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Author(s): Anabel Thomas

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Shorter Notices

A new date for Neri di Bicci's S. Giovannino dei Cavalieri 'Coronation of the Virgin'

BY ANABEL THOMAS

THE large *Coronation of the Virgin* which now hangs at the end of the left aisle of S. Giovannino dei Cavalieri in Florence (Fig.22) is one of the few altar-pieces by Neri di Bicci to have survived with its original predella,¹ but it has received scant notice in the literature concerning this artist. The altar-piece depicts the coronation in a circular glory, flanked by music-making angels and eight saints: on the left are James (or Roch), Sebastian, Mary Magdalen and John the Baptist, and on the right Zenobius(?), Dominic, Nicholas and Catherine of Alexandria. In the lower central foreground is a hinged section on which are depicted a multi-faceted ciborium and four kneeling angels. The predella shows six kneeling saints (Francis, Jerome, Peter, Michael Archangel, Lawrence and Margaret of Antioch) and, in the middle section, two narrative scenes from the lives of the two principal saints in the main panel, John the Baptist and Nicholas of Bari. These flank another hinged central panel depicting Christ as the Man of Sorrows with the Virgin and St John. The two hinged central sections probably originally served as receptacles for the chalice and host, offering an interesting example of combined tabernacle and high altar image, a combination which occurs in at least one other work by the artist.

Attributed to Orcagna by Richa in 1759,² the *Coronation of the Virgin* seems to have been first given to Neri di Bicci in Fantozzi's guidebook to Florence in 1842, a judgment followed by almost all twentieth-century scholars.³ Although it is not mentioned in the surviving workshop account book kept by Neri between 1453 and 1475,⁴ it used in the past to be dated early in his career, although more recent scholarship has been tending towards a date in the 1470s.⁵ The absence of the work from the *Ricordanze* can now be explained by recently discovered documents which reveal that the altar-piece was commissioned as late as 1488, and that it was therefore produced during the last years of the artist's life (he died in 1492).

The altar-piece was originally painted for the nunnery church of S. Niccolò dei Friari near the gate of S. Piero Gattolino.⁶ The community there was founded in 1392 when the hospital of St Nicholas was consigned (together with a garden and five houses) to a group of noble Florentine women. Becoming renowned for their hospital visiting and good works, the convent's inhabitants were known first as the nuns of the Friari (the cavaliers of the Jerusalemite order),

and subsequently as the Maltese sisters of S. Giovannino. Between 1392 and the middle of the sixteenth century, when they moved to their final home in the church of S. Piero del Murrone, later called S. Giovannino dei Cavalieri, in Via S. Gallo, the nuns occupied four different sites in various parts of the city,⁷ and it seems that (despite its great size) the high altar painting followed them to each successive site. It was certainly in S. Giovannino by 1759, when Richa described it there, noting that it was in the opposite aisle from a miraculous Crucifix which was in the first chapel on the south side,⁸ and had apparently come from the old monastery of S. Niccolò.

Two *Libri di Memorie e Ricordi* among the papers of S. Giovannino dei Cavalieri in the Florentine state archives furnish details about the commissioning and execution of the altar-piece. The decision to commission a painting for the high altar of S. Niccolò was taken by the nuns under the leadership of their mother superior, Sister Elena, and on 21st October 1488 the selection of Neri di Bicci as painter was recorded, along with his first payment for the work (see the Appendix below, document I). Evidently the nuns had made their choice after consultation with a number of knowledgeable individuals, an interesting insight into the artist's standing in these circles at the end of the ninth decade of the Quattrocento.

The complete sequence of payments made to Neri for the altar-piece is recorded in this first *Libro di Memorie*, while in the second book the artist himself records in his own hand the disbursements made to him between 30th October 1488 and 13th February 1489 (Appendix, document II). By 1st April 1489 the painting was completed,⁹ and its final value was assessed by Ser Giovanni di Ser Paolo at 56 florins, a comparatively low sum for an altar-piece of this size.¹⁰ It was installed on the altar that same day, together with a curtain to cover it; four weeks later the nuns received an addition to the altar-piece in the form of a predella. The campaign to embellish the high altar went back some time and continued after the painting's installation. As early as 26th October 1487 two heads (probably made of wood) of St John the Baptist and St Nicholas were commissioned for each side of the altar, and in 1488–89 two nuns named Maria and Lucretia made a pair of candlesticks and a pedestal or base for the cross, as well as commissioning two angels to be placed on the high altar. Other individuals made and embroidered altar-cloths in 1490 (Appendix, document III).

With the date of the painting established from documentary evidence, it is possible to set it within Neri di Bicci's production. According to the *Ricordanze* he produced quite a number of altar-pieces depicting the coronation of the Virgin, several of which have survived and can be dated with some accuracy. However, the

¹Other examples include the *Sacra conversazione* originally painted for the church of Caneto at Ponte a Elsa, and now in the Diocesan Museum at S. Miniato (PI); the *Coronation of the Virgin* from the Badia of S. Pietro a Ruoti (now Deposito Restauro, Arezzo; Fig.24); the *Sacra Conversazione* in the chapel of St. Francis, S. Martino a Mensola and the *Sacra Conversazione* now at Montreal.

²G. RICHA: *Notizie storiche delle chiese fiorentine divise ne' suoi quartieri*, Florence [1754–72], VIII, p.337.

³F. FANTOZZI: *Nuova guida ovvero descrizione storico-artistico-critica della Città e contorni di Firenze*, Florence [1842], p.447; R. VAN MARLE: *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting*, The Hague [1923–28], X, p.530 (c.1460); B. BERENSON: *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance*, Oxford [1932], p.387; W. and E. PAATZ: *Die Kirchen von Florenz*, Frankfurt am Main [1940–54], II, p.310 (1450); K. STEINWEG: *Andrea Orcagna*, Strasbourg [1929], p.21, still maintained that it was painted by Orcagna.

⁴B. SANTI: *Neri di Bicci, Le Ricordanze*, Pisa [1976].

⁵For Paatz's and Van Marle's dates of 1450 and c.1460 see note 3 above. Van Marle saw links with the *Coronation of the Virgin* now in the Accademia in Florence which he believed to have been produced for the Compagnia di S. Luca in the cloister of SS. Annunziata. Recent scholarship inclines rather to the view that the Accademia *Coronation* was the picture completed for the Benedictine nuns of S. Apollonia in July

1473; see SANTI, *op. cit.* at note 4 above, 771, p.414. I hope to publish further documentary support for this view shortly (my thanks to Dottorressa Faletti and Simari for allowing access to dossier material concerning works by Neri di Bicci in the Accademia). F. ZERI (*Italian Paintings in the Walters Art Gallery*, Baltimore [1976], I, no.54, pp.87–89), on the other hand, assumes a later date than any of the above scholars, as discussed below.

⁶The provenance of the altar-piece from the church of S. Niccolò is assumed in *Uffizio Catalogo*, Florence, S. Giovannino dei Cavalieri, no.27. I am grateful to Professoressa Meloni Trkulja and to Dottorressa Marana for their generous advice and assistance in gaining access to the files of the Ufficio Catalogo.

⁷PAATZ, *op. cit.* at note 3 above, II, pp.272–73 and 299–300; RICHA, *op. cit.* at note 2 above, IX, pp.97–102; Florence, Archivio di Stato, Corporazioni Religiose sopresse dal Governo Francese (cited in these notes as ASF Corp. Sopp.), 133, no.60, fols.1–2 and no.62, fols.3v–8v.

⁸RICHA, *op. cit.* at note 2 above, VIII, pp.336–37.

⁹A further payment in respect of the work on 3rd April 1489 is recorded in ASF, Corp.Sopp., 133, no.64, fol.106r.

¹⁰For a discussion of the cost of painted altar-pieces see A. THOMAS: *The Painter's Practice in Renaissance Tuscany*, Cambridge [1995], pp.293–95.



22. *Coronation of the Virgin*, by Neri di Bicci. 1488–89. Dimensions unknown. (S. Giovannino dei Cavalieri, Florence).

one which appears to be closest in style to the S. Giovannino *Coronation* is the otherwise undocumented painting now in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore (Fig. 23).¹¹ Federico Zeri links the two works and notes that both have a hinged section in the lower central foreground. In the Baltimore picture this carries a depiction of two angels kneeling in adoration of a *trompe l'œil* framed panel of the Crucifixion. The poses of the Virgin and the God the Father in the two altar-pieces are very close, although not identical, and there are also similarities between the two figures of St John the Baptist. The slightly simpler composition of the Baltimore painting might indicate an earlier date, and its figures are more robust than those in the S. Giovannino dei Cavalieri *Coronation*, seeming closer in style to dated works of the early 1470s. The S. Giovannino figures are by comparison somewhat thinner and more elongated with a general hollowing of the flesh. Nevertheless both works display the bulbous noses and rather harsh rendering of facial features characteristic of Neri's later works. It may be significant that the S. Giovannino predella includes a number of carefully depicted cast shadows: both the figures within the predella sections and the *trompe-l'œil* dividing

balustrades cast their own clearly defined shadows. This is unusual and suggests a new departure or interest within the Bicci workshop during this period. Although individual figures cast shadows in the predella of the high altar-piece which Neri produced between May 1471 and October 1472 for the Badia of S. Piero a Ruoti near Arezzo (Fig. 24),¹² there is no suggestion that the *trompe l'œil* balustrades are included in the same lighting system.

The question of workshop participation is raised both by stylistic disparities within the main panel and by the lower quality of parts of the predella which, as we have seen, was delivered slightly later. In the predella Sts Francis and Jerome on the left seem more refined than the other figures, with their over-large heads, and the *Dance of Salome* seems to have been painted by a different hand from the *Dowry of St Nicholas* – by an artist who offered a certain liteness of figure style, but was ill at ease with the depiction of figures in receding space.

Similar stylistic disparities are noticeable in the main panel. The heavy-jowled St Sebastian appears to be by a different hand from the Sts James (Roch) and John the Baptist, who display similarities

¹¹ZERI, *op. cit.* at note 5 above, p.87.

¹²SANTI, *op. cit.* at note 4 above, 696 and 697, pp.371–72 and 747, p.399.



23. *Coronation of the Virgin*, by Neri di Bicci. 205.7 by 201.6 cm. (Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore).



24. *Coronation of the Virgin*, by Neri di Bicci. 198 by 193 cm. (Badia di S. Piero a Ruoti, Arezzo).

with the figures of Sts Zenobius and Dominic on the other side of the panel, although the treatment (particularly of the heads) of the latter is slightly cruder, suggesting that the artist responsible was following a formula. There are variations also in the music-making angels, the one on the far left of the upper right-hand group veering towards the squat, almost pug-nosed facial qualities found in a number of other works by Neri. All this suggests a degree of workshop collaboration.

Recently published documents concerning Neri's work for the Franciscan Sisters of S. Chiara at S. Maria a Monticelli reveal the names of at least three individuals who were working with the artist in 1488.¹³ One of these, a certain Giovanfrancesco, received payment on behalf of his master on 9th October, less than a fortnight before the commission for the S. Giovannino dei Cavalieri *Coronation*, in connexion with a small devotional panel which Neri had painted for the private cell of one of the nuns. Two other individuals, 'Alessandro suo figliuolo' and 'Piero suo nipote', acted on Neri's behalf between April and May of the same year when collecting grain in part-payment for a *paliotto* for an altar in the nuns' church. It seems quite likely that at least one of these individuals was involved with the work for the Jerusalemite nuns.

The new documents for the S. Giovannino dei Cavalieri *Coronation*, placing it at a considerably later date than has hitherto been proposed, demonstrate the fallibility of purely stylistic judgments, and illustrate the need for a more stringent examination of Neri's *œuvre*, in particular of those surviving works which cannot be linked to entries made in his *Libro di Ricordanze*.¹⁴

¹³A. THOMAS: 'Neri di Bicci and the Franciscan Nuns of S. Maria a Monticelli: New Evidence of his Later Paintings', *Rivista d'Arte*, XLIV [1992], ser. 4, VIII, pp. 317–30, esp. pp. 327–28.

¹⁴The author is currently preparing a monograph which considers the style of Neri di Bicci's merchandise and the artistic individualities within his workshop.

Appendix

Documents for Neri di Bicci's 'Coronation of the Virgin' and the furnishing of the altar in S. Niccolò dei Friari, Florence

Document I: Record of Neri di Bicci's selection as painter of the altarpiece and associated payments, 21st October 1488 to 29th April 1489 (Florence, Archivio di Stato, Corporazioni Religiose sopresse dal Governo Francese, 133, no. 66, fols. 17v–18r)

Ricordo et memoria come la reverendissima Madre cioè Suora Elena Beata et così tutto convento di santo Niccolò de' Freri ispirata da dio et col santo aiuto di quello et di loro santi et avvocati dinanzi al divino cospetto di dio et in prima la gloriosa Vergine Maria e il glorioso santo Giovanni Battista e di santo Niccolò e di tutti e gloriosi Apostoli e da tutti i santi e sante di paradiso [h]anno facto buono pro[po]sito e ferma deliberazione di fare una tavola al altare maggiore e a questa [h]anno avuto buon parere da persone degni di fede e huomini di buon consiglio et [h]anno deliberato che tale opera sia fatta per mano di Maestro Neri di Bicci con questi patti condizioni che di tale opera e maissterio il prezzo sia in questa forma ce [h]anno fatto d'accordo e comessione in ser Giovanni di Ser Pagholo e quello che sia giudicato per detto Ser Giovanni faranno le parte d'accordo et così [h]a principio detta opera questo 21 d'ottobre MccccLxxxviii

Esse giudicato per Ser Giovanni di Ser Pagholo questo di primo d'aprile MccccLxxxviii che detto Neri debba avere per sua fatica e maissterio fiorini cinquantasei d'oro in oro cioè con ogni cosa del suo fl. 56 d'oro in oro

Ricordo come per grazia di dio oggi questo di primo d'aprile si pose la tavola al altare maggiore trovosi a rizzare[?] accontalla per obrigho maestro Neri el maestro che fece e lengnami e Maestro Bartolommeo scarpellino e 4 portatori tutti per obrigo e per grazia Maestro Angniolo del Carmine e Ser Giovanni di Ser Pagholo achomentatore eccolomia di casa e io servo Sandro di Gherardo

Conto delle cose appartenenti al altare maggiore a detto tempo quando si pose la tavola

Sante Linaiole per braccia . . . di pannolino pel la cortina a di primo d'aprile per tutto d'accordo lire sei soldi 13	fl. 1.6 s. 13
E factori di Neri a di primo d'aprile per mancia soldi sette	fl. 1. s. 7
E a di detto a uno merciaio per 20 champanili per la cortina	fl. 1. s. 9
E a di primo d'aprile a maestro Jacopo per ferri per la cortina	fl. 1.3 s. 6
E a di primo d'aprile a uno funaiolo per braccia 27 fune per la lampa	fl. 1. s. 4
E a di primo d'aprile a uno merciaio per 2 girelle di bronzo per porre a ferri della cortina per tutto	fl. 1. s. 10
E a di primo d'aprile a 4 portatori che arecarono la tavola e avuto rizzla(?) acconciarli per la loro faticha	fl. 1. s. 14

[margin] . . . di sotto...predella

E a 29 d'aprile a uno portatore reco la aggiunto alla tavola fl. 1. s. 1

E a di . . . per ferri della cortina a Maestro Jacopo fabro a scandici(?) fl. 1.0 s. 9

[fol. 18r]

1488

Maestro Neri creditore adirimpetto de dare fiorini cinque d'oro in oro questo di 21 d'ottobre ebbe da Ser Giovanni di Ser Pagholo e detto Ser Giovanni

fl. 5 d'oro in oro

E deba dare fiorini dieci d'oro in oro questo di 30 d'ottobre portai lo Sandro di Gherardo ebbe allo specchio per mano di Ser Giovanni fl. 10 d'oro in oro

E deba dare fiorini sei d'oro in oro portai lo Sandro a bottega sua questo di 18 di novembre fl. 6 d'oro in oro

E deba dare lire quattro questo di 8 di febbraio e per lui a Francesco di Antonio muratore l. 4

E deba dare a di 13 di febbraio fiorini dieci d'oro in oro portai io Sandro a bottega sua fl. 10 d'oro in oro

E deba dare fiorini dieci d'oro in oro questo di 14 di marzo portai io Sandro a bottega sua fl. 10 d'oro in oro

E deba dare a di primo d'aprile fiorini dodici d'oro in oro chontanti ebbe da Ser Giovanni mandò madonna fl. 12 d'oro in oro

E deba dare a di primo d'aprile fiorini due d'oro in oro e 6 grossoni d'ariento per ogni suo resto paghò Ser Giovanni di Ser Pagholo fl. 2 l. 2 s. 2

E a di primo d'aprile al fattore di Neri uno grossone di mancia fl. 1. s. 7

E a di primo d'aprile a Sante creditore adirimpetto lire 6. 13 fl. 1.6 s. 13

A di primo d'aprile al fattore di Neri creditore adirimpetto fl. 1. s. 7

A di primo d'aprile a uno mercaio adirimpetto per champanili fl. 1. s. 9

A di primo d'aprile a Maestro Jacopo creditore adirimpetto lire 3 soldi 6

fl. 1.3 s. 6 [13 – deleted]

A di primo d'aprile a uno funiolo creditore adirimpetto fl. 1. s. 4

A di primo d'aprile a uno mercaio creditore adirimpetto per due girelle di bronzo per tutto fl. 1. s. 10

A di primo d'aprile a quattro portatori recarono la tavola per loro fatica fl. 1. s. 14

A di 29 d'aprile a uno portatore arecò la predella fl. 1. s. 14

Document II: Record of payments to Neri di Bicci for the altar-piece, 30th October 1488 to 13th February 1489 (Florence, Archivio di Stato, Corporazioni Religiose sopresse dal Governo Francese 133, no.64, fols.74v., 105v)

1488

giovedì a di 30 d'ottobre

Io Neri di Bicci dipintore [h]o ricevuto detto di in due volte fiorini quindici larghi d'oro in oro dalle monache di S. Giovanni e S. Nicholo de' Freri dentro alla porta di S. Piero Gattolino. E quali sono per parte d'una tavola d'altare fo loro per la loro chiesa e per l'altare maggiore e per il prezzo che dirà ser Giovanni di Ser Pagholo fl. 15

[H]annone dato a di 18 di novembre 1488 fiorini 6 larghi in oro rechò Sandro loro fattore fl. 6

[H]annone dato a di 8 di febbraio 1488 lire 4 per me a Francesco muratore fl. 1.4

[H]annone dato a di 13 di febbraio 1488 fiorini 10 larghi d'oro in oro rechò Sandro loro fattore chontanti fl. 10

[fol. 105v]

Uscita 1488

[. . .]

E a di 8 [13 – deleted] di febbraio lire quattro a Neri dipintore e per Neri a Francesco muratore.

Ebbe infino a di 27 di questo l. 4 s.

E a di 13 di febbraio a neri dipintore fiorini dieci d'oro in oro per conto della tavola fl. 10 d'oro in oro

Document III: Other furnishings for the high altar of S. Niccolò (Florence, Archivio di Stato, Corporazioni Religiose sopresse dal Governo Francese, 133, no.65, fol.1r–v.)

1488

A di 27 d'agosto 1488 fecie suora Maria et suora Lucretia di loro fatica un paio di chandellieri e un piede per la croce e quali candellieri costarono fiorini tredici larghi d'oro in oro faciemogli per tenere in sull'altare maggiore d'onore di dio l. 84 s. d.

A di 20 di agosto 1489 fe fare suora Maria e suora Lucretia due angeli per tenere in sull'altare costarono fiorini quattordici larghi d'oro in oro l. 98 s.

Ancora faremo ricordo come a di 9 di settembre 1490 suora Cecilia fece un paliotto per l'altare di raso rosso ricamato d'oro il quale ricamò mona Felice e avevasi [?] suo figliuolo il quale costò in tutto fiorini trentadue larghi d'oro in oro cioè fl. 32 l. 10. s. 4

E più [h]a fatto detta suora Cecilia un paliotto di brocato rosso conca [?] per l'altare maggiore et più [h]a fatto due paliotti bianchi . . .

[. . .]

Ancora faremo ricordo come a di 26 d'ottobre 1487 fece fare Suora Francesca [?] le due teste di quei venerabili e degni santi cioè il nostro precursore Giovanni Battista e il nostro antistite santo Niccolò degnissimi santi per tenere al altare maggiore da ogni lato una e più fece fare due goccioline dorate per tenere su dette teste dei santi nominati costarono in tutto fiorini sedici larghi d'oro in oro cioè fiorini 16 l. 45 [?]s.

A proposal for early Andrea del Sarto

BY DAVID FRANKLIN

ACCORDING to a previously undetected *ricordo* in the Archivio di Stato, Florence, two Clarissan sisters of the Monte Domini convent in the outskirts of Florence accompanied a new high altar-piece to a church dedicated to S. Giusto on 21st September 1509 (see the Appendix below). The price of this panel painting had been borne by two sisters whose names are given simply as Margherita and Tita, while it was escorted to its new location by Sisters Madalena and Margherita, the latter presumably one of those who had helped pay for it. The subject was the Virgin with the Christ Child in her arms, and four saints: Justus and Jerome, with two Franciscans, Clare and Francis. The cost of the workmanship, exclusive of the panel, was eighteen florins, which is not a large sum for an altar-piece of this date and implies that the painting was either by a secondary master or by a younger, less experienced one.¹ The rôle of the sister named Margherita in this project is further reinforced by one entry included later in the *ricordanze*, in which she appears to be reimbursed a small sum of money by another sister ('suor Lena', perhaps the Madalena mentioned earlier) to help pay for the altar-piece (see the Appendix). Her surname is difficult to establish from the documentary evidence, but as we shall see Margherita may have been rewarded visually for her central rôle in this commission. The abbess of the convent at this date is named as Valentia della Casa. There is no mention of the painter, but this is understandable given the nature of the document, which is not a contract but simply a record.

That the new altar-piece was painted for the church of St Giusto and not for Monte Domini itself seems clear by the use of the verb *portare* in the document for the main action described. Similarly, the curtain for the panel had to be sent there ('*mandato*'). This interpretation is further reinforced by the inclusion of St Justus among the depicted saints, and the phrase in the document '*la tavola fece a San Iusto*' would thus be translated as 'the panel made for Saint Justus'. The church of S. Giusto referred to was not the church of the Ingesuati friars '*alle Mura*' on the edge of Florence, where the high altar-piece by Domenico Ghirlandaio was already in place, but a more obscure one dedicated to the same saint but located in Monte Albano in the diocese of Pistoia, forming part of the patrimony of Monte Domini.² This romanesque church at Pietramarina on the summit of Monte Albano in the Val D'Arno '*inferiore*' is known locally as S. Giustone. It had been given to the sisters by the anti-Pope John XXIII in the fourth year of his pontificate of 1410–15, but little else is known about it.³ Although it has now been restored, the Latin Cross church was in ruins by the start of this century and no painted decoration appears to remain.

¹Rosso Fiorentino, for example, received sixteen florins for his first altar-piece, completed in 1518 for the Hospital of S. Maria Nuova. For this see D. FRANKLIN: *Rosso in Italy*, London and New Haven [1994], pp.40–41.

²There is only one S. Giusto a Monte Albano in the diocese of Pistoia. For this see the entries in E. REPETTI: *Dizionario Geografico Fisico Storico della Toscana*, Florence [1833–35], I, p.60, and II, p.461. It was described by G. CAROCCI as a majestic ruin in *Il Valdarno da Firenze al Mare*, Bergamo [1906], p.59. The fullest account is M. SALMI: 'San Giusto sul Monte Albano: a proposito di influssi di oltralpe sul romanico toscano', *Miscellanea Bibliothecae Hertzianae*, Munich [1961], pp.90–96. On p.95 of this article, Salmi notes that pastoral visits record S. Giusto's belonging to Monte Domini. See also G. MOROZZI: 'Le Chiese romaniche del Montalbano', in *Il Romanico Pistoiese nei suoi rapporti con l'arte Romanica dell'occidente*, Pistoia [1966], pp.44–45. For its mention in a census of 1276–77 in the parish of S. Maria Baccareto see *Tuscia: La Decima degli Anni 1274–1280*, ed. P. GUIDI, Vatican City [1942], p.59. There is a record of the sisters' owning a property in this *popolo* of S. Giusto a Montalbano in Florence, Archivio di Stato, Corporazioni Religiose Sopresse dal Governo Francese, 99, Monache di Monte Domini, vol.116, *Oblighi*, under 1495.

³See D.M. MANNI: *Osservazioni istoriche sopra i Sigilli Antichi de' Secoli Bassi*, Florence [1742], XI, Sigillo XIII, pp.126–29, for the act uniting S. Giusto to Monte Domini.