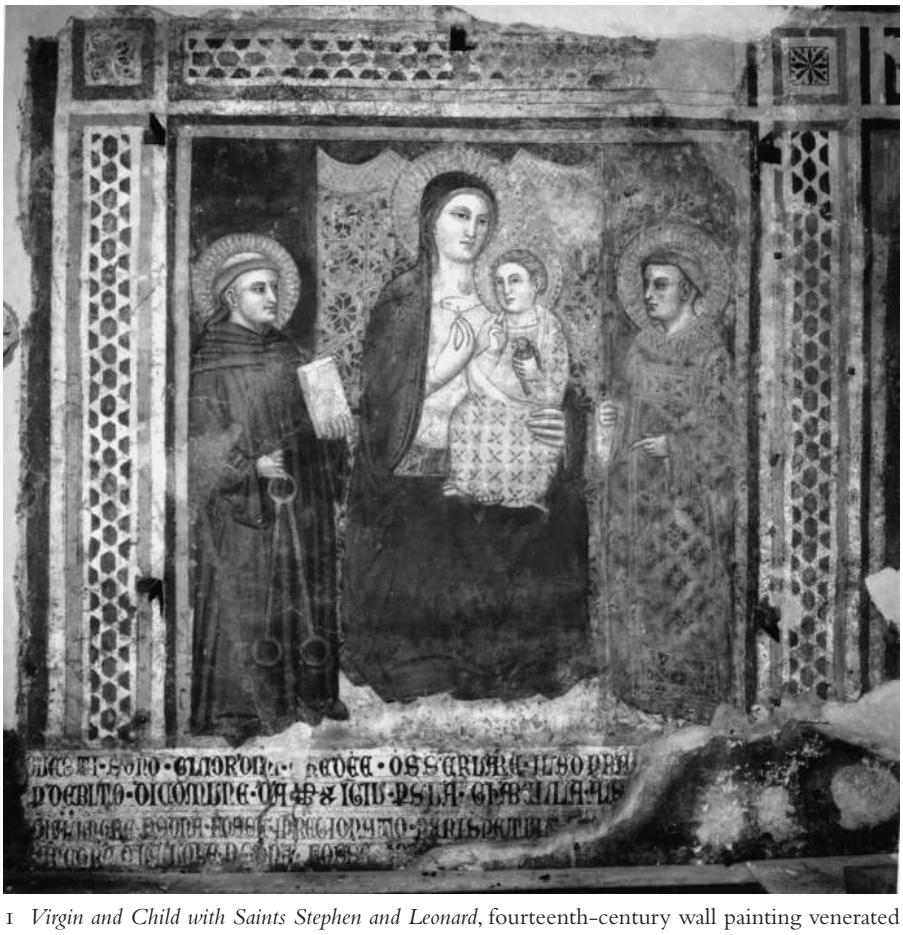
INTRODUCTION

According to local tradition, something extraordinary happened in Prato in the summer of 1484:

> In the year of Our Lord and of our Salvation 1484, on the sixth of July at about the ninth hour, a beautiful child, pale, blonde and of angelic appearance, pure and simple like a little angel, aged eight, called Jacopino, son of Antonio di Ser Nicola di Ser Tingo called La Povera, found himself on that bank round the castle of Prato and, not knowing himself how he got there, he saw a cricket jumping … and, wanting to catch it, he followed it, and the jumping cricket led him to the precincts of the prison. There, guided by the cricket, Jacopino saw the figure of the Most Glorious Virgin Mary, which was and is painted over the barred window of the prison (Fig. 1), detach herself from the wall on which she was painted and place her Most Glorious Son on the ground in that vile place at the foot of the window and kneel to adore Him, beating her breast with her hand. Having adored Him, he saw the said Most Glorious Madonna leave her Son on the ground with the swallow in his hand, the baby moving his most holy arms and the swallow seeming to be alive, and descend into the dark subterranean prison and clean that place in the earth, scrubbing three times with her hand. She then came back up and took her Son in her arms again, and returned to the same place from which she had descended and where, before, she had been painted. Having seen all this, Jacopino, frightened by it, went home but his mother, thinking that he had left school without the permission of the teacher, reproved him. He told his mother this miracle and what he had seen, but she, as is the



1 *Virgin and Child with Saints Stephen and Leonard*, fourteenth-century wall painting venerated as *Santa Maria delle Carceri*, Santa Maria delle Carceri, Prato. Photo: Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici, Florence. By permission of the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo.

way with women, did not believe him and gave him something to eat. When he had eaten a little she sent him back to school. But the boy, as it pleased God, returned to the prison, where, as soon as he arrived, he saw many clear lights shining around the figure and in the lower prison so that everything seemed to him to shine. Returning home to his mother for the second time and telling her what he had seen, she failed for the second time to stir herself and, threatening him, sent him back to school. At this, fearing his mother, he made to go but he returned to the same place and sat down at the top of the steps and door of that enclosure and, looking at the beautiful image, was almost in ecstasy, so that a certain Pauolo di Stephano, passing by and seeing Jacopino so astonished, wanted to take him away from there. He took hold of him but, with all his strength, he could not lift him.[1]

Nothing could make Jacopino move from the spot and he remained there until the evening when he was approached by Giovanni Celmi, the vicar of the bishop of Pistoia, who asked him what he was doing there so late. The boy told him what he had seen. Word quickly spread and people began to gather at the site, bringing candles and torches. In this excited atmosphere the image was seen to undergo further miraculous transformations: the figure of the Virgin shed tears, opened and closed its eyes, sweated blood and changed colour. But this was not the end of the wonders:

> The same evening, that is of the said day 6 July 1484, at the first hour of the night, there being a great crowd of people gathered in front of the said Madonna, Lorenzo di Bartolomeo del Maestro Lorenzo Saxero of Prato climbed on a wall of the precinct in order to see such stupendous miracles and signs but when he jumped down he broke his right foot. He returned home with difficulty and that night he could not rest because of the pain but, vowing to place a wax foot before the said Madonna, he went to sleep. The following morning when he woke up, he found that he was healed. He thanked God, visited the Madonna and fulfilled his vow. The same evening, that is 6 July 1484, Ridolfo Melanesi of Prato, suffering severely from the pains of sciatica so that he could not walk without crutches, and hearing of the stupendous miracles of this Madonna, commended himself humbly and vowed, if he recovered, to place there a wax leg. And in the morning he found himself healed and he fulfilled his vow.[2]

The miraculous cures and visual transformations continued over the coming days and months.

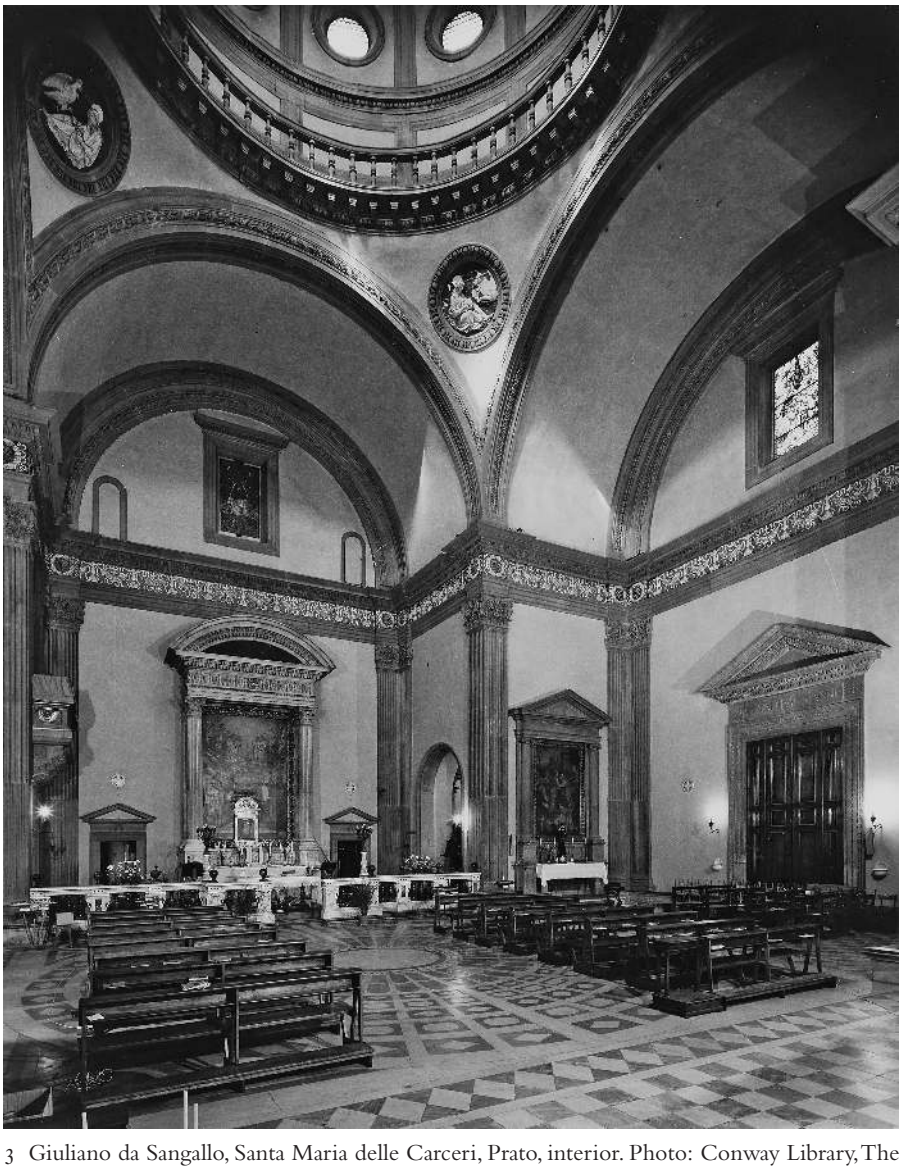
This account comes from a manuscript preserved in the Biblioteca Roncioniana in Prato entitled *The History of the Apparition and Miracles of Madonna St Mary of the Prison in Prato*.[3] The colophon states that 'I, Giuliano di Francesco Guizzelmi of Prato, doctor of civil and canon law, most faithfully composed and wrote this history' which was 'finished in the year of Our Lord 1505 on 25 August, Monday at 21 hours.'[4] Along with the story of Jacopino, the manuscript contains accounts of ninety-four miracles, mainly miracles of healing, associated with the picture of the Virgin on the prison wall.

The claim of such miraculous activity was the motivation for the town council to petition the pope for permission to build a church or hospital on the site. The permission was delayed by the death of Sixtus IV on 13 August, but his successor, Innocent VIII, eventually issued a bull granting his permission on 12 September 1484, assigning the patronage rights to the communal authorities.[5] After a troubled start, involving a change of architect and interventions by the Florentine authorities, the project finally got underway in the autumn of 1485 under the control of Giuliano da Sangallo.[6] The result is one of the most celebrated examples of Italian Renaissance ecclesiastical

2 Giuliano da Sangallo, Santa Maria delle Carceri, Prato. Photo: Author.

architecture: the church of Santa Maria delle Carceri (Fig. 2). The centrally planned church has long been seen as a quintessentially Renaissance building type and Sangallo's elegant domed Greek-cross design has justifiably attracted a good deal of study.[7] The picture itself, the nominal focus of the cult and the raison d'être of the church, has, by contrast, been almost wholly neglected. It remains enshrined above the main altar (Fig. 3) but the modest trecento fresco (see Fig. 1) has, perhaps understandably, failed to compete with the building as a focus of attention in the study of the visual arts.

The issue is not simply one of artistic quality or visual interest. The building and the management of the established cult are parts of documentary history,



3 Giuliano da Sangallo, Santa Maria delle Carceri, Prato, interior. Photo: Conway Library, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

but the story of the origin of the cult and the rationalisation of the status of the picture are of a different order. We no longer accept tales of supernatural agency as adequate explanations for social processes. What are we to make of these stories? How could they become sufficiently embedded in a community to sustain a major building project?

One initial response to these reports might be a surprise that such stories gained currency in a culture long associated with radical innovation in the visual arts and decisive advances in systematic thought and scientific method, but the

material urges that culture's continued reassessment. Generations of scholars have complicated the idea, associated with Jacob Burckhardt, of Renaissance Italy as the birthplace of the 'modern' world in any straightforward sense, and Richard Trexler, citing the sacred image, famously announced the death of the 'pagan' Renaissance in the early 1970s.[8] The persistent force of religion is indeed familiar from the career of Girolamo Savonarola, an almost exact contemporary of Giuliano Guizzelmi, the writer of the foregoing passages, and with whose ideas the Prato lawyer demonstrably engaged, as we will see. The religious culture of the period, from the overarching structures of the church's liturgy, through the para-liturgical observances of lay confraternities and the engagement of lay people with preaching, to the penetration of ritual in daily life, is now at the heart of historical study.[9] However, although the practices highlighted by the foregoing passages – involving what can seem a superstitious or even 'magical' appreciation of material objects – have attracted increasing attention in recent years, their place in the scholarship remains marginal and they are not fully understood. The challenge is to accept such apparently uncomplicated piety as an integral and central part of the culture. At the Carceri, the lucid classicism of Sangallo (Fig. 3) frames a thaumaturgic Marian image cult (Fig. 1), but it is not only the church that is the 'Renaissance' issue. The aim of this study is to confront these strong continuing elements of traditional religion and explore the culture in which these stories circulated and in which the rise of this cult was possible.[10]

The key to this exploration is Giuliano Guizzelmi himself. Quite what kind of evidence Guizzelmi's book constitutes is an important concern of this study, to be pursued in Chapter 5, but here I want to note a feature of it that sets it apart from comparable texts. Collections of miracles are a recognised genre and Guizzelmi's book is by no means unique even in dealing with the Carceri. As discussed in Chapter 4, it shares a good deal of material with another, probably earlier, manuscript and a printed pamphlet possibly dating from as early as 1485. Guizzelmi, writing at a distance of some twenty years from the events he relates, seems at first sight to be doing little more than repeating pious hearsay, and the miracle stories in his book have attracted much less attention than the other surviving Carceri collections. The collection is now published in full but the editor remarks in an annotation of the earlier manuscript that 'most of the miracles described here return in [Guizzelmi's text] with some variation of names, places and dates'.[11] This turns out to be a radical underestimation of the value of Guizzelmi's little book.

The first thirty or so folios of healing miracles in Guizzelmi's book do simply reproduce material from the earlier versions, but from then on the text becomes strikingly independent. The forty-first miracle story runs as follows:

> On 15 September 1484

> Francesco d'Andrea di Francesco Ghuzzelmi of Prato, a boy of two years and eight months, had had a severe fever continuously for two days and in that time had not eaten or drunk anything and had not spoken and slept continuously and lay in his bed as if dead. And fearing this illness, Andrea, his father and my brother, went to the Madonna delle Carceri and there vowed him to Her Majesty. And that boy was as said in bed as if dead and, at the time that his father vowed him to the Madonna, he suddenly came to and sat up in bed without a fever, healthy and liberated, and said to his mother standing there and weeping, 'Mamma, the Virgin Mary has healed me.' And he began to talk and eat and drink as if he had never had any illness and was perfectly healthy and liberated. And lifted out of bed by his mother, he began to run through the house as children of that age do, healthy and in good spirits. Seeing this, the said Andrea, his father, and his mother thanked God and the Glorious Virgin for such grace and miracle and afterwards they went to the Madonna and prayed and offered according to their consciences.[12]

The simple interjection, 'my brother', changes the character of the material. Miracle stories tend to be distanced accounts of things that allegedly happen to other people, but here the writer declares an interest. The beneficiary of the miracle is avowedly the writer's own nephew. This story is not alone. There follow further stories in which the personal investment is even clearer: the writer himself and other members of his close family are claimed to be the beneficiaries of miracles and in still more the writer presents himself as the very catalyst of miracle for others. This declaration of devotional involvement raises the stakes. It does not, of course, make the stories 'true' in any simple sense, but it does make a difference to their status as evidence. In these stories Guizzelmi does not merely assert the beliefs and claim to report the practices of others but claims some of them as his own. It is a fundamental proposal of this study that we can take these first-person stories as direct evidence of Guizzelmi's own beliefs and, more particularly, practices.

Guizzelmi's contribution does not, however, stop here. He proves to have been both a comparatively prolific writer and, perhaps to be expected of a well-qualified lawyer, a habitual record keeper. He wrote collections of the miracles of all his home town's shrines, and his collection of the miracles of Prato's principal relic, the supposed girdle or belt of the Virgin Mary, survives in an autograph manuscript.[13] In addition, on 5 December 1488 he began a record 'of those things which happen to me day by day and from day to day' which he continued diligently until shortly before his death thirty years later.[14] Such record books have survived in large numbers from this period in Tuscany and constitute an important and extensively exploited resource.[15] The two volumes of what Guizzelmi called his *memoriale* are not among the more elaborate and discursive examples.[16] The records are often laconic and amount to what Mark Phillips, writing of the slightly earlier record book of

Marco Parenti, has called a 'detailed ledger of family expenses'.[17] Yet they offer remarkable insights into Guizzelmi's life and concerns and act as ground for issues raised in his other writings. Along with other records now lost, they were also drawn on by the writers of the family's history, most notably Agostino di Bindaccio Guizzelmi (1534–1600), the son of one of Giuliano's nephews. Agostino wrote a life of Giuliano which is especially valuable for his early life and career.[18] Guizzelmi thus offers us both an overview of the sacred landscape of his home town and also the opportunity to embed his writing of sacred history among the concerns of his everyday life. In this book I will use Guizzelmi as a guide to the visual and devotional culture of his time.

The life revealed by the records is rich in images. Indeed, as it comes down to us, it is framed by them. Guizzelmi's portrait appears in his burial chapel in the town's principal church (Chapter 2) and, according to family tradition, he was portrayed by Fra Filippo Lippi as a child in the celebrated frescoes in the cappella maggiore in the same building (Chapter 1). He venerated allegedly miracle-working crucifixes (Chapter 2) as well as the Madonna of the Carceri (Chapter 4) and his devotion to these images involved further images: he handed out figured souvenirs to the people he met (Chapter 5) and offered images of himself and members of his family to the shrines (Chapter 6). As a lawyer, Guizzelmi was a man who dealt in words in a notably wordy culture, but his records reveal a life articulated, at key points, by images.

Guizzelmi's writings reveal the images with which he interacts as a continuum without sharp distinctions of status or medium and this challenges a discipline which tends to categorise its subjects in these terms. None of the categories of images with which Guizzelmi was concerned have been wholly neglected by historical and art historical study. As discussed below, there are notable approaches to miraculous images. Votive images have long exercised a fascination.[19] Pilgrim souvenirs have been studied extensively as a medieval issue, though not at all, to my knowledge, in an Italian Renaissance context. These things have, however, never been studied together in any discipline. Guizzelmi offers an opportunity to integrate all these elements and understand them as parts of a single system.

Miracle-working images are central to this study and it is around them that I pose my central questions. Such images have attracted growing attention in recent years with a notable concentration on Italy in the early modern period.[20] The tendency has been both to isolate such images as a category and to study them in an extended chronological framework.[21] I offer my study as a complement to these approaches in both dimensions. The density of the evidence Guizzelmi provides allows us to work on a biographical timescale. This is a study of a devotional culture in a particular place and at a particular time. Crucially, the evidence allows us to set the devotion to images associated with miracles in a broad devotional context, amidst the liturgy of the church,

confraternal activity, the veneration of relics and the practice of pilgrimage. That breadth of view is, I suggest, crucial if we are to frame the issues correctly. Miraculous images are only one element of a rich devotional landscape.

The literature on miraculous images remains dominated by the idea that such images were understood to generate a sacred presence. A central argument of this book is to question whether this is a necessary or productive framework for their study. My concern is that this basic stance falls too easily into a deeply rooted set of assumptions captured in W. J. T. Mitchell's two 'laws of iconoclasm': the 'idolater is always someone else' and 'idolaters believe their images to be holy, alive, and powerful'.[22] Mitchell observes that this 'deep structure' is 'alive and well in our time' and I suggest that it is very much in evidence in modern scholarship in this field.[23] In this study I seek to avoid explaining past practices with references to 'period beliefs' with which we no longer identify. People may have believed all kinds of things but I suggest that we do not have to assume a belief in images as saints in order to make historical sense of what they did. In my earlier work on miraculous images I proposed that the crucial issue in the 'miraculous image' is not the perceived ontological status of the image but image-related performance.[24] This book uses Guizzelmi's rich evidence to pursue that proposal, studying behaviour around a range of images and other objects, crucially including the Eucharist, the avowed reference point for the idea of the 'real presence' of the divine. The attempt necessarily involves an engagement with the anthropology of ritual.[25] As Frank Graziano justly observes in a recent study of miraculous images in present-day Mexico, 'devotion wants its objects to be real.'[26] However, I argue that setting the image in a wider ritual context establishes that devotion is only too used to finding its objects absent, invisible or otherwise inaccessible. This experience of frustrated desire is a crucial context for the devotion to images. However they were understood, it seems unlikely that they were taken to provide direct access to the divine.

Giving Guizzelmi a central role in the study might be thought to need some justification. In Prato he had a certain stature but in a wider context he is a frankly obscure figure. The author of the only substantial study of his materials and career to date numbers him 'among the minor, not to say minimal, personalities of the Tuscan Renaissance'.[27] To see this native and resident of a provincial town as a limited source restricted to local affairs would, however, be misleading. Guizzelmi was neither simply the product of, nor engaged solely in, a strictly Prato culture. As Chapter 1 will show, he studied for his doctorates in law in Bologna, Siena and Pisa. Thereafter he spent nearly three years in Rome. His direct 'line managers' throughout his working life were Florentine citizens and his work took him to towns throughout the Florentine territories, including regular, repeated and extended visits to Pisa, Arezzo, San Gimignano and Sansepolcro. His direct experiences thus took in a broad swathe of central

Italy and his intellectual life reached further still. The universities at which he studied had international student bodies and he engaged with the new humanist learning of the age as an avid collector and reader of the newly accessible printed books. He had an extensive library with a particularly rich representation of what we would now call the classics.[28]

In this sense, Guizzelmi demonstrably engaged with what has come to be seen as a defining element of Renaissance culture. In my title, I appeal to the Renaissance but I do so simply to signal the broad context of my subject matter in a way that is widely understood. I do not mean to imply that Guizzelmi's practices should be seen as specific to or characteristic of a particular historical 'period' or a specific set of cultural concerns. Indeed, I wish to highlight the limitations of periodisation. Guizzelmi's devotional life involved objects and practices with wide diffusion. The veneration of relics and images was common to all of Christendom in the pre-Reformation period, and the use of so-called pilgrim souvenirs and votive offerings in the process of interaction with holy figures is attested to over a wide geographical and chronological range. The rare first-person accounts of the manipulation of such objects found in Guizzelmi's writings constitute very valuable evidence, with implications well beyond the regional and chronological boundaries of the study. What is most 'Renaissance' about Guizzelmi's material is arguably the very abundance of the written records.

Though obscure, Guizzelmi was, by virtue of his education and connections, very much part of the 'elite' and it could be argued that this makes him partial as a source in another sense. Michael Baxandall famously offered a parody of the limitations of his study of fifteenth-century Italian art as merely revolving around the interests of 'a church-going business man, with a taste for dancing'.[29] My focus is, by contrast, a pious lawyer with, as we shall see, a taste for the mortification of the flesh. On one level, therefore, his evidence serves simply to enrich our understanding: he is another kind of 'Renaissance man'. More importantly, I follow Caroline Bynum and others in being cautious about assuming sharp distinctions in belief and practice between social groups.[30] The practices Guizzelmi describes are those sometimes studied under the rubric of 'popular religion' but his participation in them shows that they were not the preserve of a distinct non-elite culture. In what follows I aim to respect the particularity of the material and I give priority to what Guizzelmi says he did, which is what seems to me to be distinctive and valuable about the material. Giuliano Guizzelmi was no everyman and the degree to which his experience is generalisable remains an issue, but the evidence he provides need not be assumed to be confined to his immediate social circle and its directness demands attention.

The focus on the records of a single citizen of Prato inevitably recalls Iris Origo's celebrated study of Francesco di Marco Datini, *The Merchant of Prato*.[31]