

The Sacrality of Water

Religion and Medicine in the Spas of the Early Modern Veneto

*Eaux Sacrées : religion et médecine autour des sources de l'espace vénitien,
16e-17e siècles*

La sacralidad del agua: religión y medicina en los balnearios del Véneto moderno

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The Sacrality of Water

Religion and Medicine in the Spas of the Early Modern Veneto

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During a plague outbreak, a Marian apparition led to the foundation of a church and monastery in Monteortone, near the famous site of the Paduan baths of Abano. A central element in this narrative—underlined by an early modern printed book—is the sacred hot mineral spring called “*acqua della Vergine*” (“Virgin’s water”). By looking closely at the various sources that deal with the case of Monteortone, this article investigates the differences between miraculous springs and hot mineral springs in the Christian thought, the different uses of the Abano’s mineral waters and the sacralisation of Monteortone’s mineral spring during the Counter-Reformation. Moreover, it sheds light how the religious and medical aspects of the consumption and representation of mineral waters in early modern Italy overlapped.

Keywords: mineral springs, miraculous springs, Marian apparitions, sacralisation, Counter-Reformation

L'apparition mariale de Monteortone lors d'une épidémie de peste, a mené à la fondation d'une église et d'un monastère près du célèbre site des thermes padouans d'Abano. L'élément central de ce récit, souligné par un livre imprimé du début de l'époque moderne, est la source d'eau sacrée, chaude et minérale, appelée « acqua della Vergine » (« eau de la Vierge »). En examinant de près les différentes sources qui traitent du cas de Monteortone, cet article étudie les différences entre les sources miraculeuses et les sources thermales dans la pensée chrétienne, les différents usages des eaux minérales de l'Abano ainsi que la sacralisation de la source minérale de Monteortone au cours de la Contre-Réforme. En outre, il souligne le chevauchement des aspects religieux et médicaux de la consommation et de la représentation des eaux minérales dans l'Italie du début de l'époque moderne.

Mots-clés : sources d'eau minérale, sources miraculeuses, apparitions mariales, sacralisation, Contre-Réforme

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In 1428, when the Republic of Venice was facing an outbreak of plague,^{*1} the old soldier Pietro Falco reached the Paduan spas of Monteortone near the famous site of Abano in order to treat his wounds and leg pain. The remedies advised by physicians did not work, so he commended himself to God and the Virgin Mary to regain his health. One day, while leaving the bathing room to pray in the adjacent woods, he felt a great jubilation, looked at the sky and saw an extraordinary glow, accompanied by the sweet melody of angelic choirs. Suddenly, the Virgin Mary appeared in a cloud, promising Pietro that she would heal his wounds if he would bathe in her spring. She ordered him to search the bottom of the waters for a little painting in her image buried in the rocks, and asked him to spread the news of the newly found image. The rural village of Monteortone, she assured, would henceforth be under her protection and God would relieve the Paduan people from the scourge. After the apparition, Pietro entered the water and was healed immediately; he searched the waters and found the image of the Madonna, which he later hung on a nearby tree. The following day, the recovered soldier, along with many men who had rushed to the place of the miracle, reached Padua to report the event to the *podestà* (chief magistrate) and the bishop's vicar. The bishop donated a plot of land on the hill of Monteortone, where a small oratory was subsequently built. The number of devotees and alms increased steadily until the little sanctuary was enlarged, a few years later, into a proper church with an Augustinian monastery attached to it.²

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1 | The plague arrived in Venice in fall 1427; the following year it reached other cities of the Venetian Republic (such as Padua and Treviso) and the Lombardy region, then (1429-1431) it spread throughout Italy. See Alfonso Corradi, *Annali delle epidemie occorse in Italia dalle prime memorie fino al 1850*, vol. 1, *Dalle prime memorie fino al 1500*, Bologna, Tipi Gamberini e Parmeggiani, 1865, p. 271-272.

2 | The narration of the miracle and the subsequent events is included in [Giacomo Filippo Tomasini], *Historia della B. Vergine di Monte Ortone, Nella quale si contengono diverse grazie e miracoli, L'Origine della Congregazione dedicata al suo nome, E la Vita di Fr. Simone da Camerino Fondatore di essa [...]*, Padua, Giovanni Battista Pasquati, 1644, f. 5 et seq. Other books and treatises are based, more or less evidently, on Tomasini's words: see the well-known catalogue of miracle-working images of the Virgin Mary by Wilhelm Gumpfenberg, *Atlas marianus, quo sanctae Dei genitricis Mariae imaginum miraculosarum origines [...]*, Monachii, Ioannis Iaecklini, 1672, f. 89-91 (on which, see Olivier Christin Fabrice Flückiger

The apparition of the Madonna, the miraculous healing of Pietro Falco and the subsequent erection of the shrine are narrated in the *Historia della B. Vergine di Monte Ortone*, a book published in 1644 by the Paduan historian and Bishop of Cittanova (present-day Novigrad, Croatia) Giacomo Filippo Tomasini (1595-1655). Tomasini was born in Padua in 1595; in 1611 he joined the regular congregation of San Giorgio in Alga, and in 1619 graduated in theology at the University of Padua. He was assigned to various positions in Paduan monasteries and churches of his congregation; he was also a member of the Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti. In 1642 he was consecrated bishop of Cittanova in Istria, where he remained. He spent alternating periods in Padua, where he died in 1655.³ Published in 1644, his *Historia della B. Vergine di Monte Ortone* reveals the erudition of the author: in this book, Tomasini shows his antiquarian, historical and literary interests by retracing the main classical authorities that dealt with the Paduan baths, the history of the monastery of Monteortone and the votive offerings preserved in the church.⁴

In a Marian local cult such as the one in Monteortone, the presence of a miraculous hot mineral spring with healing properties is certainly peculiar. Water springs with special therapeutic properties were included amongst “natural wonders”. Since the mid-14th century, thanks to the interest in natural wonders and prodigies, healing springs had caught the attention of medical authorities. These waters and the related practices were thus included in a process of medicalisation, an extension of medical expertise to new domains, which had been broadening since the 14th century.⁵ In the 16th century, while medicalisation

and Naïma Ghermani (eds.), *Marie mondialisée. L'Atlas Marianus de Wilhelm Gumpfenberg et les topographies sacrées de l'époque moderne*, Neuchâtel, Éditions Alphil-Presses universitaires suisses, 2014; Nicolas Balzamo, Olivier Christin and Fabrice Flückiger (eds.), *L'Atlas Marianus de Wilhelm Gumpfenberg. Édition et traduction*, Neuchâtel, Éditions Alphil-Presses universitaires suisses, 2015); *Raguaglio fedelissimo della miracolosa scoperta fatta dell'immagine della beatissima Vergine Maria sempre immacolata [...] di Monte Ortone*, Venice, presso Antonio Zatta, 1775; [Pietro Bellati], *Discorso storico medico de' bagni di Monte-Ortone*, Padua, li fratelli Penada, 1799. A brief reference to the “*B. Mariae Virginis Montis Ortoni templum, miraculis nobilitatum*”, clearly founded on the local tradition, can also be read in the first Italian edition of *Italiae rerumq. Romanarum libri tres* by Franz Schott, expanded by the friar and inquisitor Girolamo Giovannini da Capugnano, see Francisco Schotto Antverpiensi I. C. and F. Hieronymo Ex Capugnano Bonon., *Itinerarium nobiliorum Italiae regionum, urbium, oppidorum et locorum; nunc serio auctum et tabellis chorographicis et topographicis locupletatum*, Vicenza, apud Franciscum Bolzettam, 1610, f. 52.

3 | For the biography of Giacomo Filippo Tomasini, see *Le glorie de gli Incogniti, O vero gli huomini illustri dell'Accademia de' signori Incogniti di Venetia*, Venice, appresso Francesco Valvasense, 1647, f. 188-191; Giuseppe Trebbi, “Tomasini, Giacomo Filippo”, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 96, Rome, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 2019, *ad vocem*, URL: https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giacomo-filippo-tomasini_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/ (accessed 07/07/2023).

4 | [Tomasini], *Historia...*, *op. cit.*

5 | See Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*, New York, Zone Books, 1998, p. 135-146; Marylin Nicoud, “Les médecins italiens et le bain thermal à la fin du Moyen Âge”, *Médiévales*, 43, 2002, p. 13-40; Marylin Nicoud, “Formes et enjeux d'une médicalisation

concerned the uses and perception of mineral waters, a different but parallel process affected the same water springs. After the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the Catholic authorities made an effort to delimit the sacred from the profane.⁶ The negative Catholic representation of hot mineral water baths before and after the Tridentine Council influenced the status of these springs, in contrast to miraculous water springs. However, in the same period, the process of sacralisation also influenced the perception of a few hot mineral springs, alongside the more common miraculous springs, thanks to printed books written by ecclesiastics, such as Tomasini's *Historia della B. Vergine di Monte Ortone*. The aim of this article is to analyse the case of the sacred hot mineral spring in Monteortone, highlighting how the religious and medical aspects of the consumption and representation of mineral water were deeply intertwined in the early modern period. In the first part, I will discuss the differences between miraculous springs and hot mineral springs, emphasizing the reasons for this distinction in Christian thought. In the second part, I will examine various sources related to the Abano spas and Monteortone's spring to underline the different uses of these mineral waters. Finally, the third part will demonstrate the central role of Tomasini's book in the process of the sacralisation of Monteortone's hot mineral spring during the Counter-Reformation.

The distinction between miraculous springs and hot mineral springs

The sequence of events narrated in Tomasini's *Historia della B. Vergine di Monte Ortone*—the apparition of the Madonna, the miraculous healing, the finding of a holy image, and the subsequent erection of a shrine and a church—is by no means extraordinary within its genre. Indeed, it adheres to typical Marian apparition stories and legends widespread in all Christian territories.⁷ Almost always, a prodigious event lies at the origin of a shrine, and the apparition of the Virgin or a saint can be considered as a *topos*, a common element of many myths of “foundation”. One of the most frequent of these *topoi* is the finding of a holy image (of a saint or, more commonly, of the Madonna). In these narratives, the discovered image, usually an *acheiropoieta* (not created by human hand) or

médiévale : réflexions sur les cités italiennes (XIII^e-XV^e siècles)”, *Genèses*, 82, 2011, p. 7-30 ; see also Sandra Cavallo and Tessa Storey, *Healthy Living in Late Renaissance Italy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 1-12.

6 | Ottavia Niccoli, *La vita religiosa nell'Italia moderna. Secoli xv-xviii*, second revised edition, Rome, Carocci editore, 2008, p. 137-177.

7 | See William A. Christian Jr., *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989.

an old painting, works miracles or performs supernatural acts. Typically, the image indicates the exact place where the devotees should build a shrine—if the shrine was erected in the wrong place, the Virgin or the saint would bring it down until it was constructed in the shown location. Then, the image is placed in an elevated and appropriate setting, and continues to work miracles, attracting more and more people who venerate it and record their thanks by bringing more votive images (*ex-votos*) to the site of the shrine. The sacred image is central and indispensable at every stage of the pilgrimage: as David Freedberg characterised it, “The focus of every pilgrimage journey is the shrine” and it has its origins in an image that works miracles.⁸

Another feature often present in shrines and their foundation narratives is water. One of the most common elements across human history all over the world, water has impacted and defined every aspect of human life—religion included.⁹ Water has always had a magical-sacral value: as a source and origin of every form of life, a symbol of rebirth and regeneration, an element of fertility, and a magical and therapeutical matter. Various pagan and pre-Christian cults focused on rocks, trees, and springs, which the Christian religion tried to either eradicate or assimilate.¹⁰ A common shrine typology in the Alps was the “respite” shrine (*sanctuaires à répit*), where parents brought their infants who had died without baptism, hoping for the miracle of a brief and temporary resurrection in order to baptise and then bury them in a consecrated space. These little churches were often located in remote places, possibly on a hill, near a natural spring, a fountain, a lake, a pond, or a well. As a symbol of life, water was the most common element in the *répit* phenomenon, but it also recalls pre-Christian forms and rituals of purification and initiation.¹¹ In the Christian tradition, holy

8 | David Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 100 (but see the entire chapter 6, “Image and Pilgrimage”, p. 99-135, since it is relevant for the relationship between shrine, pilgrimage, and image).

9 | See *Grounding Religion. A Field Guide to the Study of Religion and Ecology*, Whitney Bauman, Richard Bohannon, Kevin J. O’Brien (eds.), second expanded edition, London/New York, Routledge, 2017.

10 | See the well-known study by Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Le Saint Lévrier. Guinefort, guérisseur d’enfants depuis le XIII^e siècle*, Paris, Flammarion, 1979. See also Luca Giarelli (ed.), *Aquae divinae. Riti e miti nelle Alpi tra preistoria e cristianità*, Breno, Parco dell’Adamello, 2015.

11 | See Silvano Cavazza, “La doppia morte: resurrezione e battesimo in un rito del Seicento”, *Quaderni Storici*, 50, 1982, p. 551-582; Fiorella Mattioli Carcano, *Santuari à répit. Il rito del “ritorno alla vita” o “doppia morte” nei luoghi santi delle Alpi*, Scarmagno (TO), Priuli & Verlucca, 2009. Jacques Gélis has dedicated some research to this topic: see at least “Les sanctuaires ‘à répit’ des Alpes françaises et du Val d’Aoste. Espace, chronologie, comportements pélerins”, *Archivio storico ticinese*, 114, 1993, p. 183-222; *Les enfants des limbes. Mort-nés dans l’Europe chrétienne*, [Paris], Audibert, 2006. See also the recent book by Silvano Fornasa, *Il tempo di un respiro. Il miracolo del ritorno alla vita in terra vicentina*, Venezia, Marsilio editori, 2018, who has documented in the Venetian context that the belief in the temporary resurrection of infants and the existence of specialised sanctuaries was not limited to the Alpine area.

water, with almost miraculous powers for the body and the soul, prepared the soul for receiving God's grace and assistance by the Holy Spirit; it was also useful for purging venial sins when combined with prayers and supplications, such as sacramentals (*sacramentalia*).¹² Its powers were also used in miraculous remedies and magic rituals.¹³ The thaumaturgical powers of water worked against the infirmities, contagions, infections, and sterility of both humans and non-humans. The sacrality of water could come from its blessing by a priest, but in many cases the water was believed to have been invested with the supernatural and divine prior to the consecration.

Water's very sacrality, as well as its magic and therapeutic value, is illustrated by the extent of the phenomena associated with miraculous water sources. As they were associated with a Marian apparition, the martyrdom of a saint, or popular legends, these sources were believed to be able to heal various diseases.¹⁴ Miraculous and curative waters reveal an interesting overlap between medical and magical-religious aspects, as Virginia Reinburg has recently underlined in her research on the "refoundation" of pilgrim shrines in early modern France.¹⁵ On the one hand, the process of Christianisation of ancient places through the establishment of churches and shrines, and the appearance of printed texts on local miracles, is a crucial phenomenon. On the other hand, we should consider the continuity of magical-religious-therapeutic practices, linked to basic anthropological needs, at a time when the therapeutic panorama was characterised by an intense medical pluralism.¹⁶ These aspects play a central role also in the case of Monteortone: following the narration of Tomasini, the rural village of Monteortone and its mineral springs, used for medical cures, were ennobled by the apparition of the Madonna and thus sacralised.

The presence of a miraculous spring near a sacred place is quite common, but these springs are rarely hot mineral water sources. Moreover, the sites of very few thermal springs are also sacred places. This is precisely what makes the case of Monteortone so unique, as it is a hot mineral spring that also became a

12 | David Gentilcore, *From Bishop to Witch. The System of the Sacred in Early Modern Terra d'Otranto*, Manchester/New York, Manchester University Press, 1992, p. 94-127.

13 | See Federico Barbierato, *Nella stanza dei circoli. Chiave di Salomone e libri di magia a Venezia nei secoli XVII e XVIII*, Milano, Edizioni Sylvestre Bonnard, 2002 (for example, p. 115, 117 et passim).

14 | For a recent discussion of the category of "popular culture", see the historiographical article by Ottavia Niccoli, "Cultura popolare: un relitto abbandonato?", *Studi Storici*, 4, 2015, p. 997-1010; for the category of "popular medicine", see David Gentilcore, "Was there a 'Popular Medicine' in Early Modern Europe?", *Folklore*, 115, 2004, p. 151-166.

15 | Virginia Reinburg, *Storied Places. Pilgrim Shrines, Nature, and History in Early Modern France*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

16 | On the wide range of healers and forms of healing, and the religious and popular ideas about disease, see David Gentilcore, *Healers and Healing in Early Modern Italy*, Manchester/New York, Manchester University Press, 1998.

sacred place. Discussing cases from all over ancient Italy, Maddalena Bassani has explored the topic of places of worship near water springs and spa sites in ancient times, showing the lack of spa establishments near places of worship associated with curative springs. Bassani suggests that the autonomy of these religious areas from the Roman healing sites may indicate a highly differentiated exploitation of places near hot mineral springs. As the ancient authority Pliny the Younger had already noted with regard to the Clitumnus springs, there was a boundary between the sacred and the profane, between the area of the gods and that of humans.¹⁷ This differentiation was still in place in early modern times. Nevertheless, the sacred hot mineral spring of Monteortone stands as a bridge between the profane, medical aspects of the cure of the body, and the sacrality of the Virgin Mary.

Among others, Marlene Albert-Llorca has studied this common disjunction between naturally curative waters and miraculous waters, highlighting that already in Antiquity the powers of the waters were believed to derive from the minerals they contained.¹⁸ This belief was clearly at odds with the practices of many people who left *ex-votos* near the springs, believing that the healing was the effect of some divine action—an aspect that is clearly evident in the narration of the miraculous healing of the soldier Pietro Falco in Tomasini's book on Monteortone. It might also be noted that the curative powers of sulphur were considered as the special power of the god who presided over that spring, and Aristotle himself defined healing spas as sacred.¹⁹ By contrast, Christianity looked suspiciously on spas and mineral water, since hot baths were believed to weaken the spirit and ignite the flame of carnal desire. Many studies have

17 | Maddalena Bassani, "Spazi sacri e materiali culturali nei contesti termominerali", in Maddalena Bassani, Marianna Bressan, Francesca Ghedini (eds.), *Aquae salutiferae. Il termalismo tra antico e contemporaneo*, Padua, Padova University Press, 2013, p. 91-107. The passage of Pliny the Younger is analysed in Maddalena Bassani, "La schedatura dei contesti culturali presso sorgenti termominerali. Osservazioni preliminari su aspetti strutturali e materiali", in Maddalena Bassani, Marianna Bressan, Francesca Ghedini (eds.), *Aquae Patavinae. Montegrotto Terme e il termalismo in Italia. Aggiornamenti e nuove prospettive di valorizzazione*, Padua, Padova University Press, 2012, p. 391-410 (405-406). For a compelling discussion of the concept of the sacred related to water cults in Antiquity from a historiographical perspective, see John Scheid, "Lieux de culte et pratiques salutaires dans l'Antiquité romaine", in John Scheid, Marilyn Nicoud, Didier Boisseuil, Joël Coste (eds.), *Le thermalisme. Approches historiques et archéologiques d'un phénomène culturel et médical*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2015, p. 31-44.

18 | Marlene Albert-Llorca, "Eaux thermales et eaux miraculeuses", *La Ricerca Folklorica*, 51, 2005, p. 65-73.

19 | See, for further discussion, Maddalena Bassani, "Le terme, le mandrie e Gerione. Nuove ipotesi per l'area euganea", in Maddalena Bassani, Marianna Bressan, Francesca Ghedini (eds.), *Aquae patavinae. Il termalismo antico nel comprensorio euganeo e in Italia. Atti del I convegno nazionale (Padova, 21-22 giugno 2010)*, Padua, Padova University Press, 2011, p. 223-243 (225).

emphasised this association between spas and places of sexual pleasure,²⁰ which contributed to the disappearance of baths in the 16th century—an often repeated but highly questionable thesis in the historiography of medicine and hygiene. Nevertheless, even if the presence of prostitutes is attested throughout early modern times, this factor does not exclusively characterise spas as places of carnal pleasure. The issue is more complex and nuanced, and may highlight the lack of a clear distinction between “hedonistic” and therapeutic dimensions in spa practices. Moreover, as Sandra Cavallo and Tessa Storey have recently stressed, attributing the decline in the hygienic use of baths to negative religious attitudes towards bathing appears “largely speculative and alien to contemporary accounts of this shift”. Indeed, Italian lay and medical writers did not characterise bathing as a morally reprehensible custom.²¹

Despite the continued success of mineral therapeutic baths continued during the early modern period, the features of mineral waters themselves affected Christian thinking towards them. The smell of sulphur was associated with hell, and the cloudy appearance of the waters was considered a negative feature, opposite to the clarity that indicated purity. Because of this, the Virgin and saints were generally associated with pure, clear water, and not with mineral water.²² For all these reasons, the overlapping of sacred springs and hot mineral waters was quite rare.

The various uses of mineral waters within the Paduan baths

Even at a popular level, mineral springs were not associated with sacred powers, and non-therapeutic uses of them indicate that a clear distinction between mineral waters and miraculous springs did exist. Using sacred waters for work purposes or washing was considered a profanation, while mineral waters, on the contrary, were exploited in many ways, as the case of the Paduan baths clearly shows. Despite the explicit interrelation between Monteortone’s water and the Madonna, we can see an example of the differentiation between mineral and miraculous waters in the various sources that deal with Monteortone’s spring. Several early modern books point to the different uses of Abano’s mineral waters, showing the specificity of Monteortone’s spring. While the waters of the

20 | See for example, Paolo Sorcinelli, *Storia sociale dell’acqua. Riti e culture*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 1998 (second edition: Bologna, Odoya, 2016).

21 | Cavallo, Storey, *Healthy Living...*, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

22 | Albert-Llorca, “Eaux thermales et eaux miraculeuses”, *op. cit.*

Abano spas were all medicalised at the time, a process of sacralisation occurred around Monteortone's waters, leading to the creation of a sacred mineral spring.

An early 17th century engraving by Francesco Bertelli (*Thermae Aponenses in agro patavino*), included in various editions of Franz Schott's *Itinerarium*, depicts the landscape and the different infrastructures of the Abano spas.²³ At the centre of the image lies a rocky hill where many hot steaming springs rise ("La Fontega") and flow into the shared public bath ("Bagnio Comun"), near which are located the spas ("Bagni"). Opposite the public bath, a watermill ("Molino") is powered by the same hot water. In the background, in the right corner, stands the monastery of Monteortone ("Monte Orton"). Thus, the aim of this visual source is to highlight and signal to the early modern reader the importance of the Abano spas and their infrastructures, while the site of Monteortone is completely marginalised.

In his widespread and often reprinted guide for pilgrims for the jubilee of 1600, in which the engraving of Bertelli is included, the Fleming Franz Schott delineates the mineral waters of Abano spas. On this site, there were two kinds of waters "differentissime di natura" (of different natures):²⁴ the first one was used to power the watermill and believed "nocevole nel corpo" (harmful for the body), so nobody drank it, while the second one, "assai più leggiera a peso della prima" (much lighter in weight than the first one), was commonly drunk for health and therapeutic reasons.²⁵

This representation of the Paduan baths is confirmed by other early modern sources. The British traveller Philip Skippon, in Italy between 1663 and 1665, left a compelling description of this site. He mentions that Abano, "a small village", had "very plentiful springs that rise out of a rocky hillock, and there make several channels". The water was so hot that people used it to scald off hogs' hair, and sheep drank it where it was cooler. Moreover, Skippon's account describes how one of the springs powered a watermill, while towards the bottom of the hill lay a large public bath and four or five bath-houses, similar to those in Baden and Aachen.²⁶ These different uses and infrastructures likely followed a "hierarchy of use", according to which the best water was chosen for drinking, while the rest

23 | On this image, see Maurizio Ripa Bonati, *Iconografia termale euganea. Una lettura storico-medica*, in Maddalena Bassani, Marianna Bressan, Francesca Ghedini (eds.), *Aquae salutariferae. Il termalismo tra antico e contemporaneo*, Padua, Padova University Press, 2013, p. 323-331.

24 | I quote from the 1659 edition: *Itinerario, ovvero Nova descrizione de' viaggi principali d'Italia di Francesco Scoto* [...], Padua, per Matteo Cadorino, 1659, f. 62.

25 | *Itinerario...*, *op. cit.*, f. 63.

26 | *An Account of a Journey made thro' Part of the Low-Countries, Germany, Italy, and France, by Philip Skippon, Esquire*, in *A collection of Voyages and Travels, some now first printed from Original Manuscripts, others now first published in English. In six volumes...*, London, Churchill, 1732, p. 359-736 (535). This description agrees with the one made by Michel de Montaigne: Michel de Montaigne, *Viaggio in Italia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1991, p. 117.

was assigned to other, less important uses in terms of health, such as washing, watering gardens, etc.—a precaution taken by local governments of European early modern towns.²⁷

Describing the Abano spas, both Schott and Skippon mention Monteortone, delineating the various uses its waters could offer. In his *Itinerarium*, Franz Schott describes not only the Abano spas but the site of Monteortone as well, mentioning the monastery “*nel qual sono scaturrigini d’acqua bollenti, e fanghi eccellentissimi*” (in which there are springs of hot waters and excellent muds).²⁸ This source demonstrates that Monteortone’s waters were not only known for their sacred status but also for their medical uses—and the aim of Schott was to present only the medical appeal of Monteortone’s spring.

Skippon informs that, a mile from the Abano spas, there was a “fountain, called Fonte della Madonna”, less hot than the Abano mineral waters. This spring is clearly to be identified with the sacred one at Monteortone. Moreover, Skippon mentions that this specific water was “sold in apothecaries’ shops for to drink”,²⁹ showing a further use of this kind of spring. During the early modern period, some waters became a luxury good: named mineral waters which came from specific springs increased in popularity throughout this period, and began to be exported and drunk away from the original sources for medical or fashionable reasons.³⁰

The demand for mineral waters far from their sources may be related to the medical belief according to which every single source and spa had different properties suited for treating different ailments and illnesses.³¹ In keeping with this belief, it was quite common to look for a specific and distant mineral spring, even if a nearby spa was available. The Selvatico family owned a villa in Battaglia, a village near Abano; in the garden, mineral water came down from a little hill through channels, and various infrastructures exploited this situation. However, writing to the Duke of Parma in the early 17th century, Giovanni Battista Selvatico expressed a desire to try the Lombard muds, even if mud was available in his garden and was quite popular.³² The Selvaticos did not drink the mineral water available in their garden either, but sent out for San Pietro Montagnon’s water

27 | David Gentilcore, “From ‘Vilest Beverage’ to ‘Universal Medicine’: Drinking Water in Printed Regimens and Health Guides, 1450-1750”, *Social History of Medicine*, 33, 2020, p. 683-703 (685).

28 | *Itinerario...*, *op. cit.*, f. 63.

29 | *An Account of a Journey...*, *op. cit.*, p. 535.

30 | David Gentilcore, *Food and Health in Early Modern Europe. Diet, Medicine and Society, 1450-1800*, London/New York, Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 159-162.

31 | See Daston, Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature...*, p. 138.

32 | Archivio di Stato di Padova, Archivi privati, Famiglia Selvatico Estense, *busta 1143, fascicolo 1*, 16 october 1612.

(near Abano).³³ This example shows how early modern people were aware that the characteristics of specific mineral waters changed from spring to spring, and they requested them accordingly to their needs.

The practice of collecting water from its site and transporting it across long distances was not confined to therapeutic springs; it was also common in the case of miraculous waters. In Lendinara (near Rovigo), the miraculous spring of the Madonna del Pilastrello attracted many sick people, who rushed to the church to pray in front of the statue of the Madonna and to take the water. The healing cures were sudden, as one can expect from a miraculous spring. But some cases reported by the Olivetan monk Barnaba Riccoboni at the end of the 16th century attest to the permeability between religious attitudes and medical practices. For example, a woman suffering from an unknown infirmity stayed in bed on the advice of her doctor without getting better; since the doctor's advice gave no result, at one point she decided to send for the Pilastrello water and drank it for three mornings, with devotion, after which she recovered from her illness³⁴. The demand for miraculous water most likely also characterised the practice described by Skippon in reference to the mineral spring of Monteortone, and a relic-like use of this water cannot be excluded.

Negative Catholic representations of hot baths aside, mineral waters were exploited for different uses—medical and practical ones, as the case of the Paduan spas clearly shows. Even the peculiar miraculous mineral spring of Monteortone was not used only for religious purposes, but it also served medical practices.

Monteortone's "acqua della Vergine" and Giacomo Filippo Tomasini: the sacralisation of a hot mineral spring

Despite noting the different uses of the Abano waters, Franz Schott and Philip Skippon treat the sacred water of Monteortone as an ordinary mineral spring, nullifying its religious character. This attitude towards Monteortone's waters derives from the medical literature. The two most famous Italian treatises on baths were published in the second half of the 16th century, and they both discuss Monteortone's spring. In the treatises gathered by Tommaso Giunti (*De Balneis*, published in 1553), the major aim of the authors who dealt with Monteortone is

33 | Montaigne, *Viaggio in Italia*, *op. cit.*, p. 119. Anyway, Montaigne was quite sceptical about the effects of the "Selvatico"s and San Pietro Montagnon's waters, thinking that "a berne farebbe lo stesso effetto".

34 | *Miracoli della Madonna di Lendenara nella Gloriosa sua Imagine. Raccolti da don Barnaba Riccobuono Monacho Montolivetano*, Padua, per Lorenzo Pasquati, 1584, unnumbered pages.

to empirically examine the waters. While there are some differences between the authors of the treatises collected by Giunti—*e.g.*, Domenico Bianchelli and Bartolomeo Viotti mention the apparition of the Madonna and the monastery, while Bartolomeo da Montagnana does not—they nevertheless share the same approach and attitude towards mineral waters. They describe the site of the baths, analysing the qualities and properties of the water, characterised by the water flow, its temperature, smell, and medical uses.³⁵ The discussion of the waters of Monteortone in Andrea Bacci's *De Thermis* (1571) is more exhaustive than in Giunti's book. Indeed, the Virgin's water and the baths of Monteortone are discussed separately, with more detail. Apart from this difference, however, Bacci shares with the authors cited in Giunti's *De Balneis* the same epistemological approach towards mineral water, based on empirical investigation.³⁶ Therefore, the religious significance of Monteortone's mineral water was totally neglected in the medical literature.

Giacomo Filippo Tomasini's *Historia della B. Vergine di Monte Ortone* approaches the water from the opposite direction.³⁷ In the first pages of his book, the Paduan erudite and bishop describes the sites of Monteortone and Abano, quoting various classical authors and characterising this area as “*Valle stimata appresso l'antichità per le Fontane dell'acque calde [...] perché tiene medicamenti che allegeriscono i dolori e sanano le infirmità*” (a valley highly valued in Antiquity for the hot water springs [...] because it has medicaments that relieve the pains and heal the illnesses).³⁸ He goes on to highlight the “*essalationi sulfuree*” (sulphurous fumes) and the springs of hot water rising from a little hill (as shown in Bertelli's engraving), by recalling the ancient history of the site. Moreover, in defining the sulphurous springs of Monteortone, Tomasini identifies two distinct sites: the first one characterised by the presence of many sources that produced a “*fontega*” (hot spring) and flowed along a river into the valley; the second one nearer the mountain, inside a little forest, distinguished by a spring of lukewarm water, different from the others and neglected due to its hidden position among the trees.³⁹ Then, he narrates the story of the apparition of the Virgin to the soldier Pietro Falco and his miraculous cure in the Madonna's mineral spring. It is clear in Tomasini's narration that the neglected mineral spring hidden in the forest is the Madonna spring which, thanks to the miracle, “*venne in molta venerazione, e le acque sue crebbero in grandissima stima, poscia che dai medici sperimentate le loro*

35 | *De Balneis*, Venice, apud Iuntas, 1553, f. 38v (Bartolomeo da Montagnana), 71v (Domenico Bianchelli), 261r (Bartolomeo Viotti).

36 | Andrea Bacci, *De Thermis*, Venice, apud Vincentium Valgrisium, 1571, f. 283-285.

37 | [Tomasini], *Historia...*, *op. cit.*

38 | [Tomasini], *Historia...*, *op. cit.*, f. 4.

39 | [Tomasini], *Historia...*, *op. cit.*, f. 5.

virtù, le cominciorno applicare a diversi mali, togliendo il nome dalla ritrovata imagine di chiamarsi il Bagno della B. Vergine, e dal volgo chiamarsi l'Aqua della Vergine” (began to be venerated and its waters increased their value after doctors, having experienced their virtues, begun to use them for many ailments, choosing to name it “Holy Virgin’s bath”, from the name of the found image, while the common people named it “Virgin’s water”).⁴⁰

While the authors cited in the works by Giunti and Bacci, along with Franz Schott’s guide, described Monteortone’s waters as an ordinary mineral spring, Tomasini characterised them as a miraculous spring. The apparition of the Madonna and the miraculous healing of Pietro Falco are central elements in the narration of Tomasini. Prior to these events, the spring of Monteortone was essentially unknown. Thus, the apparition of the Virgin, the miraculous cure and the subsequent erection of the shrine, church and monastery served to sacralise Monteortone’s spring.

Tomasini’s *Historia* fits into the category of treatises and other texts written by medical and religious authorities that tried to delimitate the fields of medicine and religion. Particularly in its propagandistic aspects, exemplified by Tommaso Giunti’s *De Balneis* (1553) and Andrea Bacci’s *De Thermis* (1571), the growth of thermalism in the early modern period coincides with the Council of Trent and with the attempt of the Catholic Church to separate the sacred from the profane⁴¹—a process that was not always successful, especially in practice. In the case of the Virgin’s water in Monteortone, the narration of the apparition of the Madonna, the miraculous healing of Pietro Falco and the subsequent erection of the shrine affected the perception of this mineral spring, leading to its sacralisation.

Writing in the Counter-Reformation period, Tomasini used the narration of the apparition of the Virgin and the miraculous cure in Monteortone to ennoble the church and monastery of the Augustinians, and to testify—and possibly increase—the value and importance of its mineral water, overshadowed by the more famous nearby site of Abano. His printed book on the history of the Madonna of Monteortone (1644) suggests that the Monteortone mineral water is graced with more effective healing power than the famous nearby Abano spas, due to its sacred character, which could work even when ordinary medical (natural) remedies failed, as in the case of Pietro Falco.

40 | [Tomasini], *Historia...*, *op. cit.*, f. 17.

41 | On the attempt to separate the sacred from the profane, see Niccoli, *La vita religiosa nell'Italia moderna...*, *op. cit.*, p. 137-177.

Conclusion

Monteortone's "*acqua della Vergine*" reveals an interesting example of a hot mineral spring that was also considered sacred, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complex phenomenon of early modern thermalism.⁴² While the historiography has tended to emphasize the differences between miraculous/sacred springs and mineral waters, this case highlights the possibility of an overlap between religious and medical aspects, even in a period when the Catholic Church attempted to separate the link between religion and healing, demarcating sharper boundaries between the care of the soul and the cure of the body.⁴³ The analysis of the sources that deal with the Paduan spas has shown a differentiation between Abano's mineral waters and the miraculous mineral spring of Monteortone. The uses of the Abano waters encompassed not only medical and therapeutic uses, but was also used for animals and work purposes. Marginalised in the various sources that concentrate on the Abano spas, the spring of Monteortone stands out for its peculiar status only in Tomasini's *Historia della B. Vergine di Monte Ortone*. The other texts that deal with Monteortone present this spring only in relation with its medical uses. The discussion of Monteortone's spring by these sources has revealed a certain degree of medicalisation of this mineral water, as it was sold by local apothecaries. But the sacred specificity of this spring is fully considered by Giacomo Filippo

42 | On the development of thermalism in early modern Italy, especially in its medical aspects, see in particular Richard Palmer, "In this our Lightye and Learned Tyme". Italian Baths in the Era of the Renaissance", in Roy Porter (ed.), *The Medical History of Water and Spas, Medical History, Supplement 10*, London, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1990, p. 14-22; *Médiévales*, 43, 2002, *Le bain : espaces et pratiques* (especially the articles by Didier Boisseuil, "Espaces et pratiques du bain au Moyen Âge", p. 5-11; and by Marilyn Nicoud, "Les médecins italiens et le bain thermal à la fin du Moyen Âge", p. 13-40); Didier Boisseuil, *Impiego e cultura delle acque termali in Italia nel Rinascimento (XIII-XVI secolo)*, in Arturo Calzona, Daniela Lamberini (eds.), *La civiltà delle acque tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, Florence, Olschki, 2010, vol. 1, p. 491-505; Marilyn Nicoud, *Le thermalisme médiéval et le gouvernement des corps. D'une recreatio corporis à une regula balnei?*, in John Scheid, Marilyn Nicoud, Didier Boisseuil and Joël Coste (eds.), *Le thermalisme : approches historiques et archéologiques...*, op. cit., p. 79-104; Didier Boisseuil, *La cure thermale dans l'Italie de la fin du Moyen Âge et du début du XVI^e siècle*, in John Scheid, Marilyn Nicoud, Didier Boisseuil and Joël Coste (eds.), *Le thermalisme : approches historiques et archéologiques...*, op. cit., p. 105-122.

43 | Virginia Reinburg recently studied some Burgundian Pyrenean cases that confirm the attempt of various authorities (physicians, bishops) to delimitate the fields of medicine and religion with their printed books, see Reinburg, *Storied Places*, op. cit. The process of demarcating sharper boundaries between religion and healing is by no means limited to the Catholic Church, as the overlap between religious and medical aspects and practices was considerable even in Protestantism: see at least Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape. Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 395-470; Jens Chr. V. Johansen, "Holy Springs and Protestantism in early modern Denmark: A Medical Rationale for a Religious Practice", *Medical History*, 41, 1997, p. 59-69.

Tomasini's book. The apparition of the Madonna, the miraculous healing, and the subsequent erection of the shrine and the church are key elements for the building of a local Marian cult and, in particular, the sacralisation of this mineral spring. While other sources underlined the medical appeal of Monteortone's water, Tomasini's *Historia della B. Vergine di Monte Ortone*—deeply rooted in the Counter-Reformation—brought to the early modern reader's attention the religious importance of these (sacred) mineral spring. Therefore, the study of the representation and consumption of mineral waters in the early modern period reveals how the same element was perceived with a series of multi-layered meanings, and how medicine and religion were not distinct in pre-modern times on a popular and more practical level.