Chapter 6

Men and Women Preparing for Death in Renaissance Venice (c. 1200–1600)

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Introduction

In Italy, the Roman tradition of notaries continued throughout the Middle Ages, and the custom of making wills never completely disappeared. However, since the twelfth century the renaissance of Roman law with the assistance of the Catholic Church fostered the testamentary practice and made it progressively popular at every social level. If, at first, only the elites were concerned, since the end of the thirteenth century wills started to regard all socioeconomic strata of the population from the upper to the lower ones. As a result, Italy is well known for the abundance of notarial sources (wills among them) to be found not only in notarial archives, but also in public and private archives. In this, it differs from Central European areas such as Northern France or Poland, for instance.¹

Being an Italian metropolis, Venice partakes of the aforementioned abundance of notarial sources and shares some formal aspects characterizing them, but Venetian sources also show significant specific traits.

Until now, scholars focused their studies of Venetian last wills and testaments on those belonging to specific categories: gender (men or women), social status (patricians or cittadini), profession (e.g. merchants or bankers), and the time frame selected is generally rather limited, sometimes coinciding with the unfolding of dramatic events like the period of the plague epidemic.²

¹ For Poland, see the chapter by Jakub Wysmulek in this volume.
This chapter, however, concerns the entire social spectrum: men and women, from patricians to popolani, from merchants to carpenters during a period spanning from the beginning of the thirteenth century until the end of the sixteenth.

The starting point for this investigation was an archive presenting all this variety: an exceptionally rich monastic fund. About 130 wills are well preserved in the archives of the old, wealthy, and renowned Benedictine monastery of San Lorenzo di Venezia. 127 wills, dating from 1202 until 1577, are gathered together in one single folder, whereas the remaining are dispersed in several other of the monastery’s folders, mainly those concerning the estates (land and houses) bequeathed to the monastery by the testators. These wills were all drawn up by men and women, patricians as well as popolani connected in many different ways to the monastery: benefactors, future nuns, nuns’ relatives, monastery “inhabitants,” monastery employees, tenants of the monastery’s houses, and parishioners, but also people whose link with the monastery is not immediately evident.

The research continued exploring the individual archives of the notaries who drafted these wills. In this corpus, some of the notaries wrote more than one will (up to three) and therefore the search in the notarial archives, for other wills linked to the monastery, started by their funds. In their folders, some other wills by people connected to San Lorenzo were found. This additional line of investigation is very promising, but also very time consuming.

These wills are a rich and articulated source which allows to gain valuable information about the religious aspirations, property transmission strategies,