined for monastic life had to be educated in such a way as to know how to read and possess the rudiments of writing technique.<sup>55</sup> The women at Paradiso had exceeded Paolo's rather modest expectation of women by a large margin.

54 Vernacular versions are addressed in detail in Isabella Gagliardi, "I Gesuati e i volgarizzamenti (seconda metà XIV–Prima metà XV secolo)," in *Toscana bilingue (1260 ca.–1430 ca.)*. *Per una storia sociale del tradurre medievale*, ed. Sara Bischetti, Michele Lodone, Cristiano Lorenzi and Antonio Montefusco (Berlin-Boston: 2021), 415–34. <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110702231-020>>.

55 Laura De Angelis, "Paolo di messer Pace da Certaldo," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, volume 81 (Rome: 2014), online version <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/paolo-di-messer-pace-da-certaldo\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/paolo-di-messer-pace-da-certaldo_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/)>; Salomone Morpurgo (ed.), *Il libro di buoni costumi di Paolo di messer Pace da Certaldo: documento di vita trecentesca fiorentina* (Florence: 1921), 22, 127; Irene Graziani, "Saper leggere e saper scrivere", *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome – Moyen Âge*, 131–2 (2019), 385–401.

We have a good idea of the size of the library's holdings. Paradiso's library at one point exceeded one hundred manuscript books: when assets were transferred to the Conservatory of the Boniface Hospital in 1734, the inventory listed 105 codices.<sup>56</sup> Since the nuns used most of these in their devotional life, the text choices are very important and revealing.

In addition to texts relating to St. Birgitta herself and her order, the holdings included the legends of saints, miracle lists, and prayers. In addition, there were vernacular translations and *florilegia* of the Bible, patristic texts of the Christian fathers, and more recent works on the rules of spiritual life, teaching the degrees of perfection, and the path to salvation. The richness and diversity of the monastic library are certainly not an exception to the rule within the lively context of late medieval and early modern Florence. The city's literacy rate was extremely high compared to other Italian and European cities at the time; it also boasted numerous women's monasteries with nuns who could write and copy texts, as well as create and organise an archive.<sup>57</sup>

The cultural level of the monastery's nuns in the period under examination is very difficult to establish, but an educated guess would put it at a medium-high level according to indirect evidence: the nuns' scribal work seems to suggest this, and we find further confirmation in an interesting letter from the mid-15th century. The letter is addressed to the Birgittine nun Orsola by her father, Feo Belcari. He was a prominent intellectual of Medici Florence and a Jesuat, author of numerous *Laudi* and liturgical dramas, as well as the 15th-century hagiography of Giovanni Colombini.<sup>58</sup> In 1455, Feo Belcari wrote his daughter Orsola a letter entirely devoted to the virtue of humility, in which he explicitly refers to passages from the 7th-century theologian John Climacus's book *Scala Paradisi*. Unfortunately, we do not have Orsola's answer to her father and cannot know whether Feo was writing about a text known to Orsola, but it is nevertheless interesting to note that the monastery library contained two copies of the *Scala Paradisi*, one complete, the other broken off after the

56 In the 1734 inventory, on occasion of the asset transfer to the Conservatorio dell'Ospedale di Bonifazio, 105 codices are listed: Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Bonifazio, 542, fol. 63v. For the reconstruction of the monastic library, an essential text is Miriello, *I manoscritti del monastero del Paradiso*.

57 Gagliardi, "Circolazione di scritti edificanti nei monasteri e nei circoli devoti femminili in Toscana nel Basso Medioevo."

58 Domenico Moreni (ed.), *Lettere di Feo Belcari* (Florence: 1835), 1–9; 9–16; see also Cesare Guasti (ed.), *Lettera di Suor Costanza Ciaperelli a Feo Belcari* (Prato: 1861), 5. The date of Orsola's death is unknown at present, though it was certainly after 1454, when Feo Belcari wrote her a letter.

first folio and two abstracts.<sup>59</sup> The second authority cited by Belcari, again in his letter to Orsola, is St. Bernard of Clairvaux. In the monastic library we find two versions of Bernard's *Sermones* in the vernacular, one by the Jesuat Giovanni Tavelli da Tossignano, as well as numerous other works by Bernard or attributed to him,<sup>60</sup> such as Feo Belcari's translation of *De quatuor gradibus charitatis* by Richard of Saint Victor.<sup>61</sup> The references to humility made by Feo Belcari in his letter to Orsola quoting Bernard are quite vague, but could come from the *Gradi dell'umiltà e della superbia*.<sup>62</sup> Belcari's letter to Orsola and that of Sister Costanza Ciaperelli to Belcari upon the death of Orsola were later copied by the abbess of the monastery, Sister Cecilia da Diacceto, into a codex incorporating other letters of Belcari, Richard of Saint Victor's *De quatuor gradibus charitatis* and a text attributed to Bernard, *Della inimicizia della carne*.<sup>63</sup>

- 59 Vernacularised by Gentile da Foligno, see Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, *Conventi Soppressi* G.II.1491, fols. 6r–93v; 5r/v; abstract in Padova, Biblioteca Civica, C.M. 30, fol. 78v and in Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, Palatino 23, fol. 181.
- 60 Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Conv. Soppr. 466, *Sermoni del tempo e dei diversi*, vernacularised by Giovanni Tavelli da Tossignano, Conventi Soppressi 4666, fols. 1r–120v; fols. 120v–177v; Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Conv. Soppr. 469, *Sermone sul Cantico dei cantici*, vernacularised by Giovanni da San Miniato, fols. 1r–196v, as well as *Libro della coscienza*, and *Meditazioni*, Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, II.IV. 65, fols. 1r–41v; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Conventi Soppressi D. I. 1326, fols. 2r–120v (Lodi della Vergine Maria, Pianto della Vergine, Sermoni del tempo, dei santi e dei diversi, vernacularised by Giovanni Tavelli da Tossignano, *Gradi dell'umiltà e della superbia*, Parabola II. La lotta dei due re, Della miseria umana, Lamento della perdita solitudine, Sermone su Matteo 19: 27, attributed to Bernard).
- 61 Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, II.IV.65, fols. 42r–54b; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi D.I 1631, fols. 174r–176v (Meditazione), fols. 183v.193v (*Gradi dell'umiltà e della superbia*, Sermone del venerdì santo).
- 62 “Ti dico insieme con San Bernardo; se tu vuoi impetrare perdonanza de' peccati, sia umile; se tu vuoi vincere le tentazioni, sia umile; se tu vuoi oppressare i tuoi nemici, sia umile; se tu vuoi custodire, e guardare le virtù, sia umile; se tu vuoi avere le rivelazioni dei misteri, sia umile; se tu vuoi profondamente intendere la sacra Scrittura, sia umile; se tu vuoi meritare l'altitudine della gloria, sia umile; se tu vuoi esser grata a ognuno, sia umile; se vuoi servire in te la pace, sia umile,” in *Lettere di Feo Belcari*, ed. Moreni, 8–9.
- 63 Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ricc. 2627: Feo Belcari, Epistola a suor Ursula, fols. 1r–5r; Costanza Ciaperelli, Epistola a Feo Belcari in morte di suor Ursula fols. 5r–8r; Feo Belcari, Epistola a un suo amico fols. 8r–14r; Feo Belcari, Epistola a Piero di Pippo fols. 14r–23v; Iacopone da Todi, Trattato su come l'uomo può pervenire alla cognizione della verità, vernacularised by Feo Belcari, fols. 23v–30r; Detti di Iacopone da Todi cc. 30v–37v; Meditazione sulla perfezione morale cc. 37v–49r; Ugo Panziera, Dolore della mente di Cristo fols. 49v–57r; Giordano da Pisa, Predica del 21 agosto 1306, fols. 57r–66r; Terzine anonime fol. 66v; Riccardo da San Vittore, I quattro gradi della carità fols. 67r–101v (attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux and vernacularised by Belcari; ps. Bernardo, *Della inimicizia della carne* fol. 102r/v; *Vite dei santi Padri* (Libro II), vernacularised by Domenico

The surviving monastic codices demonstrate the significant link between the community of Saint Birgitta and the Florentine Jesuati community which, as we have seen, was a community to which Belcari was deeply connected. In fact, among the codices of the Paradiso abbey itself, there are also works spread by the Jesuat congregation: among these are the vernacular translation of *De quatuor gradibus charitatis*, the *Laudi* and epistolary of Feo Belcari, the translations of Bernard of Clairvaux's texts, the *Morali* and the *Regola Pastorale* of Pope Gregory by the Jesuat Giovanni Tavelli of Tossignano,<sup>64</sup> *Prato Spirituale* by John Moschus and the *Dialoghi* of Pope Gregory, again translated by Feo Belcari,<sup>65</sup> a *Lauda* by Giovanni Colombini,<sup>66</sup> a *Lauda* by the Jesuat Bianco da Siena.<sup>67</sup>

But let us now try to reflect on those books present in the library that constitute a cohesive group in terms of cultural meanings, that is, that constitute that kind of spiritual manifesto I mention above. It seems to me that at the centre of the group of these texts is a very particular book, the *Theologia Mystica*. In fact, the monastic library contained the oldest vernacular copy of Hugh of Balma's *De Theologia Mystica*.<sup>68</sup> Did this book occupy a central place among the literary choices made by the Birgittine nuns? It is certainly a significant text: meditation on the Passion is offered to the reader as the only element necessary to the believer for taking up the unitive way (the other two which precede it being the purgative and illuminative ways), in order to reach the highest degree of the soul's conformation to Christ. *De Theologia Mystica* consisted in "l'occulta sapienza dell'amore divino" (the hidden wisdom of God's

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Cavalca, excerpts fols. 103r–106v; Trattato del modo per ottenere la perfezione spirituale, fols. 107r–158r.

- 64 Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi soppressi D. I. 1326, fols. 26v–51r; 63v–121r; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi, II.IV, 85, fols. 1r/v; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi E. I. 1324, fols. 2r–185r; fol. 190r/v.
- 65 Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi, II. 1719, fols. 81r–140v; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, B. IV. 1503, fols. 1r–117r; fols. 130r–132v.
- 66 Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ricc. 1413, fol. 356r/v.
- 67 Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ricc. 1413, fols. 252r–256r. See also Silvia Serventi, "I laudari gesuati: la raccolta poetica del Bianco da Siena," in *Le vestigia dei gesuati*, 95–116, <[https://fupress.com/capitoli/i-laudari-gesuati-la-raccolta-poetica-del-bianco-da-siena/7212](https://fupress.com/capitoli/i-laudari-gesuati-la-raccolta-poetica-del-bianco-da-siena/)>; see also Gagliardi, *I Pauperes Yesuati*, 99–172.
- 68 On this text: *Hugh of Balma on Mystical Theology: A Translation and an Overview of His "De theologia mystica"*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: 2002); Marc Vial, "Le Viae Sion Lugent de Hugues de Balma et l'évolution de la comprehension gersonienne de la Théologie Mystique," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 89 (2009), 347–65; Barbara Faes de Mottoni, *Figure e motivi della contemplazione nelle teologie medievali*, (Florence: 2007), 150–178.

love), and offered the reader *the* Christian doctrine par excellence, because it flowed directly from God (as it explained in the prologue). The book exerted a strong influence in developing a method for prayer and spiritual life, and its author introduced a tripartite distinction which became recurrent in ascetic language: the purgative way, the illuminative way and the unitive way.<sup>69</sup> This position is voluntarist and anti-intellectualist, and its development owes much to exegesis of the New Testament and the letters of St. Paul in particular. The text was written within the context of the Carthusian monks, but its popularity spread beyond the order, even giving rise to a vernacular translation. The monastery's copy of *De Theologia Mystica* by Hugh of Balma was actually a vernacular version, translated by the Jesuat Domenico da Monticchiello probably between 1360 and 1367.<sup>70</sup>

Besides being influenced by Bonaventure, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and Thomas Gallus, Hugh was also influenced by Augustine and, perhaps, as Jasper Hopkins suggests, by Eriugena and Plotinus.<sup>71</sup> Hugh's book was, of course, also informed by Scripture, and being a Carthusian monk, the author was strongly influenced by Carthusian spirituality. Other scholars were in turn affected by Hugh's ideas: Benoit du Moustier lists, among others, Henry of Herp, Bernardino of Loreda and David Augustine Baker. Harald Walach adds to this list the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the Spaniard Francisco de Osuna, and still others.<sup>72</sup> In contrast to the philosophical path to God, which proceeds from first making inferences about God in relation to the empirical knowledge of the world, the *via mystica* approaches God primarily through the "feelings" or "passions".<sup>73</sup> In its beginning stages, devout meditation, heartfelt reflection, and enhanced mental enlightenment accompany and intensify the feelings of love, or *affectiones amoris*, which are directed, as they are, toward God. The soul, then, ascends mystically to God not by way of erudite learning but by way of divinely potentiated longings for

69 Tassi, *Ludovico Barbo (1381-1443)*, 108.

70 Cellierino, "Domenico da Montecchiello," <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/domenico-da-montecchiello\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/>](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/domenico-da-montecchiello_(Dizionario-Biografico)/>); Simone Albonico, "Un testo pavese in prosa del primo Quattrocento," in *Valorosa vipera gentile. Poesia e letteratura in volgare attorno ai Visconti fra Trecento e primo Quattrocento*, ed. Simone Albonico, Marco Limongelli, Barbara Pagliari, (Rome: 2014), 147-67, 160-61; Mark Chinca, *Meditating Death in Medieval and Early Modern Devotional Writing. From Bonaventure to Luther* (Oxford: 2020), 154-204.

71 Hopkins, *Hugh of Balma on Mystical Theology*.

72 Harald Walach, *Notitia experimentalis Dei. Erfahrungserkenntnis Gottes: Studien zu Hugo de Balmas Text "Viae Sion lugent" und deutsche Übersetzung* (Salzburg:1994), 241-42.

73 Hopkins, *Hugh of Balma on Mystical Theology*; see also Boyd Taylor Coolman, "The Medieval Affective Dionysian Tradition," *Modern Theology* 24 (2008), 615-32; *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Chichester: 2009).

God's presence: by way of an intensified desire that God be nearer to one than one is to himself, so to speak. Of the three stages (purgative, illuminative, and unitive), the *via purgativa* is the pathway of "preparatory cleansing" for the soul's union with God. The elevation endures as God affords illumination in conjunction with the soul's reflecting upon, and meditating anagogically upon the Word of God, as contained in the Scriptures. Finally, the soul reaches a point of elevated nearness to God, where God ecstatically heightens its fervent longing for union with Him and infuses mystical wisdom into that soul. This wisdom is called "mystical" because it exceeds any knowledge or insight the human soul could ever attain by use of its own powers, unaided by special grace. Mystical wisdom exceeds "incomparably", Hugh writes, every form of "creaturely" knowledge. At the highest stage, he continues, the mind becomes like a mirror so that, having been cleansed, it receives and reflects the bright rays of Eternal Wisdom. Once again, illumination comes to the mind through contemplating the anagogical meanings of Scripture.

The unitive stage is the ultimate stage. On this third pathway, Hugh declared, the soul proceeds toward union with God, toward being transformed *into* God. He maintains that mystical wisdom is an immediately-infused knowledge of God otherwise not available except by way of unitive apprehension, which occurs not by means of the eye of the intellect, but by means of the eye of the emotions. This takes place, further, where all reflection, all contemplation, and all conceptualising have been left behind, and where the soul takes its leave even of all consciousness of itself as a self. In other words, Hugh was writing about the soul's "deification", and of its being transformed into God.

### The *Amor Dei*

The texts thus far mentioned were copied in the vernacular. This should be no surprise: the great season of vernacular translations was well advanced by this time, and Tuscany (and Florence in particular) were leaders in an intensive, fertile, and systematic vernacularising operation carried out on numerous texts. Not only religious texts were translated, but also legal and regulatory texts, such as city *Statuti*, for example. Studies have been conducted on this phenomenon since the second half of the 20th century, and it still bears further investigation because it sheds light upon the means, paths and strategies used for disseminating high culture.<sup>74</sup> It is important to note that these texts

74 One example of a recent study is *Toscana bilingue (1260 ca–1430 ca.)*. *Per una storia sociale del tradurre medievale*.

all centred round the love of God, charity, and (for humans) the real possibility of becoming one with God through unitive love.

In short, the human comes to God through love.<sup>75</sup> With the systemization of the concept of “mystical theology”, an important step was taken in recognizing the true value of an emotional bond between creature and Creator. *De Theologia Mystica* does not claim authorship of the idea, and for a long time the book was believed to have been written by Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, and to have circulated under his influence. It simply took the idea that a union between human beings and God was truly possible thanks to the virtue of love (divine charity), and let this idea play out to its extreme consequences. It therefore confirmed it was possible for the believer to experience God, to come into absolute, experimental knowledge of God.

That is not all. In the library at the Paradiso abbey, there were other texts related to Hugh's *De Theologia Mystica*. The first, in chronological order, was Richard of Saint Victor's *De quatuor gradibus charitatis*, translated from Latin to Florentine vernacular by Feo Belcari. Richard of Saint Victor described the relationship between the soul “in love” and God using ardent language and the appropriate biblical quotations, above all from the Song of Songs. In the theologian's version, Eros was fully rehabilitated, sublimated by the intervention of *charitas*, and “sentimental passion” becomes a vehicle for man's transformation in Christ.<sup>76</sup> According to Richard, passionate love for God increased human knowledge, and this in turn increased love, drawing a virtuous circle that, in the end, carried the human being beyond the limits of his or her nature. The text portrays the absolute oblatinal abandonment to God but does so with a peculiar and, in my opinion, “revolutionary” acceptance that such an attitude could be attained by anyone – precisely because of the fact that the ability to love is the only reason necessary and sufficient to pass, whole and intact, from humanity to divinity. Richard, though, was not the only one to magnify the qualities of this perfect love.

It was the subject of love which thematically linked these kinds of books in Paradiso's library. There were other books related to mystical theology: important amongst them was the aforementioned *Horologium Sapientiae* by Henry Suso.<sup>77</sup> The tie between these two books is clearly pointed out by the Jesuat who

75 See also Walach, *Notitia Experimentalis Dei*, 226–34.

76 Ineke Van't Spijker, “Exegesis and emotions. Richard of St. Victor's *De Quatuor Gradibus Violentiae Caritatis*,” *Sacris Erudiri. A Journal of Late Antique and Medieval Christianity* 36 (1996), 147–60.

77 About the author and the text: Kurt Ruh, *Geschichte der abendländischen Mystik, Band 3: Die Mystik des deutschen Predigerordens und ihre Grundlegung durch die Hochscholastik* (Munich: 1996), 415–75; José van Aelst, “Visualizing the spiritual: images in the life and

vernacularised *De Theologia Mystica*, Domenico da Monticchiello. Domenico relates that, in order to understand what Hugo of Balma had written in his book, he had to refer to another text, *Horologium Sapientiae* by Henry Suso. Suso, a member of the *Gottesfreunde*, or Friends of God, had coined the term *philosophia spiritualis* to indicate the supernatural wisdom descending from God. It was, furthermore, a formula by which he enclosed the intimate sense of his message: the total and declared anti-rationalism of religious thought to privilege the immediate and ecstatic contact between the soul and the Creator by virtue of love,<sup>78</sup> that is, the virtue of charity understood in the Pauline sense.

In addition to these books, there were others that were strongly connected to Hugh's *De Theologia Mystica*, such as Richard of Saint Victor's book on the four degrees of charity, and Giovanni da Salerno's vernacularisation of *De Gestis Domini Salvatoris* by the Augustinian friar Simon of Cascia. The Jesuati had both read and glossed the latter. In addition, vernacular versions of John Moschus's books (translated by Feo Belcari) were also connected to Hugh's *De Theologia Mystica* because they report the stories of saints who lived by those very terms: totally immersed in the "heroic" mysticism of divine love. Finally, there was the vernacularisation of the work of John Climacus, whose *Scala Paradisi* was repeatedly mentioned in the letter which Feo Belcari wrote to his daughter Orsola, to teach her the path of humility that leads to God.<sup>79</sup>

In short, the Paradiso monastery library contains an interesting collection of books on divine love – *Amor Dei*. It is also noteworthy that the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, whose ideal centre was this concept of mystical theology, had a place in that collection. It also included works of authors such as William of Saint-Thierry, Ivo of Saint Victor and Aelred of Rievaulx. It would later include the works of Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, David of Augusta, Meister

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teachings of Henry Suso (c. 1295–1366)," in *Speaking to the Eye: Sight and Insight through Text and Image (1150–1650)*, ed. Thérèse de Hemptinne, Veerle Fraeters and Maria Eugenia Gòngora (Turnhout: 2013), 129–51.

- 78 *Heinrich Seuses Philosophia spiritualis. Quellen, Konzept, Formen und Rezeption*, ed. Rüdiger Blumrich and Philipp Kaiser (Wiesbaden, 1994); Markus Enders, "Heinrich Seuses Konzept einer geistlichen Philosophie," in *Heinrich Seuse, Diener der Ewigen Wahrheit*, ed. Jakobus Kaffanke (Berlin: 2013), 139–77. In the library of the Florentine monastery: excerpts in Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi, G. II. 1441, fol. 206r/v; copied by Sister Cleofe: Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi, D. I. 1630, fols. 11–113v; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi D. I. 1631, fols. 11–106r (excerpts).
- 79 The letter dates back to 19 October 1454. On the Jesuati, see my *I Pauperes Yesuati tra esperienze religiose e conflitti istituzionali*, especially chapter 11, 99–171; on texts vernacularised by the Jesuati, Gagliardi, *I Gesuati e i volgarizzamenti (seconda metà XIV–prima metà XV secolo)*.

Eckhart, the *Theologia Mystica* of Pseudo-Dionysius, which was experiencing something of a period of intense diffusion in the 13th century – the *Sermones* of Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler, and the works of Henry Suso. The experiential counterpart to these writings can be found in the biographies and works of some “acclaimed” female mystics: Hildegard of Bingen, Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn, Angela of Foligno, Catherine of Siena, whose *Vita* and *Opera* the nuns had in their possession, and of course, Birgitta of Sweden. These women’s daily life was graced by an experiential knowledge of God, which they had been ushered into through love, and which was described by the authors mentioned.

Ultimately, considering the range of choice that the nuns of the Paradiso monastery had at their disposal, it seems that the presence of Hugh’s *De Theologia Mystica* and what we might call other “satellite” texts is significant. In fact, these books teach *indiamento* (the Neoplatonic term for the state of being in union with God): the affective way to God which, for women, was also the only possibility and their only non-theological way to Him. Furthermore, the human being’s union with God produces a complete transformation within, that is, the Christification of the human soul, as affirmed by both Simon of Cascia and Catherine of Siena in *De divina doctrina* (a book which also, significantly, was among the books in the monastery library), and this leads to prophecy. In this union with God, the human being is so completely melded with God that he/she can become a channel for the divine voice and see with divine eyes when God enables it. For women, prophesying is not precluded: they are barred from scholastic theology, which became more and more official, but not from prophecy. According to canon law, a woman may not speak of God as a theologian does, but she is not excluded from being the medium through which God speaks. Indeed, God chooses who to use and can use whomever he wishes; as authors writing the *Vitae* of sainted women are oft to point out, if God put words into the mouth of Balaam’s donkey, he truly can do any sort of wonder.

Ultimately, theology is the discourse *on* God, while prophecy is the discourse *of* God. Thus, the commitment of these women, and (above all) that of Saint Birgitta herself, to the road leading to the Lord received the highest form of legitimation and legitimacy.

## Conclusions

All in all, what legacy did Birgitta of Sweden pass on to Florentine society? Certainly, the Paradiso monastery itself, even though it would later be converted into a women’s-only monastery, losing its men’s division in the modern

era. Perhaps the most important legacy is in the circulation of Saint Birgitta's works, from her *Regola* to her prophecies – often codicologically associated within the same manuscript – to her *Sermo Angelicus* dedicated to the excellency of the Virgin Mary. One item of quantitative data, significant though partial, points in this direction. A *recensio* conducted on feminine monastic and conventual sources by Claudia Borgia at the National Central Library in Florence – concentrating on the Conventi Soppressi and Conventi Soppressi da Ordinare archives<sup>80</sup> – revealed a few women in particular: they were either the authors of widely acclaimed works, or were particularly appreciated within the monastic context, or were particularly prolific. Birgitta of Sweden stands out among the names of female authors of whose works the library had several copies and/or several editions. Her name appears together with Catherine of Siena, as well as other sainted women-writers such as Maria Jesus Coronel (Maria de Algredda) and Catherine of Bologna, though their contributions to the library collection are not as numerous as those of Birgitta.<sup>81</sup>

Although this data is only partial, if it is considered within the greater context of the wide circulation of Birgitta's works (especially the *Revelationes* in Latin and vernacular), it confirms the success of her writings and the extent of their readership even in Florence and Tuscany.<sup>82</sup> The considerable wealth of that cultural legacy was decisive. The notary Lapo Mazzei, on the night of 13 November 1395, wrote a letter to his respected friend Francesco Datini, an affluent merchant from Prato, in which he exhorts him wholeheartedly to focus his attention on the ways and things of God, setting aside worldly interests. Lapo maintained that it was time for a great universal renewal, beginning with a renewal of the Church, and cited Birgitta's experience and her *Revelations* as the source of his conviction. He described her as the bearer of an even brighter light than that of Francis of Assisi.<sup>83</sup> For that matter, her *Revelations* could be used to rebut the poverty-embracing dissent of the Fraticelli.

The position of Birgitta's *Revelations* within the Church's recognised structures was picked up on astutely between 1379 and 1381 by the Florentine

80 Research was also carried out on several of the Manoscritti Galileiani and the Doni dei Nuovi Acquisti Archive, Borgia, "Non per passatempo ma solo per consolatione," <[https://www.archiviodistato.firenze.it/memoriadonne/cartedidonne/cdd\\_14\\_borgia.pdf](https://www.archiviodistato.firenze.it/memoriadonne/cartedidonne/cdd_14_borgia.pdf)>.

81 *Ibid.*, 4–7.

82 Around twenty vernacular codices have been found to date, and they are nearly all Tuscan origin; important results are expected from the census currently underway within the context of the international research project *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden: Women, Politics and Reform in Renaissance Italy* (2018–2022), accessible at the following URL <<https://birgitta.hf.uio.no/>>.

83 Guasti (ed.), *Ser Lapo Mazzei*, 118–23.

Vallombrosan monk Giovanni dalle Celle, and used in a letter he wrote against the Fraticelli of Florence. In this text, Birgitta's arguments are used to point out these friars' error.<sup>84</sup> So, Mazzei and Giovanni dalle Celle independently came to the same conclusion, and the main theme of the matter lies herein: Birgitta's texts repositioned eschatological expectations within the horizon of a non-dissenting viewpoint, giving every assurance of change and reform without radical transformation. In this way, her important prophetic heritage was able to reach a large audience, since it was intrinsically orthodox, thus bringing hope of renewal and reform. What happened after that is another matter: those hopes could subsequently take the route of nonconformity and dissent, and did in fact in Florence, as testified by the strong eschatological and messianic tensions felt between the 14th and 16th centuries, which led to borderline or completely dissenting experiences and experiments.<sup>85</sup>

It might then be useful to reflect on the important role played by the Paradiso monastery in the propagation of a "Birgittine" style of devotion and spirituality. We can reasonably conclude that reading and studying texts in which God's love and mercy were extolled, in which the building of a personal relationship with God by the individual human being was extolled, in which it was shown that God can speak directly to his faithful, was a very conscious choice. Not only that: the choice was made to read and study these texts translated into the vernacular, into the mother tongue, that is, into the language that the nuns knew much better than Latin. This was a choice that allowed for the full expression of spiritual potential, especially of the female monastic community: in fact, nuns could not aspire to play a magisterial role from a theological point of view because women were denied the magisterium. However, they could aspire to build a personal and loving relationship with God such that they could become the channel through which God's voice could pass: making them modern "prophetesses" who, while they lived in Renaissance Florence, lived according to an ancient and austere lifestyle. As "prophetesses" they were also allowed to speak about God: prophetic theology was not forbidden to them, on the contrary. This is, perhaps, why at the centre of the monastery library and at the heart of the spiritual manifesto of the Santa Brigida al Paradiso we find Hugh of Balma's *Mystica Theologia*. A truly unitive way of life at the Florentine Paradiso.

84 Francesco Giambonini (ed.), *Giovanni dalle Celle, Luigi Marsili, Lettere* (Florence: 1991), 453–55; see also Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana," 71–72.

85 Ottavia Niccoli, *Profeti e popolo nell'Italia del Rinascimento* (1987; repr. Rome: 2007).