
POSITION PAPER

The Convent of Santa Chiara in Urbino: A New Chronology of its Construction and Patronage

Sarah Clough Pearson*

Santa Chiara in Urbino, Italy, is a fifteenth-century convent of considerable size and architectural complexity. The founding patron of the building project, which was designed by the Sienese architect Francesco di Giorgio, has traditionally been regarded as Duke Federico da Montefeltro. New documents demonstrate, however, that the convent should rather be understood as a Montefeltro family project, begun by Duke Guidantonio da Montefeltro and continued and enhanced by his son, Federico, and his granddaughter, Elisabetta. Such a scenario reshapes our understanding of the way in which architecture was commissioned by the Montefeltro as a dynasty, and sheds new light on the way in which Federico da Montefeltro used patronage of existing family projects to cement his status as ruler of Urbino.

Introduction

The convent of Santa Chiara, begun in the fifteenth century, today the Istituto Superiore per le Industrie Artistiche (ISIA), stands on the southeastern rim of the city of Urbino in the Marche region of northern Italy. Until now, the responsibility for the convent's initial construction has been accepted as that identified in 1862 by Count Giacomo Ubaldini, who was part of a group of Urbinate citizens who petitioned for the preservation of the convent buildings. Ubaldini said the convent was 'designed and directed by Francesco di Giorgio Martini' (Rotondi 1949: 117–118). The convent is now accepted as being part of the oeuvre of Francesco di Giorgio, based on his presence in Urbino between 1472 and 1501, around the date of the convent's founding, and a comparison with his signature buildings, which include the Ducal Palace in Gubbio, circa 1476, and the church of San Bernardino in Urbino, circa 1480 to 1490 (Fiore and Tafuri 1993). The founder and principal patron of Santa Chiara is traditionally accepted as Duke Federico da Montefeltro, who ruled Urbino between 1444 and 1482 (Fiore and Tafuri 1993: 260–273). Research into the history of the Clarissan order in Urbino and the foundation of Santa Chiara demonstrates, however, that this is too simplistic a reading of the genesis of the convent.

In fourteenth-century Italy, a wave of interest in the Clarissan order led to the founding of many new convents. This interest was furthered in the fifteenth century by a wave of reformation within Clarissan houses. This reforming zeal was prompted by the preaching of religious reformers such as Bernadino da Siena, who was canonised in 1450. He initiated massive reform among the Italian

Clarissans and instigated the construction of new observant houses. Leading families of the time, the Gonzaga, the Malatesta, the Montefeltro and the Varano, already linked by ties of marriage, became further interconnected through their patronage and improvement of observant Clarissan houses.¹ Among these new convents, Santa Chiara in Urbino was a building of high status, because of both its architectural complexity and its occupants, who included relatives of the Montefeltro family.

Whilst Santa Chiara should be considered a Montefeltro commission, the convent has origins in an earlier institution. The convent's story effectively began in 1421 when Pietro Gambacurta of Pisa (1355–1435) established a conservatory, essentially a tertiary house for noble widows following a religious life but without taking any formal vows, in Urbino. A sales receipt of 16 August 1421 recorded the purchase of land to house this conservatory on the site, subsequently occupied by the Santa Chiara convent (Ligi 1953: 401). The foundation was financed by Caterina, widow of Pietro Foschi of Rimini, and her daughter, Simona, widow of Antonio di Ser Arcangelo (Londei 1998–1999: 37, 14). Details concerning the conservatory's form are provided in a receipt for the purchase of a house, formerly the property of Tomasso Catani. The sale was recorded on 31 August 1431 by the notary Nicola di Giovanni, who describes the property as 'a house with ground, roof, walls and vegetable garden adjacent to this house, located in the city of Urbino in the Santa Croce quarter' (Londei 1998–1999: 37). It is likely that, following this purchase of the house, the widows later sought to take on the Clarissan rule and establish a convent proper. Such a transition from a tertiary house to a convent was not uncommon in the quattrocento and was one of the ways in which the order spread (e.g., Filipak 1957; McNamara 1996).

Historically, the limited literature on the construction of Santa Chiara as a convent proper has assigned patronage

* Independent researcher and associate lecturer with Madingley Hall, University of Cambridge, UK
gasthorpesarah@gmail.com, Sarah.Pearson@tutor.ice.cam.ac.uk

to Duke Federico da Montefeltro. This assertion is supported by primary sources and the attribution of the design of the building to Francesco di Giorgio, whose presence in Urbino is first recorded in 1477 (Cantatore 1993: 412). A new examination of the historical record, however, makes clear that Federico's father, Count Guidantonio instigated planning for the construction of a new Clarissan convent in Urbino, and that the project was continued by his son Federico, and subsequently by Federico's daughter, Elisabetta. Thus, Santa Chiara should be understood as a Montefeltro family endeavour spanning three generations.

Count Guidantonio's involvement in Santa Chiara's construction history is demonstrated by two previously unpublished bulls issued by Pope Eugene IV dating from 1441 and 1442.² The 1441 bull permitted the sale of land to finance construction of a new convent of the Order of Saint Clare, whilst the 1442 Bull restates this intention and places the proposed convent under the governance of the Urbino confraternity of Santi Jacopo et Antonio. According to these sources, the convent was intended to house nuns from the existing convent of Santa Margherita in Urbino. The new building, according to the 1441 bull, provides information about what was to be a purpose-built convent with 'a church, bell tower, gardens, dormitory, refectory, and all else necessary'.

The two bulls demonstrate clearly that Guidantonio desired to construct a Clarissan convent in Urbino, in all probability through the formalisation of the conservatory of noble widows. The bulls identify that the convent was to be located at the site known as *lo cortile* [sic]. This demonstrates a clear link between the Guidantonio project, the conservatory of widows, and Santa Chiara. The exact location of the proposed convent, that is, the area referred to in the papal bull as *lo cortile*, can be identified as the present Santa Chiara site, located on Via del Cortile, which later came to be known as Via Santa Chiara. It is also the site where the conservatory had been founded in 1421. Thus, Guidantonio sought to establish a Clarissan convent in the exact location where Federico was later instrumental in financing the construction of a Clarissan house. Guidantonio's death in 1442 seems to have brought to an end the proposed involvement of nuns from the convent of Santa Margherita in this project, but Guidantonio should nevertheless be regarded as the convent's first patron, achieving papal permission for its formalization.

After Guidantonio's death, his son Oddantonio succeeded as count and retained the position until his assassination in 1444 (Lazzari 1806: 104). No known evidence indicates that Oddantonio pursued the creation of a convent at *lo cortile* during his two-year tenure, although he did finance improvements at the neighbouring monastery of San Girolamo in 1443 (Mazzini 2000: 512).

In 1444 Federico da Montefeltro succeeded as count of Urbino.³ As an older but illegitimate son, Federico was not expected to rule and had been carving out a successful career as a *condottieri* at the time of his highly unpopular younger brother's death; although his accession to power was unforeseen, there is no suggestion that his

illegitimacy was a bar to his succession. During his tenure, Federico pursued a patronage policy that continued and improved upon projects begun by his ancestors, with the exception of Oddantonio, whilst also launching new commissions to cement his position and status. This policy underlined Federico's familial links whilst also distancing him from his younger brother. In fact, several of the largest building commissions of Federico's reign were continuations of existing family projects in Urbino, including the new cathedral, which was begun by Guidantonio, as was the church and convent of San Donato, later renamed San Bernardino (Ugolini 1895: I, 90). Family projects were thus a part of Federico's overall patronage.

The first evidence of Federico's involvement at Santa Chiara is provided by notary Bartolomeo di Brugaldino di Martino. In a document of 1445, recording Federico's purchase of land for the purpose of constructing a convent building, the notary describes the land as being 'in the quarter of Santa Croce, in the locality of *lo cortile*' (Londei 1998–1999: 37, 15). This dating makes Santa Chiara one of the earliest construction projects of Federico's rule. The same document describes the piece of land in question as a vast section of hillside; its dimensions are given in some detail, and its location is described as adjoining 'the public road called the Via del Cortile' (Londei 1998–1999: 37).

Further evidence of Federico's involvement with Santa Chiara occurred in 1456 when the conservatory became a convent proper and it received the Rule of Saint Clare from Pope Calixtus III (Lazzari 1805: 118). This change in the institution's status, from conservatory to convent, resulted from Federico's petition to the pope. Federico also requested the transfer of his cousin, Elisabetta da Varano, from the Clarissan convent of Santa Maria di Monteluca in Perugia to become the convent's first abbess, but when the transfer was not immediately realised Federico obtained a papal order demanding Elisabetta's transfer (Fantozzi 1930: 366–67; Wood 1996: 239). Federico's intercession indicates the level of his interest in this particular establishment, and that he intended to strengthen the Montefeltro link to the convent by introducing family members to the community; Elisabetta was but one of these. Federico's first wife, Gentile Brancaleoni, entered the convent shortly before her death in 1457 (presumably in order to die there as an act of piety). A daughter of Federico who took the name Chiara was also placed in the convent as a nun.

The date of Santa Chiara's completion has been as indefinite as its foundation date (**Fig. 1**). A building of considerable size and architectural complexity, the convent is attributed to the Siense architect Francesco di Giorgio Martini (1439–1501) (**Fig. 2**). The contemporary account of Vespasiano da Bisticci, a bookseller, who worked for Federico for fourteen years and was a frequent visitor to the Urbinate court until his death in 1498, refers to both the church and convent as constructed during Federico's lifetime and erroneously states that Federico was the founding patron of Santa Chiara (Da Bisticci 1892, vol. 1: 310). This evidence provides 1482 as a definite *terminus ad quem* for the church, described by Da Bisticci at that time as a complete building. He



Figure 1: The convent of Santa Chiara, Urbino, view from the east (author's photograph).

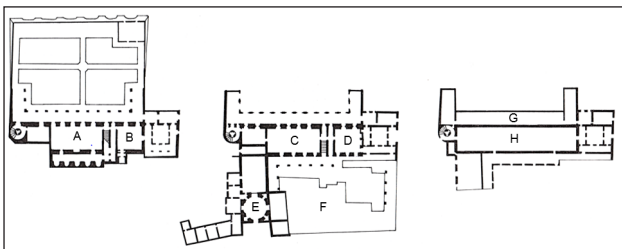


Figure 2: Reconstructed plan of the Martinian design for Santa Chiara. *Ground floor:* A. Laundry; B. Drying room. *First floor:* C. Refectory; D. Kitchen; E. Church and choir; F. Unfinished section of cloister. *Second floor:* G. Area for cells; H. Dormitory (author).

also refers to the convent but, given the building's history, it is probable that the convent, whilst established, was still under construction, not only in 1482 when the church was supposedly completed, but even at the time of Federico's death.

The family tradition of patronage of the convent of Santa Chiara was continued by Elisabetta Feltria, Federico's daughter. In 1482, she entered the convent following the deaths of both her father and her husband, Roberto Malatesta (Mazzanti 1993: 153). In a document of 26 January 1494 the notary Antonio Vanni recorded

Elisabetta's profession as nun, when she took the name Suor Chiara and designated her brother, Guidobaldo, duke of Urbino, to dispose of all her property, with the assets dedicated to the convent's construction (Londei 1998–1999: 37). The document reinforces the degree to which Santa Chiara was associated with the Montefeltro family: with her profession at the convent, Elisabetta, daughter of Federico, joined Elisabetta, her second cousin, while also establishing a patronage connection between the house and her brother, Guidobaldo.

In a letter of 23 January 1566, from the courtier Giancarlo Gianni to Duke Guidobaldo II, who ruled the city of Urbino between 1538 and 1574, the author confirms Elisabetta's involvement with Santa Chiara, recording that she retired there 'to live a religious and holy life in that beautiful monastery which she constructed at her expense' (Colucci 1794: 81). The gift of Elisabetta's dowry was valued at 12,000 florins – a considerable sum – and it would have contributed significantly to the convent's completion (Dennistoun 1909: 209).

Francesco di Giorgio did not die until 1501, so his last years coincided with Elisabetta's early years at Santa Chiara, and Elisabetta most probably funded continued construction of the convent according to the Martinian design after Federico's death in 1482. Alternative scenarios are chronologically possible but unlikely. For example, the

convent funded by Federico could have been destroyed to make way for a new one commissioned by Elisabetta from Francesco di Giorgio after 1482, but this would have been inconsistent with other building projects commissioned by Federico from Francesco di Giorgio, which were continued after Federico's death, such as the church and convent of San Bernardino in Urbino (Burns 1993: 230). The most likely scenario is that Elisabetta followed an existing tradition of Montefeltro family patronage by continuing to finance her father's commission of Francesco di Giorgio. In so doing she provided significant financial input to the construction of Santa Chiara.

As a wealthy widow and nun, Elisabetta was in a position to exert maximum control of her income, and with her gift of 12,000 florins to the convent, she should be regarded as a significant female patron of the era, and one of Santa Chiara's key patrons. Francesco di Giorgio's design for Santa Chiara was large and complex, and therefore expensive. It is highly probable that without Elisabetta's financial support, the convent's construction would have stopped long before it did. Her role was acknowledged in Fuschino Brancaleone's late sixteenth-century history of Urbino, which included a description of Santa Chiara that emphasised the institution's exceptional quality, assigning responsibility for its construction jointly to Elisabetta and Federico:

Much of the church, like the attached monastery, [is] an admirable structure and splendid artifice; one could not find its equal in all of Italy, [and this] is due to the munificence of Duke Federico and of the illustrious Lady Elisabetta his daughter, already a nun in the same monastery. (Ligi 1953: 402)

Despite Elisabetta's generous support, convent construction remained incomplete in the seventeenth century, as indicated in a previously unpublished letter of 9 June 1613, from the abbess of Santa Chiara to Duke Francesco Maria II of Urbino, the son of Duke Guidobaldo II. The abbess complained, 'We remain without a part of the monastery', and she implied that the situation affected the nuns' enclosure, observing that an adjoining property overlooked parts of the convent, including 'all of the cloister, where there is the well from which we take water', as well as 'the cells where the nuns live, particularly where the Mistress of the Novices lives' (ASF Ducato di Urbino Cl.1 Div.G CCLIV 586). The convent was never completed in accordance with Francesco di Giorgio's design, and as this letter indicates, even over a hundred years after its inception, it remained partially incomplete.

Conclusion

The new documents pertaining to Santa Chiara's development clearly refute the longstanding understanding that Federico da Montefeltro was the convent's founder and patron. Instead, it has been demonstrated that Santa Chiara should be understood as a Montefeltro family project. It was conceived by Count Guidantonio da Montefeltro, continued by his son, Federico, and then by his

granddaughter, Elisabetta, who emerged as a significant female patron. While Guidantonio decided fundamental details, such as the convent's location and religious order, continuation of the project was one of Federico's earliest architectural ventures on becoming count. The convent's final form is based on the work of Francesco di Giorgio Martini. The newly discovered documents help to clarify the structure's early history, including its patrons, the choice of site and the religious order that would occupy it.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Notes

- ¹ These convents include Santa Chiara in Naples, San Paolo in San Miniato (Pisa), Corpus Domini in Mantua, Santa Lucia in Foligno and Santa Chiara in Urbino.
- ² ASV: 267, Reg. lat. t. 379 f. 26, and 288–289, Reg. lat. t. 387 f. 239v. The two bulls have not previously been published in connection with the early history of the Santa Chiara project.
- ³ Whilst it has been suggested that Federico may have played a role in Oddantonio's death, there is as yet no documentary evidence to support this assertion.

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