

FROM SEIGNEURIAL FOUNDATION TO
COMMENDAM: THE MONASTERY OF SAN PIETRO
DI VILLANOVA AT SAN BONIFACIO, NEAR VERONA,
FROM THE TWELFTH TO THE FIFTEENTH
CENTURY

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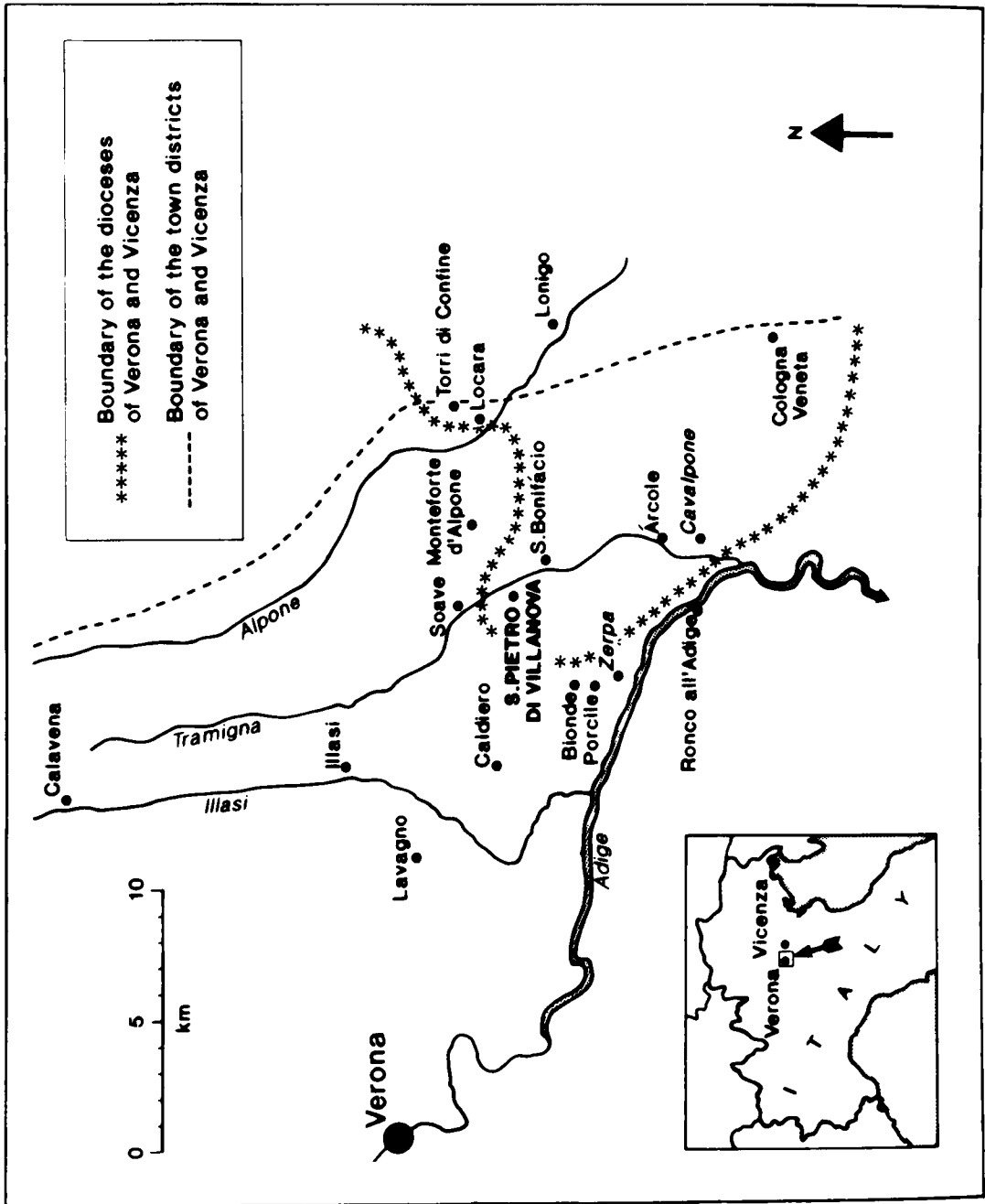
Years of scholarly work on the European aristocracy in the central Middle Ages have demonstrated the importance of private monastic foundations as family monuments, as foci for dynastic consciousness, and as landmarks within the family inheritance. Historians have recently pointed to the peculiar case of the Veneto, which stands apart from other regions of northern Italy, where local situations admittedly varied a great deal because these foundations were so unevenly distributed within it. Many important institutions were established in the period of ecclesiastical reform, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, in the regions of Padua and Treviso by seigneurial families active in the countryside, such as the Da Carrara, the founders of Santo Stefano di Carrara,¹ the Da Calaone, who founded San Michele di Candiana, the Maltraversi, founders of Praglia, and so forth.² Nothing of the sort happened in the western Veneto, least of all on Veronese territory – an area in which ‘there were no aristocratic lineages with deep roots in the countryside and eager to enhance their prestige and strengthen their family traditions by founding a monastery’,³ with the solitary exception of the San Bonifacio, the ancient

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¹ For a synthesis of Italian evidence see G. Sergi, ‘Vescovi, Monasteri, Aristocrazia Militare’, in *La Chiesa e il Potere Politico dal Medioevo all’Età Contemporanea*, ed. G. Chittolini and G. Miccoli (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), 73–98.

² A. Castagnetti, *La Marca Veronese-Trevigiana* (Turin: UTET, 1986), 27–8.

³ *Ibid.*, and Castagnetti, ‘Aspetti Economici e Sociali di Pievi Rurali, Chiese Minori e Monasteri (Secoli IX–XII)’, in *Chiese e Monasteri nel Territorio Veronese*, ed. G. Borelli (Verona: Banca Popolare di Verona, 1981), 118–20, with references at 120. The only exceptions in the region of Verona are a couple of suburban monasteries of late foundation and modest dimensions, established at the close of the twelfth century: i.e. San Giuliano di Lepia and San Pancrazio near Verona itself. The head of the citizen family of the Benzi-Armenardi was named by sources of the early thirteenth century as ‘fundator’ of the second of these suburban churches. The family held on to extensive landed estates in the immediate neighbourhoods: cf. Castagnetti,



TOWNS AND VILLAGES MENTIONED IN THE TEXT

The flow of the rivers is the same as today. Sites of uncertain location are shown in italics.

comital family of Verona to which the monastery of San Pietro di Villanova was bound. The absence of private foundations must be ascribed to the close connection of aristocratic families with the great city of Verona, which was firmly and consistently acknowledged as the traditional locus of public power in the central Middle Ages.

The abbey, too, followed its own peculiar course of development. Founded at a late date, when the movement to establish such private institutions was almost spent, the abbey of San Pietro di Villanova grew very rapidly from the fourth decade of the twelfth century onwards, stimulated not only by the support of the family, which wielded great authority in Verona in the early years of the commune, but also by its special geographical and political situation on the borders between two dioceses and two districts ruled by different cities. There was no time, however, to establish a firm institutional structure which would enable it to cut loose from the founding family, and the abbey declined as swiftly as it had risen. Like the great monasteries of the city of Verona, San Zeno Maggiore and Santa Maria in Organo,⁴ which were in deep crisis in the thirteenth century, San Pietro di Villanova proved to be a particularly easy prey to the expanding authority of the city at the time of the Scaligeri, although the abbey succeeded in preserving a modest estate for itself.

Although it was an unseasonable growth which lost its vitality in the course of a few decades of the twelfth century, the changing fortunes of this well-endowed church none the less reflect the vigorous policies of the Scaligeri towards the Church⁵ and the systematic control exerted by the Venetian Republic over prebends and benefices in the mainland dioceses.⁶ These experiences caused the archives of the abbey to be dispersed and are ultimately responsible for the limited range of the studies hitherto completed, which consist only of the researches of the Veronese scholar Gino Sandri, and of a few asides by Luigi Simeoni.⁷ It may be useful, therefore, to reconsider the subject

La Società Veronese nel Medioevo. ii: Ceti e Famiglie nella Prima Età Comunale (Verona: Libreria Editrice Universitaria, 1987), 62, including the other example cited.

⁴ For a brief reference, adequate for the present purposes, cf. Castagnetti, 'Aspetti Politici, Economici e Sociali di Chiese e Monasteri dall'Epoca Carolingia alle Soglie dell'Età Moderna', in *Chiese e Monasteri a Verona*, ed. Borelli (Verona: Banca Popolare di Verona, 1980), 64–6, 70–2.

⁵ See the contributions assembled in 'Signoria Scaligera e Istituzioni Ecclesiastiche', ed. G. De Sandre Gasparini, Section V of *Gli Scaligeri 1277–1387, Saggi e Schede Raccolti in Occasione della Mostra Storico-Documentaria*, ed. G.M. Varanini (Verona: Mondadori, 1988), particularly the synthesis by the same scholar, 'Istituzioni Ecclesiastiche, Religiose e Assistenziali nella Verona Scaligera tra Potere Signorile e Società', at 393–404, with bibliography.

⁶ See the synoptic survey by G. Chittolini, 'Stati Regionali e Istituzioni Ecclesiastiche nell'Italia Centrosettentrionale del Quattrocento', in *La Chiesa e il Potere Politico*, 147–93, with a bibliography which also covers the Venetian Republic (on which cf. G. Cozzi, 'Politica, Società, Istituzioni', in *La Repubblica di Venezia nell'Età Moderna. Dalla Guerra di Chioggia al 1517*, ed. G. Cozzi and M. Knapton, Turin, UTET, 1986, 231–52).

⁷ Cf. G. Sandri, *Breve Storia di S. Bonifacio dalle Origini alla Metà del '500*, 2nd edn., ed. Ennio Poli (Cologna Veneta: La Mainarda, 1979), 9–12. Cf. also Sandri, 'I Restauri di S. Pietro di Villanova e gli Affreschi Recentemente Scoperti', *Bollettino della Società Letteraria di Verona*,

in the light of more recent historiography concerning the seigniorial monasteries of the central Middle Ages, the ecclesiastical policies of the city-based lordships and the regional states, and the transition from the régime of the Scaligeri to that of the Republic of Venice.

The traditional belief that the abbey of San Pietro di Villanova originated in the early Middle Ages, which conjures up a somewhat stylized vision of the pioneering activities of the Benedictine order and its reclamations of land,⁸ has no firm basis other than the use in the Romanesque building of materials taken over from that period, especially the heads of a number of columns. Even the two documents of 1040 and 1045 mentioned by local scholars do not exist, and the references to them are the result of misunderstandings.⁹ Clearly one cannot dismiss the possibility that there was a church in existence before the appearance of authentic documentation, which occurred, as we shall see, in the first half of the twelfth century: but if it did exist it must have been an unimportant institution which left no traces behind. The earliest documentary information concerning the abbey goes back to the first decades of the twelfth century and the mention of Abbot Uberto di San Bonifacio. There is an inscription on the Romanesque bell-tower, well known to local scholars,¹⁰ which states that the church tower itself began to be built in the year 'MILLESIMO CENTESIMO VIII XL'. Were this to be interpreted as '1131', as has usually been done, it would be the oldest indisputable evidence of the abbey's existence. If, however, as on balance seems more likely, the

s.a. (1936), fascicolo 1-2, 5 foll. Sandri had collected further documentary material in preparation for a study of the subject; this can be consulted in Archivio di Stato di Verona (henceforth A.S.Vr.), Deposito Sandri; derived from Sandri, too, are the historical notes (not always accurate) reproduced by historians of art and architecture with interests in the abbey of Villanova – for example Arslan, who wrote a monograph of fundamental importance on the Romanesque architecture of Verona, accepts the erroneous date 1040 for the activities of Abbot Uberto, which comes from a slip on Sandri's part: W. Arslan, *L'Architettura Romanica Veronese* (Verona, 1939), 143-7. Simeoni's sporadic interest in the subject sprang from his researches on the aristocratic family which protected the church: Luigi Simeoni, 'Per la Genealogia dei Conti di San Bonifacio e Ronco', in Simeoni, *Studi su Verona nel Medioevo*, IV, ed. O. Viviani and V. Cavallari (Verona: Istituto per gli Studi Storici Veronesi, 1963), 79, 86-7. Nothing has been added by the most recent reviews of the subject, which are either intended to popularize it or are inspired by interests in art history: cf., however, the synthesis by a local scholar, Antonio Dalla Tomba, *L'Abbazia di Villanova di San Bonifacio* (Vicenza: Tipografia S. Giuseppe – G. Rumor, 1965).

⁸ Dalla Tomba, *L'Abbazia di Villanova*, 62 ff. Another scholar who accepts without question the opinion that the abbey originated before the year 1000 is G. Mantese, *Memorie Storiche della Chiesa Vicentina. I: Dalle Origini al Mille* (Vicenza: Tipografia S. Gaetano, 1962), 163-4.

⁹ The document of 1040, cited by Dalla Tomba on the strength of a 'Repertorio' of the monastery of Santa Maria in Organo preserved in A.S.Vr., cannot be found (*L'Abbazia*, 99 n. 6); the real date may be 1140 (cf. n. 25 below). As for the supposed act of 1045, the archival reference given by Dalla Tomba enables us to identify it with the document of 1145, relating to the dispute between the family of San Bonifacio and the cathedral chapter of Verona, published by Simeoni, 'Per La Genealogia dei Conti di Sambonifacio,' 86-7.

¹⁰ The text, published on several occasions, runs as follows: IN HOC ANNO EST INCEPTUS · ABBAS TURREM UBERTUS · MILLESIMO CENTESIMO VIII XL.

date should be read as '1149'¹¹ then the earliest written evidence of the abbey's existence is contained in the will of Marquess Alberto di San Bonifacio of February 1135, immediately followed by the important deed whereby Pope Innocent II entrusted the monastery of Villanova to the abbot of San Benedetto in Polirone and called upon him to reform it.¹² From this time onwards the documentation at once becomes, if not plentiful, at least consistent and full of meaning – and this makes it seem increasingly likely that the institution had been recently founded.

San Pietro di Villanova is situated on the 'Vicenza Road' ('strata Vicentina') not far from San Bonifacio, near the border between the territories of Verona and Vicenza,¹³ and in the diocese of Vicenza. Its position is of some strategic importance, since it also lies on the boundary between the bishoprics of Verona and Vicenza and on one of the most important arterial roads of the Po plain, at the heart of territories controlled by means of the castles of San Bonifacio and of the nearby Ronco all'Adige, by a family as rich in tradition and prestige as that of the counts of Sambonifacio.¹⁴

We have, then, no foundation deed and no prospect of finding one, but there is much evidence that points to a foundation at the beginning of the twelfth century, perhaps by Marquess Alberto di San Bonifacio who, in his will of 15 February 1135, freed his serfs on the understanding that they would acknowledge holding the land entrusted to them of the abbey of San Pietro di Villanova: 'terram quam ab me tenent volo ut ab ecclesia Sancti Petri de Villanova pro beneficio teneant et serviant de suis negotiis in episcopatu veronensi et vicentino'.¹⁵ This is not a new hypothesis; it is justified by Alberto's political activities over the previous thirty years.¹⁶ After the death of Matilda of Canossa in 1115, Alberto had firmly established the power of his own family in the territory of Verona, obtaining among other things the fief of Cerea from Bishop Bernardo, a supporter of the reform. Alberto had become 'an element of the first importance in the policies of the Church of Rome, which was bent on claiming Matilda's inheritance against the Empire': indeed, in c.1125 he became leader of the feudatories of the Canossian party, and Pope Honorius II pro-

¹¹ This interpretation is not at odds with the chronological practices of the time, which did not demand that the figure VIII be subtracted. In favour of it is the assonance 'centesimo/quadragesimo', obtained by reading the date as 'nono quadragesimo', which echoes the 'inceptus/Ubertus' of the previous line.

¹² Cf. n. 20 below and the text corresponding to it.

¹³ For the complicated problem of this frontier cf. Castagnetti, *La Pieve Rurale nell'Italia Padana* (Rome: Herder, 1976), 30–2 and n. 105.

¹⁴ Castagnetti, 'Le Due Famiglie Comitali Veronesi: i Sambonifacio e i Gandolfingi – di Palazzo', *Studi sul Medioevo Veneto* (Turin: Giappichelli, 1981), 63 ff.

¹⁵ For the published version of the will of Alberto di Sambonifacio, cf. A. Gloria, *Codice Diplomatico Padovano dall'Anno 1101 alla Pace di Costanza (25 Giugno 1183)* (Venice: Deputazione di Storia Patria, 1879–81), i, 214–16, no. 275.

¹⁶ P.F. Kehr, *Italia Pontificia*, vii (*Venetiae et Histria*) (Berlin: apud Weidmannos, 1926), 148.

moted him marquess and duke.¹⁷ In these circumstances the dedication of a new monastery to St Peter seems highly appropriate, as does the decision to make it directly subject to the Church of Rome without intermediaries, as attested in 1136. The political choices made after 1125 by Alberto di San Bonifacio, in holding to Conrad of Swabia against the Emperor Lothar and in withdrawing from the Canossian party, make it less likely that the foundation was deferred until the early 1130s.

Clearly, too, the place-name Villanova is of some interest, for it suggests a recent settlement which had been in some degree planned. According to Settia's researches, there is evidence of only two instances of the term 'villanova' in the Veneto before 1135.¹⁸ Here, then, is one last piece of evidence, of some significance, to suggest that the new centre had arisen recently and as the result of a deliberate policy: it was part of the general expansion of population and extension of settlement that characterized the plain of the Veneto in the twelfth century.

Marquess Alberto di Sambonifacio died in August 1135. The will he drew up in February mentioned the bishop of Verona (at the time it was still Bernardo, who died a few months later), and left to the bishopric the castle of Monteforte d'Alpone in the border region between Verona and Vicenza; also remembered was the monastery of San Benedetto in Polirone, which had previously benefited by Alberto's generosity.¹⁹ Perhaps connected with these decisions was the initiative of Pope Innocent II, who on 10 March 1136²⁰ committed to the care of Enrico, abbot of Polirone, and his successors 'monasterium S. Petri de Villa Nova quod ad ius sancte romane ecclesie noscitur pertinere ad reformandam inibi religionem', so that this church 'tam in temporalibus quam in spiritualibus vestro studio augeatur'.²¹

Marquess Alberto's testamentary dispositions not only gave the abbey a firm social and economic grounding in the freed serfs who held the land of it 'pro beneficio', but also emphasized the geographical situation of the church, straddling as it did the two dioceses ('serviant de suis negotiis in episcopatu veronensi et vicentino').

It was in the years immediately after 1136 that Uberto di San Bonifacio, abbot of San Pietro di Villanova, began to appear quite regularly in the documents. He belonged, with his brothers Bosone,

¹⁷ Castagnetti, 'Due Famiglie', 67–8.

¹⁸ A.A. Settia, *Castelli e Villaggi nell'Italia Padana. Popolamento, Potere e Sicurezza Tra i Secoli IX e XIII* (Naples: Liguori, 1984), 315.

¹⁹ Castagnetti, 'Due Famiglie', 68.

²⁰ For some doubts concerning the dating – the alternative is 1135 – cf. the annotations of Kehr, cited below.

²¹ Kehr, *Papsturkunden in Italien. Reiseberichte zur 'Italia pontificia'*, i (1896–99) (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1977), 296–7. In the same period (1132) the nearby monastery of SS. Fermo e Rustico in Lonigo (Vicenza) was annexed to Polirone; cf. P. Piva, 'Cluny e Polirone (addenda)', *Cluny in Lombardia* (Cesena: Centro Storico Benedettino Italiano, 1981), 318.

called Malregolato, and Manfredo, called Maltoleto (who died before 1136), to a different branch of the family from Alberto's.²² Although the death of the great marquess had weakened the family's fortunes (for example, the cathedral chapter of Verona recovered control over the important castle of Cerea),²³ Malregolato began to assume the title of count, as he did in an important public deed of 1139, and thereafter.²⁴ At the same time Uberto began to make his presence felt, for in 1140 he was at the consecration of the church of Sant' Elena at the cathedral in Verona, a fact of some significance given that San Pietro di Villanova was an extra-diocesan church, for it indicates that the church and its abbot had close relations with Veronese circles.²⁵ How deeply Uberto was involved with the fortunes of his own family is demonstrated by the testimony given in 1145 to the feudal 'court of peers' of the chapter of Verona, on the occasion of the lawsuit initiated by the Sambonifacio family, seeking to recover control over the castle of Cerea. One witness was the judge Ugo, a native of Zerpa (a place close to San Bonifacio which has now disappeared), who had also been present when Alberto made his will in 1135. The judge stated (and others confirmed it) that he had been present when Uberto, 'villanovensis abbas', had interrogated one of his monks who was on the point of death – a monk who, many years earlier in the second half of the eleventh century, had accompanied to that 'villa' the Counts Uberto and Enrico, the grandfathers of Marquess Alberto.²⁶

There is another important document which refers back to the 1140s and has hitherto not been used to throw light on the history of the abbey. This consists of testimony given in 1192²⁷ by the son of the 'waldemannus' of the wood of 'Colegaria', on the plains to the south of Verona on the borders with the regions of Ferrara. This man stated that more than fifty years before, Abbot Uberto had held the title to one third of the rights over that extensive forest, while the other two thirds pertained to the cathedral chapter of Verona. The witness recalled that he had seen that same abbot 'venientem ad illud nemus et capolantem'²⁸ in eo nemore per terciam partem'. These rights had been exercised without interruption, 'hucusque', down to the present day,

²² Castagnetti, 'Due Famiglie', 75; Simeoni, 'Per la Genealogia dei Conti', 81.

²³ Castagnetti, 'Due Famiglie', 74–5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁵ T. Venturini, *Ricerche Paleografiche intorno all'Arcidiacono Pacifico di Verona* (Verona: Biblioteca Capitolare, 1929), 16. Also present were the bishops of Verona, Mantua, Belluno, Feltre, Trieste and Adria, the abbot of San Benedetto in Polirone, and the abbot of Santa Maria in Organo in Verona.

²⁶ Simeoni, 'Per la Genealogia dei Conti', 86–7.

²⁷ Archivio Capitolare di Verona, perg. III.10.Iv., 23 October 1192: 'ego scio quod L anni sunt et plus quod pater meus Adam erat gualdemanus istius nemoris de quo lis est per dompnum Ubertum tunc abatem monasterii de Villanova et per canonicos S. Marie in Domo et dictus meus pater dividebat in tres partes quicquid exibat de illo nemore et dabat unam illarum trium partium illi abati Uberto, alias duas suprascriptis canonicis . . .'

²⁸ 'Capolare' is to exercise the right to 'capulum', to the collection of the products of the wood.

on behalf of Ugo, who probably enjoyed a long reign, and his successors. The rights over the wood had been transferred from the monastery to one 'dominus' Legnago, 'qui invenit illud nemus a predicto monasterio': this man's investiture 'per fictum et feudum', on behalf of 'Ubertus frater Malregolati', had taken place more than thirty years before,²⁹ 'sub porticalia ante ecclesiam de Villanova', in the presence of 'fratres eius abatis': 'de presentia personarum dixit de fratribus eius abatis nescioqui'.³⁰ Family tutelage over the abbey could scarcely have been more in evidence. On the same occasion other witnesses reported on the use to which the abbey put the produce of these forests, despite their distance from it, as 'lignamen vegetum', wood for barrels, and on its hunting rights to the capture of wild pigs, although they added nothing of substance.

There are other references to the rights exercised by San Pietro di Villanova over these uncultivated lands in the first half of the twentieth century, in evidence given in the course of the lawsuit brought by the monastery of San Zeno in Verona, concerning the jurisdiction over Ostiglia, some time before 1151. Concerning 'buscus qui dicitur Colegarie' it is confirmed that '[eius] piscerie et nemus tercia pars est monasterii Villanove, quam obtinuit per sentenciam suis testibus et instrumentis'.³¹ There had probably, therefore, been a dispute over these matters with the chapter of Verona during the 1140s.

The exercise of these rights should again be related to the abbey's rapid political and institutional development in the second half of the century, and probably connected not only with the remarkable prestige of the Sambonifacio family within the commune of Verona at the time of Bonifacio and Sauro, but also with the interests of the commune itself, which was ready to extend its own influence over the eastern part of the district. The stages of growth, and the methods used to promote it, cannot now be followed in detail, but there is an important account of what the abbey had achieved in the bull of Pope Lucius III which was granted to Abbot Vitale in 1185 when the Roman curia was in residence at Verona.³² The abbey's rights over 'silva Colegaria' were confirmed, together with its estates in the region of San Pietro di Villanova itself and in the nearby 'ville' of the plain

²⁹ It was important for the witness to establish that at least thirty years had passed, because this was the minimum period for the acquisition of ownership by long use or possession; it is quite possible that many more years had in fact gone by.

³⁰ Special attention should be drawn to this piece of information. The only known brothers of Uberto are Malregolato and Maltoleto; for them both to be present the deed would have had to take place before 1136, when Maltoleto died. It is therefore probable that Uberto in fact had other brothers.

³¹ A. Franceschini, *Giurisdizione Episcopale e Comunità Rurali Altopolesane. Bergantino Melara Bariano Trecenta (sec. X-XIV)* (Bologna: Patron, 1986), 108-9 and n. 8. Franceschini also makes use of the document of 1192, cited above (113-14).

³² This has survived, as is already known, only in a confirmation by Pope Martin V: cf. the essay by Sandri cited below at n. 34, and more briefly Sandri, *Breve Storia di San Bonifacio*, 11, referring back to Boehmer.

and hills of the district of Verona (at Illesi 'in castro', Lavagno, Calavana, Soave, Bionde, Porcile, Zerpa, Arcole, Cavalpone and Ronco all' Adige). Some of these, but probably not all of them, were traceable back to the original endowment mentioned by Marquess Alberto in his will of 1135. Most important, the bull confirmed the dependence on San Pietro di Villanova of the churches of San Nicola, San Zeno, San Vito and San Giovanni di Locara, all of which lay in the neighbourhood of Villanova,³³ together with the churches of San Nicola di Bardolino and of St Thomas of Canterbury in Verona. This last was a recent foundation – Becket had been canonized in 1172 and his cult had spread very rapidly – and there is evidence of its existence from 1179, at a time when the influence of Sauro Sambonifacio in Verona was very strong, and he held the office of *podestà* three times, almost without a break. Among the churches in the region of Villanova, San Nicola was perhaps rather more important than the others, since a judgement of 1177 concerning 'iura decimalia' records the 'decimaria ecclesiarum S. Petri et S. Nicolai'. Particularly important, however,³⁴ was the dependent church within the city, St Thomas of Canterbury: this was situated in the quarter called l'Isolo, between the two branches of the Adige, which was then at the heart of an important project for the improvement of the city promoted by the bishop of Verona.³⁵ It was not by chance that in 1199 Abbot Riprando carried out investitures at this church, 'sub porticalia ecclesie S. Thome'.³⁶ Further evidence of a close and profitable relationship with the institutions of the city of Verona is found in the grant made by Bishop Adelardo in 1198 of the tithes on arable land and on the 'novalia' (lands recently placed under cultivation) at Caldiero, Soave and Porcile, as far as the river Alpone,³⁷ to the fullest extent of the diocese of Verona, thus complementing the grants of tithes made by Pistore, bishop of Vicenza, on the lands which fell under his sway.³⁸ A few years later Guglielmo, abbot of Villanova, pronounced at Verona upon a dispute between three churches of Trento, together with an influential member of the clergy of Verona – a sure sign of his own prestige.³⁹

³³ The church of San Vito and the 'fosatum S. Viti', the 'pertinentia S. Iohannis ad Aucharam' (today called Locara) and the church of San Nicolò are cited in an act of 1244 concerning the acquisition of extensive landed properties in the region: A.S.Vr., Esposti, perg. 323.

³⁴ Sandri, 'L'Antica Chiesa di S. Tommaso Cantuariense nell'Isolo di Verona', in Sandri, *Scritti*, ed. G. Sancassani (Verona: Istituto per gli Studi Storici Veronesi, 1969), 126–7.

³⁵ On this well known episode, cf. Castagnetti, *La Società Veronese*, ii. Another church founded at the same time in the quarter called l'Isolo, and like St Thomas of Canterbury devoted to a cult which had very recently spread throughout Europe, was that dedicated to the French sanctuary of Roc-Amadour: cf. Varanini, 'Roccamaggiore. Ipotesi sull'Origine di un Toponimo Veronese', *Vita Veronese*, xxxiii (1981), 58–62.

³⁶ A.S.Vr., S. Maria in Organo, perg. 220.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, perg. 217 a.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, reg. 424, c. 1r., 7 October 1197.

³⁹ Archivio di Stato di Trento, Principato Vescovile, Sezione Latina, capsula 50, n. 25, 11 April 1203.

The abbey's development culminated in a diploma granted in 1193 by the Emperor Henry VI, whereby the abbot of Villanova obtained full jurisdiction over Villanova and Locara.⁴⁰ This concession too, although we do not know specifically how or why it was made at this particular time, must be ascribed to the process by which the sector of the diocese of Vicenza near the River Alpone was taken over by the city of Verona. The assignation to a church which undoubtedly looked towards Verona⁴¹ of two 'ville' on the border was perfectly in accordance with the line taken in those years by the commune of Verona, for it was in the same year that it acquired the Gardesana and embarked on the important enterprise for the reclamation of land at Palù di Zevio. A few years earlier, in 1184, 'ville' which had always been Vicentine, such as Lonigo or Cologna Veneta, had featured in a list of 'ville' subject to the 'districtus' of the city of Verona which represents the plans for the organization of the territory which the commune was hoping to put into effect on the morrow of the Peace of Constance. The list also made so bold as to include, from the opposite end of the district, 'ville' which belonged to the county of Ala and Avio in the Trentino.⁴²

As the abbey prospered it also acquired rights of ecclesiastical administration, and rights to tithes, according to a wholly predictable plan which led to a fierce struggle with the parish church of Sant' Abbondio in San Bonifacio. A judgement on this matter was issued by the bishop of Vicenza in 1168 and confirmed by a bull of Pope Alexander III of 1169,⁴³ whereby San Pietro was acknowledged to

⁴⁰ Sandri, 'Un Diploma Perduto di Enrico VI Imperatore', in Sandri, *Scritti*, 27–35. Both the original version of the diploma and a copy were preserved in the archive of the abbey in the middle of the fifteenth century, when it was seen by the representatives of the commune of Verona in the course of a dispute with the commune of San Bonifacio over the commune's tax assessment (*Ibid.*, 32–3). Bartolomeo Cipolla, the famous citizen jurist, also alluded to it during a mission to Venice on behalf of the commune of Verona ('the privilege of Villanova, the proof of which is with the abbot in the monastery' – A.S.Vr., S. Giacomo e Lazzaro alla Tomba, reg. 1722, fasc. 4, under date 18 April 1463).

⁴¹ Also relevant is the fact that in 1205 the men of Villanova were mentioned, together with those from Calavena and Soave, also in the eastern Veronese, among the persons who 'defferebant solas et subtellares ad vendendum' in the market of Verona. This proves some development of manufacturing and some integration with the economy of the city's market. Cf. C. Cipolla, *Le Popolazioni dei XIII Comuni Veronesi. Ricerche Storiche sull'Appoggio di Nuovi Documenti*, 2nd edn. (Giazza [Verona]: Taucias Gareida, 1978), 26; for a duty collected from 'ipsi de Villanova et S. Bonifacio' in the market of Verona already in 1175, cf. Cipolla, 'Verona e la Guerra contro Federico Barbarossa', *Archivio Veneto*, nuova serie, iii (1892), 471–2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 478. The list was then re-edited, in whole or in part: cf. for example Castagnetti, *La Valpolicella dall'Alto Medioevo all'Età Comunale* (Verona: Centro di Documentazione per la Storia della Valpolicella, 1984), 179.

⁴³ A.S.Vr., S. Maria in Organo, perg. 217 b. The sentence spells out with great care the regulations governing 'visitationes infirmorum', 'publice penitentie', and the burials: the abbot was forbidden to initiate the first two of these on the territory of the parish church of San Bonifacio, unless the monks were summoned 'ex devotione'; as for burials, however, 'libera sit ei [testatori] facultas in ultima voluntate et sana mente', with a number of restrictive clauses. Baptisms, burials, tithes and offerings from the men of Villanova pertained, in the territory of Villanova, to the abbot.

have full rights over the territory of Villanova, concerning baptisms, burials, offerings and tithes, including those levied upon 'novalia'. Disputes broke out again some years later, in 1199.⁴⁴ Very likely the preservation in Bologna of a seal which bears the legend *Abbas Riprandus Sancti Petri de Villanova* can be traced back to the discussion in Bologna of the dispute between the abbey and the parish church of San Bonifacio.⁴⁵

The rapid rise of San Pietro di Villanova within a few decades was the artificial product of an unusual geographical position and of a peculiar combination of circumstances. In the same period the political power of the Benedictine monasteries, including those of Verona, was already beginning to decline. The abbey was to diminish equally rapidly in the decades which followed. By the early thirteenth century, it had apparently ceased to exercise rights over the wood of 'Colegaria'.⁴⁶

Over the same period it is possible to follow the fortunes of the abbey's possessions, despite the gaps in the documentation.⁴⁷ A number of *mansi* were dependent on San Pietro di Villanova. These were farms occupied by one family; each was endowed with a *caput mansi*, a plot with buildings upon it situated within a village (in this case, San Bonifacio), and each consisted of a number of separate pieces of land distributed over a limited area. It is reasonable to suppose that they derived, wholly or in part, from the estates of Marquess Alberto. At the close of the twelfth century the community of monks (whose numbers were never very great)⁴⁸ showed great precision in the control they exercised over these properties and over their tenants, who were to transport goods 'ad montem', 'ad boscum' and 'ad pratum'; the farmers then promised 'dare unum bovem ad trahendum a Verona molas suas'. So the monastery already owned a mill, or was proposing to build one in some place (very likely on the Alpone). There was another contract, due to expire after four years – an unusual arrangement in agricultural agreements in the plains of the Veneto at this time – and this envisaged not only a general duty of cartage but also an obligation to transport hay 'in tegete' of the monastery and a duty 'facere ligna et encina', i.e. fastenings for the vines, for the benefit of the monastery.⁴⁹

It has been said that the abbey of Villanova suffered hard times

⁴⁴ A.S.Vr., S. Maria in Organo, perg. 224, 2 August 1199.

⁴⁵ Giorgio Cencetti, 'Sigilli Medievali Italiani del Museo Civico di Bologna', *Atti e Memorie della Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Province di Romagna*, n.s., iii (1953), 32, no. 92.

⁴⁶ Franceschini, *Giurisdizione Episcopale*, 114.

⁴⁷ San Pietro di Villanova came in the sixteenth century to depend on the Olivetans of Santa Maria in Organo of Verona (cf. n. 75 below); but the archives of this church preserve only a few traces of an accumulation of documents which must still have been quite plentiful in the fifteenth century.

⁴⁸ Six monks at most, apart from the abbot: cf. a lease of the year 1198, A.S.Vr., Santa Maria in Organo, perg. 194.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, perg. 220.

during the thirteenth century.⁵⁰ At least for the period of the commune and of Ezzelino's rule this is an impressionistic judgement deduced from information of a general character – from the outbreak of savage factional conflicts on Veronese territory, in which the abbey's protectors, the Sambonifacio, played a prominent part, and from the hostile and damaging attitude adopted by Ezzelino III da Romano towards ecclesiastical institutions. This assertion, which is undoubtedly plausible enough, may perhaps in future be supported by more convincing evidence. About 1240, for example, harsh taxation began to weigh heavily upon the communities of the eastern region of the district of Verona, which were subject to the 'party of the Counts' (that is, to the outsiders, one of whose strongholds was the castle of San Bonifacio, soon to be destroyed by Ezzelino).⁵¹ In mid-century the area must have been sacked and laid waste on several occasions.

The fate of a rural lordship such as that of San Bonifacio, situated in the borderlands between two city districts, was now sealed; it was bound up with the political fortunes of a family given to forming connections which transcended the boundaries between cities. Many aspects of these events are still buried in obscurity, and only evidence culled from the church archives of Vicenza, or from the Sambonifacio archive, or both, could throw light upon them. The last act of the drama was marked by the total collapse of the lords of Sambonifacio, who had had roots in these lands for the last five hundred years, and were now driven into exile, and by the permanent subjection of San Pietro di Villanova to Verona which then followed. As the Della Scala lordship was established and firmer control asserted over the territory, the eastern border zone, in contact with Vicenza, dominated in its turn by the bitterly hostile city of Padua, became a painfully sensitive area. It was no coincidence that in the 1270s, the years in which the régime of Mastino Della Scala and Alberto I was finally consolidated, the bridge of Villanova, too, was fortified;⁵² and thirteenth-century chronicles, like that of Rolandino da Padova, and those of the fourteenth century see Villanova as a crossing-point between two states. 'Messer Cane left Verona and went to Villanova', in the words of a ballad which marked the death of Cangrande, describing his expedition against Treviso in 1329; examples could be multiplied.⁵³

Precise evidence of the change of direction which led to a Veronese take-over may perhaps be found in documents surviving

⁵⁰ Sandri, *Breve Storia di San Bonifacio*.

⁵¹ Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Nunziatura Veneta, San Giorgio in Braida, perg. 9654: 'ipsi pignerabant nos . . . faciebant condemnare [et] dare tallas si non solvebamus dacias . . .'

⁵² Varanini, 'Un "Quaternus Expensarum" del Comune di Verona (Novembre 1279)', *Studi di Storia Medievale e di Diplomatica*, viii (1984), 98.

⁵³ Cipolla and Francesco Pellegrini, 'Poesie Minori riguardanti gli Scaligeri,' *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medioevo*, xxiv (1902), 62. The *fovea Villenove* also had an important military function in the war between the Carrara and the Della Scala in 1387, as the Vicentine chronicler Conforto de Costozza recalls.

from the 1260s and 1270s. In 1264 Abbot Gunterino (otherwise Gunterio) transacted business at the church of St Thomas in the Isolo di Verona; he was a Paduan, and by his side in 1266 was a member of his household, Guglielmo 'Gunterini.' In 1266, on the other hand, another deed bears eloquent witness to the tendency of the churches in the region of San Bonifacio to look to the Verona of Mastino I della Scala, who was then in power: it was at St Thomas's, the dependent church in Verona, that the abbot of Villanova and the archpriest of the parish of San Bonifacio, both of which were Vicentine institutions, apportioned the tithes of San Bonifacio; the archpriest was assisted by a clerk from his parish, Ezzelino Greppi, who belonged to the family which held the castle of Soave, not far from San Bonifacio and from Villanova. Eight years later, shortly after the establishment of the Mastino Della Scala authority in Verona (c.1272), it was no longer Abbot Gunterini, who came from the hostile city of Padua, but a certain Folco who performed in Verona the investiture with lands in Villanova of a Veronese resident in the Isolo, stipulating that the dues payable should in future be brought to him 'ad locum et ecclesiam S. Thomasii': the implication was that the abbot was then in the habit of residing for long periods of time in the city itself.⁵⁴ The dependence of St Thomas of Canterbury on San Pietro di Villanova was to last even into the fourteenth century, when the church in Verona was occupied by the Carmelite friars.⁵⁵

Hence it is clear that, amid the general decay of the Benedictine monasteries of Verona under the Della Scala, San Pietro di Villanova and the office of its abbot became a source of revenue, one among many, for abbots who frequently resided in the dependent priory of St Thomas in Isolo; that the number of monks, which had never been very great, fell; that the abbot was a man who might enjoy the confidence of the Della Scala lords even to the point of becoming bishop of Verona, admittedly by papal nomination, as one Nicolò did in 1331;⁵⁶ and that, at some point before the middle of the fourteenth century, a large part of the monastery's property was enfeoffed to a family of prestigious collaborators of the Della Scala – a fate which also overtook the much more distinguished and time-honoured houses of San Zeno and Santa Maria in Organo. The Cavalli, whose properties were scattered throughout the eastern Veronese, lorded it over the estates of San Pietro di Villanova at least from the mid-fourteenth century onwards,⁵⁷ at a time when the Della Scala were comprehen-

⁵⁴ Sandri, 'L'Antica Chiesa di S. Tommaso Cantuariense,' 127–8; he wrongly believed Abbot Gunterio/Gunterino to be two different people.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ For his close relations with the Della Scala cf. C. Cenci, O.F.M., 'Verona Minore ai Tempi di Dante. Francescani, Uomini di Cultura, Artisti, Libri,' *Le Venezie Francescane*, xxxiii (1966), 34.

⁵⁷ Sandri, 'Antica Chiesa', 128 and n. 27 (for the invective against the Cavalli mentioned below).

sively entrusting land in this area to other imposing families of collaborators and friends: the Dalla Legge at Lobia, and the De Lisca, who were Florentines, at Torri di Confine from 1355 onwards.⁵⁸ The Cavalli did not completely neglect the abbey and its dependent churches; it was probably in this period that the cult of St Agatha was promoted in the abbey.⁵⁹ Her bones, or what were presumed to be her bones, were discovered in the cathedral at Verona during the 1350s by Bishop Pietro Della Scala, when there were two Cavalli among the canons of the chapter. In 1384 the will of the famous mercenary captain Iacopo Cavalli was to bestow a small legacy upon the hospital of San Nicolò di Villanova,⁶⁰ though not upon the abbey itself. There is no doubt, however, that Iacopo and his brothers Nicolò and Pietro, the sons of Federico, son of Nicola, son of Federico,⁶¹ used the abbey's goods to extend their own property and to lay the foundations of an inheritance destined to last for centuries. They richly deserved the vehement imprecations against them as plunderers or 'depredatores' drawn up by a notary, or by a monk, perhaps at the time of Abbot Guglielmo da Modena in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. These can be matched with the rather similar, though infrequent, maledictions launched by the administrators of the abbey of San Zeno Maggiore against other friends of the Scaligeri. Such annexations of part of the church's landed property were a very widespread phenomenon in the late Middle Ages (its Italian manifestations have been studied in depth by C.M. Cipolla and Giorgio Chittolini). This took a particularly brutal and obvious form in the region of Verona, but it did not differ in essence from what was happening elsewhere.

For the rest, however, San Pietro di Villanova succeeded in preserving, even in the second half of the fourteenth century, something more than a modest estate. The sudden political crisis of the thirteenth century and the trials of the fourteenth did not diminish the landed endowments assembled in so brief a time in the twelfth century, and reduced once more to order towards 1400 by Abbot Guglielmo da Modena, whose virtues were celebrated in an inscription placed in the church and several times published. Guglielmo's advent was probably connected with Giangaleazzo Visconti's conquest of Verona and its subject territory in 1387, although his activity on behalf of the abbey became most marked in the early years of the fifteenth century.

⁵⁸ A. Benetti, *Locara. Tra Due Pievi e Tre Comitati* (Verona: Tipografia Comboniana, 1977), 18–19 (with the mistaken date 1355); Sandri, *Breve Storia di San Bonifacio*, 39 n. 45 (and the correction inserted by the editor of the reprint, Ennio Poli).

⁵⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁰ R.C. Mueller, 'Veronesi e Capitali Veronesi a Venezia in Epoca Scaligera', in *Gli Scaligeri 1277–1387*, 371.

⁶¹ For a renewal of investitures with tithes in 1370, cf. A.S.Vr., *Mensa Vescovile*, reg. 1, c. 382r.–v.

It is well to point out, however, that at this time San Pietro had already become a *de facto* commendam, or rather, perhaps, a pre-commendam. The abbot was nearly always an absentee, and, there being only one monk left, community life had been extinguished. Reorganization extended only to the abbey's property and was certainly not backed up by any renewal of its spiritual life. The inventories and renewals of leases drawn up by the monk, Savino da Faenza, representative of Abbot Guglielmo, show that the estate, which was in reasonably good order,⁶² had been broken up into small leasehold properties, widely scattered across the whole area of the hillsides and foothills in the Veronese. On the rather fragmentary picture which can be drawn of the settlement of Villanova and its surroundings in the early fifteenth century, we can see traces of the structures laid down in the remote past and of the travails of the more recent years of war and terror. Hence, for example, the presence of a 'burgus', whose existence can be established from the early fourteenth century onwards;⁶³ the diversion of the river Alpone, which had a 'gaibum vetus' and a new one; a 'bastita' or fortified village for the rural population to escape to in case of danger.

At intervals throughout the fifteenth century, in consequence as always of the abbey's strategic position, bitter conflicts were to arise between the citizens of Verona, the leading landowners of the region, and the abbots, who were, as we shall see, commendatories. One such incident occurred in 1454, when Ermolao Barbaro, bishop of Verona, supported the requests of Zeno and Bartolomeo Campagne, two Veronese patricians who were claiming the tithes of the portion of the territory subject to assessment in the diocese of Verona, and were creditors of the abbot for the sum of 200 ducats.⁶⁴ Another serious conflict arose in 1442 when Antonio Maffei, who belonged to a powerful Veronese family and was acquiring some mills at Soave, brought suit against the abbot of Villanova on account of a weir ('restaria') placed 'in capite fovee seralii penes moenia castelli Suavii', which was impeding the flow of the river Alpone. The Maffei forbore to transfer the case to Venice because of the procedural difficulties arising from the facts that the abbey was not subject to the *podestà* of Verona and that the abbot's representative was a 'forensis'.⁶⁵ Towards

⁶² For what follows cf. A.S.Vr., Santa Maria in Organo, reg. 420, acts of 1410 and 1411: the abbot was present in June 1411. Bound with this bundle is another, subsequent to 1502, in which one 'dominus Aeneas' transacts business 'in claustro S. Petri'.

⁶³ Two pieces of land, described as 'masivi', 'super burgo de Villanova', are mentioned in 1314: A.S.Vr., Santa Maria in Organo, perg. 1264.

⁶⁴ Archivio della Curia Vescovile di Verona, Atti della Cancelleria Vescovile, Diversorum (1454-1456), cc. 3r., 4v., 16r.-v.; edited in Matilde Rancan, 'Per lo Studio dell'Episcopato Veronese di Ermolao Barbaro: i Primi Due Anni (1454-1456). Con l'Edizione di un Registro di Atti Diversi della Cancelleria Vescovile' (Graduation thesis, University of Verona, 1987-88, relatrice Giuseppina De Sandre Gasparini).

⁶⁵ A.S.Vr., Atti dei Rettori Veneti, reg. 9, cc. 195v., 203v., 300v., 301r., 303v., 326v., 332r.

the end of the century the intervention of the Venetian Doge Barbarigo was called for by a bitter dispute between the commune of San Bonifacio and the commendatory Niccolò Cybo, again over the matter of tithes: the commune was opposed to paying an indemnity to Cybo for the losses he had suffered as the result of a fire for which a priest unpopular with the locals was held to blame.⁶⁶

In 1430 the abbot of San Pietro di Villanova was Nicola 'de Anzeleriis',⁶⁷ who belonged to a family from Vicenza. At least from the 1440s onwards⁶⁸ the abbey of San Pietro was, like many other Benedictine monasteries of the Veneto, granted *in commendam*; and it did not attract the attention of the Venetian reformers associated with the movement of Santa Giustina, who were more often concerned with the suburban churches of the mainland. It was in the gift of the papacy, which formed links between Villanova and several persons of high reputation. At least between 1468 and 1483 the commendatory was the protonotary apostolic Bartolomeo Secco, who also served as vicar to Cardinal Giovanni Michiel, bishop of Verona.⁶⁹ In the 1480s the commendam of Villanova found itself in the middle of one of those diplomatic skirmishes that characterized the ecclesiastical policies of the Italian regional states in the fifteenth century: this one had three protagonists, in the papal curia, the Venetian government and the commune of Verona.⁷⁰ In 1483, in fact, the communal council of Verona officially took steps to recover for the local patriciate the right to enjoy this important benefice. This was part of a general scheme to protect the benefices of the diocese and territory of Verona from the greed of the Venetians, a programme which inspired and informed the policies of the town authorities towards the Church, and was very much in the minds of the ruling class of Verona. In September 1483 Giusto Giusti, the Veronese legate to Venice, asked the Senate 'to be so good as to confer the vacant abbey of Villanova upon his most worthy and beloved countryman, Messer Leonardo Nogarola'. Giusti was well aware of the importance of the matter for the whole of the city, 'for our city could not have laid upon me any charge more dear to my heart and more pleasing to me than this is'. But when he wrote from Venice to the city council of Verona he admitted, with good reason, lack of confidence: 'I perceive that these things are much in doubt, because of

⁶⁶ Archivio Comunale di San Bonifacio, Armadio dei Documenti Antichi, busta 3a, 'Comune S. Bonifacii Contra Rev. Abbatem Villae Novae'.

⁶⁷ Cenci, 'Senato Veneto. "Probae" ai Benefizi Ecclesiastici', *Promozioni agli Ordini Sacri a Bologna e alle Dignità Ecclesiastiche nel Veneto nei Secoli XIV-XV*, ed. C. Piana and Cenci (Quaracchi: Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1968), 377 no. 84.

⁶⁸ A.S.Vr., Atti dei Rettori Veneti, reg. 9, c. 193v., 18 April 1442: 'cardinalis Tarantinus commendatarius abbatie Villenove'.

⁶⁹ A.S.Vr., Archivio Antico del Comune, reg. 12, c. 96v. (1468) and reg. 13, cc. 47v.-48r. (1483). His predecessor had been a certain Antonio Monaldi, who in 1460 competed unsuccessfully for appointment to the Patriarchate of Venice (Cenci, 'Senato Veneto. "Probae"', 304, no. 100).

⁷⁰ Chittolini, 'Stati Regionali e Istituzioni Ecclesiastiche', 147-93.

the designs upon this abbey of Messer Benedetto Soranzo and of the chief priest [*primocerio*] [of St Mark's] in Venice', who had received an 'absolute promise' of it.⁷¹ However, neither the patricians of Verona nor those of Venice could achieve anything, because the commendam was still in the gift of the Pope. At the end of October 1486 San Pietro had very recently ('nuperrime') fallen vacant again by the death of Cardinal Gabriele Rangoni.⁷² At this delicate moment for Venetian–Roman relations, it became part of a grandiose plan for the swapping of preferments dreamed up by the Venetian Senate to overcome the resistance of Giovanni Michiel, cardinal of Sant' Angelo and bishop of Verona, who had been appointed by the Pope to the see of Pada but was disliked by the Venetian government. According to the Senators the abbey might prove to be 'commodum medium ad perfectionem omnis aptationis', a convenient means of settling everything, and Pope Innocent VIII was asked to keep his gift 'suspensam.' This is not the place to go over this complicated affair again (other aspects of it are well known). Suffice it to say that it involved the bishoprics of Verona, Padua (to which Pietro Barozzi was nominated), Treviso (to which Nicolò Franco, the papal legate, was appointed) and Belluno (already held by Barozzi); and to add that the commendam of Villanova was eventually assigned to Niccolò Cybo, bishop of Cosenza and later of Arles, a relative of the Pope.⁷³

Cybo was succeeded in 1489 by Carlo del Carretto, likewise protonotary apostolic and bishop of Cosenza;⁷⁴ and other famous people, including Pietro Bembo, enjoyed the benefice of Villanova in the early years of the sixteenth century.⁷⁵ Later, in 1562, it was to be safely absorbed into the congregation of the Olivetans.

After the startling achievements of the twelfth century, therefore, San Pietro di Villanova passed into a twilight that lasted for centuries; but the very fact that its history became so undistinguished helped to forestall intrusive alterations to the structure of the church itself, and we are still able today to appreciate the beauty of its Romanesque and Gothic architecture.

⁷¹ A.S.Vr., SS. Iacopo e Lazzaro alla Tomba, reg. 1722, fasc. 5, under date 25 September 1483.

⁷² Rangoni, a Franciscan of Brescian origin brought up in Verona, died on 27 September 1486: see C. Eubel, *Hierarchia Catholica Medii Aevi*, II (Monasterii: Libreria Regensbergiana, 1914), 19, and the entry by Clasen in *Lexicon für Theologie und Kirche*.

⁷³ Cenci, 'Senato Veneto. "Probæ"', 423; Pierantonio Gios, *L'Attività Pastorale del Vescovo Pietro Barozzi a Padova (1487–1507)* (Padua: Istituto per la Storia Ecclesiastica Padovana, 1977), 45 and 369–70.

⁷⁴ Eubel, *Hierarchia Catholica*, II, 168 (in which San Pietro di Villanova is erroneously placed in the diocese of Verona).

⁷⁵ Sandri, *Breve Storia di San Bonifacio*, 42, n. 64 (inserted by Ennio Poli, editor of the reprint, on the authority of A.S.Vr., Santa Maria in Organo, reg. 414).

