

## **Inquisitions, Persecutions, Trials, and Sentences in Valle Camonica in 1518**

*(Original: **Inquisizioni, persecuzioni, processi, condanne e roghi  
in Valle Camonica nel 1518**)<sup>1</sup>*

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### **Abstract**

*In the northern Italian Valcamonica of 1518, there was a witch-hunt, of which the description of its course in the reports of eyewitnesses could shed light on the possible connections between the witch-hunts and anti-clerical tendencies in the remote valleys of this region.*

**Keywords:** Witch-hunt, inquisition, sorcery

### **Zusammenfassung**

*Im norditalienischen Valcamonica fand im Jahre 1518 eine Hexenverfolgung statt, deren Verlauf und Schilderung in den Berichten der Zeitzeugen Licht auf die möglichen Zusammenhänge der Hexenverfolgung mit antikirchlichen Tendenzen in den abgelegenen Tälern dieser Region werfen könnte.*

**Schlüsselwörter:** Hexenverfolgung, Inquisition, Hexerei

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<sup>1</sup> Translation from the Italian original by Edgar W. Harnack. Some passages from old manuscripts are in antique Venetian language in the original version and have been translated in a tentative approximation to the probable meaning.

Before we begin the story of the witch-hunt in Valcamonica in 1518, it is appropriate to draw some simple historical and legal coordinates that will allow us to understand the historical and social dynamics of what happened. Of particular importance in the repression against witchcraft was the bull "Summis desiderantes affectibus" of Pope Innocent VIII, issued on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1484. The papal document, issued as a result of the opposition of some bishops of Germany that viewed the inquisitors' interference in administrative and religious affairs of the diocese entrusted to their mission as irregular, stated the introduction of inquisitorial canonical trials carried out only by ecclesiastical judges in cases of magic and witchcraft, and withdraw all interference of the lay courts in the proceedings and judgments proclaimed by the Inquisition. Another document being of direct relevance to the diocese of Brescia is the brief "Dilectus" posted on September 30, 1486 by Pope Innocent VIII to Bishop Paolo Zane and Dominican inquisitor, Antonio da Brescia. The Pope, informed that the officials of the city of Brescia had refused to enforce the sentences proclaimed against the witches and unrepentant heretics, arguing that the crime of heresy was purely ecclesiastical, ordered to summon the secular officials and excommunicate "ipso facto" those that after six days had not carried out the sentences pronounced by the bishop, the inquisitor or their vicars. In the apostolic letter, everybody was prohibited to examine the pleadings, thus preventing any interference with the lay courts in the religious causes stating indirectly, but unmistakably, the supremacy of the inquisitorial court. Where the Inquisition worked there were thus two institutions that administered justice: the church that justified the reasons for its work in theology and in the temporal power of the church; this court had jurisdiction in all areas of Christian Europe and could take action against all believers; and the secular judiciary should operate in strict compliance with the statutory and, as regards the diocese of Brescia, in accordance with the orders of the Venetian Republic.

Often the defendants were also accused of having procured the death to people and animals with the use of poison or black magic, so they had committed serious crimes that actually legitimized sentences without the intervention of the secular courts. For these cases, the presence of civil magistrates called "judges of bedevilment", although not required during the performance of the proceedings, justified the intervention of the secular arm for the execution of sentences. But when prosecuted persons had not committed crimes or murders or other transgressions of legal ordinance and their trials involved exclusively religious matters, the judges preferred not to obstruct the legal procedures and not to oppose the decisions of the ecclesiastical courts, in order to avoid to fall themselves prey to the ecclesiastical censures.

In this situation, the legal powers of the office of the Holy Inquisition did not meet any obstacle in the civil authorities and the activity of the courts being almost exclusively entrusted to the Dominicans, even those religious or theological disquisitions were avoided that could have resulted in any rivalry among the monastic orders and thus affect the procedures of the ecclesiastical tribunal. In addition, since the ordinances of the Roman curia, issued on the Inquisition, had an effect in all parts of Christian Europe, this court had no territorial limits of intervention; to it had to submit even the bishops, finding that the obligation of having to cooperate with the inquisitors meant that the specific competences of the bishops could be seen as fading.

With the brief of Pope Alexander VI "Cum acceperimus", sent to the inquisitor against the heretical evildoer Angelo da Verona, installed in the fight against witchcraft and heresy in Brescia in 1499, was granted to him and his successors that every prosecution had not necessarily to be made in the presence of a panel of judges, as it was stated in the letter: *"Having learned that in the province of Lombardy many people of both sexes are concerned with different spells and evil superstitious practices, which in their charms and vain observances cause many heinous crimes that destroy people, animals and fields, which lead to different trickery which created scandals: we have established, according to the ministry of pastoral office granted us from above, to repress such crimes and to avoid scandals and the mentioned fraud as much as we can, with God's help. A cause of this to you as well as your successors installed in Lombardy, we entrust and we order that you only have to diligently investigate such persons of both sexes and punish with legal action."*

The pontifex, consigning only to the inquisitors the office of the proceedings, established the indefeasibility of the inquisitors' judgments. The inquisitors, fortresses for maintaining the central and local ecclesiastical hierarchy, developed a well-defined legal path that left no legal space to lay magistrates, however, requiring the intervention of the secular arm for the execution of the sentence.

One of the architects of the witch-hunt in Valcamonica in 1518 was the bishop of the diocese, Paolo Zane. The young prelate, a Venetian patrician, not yet twenty, was confirmed to the bishopric of Brescia, in November of 1484, after the demission of the bishop's uncle Lorenzo, his predecessor. During his long episcopate, which lasted until 1531, twenty vicars and lieutenants took turns in his absence to the spiritual guidance of the people of Brescia, leaving the diocese without an organic pastoral program.

The last persecution against witches before 1518 was, according to the chronicles of Brescia, in 1510, Sylvester Mazzolini being the Dominican general inquisitor in the diocese. "Sixty witches and some warlocks were burnt in Pi-

sogne and Edolo, which assaulted men and women and animals, dried out meadows, herbs etc. with their enchantments. When they were led into the fire they were not afraid saying that they had done miracles and the devil had appeared to them in three ineffable images". It was the same Bishop Paolo Zane with some of his vicars and officials to spread across the valley from Lake Iseo to the Passo del Tonale the ecclesiastical courts in 1518, and with the help of the general inquisitor against the heretical malice to sue, condemn and put to the stake more than seventy people. After a few months, any activity of the Inquisition in Valcamonica was suspended by order of the Venetian Republic "for impiety and even cruelty that they used". Not before 1521, with the intervention of the apostolic legate Altobello Averoldi, will be issued precise rules in inquisitional matters by the Council of Ten<sup>2</sup>, which will limit in fact, through precise control of rectors, every activity of the ecclesiastical courts.

But let us now get back to the narration of the Camunian events, as we were able to reconstruct the documents and sources that until now have been examined. In May 1518, the bishop of Brescia, Paolo Zane, and the general inquisitor against heretical malice, the Dominican Fra Gerolamo da Lodi, moved in Valcamonica with their vicars and inquisitorial officers. In Pisogne, Darfo, Breno and Edolo, the investigators urged the people to conversion and repentance. The reasons for this expedition are contained in this anonymous document transcribed by Marin Sanudo in his "Diaries": "In the year of the theogony (from the generation of God) 1518. Since in the Brescia area and especially in parts of Valcamonica, through the work of the devil, had prevailed such a large sect of witches and sorceresses and heretics of both sexes, so that with good reason, oh pain, one had to fear not little the integrity of the Christian republic. Properly the most just and upright bishop of Brescia Paolo Zane, Venetian patrician, declared at the request of the inhabitants of those parts, as well as he could, to provide for this almost incurable disease and to eradicate its deep roots all the way, as long as he could. And in order that it did not seem that the provident shepherd came less in any part of so much an enterprise and a very happy campaign, such as a second bishop St. Vigil, who died in the midst of heretics, fighting valiantly for the faith of Christ, and as befits a brave military leader, he himself, although the enterprise was of no small effort and unpredictable danger, enlisted to fight some deputies, down in the valley, offering the venerable head of a thousand arts, a thousand diabolical traps and a thousand deadly and pestiferous potions and poisons.

So, in the meantime, the most worthy bishop, like a good hunter, having sent several days before the Capurion to hold the position of deputy captain, had

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<sup>2</sup> One of the most influential political bodies of the Venetian republic (translator's note)

met in the valley a group of heretics so nourished, which hardly one thinks one can find in the whole of Italy. After a few of these heretics according to legal sanctions were put to death in Edolo, and after another was exhumed and thrown into the fire as a heretic, at the end the bishop himself, his assistants assigned to the task of patrolling some parts, settled at the small village of Cemmo. He sent the Capurion (Baptist Cappurione) to Edolo, the Bona (Bona Valerio) to Vione, the Gabiano (Jacomo de Gablani) to Mangalore, and the Grosso (Bernardino Grossi) to Pisogne with his officers that are called *plebali* in the vernacular; he himself held Cemmo together with the wise Savallo. And while the very industrious hunter, day and night, tirelessly searching, walked every path in narrow space of time, ordered to send to the stake a good number of people, including Agnes, called "captain of sorceresses", and Pasino, famous scribe of Tonale, called "chancellor". For other men who seemed to repent of errors, he decreed a milder punishment.

Therefore, the proceeding was conducted with the still contaminated defendants, and some inexperienced believed that such chief heretics had completed these bewitchments only in sleep and committed slight sins by suggestion of the devil. But these, as soon as they were obsessed in more depth, quite awake trampled on the cross and the Holy Eucharist several times with the feet and other dishonourable limbs and pissed and shitted on the same cross, I would not say only in Tonale, but also in their own homes, their fields and woods. Then they denied God and his orthodox faith, renouncing the baptism and the other sacraments of the Church. A hundred times they gave themselves to the devil in soul and body, they worship him in many ways and recognize him as their god and, knowing that devil, worship him kneeling, and something far more serious, on the same cross as on a bed they abused with wicked lust. And driven by the well-known evil concoction, as well as much other great wickedness, committed infinite and almost countless murders, mainly maltreating their families".

Against the repressive action taken by the bishop and by the inquisitor, neither the rectors of Brescia, nor the General Council of the city, nor the captain of the valley intervened nor did they regard it to be opportune to inform the government of Venice. However, many people were interested in what was happening in the valley: On June 24<sup>th</sup> the Venetian Carlo Emiliani, lord of Breno, informed Marino Zorzi, former captain in Brescia in 1509; on July 28<sup>th</sup> Alexander Pompey wrote to Giovanni Giustiniani; and August 1<sup>st</sup> Joseph of Orzinuovi communicated to Ludovico Querini, former superintendent in the fortress of Orzinuovi, what had happened in Valcamonica. These letters, from which we will read in the following some excerpts, are essential for the reconstruction of the events and the causes that triggered them, and inform us on the socio-economic

situation of the valley, on the operations of the Inquisition and the Sabbath on Monte Tonale; but also on statements made by respondents to the judges, by the prosecutors at the expense of the accused, and by the judgments rendered by the inquisitors and Episcopal vicars. Thus, they allow us, in addition, to understand the mindset of a certain, we would say today, intellectual-political class of the sixteenth century about witchcraft and demonic possession. Certainly, what has survived may have been influenced by the beliefs and feelings that these witnesses sensed in the face of the facts that were told. However, in the absence of pleadings, which until now have not been found in any archives consulted among those consultable, they are the only documents that testify what happened in the valley in 1518.

The captain of Breno wrote: "If from any older woman or from their own mothers they were promised that they will have many goods and pleasures, they were made to renege the faith. Thus they made a cross on the ground riding with their feet above it, reneged the faith. And if it was consensual, immediately a beautiful horse presented itself on which both mounted and in a short time they found themselves on a beautiful plain situated over a mountain, on top of this valley that borders with Trentino and Valtelina, they say they saw a great multitude of men and women, who in pairs were going, some dancing, some singing, some playing with different instruments, and some who entertained themselves with meals. As for the newly arrived woman, because everyone rejoiced and applauded her and everyone with a due welcome expected her, and she vain-triumphant, seeming to be the most beautiful and honoured dame in the world, she hang around celebrating herself.

And passing further they see a big and sumptuous tribunal furnished with precious stones and columns of gold that sustained them, in the midst of which was a chair made entirely of gold, upon which sat a grand master and lord, and beside that were many barons and grand masters, of gold and silk well clothed; below those were very beautiful young men. She was by her guide presented to that Lord, to whom the former said: 'Sir, I have brought you an apprentice girl'. Then the before mentioned Lord made great festivities first to the companion, and made her feel her feed over a carpet of gold, then spoke to the younger saying: "Daughter, be welcome there!". And she touched him the reversed hand, and it is said that the hand was not like ours, then he asked her if she wanted to be of his kind, on what she answered yes. Then, the mentioned Lord said to her, 'You will deny the faith of Christ, and have me as your Lord and me you will adore as your God'. Then he made her spit on the cross and she stepped on it and reneged it; after this, immediately he delivered her a beautiful young man as boyfriend, with whom she had a thing above the cross in all modes that is not decent to do or to talk about. When

asked why she did it, she replied, 'that he had forced me that I had to do all what he commanded me, and over a book he made me swear, which forced me that I had to do the worst things possible'. Then she went to that dance where she had great pleasure, where they made all lascivious things possible.

They have also confessed that maybe 40, maybe 50 died, and more than 200 creatures, and one other [woman] confessed that besides reneging God, using carnality with the devil, and the dead of many, that she made die three of her own sons. The real cause of many malefactions committed by them, they say, is that those devils, their friends, when they came to visit them beat them, which gave them also a certain oil, with which they greased a stick or their distaff, mounting on it immediately were taken above the mentioned mountain, and those who did the most bad things were honoured and caressed, but more those that converted a male or female one to this damn sect.

Some of these poor wanted to confess and some did not, even when at last all invoked the Virgin Mary to their aid. Nonetheless, it was the eve of St. John, seven women and one man were excommunicated as recidivous (which had already been convicted) and separated from the Holy Mother Church, and were unrepentant heretics, and which were given to the secular forces and arm and to the temporal jurisdiction available in this place. And so the named judge determined and sentenced these eight for such excesses that they should be put into the fire alive and burnt, and in such a way it was done. About these things, which seem to me a lot of doubts, I wanted to see any author, because I have no minor conversation of it than with books to spend the time of my life". After some consideration of books to read, including the "Decretum Graziani" containing the Canon Episcopi, then the Summa of St. Thomas and St. Augustine in the parts that relate to the demonology, he closed his letter to the magnificent and illustrious lord Marino Zorzi.

Alessandro Pompeio, citizen of Brescia and connected with circles of the bishop's curia wrote to Giovanni Giustiniani arguing that the inquisitorial activity had to be considered as useful and necessary to defeat the valley of the witches: "And heretical beasts who have chosen one mountain, that is called Monte Tonale, in which they retreated to fuck and dance. Here they affirmed that they cannot find in the world anything more delightful and that they greased one stick, mounted [it like] on a horse and made [it] a horse, above which they went to the mentioned mountain, and where intervenes the devil, whom they worship as their God and their lord and which gives them a certain powder, with which the aforementioned women and men made little children die, storm, and dry trees and grain on the field, and other evils, and throwing the aforementioned powder over a rock, it breaks. And I was in the presence of many heretics at their confes-

sion and at their unhappy death. Those that refused to repent were burned alive. And among others between the burned was a Mister Pasino, who was chancellor of the aforementioned site, where he confessed that at that place two thousand and five hundred persons participated. And it was burned another one that was his carrier, who went to France, Spain and other places greasing that stick. Of the bifurcated penis, that is of the devil who uses [it] sexually with the before mentioned females from ahead, from behind, and other things I could not write, because your Magnificence would not believe it, if you did not see it. Therefore, may you wish to put all your diligence in arriving at this holy enterprise”.

Giuseppe da Orzinuovi in the letter sent August 1<sup>st</sup> to Ludovico Querini described Valcamonica and its inhabitants in a very questionable way: “There is a valley in the head of the Brescian territory towards the borders to the German, where our cowherds each year go to feet themselves on our land from muttons, which by public name is called Valle Camonica; a place more mountainous than plain, a place more barren than fertile, and inhabited by people being for the most part more ignorant than differentiated, people with goitre, virtually all deformed, if possible without any rules of civilized life. [They are people] of rural and wild customs, where those that have knowledge are rare, I would not say that they serve the commandments of God, wherever one can, so to speak, so that there is such a difference from these valley inhabitants to the other Brescians. (...) And it seems that already for some time the witches of Albania have been transferred into this Valle Camonica. So much has this curse multiplied from one time to another, that if one does not stop them now with fair prevision, the disease of this plague proceeded so much that the hole valley, mountain and plain, those poor priests and laypersons, will become unfaithful to the divine Majesty, devoted to evil works, trained to fascinate men and to bewitch small children. Some, though priests of that valley, celebrating the mass they did not consecrate the host, and these priests were the principal sorcerers, and like wolves on sheep, secretly serving the devil not the true God, in making all evils”.

Finally, on July 31, the Council of Ten, after having called together the rectors of the city in Venice, order the mayor Giovanni Badoer "to mount his horse with all secrecy and go immediately to find the reverend bishop where we all together want that you first and foremost must put all possible diligence and ambition in having in your own hands all the proceedings that have been held against the 62 condemned and burned as against all other condemned and accused for heresy". The mayor immediately began his work of investigation, examining witnesses, listening to the alleged perpetrators, and checking how the redistribution of the confiscated goods of the condemned had been done, and sent all the collected documents to Venice. On the afternoon of August 23, the Council of Ten met to

examine the papers sent by the mayor that concerned primarily the court proceedings against the witches conducted by the bishop's vicar Bernardino Grossi in Pisogne. In fact, a few days later the vicar was summoned to Venice since according to the Council of Ten during the proceedings the legal norms had not been respected.

Bernardino Grossi reached the lagoon city with four people who were a direct embassy to the Venetian Signoria to demonstrate the need and usefulness of the Inquisition conducted by Bishop Paolo Zane. In the company of the priest Bona Valerio, respected in Venice for his collaboration in liberating the city of Brescia in 1516, were the Dominican friar Gregorio and two lay people: Bernardino di Benoli and Damiani de Federici, consul of the city of Esine. At the end of the session, the Council of Ten summoned the papal legate Altobello Averoldi and entrusted him with the task of forming a special commission presided by patriarch Antonio Contarini to examine the proceedings sent to Venice by the mayor. Probably in an attempt to block any kind of interference by the Venetian Republic, on September 9 Altobello Averoldi appeared at the Venetian Senate with a brief of Pope Leo X assigning him to deal with the heretical phenomena existing in Valcamonica.

In consideration of the interest of the pontiff, the Venetian Signoria showed its satisfaction, demanding, however, the immediate removal of the general inquisitor, so that "the issue would have to end duly and right according to sacred canons and completely eradicate the heretic errors, if there are any, and remedy those that do not proceed, so that those places may go back to the true divine cult". But from the Roman Curia came a letter to Altobello Averoldi on September 23, where it was recommended not to exclude the Dominican fathers from the inquisitorial activities and, therefore, much less the general inquisitor, Gerolamo da Lodi. Two days later, a priest came to the Venetian Signoria conducted by the apostolic legate and was questioned by the Doge and other councillors. Marin Sanudo described the encounter: "Comes the Legate of the Pope, Sir Altobello Averoldi, bishop of Pola, saying he had brought from Brescia a literate priest, who had been seduced<sup>3</sup> to go the mountain Tonal and was repentant, and had testified at Brescia and at him, the Legate. He is called father Betin of ....., and after reading his deposition, he was first made to go inside. Of him was in public, by word of mouth, said that he had been to mountain Tonal due to having one girlfriend of his there from Valcamonica, called Comina, which with the powder thrown at him had him, but he [finally] had no other [girl], which that Lord of mount Tonal gave him as a lover, than one called Bianca Maria, which he used three times; once in the befitting vase

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<sup>3</sup> Originally *stigozo*; probably an old nominal form from Venetian: *stigàr*, Italian: *istigare* = *instigate* = *seduce*

and twice into the anus. And she said to him that in this way they were connected in soul and body. Thereupon the prince (i.e., Doge) and the whole Signoria (i.e., the Doge, the ducal council and the three heads of the criminal court) interrogated him a lot, and he responded at all questions saying that they were devils with horns on their heads and hands with goose quills“.

A witness arriving from the valley told the mayor of Brescia what he saw and heard in Pisogne the 17<sup>th</sup> July, 1518, "about the burning of eight women", declared witches and unrepentant heretics, by the episcopal vicar Bernardino de Grossi, but according to the witness were truly repentant because they prayed with great devotion and entrusted themselves to God and the "Blessed Virgin". A woman before being led to the fire said publicly: "Know that I really exculpate Antonin Decus and the Chabatino, and Bartolamio de Mori, and it is not true that I ever saw them in Tonal, but they made me say so by force, and this I say to relieve my consciousness". And what he has seen "seemed a spectacle of such cruelty to see women burned alive; and what made me stay astonished was when three or four women had died before the fire could leak them. I say that I have heard publicly that those witches came after having received excessive torments, one of them being conducted into the fire without feet because they have been burnt away by the torture. And I add that these proceedings must have been performed by most expert men, theologians and canonists, well aware and God-fearing. However, I inform your Magnificence that one part of them were really witches, and the first thing that they confessed was saying that they deny the baptism and Jesu Christ and His Mother, and having sex with demons above the cross".

The patriarchal commission, after reviewing the documents received in Venice, decided to undertake a new survey by mandating the Brescian Mattia Ugoni, bishop of Famagosata, and Bartholomeo Assonica from Bergamo, a Dominican, Bishop of Capodistria and vicar of the bishop Zane, both living in Brescia. Of particular interest is the figure of the bishop Assonica who had been invited at the diocese of Brescia as general inquisitor by Pope Leo X and was immediately appointed episcopal vicar of Paolo Zane and now inspector on behalf of the patriarchal committee. This decision left virtually unchanged the existing institutional set-up and did not finish anything, we would say today due to a formal error, since the vicar bishop and in addition Dominican would never have dared to investigate neither the titular bishop nor the general inquisitor, and did so by blocking each form of control that the Republic could exercise by the two bishops appointed by the patriarchal commission.

Meanwhile, the mayor of Brescia, Giovanni Badoer, informed the Council of Ten that "immediate I will sent my chancellor to communicate the mentioned letter to the Reverend Famagusta, who was very grateful for that and showed his

commission to this chancellor at the encounter. [...] The very same then left Venice with the opinion to confer [on that matter] at Rome". Without caring about the new situation that had been created by the direct intervention of the Venetian Republic, at the end of October the vicar of the general inquisitor, Lorenzo Maggi, ordered the arrest of a certain Bartolomeo de Celeris from Malono, who was already detained as a heretic. Faced with this action taken without informing nor the bishops delegated by the patriarchal commission nor the rectors of the city of Brescia, the mayor regarded it as appropriate to inform the Council of Ten immediately, first of all in order to intervene "in such extravagant and dangerous matters", albeit having already sent from the inquisitorial vicar one of his secretaries that was received "with very inconsiderate words full of arrogance, hence my ruler, hearing that temerarious response, seems not to have sent him to say something, suspecting the very worst, because of the suspension produced in this matter and especially by the named Reverend brother Lorenzo himself. After I had deprived him of the Valemonica proceedings, he could not and he ought not to proceed detaining and imprisoning any layperson without making a movement towards me".

The Council of Ten in response to the action carried out by Maggi ordered the immediate arrest of those who had captured Celeris, and two men were arrested belonging to the "red crosses", i.e., people who had already been convicted of heresy and now as penance were obliged, on pain of excommunication, to obey the orders of the inquisitors. Later, the Justice of the Company during the interrogation of Celeris learned that the inquisitor intended to excommunicate the mayor, who – being immediately informed – ordered to transfer the prisoner from the inquisitorial prison to a public one. The mayor of Brescia, Giovanni Badoer, disappointed by the attitudes of the inquisitor, wrote to the Doge stating that "with displeasure I am intervening in this matter knowing that one finally cannot reach anything but shame, [...] And though the aforementioned friars stay quiet, I would be contented to pass these few months I have left to stay here and not to enter more inside in order to get crazy by knowing them clearly not being able because [...] they are such naive supporters, peasantry disguised, who have devoured shame and conscience together. Men of good will do not want to come in this city knowing to be mad to see [...] their bad behaviours".

Finally, even in Brescia in December 1518 the General Council of the city began to take an interest "in the sorcery that in the last days was brought about the Pisognean land and Lake Isei", reading some of the letters of the captain of Breno sent to the mayor, and send Ludovico de Buchis in the valley. In early July, while indulgences were sold in Brescia for the rebuilding of the new cathedral, Bartholomew de Celeris was released at the request of the Council of Ten after nine

months in prison, and Francis Pelosella, notary at the court of Brescia, was summoned secretly to Venice. Probably driven by religious authorities, in October 1519 the General Council demanded from the city a new and more effective action of the Inquisition against "those witches and hags and detestable persons" in order to correct, punish and eradicate the diabolic sects still existing in the valley and in the province of Brescia. In January of the following year a delegation of citizens of the Valcamonica – Zun Pietro de Lentiis, Zuan de Burlatis, ed Orsatto Orsatti – on behalf of all municipalities in the valley, requested a new intervention against the witches in Venice. The heads of the Council of Ten determined the rectors of Brescia to check the veracity of the petition presented by the Camonians, "and if the bishop of Brescia or others will have sent someone to resolve this new issue in this valley" they recommended "because of the importance of the case" to proceed by "walking on eggshells".

In February 1520, the Council of Ten received a rich documentation on the presence of the witch-sects in the valley by the rectors of Brescia and, acknowledging the seriousness of the problem, thought it appropriate to send in the province of Brescia the two prelates already designated by the patriarchal commission: Mattia Ugoni and Bartholomew Assonica, not having completed anything yet, now seemed the most suitable persons for this task. But this mission was very different from that which they obtained in the fall of 1518: then they were appointed by the apostolic legate to control the work of the bishop and the inquisitors, while this second one, in contrast, was issued by the Council of Ten to check the actual existence of witches in the diocese of Brescia. The Council of Ten with a personal letter to Bartholomew Assonica even requested the bishop to resume his inquisitorial activities in the diocese of Brescia, who being confident of the obtained guarantees immediately started with care and zeal. After a few months, he had indeed arrested five sorcerers, including Maria Mafeola of Mangalore. However, the Heads of the Council of Ten strenuously opposed the intentions of the bishop Assonica, immediately commanding the rectors to provide the pleadings and a new investigation was opened again.

While the rectors of Brescia tried to put together the many court documents scattered among the courts, which were established by the inquisitorial and episcopal vicars, on August 27 "coming on Tuesday, there was coming rain to parts of the deanery of Edolo, and nowhere else, so big as the Ojo (river) and the valley of Vezza, some valley in the vicinity of Ramul and the *Rabbia de Sonico valley*, increased so much that there was not such a thing than this flood in that valley. Before Ponte de Legno (wooden bridge), at Pra and at Pentagna came a landslide that destroyed mills, homes, possession, dwellings of the countryside, the same at Vezza. All smithies, mills, and dyeing mills, houses of the land were

jumbled up. Then a high and feeble, horrific extermination of Sonico, where, caused by earth, a landslide came breaking away from the mountain, where this never before has been, of very big stones, which uprooted countless trees and chestnuts, and then altogether about sixty houses devastated, at night and abruptly, and pushed into the Ojo. Sixty-four died on that land, which during the day were found, and they found the bodies torn, these headless, those without arms, those without legs, a piece here and a piece there. And this avalanche, running in the Ojo river, overwhelmed all the bridges; from Ponte di Legno it came to Cuzeno and Vezza, Malano, Cidegol, Siancea and Breno, all destructed and extirpated. And I say, if you had seen the wooden forces that came together<sup>4</sup> [?], seeming to have sallied out in destruction of that poor valley, then the coal deposits destroyed, of which, I think, four thousands sacks were moved to the extreme point of the lake; not to speak about the hay, the seeds and apple, and other fruits from Ponte di Legno until the lake, because the valley was all a lake, and it seemed wanting to arise another flood. Neither war, nor famine nor plague in the time of the living has so frightened the men of this valley, of that ravine as this bloodbath and extermination, which I think has inflicted damage on our valley of not less than a hundred thousand ducats. It is necessary that this poor, unhappy valley sends away its cattle, because there will not be hay for the cattle nor for sustaining the persons. Now think how the country is, where the tempest is still in the major part of the valley. And therefore we cannot think otherwise than that there was a bad sect in this diabolic valley. A brother of Saint Peter said that certain men are excavating those who died of famine, and he met with a woman, who was a witch, and she said these words to him: 'as long as they do not let go the sorceresses and sorcerers it will never be different'. And these men [went] united to Edolo, where the inquisitor was, and told him about the case, and the mentioned inquisitor ordered to capture that woman and questioned her, and she began denying having said such things, and the inquisitor ordered to call those men, and standing face to face with them she confessed that she had said it, and said that many of their sorcerers and sorceresses had agreed to do that".

Then on the afternoon of September 28, several trials and interrogations on sorcerers of Valcamonica were read in the Council of Ten. The councillors discussed at length but did not arrive at any conclusions. Luca Tron, being a Sage, i.e. one of the six senators of the Venetian republic's council, which determined the domestic and foreign policy of the republic, "did not want that they went further in the direction of making an issue out of it". Also in the session of De-

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<sup>4</sup> Orig. "*legnami di opera che sono venuti zoso*"

ember 12 were some case files read and Luca Tron spoke at length during the session, and finally he decided to call Bartolomeo Assonica to the new trials at Venice, but then almost ten months had passed since the bishop had jailed the five alleged sorcerers. Finally on January 3, 1521 the bishop presented himself in the Council of Ten and confirmed at the hearing the existence of the witch sects in the valley. Confronted with the words of Assonica, "Luca Tron made up his mind, saying that it was not true" and ten days later the Council ordered the bishop to leave the territory of the diocese of Brescia and to return to Bergamo, thus withdrawing from him the mission conferred to him by the apostolic legate in April 1520. As a consequence, on February 15, Pope Leo X with the brief "*Honestis petentium votis*" addressed with harsh words the interference of the Venetian Republic in a case considered purely ecclesiastical: The papal document guaranteed full legal autonomy for the inquisitors and bishops in cases of sorcery and witchcraft in the territories under their jurisdiction. The brief also resumed the provisions that have been enacted in 1486 by Pope Innocent VIII in the brief "*Dilectus*" with which he forced the judges and secular officials through the ecclesiastical censures to execute the judgements delivered by the inquisitors strictly excluding the revision of the pleadings, as we mentioned at the beginning of this report.

In the face of the papal brief the Council of Ten had a moment of hesitation, and almost all the councillors wanted the intervention of the inquisitors in Vallecamonica, but Luca Tron polemicized bitterly arguing that "those petty ones are dead martyrs, and there was nothing at Mount Tonal" the conference was suspended and summoned three days later where there was "a great disputation, but not competing for matter, and was deferred to another council". Finally, on 20 and 21 March after "many disputation" of a political and theological character the councillors decided to write to the rectors of Brescia. After the Council of Ten, the apostolic legate Altobello Averoldi was called and he presented them a declaration of consent aiming at the elimination of the "heretics and extirpate such detestable crime" with the desire to re-establish in a short time "the true Catholic faith". Nevertheless, this basically refused the provisions of the papal brief of Pope Leo X. The document proposed, in fact, the establishment of a panel of judges consisting of one or two bishops, an inquisitor, and two prominent doctors of the city of Brescia to review the pleadings and rulings given by the inquisitors. The text also indicated the procedures to be followed once the processes had been established, explicitly prohibiting the use of torture and specified that before the final judgment the pleadings had to be seen by the rectors of Brescia, by the court of the mayor, and by four other doctors of the city. The commission composed in this way was assigned to speak on the merits

of the judgments rendered by the inquisitors, however paying attention to the "extortion [...], as is said to be the case at present. But in the first place if you find any expedient so that the appetite for the money is not the cause of condemning or humiliating anyone. [And one should] take into consideration that the poor of Valcamonica are simple people and of a dull mind: and which have no less need of preachers with prudent instructions of the Catholic faith than of persecutors with a stern advertence, being such a number of souls that can be regained in those mountains and valleys".

On April 11, 1521, the Apostolic Legate affixed his signature to the document and accepted the proposals of the Council of Ten. The document, important for its legal significance, was extended to the entire territory of the Venetian Republic and later has been contested in the inquisitorial proceedings brought against the Protestant heretics residing under the Venetian rule. The ideological, theological, juridical, and cultural conflicts could not hamper, however, the activity of the inquisitors and much less their work of persecution and alleged redemption that continued unabated for over two centuries. On the other hand, the opposition to the demonological doctrines, both lay and clergy, did not organize a united front in defence of the witches and wizards, nor were the theological prerequisites, which justified the actions of the inquisitors, attacked and refuted by Renaissance Humanism. The disputes seized only the formal aspects of the inquisitorial and judicial procedures and never openly opposed to the activity of the ecclesiastical courts. Then the attempt to distinguish the magic in its good and evil aspects and the attempt to justify the usefulness of white magic, alchemy, and astrology, practiced by Renaissance magicians, unwittingly provided an extenuation of the belief in magic and witchcraft. With the advent of the Reformation, the Inquisition courts had instead to face new and different ethical and religious ideas, and then the ideological confrontation did not take place any more between the inquisitorial authorities and the poor deluded or crazy and fearful peasants, but among learned theologians, canonists, and experts. So the job of the inquisitors appeared more difficult and complex because the Reformation produced with its divulging and innovative force difficult problems with which the instruments of torture and the inquisitorial trial had to deal. Faced with the new situation, therefore, Paul III in 1542 with the bull "Licet ab initio" instituted the Roman Inquisition.

### **About the author**

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