

# Mobilizing Objects and Money: Inventories of the Donations at the Origin of the Monti di Pietà\*

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## ABSTRACT

Monti di Pietà were first founded in the 1460s as public banks whose aim was to provide citizens with solidaristic credit. In this institution, the interplay between the objects pawned and the small money loans granted in exchange was vital and mediated by a well-organized paper “ecosystem” of account books that served as written records and guarantees. In setting up the Monti, a specific type of paper inventory played a crucial role, namely the list of donations (either in money or in kind) made by different social actors. These actors’ involvement (at times within choreographic ceremonies) was crucial to create consensus and gather the initial capital for a Monte. By focusing in particular on the rich documentation of the archive of the Monte di Pietà of Padua, this article highlights three key aspects of this type of inventory: how they traced the active involvement of several social groups in the city; how they recorded objects in transition from personal/household use value to financial value; how they served to build the memory of the “glorious” history of the institution.

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## 1. The Monti di Pietà and their documentation

Monti di Pietà were first founded in several Italian cities in the 1460s as a form of public bank whose aim was to provide citizens with “solidaristic” credit.<sup>1</sup> At first, these institutions offered pawn loans at considerably lower rates than the loans offered on the market (i.e., by private banks/moneylenders). This choice to make credit more accessible to the less wealthy was in many cases also a strategy to weaken the social and economic position of Jewish bankers (and communities) in Italy.<sup>2</sup> In its early phase, a key goal of the institution was to provide credit to those lower economic segments of society which practised modest artisanal and commercial activities.<sup>3</sup> Pawn loans represented a simple and quick way of accessing small amounts of money by temporarily pawning objects that guaranteed the debtors’ solvency. This policy intended to alleviate the conditions of the (vast and fluid) class of “conjunctural/working poor” in moments of temporary economic difficulty (e.g., due to illness, war, or

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<sup>1</sup> See D. Montanari, *Monti di Pietà e presenza ebraica in Italia (secoli XV-XVIII)*, Rome, 1999; M.G. Muzzarelli, *Il denaro e la salvezza: l’invenzione del Monte di Pietà*, Bologna, 2001, and P. Delcorno and I. Zattero (eds.), *Credito e Monti di pietà tra Medioevo ed età moderna: un bilancio storiografico*, Bologna, 2020, which is an extensive reassessment of the scholarship on this topic. Among the most recent contributions in the field, see L. Bruni, *Capitalismo meridiano: alle radici dello spirito mercantile tra religione e profitto*, Bologna, 2022, pp. 27-55 and L. Righi, “Lending at Interest: A Medieval Controversy in the Contemporary Debate”, in *Cristianesimo nella storia*, 43, 2022, pp. 61-91 and T. Skambraks, *Karitativer Kredit: Die Monti di Pietà, franziskanische Wirtschaftsethik und Städtische Sozialpolitik in Italien (15. und 16. Jahrhundert)*, Stuttgart, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> The latter goal was explicit in many of the earliest Monti, including the Paduan Monte which will figure prominently in this paper; see M. Melchiorre, “La propaganda antiebraica dell’Osservanza nei centri minori: Frate Bernardino da Feltre nel distretto padovano (1491-1494)”, in *Il Santo*, 56, 2016, pp. 43-63. Overall, see G. Todeschini, *La banca e il ghetto. Una storia italiana*, Rome-Bari, 2016, in which the Monti are framed within a broad (political, juridical, economic) process of delegitimation and marginalization of Jews in fifteenth-century Italy. On the intrinsic ambiguity of charity/welfare initiatives, often entangled with complex dynamics of inclusion/exclusion and control, see P. Delcorno (ed.), *Politiche di misericordia tra teoria e prassi: Confraternite, ospedali e Monti di Pietà (XIII-XVI secolo)*, Bologna, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> See M.G. Muzzarelli, “Un “deposito apostolico” per i poveri meno poveri, ovvero l’invenzione del Monte di pietà”, in V. Zamagni (ed.), *Povertà e innovazioni istituzionali in Italia dal Medioevo ad oggi*, Bologna, 2000, pp. 77-94.

famine), preventing them from falling into misery or resorting to begging.

In the new institution, the interplay between the objects pawned and the small money loans granted in exchange was vital. In this operation, a well-organized system of account books served as written records and guarantees. The duty to carefully note down the Monti's every operation was entrenched in their public nature and in the ideal of their accountability as a civic bank that (allegedly) served the common good. Hence, in 1493, when depicting the key aspects of a Monte, Bernardino da Feltre, a passionate Franciscan preacher who energetically promoted this institution in dozens of Italian cities, underlined that "the Monte ought to have a register, provide receipts, and produce many written documents."<sup>4</sup> His sermon was quite interesting, to present both the institution and its internal organization as divinely inspired, the preacher let God speak in the first person; in the text, it is God who gives a definition of what a Monte di Pietà is and how it has to function. In any case, Bernardino stated that the duty to write down and account for everything was as important as having an appropriate building to safeguard the objects and money. Consequently, the Monti di Pietà produced and conserved a massive amount of written material, reflecting its self-fashioned status as a public institution whose actions had to be verifiable.

The recent *Paper in Motion* exhibition presented some of the documents produced by the Monte di Pietà of Bologna and the Monte dei Poveri of Naples.<sup>5</sup> While providing just a glimpse of this "mountain of paper", the collective contribution to the exhibition catalogue underlined how the statutes determined that each Monte should keep a certain number of books, which ranged from one to seven,

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<sup>4</sup> "Opportet etiam habere librum et facere buletum et multas scripturas"; *Sermoni del beato Bernardino Tomitano da Feltre nella redazione di fra Bernardino Bulgarino da Brescia*, ed. C. Varischi, Milan, 1964, vol. II, p. 186 (henceforth: Bernardino da Feltre, *Sermoni*).

<sup>5</sup> See J.M. Pérez Fernández, G. Tarantino, M. Calcagni (eds.), *Paper in Motion: Information and the Economy of Knowledge in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, Siena, 2021, also available online: <https://www.paperinmotion.org/> (22/10/2022).

for different purposes. Indeed, the variety of documents testifies that despite the similarity between the institutions, they were nevertheless distinct in their internal organization.<sup>6</sup>

In different forms and based on the organization of each local institution, the Monti's paper documentation recorded – with different degrees of detail – the objects pawned (with their description and evaluation), the clients, the amount of money that was granted, and whether or not the loan was returned. As such, paper, ink and books formed the irreplaceable material infrastructure that allowed the system to work. At the same time, by recording the institution's activities, these documents charted a peculiar map of the significant portion of society connected with a Monte. The heuristic value of this paper documentation has not escaped scholars' attention.<sup>7</sup> However, a pivotal role could be played by a less investigated type of paper inventory, namely the list of donations (either in money or in kind) made by different social actors to set up the Monti.<sup>8</sup> Their involvement (at times within well-planned and choreographic ceremonies) was crucial to gather the initial capital for, or to recapitalize, a Monte di Pietà, as well as to establish and strengthen the institution's civic identity.

## 2. Donations in kind: a form of support for the Monte's capital

Preachers often had a key or at least a very visible role in supporting

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-60. See also M. Carboni and M.G. Muzzarelli (eds.), *I conti dei Monti. Teoria e pratica amministrativa nei Monti di pietà fra Medioevo ed età moderna*, Venice, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> See M. Carboni and M.G. Muzzarelli (eds.), *In pegno: oggetti in transito tra valore d'uso e valore di scambio*, Bologna, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> On the donors' function, see M. Carboni and E. Loss (eds.), *Oltre la carità: Donatori, istituzioni e comunità fra Medioevo ed Età contemporanea*, Bologna, 2021. One of the chapters deals with donations to the Monte of Orvieto left in 19 last wills; the donations were mainly of cash or properties (fields or vineyards), yet in 1499 a woman bequeathed to the Monte "a cloth of dark fabric" ("un pallio di panno nero"); A. Santilli, "I benefattori del Monte di Pietà di Orvieto tra la fine del Quattrocento e gli inizi del Cinquecento", *ivi*, pp. 91-111: 95.

this process.<sup>9</sup> They had the know-how (and the moral authority) to convince both the (civic) authorities and the population not only of the benefits of this institution, but also of its necessity. Their persuasion aimed to obtain very concrete results, since they asked the local community to provide the Monte with a location and a starting capital. We have only a few sermons pronounced on such occasions. Shedding light on this key aspect of the communication campaign in favour of the Monte is a paper manuscript recording the sermons preached by Bernardino da Feltre in Pavia, in 1493 (which underwent quite a complex transformation during the transcription process).<sup>10</sup> On a day when – according to Bernardino’s hagio-biography – a “solemn procession for the offering to the Monte di Pietà”<sup>11</sup> due to open in the town was scheduled, Bernardino exhorted everyone to give good offerings and admonished that nothing was to be squandered, so as to keep those with “talons and beaks like birds of prey” that wanted to “eat” from the Monte at arm’s length.<sup>12</sup> Here the preacher introduced an anecdote about a collection of offerings made in Padua a few years before. He recalled how peasants from the *contado* (the area around the city) contributed to the capital of the Monte by bringing 300 sacks of wheat.<sup>13</sup> Moved by their example, a

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<sup>9</sup> Their visible role should not overshadow the fact that local political authorities had often already discussed the opportunity of creating a Monte – and invited a skilled preacher exactly for this purpose.

<sup>10</sup> Milan, Biblioteca dei Cappuccini, MS A17. On this manuscript and the problems of Varischi’s edition (see note 4), see P. Delcorno “‘Per smorbare quella città’: il nesso usura/peste in Bernardino da Feltre”, in M. Tagliaferri (ed.), *I Monti di Pietà nel territorio di Ravennatensia: esperienza a confronto*, Treviso, 2022, pp. 23-54.

<sup>11</sup> Bernardino Guslino, *La Vita del beato Bernardino da Feltre*, ed. I. Checchi, Bologna, 2008, p. 227.

<sup>12</sup> “Tuti a far bone offerte etc., et nullus lo volia manzar etc.”; Milan, Biblioteca dei Cappuccini, MS A17, fol. 207v (cf. Bernardino, *Sermoni*, vol. II, p. 273).

<sup>13</sup> On donations of wheat going to form the initial capital of the Monte, see G. Silvano, *A beneficio dei poveri: Il Monte di pietà di Padova tra pubblico e privato (1491-1600)*, Bologna, 2005, pp. 145-146, which recalls how, between 1491 and 1499, more than 6% of the donations received by this Monte came in this form (3,320 out of 52,706 lire). Since between 1491 and 1495 donations of wheat were also used to organize a Monte frumentario, there may actually have been more of them; on this short-lived venture, see V. Meneghin, *Bernardino da Feltre e i Monti di Pietà*, Vicenza, 1974, pp. 298-299.

poor woman (“una poverina”) gave two eggs, which was all that she had.<sup>14</sup> The officers of the Monte accepted the gift, but when accounting for the donations received, they decided to give the eggs to the simpleton *Piero matto* (“Peter the Fool”). However, as soon as Piero heard that the eggs were an offering made to the Monte, he refused to take or eat them, saying: “May God forbid that *Piero matto* be the one who eats something belonging to the Monte...”<sup>15</sup> The anecdote served to exhort the people of Pavia to do the same and follow the exemplary morality of Peter the Fool, so the preacher asked them to publicly and collectively swear to respect the donations made to the Monte.

Within the sermon, the story is just a brief exemplary tale, yet it shows that donations were made in kind too, as is confirmed by several other sources. This type of donation was then sold or auctioned to contribute to the Monte’s capital. In this way, objects helped to set in motion the circularity between the cash (loans) and other objects (pawns) which characterized the daily life of the institution. A sixteenth-century *Vita* of Bernardino da Feltre, written on the basis of the diary of a friar who accompanied him for several years, says that the initial capital of the Monte di Pietà of Faenza combined public funds granted by the city government (a public investment in a sort of welfare system), money collected during the main feasts, and what was gained “by sending carts around, house by house, on weekdays, carts that came back always full of *panni lini* [linen sheets] and other things.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The story mirrors the biblical episode of the widow’s offering (Mark 12:41-44).

<sup>15</sup> “Non volia dio che sia Piero matto che aliquid comedat de monte, non se dica may che etc.”; Milan, Biblioteca dei Cappuccini, MS A17, fol. 207v (cf. Bernardino, *Sermoni*, II, pp. 273-274). The story is also mentioned by Bernardino Busti (a collaborator of Bernardino da Feltre): “Nemo ergo sibi appropriet predicta bona deposita pro pauperibus que etiam stulti timent sibi usurpare. Unde Petrus stultus Padue renuit comedere duo ova Monti oblata dicens: Absit ut dicatur quod Petrus fuit primus qui comedit de Monte”; *Defensorium Mons pietatis*, Milan, 1497, fol. i4r.

<sup>16</sup> Guslino, *Vita*, p. 193. Fabrics were often used for donations (as well as pawns), a custom that is also confirmed in Padua (see below).

This type of collection was sometimes organized as a sort of challenge, fostering emulation between social groups. Friar Michele d'Acqui, a contemporary of Bernardino, was a professional at promoting the Monte di Pietà by means of spectacular fundraising initiatives.<sup>17</sup> In 1496, it was thanks to Friar Michele that the Monte di Pietà in Crema was able to finally take off. Its foundation had been decided in 1493, but it had never come to light. However, Friar Michele had its statutes approved by the city council and, most crucially, helped gather the capital. As part of this initiative, he first organized a general collection of offerings during the procession of the feast of the *Corpus Domini*. This choice of timing linked the Monte (which already used the image of the Man of Sorrows) with the powerful message of this feast, that is, the symbolic overlap between the body of Christ and society, based on the idea that the Eucharist represented (and created/strengthened) the unity of Christian society.<sup>18</sup> Then, on the following days, each city district was asked to gather and present its offerings (both in cash and in kind) at the four gates of the city, in a sort of charitable competition between neighbourhoods. According to the description given by the chronicler Pietro da Terni, the winners were without a doubt the people of Porta Ripalta, who organized a majestic procession of pageant wagons, animals and banners.<sup>19</sup> The parade included a spectacular machine "higher than the roof of the houses" (*ogni tetto di case ascendeva*), representing heaven (with a real woman and a real child at its top), which needed no fewer than 40 porters to carry it. Besides other religious scenes and symbols, there

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<sup>17</sup> See P. Delcorno, "Michele d'Acqui 'motore e fundator' del Monte di Pietà di Verona", in *Il Santo*, 56, 2016, pp. 65-91.

<sup>18</sup> Beside the classic J. Bossy, "The Mass as a Social Institution 1200-1700", in *Past and Present*, 100, 1983, pp. 29-61, see (also as a counterbalance to Bossy's interpretation) M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, Cambridge, 1991.

<sup>19</sup> *Storia di Crema raccolta per Alemanio Fino dagli annali di m. Pietro Terni*, ed. G. Solera, Crema, 1844, pp. 233-235. According to Pietro da Terni, they were sponsored by Cardinal Girolamo Basso della Rovere, the commendatory abbot of Abbazia Cerreta, close to Crema. This chronicle is briefly discussed in G. Albini, "La comunità ebraica in Crema nel secolo XV e le origini del Monte di Pietà", in *Nuova Rivista Storica*, 59, 1975, pp. 378-406: 404.

were some quite inventive additions, such as a “artificial elephant” (*un elefante fincto*), with a tower and children dressed as soldiers on its back.<sup>20</sup> Stranger still was the presence of a rider “on a most beautiful ostrich” (*uno bellissimo struzzo*) or a person acting as a minotaur. Yet, the wagon that concluded the show left no doubt as to the overall “political” message: “lastly, [someone impersonating] Vespasian came on a real triumphal chariot with a crowd of Jews, tied and chained, [...] and he pronounced many verses about the Monte and against the Jews.”<sup>21</sup> The anti-Jewish tone was entrenched in the spectacle, which concluded the fundraising that in those days – between donations in money and in kind – had provided the Monte with about 12,000 lire of capital.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. Inventories of donations in favour of the Monte of Padua

In most of the cases – such as those that I have mentioned – we get just a glimpse of the actual objects collected as contributions to the capital of a Monte. A remarkable exception is given by some detailed inventories of donations in favour of the Monte di Pietà of Padua, made on several occasions in its early phase, with the involvement, among others, of Bernardino da Feltre and Michele d’Acqui. In his rich analysis of the history of this Monte, Giovanni Silvano used these sources only in part, that is, to trace the formation and increase in the Monte’s capital, without paying proper attention to the public rituals or the objects involved.<sup>23</sup> Before looking at these lists, it is

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<sup>20</sup> Given the context, this may be a reference to Eleazar’s heroic death (1 Maccabees 6:43-46), which in the medieval Christian exegesis was interpreted as a prefiguration of the salvific Passion of Christ – a topic and iconography also common in illustrated texts such as the *Speculum humanae salvationis*.

<sup>21</sup> “[...] ultimamente presentossi Vespasiano sopra di uno veramente triumphale carro cum tanta caterva di Giudei ligati et incatenati [...] disse molti versi in proposito dil Monte contra Giudei”; *Storia di Crema*, p. 235. Vespasian was the Roman emperor under whose authority Jerusalem was conquered and destroyed and many Jews were sold as slaves.

<sup>22</sup> Albini, “La comunità ebraica in Crema”, p. 404.

<sup>23</sup> Silvano, *A beneficio dei poveri*, pp. 135-191. Meneghin, *Bernardino*, pp. 263-340 solely



worth considering that they have come down to us in three different formats.

The first document is an early account book of donations (made or promised) to the Monte: the *Oblationes Monti Pietatis, promissiones et donationes*.<sup>24</sup> Its parchment cover depicts the Man of Sorrows emerging from the sepulchre, showing his wounds (the suffering body to which the poor were ideally connected). He is depicted on the top of the Monte, with some words, added at a later stage, that read: *Primo zornal delle oblazioni del S. Monte de Pietà di Padova, 1491* (fig. 1). The account book is composed of three paper quires that record, in chronological order (albeit patchily), the donations to the Monte from its foundation in 1491 to 1506, when the way of recording the contributions to the *cavedal* (capital) of the Monte changed.<sup>25</sup> As also visible from the identical layout of the book cover, this book had a sibling in the Monte of Padua's initial accounts system, the *Liber depositorum*, which recorded bank deposits and loans (*deposita et mutua*) to the new institution.<sup>26</sup>

The earliest inventories of donations in the *Primo zornal delle oblazioni* were copied – probably shortly after 1497<sup>27</sup> – into a new document, where they are not only transcribed in good order but

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considers (with his partisan approach) Bernardino da Feltre's role, while only briefly discussing the other preachers involved in strengthening this Monte (pp. 327-328).

<sup>24</sup> Padua, Archivio di Stato di Padova (henceforth: ASPd), Monte di Pietà, b. 18. Silvano, *A beneficio dei poveri*, p. 79 mentions an early copy of this document (ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 16) "that does not change anything of the original", however, I was not able to consult it. On the administrative culture of the Paduan elite that, in those decades, led the civic "welfare system" (i.e., the main charitable institutions and the Monte itself), see F. Bianchi, "Alle origini della scuola di Santa Maria della Carità", in *La scuola della Carità a Padova*, ed. G. Silvano, Milan, 2014, pp. 25-43, in particular p. 34, which recalls how the management of these institutions was intertwined with the Scuola della Carità that expressed one of the *conservador* of the Monte and used it as its own bank.

<sup>25</sup> On this change, see Silvano, *A beneficio dei poveri*, pp. 159-161.

<sup>26</sup> ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 19. Both books were initiated by the notary Zanon Tergolina (see b. 18, fol. 5r and b. 19, fol. 1r). On these two account books, see Silvano, *A beneficio dei poveri*, pp. 76-79, which devotes particular attention to the deposits and their registration (pp. 193-219).

<sup>27</sup> The last donation – derived from selling six women's shirts worth 10 lire and 4 soldi and a dark velvet pair of sleeves worth 5 lire – dates from September 14, 1497; ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 265, f. 1, fol. 35v.

**FIGURE 1**  
Christ as the Man of Sorrows over the Monte



Parchment cover of the *Primo zornal delle oblazioni* (1491-1506), Padua, ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 18.

preceded by a laudatory narrative about the foundation of the Monte.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, this document came down to us in a very poor condition of conservation (fig. 2); still, it is evidence of a conscious effort to create an ordered memory – even a sort of official narrative – about the origins of the institution, with special attention to the donations received and the social actors involved in the “heroic years” of the bank’s foundation and consolidation.

Later on, the content of these early account books also became part of a paper monument built – or rather, printed – to celebrate the Monte di Pietà of Padua, namely the *Thesaurus urbis Paduanae [...] vocatus Sanctus Mons Pietatis*, published by Pietro Saviolo in 1682, a book whose value has strangely enough not yet been fully appreciated by scholars.<sup>29</sup> Its full title is quite telling: “Treasure of the City of Padua which is called Mount of Piety, that is, the apostolic deposit of the Paduan goods [*pecunia*] collected by the civic fathers and gifted to the society of the poor so that the needy may be perpetually assisted”.<sup>30</sup> The iconography of its frontispiece, structured like a single-panel altarpiece, is even more impressive (fig. 3).<sup>31</sup> Under a vigilant Lion of Venice (symbol of the dominant political power), the city is represented with the symbolic Monte di Pietà at the centre. In its core is the *Imago pietatis*, the veritable logo of the institution (as we have also seen in its account books): the Man of Sorrows, who

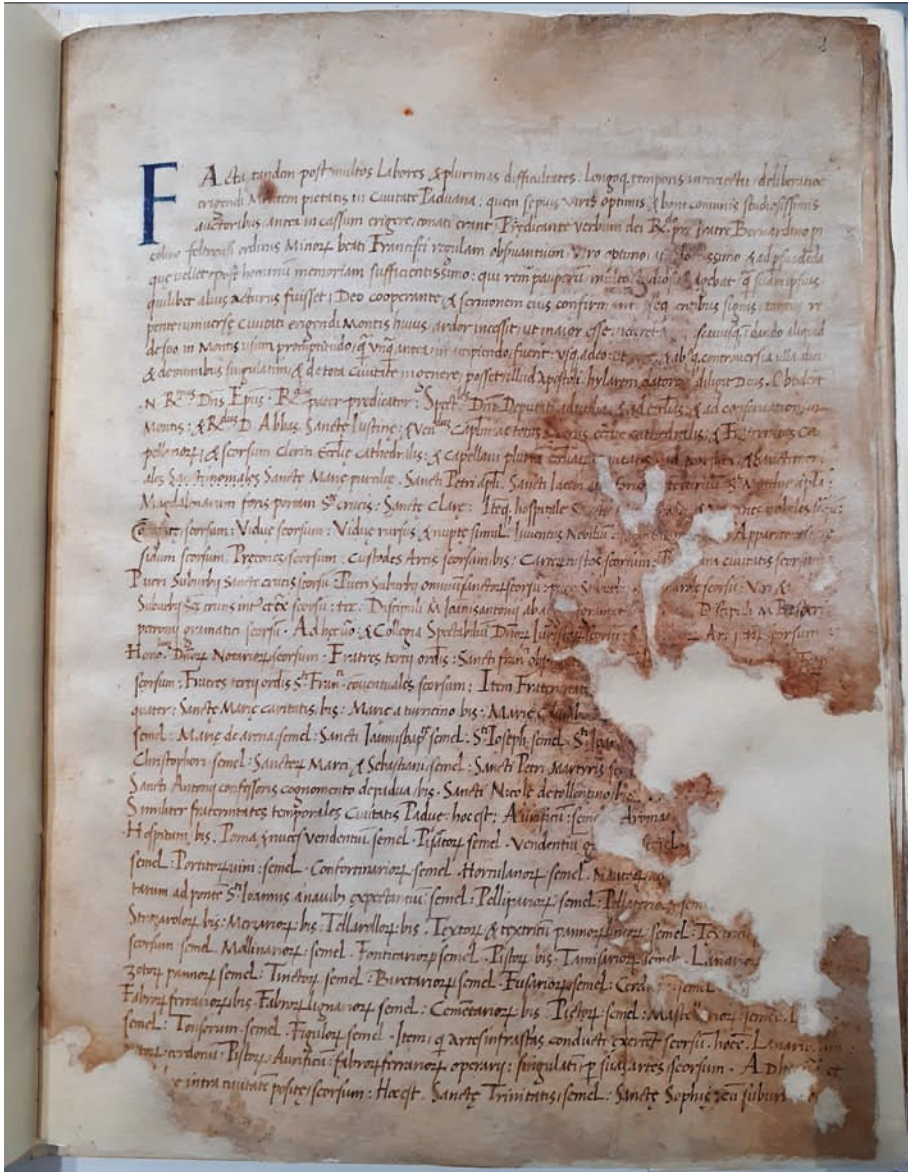
<sup>28</sup> ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 265, f. 1, fol. 1rv. Silvano, *A beneficio dei poveri*, p. 136 pays little attention to this narrative or this document.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136 only mentions it in a footnote. Saviolo had already published the early documents and statutes of the Monte in 1647 (see *ivi*, p. 26). The only scholar to extensively use Saviolo’s *Thesaurus* is Meneghin, *Bernardino*, pp. 291-301. His focus is on the events of 1491 (i.e., on Bernardino’s role), not on the material objects (cf. p. 297).

<sup>30</sup> Pietro Saviolo, *Thesaurus urbis Paduanae, alter apostolicum depositum patavinum pecuniae a patribus civitatis collectae et donatae societati Pauperum ut egeni perpetuo subleventur, vocatus S. Mons Pietatis*, Padua, 1682. The idea of the Monte as an “apostolic deposit” dates back to the earliest years of this institution; see M.G. Muzzarelli, “Un ‘deposito apostolico’ per i poveri meno poveri, ovvero l’invenzione del Monte di pietà”, in *Povertà e innovazioni istituzionali in Italia*, ed. V. Fortunati, Bologna, 2000, pp. 77-94.

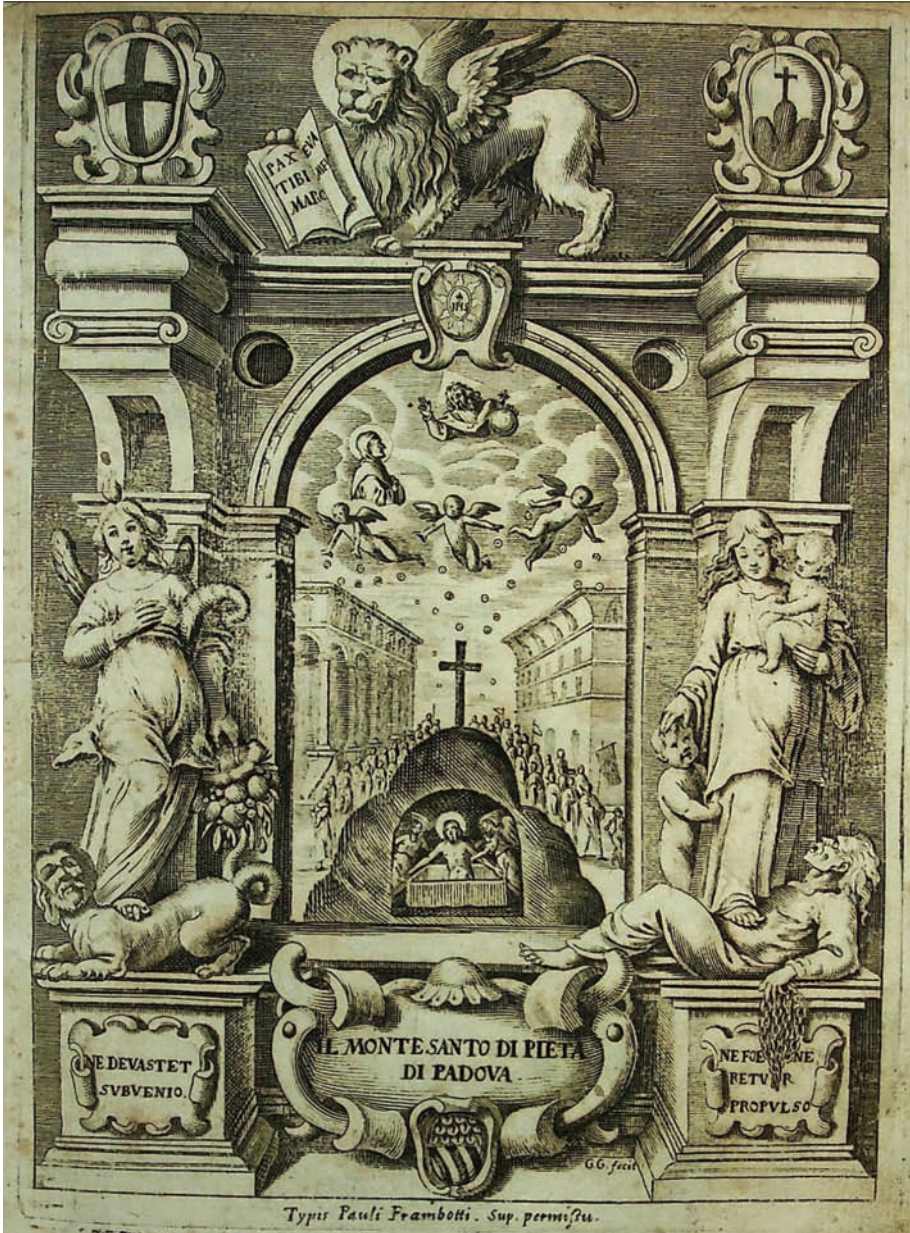
<sup>31</sup> Reproduced in Meneghin, *Bernardino*, p. 272\* (his iconographic interpretation is slightly different from mine).

FIGURE 2  
Narrative incipit of the inventory of donations (1491-1497) in Padua



ASPD, Monte di Pietà, b. 265, f. 1, fol. 1r.

**FIGURE 3**  
Frontispiece of Pietro Saviolo, *Thesaurus urbis Paduanae* (Padua 1682)



Copy held by the Archivio Generale Arcivescovile di Bologna (Reggio Emilia XVII 880).

shows his wounds, supported by two angels.<sup>32</sup> Around this symbol, a solemn procession (with banners) takes place in front of the recognizable building of the local Monte, which still dominates the square beside the Cathedral of Padua today.<sup>33</sup> The most striking detail of this image is the coins raining from the sky, sent by God through the angels as a response to the procession and to the intercession of a saintly friar (arguably Bernardino da Feltre, founder of the Paduan Monte, who had been proclaimed *beatus* in 1654). Equally interesting are the two allegorical figures on the altar-like structure that frames the main scene. On the left, an angelic woman, with a cornucopia in one hand, the other hand on her heart and a flame on her head, symbolizes Piety, following the description of the *Iconologia* (1593) of Cesare Ripa.<sup>34</sup> Under her feet is an anthropomorphic beast, which may be interpreted as the risk of subversion/unrest in light of the wording: “Ne devastet subvenio” (“To avoid destruction, I help the poor”), a message coherent with one of the goals of the modern *subventio pauperum*.<sup>35</sup> It might also be read in a religious perspective, since the works of mercy were often presented as an effective defence against any manifestation of divine wrath.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> On the pervasive presence of this image and its civic meaning in Padua, see W. Barcham, “La trasformazione del Christo passo in un emblema urbano a Padova nel Quattrocento”, in M.G. Muzzarelli and M. Carboni (eds.), *L'iconografia della solidarietà: la mediazione delle immagini (secoli XIII-XVIII)*, Venice, 2011, pp. 29-46. More in general, see C. Puglisi and W. Barcham, “Bernardino da Feltre, the Monte di Pietà and the Man of Sorrows: Activist, Microcredit, and Logo”, in *Artibus et Historiae*, 58, 2008, pp. 35-64.

<sup>33</sup> On the characteristics and meaning of these buildings, see also L. Jacobi, *The Architecture of Banking in Renaissance Italy: Constructing the Spaces of Money*, Cambridge, 2019, pp. 123-157.

<sup>34</sup> “Giovane, di carnagione bianca, di bello aspetto, con gl’occhi grassi e con il naso aquilino, haverà l’ali alle spalle, sarà vestita di rosso, con una fiamma in cima del capo, si tenga la man sinistra sopra il cuore e con la destra versi un Cornucopia pieno di diverse cose utili alla vita humana”; Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia ovvero descrizione dell’imagini universali cavate dall’antichità et da altri luoghi*, Rome: Lepido Facii, 1603, pp. 401-402 (this is the first illustrated edition). I am grateful to Dr Lorenzo Coccoli, who called my attention to this passage.

<sup>35</sup> See L. Coccoli, *Il governo dei poveri all’inizio dell’età moderna*, Milan, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> The idea that the Monte summarizes and transcends the seven works of mercy is entrenched in the (visual) discourses about this institution, as well as being represented

On the right, Charity (or again, Piety)<sup>37</sup> helps and supports two children (symbol of the most needy), while under her feet is the personification of usury, who wished to enslave the people and put them in chains – if I interpret the writing correctly: “*Ne foeneretur propulso*” (“To prevent usury, I drive it away”).

In this book, we also find a rewriting of the abovementioned brief narrative about the foundation of the Monte di Pietà of Padua, which surprisingly sheds light also on the mysterious identity of *Piero matto*.<sup>38</sup> The story details the role of a certain *Petrus sapiens* (“Peter the Wise”), a euphemistic nickname for a fool (someone “in insania veniens”), who was the son of a rich family of Brescia. He used to be seen running naked through Padua, even in winter, and was considered a fool by all. Yet, during the campaign for the Monte, he became one of most active people, collecting offerings for it all around the city.<sup>39</sup> Such was the faithfulness with which he acted (a fame confirmed by the *exemplum* given by Bernardino in Pavia) that no one considered him a fool anymore. In this new role, many people (including Bernardino) trusted him as the right person to receive their offerings; indeed, this was also a way for the benefactors to be

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in the *Tabula della salute* used by Marco da Montegallo († 1496); see Muzzarelli, *Il denaro*, pp. 114-118.

<sup>37</sup> Both options occur in Ripa, *Iconologia*, pp. 63-64 and 403.

<sup>38</sup> Saviolo, *Thesaurus*, pp. 2-3, which depends on ASPd, b. 265, f. 1, fol. 1rv.

<sup>39</sup> He became involved in this charitable enterprise not right from the start (June 26, 1491), but already in the year of its foundation, when Bernardino was heavily involved in promoting the Monte; after a couple of “normal” donations, Piero’s name stands out on July 24, 1491, when “PETRUS BRIXIENSIS, cognomenato SAPIENS, argentum diversarum formarum cereo cuidam appensum et aliquantam pecuniam ei affixam, cuius numerus ignoratur, habetur autem in summa pecuniarum minutatim collectarum; item tobaleas quasdam inter quas erat una auro in extremitatibus texta”. At the end of the list of the donations of that day it is added: “Item, quas obtulerunt utriusque sexus persone ignotae, inter quas etiam computatur oblatio Petri cognomenato Sapientis, L. 101.3”, Saviolo, *Thesaurus*, pp. 23-24 (capitalization and italics in the text). The text (as far as can be read) comes from ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 265, f. 1, fol. 5v-6r. Meneghin, *Bernardino*, pp. 295-296 recalls the role of Piero da Brescia not only in Saviolo’s text, but also in the poem *Mons Euganeus* composed by Giovanni Barozzi to celebrate the foundation of the Monte (a text also significant for its harsh attacks against the Jews; p. 301). On the use of wax as an actual currency, like in the offering of Petrus, see B. Del Bo, *L’età del lume: Una storia della luce nel Medioevo*, Bologna, 2022, pp. 53-64.

assured of their anonymity, something – it is said – that was considered particularly virtuous, in compliance with the teaching of the Gospel (cf. Matthew 6:1-4). Hence, in Padua many of the offerings passed through the hands of a person who embodied the liminal figure of a saintly fool, and this is how he is memorialized in this document, where his name is capitalized – something that is not even done for Bernardino, the main hero of the story.<sup>40</sup>

Still, most of the 1682 publication is occupied by the transcription of the lists of donations and donors, which covers (again unevenly) the years 1491 to 1506. For instance, in 1496, as a result of his Lenten preaching in the cathedral, on the Tuesday after Easter (April 5), Michele d'Acqui led a fundraising event in the main square, with a ceremony that involved different religious groups, trade guilds and individual citizens, all called to publicly manifest, on the Paduan civic "stage", their generosity and support for the local Monte di Pietà. The detailed inventory – made at the time, then copied and conserved, and finally printed almost two centuries later – opens with the preacher donating the significant amount of 621 lire, which evidently had been given to him during Lent.<sup>41</sup> The second person listed is *Petrus sapiens*, who gave 391 lire; clearly, he continued to play a significant role well after 1491. Next, professional associations are mentioned, first of all universities: the *collegium iuristarum* and the *collegium artistarum* gave the same amount (620 lire), while the notaries offered 100 lire and the *scolarum* of the Collegio Pratense 32.<sup>42</sup> Several organized social groups were also involved; for instance,

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<sup>40</sup> On the basis of Saviolo, a brief mention of Piero da Brescia occurs in O. Niccoli, *Il seme della violenza: Putti, fanciulli e mammoli nell'Italia tra Cinque e Seicento*, Rome-Bari, 1995, p. 84. Silvano, *A beneficio dei poveri*, pp. 138, 141-143, mentions him while overlooking his special identity and role.

<sup>41</sup> The introduction of this list underlines that Michele preached during Lent "ad contribuendum Montipietatis sollicitante omnes"; ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 18, fol. 135r. I partially discussed this list – on the basis of Saviolo, *Thesaurus*, pp. 69-74 – in P. Delcorno, "All'ombra del gigante: il Monte di Pietà nell'azione di Timoteo da Lucca e Michele d'Acqui", in *Credito e Monti di Pietà*, pp. 245-280: 259-260.

<sup>42</sup> ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 18, fol. 135r. On the involvement of the *collegium iuristarum* in charitable/welfare institutions in Padua, see Bianchi, "Alle origini della scuola di Santa Maria della Carità", p. 30.



young nobles (352 lire) and different groups of women: unmarried girls (125), wives (486), widows (383) and handmaids (*ancillæ*), who presented 24 lire (a small amount but coming from a lower segment of the working class).<sup>43</sup> Many parishes and confraternities also contributed, as well as trade associations. For instance: the glass-makers offered 46 lire, blacksmiths 40 lire, ragmen (*fratalea strazzarolorum*) only 14, jailers 40, bakers 50 and so on.<sup>44</sup> While considering and comparing the different types of support that the Monte received from different parishes and the different working categories (in that year, bakers and jailers together almost matched the donation made by notaries – something that one might not expect) is beyond the scope of this contribution, this type of source would allow us to draw a (social) map of the type of support the Monte received during its first few years of existence. Finally, specific citizens are also recorded as making monetary donations (“hec in pecunia numerata”), including four women who were teachers, for example, Venturina de Strata, who offered 24 lire.<sup>45</sup> Altogether, these teachers collected (perhaps also from their students) 60 lire.

The second part of the list records donations of objects that would then be auctioned a few weeks later (on April 26 and 29). The register states that only the main gifts have been recorded (so, things like the poor woman’s two eggs mentioned in Bernardino’s sermon do not appear). Still, besides several jewels (such as a ruby set in gold, auctioned for 12 lire and 8 soldi), there are also some quite ordinary objects, as can be seen in the following excerpt (figure 4 and table 1).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 18, fol. 135v.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 135rv. The support of trade associations (in the form of deposits) can also be seen in the refoundation of the Monte of Bologna in 1504; see A. Antonelli (ed.), *Il Giornale del Monte della Pietà di Bologna: Studi e edizione del più antico registro contabile del Monte di Pietà di Bologna (1473-1519)*, Bologna, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> “Magistra puellarum apud ecclesiam cathedralem [...] l. 6; magistra de Strata Venturina [...] l. 24; magistra alia puellarum in civitate discentium [...] l. 24; magistra alia [...] l. 6”; ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 18, fol. 135v.

<sup>46</sup> I have marked in bold the words that are changed in Saviolo, *Thesaurus*, pp. 72-74, sometimes owing to a mistake in reading the original (*schutellinus* becomes *cultellinus*),



**TABLE 1**  
**Inventory of donations made on April 5, 1496,**  
**Primo zornal delle oblazioni, Padua**

Cultelli 8	Eight knives
Schuffieta una velluti a puero	A baby's velvet bonnet
<b>Schutellinus</b> unus de peltro	A little pewter bowl
Una bambasina alba	A white cotton wool [dress]
Una rassa morella <b>sine</b> manicis	A dark purple woollen [dress] without sleeves
Unum par manicarum beretinarum in modum retis	A pair of grey sleeves, woven like a web (?)
Unum par manicarum damaschini aurati lacerati	A pair of sleeves of broken golden damask
Unum par manicarum de scimito nigro [...]	A pair of sleeves of black silk/velvet
Una <b>camisia</b> ad homine portata	A used men's shirt
Una <b>camisia</b> ad homine nova sine collario	A new men's shirt without collar
Tres fassie a pueris	Three children's bands
Unum mantile novum brachiorum 6 grossum	A new thick cloak long six arms
Due toballee novee	Two new tablecloths
Six <b>toballeoli</b> novi et unus vetus [...]	Six new napkins and one used [...]
Unum <b>lenzoletum</b> a cuna cum capitibus ut supra [i.e. <i>aviculatis</i> ] [...]	A little sheet for a cradle with <i>aviculatis</i> trims [...]
Vigintisepte <b>facioleti</b> vari	Twenty-seven assorted handkerchiefs
Quatuor facioli serici, triti et maculati [...]	Four silken handkerchiefs, worn out and stained [...]
Una <b>zorneta</b> alba a puero	[...] A child's white overcoat
Unum cingulum <b>prunacium</b> (?) non fulciturum cum tres paternostris	A purple belt not filled up, with three <i>Pater noster</i> s
Unus Virgilius impressus	A printed book of Virgil
Bona autem vendenda sunt, videlicet:	Goods also to sell, that is:
Unus cingulum aureum ad damaschinam [...]	A golden belt of damask [...]
Unus cultellus cum manico aniclato pauci valoris	A knife with an <i>aniclato</i> handle of little value
Unus annulus aureus cum lapide simili alicom, caratorum quindicim (?) [...]	A ring of gold with a stone similar to unicorn's ivory, fifteen carats [...]
Uncie tres corallorum variorum et minorum	Three ounces of various small corals
Carati novem gemmarum parvarum	Nine carats of small gems
Unus <b>elmus</b> antiquus	An antique helmet
<b>Camisie septem</b> a donna sex subtiles nove	Six women's blouses, new and thin
<b>Camisie</b> due a donna grossiores	Two women's blouses, in a thicker fabric
Unus <b>linzoletus</b> a cuna cum capitibus aureis	A little sheet for a cradle, with golden trims
Una vestis damaschini nigri a donna, oblata tempore fratris Bernardini, que vendita fuit ut infra L. 47, s. 10	A women's dress of black damask, given at the time of friar Bernardino, which was sold for 47 lire and 10 soldi
Una petia telle de lisino, brachiorum vigintiduorum, vendita ut infra L. 10 47	A piece of fabric <i>de lisino</i> , twenty-two arms long, which was sold for 10 lire

ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 18, fol. 136rv.

It is a list of very concrete objects suggesting that different types of citizens decided, once again, to support the institution that had started to operate in Padua five years before.<sup>48</sup> Since these objects were then sold, they speak of the circulation of material goods, some of which offer a glimpse into the “material culture of the middling class.”<sup>49</sup> All considered, the fundraising promoted by Michele d’Acqui (one assumes in strict cooperation with the lay officers of the Monte, who presided over the activity) gathered the considerable sum of roughly 5,500 lire, one of the highest registered in this account book.<sup>50</sup>

As is clear from this sample, clothes and fabrics take up a great deal of space in this type of list. For instance, on July 17, 1491, Bernardino da Feltre gave the Monte a precious dress (“unam investituram raxii cremexini cum cassis dalmascheni auri et brazalibus de restagno”) offered by a widow, as well as a cloak (“unum mantile cum capitibus in aureo brachiorum quatuor vel circa”), and several belts – one white belt with red and white fringes and a fibula, with seven decorations made of gilded silver (“cum paxetis septem argenti auratis”), another reddish / orange (*leoninus*) women’s belt with a fibula and 11 silver decorations (“coloris leonini cum capite fiba longis et paxetis XI argenti non aureati”).<sup>51</sup> Similarly, we find several

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but most often to formalize the macaronic Latin of the original text: *camisia* -> *subucula*; *toballeoli* -> *mappulae*; *lenzoletum* -> *linoleolus*; *facioleti* -> *sudarioli*; *elmus* -> *galea*. The English translation is at times tentative, since the objects are not always clearly identifiable.

<sup>47</sup> For the last two items, the value at which they were sold is added in smaller writing.

<sup>48</sup> This point is underlined in Silvano, *A beneficio dei poveri*, p. 152.

<sup>49</sup> See P. Hohti Erichsen, *Artisans, Objects and Everyday Life in Renaissance Italy: The Material Culture of the Middling Class*, Amsterdam, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> At the end of Lent in 1504, friar Francesco di San Colombano led a fundraising campaign worth 7,534 lire (the list of donations is missing); see Saviolo, *Thesaurus*, p. 86. On this friar, see Delcorno, “All’ombra del gigante”, pp. 260-263. To give an idea of the extent of the success of these fundraising activities, one can compare them with the annual income of the main charitable institutions of Padua at the time: Ospedale Ca’ di Dio about 6,500 lire in 1473; Ospedale San Francesco about 3,000 lire in 1490; Scuola della Carità 5,136 in 1487 (to which one has to add donations in kind); cf. Bianchi, “Alle origini della scuola di Santa Maria della Carità”, p. 35.

<sup>51</sup> ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 18, fol. 19rv. With minor differences (two belts instead of three) in ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 265, f. 1, fol. 5r and Saviolo, *Thesaurus*, pp. 20-21.

pairs of sleeves of different colours (with golden stripes, red images, or made of damask) but also more humble handkerchiefs of different dimensions.<sup>52</sup> Among the donations, books are rare, yet we do not only find a copy of Virgil but also, on another occasion, a prayer book of parchment made in Paris (“*officioulum quodam literarum Parisiensium membranis*”), with an estimation of its value at 4 lire.<sup>53</sup>

It would be possible to continue to add objects, as there are hundreds of them, including some peculiar items (in our sample, things such as an “antique helmet” or a “little sheet for a cradle, with golden trims”). Leaving behind the “vertigo of the list”,<sup>54</sup> which is quite a temptation when looking at such rich inventories, the material goods mentioned should be enough to show how this type of source provides us with a precious vantage point to view the life of Paduan urban society. We can imagine piles of objects (at times even their shapes, materials and colours) and the organized movement of the various social groups and individuals who decided to take part in this collective enterprise. As historians, we can only speculate on the multiple reasons and feelings of the people who participated in this event. One can think that some gave generously, making a real sacrifice, while others gave just a small fraction of what was at their disposal. Some of the objects may have been superfluous to their previous owners, who gave them without a care, while other objects may not have been easily replaceable or their owners might have been profoundly attached to them. All of these things can be imagined behind these lists of objects. While these elements remain beyond the reach of historical research, the movement of goods for charity (rather, for a public credit institution) is instead very concrete. And while money (*pecunia numerata*) had a somewhat straight itinerary (from the hands of the donors to the bank capital), for donations in kind the dynamic was more complex, since once an object

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<sup>52</sup> ASPd, Monte Pietà, b. 18, fol. 19v.

<sup>53</sup> ASPd, Monte Pietà, b. 265, f. 1, fol. 4v (July 10, 1491). On May 6, 1492, it recorded a donation of many books by wives and widows, but no details were given (fol. 8v).

<sup>54</sup> U. Eco, *La vertigine della lista*, Milan, 2009.

was gifted to the Monte it needed to be auctioned to actually be of use. It needed the (second-hand) market to be effective, since only when it was sold would the donation achieve its worldly effect. In the abovementioned list, we find a dress of black *damaschino* that is registered as “given at the time of friar Bernardino”, which means at least three years earlier, since the last time Bernardino da Feltre was in town was June 1494.<sup>55</sup> We do not know why it was not auctioned at that time; yet, in 1496 it sold quite well: for almost 48 lire.

The last aspect I would like to underline is how at times this account book also recorded the scenographic elements of these public events. For instance, on Sunday May 6, 1492 it notes that the offering of 400 lire made by our Peter the Fool was presented “in curru triumphali cum virtutibus”, that is, in a spectacular way, on a wagon decorated with symbolic figures that passed through the city.<sup>56</sup> He is also mentioned in 1495: a famous preacher, Bernardino de Busti, set up “a solemn scenography (*apparatus*)” in the main square to collect donations. Immediately after the Franciscan friar, who offered a “white candle” of the value of 113 lire, it is recorded that “Peter nicknamed the wise, with a huge procession of boys and girls” (“*Petrus cognomenato sapiens cum grande apparatu puerorum utriusque sexus*”) presented an offering of 136 lire (followed by a list of objects).<sup>57</sup> We encounter the active involvement of children and teenagers in support of the foundation and life of the Monte in other places too, most famously in Savonarola’s promotion of the Monte di Pietà in Florence. Moreover, on many occasions we are told that confraternities and parishes put their offerings on display in parades with banners with their saints’ image. Indeed, this type of procession

<sup>55</sup> Guslino, *Vita*, p. 254, which records that Bernardino preached for one month, several times inviting the people to make donations to the Monte. We have the list of donations collected on Sunday July 22, 1494; see ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 265, f.1, fol. 12r-13r (and Saviolo, *Thesaurus*, pp. 53-57).

<sup>56</sup> ASPd, Monte Pietà, b. 265, f. 1, fol. 8v. On these spectacular initiatives, see Muzzarelli, *Il denaro*, pp. 24-29 and – for Padua – Meneghin, *Bernardino*, pp. 297-298 and 300-302.

<sup>57</sup> ASPd, Monte Pietà, b. 265, f. 1, fol. 14r. On wax used as an alternative currency, see note 39.

and public display of (civic) charity is recorded by other sources – and also captured in the image of 1682 in Saviolo’s book.<sup>58</sup> For instance, the parishioners of St Lorenzo arrived with their priests, following the *vexillum crucis* (and giving 40 lire). Yet, the solutions could be more inventive and picturesque still: on the same day, greengrocers (*hortolani*) brought 30 lire “embedded in a melon, with a golden coin on its top.”<sup>59</sup> A few days later, the offerings almost reached the heights of a religious play. The residents of the suburb of Santa Croce, especially the brick-makers (*fornacerii*) and sailors, arrived in a procession, with horses in front and behind people dressed up as the Three Kings, with a large crowd dressed as *ethiopi* (black people) and strangers, creating an explicit link between the Monte and the Nativity (*presepe*).<sup>60</sup> It was not just show, since it resulted in a conspicuous donation of 222 lire.

It would be difficult to overestimate this type of donation, which arrived in different forms and with different choreographies. Indeed, in the accounts of the formation of the Monte’s *cavedal* leading up to May 1, 1499, the first and by far most important entry is “the donations in cash [and] derived from the selling of the silver, wax, and things offered to the Monte”. These amounted to 40,122 lire, 76% of the total capital (52,705 lire), to which one has to add the second entry, the income from wheat donations (3,320 lire).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> On the use of banners, see Muzzarelli, *Il denaro*, pp. 125-136.

<sup>59</sup> “Hortulani libras triginta in quodam melone infixas, qui in summitate habebat aureum unum”; ASPd, Monte Pietà, b. 265, f. 1, fol. 4r (July 24, 1491).

<sup>60</sup> “Incolę suburbii Sancte Crucis ab intus et ab extra, una cum fornaceriis et navicularibus eiusdem loci, obtulerunt libras ducentasvigtintiduas, hoc est L. 222. Il venerunt processionaliter cum ingenti numero equorum precedentium et subsequendum tres magos ad presepe dei (?) contra domum montis instructum munera oblaturus, habentes grandem numerum ethiopum et vestitum habitus peregrini”; Ibid., fol. 6r (July 31, 1491). Borgo Santa Croce was in the southwestern part of Padua, close to the river Bacchiglione.

<sup>61</sup> “Oblatione del Monte de pietà de Padoa. Dieno haver adì primo mazo 1499 per loreo medesne riceputi in contadi, tratto de arzenti, cere et robe vendute offerte a dicto monte da XXVI zugno 1491 che principiò fin in april 1499, reduiti in sumario per li spettabili [...] calculatori electi a fare le ragione de dicto monte. Apare per suo conto in secretario. Registrado L. 40122, s. 9”; ASPd, Monte di Pietà, b. 941, fol. 1r. The other entries are do-

#### 4. Conclusion: bookkeeping and memory

Overall, based on the case of Padua, three aspects of this type of inventory of donations emerge. First, these lists trace the involvement of several actors in the city, both as private citizens and organized religious and social groups (in Italian, one would speak of the *corpi intermedi* of society): from parishes and confraternities to trade guilds. Second, these documents record the movement of objects in their transition from individual/household use value to a financial value. While at the moment of the donation the objects had a symbolic value (within a ritualized gesture, the donation publicly expressed the people's active support for the project of the Monte and the acknowledgment of its concrete value for the city), only when they were sold were they integrated into the Monte's actual capital. Third, these account books were more than practical bookkeeping tools. In the earliest phase at least, they also provide records of the social context that generated the *cavedal del Monte*, with its expected or unexpected heroes (acclaimed preachers, officers of the Monte, but also *Piero matto*), the crowds of people and social groups, as well as descriptions of the visual and spectacular organization of fundraising events.

Looking at this source more closely, it is less odd that in 1682, a two-century-old account book, safeguarded in the archive of the Monte of Padua, was published to celebrate the institution's "glorious" history. Paper had preserved not just strings of numbers, dates and names, but traces of a complex history. This history remains in part to be explored, particularly concerning the material goods (and material culture) it involved, which could be of great financial value or quite humble, mirroring the story of the pawns of the Monte. And it is not impossible to think that some of the people who gave small donations to the Monte – both personally or as a collective group – may have been among its clients later on. There was no fixed divi-

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nations collected in the cashboxes of some churches (for 522 lire, just 1% of the total) and the support provided by the Monte confraternity, founded in 1492 (8,710 lire, more than 16%).



sion of roles between benefactors and beneficiaries. Hence, their act of charity was also an investment in an institution that could support them in times of need. Documents such as the *Primo zornal delle oblationi* give us a concrete glimpse of this movement of material goods which was a collective investment in the life of the city, and opens the door to an in-depth study of the different social groups who supported the Monti.

