Sex, Salvation and the City: Sant’Elisabetta delle Convertite as a civic institution in Florence, 1329-1627

This thesis reassesses the importance of Sant’Elisabetta delle Convertite, a monastery for repentant prostitutes, in Florence from its foundation in 1329 to 1627 after the Grand Duke became the monastery’s protector. Although it was one of the oldest and most populous female houses in the city, historians have tended to underestimate its importance to municipal authorities. This thesis reframes the monastery as a civic institution with a key role in changing municipal responses to prostitution.

The thesis makes extensive use of primary source material from the monastery itself, including ricordi (record books), accounts, and contracts, as well as from civic magistrates, particularly the Ufficiali dell’Onestà. Legislative sources from the late thirteenth to the early seventeenth centuries also show how the funding of Sant’Elisabetta reflected the city’s changing responses to the regulation of prostitution, and the funding of Sant’Elisabetta.

This thesis argues that the monastery of repentant prostitutes was an important civic institution in late medieval and early modern Florence and became so as a result of civic funding provided in consequence of changing municipal strategies to control prostitution. Successive Florentine municipal administrations acted to ensure the monastery’s survival and stability in response to petitions from the Convertite claiming poverty. The priors’ solutions varied between ad hoc direct funding, portions of the fines and penalties levied by magistrates, and a quarter of prostitutes’ estates, redirected to Sant’Elisabetta until ultimately, the monastery would be brought under the direct control of the Grand Ducal administration in 1620. They also restricted admissions to the monastery, which had the effect of ensuring its longevity by preserving its unique place among the city’s welfare institutions.

By tracing municipal interest and intervention in Sant’Elisabetta delle Convertite, this study contributes to knowledge of the significance of the civic role played by the monastery.