EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF VENICE

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Three key moments defined pre-university education in the Republic of Venice between 1400 and 1797. In the Renaissance, Venice created new state schools that lasted to the end of the Republic. Moreover, all Latin schools, whether state, independent, or clerical, adopted the humanistic curriculum, as humanism became the culture of the Latin-educated. Second, Venice did not participate fully in Catholic Reformation education, the pre-university schooling of the new religious orders that dominated Latin education in Italy from the late 16th century to 1773. Venice expelled the Society of Jesus, the most important order of the Catholic Reformation, in 1606 and did not permit it to return until 1657. Although the Somaschans (Clerics Regular of Somasca, who took their name from their motherhouse at Somasca, a tiny hamlet near Bergamo) operated schools in the Venetian Republic, the schools of the religious orders of the Catholic Reformation had less influence than in other Italian states. Third, in the late 18th century the Venetian government imposed major educational changes that reflected Enlightenment values. It expelled the regular clergy from the classroom and implemented a more utilitarian curriculum to be taught in the vernacular. Nevertheless, the changes were less radical than anticipated.¹

¹ I wish to thank Benjamin Ravid for his advice and careful reading and Howard Adelman and Konrad Eisenbichler for sending me publications. This article focuses on education in the mainland state of Venice because little is known about education in the overseas territories ruled by Venice. But Eric Dursteler, "Education and Identity in Constantinople’s Latin Rite Community, c.1600," Renaissance Studies 18 (2004), 287–303, is a good start.
they should be named “communal schools,” because the town government was called the commune. Some towns had communal schools before becoming part of the Republic. This usually meant that the city council hired a master or two to teach a limited number of local boys and paid him from government revenues. Often, student fees supplemented the master’s salary. Because the Venetian government permitted its subject towns considerable freedom to manage their own internal affairs, those with communal schools kept them after absorption into the Venetian state. For example, the communes of Chioggia and Treviso appointed communal Latin teachers in the 14th century, and these positions continued in the 15th century and beyond. Verona appointed a communal master to teach *abbaco* [commercial arithmetic] as early as 1284 and maintained the position in the 15th century.  

Church schools were pre-university schools organized by and under the supervision of an ecclesiastical body such as bishop, cathedral chapter of canons, monastery, or parish. They usually taught both future clergy-men and lay boys. Although church schools were common in the early Middle Ages, their numbers had declined precipitously by 1400. If Venice and the towns of the Veneto had more than a handful of church schools around 1400, they have not left a documentary footprint large enough to be noticed by historians. By contrast, Venice had numerous independent schools in the 14th and 15th centuries. A freelance master created an independent school. He opened a school in his home or rented premises and taught all the boys whose parents were willing to pay him for his services. He was not subject to the control, approval, or supervision of any civic authority. Some independent masters tutored the children of wealthy households, either living in the house or coming daily to teach. Independent masters did almost all the pre-university teaching in Venice and the Veneto in the late Middle Ages and in the 15th century. Enrico Bertanza and Giuseppe Dalla Santa have documented the existence of hundreds of independent masters in Venice, as many as 55 teachers in a single year in the late 14th century

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3 Grendler, *Schooling*, pp. 6–11.