

Finding Foundlings:

A Student's Journey into the *Archives of the Innocent*

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While studying at ISI Florence last semester, I had the incredible opportunity to work with Professor Gaston Basile in the ISI Scholars program. Part of the reason I had chosen ISI Florence for study abroad was to develop my undergraduate research project. I am focusing on children in the early years of the *Ospedale degli Innocenti* in Florence, the first modern orphanage founded in Europe. More specifically, I am interested in children of enslaved descent, whether they were connected to the Black Sea slave trade or the emerging Portuguese trade network. Studying abroad in Florence gave me the perfect chance to work directly with the *Archivio dell'Ospedale degli Innocenti di Firenze* and consult original documents tied to my research.

When I enrolled in the Scholars Program, I was paired with Dr. Gaston Basile, who quickly became more than just a research supervisor – he became a close mentor and friend. We met over Zoom before I departed for Italy to discuss the project and introduce ourselves. Once I arrived in Florence, we established a schedule for the semester to structure my time in the archives.

I also participated in the Medici Archive Project's one-week paleography seminar during my first week of classes. Alongside a group of mostly doctoral students, I learned from many scholars how to read handwritten Italian documents from the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries. One of the many visiting scholars of this program was Dr. Basile. Having a familiar face helped during a seminar where I often felt a bit behind, given the advanced coursework. I could not attend every lecture due to my ISI classes, but the seminar was a great way to get initial exposure to the types of documents I'd be working with.

Walking into a centuries-old archive in a foreign country was honestly intimidating at first. I had worked in archives in the U.S. before, but

always in English and a setting I was more familiar with. In Florence, I had to deal with language barriers, old handwriting, and the general pressure of not screwing anything up. Dr. Basile joined me for my first few visits and helped me get my bearings — both with the documents and with the incredibly helpful archivists.

The first visits at the Innocenti were a “feeling out” process, so to speak. I started with entrance records of black children, which scholars like Kate Lowe and Angela Zhang had already written about. Since I was already familiar with the general content of these records, these served as a good way to test my ability to read and interpret the material. I am still learning Italian, and while living and studying in Italy certainly helped, I am not fluent. I initially felt frustrated and overwhelmed — at times, it felt like I was flipping through incomprehensible text.

So, I decided to refocus my archival objectives. Seeing as there was already extensive scholarship on black children in the Innocenti, I narrowed my scope to the first two years of the Innocenti's operations, 1444-45.

I looked through all of these documents, taking scans of the papers that mentioned the word *schiaava*. *Schiaava* was a term used in these documents to denote an enslaved person — many records from these first two years mention children that are born explicitly of a *schiaava* (enslaved woman). The way the record keepers wrote the word *schiaava* was very distinctive; so specifically searching for this one phrase (and other repeated phrases) made my work more efficient and the documents less daunting.

As the semester stretched on, I started going to the archive independently. I targeted the specific documents, scanned and organized them, and built a system. By the end of the semester, I had around 30 documents from 1444-45 that I could analyze in depth, ones that scholars had not previously discussed.

Parsing the details of individual records was often difficult — I could understand some parts, but I needed Dr. Basile's help to fully interpret some of them. One fascinating case was a record about a child named Giovanni Innocente. He was taken in by the hospital in March 1445 and adopted in 1454 — which was rare. Even more interesting, we found a

mention of Giovanni di Bartolomeo di Michelozzo (brother of the famed Renaissance artist Michelozzo) in the record making a contract fully detailed in the *Ricordanze*, a separate part of the archive that focuses on the hospital's operations and finances. We even had the exact date of this contract — November 6, 1445 — but it was still difficult to track down the full details. Many leads from the *Balie e Bambini* (the section of the archive that details the entrance of a child to the Hospital) didn't pan out when cross-referenced in the *Ricordanze*, though occasionally something would come up entirely by chance.

I was looking in the *Ricordanze* for the year 1482, hoping to find mentions of enslaved children being adopted. I flipped to a page with a register of all the children in the Innocenti at that year and came across a likely black child identified as Ghaberotto Nero. Ghaberotto hadn't been mentioned by Kate Lowe or Angela Zhang — the two leading scholars on this topic — which made the find even more exciting. As I learned firsthand, the best discoveries in an archive tend to be unplanned and improvised.

Overall, working with the ISI Scholars Program and spending time in the Innocenti archives was one of the most rewarding experiences I've ever had. Opening those huge Renaissance-era books and realizing I was handling something a record keeper had six hundred years ago was surreal. Dr. Basile's guidance meant a lot, and the Scholars Program gave me the structure and support to pursue serious research abroad. As I head into graduate school, I plan to return to Florence to keep following those threads I uncovered — and maybe, one day, piece together the full stories of Giovanni, Ghaberotto, or others whose lives deserve to be known.

None of this would have been possible without the ISI Scholars Program.