Introduction

*D*eep in the Veneto countryside, travelers in the seventeenth and eighteenth century might easily bypass the Italian town of Monselice, overshadowed as it was by the graceful Renaissance cities of Padua and Ferrara. Fortunately for Monselice, the little hamlet had its own attraction that lured wayfarers who might not otherwise have bothered to scale the heights of the rocky promontory against which Monselice was poised if they were hastening between the two great cities which framed it. It was not the town's sturdy duomo that drew people – any town of consequence had one of these – nor the castello that stubbornly topped the promontory with a crenellated crown; it was something quite unexpected that greeted a pious Christian pilgrim this close to the powerhouse of Venice: a microcosmic, sacred Rome artfully arranged according to a symbolic, secret order.

A curving path up Monselice's mountain, just beyond its duomo and city center, revealed a series of six identical chapels strung out like rosary beads. Each chapel represented – indeed, was metonymically identical to – six of Rome's seven great pilgrimage churches. As the faithful ascended Monselice's *monte sacro*, each chapel visit conferred a new papal indulgence, just as visiting the real pilgrimage churches in Rome did. The regular pulse of these tidy, white-stuccoed shrines – built almost perversely *not* to resemble Rome's churches but in the style of Roman pagan *aediculae* – continued up the curve until the sixth chapel brought its panting pilgrims, hearts pounding with exertion, up to a flat, open space marked out by regular, geometrical gardens; a surging fountain; a handsome and capacious villa; and the seventh chapel – different from the rest, but in a significant sense, the jewel in the site's crown. It was the first and most important of the shrines: the Oratory of San Giorgio.

Twenty years ago, I found myself, entirely by happy accident, standing on this plateau, my gaze fixed on the panorama of verdant farms and fields that the site commanded. Studying Italian in Siena, I had chanced to meet some architecture students from the University of Pennsylvania who invited me to visit them at the place the university had set up for them to stay: the Villa Duodo, a Renaissance palace once owned by the noble Venetian Duodo family that had commissioned the construction of Monselice's *monte sacro* complex. There were only a handful of us, and we had the run of the twenty-room estate to ourselves. Inside, the villa was flea-infested and had a mournful, neglected air of forgotten nobility; outside, the planned gardens, complete with a huge stone exedra, stood preserved in perfect Renaissance tidiness. The site was largely, even oddly, silent, except for the chapel's bell tower, from which each fifteen-minute interval was punctuated by two dull, thudding bells.

The bell tower sprouted from the San Giorgio Oratory, which adjoined the oldest wing of the villa. It was kept open during regular hours, but the Penn students steered clear of it because it contained "creepy saints." One afternoon I ventured inside. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw at the back of the small chapel's double rooms six rows of glass-fronted cabinets, four fronts to a row. Drawing nearer, I saw, with growing horror and fascination, that each glass-fronted cabinet revealed a sort of bed with what appeared to be large dolls inside. But they were not dolls: they were human mummies, each dressed up with satin and lace bonnets, with dehydrated flesh faces and lusterless hair still sometimes poking out from their headdresses. All clutched miniature chalices, wired into their skeletal hands; they were also shod in little satin slippers that mice had gnawed away, revealing tiny bone toes. These twenty-four "shrunken saints" had, I learned, been brought from Rome's catacombs in the seventeenth century to reside there, high up on Monselice's plateau, making the Oratory of San Giorgio a holy place and the Duodo family very powerful indeed. In fact, San Giorgio housed an impressive host of saints: Veneranda, Liberata, Chiara, two female saints by the name of Faustina (one a virgin martyr, the other a mother), Felicita, Febronia, Elite, Clemente, Fruttoso, Ilocio, Celestino, Emiliano, Gregorio, Bovo, Bonifacio, Rusticiano, Pio, Teodoro, Venanzio, Martino, Alessandro, Giustino, Benedetto, and two child saints: Faustina's son Costantino, and Rusticiano son of Rusticiano, "who lived for five years, eleven months, and twenty-four days," according to his epitaph, still preserved

in the church. It could even boast the bones of St. Valentine, San Valentino – the patron saint of lovers. But here at Monselice on his feast day, February 14, people came to Valentine not to bless their romances but to protect their children from epilepsy – his local specialty. How could power, secular or sacred, come from the desiccated human bodies of Rome's long dead? And how could the presence of these moldering catacomb bones mark out another Rome, a sacred city, here in the green hills of the Veneto?

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The example of Monselice's *monte sacro* illustrates how the Cult of the Saints in early modern Rome effectively reordered topography, replicating *Roma sancta* in backwater towns such as Monselice, effectively and literally putting them "on the map." Architectural and ecclesiastical visionaries engaged in an active "imagineering" of Rome that extended far beyond the confines of the city itself.[1] Monselice's *monte sacro* project was developed by the great Renaissance architect Vincenzo Scamozzi, at the request of Pietro Duodo and his sons, Francesco and Domenico, in the 1590s.[2] It was the height of the Counter-Reformation, and the Duodo family wanted to expand their familial site beyond the oratory of San Giorgio. The little chapel needed a complete overhaul, for which Scamozzi devised the idea – borrowed from other *monte sacro* sites in the Veneto – of using the natural slope of the hillside to form a *Via Romana* with seven chapels that would correspond to Rome's seven pilgrimage

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[1] On "Imagineering," see Dennis Trout, "Theodelinda's Rome: 'Ampullae,' 'Pittacia,' and the Image of the City," *MAAR* 50 (2005): 134; Trout borrows the term from E. Soja, "Los Angeles 1965–1992," in A. Scott and E. Soja, eds.*, The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

[2] For an architect's analysis of Scamozzi's project at Monselice, see Ann Marie Borys, "Number, Spoils, and Relics: Totemic Images in a *Mnemotopia*," *Journal of Architectural Education* 54/1 (2000): 28–34. On Renaissance *sacri monti* including Monselice, see Judith Wolin, "Mnemotopias: Revisiting Renaissance *Sacri Monti*," *Modulus* 18 (1987): 37–38; on the most famous of the *sacri monti* at Varallo, see David Leatherbarrow, "The Image and Its Setting: A Study of the Sacro Monte at Varallo," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 14 (1987): 107–22. On Villa Duodo in relation to other Renaissance villas, see Adalbert dal Lago, *Villas and Palaces of Europe* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1969).

churches.[3] Ascent would be a sort of spiritual exercise, a drawing close to God. However, there was an immediate problem: San Giorgio already stood at the crest of the plateau, and the Duodi did not want it substantially altered. Long consecrated to Saint George, the chapel posed an additional challenge: it did not correspond to any one of Rome's seven key pilgrimage churches that were to form the model for the *sacra via*. As a solution, Scamozzi devised that his sixth chapel would represent both the churches of St. Peter and St. Paul – a natural pairing, to be sure, since Peter and Paul had stood together as the twinned patron saints of Rome since the late fourth century. Nevertheless, there is something remarkable about the most important of Rome's pilgrimage churches being combined such as to effectively redraw Roman sacred landscape to place the obscure, and untwinned, San Giorgio at the pinnacle of Scamozzi's *sacra via*.

There was only one way that Rome's sacred landscape could be radically reordered at Monselice, and it hinged, curiously, upon human corpses. Relics provided the answer to the problem of San Giorgio. The lesser six miniature pilgrimage chapels along the *sacra via* were devoid of relics; their importance lay purely in their symbolic, metonymous correspondence with their Roman prototypes. But only San Giorgio contained the source of true power – the twenty-seven saints. Beginning in 1652, their bodies were carefully removed from the catacombs and placed here, far from Rome, patiently awaiting the resurrection in their silken beds. While they waited, they were at the disposal of the Duodi and those pilgrims who trudged up the hill, dutifully pausing at each shrine. They were there to cure the *aigue*, powerful fevers, to offer comfort to the sick and bereaved.

The saints' removal from the Catacombs of Rome happened long after Villa Duodo's *Via Romana* was completed and consecrated. In 1605, the pope, Paul V, had decreed that pilgrims to Monselice's shrines would receive the same indulgences as they might for visiting the actual Roman churches upon which they were modeled. Yet, in truth, Villa Duodo's sacred way was at best a modest site architecturally and visually, so the spiritual boon to be granted from a visit more than made up for the impression made on the early modern visitor. Still, in a curious way, the simplicity and emptiness of the chapels was too austere – too Protestant,

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[3] Thomas K. Davis, "Scamozzi's Duodi Estate in Monselice: Affirming an Architecture of Ambiguity," *The Architecture of the In-between* 78 (1990): 55–65.

even – for Counter-Reformation sensibilities. For there to be any kind of real payoff for trudging up Monselice's hill, there had to be something special at the top: something to really see and wonder at. There had to be holy bones. And these, too, could only come from Rome, naturally. Niccolò Duodo set about procuring some.

Time and space prevent me from a full history of all twenty-seven saints at San Giorgio, and so I will tell the story of only one of them: Saint Faustina, a virgin martyr, whose body resides just to the left of the main altar in the back chapel. Her red robes, embroidered with golden thread, are now shabby, and her white-gloved hand rests slackly against the gold-painted chalice with the words *vas sanguinis* written on it. Her left hand holds a gold paper palm leaf. Her skull is yellowed and, like others in the chapel, seems to have had its eye sockets filled in and nose built up with a sort of plaster. At the front of the case, the label in a sure, cursive hand reports that Faustina, virgin and martyr, was excavated from the Catacombs of St. Callixtus along with her tombstone, which reads "FAVSTINAE VIRGINI FORTISSIMAE, QVE BIXIT AN. XXI" (Figure 1).

How did Faustina arrive here, in this modest hamlet so many hours from Rome? In 1672, Pope Clement X established a new papal office, the *Custode delle ss. Reliquie e dei cimiteri*, to regulate and establish control of Rome's catacombs. Those men who held the position of custodian had the task of "protecting" relics from unscrupulous theft or sale; ironically, however, they themselves trafficked in sacred commodities, perhaps even manufacturing them to suit the orders and predilections of their friends and sponsors. Marco Antonio Boldetti (1663–1749), canon of Santa Maria in Trastevere and himself a *Custode*, was one of the great brokers of the holy.[4] Fascinated by the early martyrs, his book *Osservazioni sopra i cimiterj de' Santi Martiri* (1720) marked out a sacred

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[4] Marco Antonio Boldetti (1663–1749), a Jewish scholar, comes across badly in the work of W. H. C. Frend's study of Christian archaeology as "a collector and hoarder" (W. H. C. Frend, *The Archaeology of Early Christianity: A History* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998], 24). Appointed by Clement XI (1700–21) as Custodian of the Sacred Cemeteries, in 1720 Boldetti published his *Osservazione sopra i cimiterj de' santi martyri ed antichi cristiani di Roma*, "a useful, if not always accurate work" (Frend, 24). Boldetti was responsible for removing inscriptions, and frescoes, and opened more tombs in search of relics. "On his death in 1749 at the age of 86," remarks Frend, "his church and presbytery must have resembled a cross between a repository for antiques and a charnel house" (24).

Photo by Denise Bolton, 2016.

Figure 1. The Virgin Martyr Faustina, 2016.

history of early Christians in Rome based on a fanciful reconstruction
drawn from the material culture of the catacombs.[5] Boldetti, as some of
his contemporary critics noted, played rather fast and loose with the cat-
egory of "martyr."[6] Indeed, he averred that *most* bodies in the catacombs
were those of holy martyrs: at any rate, certainly those buried with small
glass bottles of what he claimed was dried blood still visible inside (later
discovered to be perfume to cover the stench of corpse), or those with
tomb inscriptions featuring palm leaves or birds – very common motifs
in catacomb art.[7]

In Boldetti's *Osservazioni sopra i cimiterj de' Santi Martiri*, we come
across the following notice:

[5] Marco Antonio Boldetti, *Osservazioni sopra i cimiterj de' santi martiri: ed antichi
cristiani di Roma. Aggiuntavi la serie di tutti quelli, che sino al presente si sono
scoperti, e di altri simili, che in varie Parti del Mondo si trovano: con alcune rifles-
sioni pratiche sopra il Culto delle Sagre Reliquie* (Rome, 1720).
[6] Ann Marie Yasin, "Displaying the Sacred Past: Ancient Christian Inscriptions in
Early Modern Rome," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 7/1 (2000):
46–48.
[7] Boldetti, *Osservazioni*, lib. II, cap. III, p. 339. As Ann Marie Yasin notes
("Displaying the Sacred Past," 48, n. 34), these criteria are not Boldetti's own but
are based on a 1668 decree of the Congregation of Rites.

> *Il corpo di questa S. Martire contrassegnato col suo vaso di vetro col Sangue fuori del sepolcro, fu da me trovato nel gran Cimitero di Calisto … Tutte le ossa del sagro suo Corpo si trovarono entro il Sepolcro candide, e intere, e molto ben conservate, ed insieme colla lapida tutto il sagro Corpo, col vaso di Sangue, fu sino d'allora conceduto dal Signor Cardinal di Carpegna ad un Personaggio riguardevole di questa Corte, da cui poi finalmente è passato alle mani del piissimo Signor Cavaliere Niccolò Duodo Ambasciatore della Serenissima Repubblica di Venezia al Regnante Pontefice.*

> The body of this sacred martyr labeled with its glass vase of Blood outside the grave, was discovered by me in the great Cemetery of Callixtus. All the bones of this holy Body were found inside the Grave, white and complete, and very well preserved, and together with the stone marker and with its vase of Blood, this whole sacred Body was immediately handed over to the Cardinal of Carpegna, a highly regarded Person in this Court, and from whom finally it passed into the hands of the most pious Signor Cavaliere Niccolò Duodo, Ambassador to the most Serene Republic of Venice to the reigning Pontiff.[8]

The "holy Body" Boldetti discusses here belonged to an unmarried woman of twenty-one, whose name Boldetti gives only as "Faustina." She died, Boldetti maintained, as a witness to her faith, bravely resisting the forces of evil arrayed against her. He discovered her body, gloriously uncorrupt, at Callixtus and delivered her along with her engraved tombstone to the Cardinal, then on to Duodo, who installed her at San Giorgio. She was not the first saint to reach Monselice; Boldetti writes of the seven pilgrimage churches of the Duodo family and how they were granted special privileges in Paul V's bull, and of the many relics and holy bodies (*Corpi Santi*) that rested in the sanctuary of this site.[9]

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[8] Boldetti, *Osservazioni*, lib. II, cap. III, p. 339.

[9] *… ad effetto d'illustrare con esso una della sette Chiese esistenti nel Castello di Monselice nella Diocese di Padova Padronato della sua Nobilissima Famiglia; alle quali la sa. Me. Di Paolo V. concedette con Bolla special le stesse Indulgenze, e Privilegj, che godono le sette Chiese di Roma; Per secondare poi le divote brame del mentovato Signor Cavalier Duodo, oltre le numerose Reliquie, e Corpi Santi, che da molti anni si venerano nel Santuario di quelle sette Chiese, nel tempo della sua gloriosa Ambasciaria in Roma, è stato anche onorato di varie altre Reliquie, e Corpi di Martiri da molti Porporati, e Vescovi di varie Diocesi* (*Osservazioni*, lib. II, cap. III, p. 340).

Faustina still rests with her sisters and brothers in a glass-fronted display in San Giorgio. But her curious story is not yet over.

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Twenty years after my initial visit, in 2016 I once again climbed Monselice's hill. The oppressive heat – just under 100 degrees Fahrenheit on an otherwise clear early September day – slowed my long trek from the train station until I found myself again walking into San Giorgio, engulfed by its dark, curved walls. My shrunken saints still lay in their moth-eaten glass coffins, unmoving, unseeing, as visitors – some moved, some disinterested, some frankly unnerved – moved in and out of the gloom like shadows. Unlike my first trip here as a graduate student, I now knew these saints: how they had come to rest here on this hill; where they had come from, and who had lifted them from over a thousand years of slumber in the catacombs, so far away in Rome.

My creepy saints had come to Monselice as ready-packed little assemblages of holiness: not only their bodies were here, but the glass vials holding the perfume once believed to be their blood had been gouged out of the mortar of the catacomb galleries and placed in the coffins too; with them, as well, were their funerary inscriptions – little stone "certificates of authenticity," so to speak. I peered into Faustina's glass coffin and read her epitaph: "FAVSTINAE VIRGINI FORTISSIMAE, QVE BIXIT AN. XXI." This time, however, I noticed something else I had not noticed before: her epitaph is almost certainly a fake. Nothing about it, to me, suggests authenticity. The carving is regular in size, spacing, and lettering – virtually classical in style – far different from most late antique Christian epitaphs. The unique phrasing of Faustina's epitaph – that she was a "steadfast" or literally, "most strong" virgin – evokes the image of a martyr withstanding tortures, not unmarried woman or even a consecrated virgin of the church. This is an image drawn from later martyr narratives, not from the social history of late antique Rome.

To confirm my hunch, I researched the language used on Christian inscriptions from late antiquity to commemorate virgins. My search for inscriptions commemorating virgins on the University of Bari's database (EDB) of early Christian inscriptions in Italy, returned 198 examples,

most from Rome.[10] Of these, twenty were established by parents com-
memorating their daughters, some of whom died while still very young.[11]
Four are from husbands to their "virgins," a practice not uncommon in
late antique Christian circles; these were probably celibate Christian
marriages, not virgins consecrated by the Church. Only a small hand-
ful of these forty-three commemorate virgins buried without mention of
family, and these all seem to be relatively late judging from their distinc-
tive language, style, or consular dating.[12] None of these were identified
as martyrs on their inscriptions. Some adjectives associated with named
virgins on late antique Christian epitaphs are *casta*, chaste (*ICUR* 4
10953); *dulcissima*, sweetest (*ICUR* 8 22074); *innocentissima* (*ILCV*
1591); and *sanctissima* (*ICUR* 6 17162), although the most common
adjectival phrase used is "well deserving," as on most Christian funer-
ary inscriptions. While authentic Christian inscriptions do occasionally
commemorate women as "virgins," the phrase "*virgo fortissima*" is
found exactly once in the entire *Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae*
(*ICUR*) collection, which records 40,000 Christian inscriptions: here, in
Faustina's epitaph (numbered and reproduced as *ICUR* 3 8879).

The last part of Faustina's inscription, "…QVE BIXIT AN. XXI," also
seemed very curious. The use of the vernacular Latin "*bixit*" ("lived")
would be nonsensical next to the formal Latin *virgo* of the first line. Why
would "virgin" be written with a "v," but "*vixit*" (the proper form) be
changed to the vernacular "b" (as late antique Christians clearly pro-
nounced "v" as "b" and thus, when uneducated, came to write "*bixit*" in
place of "*vixit*")? Put simply, if whoever inscribed Faustina's stone was

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[10] A search for "*virgine*" returns 3 examples and *virgini*, 42; for "*virgo*," 139, and for
"*birgo*," an additional 14.

[11] For example, Athanasia dies at 2 years, 5 months, and 6 days (*ICUR* 8 20910);
Laurentia at 3 years, 3 months (*ICUR* 6 15530); Marina at 6 years, 11 months (*ICUR*
1 1687). Of the remainder, where age is given or still legible, one commemorates a
daughter of 12; two, a daughter of 14; two, a daughter of 15; one, a daughter of 16, and
two, a daughter of 17.

[12] Examples are: "THEODORA VIRGO" (*ICUR* 6 16514, from Catacombs of Peter
and Marcellinus); *ICUR* 7 18464; "PLAGINIANE VIRGO" (*ICUR* 5 14551, from
the Catacombs of Praetextatus); "IRENE VIRGO" (*ICUR* 3 6760, Catacombs
of Domitilla); "PRIMITIBA VIRGO" (*ICUR* 1 382, now lost); "EUSEBIA
VIRGO" (*ICUR* 7 18718); "BALSAMIA V(irgo) R(e)Q(uiescit)" (*ICUR* 7 20623,
now lost).

Figure 2. M. A. Boldetti, *Osservazioni sopra i cimiterj de' santi martiri, ed antichi cristiani di Roma. Aggiuntavi la serie di tutti quelli, che sino al presente si sono scoperti, e di altri simili, che in varie parti del mondo si trovano: con alcune riflessioni pratiche sopra il culto delle sagre reliquie,* lib. II, cap. III, p. 339, 1720. In the public domain.

educated enough to write "virgin" with a "v," that person was educated enough to know (especially with a classical-style inscription) that *vixit* was also spelled with a v.[13]

Given how dubious Faustina's funerary epitaph appears to the trained eye, I was even more interested when I found her stone reproduced in full in Boldetti's *Osservazione* (Figure 2).

Only the top half of Faustina's stone is visible at San Giorgio; it is not clear to me if it is broken off or merely hidden; but seeing a drawing of the whole stone does nothing to convince me that it was authentic. The images of the bird and anchor are standard ones, as is the acclamation "*in pace.*" The christogram within a martyr's crown is, however, suspect; I do not know of any other authentic examples where a *chi rho* (a very common emblem) is enclosed in a martyr's crown.

The idea that a Christian epitaph – here used to authenticate the body of a martyr – might have been faked is somehow more disturbing

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[13] The vernacular "*birgo*" for "*virgo*" certainly appears: see, for instance, *ICUR* 10 27370; *ICUR* 10 26656 (commemorating a "*birgo*" named "*Bictoria*" rather than "*Victoria*," but then uses "*vixit*" rather than "*bixit*"); *ICUR* 2 4498; *ICUR* 3 8998; *ICUR* 7 20235; *ICUR* 3 6822; *ICUR* 3 6930; *ICUR* 7 18518; *ICUR* 7 19105; *ICUR* 7 19374, died aged 3; *ICUR* 7 19464, a male virgin (*birgo*) who dies aged 30; *ICUR* 1 2038, a "*birgo dei*" named Victora, qui "*vixit*"…; *ICUR* 4 10305. The quality of these inscriptions are overall low, with poor script, misspellings, and grammatical errors – very different from Faustina's epitaph.