

# Auctioning God's Kingdom

## Modelling the 1766 Ecclesiastical Property Reform in the Republic of Venice

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### context

In the Republic of Venice, the handling of a new issue often required the creation of new magistracies. On April 12<sup>th</sup> 1766, the Senate voted to establish the *Deputazione ad Pias Causas* to identify and confiscate the property of regular establishments deemed useless in view of their number – those with less than twelve members. The *Aggiunto Sopra Monasteri*, instituted later in September 1768, was responsible for auctioning off the property.

The aim of the reformers was to reverse the balance of power between Church and State once and for all in favour of the latter. To do this, they had to seize the lands that were owned by the Church and bring it back under its direct authority. Indeed, in his report of June 12<sup>th</sup> 1767, Pietro Franceschi, the secretary of the *Deputazione ad Pias Causas*, wrote that :

« The ultimate public object is to prevent the extermination of the Laity, just as the object of the Clergy is to prevent their own »

This rebalancing also enabled to reduce the public debt (redemption of the debt through the exchange of land) and to obtain liquidity for investments (profit from sales) as well as infrastructures through the reuse of ecclesiastical monuments (hospitals, schools). These sales coincided with the transformation of the relationship to solidar-

ity and the disqualification of charity in favour of state intervention.

### Previous reforms

It was not the first attempt to limit ecclesiastical property for fiscal reasons and to prevent too many possessions from leaving families without hope of return. Two previous laws promulgated in 1536 and 1605 stipulated that property bequeathed to pious institutions of the city and duchy, and then of all Venetian territories, had to be sold within two years. These restrictions were very poorly applied in view of the growth of ecclesiastical property during the Counter-Reform period.

### Related literature

This episode has been discussed in the Venetian historiography in three ways: first, as one element among others of the reform policy (Venturi, 1989); second, as a stage in a long process that saw the Church and the Venetian state clash on jurisdictional issues and on the becoming of mortmain property (Agostini, 2002). Finally, in a case study limited to Benedictine establishments, Dino Bresan (2006) reconstituted the social profile of the buyers. This situation contrasts with the attention given in many studies to the modes of transmission and management of

family patrimonies (Chauvard, 2005; Derosas, 1987), but also with the interest in the management of ecclesiastical patrimonies and the forms of ownership at the end of the Middle Ages (Masè, 2006 ; Hocquet 2020).

### Defining ecclesiastical property

Studying the first systematic resizing of the ecclesiastical patrimony by the Venetian authorities raises the question of its constitution, through donations, and its definition in the long process of the making of property. It can be understood as the participation of believers in an ecclesiological project (Brown, 2016; Toneatto, 2012) of occupation of the world (Piron, 2018).

### Methodology

Therefore, the first step is to explain why this reformation took place by understanding the Venetian reform context and the local debates on suppressions. The second step is to reconstruct the institutional dispositive developed from pre-existing models (previous reforms, sales of commons). Finally, the core of my project is a systematic study of the sales themselves, from which I develop case studies in order to understand the motivations of the buyers, the fate of the goods, and the possible transformation of the modes of exploitation and production.

### auctions

Following the establishment of the two aforementioned magistracies, the first decrees obliged the ecclesiastical congregations to communicate the number of members in their establishments and to make an inventory of the property of those concerned. The dispositive set up enabled an inventory to be drawn up, sometimes from kitchen equipment to agricultural estates, with surprising continuity. Then the list of goods concerned by the sales was published in the chief town of the territory to which the institution was attached, as well as in Venice. Finally the auction was publicly announced in these same places, and it took place in *Piazza San Marco*.

There were just over 400 sales between the early 1770s and the end of 1796. There was an initial period of intense seizures and sales, but from 1774 onwards the reformist party lost its influence. The pro-Roman party then suspended the sales. The number of sales did not increase again until the early 1780s [Figure 2].

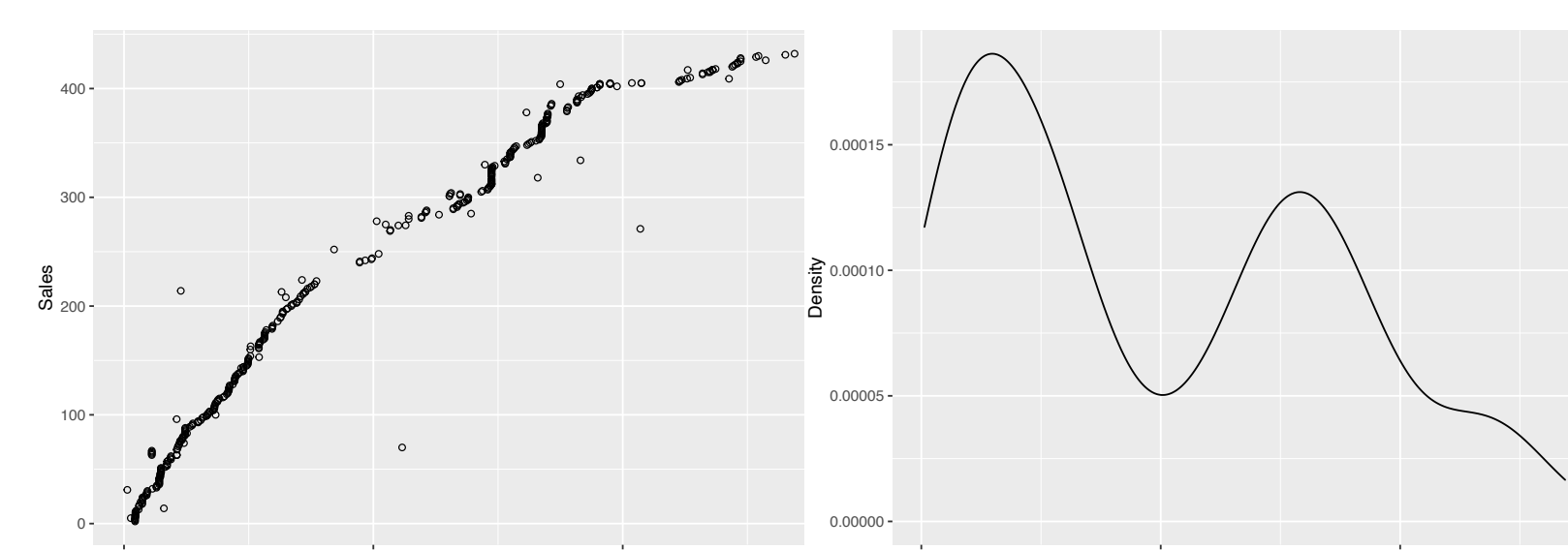


Figure 2. Sales overtime

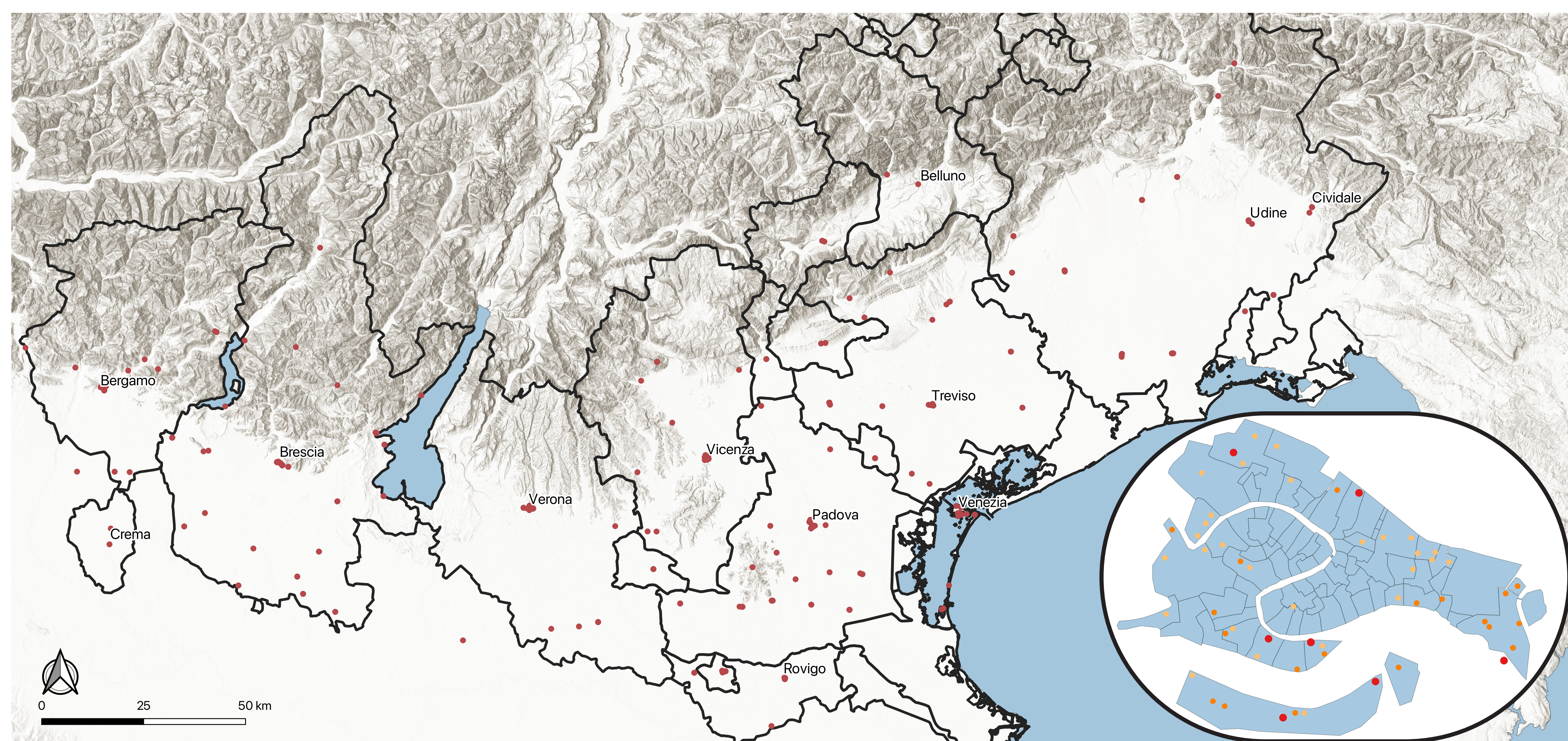


Figure 1. Suppressed institutions  
Nb of institutions: 206  
Urban vs Rural institutions: 82 / 124  
Most represented cities: Vicenza (10), Padova (9), Venezia (8), Verona (8)

Figure 3. Focus on the Venetian case  
Comparison of the extent of sales after the 1766 reform and during the Napoleonic occupation (1806: orange; 1810: yellow). (Dumond, 2011)

### prices

In most transactions, property was exchanged for public debt bonds. These confiscations resulted in a double transfer of land from the church to the state and then to private individuals - and also a transfer of cash from private individuals to the state, especially to cover the public deficit.

The average price of goods sold was £16.000, with a median price of £3.500. This was more than ten times the average annual wage of a worker which was then £297 (Zannini, 1999).

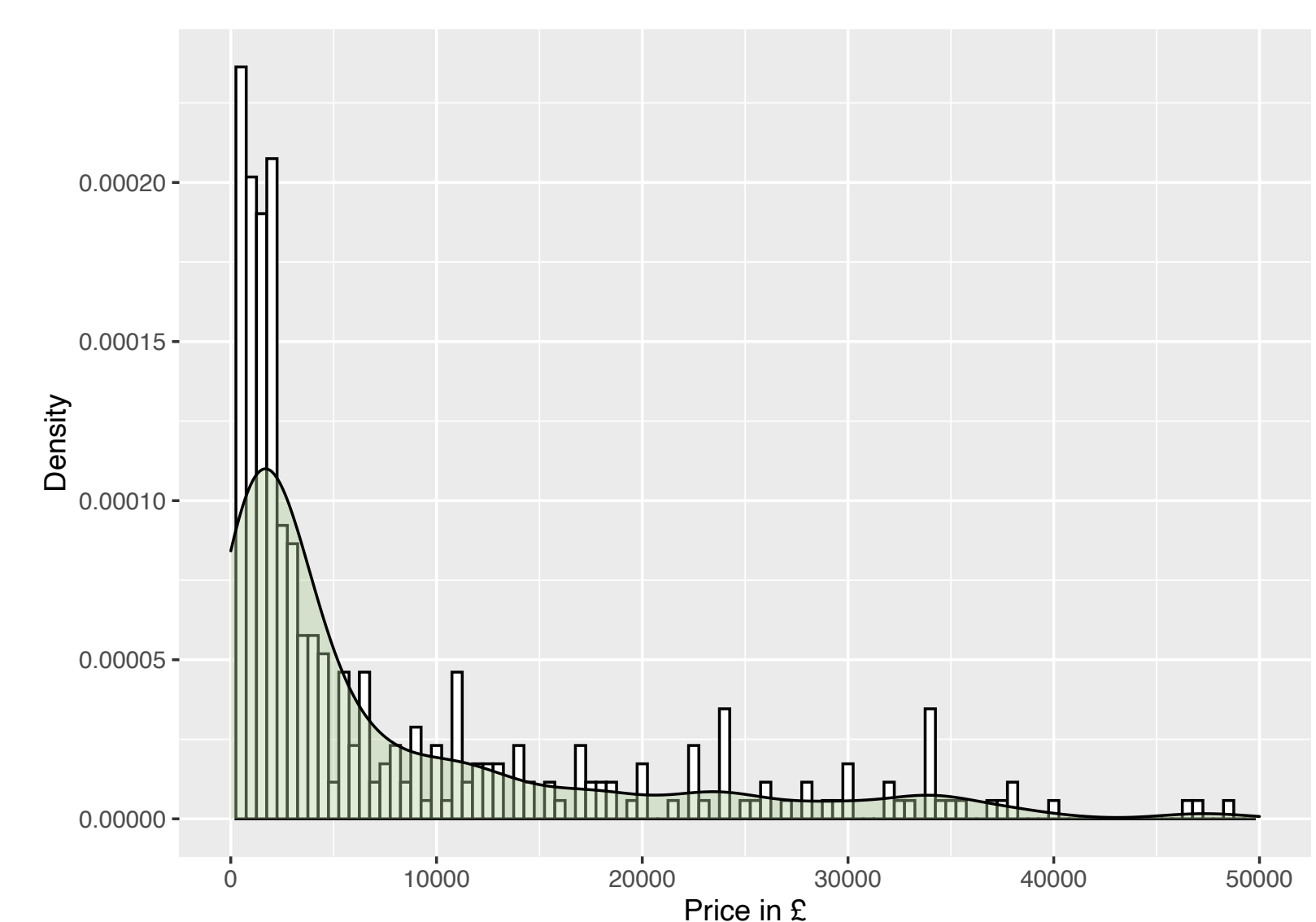


Figure 4. Prices distribution  
Only prices below 50 000 £ are plotted (82% of the set)

### buyers

There were 349 buyers, 322 bought only one property, 10 bought three or more. Among them there were 35 institutional buyers, 40 Venetian nobles, 4 women, of which 3 were Venetian nobles.

These sales were very good deals for the big buyers who belonged to the patrician oligarchy, the same one that had initiated the suppressions. Andrea Querini who bought the property of Santa Maria della Riviera for 99.000 ducats, was the best known figure of this mixture of public and private interest.

More than 20% of purchasers bought in groups, this is an important phenomenon. There are more than 50 siblings who operated together. There are two possible explanations for these associations: because large amounts of capital had to be raised or because they were already operating together on other transactions. It is highly likely that these buyers were using fideicommiss trust capital (Chauvard, 2018).

Buyers	Acq.	Prices (£)	Rank price
Bertani Pietro	7	92.555	12
Erizzo NHZ Niccolo	6	497.891	1
Querini NHZ Andrea	6	340.161	2
Vicenza Citta	5	13.050	94
Barbera Co. Girolamo	4	70.876	24
Todeschini Ecc.te Frevigo	3	91.246	15
Cordellina Ecc.te Carlo	3	75.458	22

Figure 5. Price and number of acquisitions by buyers

### lands

The goods sold were mainly agricultural land. They were basically of two kinds: fields (*campo*, *pezzo di terra*) and larger properties (*possessione*) [Figure 7]. Their exploitation was delegated to tenants who paid a rent in cash or in kind (grain, chickens, etc.).

Descriptions give an overview of land structures, but the most interesting analysis will be to compare this phase with the later management by lay purchasers, taking into account the transformation of rights on land.



Figure 7. Examples of a set of lands of the Abbazia di Leno (Brescia)  
La possessione detta la Casella delineata fra le sue coerenze ASVe, Aggiunto Sopra Monasteri, b. 84, f. 69

