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► **To cite this version:**

Haude Morvan. Observant Reform and Dominican Church Interiors in Italy (15th-16th Centuries). Pietro Delcorno; Bert Roest. Observant Reforms and Cultural Production in Europe, Radboud University Press, pp.113-133, 2023, 9789493296084. 10.54195/XFRB6134\_CH06 . hal-04183951

**HAL Id: hal-04183951**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04183951>**

Submitted on 21 Aug 2023

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# Observant Reform and Dominican Church Interiors in Italy (15th-16th Centuries)

*Haude Morvan*

## Introduction

In a sermon on Exodus pronounced on March 5th 1498, two months before his execution, Savonarola criticized the members of the clergy who chatted about wine and roasted capon during masses, and who did not wish to have their choir isolated from the laity by high walls, because they wanted to glimpse women from their stalls.<sup>1</sup> Even if Savonarola dealt with clerics and religious in general, and not with Dominican friars in particular, his sermon shows that questions related to liturgical space were of concern to Observant Dominicans. However, if Savonarola condemned in his sermons and treatises excessive expense and decoration in convents,

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1 Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra l'Esodo*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci, 2 Vols. (Rome: A. Belardetti, 1955), Vol. 1, 261 (predica IX): 'Fa' ora el tuo figliuolo prete o sacerdote, fallo grande prelato, andate ora alle dignità della Chiesa. È grande pericolo, ti dico io. Frati miei, abbiatevi cura. Stanno là li sacerdoti, in coro, e non tengono silenzio: non si debbe cianciare nel luogo delle orazioni e dell'offizio. Dice santo Augustino: *in oratoria nemo aliquid agat nisi ad quod factum est unde et nomen accepit*. Non vogliono li sacerdoti le tende nè el muro alto attorno al coro: fatelo suso alto, cittadini, chè li sacerdoti non hanno a vedere le donne per chiesa, quando sono in coro. Stanno là, e cicalano, e l'uno ragiona di fiaschi di trebbiano e di buoni capponi cotti, l'altro dice: - *Domine, labia mea aperies*. - Pensa che officio è quello. Quell'altro sta là a dire la messa presto presto, l'altro sta con la concubina. Questo è il rubo, ti dico io, pieno di spine: la chierica piena di peccati. A questi tali dà poi noia la scomunica, sono fatti molto scrupolosi questi sacerdoti!'

he never gave any precise indication about an ideal location and form of Dominican choirs,<sup>2</sup> nor did the chapters of the Observant congregations.

At the time of Savonarola, liturgical space was being profoundly modified in Italy. In Dominican churches until then, as required by the 1249 General Chapter, the friars' choir and the main altar were isolated from the nave by a screen (called 'intermedium'), to make the friars' movements between convent and choir invisible from the nave.<sup>3</sup> In Dominican churches, as in many ones belonging to other religious orders, space was divided in three areas: the nave for the faithful, the choir for the religious community (divided itself between professed friars' and lay friars' choirs), and the sanctuary with the main altar. This division corresponded to a symbolic hierarchy that was the subject of numerous liturgical and theological commentaries, such as that of Richard of Saint-Victor, later quoted by Guillaume Durand and Jacobus of Voragine.<sup>4</sup>

This division of the church was gradually abandoned in the early modern period. Choirs were relocated in the apse behind the main altar (in such a position, they are called 'retro-choir'), and this was often coupled with the removal of the rood screen. This new layout, in which the main

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2 For artistic theory in Savonarola's writings, see Alessio Assonitis, *Art and Savonarolism in Florence and Rome*, PhD dissertation (New York, Columbia University, 2003).

3 *Acta Capitulorum generalium ordinis praedicatorum*, Vol. 1 (*Ab anno 1220 usque ad annum 1303*), ed. Benedictus Maria Reichert, Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Historica, 3 (Rome: in domo generalitatis, 1898), 47: 'Intermedia que sunt in ecclesiis nostris inter seculares et fratres sic disponantur ubique per priores quod fratres egredientes et ingredientes de choro non possint videri a secularibus vel videre eosdem. Poterunt tamen aliquae fenestre ibidem aptari ut tempore elevationis corporis dominici possint aperiri'. For Dominican architectural norms, see Gilles Gérard Meersseman, 'L'architecture dominicaine au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Législation et pratique', *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 16 (1946), 136-90; Bernard Montagnes, 'L'attitude des Prêcheurs à l'égard des œuvres d'art', in: *La naissance et l'essor du gothique méridional au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Cahiers de Fanjeaux, 9 (Toulouse: Privat, 1974), 87-100; Gabriella Villetti, 'Legislazione e prassi edilizia degli Ordini Mendicanti nei secoli XIII e XIV', in: *Francesco d'Assisi, chiese e conventi*, ed. Renato Bonelli (Milan: Electa, 1982), 23-31, repr. in Gabriella Villetti, *Studi sull'edilizia degli ordini mendicanti* (Rome: Gangemi, 2003), 19-30; Richard A. Sundt, 'Mediocris domos et humiles habeant fratres nostri: Dominican Legislation on Architecture and Architectural Decoration in the 13th Century', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 46 (1987), 394-407; Costantino Gilardi, 'Ecclesia laicorum et ecclesia fratrum: Luoghi e oggetti per il culto e la predicazione secondo l'*Ecclesiasticum officium* dei frati predicatori', in: *Aux origines de la liturgie dominicaine: le manuscrit Santa Sabina XIV LI*, ed. Leonard E. Boyle and Pierre-Marie Gy, Collection de l'École française de Rome, 327 (Rome: École française de Rome, 2004), 379-443; Panayota Volti, 'L'explicite et l'implicite dans les sources normatives de l'architecture mendicante', *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes* 162 (2004), 51-73.

4 See for example Iacopo da Varazze, *Legenda aurea*, ed. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, Millenio medievale, 6 (Testi, 3), 2 Vols. (Florence: Sismel – Edizioni del Galluzzo, 1998), Vol. 2, 1291.

altar was placed between the faithful and the religious community, spread across Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, it was initially adopted in Italy in many monastic, mendicant and canonical churches from the fifteenth century onwards, long before it became more widespread elsewhere.

Retro-choir arrangements and rood screens' removal in Renaissance Italy are complex phenomena, dependent on many factors.<sup>5</sup> Three are often mentioned: in the first place, the new aesthetic ideals promoted by Italian Renaissance architects; in the second place, a rising devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, increasingly often kept outside Mass in a tabernacle on the main altar; in the third place, lay patrons' hold on the presbytery. However, there are many other factors, related to local situations. Regarding the Dominicans, I highlighted in a recent article that, in many cases, the renovation of the choir and presbytery was not incentivized by an architect or an external patron, but by the friars themselves. Their purpose was usually to make more room for the faithful in the nave and also, in some cases, to facilitate lay devotion to the Blessed Sacrament or to some relics located in the main altar.<sup>6</sup> The new spatial organization generated some practical issues, related in particular to the visual participation to the Mass from the choir. The main altar, often topped by a high tabernacle, created a barrier between the religious community and the celebrant, and largely hid the latter from the religious. Some tabernacles included apertures in their lower part, to ensure that the religious could at least glimpse the Eucharistic elevation from their stalls. The suppression of the rood screen had other consequences on the friars' daily liturgy: it often involved the relocation of the entrance door to the choir, since this door should be invisible from the

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5 Two papers sketched provisional overviews of this phenomenon: Marcia B. Hall, 'The Tramezzo in the Italian Renaissance, Revisited', in: *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*, ed. Sharon E.J. Gershtel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 215-32; Sible de Blaauw, 'Innovazioni nello spazio di culto fra basso Medioevo e Cinquecento: la perdita dell'orientamento liturgico e la liberazione della navata', in *Lo spazio e il culto: Relazioni tra edificio ecclesiale e uso liturgico dal XV al XVI secolo*, ed. Jörg Stabenow (Venice: Marsilio, 2006), 25-51.

6 Haude Morvan, 'The Preachers and the Evolution of Liturgical Space in Italy. Thirteenth to Sixteenth Century', in: *The Medieval Dominicans. Books, Buildings, Music and Liturgy*, ed. Eleanor J. Giraud and Christian T. Leitmer, *Medieval Monastic Studies*, 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 135-165.

nave, so that the religious could not see women, or be seen by them when entering their choir, as required by the 1249 General Chapter regulation.

While this profound change in church interiors was underway, the Observant reforms, initiated in the late fourteenth century in several religious orders, were reaching an age of maturity and institutional organization.<sup>7</sup> How did the Observant Dominicans welcome the modernization of churches' layout? The Observant Franciscans *sub vicariis* and the Benedictine Observant congregation of Santa Giustina explicitly preferred the traditional organization, where the choir was located in front of the main altar.<sup>8</sup> The chapter of the Observant Franciscan province of Bologna, held in 1501, mentioned the church of San Francesco in Cotignola for its unusual retro-choir, and made it very clear that this peculiar layout was not to be considered customary.<sup>9</sup> The Benedictine congregation of Santa Giustina, at least until the 1570s, likewise remained attached to the former model in which choir stalls were located in front of the altar. Deliberation about the reconstruction of Santa Giustina in Padua in 1520 thus asserted: 'Item et altare maius statuatur in capite capellae majoris prout est consuetudo congregationis nostrae'.<sup>10</sup>

In the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Dominican legislation, though, nothing was said about the choir and altar placement, either in the general

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7 For an overview on Dominican Observant reforms in Italy, see: Sara Fasoli, *Perseveranti nella regolare osservanza: i predicatori osservanti nel ducato di Milano, secc. XV-XVI* (Milan: Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, 2011); Sylvie Duval, 'Comme des anges sur terre': *les moniales dominicaines et les débuts de la Réforme observante*, Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 366 (Rome: École française de Rome, 2015); *Il convento di Santa Maria delle Grazie a Milano. Una storia della fondazione a metà del Cinquecento*, ed. Stefania Buganza and Marco Rianini, *Memorie Domenicane*, 47 (Firenze: Nerbini, 2016); Anne Huijbers, *Zealots for Souls: Dominican Narratives of Self-Understanding during Observant Reforms, c. 1388-1517*, *Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte des Dominikanerordens. Neue Folge*, 22 (Berlin - Boston [Mass.]: De Gruyter, 2018).

8 Haude Morvan, 'The built environment as a mirror of community. Some reflections on architectural norms in Observant settings', in: *Les réformes de l'Observance en Europe (XIV-XVI siècles). Régler, éduquer et contrôler la société chrétienne*, ed. Cristina Andenna, Marina Benedetti, Sylvie Duval, Haude Morvan and Ludovic Viallet, forthcoming.

9 Quoted in Roberto Cobiainchi, *Lo temperato uso dele cose. La committenza dell'Osservanza franciscana nell'Italia del Rinascimento*, *Medioevo francescano. Arte*, 2 (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, 2013), 26: 'De voluntate R. p. Vicarii generalis fr. Ludovici de la Turre ac totius Capituli provincialis conclusum est quod corus ecclesie nostre Cotignolle stet post altare maius prout nunc est: sed quod nullus amodo corus sic fiat, nisi de licentia et assensu capituli provincialis'.

10 Quoted in Natale Baldoria, 'Andrea Briosco ed Alessandro Leopardi architetti. La chiesa di Santa Giustina a Padova', *Archivio Storico dell'Arte* 4 (1891), 180-203, at 188.

chapters<sup>11</sup> or in the chapters of the Observant congregations in Italy.<sup>12</sup> The congregation of Lombardy, created in 1459, was the first Observant congregation of the Order of Preachers. It included all reformed friaries in Italy, that were by then independent from the provincial priors, and answered only to a General Vicar and to the General Master. In 1493, Savonarola founded the short-lived congregation of San Marco, independent from the congregation of Lombardy. It was then diluted in the larger Tusco-Roman congregation in 1496, at the behest of Pope Alexander VI, great enemy of Savonarola.<sup>13</sup>

Though Dominican chapters did not rule on the question of choir placement, can we nevertheless highlight some specific tendencies when observing individual Observant and non-Observant Dominican churches? When dealing with church interiors, were the reformed friaries more conservative than others, or did they adopt a ‘modern’ arrangement of the choir and altar at the same time as the ‘Conventual’ friaries?

### **Traditional or modern liturgical layout in Observant Convents**

For the thirteenth-century Dominican Master General Humbert of Romans, architectural uniformity was an ideal: it should embody the unity of the order.<sup>14</sup> However, this wished-for uniformity, desired by Humbert of Romans, was far from being effectuated in Renaissance Italy.

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11 The 1505 General Chapter reminded that the friars must sing the antiphon *Salve Regina* after Compline, repeating with exactly the same words the thirteenth-century *Ordinarium* by Humbert of Romans: while they sing, the friars must walk out the choir in pairs, and bow to the image of the Crucifix located on the rood screen that separates the choir from the lay church. *Acta capitulorum generalium ordinis praedicatorum*, Vol. 4 (*Ab anno 1501 usque ad annum 1553*), ed. Benedictus Maria Reichert, *Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Historica*, 9 (Rome: In domo generalitia, ex Typographia Polyglotta S. C. De Propaganda Fide, 1901), 29. In 1505, though, some Italian churches’ interior included no more a rood screen, and some modifications in the execution of the procession were therefore necessary. However, the General Chapter did not mention them.

12 Raymond Creyten and Alfonso D’Amato, ‘Les actes capitulaires de la Congrégation dominicaine de Lombardie (1482-1531)’, *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 31 (1961), 213-306; Raymond Creyten, ‘Les actes capitulaires de la congrégation toscano-romaine O.P. (1496-1531)’, *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 40 (1970), 125-230.

13 See the introduction in both papers mentioned in the previous footnote.

14 *Humberti de Romanis Opera de vita regulari*, ed. Joachim Joseph Berthier, 2 Vols. (Rome: Marietti, 1956, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Vol. 2, 5: ‘Nos ergo qui sub unius magistri obedientia sumus, sub unius professionis voto vivere dicimur. Justum est autem ut nos qui hujusmodi unitatem habemus, ‘uniformes in observantiis canonicae,’ id est regularis, ‘religionis inveniamur.’ Sic nimirum

Some Observant Dominican houses adopted very late a retro-choir arrangement: San Marco in Florence is one such case. The convent (initially a Benedictine monastery) was given to the Observant friars of Fiesole by Pope Eugenius IV in 1436. Michelozzo was appointed by the Medici to renovate the sanctuary in 1438. The apse was rebuilt larger in 1438-39, and consecrated in 1443 by Pope Eugenius IV. New stalls were installed to house the friars, isolated from the laity by a choir screen. A door was inserted at the center of the screen, which was flanked by two altars on the side of the nave, and probably topped already in 1439 by a crucifix (we know the one sculpted by Baccio of Montelupo in 1496). In addition to the choir screen, an other wall was built in the nave to separate the men from the women; yet this partition was suppressed in 1563 (**fig. 1**).<sup>15</sup> The mid-fifteenth-century internal layout of San Marco is well known thanks to several sources, including the chronicle written before 1457 by Prior Giuliano Lappaccini,<sup>16</sup> and a drawing by Giorgio Vasari the Younger (1562-1625), which is a copy of an older drawing made during the second half of the sixteenth century, but anyway after 1563, since it does not show the wall dividing men from women (Uffizi, A 4861). The work in the apse was completed while Antonino Pierozzi was both Prior of San Marco (1439-44) and Vicar General of the Observant friaries in Italy (1437-1446): he

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invenitur apud approbatas religiones ejusdem professionis quod summam uniformitatem in exterioribus praetendant non solum in observantiis, sed etiam in habitu, et in aedificiis, et in aliis quibusdam. In quo cum gemitu quodam considerandum est quantum in hoc adhuc distamus ab illis. Habent namque ecclesias et officinas ejusdem formae, et eodem modo dispositas: nos autem fere quot domos tot varias formas et dispositiones officinarum et ecclesiarum habemus.’

15 Janet Cox-Rearick, ‘Fra Bartolomeo’s St. Mark and St. Sebastian with an angel’, *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 18:3 (1974), 329-354, esp. 340-42; Hans Teubner, ‘S. Marco in Florenz: Umbauten vor 1500. Ein Beitrag zum Werk des Michelozzo’, *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 23 (1979), 239-272; Sally J. Cornelison, ‘Relocating Fra Bartolomeo at San Marco’, *Renaissance Studies* 23:3 (2009), 311-334.

16 The chronicle by Giuliano Lappicini has been published by Morçay: Raoul Morçay, ‘La cronaca del convento fiorentino di San Marco: La parte più antica, dettata da Giuliano Lappaccini’, *Archivio Storico Italiano* 71:1 (1913), 1-29, at 12-13: ‘Et sic ceperunt reparare et reaedificare dictam Tribunam, in qua collocaverunt chorum novum cum pulpitis et armariis oportunitis, ubi ex tunc fratres semper dixerunt officium divinum diurnum pariter et nocturnum; feceruntque dictam Tribunam augmentari ita ut altera Tribuna praedictae minor copularetur, ubi fabricatum est altare majus totum de lapidibus sectis et politis. (...) et chorus qui erat in medio ecclesiae reductus fuit per ejus transversum, id est per longum brachii ecclesiae pro viris laicis, et reliquum corpus ecclesiae pro usu mulierum. Et sic triplex distinctio apparuit. Prima est chorus seu oratorium fratrum, reclusum, tanquam a laicis separatum; secunda est chorus laicorum in secunda parte ecclesiae; tertia est ecclesia inferior, quae dicitur mulierum, ubi fuerunt erecta quattuor altaria et ubi facta fuerunt sedilia pro audientia confitentium mulierum.’

certainly played a key role in the arrangements for strict separation between friars, men and women in the church.<sup>17</sup>

The church underwent many modifications after Antonino's death, partly due to the wish of the friars and patrons to enhance the devotion to his relics. During the first quarter of the sixteenth century, it was twice planned to completely reconstruct the church. Neither of the projects came into effect. The first one, commissioned in 1512 by Prior Santi Pagnini to the architect Baccio d'Agnolo, presents a Latin cross plan with a retro-choir.<sup>18</sup> Around 1520, two more ambitious projects were drawn by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger, probably at the request of Cardinal Giulio de' Medici (future Pope Clement VII), archbishop and actual ruler of Florence, after the Medici had returned to rule Florence and while the canonization of Antonino Pierozzi was underway.<sup>19</sup> One of the drawings shows a church with a basilica plan: a single nave is flanked by side chapels vaulted with cupolas, and terminates in a rectangular apse. The altar is located at the entrance of the apse, so the choir stalls would have been installed behind. The other drawing presents a far less usual plan. The area for the laity is a circular space with radial chapels, all set in a square plan. This part of the church communicates through a short corridor with a semicircular choir where the stalls and the altar are located in a way that remind the *cavea* and the stage of a roman theatre. If this project of making the church a vast mausoleum to the glory of St Antonino (and of the Medici family) had succeeded, San Marco would have become a radically new building, where the articulation of the liturgical spaces would have been

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17 For the interest of Antonino as archbishop in developments in liturgy, lay devotion and church interior, see: Lorenzo Fabbri, 'Culmen templi. Antonino Pierozzi a Santa Maria del Fiore', in: *Antonino Pierozzi OP (1389-1459). La figura e l'opera di un santo arcivescovo nell'Europa del Quattrocento. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi storici (Firenze, 25-28 novembre 2009)*, ed. Luciano Cinelli and Maria Pia Paoli, *Memorie domenicane. Nuova serie*, 43 (Florence: Nerbini, 2012), 495-508. More generally, for the relationships between Antonino and visual arts, see Sally J. Cornelison, *Art and Relic Cult of St. Antoninus in Renaissance Florence* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2021), 15-16 (with overview of older bibliography).

18 Cornelison, *Art and Relic Cult*, 80-81.

19 Mauro Mussolin, 'La promozione del culto di Sant'Antonino al tempo di Leone X e Clemente VII e i progetti di Antonio da Sangallo il Giovane per la chiesa di San Marco', in: *Antonino Pierozzi OP (1389-1459). La figura e l'opera di un santo arcivescovo nell'Europa del Quattrocento. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi storici (Firenze, 25-28 novembre 2009)*, ed. Luciano Cinelli and Maria Pia Paoli, *Memorie domenicane. Nuova serie*, 43 (Florence: Nerbini, 2012), 509-532; Cornelison, *Art and Relic Cult*, 85-89.



profoundly modified. Unfortunately, we know nothing about the opinion of the friars about Sangallo the Younger's projects. In at least one case, the reconstruction of the choir and presbytery by lay patrons in Renaissance Florence did not please the religious community: the Servite friars of the Santissima Annunziata manifested discontent when their choir was to be relocated at the center of a rotunda, according to a project launched in 1444 and completed in 1481.<sup>20</sup> The opinion of San Marco's friars about projects such as the ones drawn by Sangallo would surely have had less to do with their magnificence than with their capacity to maintain or not a strict seclusion from the laity, as required by order regulations.

Finally, a funerary chapel for St Antonino, sponsored by the powerful Salviati family, was built in San Marco's transept in 1582-89, without changing the general organization of the church.<sup>21</sup> The choir screen was suppressed only in 1678. The altar was then moved toward the nave, and the choir stalls were newly located in the apse, behind the altar. It seems that such a modification had been already planned in 1630 by a lay patron, but was rejected by the friars.<sup>22</sup> According to the testimony of the historian of Florence churches Giuseppe Richa, who wrote in the middle of the eighteenth century, the modifications were carried out in 1678 to update the church according to the modern taste: for him, the old church was in disarray due to the position of the choir, which made the building less magnificent, and made professional artists suffer.<sup>23</sup>

One century before, the incompatibility of rood screens with new aesthetic taste was already a key factor in the rearrangement of the church

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20 Beverly Louise Brown, 'The Patronage and Building History of the Tribuna of SS. Annunziata in Florence: A Reappraisal in Light of new Documentation', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 25 (1981), 59-146. See also: eadem, 'Choir and Altar Placement: a Quattrocento Dilemma', *Machiavelli Studies* 5 (1996), 147-180.

21 Cornelison, *Art and Relic Cult*, part II.

22 Giuseppe Richa, *Notizie istoriche delle Chiese Fiorentine, Divise ne' suoi Quartieri*, 10 Vols. (Florence: Viviani, 1754-62), Vol. 7, 136: 'ma due rispetti trattennero i religiosi dall'acconsentire a' liberali inviti del Senatore predetto, cioè la riverenza de i medesimi alla memoria de' Medici, che ne erano stati i Fondatori; e la gelosia di non perdere il Coro antico, a essi carissimo'.

23 Ibidem: 'Questi motivi però cessati essendo nel 1678 sì per la permissione, e gradimento del Granduca, sì per la mormorazione de' Professori dell'Arte che malvolentieri soffrivano quell'ingombro del Coro vecchio, da' medesimi padri si principò la nuova tribuna colla direzione di Pier Francesco Silvani Architetto, che levò il muro del tramezzo, e in eminenza tirando innanzi l'Altar Maggiore, comodamente addatò per Coro lo spazio, che molto restava dietro'.

of the Conventual Dominicans in Florence, that is Santa Maria Novella. Work was instigated and financed by Duke Cosimo de' Medici in 1565, and conducted quickly in one year by his architect, Giorgio Vasari. The purpose was to create a unified church interior, by eliminating the rood screen, transferring choir stalls to a location behind the high altar, white-washing the walls and creating uniform nave altarpieces.<sup>24</sup> Vasari wrote in his autobiography that the rood screen took away all beauty ('toglieva tutta la sua bellezza') from the church.<sup>25</sup>

By 1566, the two Dominican churches in Florence looked very different. The Observant one, San Marco, was no more divided by the transverse wall that once separated men from women, but the main altar was still hidden from the laity by a screen that isolated the friars' choir. The Conventual church, on the contrary, offered (and still offers) a clear view on the new tabernacle above the altar, while the friars were seated in a retro-choir in the *cappella maggiore*.

Are the Florentine churches representative of two different spatial concepts that Observants and Conventuals might have been following in sixteenth-century Italy? The situation is not that simple. In San Domenico in Bologna, one of the convents of the Observant congregation of Lombardy, new stalls decorated with the intarsia technique (wood inlay) were ordered in the second quarter of the sixteenth century to be located in a traditional setting, that is in front of the main altar. The rood screen was even rebuilt in 1550, and was only removed in 1625, when the stalls were moved into a new apse (**fig. 2**).<sup>26</sup>

However, whereas the traditional position of the stalls and the rood screen were maintained in San Domenico in Bologna as in San Marco in Florence until the seventeenth century, other Observant communities were quick to adopt a modern arrangement. This was the case, for instance, in Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. In 1492, Duke Ludovico Sforza com-

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24 Marcia B. Hall, 'The Ponte in S. Maria Novella: The Problem of the Rood Screen in Italy', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 37 (1974), 157-173; eadem, *Renovation and Counter-reformation. Vasari and Duke Cosimo in Sta Maria Novella and Sta Croce. 1565 - 1577* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); Roberto Lunardi, 'Ristrutturazione vasariana di S. Maria Novella', *Memorie domenicane* 19 (1988), 403-419.

25 Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Paola Barocchi and Rosanna Bettarini, 11 Vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1966-1987), Vol. 6, part 1, 406.

26 Venturino Alce, *Il coro di San Domenico in Bologna* (Bologna: Parma, 1969).

missioned the reconstruction of the apse where he had chosen to be buried with his wife Beatrice d'Este, who died in 1497. The sources do not allow us to know where the tomb, the friars' stalls and the altar were supposed to be located in the initial project, which was designed very likely by Bramante. The most recent studies conclude that the stalls were located most probably in front of the main altar, and the tomb behind it (so poorly visible from the nave).<sup>27</sup> However, the stalls were moved behind the altar very quickly, in 1510 (**fig. 3**). In the end, Ludovico Sforza was not buried in Milan, since he was made prisoner by the French king Louis XII and died in Loches in 1508. The tomb already realized for him and his wife by Cristoforo Solari was moved in 1564 to the Certosa of Pavia.<sup>28</sup>

In some cases, as in Vicenza, the reasons for the relocation of the friars' choir behind the main altar are well documented. The friary of Santa Corona in Vicenza was founded around 1270 to house relics of the Passion. It passed to the Observance in 1463. Over time, the church had become too small for the numerous pilgrims and in 1478, therefore, work was undertaken following the friars' decision to enlarge the apse and remove the rood screen, in order to make more room for the faithful in the nave.<sup>29</sup> The choir was relocated behind the main altar at the same time. A new crypt was designed to facilitate access to the relics: the sanctuary and choir were thus located above the crypt, in a higher position than the nave.<sup>30</sup> The new arrangement was completed by 1520 when the relics were solemnly transferred to the new crypt. A compendium of the friary's history, written

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27 Bruna Ciati, 'Il coro', in: *Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milano*, ed. Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua and Carlo Bertelli (Milan: Banca Popolare di Milano, 1983), 214-223. Not all scholars agree on the initial location of the choir in Santa Maria delle Grazie. Some argue that it was already behind the altar before 1510. The debate has been synthesized by Luisa Giordano, who concluded that the choir did not move behind the altar until 1510: Luisa Giordano, 'In capella maiori: il progetto di Ludovico Sforza per Santa Maria delle Grazie', in: *Demeures d'éternité: Églises et chapelles funéraires aux XV<sup>e</sup> et XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles*, ed. Jean Guillaume (Paris: Picard, 2005), 99-114.

28 Roberta Battaglia, 'Le 'Memorie' della Certosa di Pavia', *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Classe di Lettere e Filosofia*, 3.Ser. 22:1 (1992), 85-198.

29 See document of January 1479 transcribed in Joanne Allen, *Choir Stalls in Venice and Northern Italy: Furniture, Ritual and Space in the Renaissance Church Interior*, unpublished doctoral thesis (University of Warwick, 2009), 300.

30 For the renovation of the sanctuary in Santa Corona, see Giovanni Lorenzoni and Giovanna Valenzano, 'Pontile, jubé, tramezzo: alcune riflessioni sul tramezzo di Santa Corona a Vicenza', in: *Immagine e ideologia: Studi in onore di Arturo Carlo Quintavalle*, ed. Arturo Calzona (Milan: Electa, 2007), 313-317 and Allen, *Choir Stalls in Venice*, 158-166.

in 1706 by Father Gondisalvo Della Chiesa, explained that the choir had already been moved behind the main altar before the translation.<sup>31</sup>

The foregoing consideration of Dominican churches in Renaissance Italy suggests a varied landscape. When they were renovated, the choir was re-located in either a traditional position, that is to say in front of the main altar, or a modern one, behind the main altar. In each case, the reasons were specific, and friaries did not follow a uniform movement, even inside the same province or the same reformed congregation. In most cases, the transformation of church interior was a long process, which implied several steps. In San Marco in Florence, for example, even though the screen that separated lay men from women was removed in 1563, the choir screen and the old arrangement of the stalls were maintained.

### **A Case of local emulation? Observants and Conventuals in Viterbo**

A different situation from that we have described in San Marco can be observed in a friary that yet belonged to the same Tusco-roman congregation, namely Santa Maria della Quercia, on the outskirts of Viterbo. In this case, it is likely that an emulation effect with the other Dominican church in the town played a role. In Viterbo, the choir was indeed relocated behind the altar at around the same time by the Conventuals (Santa Maria in Gradi) and the Observants (Santa Maria della Quercia). Both apses were rebuilt to accommodate a retro-choir at the very end of the fifteenth century, but because of a lack of precise chronological data, it is difficult to know which reorganization came first and may have influenced the other. The particu-

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31 Gondisalvo Della Chiesa, *Breve e compendiosa relazione di quanto a forza di studiosa diligenza si è potuto rinvenire di memorabile nell'antichissimo monistero di S. Corona di Vicenza dalla fondazione sino al di d'oggi*, Rome, Archivio Generale dell'Ordine dei Predicatori, XIV, Liber D, 363-364: 'Ma perché la chiesa riusciva troppo angusta a capire il numero delle persone, che concordevano all'adorazione, fu stimato meglio ingrandirla trasportando il coro, qual era in mezzo alla chiesa, conforme l'uso antico, dietro all'altar maggiore, che stava dove ora è la scala del coro, fabricando la capella grande, come ora si vede; finita la fabrica fu trasferita la spina con quel pezzo di croce nella catacomba o sotto coro, dove tuttavia si conserva. Questa translazione si fece con grande solennità l'anno 1520.' This document contradicts Joanne Allen's opinion, who wrote that the choir and altar would have been exchanged only in 1663: Allen, *Choir stalls in Venice*, 163-164.

lar organization of Santa Maria della Quercia's interior may also have been influenced by an Augustinian church, Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome.

Santa Maria della Quercia is a votive church whose construction began in 1470 next to the city of Viterbo to worship a miraculous image of the Virgin. The original plan was very simple: it consisted of a three-nave church terminating in a rectangular apse.<sup>32</sup> This apse housed the main altar, with the miraculous image of the Virgin, enshrined in a tabernacle commissioned to Andrea Bregno in 1490. In 1496, the church was given to the Observant Friars Preachers of the Tusco-Roman congregation. This body was newly created by pope Alexander VI to undermine the influence of Savonarola, by adding fourteen friaries to the four ones of the former San Marco congregation, created by the Florentine reformer in 1493. From 1498 onward, the apse of Santa Maria della Quercia was extended to house the friars' choir (**fig. 4**). Work was completed around 1511, when new intarsia stalls were realized by Domenico di Zanobio del Tasso and Giuliano di Giovanni called 'il Pollastra'. An altar for the daily masses of the friars was set up at the end of the apse, in a niche, while the main altar with the miraculous image remained at its original place, outside the new apse (**fig. 5**).<sup>33</sup> According to Chrysa Damianaki, it is clear that the addition of a larger apse to house the choir was not planned from the beginning, since the tabernacle realised by Andrea Bregno before this addition is only sculpted on one side (**fig. 6**).<sup>34</sup>

This particular arrangement in Santa Maria della Quercia, with two altars in the presbytery, was conceived to adapt the votive church to the necessity of the religious community, leaving the main altar and the miraculous image of the Virgin it contains visible and accessible to the laity. It can be compared to another church that houses a miraculous image of the Virgin, namely Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome. During the fifteenth century, the Augustinian friars' choir was moved into the apse, to be placed between two altars. The first one, the most monumental, was located at the

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32 Roberta Lorusso, 'Santa Maria della Quercia à Viterbo', *Quaderni dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Architettura* 40 (2002), 85-96.

33 Such a disposition is described in the Apostolic Visit carried out in 1583 (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Congr. Vescovi e Regolari, Visita Ap. 108, ff. 231-232).

34 Chrysa Damianaki, 'Andrea Bregno e il tabernacolo di Santa Maria della Quercia a Viterbo', in: *Andrea Bregno. Il senso della forma nella cultura artistica del Rinascimento*, ed. Claudio Crescentini and Claudio Strinati (Florence: Maschietto, 2008), 333-355.

crossing of the transept and was topped by a tabernacle sculpted by Andrea Bregno (the same artist who worked at Santa Maria della Quercia) that enshrined an image of the Virgin.<sup>35</sup> The second altar was set up against the wall of the apse. The choir stalls were moved to the right transept in 1508, when Pope Giulio II asked Bramante to enlarge the apse to create a burial chapel for Cardinals Ascanio Sforza and Girolamo Basso della Rovere. The stalls were then brought back to their location in the apse in 1559.<sup>36</sup>

The solution adopted in Santa Maria della Quercia can also be compared to the other Dominican church in Viterbo, Santa Maria in Gradi. Almost nothing remains of the medieval church, entirely rebuilt on its foundations by Nicola Salvi in the eighteenth century, and today badly damaged. However, archival documents, archaeological surveys and comparisons with other churches have though consented Claudio Varagnoli to propose a restitution of the church's layout before 1736.<sup>37</sup>

The medieval church rebuilt by Nicola Salvi in the eighteenth century had been erected during the thirteenth century: it presented originally as a three nave building, with a transept as large as the nave that terminated in a rectangular apse flanked by two smaller lateral apses. The central apse hosted on its left side an important monument: the tomb of Pope Clement IV. The apse was then extended, to host the friars' choir (**fig. 7**). This work, which started during the second half of the fifteenth century and ended only in 1546, is known thanks to a chronicle written around 1616 by Friar Giacinto dei Nobili.<sup>38</sup> As explained by the author himself, it is a shorter version ('Cronica compendiata') written in Italian, based on a

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35 Thomas Pöpper, 'Andrea Bregno's Hochaltarädikulen in Santa Maria del Popolo (Rom) und Santa Maria della Quercia', in: *Arredi di culto e disposizioni liturgiche a Roma da Costantino a Sisto IV*, Atti del colloquio internazionale (Istituto Olandese a Roma, 3-4 dicembre 1999), ed. Sible de Blaauw, *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome* 59 (2000), 251-278.

36 Christoph Luitpold Frommel, 'Giulio II e il coro di Santa Maria del Popolo', *Bollettino d'Arte* 112 (2000), 1-34.

37 For a restitution of the medieval church, see: Francesco Gandolfo, 'La vincenda edilizia', in: *Santa Maria in Gradi*, ed. Massimo Miglio (Viterbo: Università degli Studi della Tuscia, 1996), 41-93 and Claudio Varagnoli, 'S. Maria in Gradi a Viterbo, dalla chiesa duecentesca al progetto di Nicola Salvi', *Palladio* 40 (2007), 5-26.

38 Giacinto dei Nobili, *Cronica compendiata di Santa Maria in Gradi di Viterbo*, Rome, Archivio della Provincia Romana (Santa Maria sopra Minerva), F.IV.11.

longer chronicle written by the same Giacinto dei Nobili in Latin, unfortunately now lost.<sup>39</sup>

According to this source, we know that the main apse of Santa Maria in Gradi was extended during the second half of the fifteenth century: it is likely that this new apse was intended from the beginning to house the friars' choir. The construction of new stalls began in 1505, but progress was delayed by the damage inflicted by the soldiers of Charles V, who burnt the friary's timber in 1527. In 1546, the new choir was finally installed in the apse.<sup>40</sup> The main altar, originally located at the crossing of the transept, was then moved to the East, to be relocated at the entrance of the apse, and newly consecrated in 1547.<sup>41</sup> The original location of the choir, before the sixteenth century, was unusual: the main altar was located at the crossing of the transept, and not in the apse, as was more common. As a result, the choir occupied two bays of the nave (**fig. 7**). According to me, this unusual organization was due to the presence of the tomb of Clement IV in the apse: the friars tried to encourage a devotion to this pope, and thus they had to provide the laity access to the main apse.<sup>42</sup> Unlike in Santa Maria della Quercia, Santa Maria in Gradi's friars did not add a second altar in the apse.

Unfortunately, Giacinto dei Nobili said nothing about a rood screen. A screen, or *intermedium*, was made mandatory by the thirteenth-century constitutions, so it is likely that such a structure existed in the medieval

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39 For the chronicles on the convent of Santa Maria in Gradi, both preserved and lost, and especially for the two chronicles by Giacinto dei Nobili, see Emilio Panella, 'Cronaca antica di Santa Maria in Gradi di Viterbo: perduta o mai esistita?', *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 65 (1995), 185-233.

40 Giacinto dei Nobili, *Cronica compendiata*, 22: 'Il coro fu incominciato da Frati l'anno 1505 per levare il vecchio, che stava tra le tre colonne più vicini all'Altar maggiore. Ma nell'anno 1527 essendo condotti li travi, tavole et altro legname necessario per l'armature, etc di detta fabrica, furon tutti abrugati dalli soldati, che andarno al sacco di Roma, onde convenendo di novo provvedere si trattene l'opera sino al'anno 1546, in cui fu totalmente compito di edificare.'

41 Ibidem, 11: 'Consacrò anche questo Pontefice [Alessandro IV] l'Altar maggiore et pose in quello molte reliquie de Santi, le quali nel trasportar detto Altare un poco più su verso il novo Coro furon trovate l'anno 1547'.

42 Haude Morvan, 'Architecture dominicaine et promotion de nouveaux saints: autour de la tombe de Clément IV à Santa Maria in Gradi (Viterbe)', *Bulletin Monumental* 171:2 (2013), 99-106; eadem, 'Sous les pas des frères'. *Les sépultures de papes et de cardinaux chez les Mendicants au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 389 (Rome: École française de Rome, 2021), 197-207.

Santa Maria in Gradi.<sup>43</sup> The reason of the enlargement of the apse is not mentioned by Giacinto dei Nobili, but it was very probably motivated by the need to make more room for the laity in the nave.

In both Dominican churches in Viterbo, the apse was extended at the same time. Work in Santa Maria in Gradi was carried out slower: even if it was completed after the one in Santa Maria della Quercia, it started before. It is therefore likely that the Observant friars who settled in Viterbo in 1496 were aware of the ongoing project carried out in Santa Maria in Gradi to relocate the choir behind the main altar in a longer apse. However, no second altar for the exclusive use of the religious community was planned in Santa Maria in Gradi, unlike in Santa Maria della Quercia. The Observant friars were very probably also influenced by other churches, such as Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome.

The transformation of the interiors of these two Dominican churches did not happen in isolation. Even if it did not always come with an extension of the apse, the relocation of the choir to a location behind the main altar was common to many churches in the Viterbo diocese during the sixteenth century. Thanks to an Apostolic visitation to this diocese from 1583, we have an overview of choir positions in all monastic, mendicant and canonical churches. In addition to Santa Maria in Gradi and Santa Maria della Quercia, the choir stalls most often were located behind the main altar: this was the case in the churches of the Capuchins (Sant'Antonio da Padova), the Observant Franciscans (Santa Maria del Paradiso), the Servites (Santa Maria della Verità) and the Carmelites (Santa Maria del Monte Carmelo).<sup>44</sup> In contrast, the choir was still located in front of the altar in the collegiate church of Santi Angeli and in another Carmelite church (San Giovanni Battista).<sup>45</sup>

The choices made for the construction and furnishing of the choir between 1498 and 1511 in Santa Maria della Quercia shows little impact of the convent's membership of an Observant congregation. They were rather

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43 See above note 3.

44 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Congr. Vescovi e Regolari, Visita Ap. 108. Vincenzo Cultello, Bishop of Catania, was appointed visitor of the diocese of Viterbo by Gregory XIII in April 1583. He referred to a 'chorus post altare maius, undique septus' in Santa Maria della Verità (f. 128v), Santa Maria in Gradi (f. 136r), Santa Maria del Paradiso (f. 179), Santa Maria del Monte Carmelo (f. 217v), Sant'Antonio da Padova (f. 226v).

45 Ibidem, f. 58r and f. 187v.



led by a local movement of modernization of church interiors, and by the presence of a highly worshiped image, which implied that lay access to the tabernacle had to be reconciled with conventual liturgical practice. The solutions adopted were influenced by both local and Roman models.

## Conclusion

It was at first seducing to think that the Observant Dominicans would have adopted a unified option for the choir placement in their churches, as some Observant Franciscan and Benedictine congregations did at the same time, by warning that a traditional stalls' position, that is in front of the main altar, was more appropriate than a modern retro-choir. However, the case study of Viterbo and the other examples referred to in this essay highlight a more complex picture. The fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Dominican regulations made no mention of the choir position. When considering the churches themselves, there can be discerned a significant variety in the actual choir position. It can be asserted that the Observant communities participated in the general movement of modernization of the ecclesiastical space no less and no more than the Conventual Dominicans and other regular communities in general.

It should be borne in mind that Observant reforms did not represent a uniform movement: different interpretations of what meant living *de observantia* coexisted. San Marco in Florence and San Domenico in Bologna may have been more eager, at least in a first instance, to follow the thirteenth-century choir screen regulations than other friaries that instead adopted more quickly modern tendencies spreading across Italy.

When they chose to relocate their choir into the apse and to remove the screen, the motivations of the Dominican communities discussed in this article were in each case specific: in some cases, it was the necessity to make more room for the laity, in others, to facilitate the coexistence of the friars' liturgy with the lay devotion to a relic or a miraculous image, such as in Santa Corona in Vicenza and in Santa Maria della Quercia in Viterbo. Although it is not always possible to document these discussions, choices were doubtless often made in consultation with artists and external benefactors. In the end, even if the initial conditions were comparable, the solutions that were adopted were sometimes different. The retro-choir gradually adopted in most of the churches limited the visibility of the Eucharist

for the members of the religious communities. They generally solved the issue by commissioning tabernacles or altarpieces with openings in their lower part to ensure visual access to the main altar,<sup>46</sup> but the friars in Santa Maria della Quercia chose instead to have their own altar in the apse.

The aesthetic motivations behind some church renovations seem to have come rather from external patrons than from the religious communities themselves. It was the case, for example, in Santa Maria Novella and in the projects by Sangallo the Younger for San Marco. In San Marco, the late removal of the choir screen was maybe less the mark of an Observant agenda than the consequence of aborted projects, designed by the friars themselves or by external patrons. In the final instance, the renovation of a church depended on material and financial circumstances, and could thus be implemented long after the project initially arose.

Whether they were initiated by the Dominican friars or by external patrons, the process of transformation of early modern church interiors was influenced by a network of local trends and emulation processes. For this reason, the provisional observations presented in this essay will need to be refined by conducting more systematic surveys.

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46 See examples referred to by myself: 'The Preachers and the Evolution of Liturgical Space' and by Donal Cooper, 'Revisiting the Umbrian retro-choir. Plurality and choice in the medieval Franciscan church interior', in: *Spaces for friars and nuns. Mendicant choirs and church interiors in medieval and early modern Europe*, ed. Haude Morvan, Collection de l'École française de Rome, 578 (Rome: École française de Rome, 2022), 81-152, esp. 150.

## Illustrations

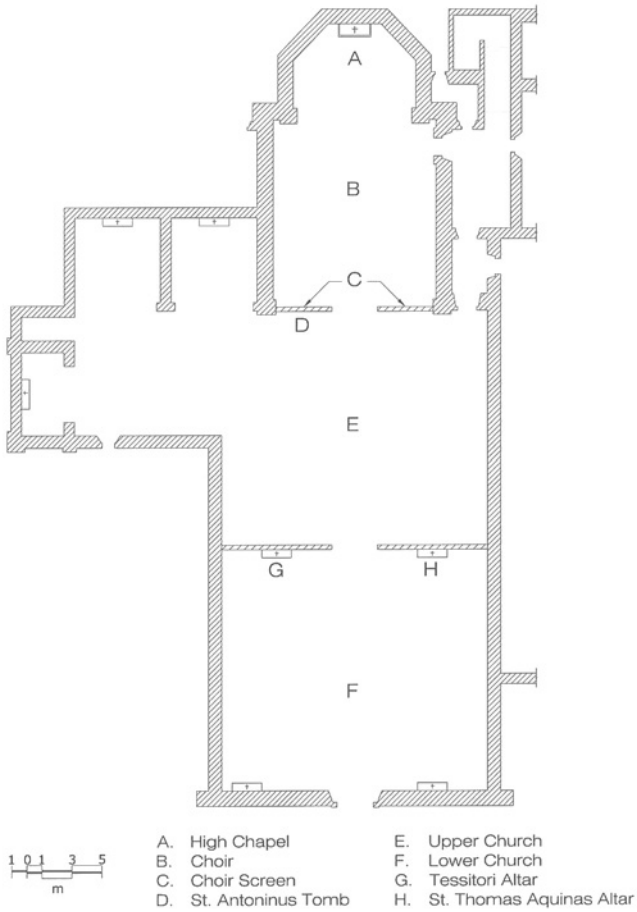


Fig. 1: Florence, San Marco, plan of the church in the second half of the fifteenth century (published in Cornelison, 'Relocating Fra Bartolomeo at San Marco' and eadem, *Art and Relic Cult*).

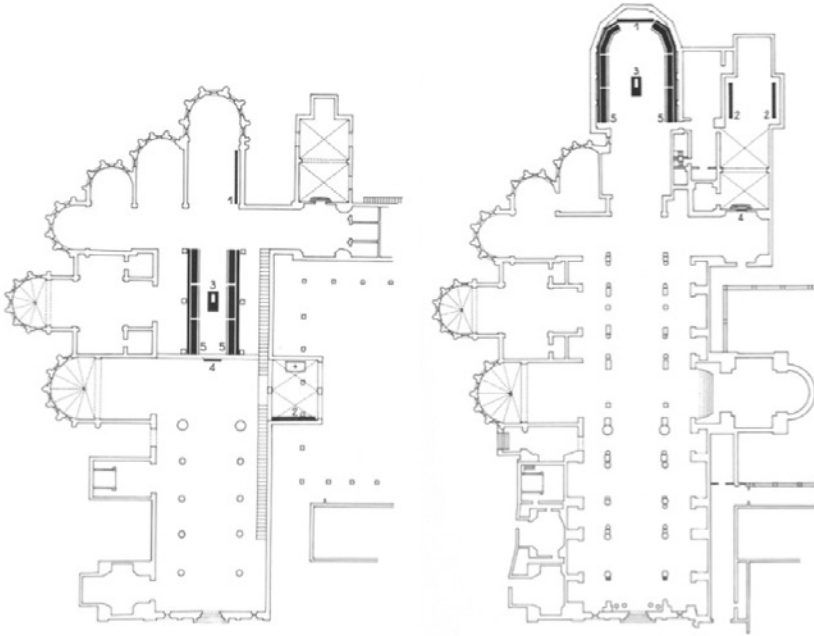


Fig. 2: Bologna, San Domenico, plan of the church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with successive choir placements (n. 5).  
 From Alce, *Il coro di San Domenico*.



Fig. 3: Milan, Santa Maria delle Grazie, main apse with the stalls (photograph: Haude Morvan).

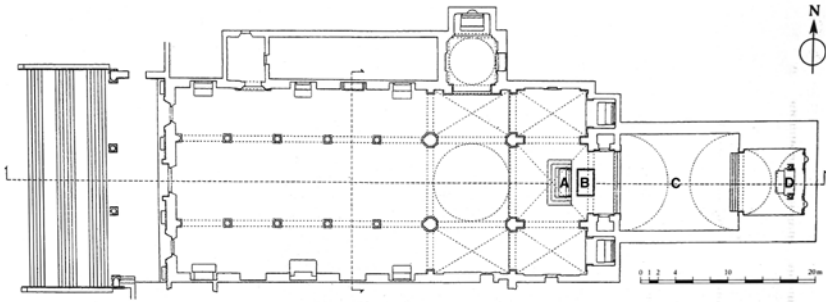


Fig. 4: Viterbo, Santa Maria della Quercia, plan of the church after 1496 (from Lorusso, 'Santa Maria della Quercia').



Fig. 5: Viterbo, Santa Maria della Quercia, Andrea Bregno's tabernacle and apse (photograph: Haude Morvan).



Fig. 6: Viterbo, Santa Maria della Quercia, Andrea Bregno's tabernacle seen from the choir stalls (photograph: Haude Morvan).

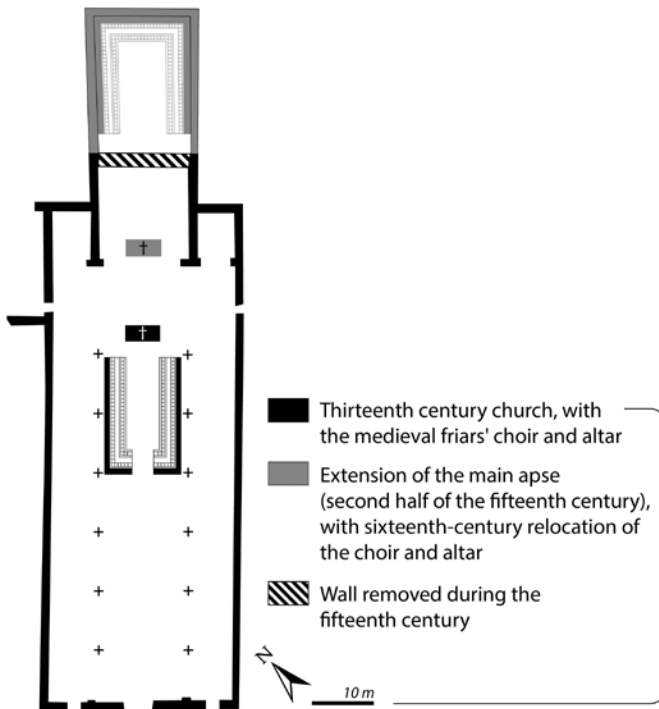


Fig. 7: Viterbo, Santa Maria in Gradi, restitution of the medieval plan by Claudio Varagnoli, reworked by the author with successive choir and altar placements (drawing by Sylvain Ducasse).