THE 'SACRA ABSENTIA' DATABASE ON THE LOST FURNISHINGS OF MEDIEVAL CHURCHES IN VENICE: FROM THE OVERALL FRAMEWORK TO THE CASE STUDY OF SANT'AGNESE

1. A glimpse into the Venetian context and the origin of the project

During his second pilgrimage to the Holy Land, in the years 1483-1484, the Swiss Dominican Felix Fabri of Ulm stopped in Venice (Bravi 2015). In his travel diary, he extols the Serenissima as «più bella e più pregevole di ogni altra città da me veduta», listing thirteen characteristics that made it famous, ranked by importance (Fabri da Ulma 1881, 21). Midway through this ranking, he highlights the marvellous appearance of the liturgical furnishings in sacred buildings: «Seventhly – he writes – Venice is renowned for something associated with holy relics, namely, the preciousness of its treasures. How much gold, silver, and gemstones there are in all the churches and monasteries, in the cabinets, sarcophagi, monstrances, reliquaries, crosses, images, and so on, can be partially seen by those who, astonished, observe the processions. As for the chalices and sacred furnishings, one sees them every day» (Fabri da Ulma 1881, 82). More than five centuries after this Northern European traveller's time, the interiors of Venetian churches – except for a handful of cases – have been radically transformed due to Renaissance or Baroque reconstructions (Dorigo 1983, 2003; Zorzi 1972). The furnishings used in religious functions up to that point – many likely of medieval origin – have been almost entirely lost.

The 'Sacra Absentia' project aims to trace any type of evidence related to the lost furnishings of medieval churches in Venice. The idea stems from a previous study dedicated to the memory of the city's lost wall mosaics, which led to identify around fifteen cases based on data from local scholarly texts, ancient chronicles, and archival documents (Piazza 2020). These sources occasionally shed light on other decorative elements, including architectural components such as floors, columns, ciboria, and altars, as well as movable artworks like liturgical furnishings and icons.

Jacopo de' Barbari's famous map, created around the year 1500 (Schulz 1978; Huffman 2024), serves as a valuable tool for understanding the original appearance of the numerous religious buildings – approximately two hundred (Dorigo 1995, 814) – scattered across the various districts of Venice. At that time, their structures had not yet been altered by modern renovations and thus largely retained their basilical layout, featuring three naves, a portico, and a bell tower, which had been adopted during the Romanesque period
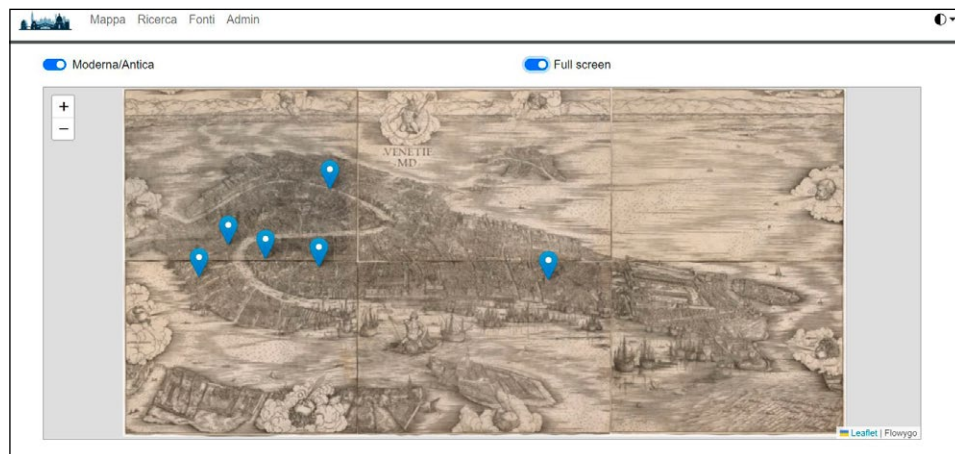
Fig. 1 – Screenshot of the 'Sacra Absentia' database with location of some of the catalogued churches on the Jacopo de' Barbari map (1500).

or even earlier (Fig. 1). De' Barbari's perspective view captures the medieval configuration of many buildings, some of which would soon undergo radical transformations, such as San Salvador near Rialto and the cathedral of San Pietro di Castello (Piazza 2020, 69, 72-74). The same view also documents churches that were later demolished, such as Sant'Angelo in the San Marco district and Santa Chiara in Santa Croce (Zorzi 1972, 309-311, 323-324; Franzoi, Di Stefano 1975, 87-88, 344-346).

But what do we know about the interiors of medieval churches? In his *De situ urbis Venetae*, a late 15ᵗʰ century description of Venice, Marco Antonio Sabellico states that all the churches in the city were paved with marble slabs or *opus tessellatum*, had columns of 'foreign stone' (*peregrini lapidis*), both at the entrance and in the choir, and many (*pleraeque*) featured vaults adorned with golden *tesserae* (Sabellico 1722, 20). As for the *vasa sacra*, icons, and reliquaries that were once kept within them, apart from a few exceptions – such as the Treasury of San Marco, which has survived in a significant proportion, and a small number of objects that have remained in their original locations or have been moved to museums – our only knowledge comes from sources, primarily written texts, and, to a lesser extent, iconographic testimonies. The former include pastoral visits, inventories, wills, account books, local chronicles, and pilgrim diaries, some of which have been published while others are preserved in archives. The latter category consists of depictions of church interiors, which may be more or less accurate, and copies of individual objects.

Among the illustrations of monumental interiors is, for example, a canvas from the early 16ᵗʰ century, now in the Gallerie dell'Accademia, depicting

The Apparition of the Crucifixes of Ararat, an evocation of the vision experienced by the prior of the convent of Sant'Antonio at Castello, Francesco Ottobon, in 1511 (Zorzi 1972, 313-314; Fortini Brown 1988, 186-189, pls. XVIII-XIX). The work, executed by Vittore Carpaccio and dated to 1515, portrays the event in the actual location where it allegedly occurred, namely, the church of Sant'Antonio (Fig. 2). The painter thus sets the scene within

CHIESA			
LOCALIZZAZIONE	Indirizzo		
	Dati di geolocalizzazione		
INTRODUZIONE AL CONTESTO MONUMENTALE	Fasi storiche		
	Stato di conservazione		
BIBLIOGRAFIA			
FONTI			
TESTIMONIANZE RELATIVE ALL'ARREDO PERDUTO			
1. Decorazioni parietali			
2. Pavimenti			
3. Coperture			
4. Sculture architettoniche	4.1. Colonne (fusti, basi, capitelli)		
	4.2. Portali (architravi, stipiti, soglie)		
	4.3. Finestre		
	4.4. Rilievi in parete		
5. Arredo liturgico	5.1. Altari		
	5.2. Cibori		
	5.3. Recinzioni presbiteriali (plutei, pilastrini, transenne)		
	5.4. Coro		
	5.5. Fonti battesimali		
	5.6. Pulpiti		
	5.7. Lettorini		
	5.8. Tabernacoli		
	5.9. Campane		
6. Suppellettile liturgica	6.1. Oreficeria sacra	6.1.1. "Vasa sacra"	6.1.1.1. pissidi/bussoli
			6.1.1.2. calici e/o patene
			6.1.1.3. capselle/cofanetti
			6.1.1.3. vasetti
			6.1.1.4. bacili/lavelli
			6.1.1.5. acquamanili
			6.1.1.7. navicelle
			6.1.1.8. custodie per ostie
		6.1.2. Reliquiari	
		6.1.3. Cofanetti	
		6.1.4. Tabernacoli	
		6.1.5. Pastorali	
		6.1.6. Coperte di libri liturgici	
		6.1.7. Turiboli	
		6.1.8. Candelabri / Lampade	
		6.1.9. Croci	
		6.1.10. Corone	
		6.1.11. Paci	
		6.1.12. Ex voto	
	6.2. Avori	6.2.1. Cofanetti	
		6.2.2. Pissidi	
		6.2.3. Coperte di libri liturgici	
		6.2.4. Pettini	
		6.2.5. Pastorali	
	6.3. Libri liturgici	6.3.1. Messali	
		6.3.2. Sacramentari	
		6.3.3. Salteri	
		6.3.4. Antifonari	
		6.3.5. Evangeliari	
		6.3.6. Graduali	
		6.3.7. Breviari	
	6.4. Icone / Pale d'altare		
	6.5. Paramenti sacri	6.5.1. Tessuti d'altare	6.5.1.1. Tovaglie
			6.5.1.2. Panni d'altare (*aeres*)
			6.5.1.3. Fazzoletti per calice
			6.5.1.4. Cuscini d'altare
		6.5.2. Tendaggi	
		6.5.3. Vesti liturgiche	6.5.2.1. Pianete
			6.5.2.2. Piviali
			6.5.2.3. Camici
			6.5.2.4. Corporali
			6.5.2.5. Dalmatiche
			6.5.2.6. Ombrelli
			6.5.2.7. Mantelle
		6.5.4. Tessuti per custodia di reliquie	
		6.5.5. Tessuti per statue	
	6.6. Statue		
7. Reliquie			
8. Sepolture			

Fig. 2 – 'Sacra Absentia' database card structure example.

Fig. 3 – Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Vittore Carpaccio, *Apparition of the Crucifixes of Mount Ararat in the Church of Sant'Antonio di Castello*, 1515 (after Russo 1991).

the 14th century structure, making his testimony invaluable since the entire building was demolished during the Napoleonic era. Moreover, his work meticulously captures several late medieval furnishings (Sandrelli 1996): two gilded wooden altarpieces featuring saintly effigies and a tall rood screen separating the nave from the choir.

To visually document the memory of liturgical artifacts from medieval Venice, there is also the large canvas depicting the *Procession in Piazza San Marco*, by Gentile Bellini, dated to 1496 (Fortini Brown 1988, 60-66, pl. XII; Rodini 1998). In the foreground, protected by a baldachin, is the sacred focal point of the city's parade, the reliquary of the 'True Cross' from the church of San Giovanni Evangelista (Zorzi 1972, 19). In the painting, the shape of the *staurotheca* is barely discernible, as the artist depicts it in profile, yet it is still identifiable with the example made of gold and rock crystal, which has survived to this day and is still preserved in its original location (Freeman 2011, 161-162, fig. 25; Mezzacasa 2019, 122-124). However, the golden case carried on the shoulders beneath it, with its Gothic style, parallelepiped shape, and the four golden angel candlestick holders, has been lost. Its
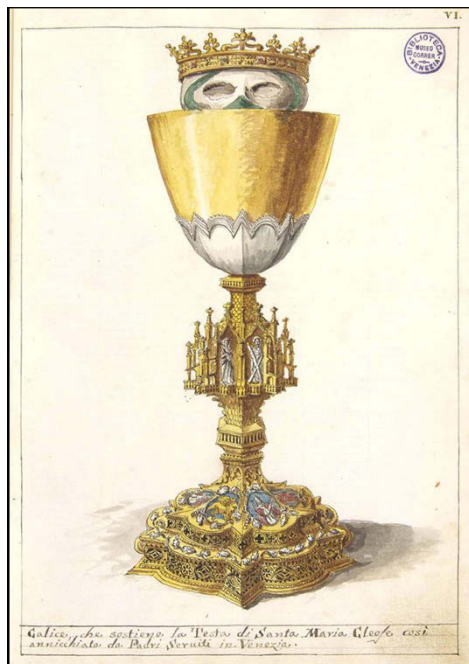
Fig. 4 – Venice, Correr Museum Library, Jan Grevembroch, *Reliquary with the head of Saint Mary Cleophas* (Gradenigo Dolfin ms. 65.3, 12, 1764; after MEZZACASA 2023).

appearance suggests it may have been an actual object, perhaps symbolically evoking the Ark of the Covenant (PIAZZA 2021, 666).

We also have the watercolour copies by Jan Grevembroch, a Dutch-born painter who lived in Venice, who in the second half of the 18th century reproduced a series of liturgical objects from Venetian churches (pissidi, chalices, crosses, and reliquaries), many of which have since been lost (ZORZI 1972, 352-353, figs. 284-290). Among these illustrations, found in the manuscript titled *Varie venete curiosità sacre e profane* (1755-1764) (BMC, Gradenigo Dolfin ms. 65.3, 12), is the particularly interesting case of the chalice from Santa Maria dei Servi in Cannaregio (MEZZACASA 2023, 214-215, fig. 95) (Fig. 4). The object has been lost, and the church itself, of 14th century origin, was demolished at the beginning of the 19th century (TRAMARIN 2023). In Grevembroch's work, the object, made of gold and silver with translucent enamels, is depicted in minute detail with great precision, to the point that it can confidently be attributed, due to its resemblance to a series of similar examples, to 15th century Venetian production.

However, the significance of the 18th century copy lies in the fact that the designer has depicted the upper part of a crowned skull inside the chalice, which the caption beneath the illustration explains is «the Head of Saint Mary Cleophas» none other than the head of the woman whom the Evangelist Matthew mentions as 'the other Mary' (Mt. 27:61; 28:1). The first record of the presence of this legendary relic in Santa Maria dei Servi dates back to the late 15th century: in the aforementioned description of Venice, SABELLICO (1722, 11) notes the «Virginis templum cum numeroso servorum cœtu […] ad aram maximam Mariae Cleophae caput». It is possible that when the scholar saw the saint's head on the high altar of the cited church, it was already inside the chalice copied by Grevembroch. This is suggested by a similar version reproduced by Fra Giovanni da Verona at the end of the 15th century in the choir of the Neapolitan abbey of Santa Maria di Monte Oliveto (MEZZACASA 2017, 168, figs. 7-8; 2023, 214). The choice to display a skull inside a chalice may seem rather macabre, but upon closer reflection, it aligns with a phenomenon of theatricalization of the relics of saints, particularly widespread in the late medieval period and especially in Venice, a city that represented the first stop for European pilgrims awaiting departure to the holy sites of Palestine (BACCI 2020).

It is no coincidence that Felix Fabri from Ulm, cited at the beginning of this paper, ranks the display of relics sixth among the wonders of the lagoon city, even before the 'sacred vessels': «The sixth reason for the fame of Venice is the quantity of holy relics. Indeed, since the power of the Venetians expanded over the sea and the land, all the holy bodies that they obtained were brought to Venice» (FABRI DA ULMA 1881, 79). This statement is followed by an extensive list of sacred remains scattered across numerous Venetian churches, linked by suggestive visitation routes that foreigners followed, motivated by both faith and superstition. A century earlier, the Florentine Simone Sigoli attested to this in his travel account from Venice to Sinai (1384-1385): «Next, we shall mention all the holy relics we saw in the city of Venice. We saw the body of Saint Lucy, and it is a beautiful relic […]. And we also saw […] the knee of Saint Christopher […] a finger of Constantine the Emperor […] a molar of the giant Goliath […] killed by King David» (SIGOLI 1862, 266; BACCI 2020, 114). These were exceptional relics, artfully displayed to impress visitors, sometimes of superhuman size, as in the cases of Saint Christopher and Goliath, and other times of infant proportions, such as the collection of presumed bodies of the Massacre of the Innocents: «In Murano, – continues the naïve Simone – in the church of San Donato, […] we saw in an altar one hundred and ninety-eight innocent little children all small in swaddling clothes; and they are all intact, and they all have knife wounds, some in the throat, some in the chest, some in one place and some in another, and some with their throats slit […] their

wounds are bloody and fresh, almost as if they had died very recently» (Sigoli 1862, 265).

Whether from figurative contexts or written texts, evidence such as the ones just analysed allow us to develop theories and reasonings that help formulate hypotheses about the physical appearance of lost works and contexts. But the memory of the medieval furnishings in the churches of Venice can also be recovered through the lists of pastoral visits, which from the 15th century onwards provided brief descriptions of the inspected places of worship, with systematic lists of altars, ambones, relics, icons, and all types of liturgical furnishings. The archival material in this regard is considerable, and to enhance the large amount of information, the 'Sacra Absentia' project has created a database capable of acquiring any type of information found in published and unpublished documents[1]. To proceed systematically and in an organized manner, a board template has been developed that includes a brief description of each monument, the indication of sources, and the various types of objects, without overlooking possible information regarding the monumental contexts (floors, columns, paintings, mosaics) (Fig. 2).

The input of data into the system will allow searches by object categories, monuments, or saints' names associated with various places of worship, altars, statues, altarpieces, reliquaries, and relics. For the most effective use of the collected materials, an interactive mapping system has been created based on the de' Barbari perspective map, geolocating the churches to identify their locations in current cartographic systems (Fig. 1). The decision to use the famous Venetian view is due to the fact that it is a representation rich in architectural details that have now disappeared, many of which still have a medieval layout.

S.P.

2. Implementation of the database and the case study of Sant'Agnese

Our work on cataloguing the lost furnishings of Venetian churches has so far counted nearly ninety contexts. However, our investigation is clearly still in progress, and the database will continue to grow. To provide an example of how the records in the database are being developed, we will use the church of Sant'Agnese, in the Dorsoduro district, as a case study (for bibliography, see the most recent studies: Zorzi 1972, 487; Franzoi, Di Stefano 1976, 213-214; Dorigo 1983, 392, 480, 603 n. 1, 611, 616-617, 619, 623; 2003, 956).

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[1] The technical and informatics setup of the database and the interface with both ancient and contemporary maps, required for georeferencing, were carried out by Dr. Alessandro Fiori (PhD, researcher and professor of Data Science and Database Technology at the Polytechnic University of Turin).

The first section of each database entry is dedicated to briefly reviewing the architectural phases and the historical-artistic events of each church under analysis (Fig. 2). For Sant'Agnese, the parish is first documented in 1081 (Corner 1749, 153, 155); scholars have therefore hypothesized that the church was founded between the late 10th and early 11th centuries (Dorigo 1983, 611; 2003, 956). The building that has come down to us is the result of various interventions that took place over the centuries on a structure that probably corresponded to the one that had to be rebuilt following an extensive fire spread in 1106 (Martinioni 1663, 24; Dorigo 1983, 480). Scholars attribute the phase of rebuilding certain architectural elements traceable to the medieval period still observable, such as the series of paired arches on brick columns along the external perimeter, the pillar supports that divide the three naves internally, and the semicircular apse (Figs. 5b-6). However, the portico on the façade of the church no longer exists, while only the lower part remains of the ancient bell tower, possibly dating back to the 13th century, having undergone significant alteration between 1837 and 1838 (Cicogna 1834, 624; Dorigo 1983, 392, 623; 2003, 255, 258, 260, 956). The building currently retains almost nothing of the ancient decorative features (Fig. 6).

During the 14th century, work was undertaken in the church, and a reconsecration ceremony was held in 1321 (Dorigo 2003, 255), mentioned in an inscription preserved in the church (Zorzi 1972, 487, note 2; Di Leonardo 2014, 34, note 4). Recently, Matteo Ceriana has emphasized the chronological and figurative proximity of some fragments of frescoes that still survive inside the church with the altarpiece depicting the *Coronation of the Virgin*, commissioned from Michele Giambono in 1447 for Sant'Agnese, a subject to be discussed further later (Ceriana 2016a, 46).

Fig. 5 – a) Jacopo de' Barbari, *Perspective view of Venice*, 1500, part., church of Sant'Agnese; b) Venice, Dorsoduro, church of Sant'Agnese, current exterior, southern side (photo G.A.B. Bordi).

Fig. 6 – Venice, Dorsoduro, church of Sant'Agnese, current interior.

It seems that the most significant transformations to the sacred space occurred during the 17th century, starting from the early years of the century, when the church boasted eleven remarkable altars. Stringa confirms that at that time: «questa chiesa anch'ella viene abbellita, et ornata all'uso moderno» (Stringa 1604, 181*r*). Around 1670, the construction benefited from interventions promoted by the benefactor Lodovico Bruzzoni; later, in 1733, the atrium was also restored at the expense of the priest Salvatore Bertella (Cicogna 1824, 197, 200-201, 202-203, 205-206). The following century marked a period of severe decline for the parish, as it was suppressed on 18th September 1810 (Cicogna 1824, 197; Zorzi 1972, 487). Around the mid-19th century, the church was reopened for worship but following a complete renovation that preserved nothing of the original decor. Further restorations, which scholars believe contributed to altering the original character of the building, also took place in 1939 (Franzoi, Di Stefano 1976, 213). Nevertheless, it is possible to get an idea of the original appearance of the ecclesiastical building, including its attached portico and bell tower, thanks to its representation in the aforementioned bird's-eye view of the city by Jacopo de' Barbari (1500) (Fig. 5a). As regards its ancient internal appearance, however, it is possible to take advantage of manuscript traditions and descriptions by erudites (see, for example, Cicogna 1824, 197-209).

As already mentioned, in 1447, Michele Giambono was commissioned to create an altarpiece depicting the *Coronation of the Virgin* for the main altar of the church of Sant'Agnese (Ceriana 2016a, 40, 79-80; 2016b, 186-188). The central panel of this altarpiece, which has not survived intact, has been identified as a painted panel in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice (Ceriana 2016a, 39-70; 2016b, 186-188). Neither this work, nor others, is unfortunately mentioned by Marcantonio Sabellico in his description of the lagoon city, compiled towards the end of the 15th century. Sabellico describes the church as «vetusta ædes» that «modice assurgit». The altar of the saint must have appeared quite old, as the scholar states that the «divæ ara» was «vetustissima» (Sabellico 1722, I, 5). A «pala del Paradiso di assai eccellente mano» is, however, mentioned at the beginning of the 17th century by Giovanni Stringa (1604, 181*r*; Ceriana 2016a, 41).

The consultation of some unpublished documents has allowed for the enrichment of the information currently available regarding the liturgical arrangement of the church and its decorative apparatus. An indication by Wladimiro Dorigo (2003, 566, n. 4, 570; 2004, 59, 63 note 74), later taken up by Devis Valenti (2019, 51) and Simone Piazza (2020, 77 note 148), highlighted the probable existence of a mosaic work within the basilica. In his will from May 1291 – which has been revisited by the author –, Matteo Bondumier, the procurator of San Marco, stated: «[…] volo que fiat opus mosaicum in Ecclesia Sanctæ Agnesis […]», commissioning the work to the mosaic artist Pietro Zaparino (ASVe, registry of Matteo Bondumier, unnumbered pages). However, based on current research, it is not possible to determine whether this testamentary provision was actually carried out.

Considering that the most significant interior renovation interventions took place during the 17th century, the reports by the prelates tasked with verifying the state of the parish towards the end of the 16th century become even more significant. Particularly rich in data are the Apostolic Visitation of 1581, carried out by the nuncio Lorenzo Campeggi and the Bishop of Verona Agostino Valier (ASPV, *Visitationes apostolicae*. Very useful is Tramontin 1967), and the Pastoral Visit of Patriarch Lorenzo Priuli, between 1591 and 1593, who inspected the Church of Sant'Agnese on 10th January 1593 (ASPV, *Visitationes ecclesiarum*, 371*r*-375*v*).

In this contribution, we will not review all the categories of furnishings listed in the aforementioned testimonies – these are instead systematically and organized in the database – but we will focus on some information that seems particularly interesting in light of the current state of the building's interior. Regarding the support system, it is worth noting that, unlike the current structure of the church, where the aisles are separated by pillars, the Apostolic Visitation mentions the presence of wooden columns (ASPV, *Visitationes apostolicae*, 258*v*). There is also a wealth of valuable information

from the surveys of all the altars that were once in the church and which no longer exist today due to the 17th and 18th century renovations and the various changes the building underwent, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries.

We will not review all the altars inspected during the two Visits, as they are also included in the database's records, but we aim to highlight some information that has seemed most noteworthy. In the case of Sant'Agnese, it is noted that there were two altars dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary: one was located on the Epistle side (ASPV, *Visitationes ecclesiarum*, 372*v*), also referred to as 'left' (ASPV, *Visitationes apostolicae*, 256*r*), while the other is described as being entirely made of wood and situated on the Gospel side (ASPV, *Visitationes ecclesiarum*, 372*v*). The main altar was not dedicated to Saint Agnes, the church's eponym, but to All Saints, and had what is described as a «buco nell'antipetto» (ASPV, *Visitationes apostolicae*, 257*v*; ivi, *Visitationes ecclesiarum*, 371*v*, 374*r*), a term which would suggest the presence of an opening, similar to a small window, on the front of the altar. The altar of Saint Agnes, on the other hand, was located behind the choir, where there was also the altar of Saint Mathias (ASPV, *Visitationes ecclesiarum*, 372*v*). The same choir and the *Pergolo dell'Evangelio* however, were considered too large for the liturgical needs at the time of the pastoral visit of 1593. It was therefore ordered that the pulpit be completely removed «et all'hora si facciano dui pergoleti, proportionati, uno per parti nelli pilastri d'essa capella maggiore» and that «il choro si riduca nella cappella grande serrandola con colonnelle» (ASPV, *Visitationes ecclesiarum*, 372*v*, 374*v*). The church was also equipped with a baptismal font, which «ritrovò essere un belissimo vaso […] se bene non è totalmente ridutto à perfettione» located near the Gospel pulpit, which was placed on one of the choir's pillars (ASPV, *Visitationes apostolicae*, 256*v*; ivi, *Visitationes ecclesiarum*, 371*r*, 374*r*). From the survey of the icons on the sacred altars it is possible that the «palla d'ogni santi» recorded above the main altar corresponds to the work commissioned to Michele Giambono in 1447 (ASPV, *Visitationes ecclesiarum*, 371*v*).

Among the numerous types of liturgical books and sacred goldsmithing catalogued by the visitors there is one annotation of particular interest concerning a 'peace' (i.e., a tablet with a sacred image shown for the kiss of peace before Communion during the liturgical celebration, in use from the 13th to the 18th century: MEEHAN 1911), as a visual record of it was found in a graphic evidence: a watercolor by Jan Grevembroch, found in the Gradenigo Dolfin manuscript 65.3 dated 1764, where the caption notes its custodianship at the parish of Sant'Agnese (BMC, Gradenigo Dolfin ms. 65.3, 4) (Fig. 7). This 'peace' depicted the central figure of a blessing Christ, surrounded by a frame of vegetal scrolls recorded in Patriarch Priuli's pastoral visit as «a pace d'argento con il Cristo di Avolio» (ASPV, *Supplemento*, 6*r*).
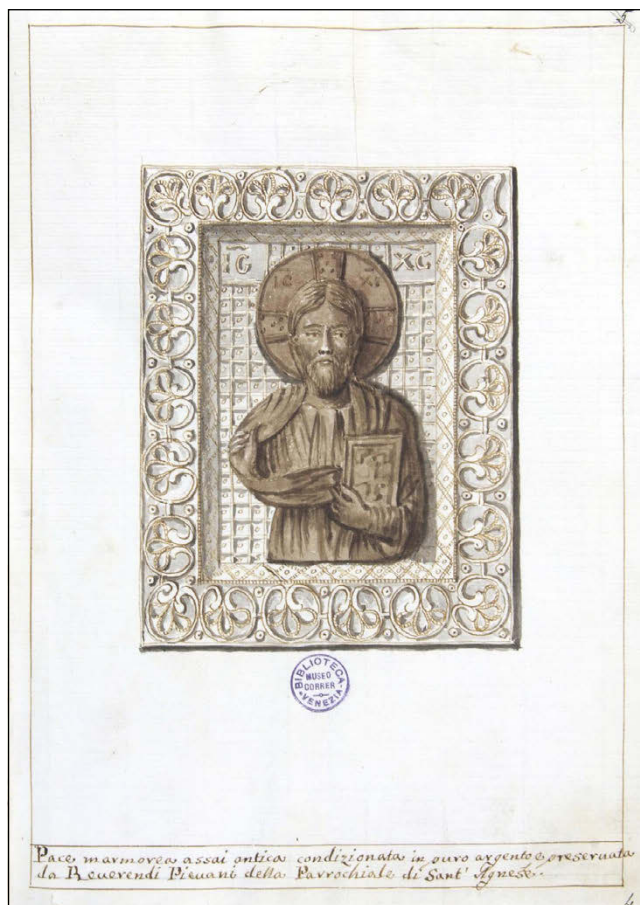
Fig. 7 – Venice, Correr Museum Library, Jan Grevembroch, *Ivory and silver 'pace' with Christ*, watercolor drawing (Gradenigo Dolfin ms. 65.3, 4, 1764; courtesy of the Correr Museum Library).

Of great importance, for the purposes of this project, are the information gathered from the sources regarding the relics held by the churches surveyed. In our case, it is noted that the altar of Saint Jerome housed sacred relics of saints referred to as 'old' (ASPV, *Visitationes ecclesiarum*, 372r, 374v), possibly from a very ancient time, while the 1581 Apostolic Visitation records the presence of relics of Saint Agnes and Saint Mary Magdalen «in vasculis inauratis, sine aliquo documento sed ex vetera traditione» (ASPV, *Visitationes apostolicae*, 257v).

G.A.B.B.

3. Final remarks

In conclusion, some brief methodological reflections are offered on our work. For each piece of data recorded in the database, it is possible – as is logical and correct – to trace it back to its source. In this way, when the application's implementation is completed, it will be possible to identify the most informative sources to be further used for in-depth research. Moreover, general comments and reflections on the types and purposes of the sources, and the categories of information they provide could also be developed. Furthermore, the linguistic aspect related to the systematisation of the data within the platform must be considered: for the different categories of recorded works, Italian terms have naturally been chosen (for example: 'altare', 'pala', 'icona', etc.), but it is of our interest to also keep track of the various expressions used in Latin or vernacular languages which sources refer to the elements of our study. For this reason, most of the time, we have opted to directly report the words from the documentary occurrences in quotation marks.

Another aspect where general, quantitative, and taxonomic considerations can be developed concerns the material nature of the decorative elements: by the end of this work, statistical evaluations can be made on the recurrence of specific materials used in liturgical furnishings. It will also be possible to check the frequency of certain materials in relation to types of furnishings. Furthermore, we will need to reflect on the reasons for the use of specific materials in relation to the production systems of the medieval city.

The core issue that arises from the systematic review of the aforementioned sources is primarily the difficulty in identifying, among the lost furnishings, those that can certainly be ascribed to the medieval era, as most of the usable archival documents were produced from the 15th century onward, and the data they contain are often quite essential and lack detail. Significant clues for a possible assignment to the Middle Ages, although general, sometimes emerge from references to the materials of the works or from certain phrases regarding their inadequacy or old age. Very often, the documents provide information on the arrangement of altars, pulpits, and choir screens before the liturgical adjustments prompted by the Council of Trent, but just as often they reflect the 'image' of sacred spaces in which changes had already occurred in the early Renaissance period. Therefore, it will be necessary to cross-reference the data from the sources (both published and unpublished) with studies on the history and architectural phases of the buildings.

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ABSTRACT

The 'Sacra Absentia' project, led by Simone Piazza (PI) with Giulia Anna Bianca Bordi (research fellow), is part of the PNRR (2022-2025) within the CHANGES program, Spoke 8, at University Ca' Foscari Venice. This study examines medieval and early modern pilgrims' accounts of Venice's religious heritage, informing the cataloguing and spatial reconstruction of lost or recontextualized liturgical furnishings. An online database georeferences these objects using contemporary maps and Jacopo de' Barbari's 1500 Venice view. A case study on Sant'Agnese, integrating published and unpublished sources, demonstrates the methodology's effectiveness in uncovering new historical insights.