



22 Map of the Venetian lagoon, from Benedetto Bordon, *Isolario veneto*, woodcut, Venice, 1528 (Venice, Museo Correr)

Western monastic life grew from the ideals formulated by St Benedict, whose 'Rule' was drawn up about 530. Over the centuries, the Benedictine order spread across medieval Europe, gaining in wealth and prestige.⁴ Alongside the landed nobility, the Benedictines became major landowners and developed close connections with the princely courts and feudal nobility of Europe. While the monks dedicated their lives to prayer and religious devotion, their monasteries also became renowned centres of learning and artistic production. Inevitably, tensions arose between the increasing wealth of the order and the traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, a theme that has coloured the whole history of Western monasticism. Numerous offshoots, such as the Cluniacs, the Cistercians, the Carthusians and the Camaldolese, attempted to resolve these tensions through modifications to the original ideals, but they all remained dedicated to the solitary life of the rural monastery.

In Venice, as elsewhere in Europe, the Benedictines enjoyed close links with the seat of government. The Benedictine monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore, founded in 982, lies on an island in the *bacino* (the stretch of water in front of the Doge's Palace) and forms the backdrop to the view from the Piazzetta. Its church was visited annually by the doge and the Signoria to celebrate the feast of St Stephen, whose relics were preserved in the church. The other monastery church to be considered here, San Michele in Isola, belonged to a hermit offshoot of the Benedictines known as the Camaldolese order, founded by St Romuald in the early eleventh century.⁵ Although true hermits lived entirely in solitude, in practice the numbers of monks



23 Mauro Codussi, San Michele in Isola, begun 1468, façade (Cameraphoto, Venice)

in many Camaldolese houses, including that of San Michele, led to the adoption of a coenobitical or communal way of life. Because the church of San Michele was the first to be rebuilt, our peregrination to the island monasteries begins there.

SAN MICHELE IN ISOLA

The small island of San Michele between Venice and Murano had been given to the hermits of the Camaldolese order by the Venetian Republic in 1212.⁶ The church of San Michele in Isola, begun in 1468, is the first known work of the gifted Bergamasque architect Mauro Codussi.⁷ Codussi was first recorded at San Michele in 1469, and the nave and façade were largely completed in 1477; in that year, while the abbot, Pietro Donà, was on a visit to Ravenna, his deputy, Pietro Dolfìn (Delfino), sent him a letter describing the new church as second only to the church of San Marco, and claimed that it 'not only imitates antiquity but even evokes the finest works of the ancients'.⁸ The chancel was completed by about 1514, and the church was consecrated in 1535.⁹

San Michele in Isola was the first church façade in Venice to be clad in Istrian stone, discreetly inlaid with greyish marble to give sheen and opulence without compromising its innovative luminescence (pl. 23). Apparently floating on the broad expanses of the northern lagoon, the whiteness of the trilobed façade seems



24 Jacopo de' Barbari, bird's-eye-view map of Venice, woodcut, 1500, detail showing the islands of San Michele and San Cristoforo (Photo: Faculty of Architecture and History of Art, University of Cambridge)

to evoke the spiritual purity sought by the Camaldolese order. The geographical situation was greatly altered in the nineteenth century when the present cemetery was created on a huge area of reclaimed land, obliterating the neighbouring island monastery of San Cristoforo. In its original state the monastery enjoyed far greater tranquillity and seclusion (pl. 24). Here the monks recited the divine office day and night in their snow-white robes, protected from the outside world by the crisp rustication of Codussi's façade.

The acoustics of San Michele in Isola are important in the context of this book for three reasons. First of all, the church still preserves its *barco*, or raised choir gallery, in which the monks could recite the monastic hours in seclusion. Second, the nave and aisles of San Michele have wooden coffered ceilings, similar to the flat ceiling later recommended for San Francesco della Vigna in Fra Francesco Zorzi's famous memorandum, to be discussed in the following chapter. And finally, we were curious to try out the acoustics of the Emiliani (Miani) chapel, the tiny funerary chapel lapped by the waves on the north-west corner of the church.

The Camaldolese Congregation of Murano

It is obviously not insignificant that the words *isola* and isolation have the same root. St Romuald himself is believed to have lived for some time in a hermitage in the Venetian lagoon near Jesolo, and the last of the small cells for individual monks in the garden of the monastery at San Michele survived until 1607.¹⁰ Nevertheless, despite their eremitical origins, the monks of San Michele did not



25 San Michele in Isola, cloister of Camaldolese monastery, begun 1436 (Photo: Deborah Howard)

live as strict anchorites, but communally in cloistered seclusion. The abbey was the principal member of the group of Camaldolese monasteries known as the Congregation of Murano, formed in 1474, which included both hermitages and coenobitical houses.¹¹ In contrast to most traditional Benedictines, who ate and slept communally, the Camaldolese monks – like mendicant friars – inhabited separate cells, even in coenobitical monasteries such as San Michele (pl. 25). They lived a life of exceptional austerity, and underwent strict fasting during the two penitential seasons of Lent and Advent. At San Michele in Isola the tiny windows of their cells still punctuate the upper wall of the main cloister, for, as in the urban mendicant friaries, they placed a high value on private study. The monks wore pure-white robes, symbolising spiritual purity, like the brilliant whiteness of the Istrian stone façade.¹²

A line of distinguished abbots of the fifteenth century transformed the spiritual and material life of the monastery.¹³ It was during Donà's period as abbot that the main part of Codussi's church was erected. His main preoccupation, in the meantime, was the formation of the Camaldolese Congregation of Murano – and, in particular, the wresting of the abbey of Sant'Apollinare in Classe, outside Ravenna, from its lay commendators to bring it into the Congregation, an aim that he fulfilled in 1475.¹⁴ In this quest he was often away from San Michele, leaving the day-to-day running of the monastery to Pietro Dolfin. A fascinating

window onto the building site at San Michele is provided by the letters of Dolfin to the abbot in Ravenna.¹⁵

Dolfin himself was less enthusiastic about the building project than Abbot Donà – as early as 1469 he urged his superior to postpone the work until more funds were available, but his advice was ignored. By 1477 he was complaining that the noise of hammers was deafening, while the clutter of wood, stones, bricks and cement tripped him up all over the site.¹⁶ He protested that too little money was left for books and even food, and that the monks were living in abject poverty, even if he gained some comfort from the beauty of the new church.¹⁷

Described by Sanudo as ‘a most learned humanist’, Dolfin succeeded Donà on the latter’s death in 1479, but served only two years as abbot of San Michele because in 1481 he was made general of the Camaldolese order. None the less, he remained deeply involved in the affairs of San Michele, and when he died in 1525 at the age of 80, after forty-five years as general, he left his precious humanist library to his former abbey.¹⁸

Music and liturgy at San Michele

It is not easy to reconstruct the musical life of San Michele in Isola within the present state of musicological research.¹⁹ Some light is thrown on the liturgical traditions of the order by the survival – often in a dismembered state – of a series of beautiful choir books made in the Camaldolese monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, with some additions made until 1505–6. Because of the later theft of many of the illuminations, the reconstruction of the choir books has been an exacting task, but it has revealed the exceptional quality of the manuscripts.²⁰ Impressed by the skill of both the scribe and the illuminator, Vasari reported that their hands were even preserved as relics in the Florentine monastery.²¹ The books consist of both graduals (sung by the priest during Mass) and antiphons (chants for the daily office), in single-voice plainchant compositions.

In a letter to the Venetian humanist Leonardo Giustiniani in 1429, the celebrated Camaldolese scholar Ambrogio Traversari, based at Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence and soon to become general of the order, defended the role of music in the life of the cloister. While he admitted to deficiencies in his own vocal ability, he loved the singing of the hours, and even defended the value of lauds written in the vernacular, referring to their classical and biblical precedents:

As is well known, Socrates as an old man sang, accompanying himself with a lyre. [. . .] Holy father Augustine wrote six books on music, and he intended to write more. [. . .] I pass over those more ancient, namely holy King David, and others, who had a wonderful love for sacred music.²²

Fortunately, a precious testimony to the worship of the Camaldolese monks at San Michele is preserved in the beautiful incunabulum of their liturgical calendar



26 *Missale monasticum ordinem camaldulensem*, Venice: Antonii de Zanchis de Bergamo, 1503 (British Library, no. c.24.f.8), frontispiece (© British Library Board)



27 *Missale monasticum ordinem camaldulensem*, Venice: Antonii de Zanchis de Bergamo, 1503 (British Library, no. c.24.f.8), fol. 69 (© British Library Board)

published in Venice in 1503 for Pietro Dolfin and the monks of San Michele (pl. 26).²³ Printed in black and red ink on parchment, and illustrated by numerous woodcuts, several of them hand-painted and gilded, the missal begins in Advent and moves through the festal calendar, with a section on the liturgy for the year’s saints’ days at the end. The texts in red type give ‘stage directions’ explaining the actions of the priests and monks, while the black type records the words of the liturgy itself, including hymns, prayers and readings. Long passages of music are included, exclusively in plainchant, although simple improvised polyphony may perhaps have been employed to enrich the musical lines. The music is highly dramatic in places – as, for example, in the Passion of St Matthew, where long-drawn-out melismas in descending notes poignantly express Christ’s agony as he breathed his last on the cross (pl. 27).²⁴

The Camaldolese monastic day, following the traditional Benedictine rule, was based around the daily liturgy of the hours: at regular intervals, day and night, the monks joined together to sing the divine office and to chant the psalms, in the quest for spiritual union with God. Each monk had his own breviary, and many beautiful choir books dating back to the fifteenth century were still pre-

served at San Michele in the late eighteenth century.²⁵ The ability to read and sing was a condition of admission to the Camaldolese order, according to the constitution of 1253.²⁶ As Pietro Dolfin advised a novice in 1494: '[In your fellow monks] you can find models of the religious life and true observance. You must emulate their concord, humility, charity, prayers, vigils, psalmody and silence.'²⁷

When Dolfin left the monastery to become general of the Camaldolese order in 1481, there were thirty monks, including seven *sacerdoti* (priests), seven *chierici* (clerics in minor orders), six *novizi* (novices), six *conversi* (lay brothers) and four *commessi* (postulants).²⁸ Since the monastery was served by its own clergy, the celebrants would be drawn from the monks themselves during public worship such as the daily Mass and the celebration of a feast-day, while those not actively involved would remain in the choir. The printed missal highlights the dramatic effect of the interchange between the priests in the presbytery and the remaining monks in their raised choir gallery near the back of the nave.

Although Dolfin himself complained of a decline in the monks' moral standards, the monastery was still admired in the sixteenth century for the solemnity of its liturgy and its exemplary use of prayer and study.²⁹ In 1523 a new organ was ordered from the celebrated organ-builder Giovanni Battista Sacchetto at the cost of 200 ducats, with the intriguing stipulation that it should work better than those at the church of the Madonna dell'Orto in Venice and the cathedral of Chioggia.³⁰ The commission reflects the high musical ambitions of the Camaldolese monks – in 1521 the organ-builder had been 'borrowed' from the employment of Federico Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua, to work on the organs of San Marco. The organ loft was probably in a raised position in the left aisle, near the *barco* or monks' choir. The painted shutters, commissioned from Giovanni and Bernardino da Asola in 1526, still survive today in the Museo Correr (pls 28, 29), but the organ itself was rebuilt in the eighteenth century and dismantled before 1829.³¹

The barco

The length of the nave of San Michele in Isola is divided into two unequal parts by the *barco*, or raised monks' choir (pl. 30). Interrupting the flow of the semi-circular arches of the nave, the choir seems to invade the basilical space, converting it into an almost centralised space to the east and an entrance vestibule or atrium to the west (pl. 31). The fact that the arches that vault the choir are slightly wider than the other bays of the nave suggests that the *barco* was part of Codussi's design from the outset, creating an arrangement similar to that depicted by Carpaccio at Sant'Antonio di Castello (pl. 34).³²

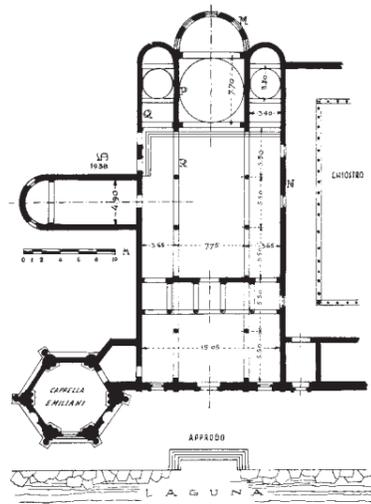
The choir space, in this case the elevated *barco*, lay at the heart of the liturgy – a place of seclusion and privacy, where the monks sought spiritual peace and revelation. Although they studied and even ate separately in their cells, the shared experience of prayer brought them closer together before God. A door from the upper floor of the main cloister gave direct access to the *barco* day and night.



28 and 29 Giovanni and Bernardino da Asola, outer doors of the organ shutters from San Michele in Isola: on the left, *Two Camaldolese Monks before St Benedict*, and on the right, *Doge Pietro Orseolo before St Romuald*, 1526 (Venice, Museo Correr)

Visiting monks could join in the sung prayers – indeed a *foresteria* was constructed in the monastery in the years 1523–6 – but the *barco* was not accessible to lay people.³³

The *barco* is far more elaborate in its delicate *all'antica* relief carving than the rest of the church, as if to reflect the special status of the monks and their devotions. Its rich ornament is not typical of Codussi's work, but the greater elaboration may simply have been intended to highlight the scholarly refinement and devotion of the monks themselves. The most likely author of the sophisticated *all'antica* relief ornament seems to be the stone-carver known as Taddeo, who was warmly praised in a letter of Pietro Dolfin in 1477: 'In our monastery there are works by him fashioned and carved with marvellous skill, which confer the most excellent ornament on our church.'³⁴ It has been often observed that the quality



ABOVE 30 San Michele in Isola, plan, from Luigi Angelini, *Le Opere in Venezia di Mauro Codussi*, Milan 1945

RIGHT ABOVE 31 San Michele in Isola, nave looking from the chancel towards the *barco* or raised monks' choir (Cameraphoto, Venice)

RIGHT BELOW 32 San Michele in Isola, *barco* or raised monks' choir from the entrance (Cameraphoto, Venice)



of the carving on the side facing the entrance is greatly superior to that on the side towards the nave, suggesting that the skills of Taddeo were perhaps confined to the west side (pl. 32).³⁵

The beautiful inlaid wooden choir stalls, executed between 1532 and 1534, are signed by Alessandro Bigno of Bergamo (pl. 33).³⁶ There are twenty-nine choir stalls: nineteen on the upper tier and ten on the lower level, corresponding very closely to the thirty monks recorded in Dolfin's time. It seems that the strain on the woodcarver almost cost him his life, for in 1534 he made his will, asking to be buried at San Michele, but fortunately he recovered to continue his career else-



LEFT 33 Alessandro Bigno of Bergamo, choir stalls in the *barco*, San Michele in Isola, 1532-4 (Cameraphoto, Venice)

BELOW 34 Vittore Carpaccio, *Dream of Prior Ottobon at Sant'Antonio di Castello*, circa 1515 (Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia. Cameraphoto, Venice)

where; he went on to work on the choir stalls at Santa Maria della Carità in Venice and was later employed in Bologna.³⁷

There were two types of *barco* in Venetian churches: those attached to the entrance wall over the main portal, as in the church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli and Sansovino's monastic church of Santo Spirito in Isola, now destroyed, and those that crossed the nave further down creating a separate atrium, such as those at Santa Maria della Carità and Sant'Antonio di Castello (pl. 34), neither of which is extant.³⁸ The *barco* at San Michele is thus a precious survival of the latter type. For the listener in the nave, the acoustic effects of the two types must have been similar,

