



# La grande contessa

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## LA GRANDE CONTESSA

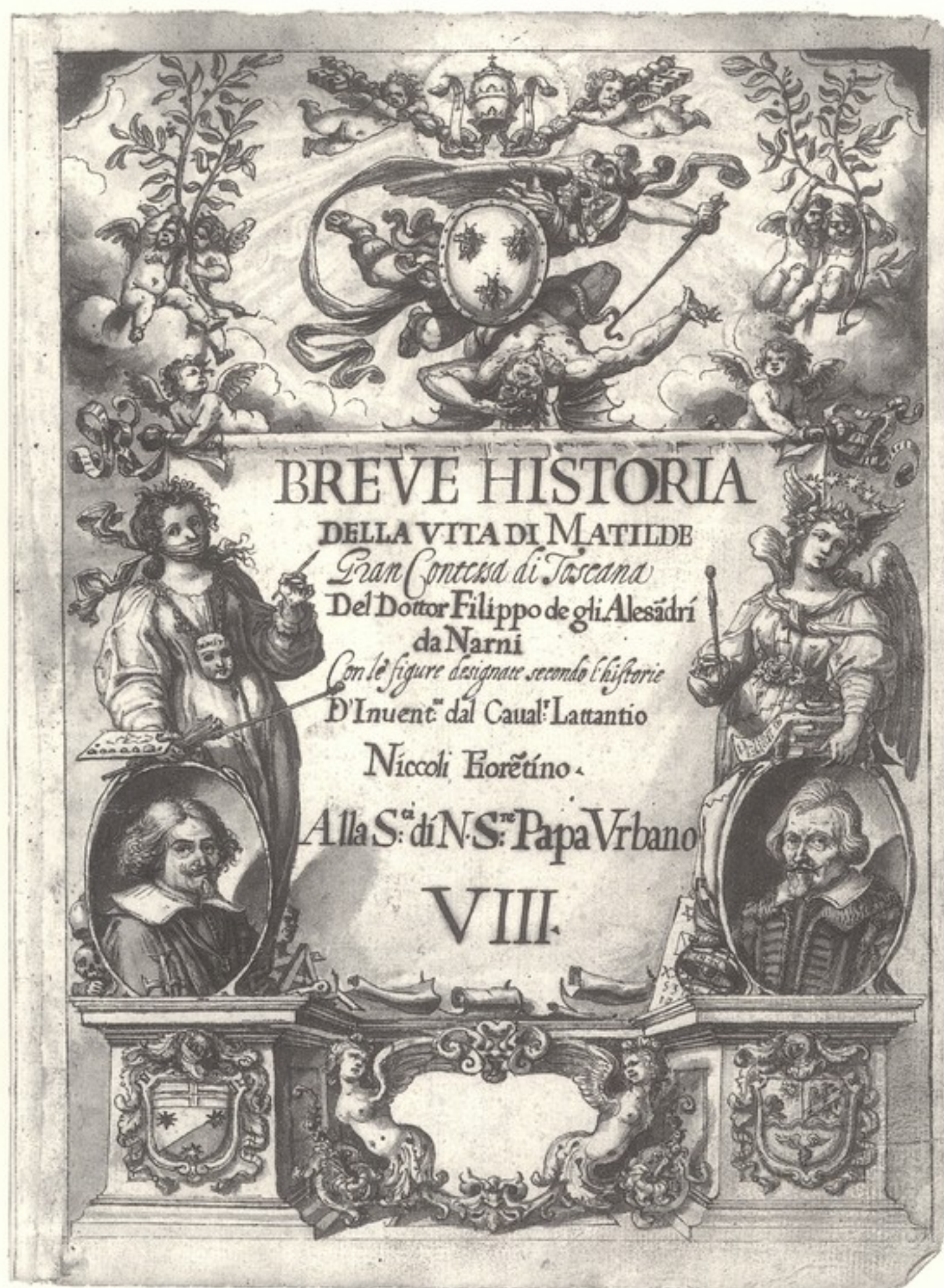
Filippo degl' Alessandri (fl. 1620-1640), *Breve historia de la vita di Matilde, gran contessa di Toscana, del dottor Filippo de gli Alesa[n]dri da Narni, con le figure designate secondo l'histoire d'inuent[io]ne dal caual.r Lattantio Niccoli fiore[n]tino. Alla S.ta di N. Sr.e Papa Urbano VIII.* [Rome?] 1639.

Manuscript on paper; acquired in 1999 on the Hofer Trust fund (1984) \*98M-75

LA GRANDE CONTESSA MATILDE DI CANOSSA (1046-1115) MAY HAVE HAD a greater impact on the history of her time and the centuries that followed than any other woman in Italian history. A charismatic figure who combined beauty, piety, and political acumen, she played a central role in the investiture struggle between the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire that consumed much of Europe at the time. Her lands in central Italy stretched from the Mediterranean to the Adriatic and provided a significant buffer for the Papal States. A cousin of the Emperor Henry IV, she was also devoted to Pope Gregory VII, and was instrumental in bringing about their meeting in 1077 at her castle of Canossa. She personally led her troops into battle against the enemies of Rome in the many conflicts that followed.

Matilde's two marriages were politically motivated alliances dictated by family and church. The first in 1069 with Godefroy le bossu, the hunchback duke of Lorraine was intended to cement the alliance of the houses of Lorraine and Tuscany. Matilde, however, abandoned Lorraine and Godfroy barely a year after the wedding and returned to Italy where she remained for the rest of her life. Godefroy took his revenge at the Diet of Worms in 1076, where he distinguished himself by lending support to charges that Gregory VII's relationship with Matilde was something more than platonic. A month later he was assassinated in the woods near Verdun under mysterious circumstances. Matilde remained a widow until 1089 when she married Welf V, Duke of Bavaria, 27 years her junior and known in Italy as Guelfo il Pingue (Guelf the Fat). This alliance, arranged to bolster the forces of the Pope against the Emperor, was no more successful as a marriage than the first. Scorned by Matilde, Welf V returned to Bavaria, and when Matilde died in 1115, she left no heirs. Sometime between 1077 and 1080, however, in order to safeguard her lands from the grasp of the Emperor, Matilde had donated all her territories and earthly goods to the Holy See. This fateful inheritance became the cornerstone of the territorial claims of the papacy, and in so doing, it made central Italy into a bloody battleground for centuries to come.

Pope Urban VIII (1568-1644), to whom the Houghton manuscript is dedicated, identified with Matilde's Pope Gregory VII to the extent that Gregory is represented with the features of Urban in some of Urban's art projects. The issues of the temporal power and political expansion of the papacy remained as vital in the Seventeenth century as they were in the Eleventh. Urban VIII found in Matilde an exemplification of unswerving loyalty to the papacy, and her donation legitimized his dreams of political aggrandizement. A flurry of Matilde-related activity took place under Urban VIII's patronage during the 1630's. In 1633 he ordered Matilde's remains removed (in the dead of night to avoid confrontation with the local populace) from her tomb in the Badia San



Title page from the Breve historia de la vita di Matilde, Houghton \*98M-75. [Original 9" x 6.75"]

Benedetto di Polirone (Mantova) and brought back to the Castel Sant' Angelo in Rome, where they were kept under guard until the tomb he contracted from Bernini was completed and conspicuously installed in Saint Peter's. He commissioned tapestries, and a fresco cycle by Giovanni Francesco Romanelli for the Sala della Contessa Matilda in the Vatican (1637-1642). The Houghton manuscript appears to be an attempt to gain favor and patronage from Urban VIII by exploiting one of his favorite topics.

The manuscript is fragmentary and extremely fragile, the iron gall ink having eaten through the paper in several places. It consists of an elaborate allegorical title-page including the Papal arms and medallion portraits, presumably of the artist and author, another full-page allegorical illustration preceding two leaves of the dedication (dated 1639), followed by 61 pages numbered in ink for the text and illustrations, and in appendix 9 leaves of letterpress genealogical tables. The first leaf of text is wanting. Each page has at least one and sometimes two mounted pen drawings illustrating the text (39 in all) and 17 blank spaces are lined off for drawings apparently never completed (or since lost?). There is much about this manuscript that remains to be investigated. It is not clear whether the *Vita di Matilde* was to be presented to the Pope as a finished illustrated manuscript, or was intended to be copy for a printed and engraved volume, or perhaps to provide material for other cycles in the Matilde saga such as the Sala della Contessa Matilda (to which it does not appear to be related except by subject). Little is known about the author, Filippo degli Alessandri, described by Mazzuchelli as a "giureconsulto" and author of a history of the wars of Italy (Rome, 1632). The artist Lattanzio Niccoli (d. Rome, 1660) is equally obscure, known only to be a member of the Congregazione dei Virtuosi and the Accademia di San Luca.

The sources for the text and illustrations are a subject for further research. The full-page portrait at the end clearly derives from the earliest image of Matilde in the *Vita Mathildis* by Donizone, which was presented to Matilde in her lifetime, and which by 1600 was in the Vatican Library in Rome (Vaticano latino 4922). This simple medieval image is in striking contrast to the Baroque vagueness of Romanelli's images in the Sala della Contessa Matilda. Was the inclusion of the image here intended as yet another homage to the learned Urban VIII, who surely would have known this rare document in his library? The provenance of the Houghton manuscript has yet to be conclusively determined. A fragment of a Barberini bookplate is mounted on the inside front cover, displaying the Barberini Bee, elevated by Urban VIII from horsefly to golden bee at the time of his election. An unidentified armorial bookplate is mounted on the inside of the back cover, a clue perhaps to the private library where this manuscript lay hidden for many years. This unpublished work so rich in imagery has not been described in any of the works discussing the iconography or fortunes of Matilde and deserves further study.

The extensive Italian collections of the Houghton Library offer a rich context for the study of the Matilde manuscript. The Library holds most of the important early printed books on the subject of Matilde, including the works of Benedetto Luchino (1592), Silvano Razzi (1587), Domenico Mellini (1589), Francesco Maria Fiorentini (1642), Felice Contelorio (1657); and Giulio Dal Pozzo (1678), as well as the works of Urban VIII, including his *Poesie toscane* (Rome, 1635), where his "Ode in lode della contessa Matilda," written while he was still a Cardinal, was first published.

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