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The Virgin on the Street Corner: The Place of the Sacred in Italian Cities

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ON NEARLY EVERY STREET CORNER in the back alleys of Venice, one can still find the Virgin Mary.[1] She usually presents herself as a modest statue or crude painting, or sometimes only a faded picture postcard set up within a niche or frame (*capitello*) on the outside wall of a house or church. Thousands of images of Mary, the saints, and Christ proliferated throughout the city, encouraged by religious orders and parish priests but most often produced by neighborhood or private devotions. Beginning in 1450 the republic charged a local patrician with responsibility for watching over these images, and in the residential neighborhoods they still flourish. Historians can never recapture all their functions and meanings in the little and great dramas of urban activity, but these Madonnas and saints had many lives. Some depicted the patron of the parish church, extending the sacrality of the church outward through a neighborhood cult; others worked miracles, cured the afflicted, and guarded against plague; some succored the poor, protected against street crime, or discouraged blasphemy; and most reminded the living of their obligations to pray for the dead.[2] Saintly images created a setting where reverential behavior was appropriate, and the ubiquity of images may point to a social style characterized by formality and the pervasiveness of ritual and theatricality in daily life. Intercessors with the divine permeated urban spaces in many Italian cities to such a degree that rigid distinctions between sacred

and profane, so typical of the Reformation, must have seemed alien, even
irreligious, to many who lived in towns magically tied together by little
shrines. Italian towns, moreover, were themselves mystical bodies, a
corporation both in the legal sense and the literal one of a number of persons
united in one body, nourished and protected by a civic patron saint.[3]
Citizenship was not just a legal distinction but one of the principal social
influences in identity formation.

But situating little holy places about the city like fountains hardly
guaranteed appropriate behavior. In an attempt to reduce street violence,
Udine followed such a strategy by erecting images at the entrances of each
quarter and on certain houses and by encouraging neighborhood cults, but
the city fathers largely failed to pacify their community.[4] Local context
determined the social significance of holy places, and the multiple
touchstones of the sacred in Italian cities – street-corner Madonnas, parish
churches, monasteries, confraternity chapels, even government buildings –
created tangled, overlapping, and conflicted religious commitments among
believers which resembled the agonistic character of their social lives.[5] In
the relationship between place and the sacred, one finds contradictory
tendencies – some that promoted tensions and urban conflicts, others that
fostered spiritual community. By focusing on the relationship between social
behavior and the character of the holy, one can see both how humans create
sacred objects and places and how these influence behavior.

In her essay, "The Sacred and the Body Social in Sixteenth-Century
Lyon," Natalie Zemon Davis analyzes the symbolic configurations of urban
religion and treats Protestantism and Catholicism as "two languages which,
among many uses, could describe, mark and interpret urban life, and in
particular urban space, urban time and the urban community."[6] Whether or
not the sacred could be localized in space became, after all, a major issue in
the theological conflict between Catholics and Protestants, the former
insisting on the divine presence in the Eucharist and treating relics as special
objects of devotion, the latter refusing to acknowledge such an impious
mixing of spirit and matter. But the dispute was never purely theological.
Relations with the sacred provide an idealized pattern of earthly social

[3]Hans Conrad Peyer, *Stadt und Stadtpatron im Mittelalterlichen Italien* (Zurich: Europa Verlag,
1955). Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

[4]Antonio Battistella, "Udine nel secolo XVI: La religione e i provvedimenti
economico-sociale," *Memorie storiche forogiuliesi* 20 (1924): 5.

[5]Ronald F. E. Weissman, "Reconstructing Renaissance Sociology: The 'Chicago School'
and the Study of Renaissance Society," in *Persons in Groups: Social Behavior as Identity Formation
in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, ed. Richard C. Trexler (Binghamton, N.Y.: Center for
Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1985), 44-45.

[6]Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Sacred and the Body Social in Sixteenth-Century Lyon,"
Past and Present 90 (1981): 42.

relations, and changes in attitudes toward the sacred altered the means by which Renaissance townspeople might form their social identity.[7] Even before the Reformation many Italian cities exhibited religious heteroglossia, to adopt Bakhtin's term, multiple languages through which various social groups approached and understood the location of the sacred.[8] Structured in part by dogma and in part by the relations between clergy and laity, a language of religious symbolism is also the product of the "distinctive experience of the people who use it."[9] It is this peculiarly lay language of the sacred that wants recapturing, an argot discovered in what Angelo Torre calls the "consumption of devotions."[10] Despite many dialectal variants, two forms, I would suggest, dominated in Italian cities.

One might be called the prophetic language, unstable in time and space, appearing, disappearing, and reappearing according to the vicissitudes of events. Prophecies played a major role in lay culture, as Ottavia Niccoli has shown in her analysis of the pamphlets sold by itinerant ballad singers and preachers after piazza performances. During the political disintegration of Italy after 1494, editions of prophecies multiplied, but after the Peace of Bologna in 1530, they virtually disappeared, except perhaps in Venice.[11] The notorious plasticity of prophecies, subject to highly imaginative reinterpretations, made them alluring in unstable times but apt to evanesce after a short time.

The second kind of sacred language, and for our purposes the more important, might be called the iconic, in which holiness tended to adhere to an object or a place, sometimes in direct defiance of theological doctrine. The sacred presented itself in temporal cycles rather than with apocalyptic finality and had a more fixed relationship to space than the prophetic language, although all venerated objects were potentially mobile and some actually so, regularly moving about the city in processions. The iconic

[7]William A. Christian, Jr., *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[8]Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968). Katarina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984). Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 56, 72-73, 77.

[9]Davis, "The Sacred and the Body Social," 67.

[10]"Il consumo di devozioni: rituali e potere nelle campagne Piemontesi nella prima metà del Settecento," *Quaderni storici*, n.s., 58 (1985): 181-82.

[11]Ottavia Niccoli, "Profezie in piazza: Note sul profetismo popolare nell'Italia del primo Cinquecento," *Quaderni storici* 41 (1979): 514-15. Cf. idem, "Il re dei morti sul campo di Agnadello," *Quaderni storici* 51 (1982): 929-58. I have not yet been able to consult Niccoli's new book on prophecies. On the survival of a prophetic tradition in Venice after the period Niccoli discusses, see Marion Leathers Kuntz, *Guglielmo Postello e la "Vergine Veneziana": Appunti storici sulla vita spirituale dell'Ospedaletto nel Cinquecento* (Venice: Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani, Quaderni no. 21, 1981). John Martin discussed a late sixteenth-century millennialist group of Venetian artisans in "The Sect of Benedetto Corazzaro," a paper presented at the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, Tempe, Arizona, October 30, 1987.

language offered citizens immediate and personal intimacy with the saints rather than the future collective salvation promised by the prophets, and images and relics had intensely meaningful relationships with urban spaces, not only because the devout wished to see and touch such objects, but also because the moving of images and relics through city streets in processions celebrated *communitas*. The perpetuation of the procession's salubrious effects was one of the objectives in erecting images of the Virgin in public places. Virgins in many locations created a different kind of procession, one actively experienced by citizens as they walked about following their daily affairs.[12]

The meanings conveyed and behaviors evoked by these images, however, could hardly be controlled or predicted. In particular, women may have reacted very differently from men to the Virgin, and since Jews could not be expected to respond as Christians, authorities had to face the reality that their cities were never fully united. In Venice and other cities where ghettos were established, residential segregation created zones free from Catholic notions of sacred spaces, and the movement of non-Christian residents about the rest of the city was carefully restricted, since they would not be influenced toward righteousness by the Virgin Mary or Saint Francis. In a few cases Jews were even allowed to destroy Christian images painted on the walls of their houses, although the reaction of the Christian populace to such perceived defilements might be quite violent.[13] Despite the variety of behavior stimulated by such images, established norms defined appropriate responses.

Most Italian urban laymen and women were likely to seek communion with the saints through a proper self-presentation rather than through an agonized Augustinian self-examination on the issue of sincerity. In his recent historical anthropology of Italy, the "land of façades," Peter Burke proposes what he calls the "sincerity threshold." Higher in the North of Europe than in the South, the sincerity threshold operates on a "kind of sliding scale . . . so that a stress on sincerity in a given culture tends to be associated with a lack of emphasis on other qualities, such as courtesy. . . . Paradoxical as it may seem on the surface, sincerity cultures need a greater measure of self-deception than the rest – since we are all actors – while 'theatre cultures', as we may call them, are able to cultivate the self-awareness they value less."[14] Burke seems to mean that it is more important in the North than the South to make statements on intention correspond to overt actions. In

[12]Niero counted 406 images of the Virgin in the streets of Venice. "Il culto dei santi," 264-85.

[13]Michele Luzzatti, "Ebrei, chiesa locale, 'Principe' e popolo: Due episodi di distruzione di immagini sacre alla fine del Quattrocento," *Quaderni storici* 54 (1983): 847-77.

[14]Peter Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 12-13. Cf. David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

the southern theater cultures, norms are more often established in behavioral rather than verbal terms; thus, the issue of intention and sincerity is less likely to arise. The goal of social relations in a theater culture is similar to that of dramatic acting: to create the appearance of effortless, natural behavior even though all may be calculated. Such an emphasis on appearances correlates with the belief, which anthropologists find characteristic of Mediterranean societies, that "seeing" is the only reliable source of knowledge.[15] The Virgin hovering in every street required a performance, and even for the pious the most important thing was to bring it off.

Thus, when approaching the various sacred images and objects, the devout conveyed reverence through a demonstration that one had been properly socialized.[16] To calm a riotous crowd, priests would proceed through the city with a miracle-working image or relic. But there also remained a deep ambiguity about the range of behaviors acceptable in the presence of the sacred. Its separation from the corruption of business activity (seemingly required of Christians by the example of Christ's casting out the money-changers from the Temple) was often transgressed in Renaissance Italy, where the market needed holy objects to facilitate business and where, for many, religious behavior was merely another form of negotiation. Requiring an atmosphere of trust for the extension of credit and the firming of business deals, traders and artisans sought to sanctify their commercial dealings by notarizing, signing, and witnessing their contracts in a church where the parties might be invested with a fear of divine punishment for breaking their word.[17] One of the oldest standing churches in Venice, for example, is in the center of the Rialto market, and elsewhere saints' shrines became the site for market fairs. Such profane uses provoked protests from reforming preachers, such as Bernardino of Siena, but they enjoyed little success in isolating churches from the mundane, at least until the Counter-Reformation.

Ambiguity about the proper use of churches, of course, reached back to the concept of sacred space peculiar to Christianity. Peter Brown has argued that one of the distinguishing characteristics of early Christianity was its belief in the mobility of the sacred.[18] Christians replaced sacred wells, caves, and trees with Christ's eucharistic body and the corpses of martyrs for the

[15]David D. Gilmore, "Anthropology of the Mediterranean Area," *Annual Reviews in Anthropology* 11 (1982): 197-98.

[16]Richard C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 45-128. Cf. Moshe Barasch, *Gestures of Despair in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1976). Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 56-71.

[17]Trexler, *Public Life,* 111-12, 263-70.

[18]Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 86-105.

faith, objects which could be moved from place to place. Churches and monasteries were holy because of the ceremony of consecration but also because of the activities they permitted and the objects they contained: "The place does not sanctify the man but the man the place," and the church is not essential to the relic but the relic to the church. In devotional practice holiness was revealed in gradations of intensity: some things were more holy than others. Even Saint Bernardino argued that a sacrilege against a holy object was far worse than one simply perpetrated within a holy place.[19]

Such distinctions manifested themselves in numerous ways. *Ex votos* clustered around a reliquary or a miracle-working image reflected a sensitivity to the location and intensity of the holy, and pilgrimages encouraged belief in the efficacy of gaining access to sacred objects.[20] Lay devouts often seem to have considered images as signs that indicated the presence of the saint rather than as symbols that brought the saint's spiritual qualities to mind. The impulse to decorate and embellish churches (especially altars) may have come in part from an underlying anxiety about the mobility of the sacred. A saint who was ill-treated or forced to dwell in shabby surroundings might just allow his or her body to be "translated" elsewhere. And the theft of relics was always a danger. Many of Venice's most important relics, including the body of Saint Mark and the head of Saint George, had in fact been stolen in North Africa or the Near East and brought to Venice by traveling merchants and crusaders.[21] Anxious about such possibilities, Italian citizens and clerics sought to fix sacred objects in particular places by arguing – often through hagiography, pious legends, and apparitions – that a saint favored a certain place or church. The emanations of ecclesiastical buildings confused spirit and matter in a manner that would become especially offensive to reformers. Although Catholic theology placed strict limits on sanctified objects and rejected as pagan the notion that places could be sacred by themselves, popular practice tended nonetheless to create sacred places. Leon Battista Alberti, who saw all spaces in the mathematics of proportionality and geometry, was puzzled by the mystic hierarchy of places created, he thought, by popular beliefs. But in recognizing how widespread such attitudes were, he conceded that the architect must prescribe fixed places for religious statues.

> I wonder how most people can so credit the opinions transmitted by our ancestors that it is believed that a certain picture of a god [or saint] situated in one place hears prayers while a statue of the same god a short distance away is unwilling to heed appeals? Not only

[19]Quotation from Francesco da Barberino as translated in Trexler, *Public Life*, 52-54.

[20]Cf. Burke, *Historical Anthropology*, 209-10.

[21]Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 78-102. Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

that but when these same, most venerated images are moved to a different place, the people lose faith in them and quit praying to them. Such statues, therefore, must have permanent, dignified locations set aside for them alone.[22]

Complex social patterns and traditions enmeshed sacred places in a profusion of ambiguities that forced concessions to popular beliefs, which were themselves often highly creative. At the present state of research perhaps all that can be achieved is a very tentative suggestion of the varieties of these relationships. To do so, one might compare Venice, Florence, Naples, and Udine. As often happens in Italian history, systematic comparisons are difficult, especially because research in these cities has concentrated on different periods. Given the diversity of Italian regions, moreover, it would be absurd to argue that these cities are representative or typical, but they do encompass a calculated variety by including two major city-republics and two cities linked by formal feudal ties to the countryside and dominated by a "foreign" power. By the end of the sixteenth century Naples was the largest of these cities, indeed the largest of Christendom. With a population of 280,000, it was twice the size of Venice, three times that of Rome, four times that of Florence, and nearly twenty times the population of Udine.[23] Within each of these cities diverse social groups expressed their devotion in various ways. Diversity seems to have been most dramatic in Naples, least evident in Venice. Particularly before 1530, Florence displayed a range of competing forms, and the laity of Udine lacked a deeply-rooted Christian language of the sacred, at least in comparison to that of other Italian towns.

As a "theater state," Venice, like Counter-Reformation Rome, most effectively interpreted an iconic language for the purposes of maintaining public order.[24] The doges succeeded in permanently capturing Saint Mark for themselves, and although Mark was the patron of all Venetians, after the fourteenth century he was so surrounded by institutional barriers that he was limited to silent service at the placid center of the state cult. In Venice processional routes included the whole city and tied the neighborhoods to a ceremonial center where a vast architectural frame set apart ritual performances. In Piazza San Marco, as in Rome's Piazza San Pietro, a large public square retained a special character derived from the sacred activities

[22]Leon Battista Alberti, *L'Architettura [De Re Aedificatoria]*, ed. Giovanni Orlandi (Milan: Edizioni il Polifilo, 1966), 2: 661-63 (book 7, chap. 17). The translation is mine. The passage is analyzed in Joan Gadol, *Leon Battista Alberti: Universal Man of the Early Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 150-51. Also see Lionel Rothkrug, "Holy Shrines, Religious Dissonance and Satan in the Origins of the German Reformation," *Historical Reflections* 14 (1987): 146 and idem, "German Holiness," 161-64.

[23]Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 1: 345.

[24]Cf. Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), and Burke, *Historical Anthropology*, 10, 174.

that took place there, and through an escalation of magnificences during the late sixteenth century, these two cities defiantly reasserted the incorporation of the sacred into worldly spaces.[25]

The salient feature of Venice's distinctive cityscape was its center, where the most prestigious and powerful institutions clustered around the Doge's Palace and adjacent Basilica of Saint Mark. Exhibiting weaker forms of neighborhood organization than in other cities and a high level of residential mobility evident as early as the thirteenth century, Venetian parishes played a small role in forming citizens' social identity.[26] Males from patrician families pursued rewards and influence by competing for civic offices and seeking government favors; thus in Venice patronage was more city-wide and less neighborhood-bound than in Florence, Genoa, or probably most other Italian cities.

Venetian patronage, however, may have been peculiarly sex- and class-specific. Dennis Romano has suggested that Venetian patrician women, in contrast to their husbands, developed well-articulated local patronage networks largely because women were secluded in their palaces and seldom appeared in public beyond the parish confines. Romano has found evidence that lower-class women in the fourteenth century frequently chose a patrician woman from their own parish to act as executor of their wills whereas lower-class men almost never designated a male patrician to serve in this delicate capacity. Neighborhood patronage among males in Venice fell to the better-off commoners, especially to the secondary legal elite of *cittadini*, who dominated, for example, the parish-level priesthood. A Venetian priest's influence came less perhaps from his role as confessor, spiritual advisor, and preacher than from his involvement in the secular world. Parish priests served as executors of wills, held the power of attorney, acted as notaries, invested in commercial ventures, and were particularly valued as sources for small loans.[27] Appparently indifferent to parish affairs, the upper class male Venetian experienced the sacred by joining a city-wide confraternity or by acting as a lay patron for a monastery or mendicant church as did Italians of other cities. In fact, a significant minority of wealthy Venetians sought burial

[25]Muir, *Civic Ritual.* Charles Stinger, *The Renaissance in Rome* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). Burke, *Historical Anthropology*, 168-82.

[26]Stanley Chojnacki, "In Search of the Venetian Patriciate: Families and Factions in the Fourteenth Century," in *Renaissance Venice*, ed. J. R. Hale (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 59-60. Rona Goffen, *Piety and Patronage in Renaissance Venice: Bellini, Titian, and the Franciscans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 27-28.

[27]Dennis Romano, *Patricians and Popolani: The Social Foundations of the Venetian Renaissance State* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 91-102, 131-40. Romano has further discussed the decline of Venetian parishes after 1297 in a superb paper, "Politics and Parishes in Early Renaissance Venice," presented at the annual conference of the Renaissance Society of America, New York, March 18, 1988. Also see Richard Mackenney, *Tradesmen and Traders: The World of the Guilds in Venice and Europe, c. 1250-c. 1650* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1987), 47.

sites outside of their parish and paid for tombs in convents, monasteries, or mendicant churches often located at some distance from the family house or palace.[28]

For the various annual feasts the Venetian doge and signoria attended special masses throughout the city, and in comparison to other cities, especially Florence, Venice more often commemorated historical events important for the entire city in its civic liturgy and less often recognized local patrons or important ecclesiastics.[29] Lay officials exemplified their control by dominating sacred places. Unlike Florence, neither parishes, *sestieri* (quarters), nor any other neighborhood division was ever represented after the fourteenth century in a Venetian ritual. The constituent elements of the Corpus Christi rite in Venice, for example, were corporate groups, especially the confraternities, which were carefully regulated by the Council of Ten, and the greatest annual festival, the marriage of the doge to the sea, engaged secular and ecclesiastical hierarchies, arranged according to a rigid protocol of precedence, in a mystical union with the watery environment.[30] In comparison to other Italian cities except perhaps Rome, Venice displayed the most precise hierarchy of sacred and profane spaces, a time-bound, sometimes inverted, occasionally subverted hierarchy, but nevertheless a symbolic scheme which organized much of the urban plan. In most other cities the relative strength of private power ensured that private groups would successfully compete with public authority by elevating their private spaces to a high symbolic position.

The goal of the public control of space, to be perhaps too crudely simple, was to influence the loyalties and obligations of individuals. To accomplish this, the sacred was employed iconically to work a miraculous restructuring of social obligations in a way impossible merely through the legal expansion of public domination over urban spaces. In Venice, the necessity of controlling a difficult habitat, that ever recalcitrant space that would disappear into the sea without consistent intervention, led to the subordination of neighborhood-based loyalties in the interest of collective ecologic survival. Only the highly personalized street Virgins and saints had strong neighborhood ties, but the central government encouraged devotion to these images and they never seem to have threatened the hegemony of Saint Mark, who had a greater, more unifying, and more lasting hold on Venetian loyalties than anyone or anything else. The civic triumphed in Venice, not completely, perhaps, but completely enough to allow centrally located institutions to dominate the Venetian social and spatial order.

[28]Romano, *Patricians and Popolani*, 102-18; Mackenney, *Tradesmen and Traders*, 56-61; Brian Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice: The Social Institutions of a Catholic State, to 1620* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 33-196.

[29]Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 212-23.

[30]Ibid., 119-34.

Multicentered Florence, in contrast, had various sources of social power and a physical geography with several distinct and dominant visual foci.[31] Major institutions were dispersed throughout the city, creating a physical geography that was visually and conceptually chaotic. Up to the end of the fifteenth century Florence was the home of prophetic publications in Italy, a sign of instability furthered by the absence of a single source of the sacred that triumphed over all others.[32] In Florence neighborhood clients were still the base for a political career, and in contrast to Venice there was a greater tendency for patricians to identify with their neighborhood by sponsoring works for the local church, as the Medici did so famously with San Lorenzo.[33]

Outside of the political class, Florentines found their most vital daily contacts in their face-to-face relationships in the neighborhood piazza. These neighborhoods, like those in Venice, did not conform to the stereotype of the medieval city in which members of the same craft lived close together in the same district. Most neighborhoods were socially heterogeneous, containing both the palaces of the rich and the tenements of the poor, and members of many different trades. With a few exceptions, industry was organized on such a small scale that artisans in the same trade had no special incentive to live in close proximity to one another. Apart from ethnic ghettos of foreign workers, residential segregation was normal only for the artisans in a few specialized crafts, so that the majority lived among and married the daughters of craftsmen in other professions, although during the fifteenth century, as Samuel Cohn has argued, members of the Florentine working class may have begun to experience higher rates of parish, if not occupational, endogamy than before.[34] The extended family, although it had lost its thirteenth-century corporate status, remained a vital social unit, serving as the organizing force behind Florentine commerce, qualifying one for membership in guilds and other corporate groups, continuing as a component

[31]My analysis of Florence closely follows Muir and Weissman, "Social and Symbolic Places," and is particularly indebted to Ronald F. E. Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1982), and Trexler, *Public Life*. Also see Giorgio Simoncini, *Città e società nel Rinascimento*, 2 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), and Richard Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

[32]Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). Niccoli, "Profezie in piazza," 505.

[33]Dale Kent and F. W. Kent, *Neighbours and Neighbourhood in Renaissance Florence: The District of the Red Lion in the Fifteenth Century* (New York: J. Augustin, 1982). Cf. Goldthwaite, *Building of Renaissance Florence*, 12-13.

[34]Samuel Kline Cohn, *The Laboring Classes in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

of prestige, and influencing one's honor, status, and ability to participate in urban politics.[35]

Neighborhood could also generate strong animosities and jealousies, for the piazza served as a common stage bringing together a citizen's many, sometimes incompatible, roles of kinsman, friend, political ally, tax assessor, business partner, client, parishioner. Managing them and maintaining numerous potentially conflicting loyalties was an arduous task in which the most valuable social commodity of honor could be won or lost.[36] The specific role of neighborhood in social life varied by class, by status, by age, and almost certainly by sex. For the Florentine citizens who were politically eligible and wealthy enough to pay taxes, the *gonfaloni* and quarters of the town had significant meaning. It was, after all, around the banner of the *gonfalon* that each male citizen assembled under threat of fines during the city's chief civic pageant, the feast day of Saint John the Baptist. For the socially marginal – the poor and the working classes, adolescents, and women – neighborhood boundaries were more fluid and amorphous, and could include piazza, street corner, or alley but generally coalesced around the parish. In the fourteenth century and again in the late fifteenth century the *popolo minuto* organized neighborhood festive bands which staged mock and occasionally real turf battles during feast days. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the parish, newly energized by the forces of Catholic reform, was the only remaining source of corporate solidarity, in the wake of the collapse of *gonfaloni* and guilds.[37]

As a counterweight to neighborhood loyalties, Florentine city fathers promoted civism with the cult of Saint John the Baptist, whose popularity spread from the Romanesque baptistry where all of Florence went to be baptized. The baptistry and the adjacent cathedral became the spiritual center of Florence, and the beginning and end for most processions. In addition, government buildings, especially the city hall, represented political salvation through the display of sacred signs and symbols. A raised platform in front of Florence's hall, for example, became an altar during civic ceremonies, thereby directly imputing divine sanction to public authority.[38]

The mobility of the sacred and the annual liturgical cycle conspired to give every major neighborhood and its chief lay patrons a chance to demonstrate their charisma to the entire city, a chance to link the collective

[35]Francis William Kent, *Household and Lineage in Renaissance Florence: The Family Life of the Capponi, Ginori, and Rucellai* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). Alfred Doren, *Le arti fiorentine*, 2 vols. (Florence: Le Monnier, 1940). John M. Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus in Florentine Electoral Politics, 1280-1400* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982). Dale Kent, *The Rise of the Medici: Faction in Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[36]Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood*. Kent and Kent, *Neighbours and Neighbourhood*.

[37]Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood*. Trexler, *Public Life*.

[38]Trexler, *Public Life*, 49.

honor of its inhabitants to devotion to the city's chief saints. In the Florentine feast of the Magi, the link between space, sacred charisma, and earthly honor was especially obvious. In this Medici-sponsored celebration of the fifteenth century, representatives of each of three quarters of Florence, dressed as Magi kings, paid homage to the fourth quarter, passing the Medici palace and walking on to "Bethlehem," the Medici-dominated convent of San Marco, to adore the Christ Child.[39] In contrast to Venice, private groups in Florence enhanced their charisma and their claims by manipulating sacred spaces. There the sacred was subject to the same particularist forces as was the secular. Among the constants of Florentine history are that every regime laid claim to legitimacy by employing the city's vocabulary of sacred space and that social ties to local places constrained the thoroughgoing expansion of public over private space.

Naples shows even more dramatically the strangely contradictory forces playing upon sacred objects and place names, which were ritually invoked by authorities for social control and adopted by intermittent rebels to legitimate themselves and to cleanse the body politic of evil rulers. One of the distinguishing features of Naples may have been that its central sacred object, the relic of Saint Janarius, recurrently stimulated prophetic enthusiasms through the prognostic capabilities of the triennial liquification of the saint's blood.[40] Since the liquifications only began after Saint Janarius's translation to Naples in 1497, the cult evolved during Naples' domination by foreign powers, principally Spain; and since social strife was manifest through struggles over the control of the cult, its socio-political role was ambiguous.[41]

Almost every year the archbishop, civic deputies, and the viceroy argued over rights of precedence in the ceremonies. For example, in 1646, the year before the revolution of Masaniello, the archbishop provocatively announced that the relics were his alone and denied the laity any rights to them. During the revolution the following year, the cathedral diarist assigned to describe the liquifications laconically recorded, "there is nothing to note because there was the revolution."[42] But the people saw visions of Saint Janarius and

[39]Ibid., 424-45

[40]Tommaso Costo, *Giunta di tre libri al compendio dell'Istoria del Regno di Napoli. Ne' quali si contiene quanto di notabile, e ad esso Regno appartenente e accaduto, dal principio dall'anno MDLXIII insino al fine dell'Ottantasei. Con la tavola delle cose memorabili, che in essa si contengono* (Venice: Gio. Battista Cappelli e Gioseffo Peluso, 1588), 120.

[41]G. B. Alfano and A. Amitrano, *Il miracolo di S. Gennaro in Napoli* (Naples: Scarpati, 1950), 145. Cf. Giuseppe Galasso, "Ideologia e sociologia del patronato di San Tommaso d'Aquino su Napoli (1605)," in *Per la storia sociale e religiosa del Mezzogiorno d'Italia*, ed. G. Galasso and Carla Russo, 2 vols. (Naples: Guida Editori, 1982). I wish to thank John Marino for bringing Galasso's article to my attention.

[42]Archivio dell'Arcivescovado, Naples (hereafter, AAN), MS titled "I diari dei ceremonieri della cattedrale di Napoli," 3: 165. Franco Strazzullo, *I diari dei cerimonieri della cattedrale di Napoli: Una fonte per la storia napoletana* (Naples: Agar, 1961), xxi.

employed his image on rebel coins, stealing his favor, in effect, from the archbishop, who was constrained from presiding over the regular liquification miracle. Additionally, a dark, miracle-working image of the Virgin offered special assistance to the poor of the fruit market; and on several occasions, while the authorities squabbled over the blood of Saint Janarius, her feast days supplied the occasions for piazza uprisings. In 1647, in fact, the market-place church of Santa Maria del Carmine served as the stage for Masaniello's raptured but short-lived revolutionary performance.[43] The great Neapolitan revolution consisted, in large part, of a competition among saints. After Masaniello's death, the archbishop interpreted a dramatically complete liquification as a sign of the saint's pleasure with the suppression of the rebellion: "In particular," reads the cathedral diary, "His Eminence commented more than once about never having seen [the blood] so beautifully [liquified], since after calamitous times [in the past] it had always appeared thus as a happy augury for our city . . . which has in the end been liberated from the tyranny of the mob."[44]

Even more than Florence's, Naples' sacred and political centers were widely dispersed; its cathedral housing the miraculous relics of Janarius lay far from the Castel Nuovo, where thick stone walls protected the viceroys. Large sections of the city were divided among the noble barons, and the packed popular quarters clustered around the marketplace where the Carmelites and other orders provided the spiritual services the parish clergy neglected. Unlike Venetian doges or the Medici of Florence, no Neapolitan authority succeeded in capturing for himself the charisma of Saint Janarius through the sacralization of urban spaces and institutions, a failure that assisted in keeping Naples permanently unstable and politically backward.

An even more extreme example of such a failure might be Udine, a city where social divisions had clear cultural and linguistic correlates. In the early sixteenth century Udine and the surrounding Friulan countryside witnessed some of the most widespread and violent revolts by artisans and peasants in Renaissance Italy. In 1511 more than twenty palaces in Udine were looted and burned and perhaps two dozen castles beseiged and damaged in the nearby countryside. What is most remarkable about these disturbances, especially when compared to the nearly contemporaneous revolts in the South Tyrol and Upper Swabia, is the absence of any religious content. Even the urban riots of Udine lacked the sensitivity to symbolic places so evident in similar disturbances in Florence and Naples.

[43]Burke, *Historical Anthropology*, 191-206. Rosario Villari, "Masaniello: Contemporary and Recent Interpretations," *Past and Present* 108 (1985): 117-32. Cf. Rothkrug, "Holy Shrines," 175-76.

[44]AAN, "I diari dei cerimonieri della cattedrale di Napoli," 2: 173.

This relative poverty of Christian imagery was widespread even though for nearly four centuries the region had been an ecclesiastical principality under the patriarchs of Aquileia and still had an exceptionally large establishment of religious, constituting nearly 4 percent of the population of Udine alone. But this establishment was notoriously neglectful of its pastoral duties. Even after Trent, suburban parish churches were still being used as barns, and the functioning of Udine's cathedral was jeopardized by a lack of liturgical vessels and ill repair. One report noted that the roof leaked so badly that divine offices might as well be said in the open. A visiting cardinal lamented that cathedral canons were infamous street fighters, most parish priests were illiterate and incapable of reciting the Mass, and the monasteries were dangerous places where the monks divided into armed camps. The cathedral chapter and the civil government were forever bickering over the administration of the divine cult, but artisans and suburban peasants were apparently indifferent to the expressive possibilities of religious ritual and sacred places, neither invoking the saints nor following a ritual geography during disturbances.[45] Their models of representation derived from other sources, the vendetta, factional loyalty, magic, and carnival practices, while the populace was far more open to Protestant doctrines than the Venetians, Florentines, or Neapolitans. The Cardinal of San Severina complained in 1535 that monasteries in Udine could barely survive from what charity trickled in from the laity because "this land is close to German places infested with Lutheran lies."[46] Lacking a charismatic center, the extremely agonistic society of Friuli was symbolically atomistic, failing to accept any social bodies larger than family and faction.

The gap between ecclesiastical institutions and popular spiritual life was so vast that the town remained in a semi-feudal, almost clannish environment in which animal totems and heraldic blazons carried greater emotive power than relics and images. Neighborhoods in Udine demarcated factional turfs, and even the images of the Virgin, erected about the city (probably in imitation of Venetian practice) seem to have been largely ignored by the laity. Much as did the Spanish viceroy of Naples, the Venetian *luogotenente* in Udine, who after 1420 was officially in charge, lived as the outsider he was, separated from the citizens on a strongly fortified hill within the city; the cathedral and monasteries, extensions of factional patronage systems, were thoroughly incapable of providing refuge from the recurrent strife.[47] Udine might not represent so much a failure of cognition or of faith as a failure of Christianity and of political institutions to create a civic culture by encouraging the veneration of images in public places.

[45]Battistella, "Udine nel secolo XVI," 1-17. The situation in Friuli paralleled the prince-bishoprics in Germany. Rothkrug, "German Holiness," 162.

[46]Battistella, "Udine nel secolo XVI," 7.

[47]These comments come from a book I am currently preparing on vendetta and factional strife in Friuli during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In all these cities, conflicting forces exerted pressure on the sacred. On the one hand, relations with the sacred presented an idealized pattern for human social relations that emphasized the virtues of hierarchy, deference, and obedience and that encouraged civic concord by investing urban places with a hallowed character. Ecclesiastic and secular authorities cooperated by representing the sacred in ways that would serve desirable social ends, but their effectiveness largely depended on the ability of the civil government to marshal support and suppress opposition. Although all governments appeared to legitimate themselves through divine sanction, only those regimes that built or forced some degree of social consensus succeeded in achieving legitimacy.

On the other hand, agonistic relations among individuals and urban groups – families, neighborhoods, guilds, classes – were projected onto the sacred, creating counter pressures that gave spiritual sanction to civil conflicts. In Venice the Virgin encouraged passivity; in Naples she sponsored rebellion. In all of these cities, sacred places and objects were approached and understood through public performances and rituals, but the meaning of gestures of reverence came not from the form of the performance itself but from what one might call the social script. In the theater states, the authorities made certain that they wrote the script and dominated the stage. The sincerity threshold was quite low because performing well brought rewards even if it masked crude self-interest and significant social conflict. In other cities, sacred performances were competitive – they constituted street fighting by another means – and the sincerity threshold was higher precisely because there was little agreement over the social script or even the most appropriate stage.

Where the sacred was most completely interwoven into the urban fabric, where the spiritual was most readily manifest in objects, where the incandescence of the holy could be found in the most mundane places, such as in Venice and Florence, one also finds the most effectively institutionalized, most politically sophisticated, the most economically advanced cities. Communities that failed to infuse urban spaces with a spiritual presence or to control their sacred objects were more awkwardly organized, more conflict-ridden, more economically backward, and perhaps more often open to religious reformist ideas. Such a pattern is, of course, the exact inverse of what traditional Durkheimian sociology might lead one to expect and differs, as well, from the more recent revisionist view that all societies are equally ritualized.[48] It is not the amount of ritual that counts but its character and its relationship to social behavior and verbal protestations.

The proper balance between ritual and the word, performance and intention, spirit and objects in representing the sacred was certainly one of the more vexing issues of the sixteenth century. Debated by theologians and

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[48]Cf. the comments on this issue in Burke, *Historical Anthropology*, 223-24.

humanists, these issues met the hard realities of daily social life in the cities. When one recalls Luther's reaction to his Roman sojourn or Erasmus's complaints about the moral laxity among celebrants of the liturgy and lay believers alike, one wonders how much of the Reformation may have come from misunderstandings of the various dialects of popular devotion, misunderstandings that were stumblings, in effect, upon the threshold of sincerity.