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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sister Giustina Niccolini. *The Chronicle of Le Murate.* Edited and Translated by Saundra Weddle. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies Publications, 2011. xiv + 361 pp. $32.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7727-2108-2.

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Published on H-Italy (July, 2012)
Commissioned by Matt Vester

In preparing her dissertation at Cornell University on the architectural history of the Benedictine convent Santissima Annunziata delle Murate, the largest house of nuns in Florence, Saundra Weddle made extensive use of a chronicle composed by one of the nuns, Sister Giustina Niccolini. The original 179-folio manuscript, completed at the end of January 1598, resides in the city's Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale; an eighteenth-century copy is housed in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze. It is one of only two Florentine convent chronicles brought to light by intensive scholarly work on religion and women. The other, Sister Fiammetta Frescobaldi's account of the Dominican house San Jacopo di Ripoli, finished twelve years earlier, is held in the Archivio di Santa Maria Novella. Several previous scholars have drawn on Niccolini's chronicle and a few on Frescobaldi's. Weddle was persuaded by Sharon Strocchia that Niccolini's document would interest readers beyond the restricted circle of specialists conversant with sixteenth-century Italian handwriting. This edition provides an afterlife and audience for Sister Giustina's chronicle that Sister Fiammetta's will probably never enjoy, for access to the earlier manuscript is restricted on account of its extremely fragile condition.[1]

Born into a Florentine merchant family and baptized Lisabetta, the future Sister Giustina entered Le Murate in 1567, presumably "in education," at the age of about nine. When did she take the veil and then profess?-Surely not immediately. During its final session in late 1563, the Council of Trent had decreed that young men and women could not enter religious houses as novices and take vows until ages fifteen and sixteen, respectively. Although archiepiscopal authorities did not present the Tridentine decrees to the nuns of Le Murate until 1568, they would not have granted permission for Lisabetta's premature vestition and profession as Sister Giustina the year before. At home and/or in Le Murate, she learned to read and write well, and at some point she was elected to the office of convent scribe. Did the abbess order her to compile the chronicle? When did she compose it, and how long did it take? One thing is clear: she dictated it to Sister Maria Benigna Cavalcanti, the scribe at the time. Was this mode of procedure dictated by convent custom or rules about the scribe's prerogatives? Or was Sister Giustina–only about forty in 1598–impeded by the unspecified "tiresome ailment" mentioned in her introductory letter to the abbess and sisters of Le Murate (p. 42)? When did she die? Why was her chronicle not continued by subsequent inhabitants, as was often the case? Unfortunately, the sparse records of Le Murate remaining in the Archivio di Stato, which Weddle has thoroughly examined, yield no answers to these and many other questions.

Niccolini's chronicle begins in 1390, when a devout Sienese woman named Apollonia settled in a small house on a bridge over the Arno River. The like-minded Agata from Pontassieve soon joined her, and a few others followed. A decade later, the women–all illiterate except for a girl whom their chaplain taught to read well enough to instruct the others in saying the Office–enclosed themselves. In 1413, members of the group, now numbering seven, took the habit and began to follow a rule. When the Portuguese Benedictine don Eanes Gomes came to Florence to reform the Badia, his order's house in the center of the city, he persuaded Agata, now abbess, and her sisters to relocate in more commodious, safer quarters: a house on via Ghibellina in the parish of Sant'Ambrogio. They moved there in 1424. Nine years later, in 1433, Gomes gave the convent its name, vested the thirteen inhabitants in the Cassinese Benedictine black habit, and professed them according to the Benedictine Rule. After forty-three years, then, their status changed from that of hermitesses unaffiliated with any officially recognized religious congregation to that of full-fledged Benedictine nuns, enclosed behind high exterior walls (*mura*) and therefore known as Le Murate.

Niccolini's work is organized mainly in chronological terms. The tenure of an abbess (a varying number of years, since the Tridentine stipulation of a term limited to three years did not come into effect at Le Murate until 1597) occupies the majority of chapters, with several allotted to such particularly long and significant periods in office as that of Scolastica Rondinelli (1439-75), the first abbess of elite social status (chapters 9-16). Every so often, Niccolini broke stride to discuss a particular topic or event. Chapters 13, 14, 27, 38, 46, and 50, for instance, are devoted to "miraculous" experiences of certain especially holy nuns; chapter 30 to the stay in the convent, during a period marked by plague and war (1527-29), of the young orphan Caterina de' Medici, future queen and queen mother of France and benefactor of Le Murate; and chapters 36 and 62 to disastrous floods of the Arno in 1557 and 1589.

Over the 206 years surveyed in the chronicle, Le Murate was transformed from an informal association of a few devout women living in poverty, austerity, and complete separation from "the world" devoted to a quite different kind of establishment. Niccolini enables us to trace the changes. Tailored habits and shoes, she noted, replaced simple tunics and sandals. Polyphonic singing with organ accompaniment supplanted plainchant. Mattresses took the place of piles of straw, and eating meat was permitted when it was donated to the convent. In 1494, *converse* (lower-class servant nuns) were introduced to shoulder the burden of physical work previously done by choir nuns. For those whose relatives could afford to have them constructed, private cells made it unnecessary to sleep with others in the dormitory. (Niccolini does not say whether they ate there, too, avoiding meals in common in the refectory, as occurred in other "gentrifying" convents.) Prominent patrons favored the convent: popes, who conferred privileges, indulgences, and money; foreign nobles and rulers, among them Queen Leonor of Portugal, who repeatedly sent Le Murate large quantities of sugar; and members of the Florentine Benci, Lenzi, and Medici families, who donated works of art and real estate, underwrote construction projects, and left substantial bequests to the convent.

To this historian's critical eye, such developments signify slipping down a slippery slope to a "relaxed" and debased form of convent life. What did they mean to Sister Giustina? She could hardly tell members of her primary audience, the nuns of Le Murate, that they were living in an institution that had declined from its original standards. As tactful and prudently restrained as she was, her opinion can sometimes be glimpsed between the lines. From the perspective of a century and a half later, she wrote, "truly they say that the practices they followed in those days [Abbess Rondinelli's time] were spiritual and devout" (p. 175)–almost certainly implying that such was no longer the case. About the changes mandated by the Council of Trent, she was more forthcoming. The new regulations caused "many difficulties," some of which she detailed (p. 290). The nuns objected particularly to the three-year limitation on abbesses' terms, believing that "changing administrations so often would harm every congregation," but they resigned themselves to it: "nevertheless, we who accepted the yoke of obedience to the holy mother church agreed to be silent and obey whatever the prelates commanded" (p. 295).

Niccolini had firsthand knowledge of only the past thirty years of the convent's existence. How did she obtain information about the previous century and a half? As she made clear at several points, the state of Le Murate's archive left much to be desired. Many documents that would have proved useful to her had been destroyed by a fire in 1472 and recurrent floods before and after. Therefore she had to rely heavily on traditional lore passed down in the convent from generation to generation and the recollections of living nuns, above all Sister Oretta Sapiti, who possessed an extraordinarily retentive memory. After her departure in 1592 to participate in the founding of a new Benedictine house across town according to the wishes of Duchess Eleonora di Toledo, who had died thirty years earlier, Sapiti continued to supply additions and corrections in writing.[2]

Of the several convent chronicles I have read, Niccolini's is the closest to being a fluent historical account. Perhaps the oral mode of production, involving not only the author and the scribe but also other nuns who furnished information, enhanced its liveliness and coherent narrative line. Weddle does the chronicle full justice. Her introduction and notes, based on familiarity with a wide variety of relevant scholarly literature (listed in the bibliography), supply all the context a reader at any level, from seasoned professional to interested adult to undergraduate student, might desire. The smooth, eloquent translation, which I have not been able to check against the original manuscript, gives the impression of accuracy and reads very easily. Like all canny translators of early modern prose, she has broken down long, complex sentences into digestible shorter ones. An unusually detailed, intelligently organized index of persons and subjects facilitates tracking them down in the text.

Weddle's magnificent achievement stands alongside Daniel Bornstein's *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent: The Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395-1436*

by the Dominican Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni, which appeared in 2000 in the University of Chicago Press's The Other Voice series. Anglophones who wish to learn about life in early modern Italian convents from those who experienced it now have two wonderful resources to consult.

Notes

[1]. For information about Frescobaldi's chronicle in journal form (Elissa B. Weaver calls it a *Diale*), see Elissa B. Weaver, "Fiammetta Frescobaldi (1523-1586) and Her Chronicle of the Florentine Convent of San Jacopo di Ripoli," in *Ritratti: La dimensione individuale nella storia*, ed. Robert A. Pierce and Silvana Seidel Menchi (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2009), 177-191. In conversation, Weaver told me about the manuscript's precarious condition.

[2]. On convent memory in Rome, see Marina Caffiero, "Le scritture della memoria femminile a Roma in età moderna: La produzione monastica," in *Memoria famiglia identità tra Italia ed Europa nell'età moderna*, ed. Giovanni Chiappelli (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009), 235-268.

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Citation: Anne J. Schutte. Review of Niccolini, Sister Giustina, *The Chronicle of Le Murate.* H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. July, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35835

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