

# LAND, FAMILY, AND WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL ROME: REASSESSING A MENTOR'S CLASSIC ARTICLE

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In summer 1999 a seminar in Rome inspired me to return to an early and much-cited article by David Herlihy, "Land, Family, and Women in Continental Europe," and look again at some of the cartularies that he had used in that 1962 article from *Traditio*.<sup>1</sup> What I gradually discovered is how little his conclusions may have had to do with "Continental Europe," and how much with Italy and Rome. I certainly do not question his method of tracing indices of women's power and authority, counting as he did various appearances of women in thousands of charters, but I must reiterate, as he himself told us in that article, that about seventy percent of his documentation came from Italy. I realized in revisiting those charters, moreover, that half of that seventy-percent (or 35 percent overall) came from Rome itself. Conclusions that many have borrowed from Herlihy's early work about land, family,

and women, then, may not be as much about continental Europe as they are about the city of Rome itself. A further insight may be had, however. My revisiting of the documents used in those "classic" articles, show that of the charters for Rome (those which make up 35 percent of the whole) nearly forty percent of the available charters came from houses of religious women. By treating all documentation from Italy together, Herlihy failed to communicate the possible uniqueness of Rome in terms of its evidence for women's activities. Yet fourteen percent of all the charters he consulted for the study in question came from Roman religious houses for women. In providing clear indices of women's presence in the charters he had worked through, he did not remark on the importance of such religious women's communities at the very heart of Catholic Christendom, and he did not suggest the possibility that secular women's activities as

donors and patrons tended to favor religious women and hence that documents for religious women's houses in turn can be particularly important for understanding secular women's control of property. Forty years of hindsight makes it possible to add nuance to the important statements that Herlihy made.

Let me describe the context in which I began to make these observations and then give some details. In 1999, I was a participant in the NEH seminar in Rome directed by Dale Kinney and Birgitta Wohl organized around a "pilgrim guide" to the city, the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, or *The Marvels of Rome*, dating to the 1140s and sometimes attributed to a canon of Saint-Peter's.<sup>2</sup> It was possible to organize our study around a series of walks through the city that highlighted particular sections of the text, which described Christian and pagan sites that one might see in the middle of the twelfth century. This was less a guidebook than a disorganized collection of notes for use in sermons—perhaps a memory text, but only vaguely a guide, mentioning

as it does no bridges. That it was not written by a woman is suggested by the fact that none of the many women's religious houses in the city are mentioned. Its interest was in the fact that it was attributable to the 1140s and bore witness to mid twelfth century as a transitional moment in Rome, when ancient monuments were only beginning to be transformed into medieval ones.

In my own approach to the text, I hoped to accomplish several things, including looking beyond the *Mirabilia* to expand its witness with other descriptions of Rome at that moment. Could it be supplemented by other materials and what were they? There are a number of histories and chronicles and lives of saints that consider Rome in the eleventh and twelfth centuries which we consulted in the seminar. There is the much-mined *Liber Pontificalis*, the book of the acts of the popes that was compiled in Rome itself as an ongoing biography of Popes. There is the *Liber Censuum*, a volume that shows the ambitions of papal tax collectors that churches all

over the world pay taxes to the papacy and seeing it in the original allowed one to see the spaces left on each page in which to add more churches as they came under that taxation system. There are also a number of monastic chronicles and histories, most of them written by Lombard or German monks like Liutprand of Cremona, who saw the Rome of the tenth century as a despicable place, ruled by women and their weakling sons. They seem to criticize aspects of Rome which connect it right up to the twelfth century with its Greek and Christian Byzantine roots.<sup>3</sup>

My second purpose turned me away from the chronicle record because I wanted to look at medieval Rome as a place in which I could examine the positive role of women in development of the medieval economy. In considering Rome in the years after 1000 CE with a discerning eye, I hoped to discover how women as well as men, as pilgrims, penitents, and petitioners to the papal court, held increase the circulation of money in the local economy. I thought this would be primarily because women and men

brought treasure to Rome from elsewhere. It soon became clear that the chronicle accounts were extremely biased against women and would need to be tempered by the administrative records with their fewer rhetorical biases. Such records for the twelfth century and earlier are the charters and charter-books or cartularies of real-estate transactions between churches and lay-people. To consult them, I found myself going back to the lists of charter books included in the early articles by Herlihy.<sup>3</sup> I discovered that more than forty percent of the charters for Rome for the years from 1000 to roughly 1200 were produced by houses of nuns.<sup>5</sup> Despite how often we describe Rome and its churches in the central middle ages as dominated by the clergy and the papacy, there was also a strong presence of religious women in the city from the tenth century. Houses of nuns were important players and they were involved in putting back into circulation wealth that had lay dormant in Rome itself.

I consulted the following list of charter collections (all published):

- Monks of Saint Alessio on the Aventine (987-1217),<sup>6</sup> 28 documents.
- Monks of SS. Cosme and Damiani in Mica Aurea (Trastevere) (948-1100)<sup>7</sup> 97 documents.
- Nuns of S. Maria in Campo Marzio ( 986-1199)<sup>8</sup> 66 documents.
- Nuns of S. Maria in Via Lata (includes Saint Cyriacus) (921-1200)<sup>9</sup> 290 documents.
- Deacons of S. Maria Nova (982-1200)<sup>10</sup> 169 documents.
- Church of S. Maria Maggiore: (or Liberiano) (981-1212)<sup>11</sup> 26 documents.
- S. Maria in Monasterii<sup>12</sup> one document for nuns of S. Agnesi.
- Monks/canons of S. Paolo outside the walls (1081-1212)<sup>13</sup> 15 documents.
- Canons of Saint Peter in the Vatican (936-1197)<sup>14</sup> 81 documents.
- Church of Saint Prassede (987-1212)<sup>15</sup> 52 documents.
- Monks of San Salvatore sul Monte Amiata (736-1197)<sup>16</sup> 70 documents.
- Monks of San Silvestro de Capite (761-1214)<sup>17</sup> 70 documents.

These charters add to what we can know about Rome in the central Middle Ages showing in particular the importance of religious women in the city. The information included in those charters that elucidates the study of Rome (or any other locale) includes the following, mentioned either systematically or occasionally:

- principals, kings, counts, private men and women, the canons of Saint Peter's, or the nuns of Saint Mary in Campus Martius or on Via Lata, the renewed Senate acting as a judicial body, even occasionally the Pope.
- types of contracts that are being undertaken
- descriptions of land therein including its locations in districts in the city of Rome: near the Trevi fountain or the Colossus status that gives its name to the Colosseum, on the Palatine, in the Leonine City (Vatican), in Trastevere or particular sites and sights, the Marble horses, the meta of saint Peter's, the monument of Anthony, the arch with seven candles.
- perambulations of holdings conveyed, that is the

descriptions of adjacent owners on the four sides of the property which provide us indications of other ecclesiastical owners, the same or other owners or tenants, and can be used to describe consolidation in some cases.

- condition of land, vacant to make vineyards, vineyards with winepress, existing houses, mills, cellars, and crypts.
- rents to be paid in money or kind and the type of money involved (it goes from the money of Padua, to that of Lucca, to that of Provins (actually issued by the local senate in imitation thereof))
- reasons for tenants to take up land. For instance, after five years only will they pay rent.
- special cases— what will happen if destroyed by flood, if you find gold, etc.
- special restrictions—you are not allowed to transfer this to another religious house
- religious services promised, such as light in monastic dormitory, health of soul, hospital, etc.
- dispute resolution—percentage of offering at

Saint Peter's go to canons of Saint Peter's

- law used, e. g. Roman or Lombard
- witnesses to the contracts priests' wives and families
- influences of particular ethnic groups Greeks, Lombards, Franks, Roman
- importance of certain families such as the Frangipangi or Crescentii
- changes in old terminology thus Regio 4, that of the Colosseum up to eleventh century becomes the region of the church of Santa Maria Nova (formerly a pagan temple on the forum)
- confirmation lists of all property held by a religious community.
- These are all things that allow us to reconstruct something more than the content of the charters alone—although they are interesting in and of themselves.

What is harder to extract from these charters is the size of the religious houses in question. Fortunately, a further guide to the religious houses of Rome and to the numbers of religious women (as well as men) in the city as well as the numbers of

inhabitants in each is found in a unique document from sometime between 1270 and 1300, the Catalog of Torino.<sup>18</sup> The catalogue lists all churches in Rome, which is “divided into three parts” or zones. Its lists of numbers of incumbents in each of the religious communities—priests, nuns, monks, lay-brothers and sisters, show that religious women were a strong presence in the city.

We can separate out the thirteenth century foundations of Cistercian nuns, Franciscans and Dominicans, leaving 15 houses of religious women founded before 1200 with vaguely Benedictine or Greek customs. At the end of the thirteenth century, these fifteen communities had the following numbers of inhabitants:

|                            |    |
|----------------------------|----|
| St. Agnes                  | 40 |
| St. Cyriacus               | 40 |
| St. Mary in Julia          | 40 |
| St. Mary in Campus Martius | 17 |
| St. Vivianus               | 18 |
| St. Andrew de Francia      | 18 |
| St. Urbana                 | 18 |
| St. Erasmus                | 16 |
| St. Bibiana                | 15 |
| St. Mary Petroluca         | 15 |
| St. Mary of Maggiore       | 12 |

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| St. Mary of Cella   | 8 |
| St. Caterina        | 8 |
| St. Eufemia         | 4 |
| St. Ann of Mamorata | 4 |

**Totals in above houses:**  
**273**

To these may be added the houses founded in the early thirteenth century:

|                               |    |
|-------------------------------|----|
| San Pancrazio, Cistercian     | 35 |
| SS. Cosme and Damiani, Clares | 36 |
| S. Silve de Capite, Clares    | 36 |
| S. Sixtus, Dominican nuns     | 70 |

**Total in 13th century houses:**  
**177**

Total for both pre 1200 and post 1200 houses equaled 450.

As for religious women overall, the 450 listed in communities of nuns must have added to them approximately 137 women of the 275 servitores of hospitals as well as 260 female recluses living in family homes and elsewhere in the city. This means that religious women in Rome in the high middle ages may have made up as much as three percent of the total lay and clerical population and that while not outnumbering religious men, religious women may have been as high as a third of the total clerical/religious (non-secular) population. How

does this change our picture of the city of Rome found in the *Mirabilia* (which mentions no nuns), but also in Herlihy's early work?

First, there is a very strong Greek presence still in the city of Rome in the twelfth century, found not just in the Greek practices which may still have been observed in certain houses of religious men and women, but in certain more Greek attitudes about clerical marriage and women's activities within the ecclesiastical hierarchy.<sup>19</sup> Herlihy had noted particularly for the eleventh century, an increase in the numbers of women mentioned in the charters, including an increase in what are called *matronymics*—often indicative of clerical marriages. There was also an increase in women as principals and as owners on one of the *perambulations* of property transferred that is on the lists of owners on each side. These results may be particularly relevant for Rome and in a city of priests and popes where the continuity of a Greek tradition of clerical marriage was still strong.

Second, houses of nuns in Rome were not only prominent, but large landowners. To cite but a single example, the papal confirmation of properties to the nuns of St. Mary in the *Campus Martius* (located close to the Pantheon) by Celestine III in 1194 confirmed all its properties to the nuns of Santa Maria in Campo Marzio who followed the Rule of Saint Benedict lists 137 rent-paying houses in the city of Rome, a tower with tenement and another *castrum*, the church of St Mary sopra Minerva, rights over three mills, rights in 40 vineyards, and another 27 holdings, all with rent-paying tenants.<sup>20</sup> It seems unlikely that the *Mirabilia's* author, making notes on Rome, would not ever have mentioned one of these very prominent houses; so it is possible that references to women's houses were excised at some point in the redaction of the text—that the text as we have it is incomplete. Whereas I see no reason to question Herlihy's general findings with regard to women, it is necessary to consider them more heavily weighted towards the city of Rome than is usually thought. The presence of large numbers

of religious women with large endowments in the city of Rome is a factor in the evidence that Herlihy treats as reflecting Italy and continental Europe.

Third, Herlihy noted an enormous reinvestment of church wealth in the countryside as part of the economic revival of Italy in the eleventh century. Herlihy described bishops taking church plate, jewels, gold and silver out of ecclesiastical treasuries and using it to purchase and ameliorate land-holdings, investing in rental contracts and rounding out endowments.<sup>21</sup> This was clearly happening in Rome as elsewhere, and the charters show that religious women were not less active than religious men in this way. As the charter collections cited above show, nuns in Rome used various contractual arrangements to make land more productive both inside the city of Rome and beyond. In this countryside outside the city, everything is under development. We see the establishment of new vineyards and other holdings seven miles outside the S. Pancrazio gate, or beyond the Portal of St. John

Lateran. Marsh land brought under cultivation is often described as adjoining vineyards, apple orchards, wheat fields, wine presses, cellars and crypts. Charters mention of mills in the territory of Silva Candida at Castellum called Insula. Rural churches were brought under the control of city monks and nuns alike, open plain being settled with new towns and new houses. We see development of properties within the city as its walled suburbs as well. Permission to build houses within the Leonine wall in the bourg of Saint Peter's, adjoining places like the meta of Saint Peter, the Naumachia, the steps of Saint Peter's, the scholae or foreign enclaves may have been granted primarily by the canons of Saint-Peters, but elsewhere it is often nuns that are in control, for instance in the vicinity of the Colosseum or the Palatine hill: Houses and vineyards are being established in the "rota" of the Colosseum, in the Campus Martius near the column of Antoninus houses are built. Rental contracts describe houses of several stories from their crypts to their tiled or shingled roof, with marble steps, like the still-standing house of



the Crescentii. Nuns' contracts occasionally show that much of the wealth used for this development may have come from the city itself. Among arrangements for pilgrims, economic development and trade, evidence of artisans, merchants, mills, mortgages, we discover clauses regulating the distribution of useable wealth precious metals and jewels, statues and money, as well as the pre-made building materials (or *spoliae*) that is dug up from the buried treasure in the city.<sup>22</sup>

The digging up of such treasures and building materials, puts them back into circulation in the Roman economy of the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries, becoming real economic assets which stimulate the local economy. Indeed the treasure already there may have been sufficient to keep the Roman economy thriving until the later middle ages when so much wealth began to be imported from the west of Catholic Christendom as papal taxation of the church intensified. There is much more to be gleaned from the charters from Rome and in particular from the charters for the nuns of Rome. We

have long described the wealth of artifacts that Charlemagne and others took to the north from Rome to use in building northern palaces and churches, and the re-emergence of Roman provincial cities has been described as based in part on the reusing of Roman building materials. Nowhere more than in Rome would there be such buried treasure that gathered through a far-flung empire, available for economic revival simply by settling tenants and sharing with them the wealth acquired. The charters for religious women in Rome show that they participated in that development and economic revival in a number of ways which will be described in further work. This is only a first report on a larger project.

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#### END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> David Herlihy, "Land, Family, and Women in Continental Europe, 701-1200." *Traditio* 1 (1962): 89-120, and other articles in volume, cited in note 4.

<sup>2</sup> *The Marvels of Rome, Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, ed. and trans. Francis Morgan Nichols, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. With new introduction, notes and bibliography by Eileen Gardiner (New York: Italica, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> In general, see Peter Llewellyn, *Rome in the Dark Ages* (London:

Faber, 1971); texts include: *The Book of the Popes, Liber Pontificalis*, trans. and ed. Louise Ropes Loomis (New York: Octagon books, 1965); *Le Liber censuum de l'Eglise romaine*, ed. Paul Fabre and L. Duchesne, (Paris: Fontemoing 1910-52). On Liutprand, see Jo Ann McNamara, "Canossa and the Ungendering of the Public Man," In *Medieval Religion: New Approaches*, ed. Constance H. Berman (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 102-22.

<sup>4</sup> See also David Herlihy, *The Social History of Italy and Western Europe, 700-1500* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1978), and *Pisa in the Early Renaissance: A Study of Urban Growth*. (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press [1973, c1958]).

<sup>5</sup> Totals from charter collections listed in next notes by century:

| CENTURY          | TOTAL |
|------------------|-------|
| 8 <sup>th</sup>  | 11    |
| 9 <sup>th</sup>  | 32    |
| 10 <sup>th</sup> | 46    |
| 11 <sup>th</sup> | 260   |
| 12 <sup>th</sup> | 577   |
| 13 <sup>th</sup> | 48    |
| total            | 965   |

Of these totals, about 375 documents or 39 percent were about nuns overall, but if we look at the period after the ninth century only, the percentage is an even higher 41 percent (375 of 922).

<sup>6</sup> A. Monaci, "Regesto dell'abbazia in Sant-Alessio all'Aventino." *Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria* (ASRSP) 27 (1904): 361-98; 28(1905), p. 151 ff.

<sup>7</sup> P. Fedele, "Carte del monastero dei Ss. Cosma e Damiano," *ASRSP* 22 (1899): 25-97; 383-445; this becomes a house of Clarissan nuns in the thirteenth century.

<sup>8</sup> *Cartario di S. Maria in Campo Marzio (906-1199)*, ed. Enrico Carusi Miscellanea della Società Romana di Storia Patria (Rome: Società alla Bibliotheca Vallicelliana, 1948).

<sup>9</sup> *S. Mariae in Vita Lata Tabularium*, ed. L. Hartmann (Vienna, 1895-1912).

<sup>10</sup> P. Fedele, "Tabularium S. Mariae Novae ab an. 982 al an. 1200," *ASRSP* 12 (1900): 171-237; 24(1901): 159-96; 25(1902): 169-209; 26(1903): 21-137; (temple of Mars and Venus on the forum that becomes S.Francesca).

<sup>11</sup> G. Ferri, "Le Carte dell'Archivio Liberiano dal Secolo X al XV," *ASRSP* 27 (1904)147-202; 443-59; 28 (1905): 23 ff. This church belonged to the bishop of Rome; the collection includes charters for the Greek nuns of Santa Bibiana.

<sup>12</sup> P. Fedele, "S. Maria in Monasterio: Note ed Documenti," *ASRSP* 29(1906), pp. 203 ff.

<sup>13</sup> B. Trifone, "Le carte del monastero di San Paolo di Roma dal secolo XI al XV," *ASRSP* 31(1908): 277-313 and ff.

<sup>14</sup> L. Schiaparelli, "Le carte antiche dell'Archivio capitolare di S. Pietro in Vaticano." *ASRSP* 24(1901): 425-96; 25(1902): 273-354.

<sup>15</sup> P. Fedele, "Tabularium S. Praxedis," *ASRSP* 27(1904): 27ff.

<sup>16</sup> C. Calisse, "Documenti del moanstero di San Salvatore sul Monte Amiata. Riguardanti il territorio Romano (secoli VIII-XII)," *ASRSP* 16(1893) 289-345; 19(1894): 95-129.

<sup>17</sup> V. Federici, "Regesto del Monastero di S. Silvestro de Capite (761-1227),"

ASRSP 27 (1904): 213-300, 489-538;  
33 (1900): 67-128, 416-47.

<sup>18</sup> G. Falco, "Il Catalogo di Torino della Chiese, degli Ospedali, dei Monasteri di roma nel scolo XIV," ASRSP 32 (1909):411-43. My thanks to Meg Lande who retabulated the results.

<sup>19</sup> Sant' Alessio may have been of the Greek practice. On Greek names, etc., see *S. Maria in Via Lata Tabularium*, passim.

<sup>20</sup> Cartario, ed. Caruso, no. 62 (1194).

<sup>21</sup> David Herlihy, "Treasure Hoards in the Italian Economy, 960-1139," *The Economic History Review*, 10(1957-1958):1-14.

<sup>22</sup> See the charter collections cited in above notes. On the countryside in particular, see Pierre Toubert, "Monachisme et encadrement religieux des campagnes en Italie aux Xe-XIIIe siècles," *Miscellanea: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*. Centre di Studi medievali (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1977), pp. 416-41.



"The active sex shudders in disgrace as it sees itself degenerate into the passive sex."

— Alan of Lille in his *Plaint of Nature*  
(translated by James J. Sheridan)

