

FROM WORDS TO SPACE  
TEXTUAL SOURCES FOR  
RECONSTRUCTING AND UNDERSTANDING  
MIEVIAL SACRED SPACES

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CAMPISANO EDITORE

# QUADERNI DELLA BIBLIOTHECA HERTZIANA

## 11

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This volume builds on the research questions raised by the workshop *From Words to Space. Textual Sources for Reconstructing and Understanding Medieval Sacred Spaces* (Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, 27–28 March 2019), promoted by the project *Mapping Sacred Spaces. Forms, Functions, and Aesthetics in Medieval Southern Italy* and organized by Elisabetta Scirocco and Sible de Blaauw.

All articles of the present volume have undergone an anonymous scholarly peer-review by international experts, to whom we are grateful for their generous support.

in copertina

Anna Kelblová, Graphic elaboration from  
Kenneth J. Conant and Henry M. Willard's  
1947 conjectural reconstruction of the  
Desiderian basilica at Monte Cassino, 2019

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Campisano Editore Srl  
00155 Roma, viale Battista Bardanzellu, 53  
Tel +39 06 4066614  
campisanoeditore@tiscali.it  
www.campisanoeditore.it  
ISBN 979-12-80956-20-0



**BIBLIOTHECA HERTZIANA**  
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# TEXTUAL SOURCES AND MEDIEVAL SACRED SPACES

Elisabetta Scirocco, Sible de Blaauw

## Texts as Sources for Sacred Spaces

Medieval society was full of holy places. Each church and chapel alone constituted a *locus sacer*. But numerous locations in the landscape and in cities were also imbued with a notion of sacredness, either through memory associations or ritual use. Contemporary historians and art historians are consistently intrigued by these sites and spaces, but they face two problems: the spaces themselves are rarely preserved in their entirety, and traces of experience and use from the Middle Ages are most often lost. There are however some sites for which texts have survived, and which contain references to the form, layout, and functions of these sacred spaces. These texts and spaces were the focus of a workshop held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome on March 27–28, 2019. The essays that follow were inspired by the papers and discussions of the workshop but have been written specifically for this publication.<sup>1</sup>

The book's subject is, in principle, broad: medieval spaces permeated by the notion of sacredness in the religious realm of Christianity. Those considered are not only at the scale of monuments, urban centers, and landscapes, but also spaces and places temporarily given a mental and ephemeral sacral dimension. In each case, though, the lense through which we look at these spaces is created by words: words handed down in written texts of various kinds, in poetry or prose, in liturgy or music; texts which speak of (or for) spaces but are not materially embedded or permanently visible in the spatial context they refer to.<sup>2</sup> Although words alone cannot help us grasp the material and phenomenological complexity of a space of the past, it is undeniable that the clues inferable from texts offer fundamental resources for researching medieval sacred spaces, of which many have disappeared in the meantime, or at least have been dramatically transformed in their architectural, aesthetic, and ritual aspects. The essays in this volume, written by specialists in the history of art, architecture, and liturgy, demonstrate this in many ways. The authors deal with various categories of textual sources related or linkable to sacred, ritual, and liturgical spaces in the Middle Ages, and through differ-

ent methodological and hermeneutical approaches, aim to reconstruct and better understand medieval sacred spaces.

‘Reconstruction’ here does not refer to the meanings perhaps most immediately and intuitively associated with the word today. We speak neither of the rebuilding of destroyed or damaged monuments – such as those affected by wars or natural disasters – nor of the drawing and modeling used to visualize hypotheses about the original appearance of spaces, architectures and objects of the past.<sup>3</sup> We use the term instead in a more general and less technical sense: of ‘reconstruction’ as the ideal recovery of forms of the past lacking material traces and of which there is only incomplete evidence.

This desideratum is not the final goal; but it is the necessary stage in trying to understand and interpret spaces of the past in their material, aesthetic, and performative aspects. Apart from particularly fortunate cases, however, it is very difficult, if not impossible to grasp – albeit abstractly – spaces that are distant in time in their material substance (not to mention social or symbolic dimensions). The first challenge is therefore a retrospective and diachronic investigation of the contours and character of the object of research. For spatial contexts affected over the centuries by transformations that were often as radical as they were irreversible, a scientific reconstruction is destined to remain partial. There will always be an opaque boundary, obscure detail, or irremediable gap, but they too are indelible and significant traces of history.

The historian’s research tools are, first and foremost, oral, written, visual, or material sources, and their infinite sub-categories. And if for historians of art and architecture the primary material sources are necessarily buildings, artworks, epigraphs, and evidence of artifacts and decorations, their investigations rely to a great extent on textual sources. Let us think for example of the information that comes from commission documents for buildings, chapels, liturgical furnishings, or from the codifications for rites, or from building descriptions and the accounts of their transformations. Of course, the realm of sources is far broader: one need only look at the series *Typology of Sources of the Western Middle Ages* (begun in 1972 and about to reach its 90th volume), and the heterogeneity of the classes identified in it.<sup>4</sup> Borrowing from Umberto Eco, Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri has warned of the “vertigo of the list” with respect to the impossibility of an exhaustive classification of sources and their various typologies and genres, not to mention the hybrid character of some cases with respect to any taxonomic principle.<sup>5</sup> If any testimony from the past – from obituaries to ceramics, from liturgical chant books to human bones, from *gesta episcoporum* to tapestries – is potentially a document to interpret,<sup>6</sup> we can also all agree with Jacques Le Goff that every document can have the status of monument within a specific context.<sup>7</sup>

From this vast pool of possibilities, the authors of this volume reflect on one macro category of source: those of textual nature. The shared ambition is

not to give a systematic overview of the written sources at the service of the history of medieval art and architecture, but rather to use contexts to explore texts, and vice versa, guided by questions about the form, disposition, function, and aesthetics of certain sacred spaces. This approach urges a reexamination and questioning of individual texts – some well-known, others less so – and a discussion of certain typologies and genres that are most relevant for the reconstruction and understanding of medieval sacred spaces. We hope that, in this way, this collection offers an opportunity to look from different perspectives through the prism of sacred space at the wide and varied field of textual sources that can be brought to bear on the history of medieval art.

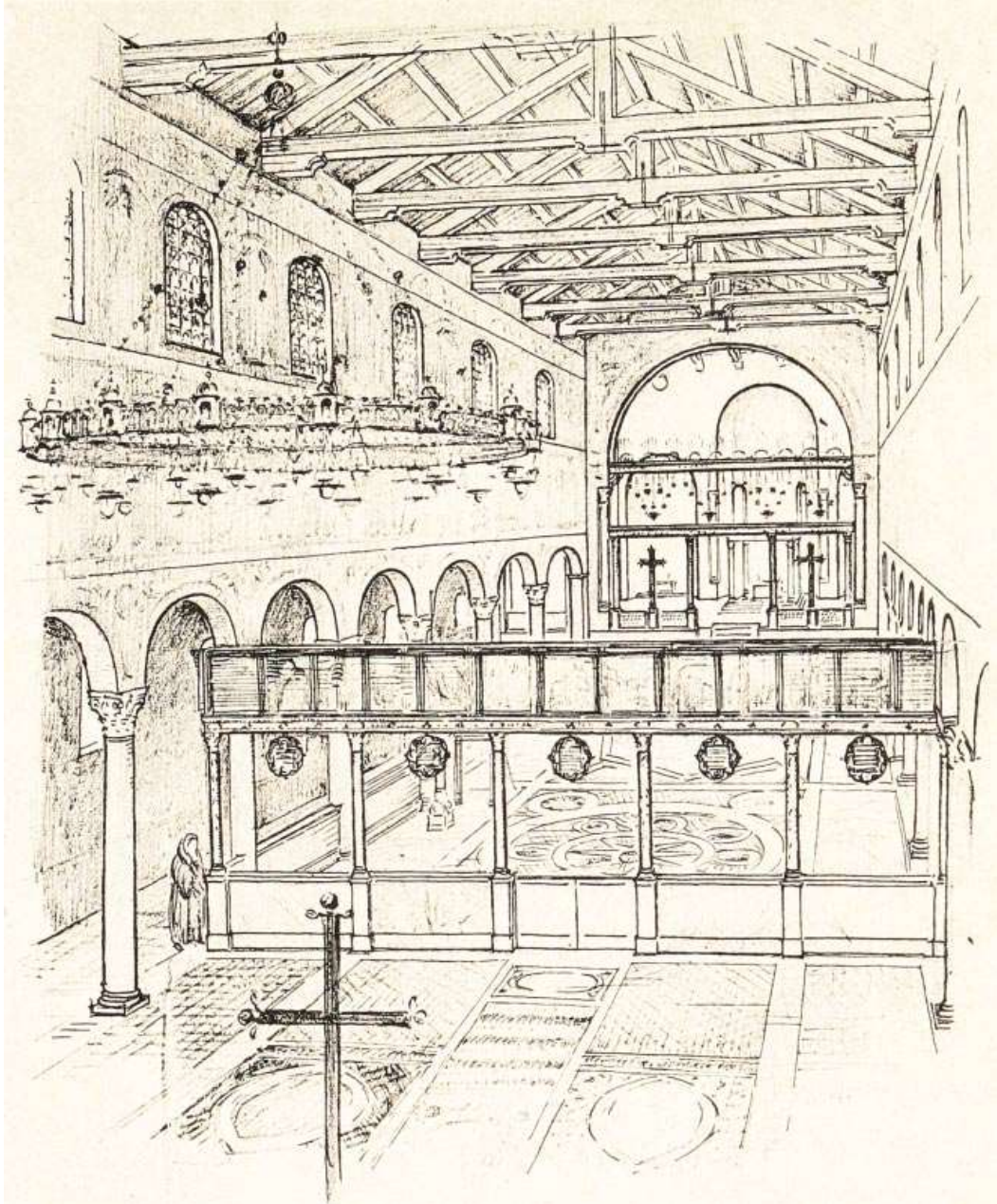
#### Words versus Spaces, Words without Spaces

The image on the cover of this book is a graphic abstraction of Kenneth J. Conant's and Henry M. Willard's famous reconstruction of the interior of the basilica of Saint Benedict at Monte Cassino rebuilt by Abbot Desiderius and inaugurated in 1071 (fig. 1). Published in 1947 as a "conjectural restoration" in the anthology *Literary Sources of Art History* together with a drawing of the Desiderian abbey complex that had already been published in 1935 as a "preliminary reconstruction drawing"<sup>8</sup>, the proposal was based on sources of various type and origin.<sup>9</sup> These included sixteenth-century drawings by Antonio and Giovanni Battista da Sangallo, archival documents preserved in the abbey, and above all Leo Marsicano's *Chronica monasterii Casinensis* (chapters 28 and 32).<sup>10</sup> Marsicano's words, as handed down to us in the *Chronica* and in the *Narratio de consecratione ecclesie Casinensis*, remain to this day the main sources about Abbot Desiderius' artistic patronage at Monte Cassino.<sup>11</sup> These two texts contain information about the monastic complex, the position of the buildings and their architectural character, the techniques employed for their embellishment and the provenance of craftsmen and artworks. Many historians of medieval Western art will have come across the passages of Leo's chronicle in which he describes the liturgical setting of the church commissioned by Desiderius and its precious furnishings.<sup>12</sup>

The material and archival data available to Conant and Willard, supplemented with the archaeological evidence that emerged in the aftermath of the war destruction in 1943, has not allowed us to fully solve the interpretative problems presented by some parts of Leo Marsicano's texts.<sup>13</sup> Because of occasional ambiguities in terminology and syntax and the inherent difficulty in interpreting a text that refers to a space that has almost completely disappeared, Leo's words have left space for different interpretations by scholars, and some aspects are still debated today. Successive reconstruction drawings demonstrate the relatively wide margin of interpretation based on the same text, as can be seen in the differences between the first proposal by Willard and Conant, a second drawing which appeared under the name of Conant forty years later,

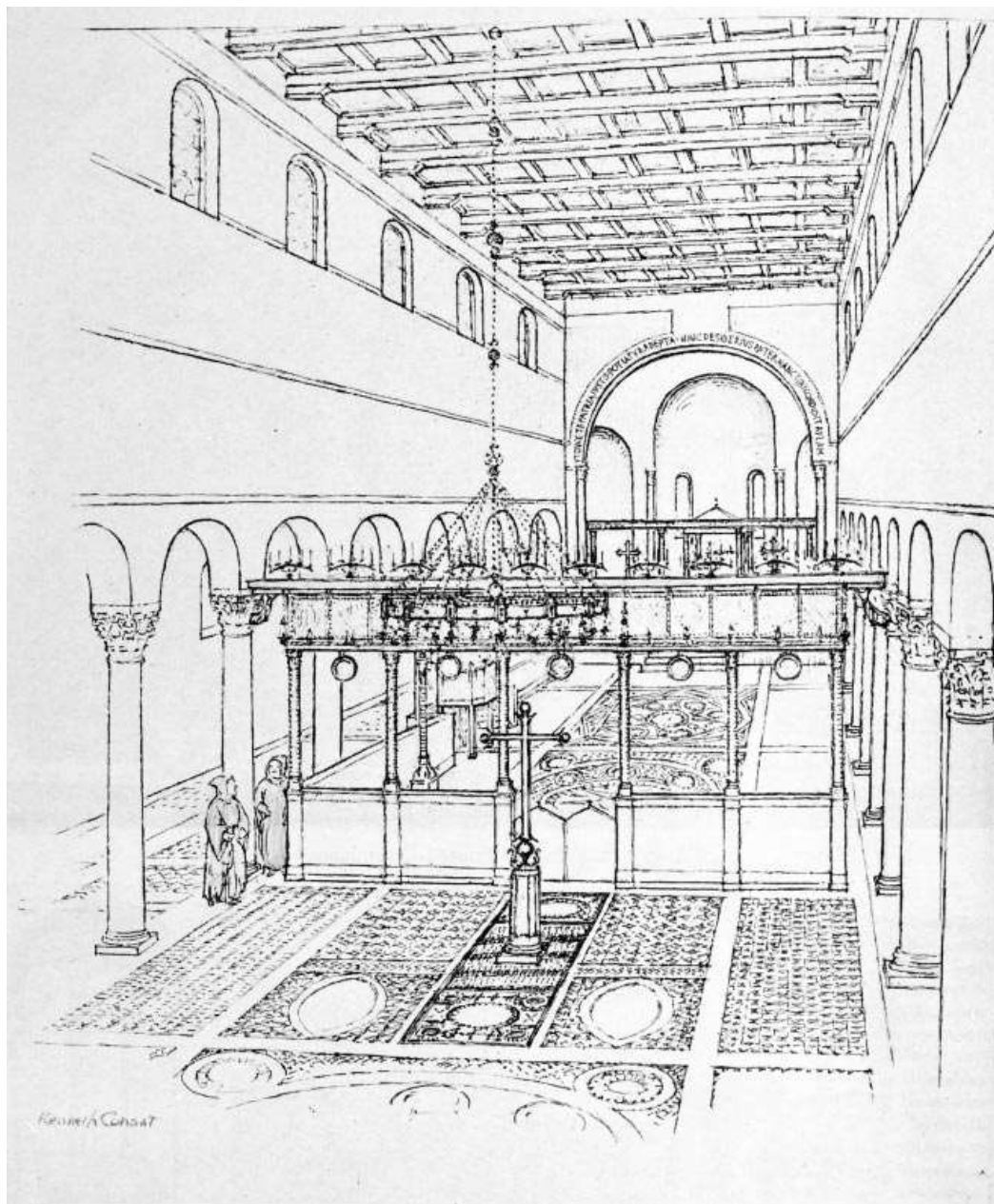


1. Kenneth J. Conant with the collaboration of Henry M. Willard, *Montecassino, the Desiderian Monastery, Conjectural restorations, Interior*, from *Literary Sources of Art History* 1947 (note 9), p. 11, fig. 1

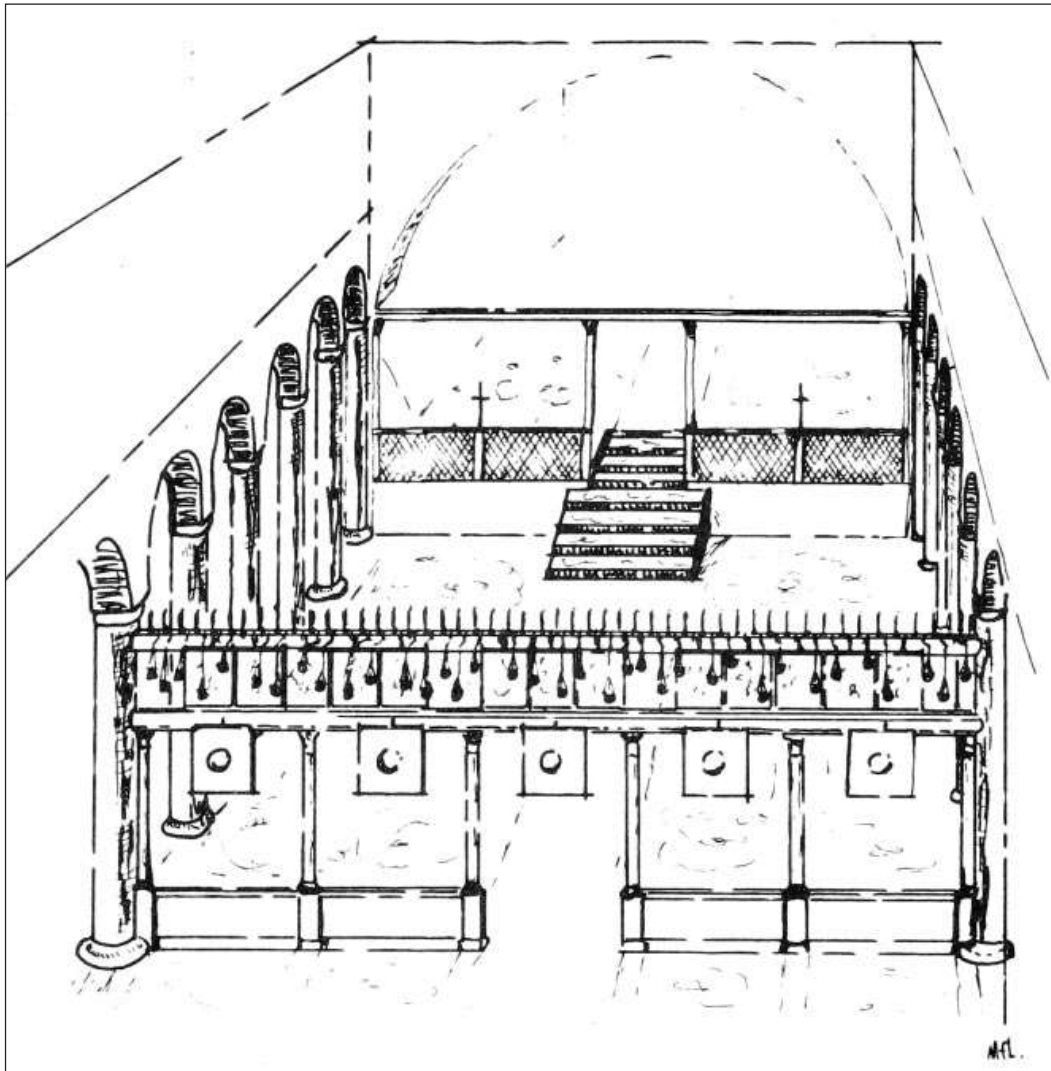




2. Kenneth J. Conant, *Monte Cassino, Desiderian Basilica, Interior, Reconstruction*, from Bloch 1986 (note 14), p. 1156, fig. 27

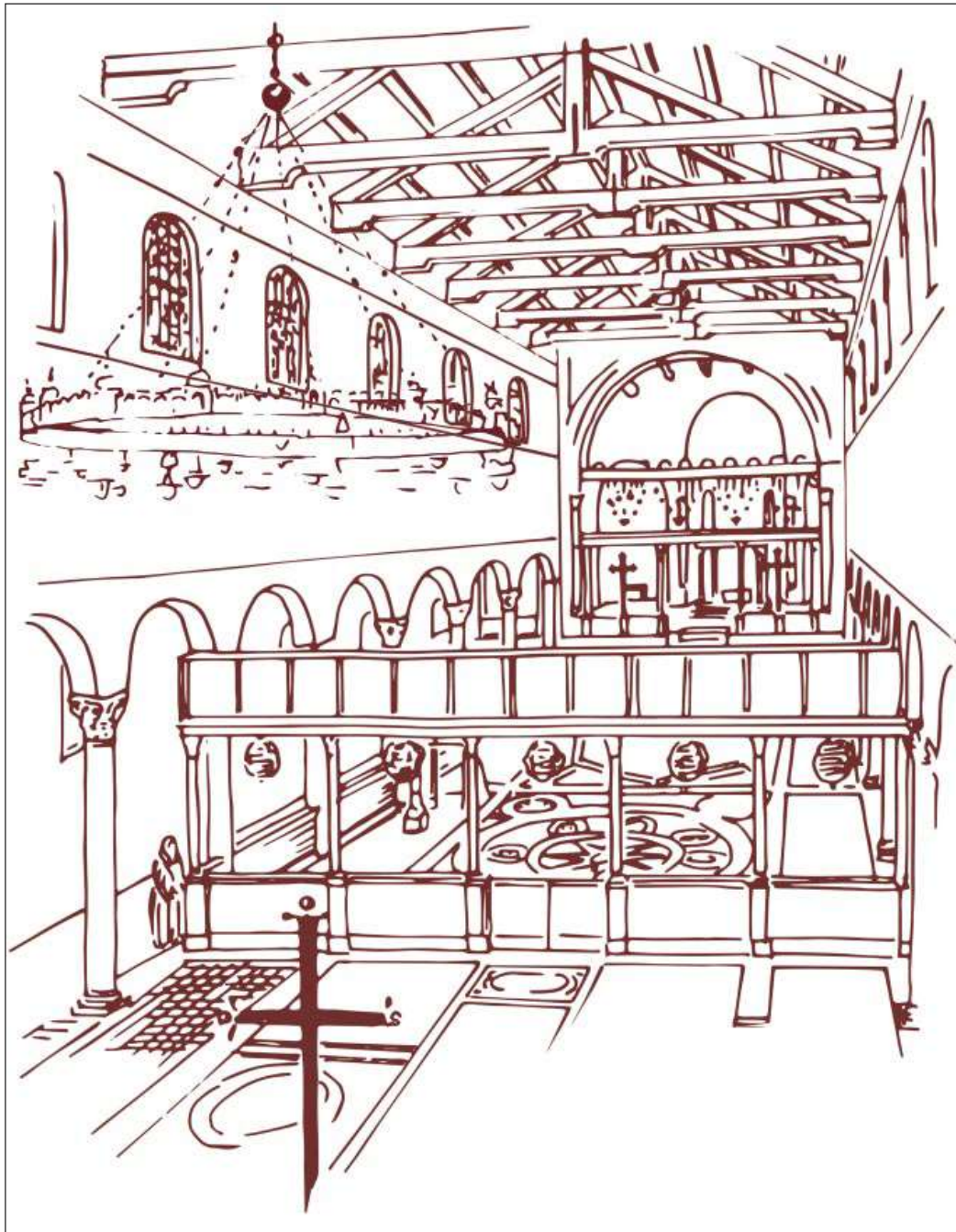


3. Jennifer M. Sheppard (drawing by Michael F. Lacy), *Conjectural restoration of the interior of Monte Cassino*, from Sheppard 1982 (note 14), p. 242, fig. 3



and the alternative proposal elaborated by Jennifer Sheppard published in 1982 (figs. 2–3).<sup>14</sup> All three diverge in details like the width of the monks' choir enclosure inside the main nave, its arrangement on the sides running in line with the colonnades, the position of the beam supported by two silver corbels in the shape of a hand, and the structure and location of the ambo. And while it is undeniable that these authors were careful in stating that their drawings were tentative hypotheses of “restoration” or “reconstruction”, it is also true that these images have acquired an authoritative status themselves, circulating with-

4. Anna Kelblová, Graphic elaboration from Kenneth J. Conant and Henry M. Willard's 1947 conjectural reconstruction of the Desiderian basilica at Monte Cassino (here fig. 1), 2019





out their captions and being republished without their explanatory notes. In some cases, they exert a stronger agency than the text on which they are based: the reconstructions influence the reading of Leo Marsicano's words in such a way that they – instead of the text itself – become the authoritative source for anyone thinking about the lost Desiderian basilica. It is for this reason that Anna Kelblová's 2019 graphic reconstruction (fig. 4) – based on Wilard and Conant's drawing – invites us to take a step back and establish a critical distance from these images and the effect they have on scholarship, emphasizing not only the dynamic interaction between source text and modern interpretation, but also the hypothetical nature of any (re)construction.

From Contexts to Texts, and vice versa

The intention of this collection of essays is twofold: on the one hand, to explore the potentialities of the relationship between texts, objects, and contexts; on the other, to provoke reflections around the problems of hermeneutics raised by textual sources for medieval art history. The geographical focus in the case studies is the central-southern part of the Italian peninsula, with other Italian and European examples included in relation to specific methodological questions. In terms of the monuments considered, the chronological framework spans the 7th to the 14th centuries. The real protagonists, the textual sources analyzed, are mostly medieval, although some extend up to the 18th century. It is not only the text in its contents and forms of transmission that is considered, but also the materiality of the object-source and the (inter)medial dynamics involving scripture. The scholars writing in this volume either declare, problematize or challenge the ambiguities of textual sources and the resulting epistemological problems for historical reconstruction. The most common of these are hermeneutical problems related to genre, among them the rhetorical and atemporal content of *ekphrasis*, the general and generic character of liturgical regulations, the celebratory intention of *gesta*, and the retrospective gaze of early modern sources.

The first two contributions address some of the main types of medieval narrative sources: *gesta episcoporum*, hagiographic texts, and chronicles. Both deal with early medieval spaces and sources. In Vinni Lucherini's study of Naples Cathedral, the loss of evidence (building, decorations and furnishings) mentioned in the *Gesta episcoporum Neapolitanorum* requires the careful weaving of various material, textual, and memorial traces to formulate plausible hypotheses. It demonstrates that a specific source has to be recognized in its own structure and nature and should not be merely 'plundered' for art-historical and architectural information. Andrew J.M. Irving's suggestion that the path of the Easter Tuesday procession performed by the Cassinese community should be reconstructed and interpreted as a cultural technique prompts a shift from the textual evidence of the procession to the con-

struction of its sacred landscape. The procession bestowed sacredness through the repetitive and solemn marking of sites, establishing destinations, and enhancing symbolic ties in the territory surrounding the abbey.

Taking two homilies by Gregory the Great and the architectural setting of the Roman church of Sant'Agnese fuori le mura as their starting points, Ivan Foletti and Martin F. Lešák reconsider the church's apse mosaic, its iconography and its aesthetic features in relation to the gospel pericopes that were read in the church on the feast days of the saint. Poetry for liturgical music is at the center of Bissera V. Pentcheva's analysis of the eleventh-century Office of Sainte Foy at Conques, which explores the creation of sacred space through chant. The music's compositional and melodic structures and word-painting produce 'images' that have a relationship with the presentation and representation of the Saint's images at Conques.

Another group of essays addresses ceremonial books containing instructions for the ritual performance of liturgy. Taking different analytical approaches to the same type of source, liturgical books, Elisa Di Natale examines the lost cathedral of Milan, and Maddalena Vaccaro considers Salerno cathedral, in the twelfth century. Elisa di Natale proposes a hypothetical reconstruction of Santa Maria Maggiore – formerly one of the two cathedrals in the episcopal complex of Milan and documented by scarce archaeological evidence – on the basis of the *Ordo* (ca. 1130) of Beroldus, "ecclesiae cathedralis Mediolanensis custos et cicendelarius". By cross-referencing the ritual instructions contained in the rubrics of a recently discovered mid-twelfth-century Breviary-Missal with both later liturgical manuscripts and the medieval decorations and liturgical furnishings still in situ in Salerno cathedral, Maddalena Vaccaro offers a precise definition of the ritual paths in and out of this church, and of the ritual actions performed in its liturgical areas on the major feasts of the year. Antonino Tranchina's essay is devoted to *typika*, authoritative ceremonial texts used by the monastic communities of Byzantine rite in Southern Italy. He tests the strict relationship between these texts and the specific spaces of their use with a case study of Santa Maria del Patir, taking a transdisciplinary approach that spans philology, archaeology, history of architecture and art history.

Ruggero Longo invites us to look closely at a written source that has played a significant, if not crucial, role in art-historical investigations of the Cappella Palatina in the Norman Palace in Palermo: Philagathus of Cerami's *ekphrasis* describing the church. His study shows how the advancement of knowledge on a well-preserved medieval monument through the integration of archaeology and technical-scientific investigations can refresh an established written source.

When they are coeval with significant moments in the afterlife of objects and spaces, post-medieval texts become primary sources for medieval art his-



tory. To reconstruct the medieval liturgical spaces and furnishings of San Silvestro in Capite in Rome and trace their transformation in late medieval and early modern times, Manuela Gianandrea interweaves textual sources with material, documentary, and iconographic evidence. Her analysis delves into the early modern era, when liturgical spaces, decorations, furnishings, and objects not only underwent significant transformations, but captured antiquarians' attention, and were invested with memorial and iconic meanings.

Xavier Barral i Altet's contribution shifts the focus. It is not related to textual sources instrumental to the reconstruction of medieval spaces, but to the textual and conceptual construction of the notion of sacred space in the ecclesiological milieu of the eighteenth century. Addressing the understanding of early Christian liturgical spaces from the perspective of ecclesiologists and antiquarians, he sheds light on the origin of a specific view of the past that was to become influential in the centuries that followed.

Barral's essay about historiography prompts two final considerations. The first, not strictly related to textual sources and their relation to medieval sacred space, tackles a familiar issue: the elusive dimension of interpretation that always dominates the connections between sources and historical reality. The second relates to the wider cultural context in which research takes place, and to the way in which our predisposition towards history and the expectations sedimented in the historiographical debate influence the interpretation of textual (and other) sources from the past. These are caveats that should always be borne in mind in the practice of history as a discipline, and art history is no exception.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The editors would like to thank Tanja Michalsky, Marieke von Bernstorff, Caterina Scholl, Mirjam Neusius, John Rattray, and the staff of the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History for their support in making the workshop and this publication possible. Gratitude also goes to the speakers, discussants, and the public at the workshop, and to the specialists who contributed as peer reviewers for the essays in the volume.

<sup>2</sup> Though considered in some of the case studies presented here, epigraphs and inscriptions materially related to sacred spaces require separate treatment because of their special status as exhibited scripts in a specific spatial context. As reference titles about script in sacred spaces: *Inscriptions in Liturgical Spaces*, ed. Kristin Blikrud Aavitsland and Turlid Karlsen Seim (Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia, N.S., 10–24), Rome 2011; Vincent Debiais, *Messages de pierre. La lecture des inscriptions dans la communication médiévale (XIIIe–XIVe-siècle)*, Turnhout 2009; *Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Early Medieval World*, ed. Antony Eastmond, Cambridge 2015; *Writing Matters. Presenting and Perceiving Monumental Inscriptions in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Irene Berti et al., Berlin et al. 2017; *Sacred Scripture/Sacred Space. The Interlacing of Real Places and Conceptual Spaces in Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. Tobias Frese, Wilfried E. Keil, and Kristina Krüger, Berlin et al. 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Günther Abel, “Das Prinzip Rekonstruktion”, in *Das Prinzip Rekonstruktion*, ed. Uta Hassler and Winfried Nerdinger, Zurich 2010, pp. 64–75; *Reconstruction, Replication and Re-enactment in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. Sven Dupré et al., Amsterdam 2020. With special reference to

3D models: *Visualizing Complexities. Practices and Heuristics of Digital Models in Art History*, ed. Nicola Camerlenghi, Tanja Michalsky, and Elisabetta Scirocco (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> *Typologie des Sources du Moyen Âge Occidental*, series ed. Baudouin van den Abeele and Jean-Marie Yante, Turnhout 1972–present.

<sup>5</sup> Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri, “La fonte e lo storico: una coppia inseparabile”, in *Fonti medievali. Un’antologia*, ed. Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri, Amedeo Feniello, and Christian Grasso, Rome 2017 pp. 15–27; Umberto Eco, *Vertigine della lista*, Milan 2009 (Eng. trans. *The Infinity of Lists: An Illustrated Essay*, Milan 2009).

<sup>6</sup> The examples cited are taken from titles in the series *Typologie des Sources du Moyen Âge Occidental* (note 4). See also Salvatore Tramontana, *Capire il Medioevo. Le fonti e i temi*, Rome 2017, esp. pp. 109–203.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Le Goff, “Documento/Monumento”, in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, vol. 5, Turin 1978, pp. 38–43.

<sup>8</sup> Henry M. Willard (drawings by Kenneth J. Conant), “A Project for the Graphic Reconstruction of the Romanesque Abbey at Monte Cassino”, *Speculum*, 10 (1935) pp. 144–146, pl. I–II.

<sup>9</sup> *Literary Sources for Art History. An Anthology of Texts from Theophilus to Goethe*, selected and ed. Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, Princeton 1947; the English translation of Leone Marsicanus’ Chronicle is on pp. 4–10; the drawings with the “Conjectural restorations of Montecassino Desiderian Monastery, 1. Interior [church interior], 2. Exterior [monastery]”, made by Kenneth J. Conant with the collaboration of Henry M. Willard, are on p. 11, figs. 1–2.

<sup>10</sup> *Chronica monasterii Casinensis*, ed. Harmut Hoffmann (Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores 34), Hanover 1980, pp. 1–409.

<sup>11</sup> For the *Chronica* and the *Narratio*: Leone Marsicano, *Cronaca di Montecassino (III 26–33)*, ed. Francesco Aceto and Vinni Lucherini, Milan 2001 (Latin text, with critical edition and Italian translation). See also Herbert Bloch, *Monte Cassino in the Middle Ages*, 3 vols., Rome 1986.

<sup>12</sup> “Pavimentum etiam universum totius ecclesie [...] mira prorsus et hactenus partibus istis incognita cesorum lapidum multiplicitate constravit gradibus illis, quibus ad altare conscenditur, crustis pretiosorum marmorum decenti diversitate distinctis. Frontem quoque chori, quem in medio basilice statuit, quattuor magnis marmorum tabulis sepsit, e quibus porfiredica una, viridis altera, relique due ac ceterae omnes in chori circuitu candide. [...] Ad supradictam igitur regiam urbem [Constantinopolim] quendam de fratribus cum litteris ad imperatorem et auro triginta et sex librarum pondo transmittens auream ibi in altaris facie tabulam cum gemmis ac smaltis valde speciosis patri mandavit, quibus videlicet smaltis nonnullas quidem ex evangelio, fere autem omnes beati Benedicti miraculorum insigniri fecit historias. [...] Fecit itaque et cancellos quattuor fusiles ex ere ante altare, scilicet hinc inde inter chorum et aditum statuendos, trabem quoque nichilominus fusilem ex ere cum candelabris numero quinquaginta, in quibus utique totidem cerei per festivitates precipuas ponerentur, lampadibus subter in ereis uncis ex eadem trabe triginta et sex dependentibus. Que videlicet erea trabes ereis eque brachiis ac manibus sustentata trabi lignee, quam pulcherrime sculpi et auro colorumque fucis interim fecerat Desiderius exornari, commissa est, et supra sex columnas argenteas quattuor et semis in altitudine cubitos habentes et octo libras per singulas in ipsa chori fronte constituit. Sub qua nimirum trabe quinque numero teretes iconas suspendit, tredecim vero quadratas pari mensura ac ponderis desuper statuit. E quibus videlicet decem ex quadratis predictus frater apud Constantinopolim crosso argento sculpsit ac deauravit habentes per singulas alie quattuordecim libras, alie duodecim. Rotundas autem omnes argentea solum urna circumdans cetera coloribus ac figuris depingi Greca peritia fecit. Tres vero alias de quadratis eiusdem metalli atque mensura patri suorum artificum opere nequaquam dissimili Desiderius iussit. Alteram quoque iconam rotundam ex utraque parte celato argento ac deaurato vestitam, argenteis etiam bullis extrinsecus in giro circumdatam quidam nobilis tunc beato Benedicto a regia urbe transmisit; cui postmodum similis fieri iussa altera, utraque est in ciburio altaris hinc inde suspensa. Fecit preterea Desiderius et aliam trabem de argento librarum circiter sexaginta sculptam nichilominus ac deauratam, quam in fornice maiori ante altare super quattuor argenteas columnas ex parte inauratas locavit, quarum unaqueque et argenti libras decem et quinque cubitos altitudinis habet. Fecit et duas cruces magnas argenteas librarum triginta per singulas, quarum imagines celatura mirifica prominent, easque sub predicta trabe inter easdem columnas hinc inde super marmoreos stipites statuit. Tres porro residuas maioris altaris facies argento librarum octoginta et sex sculpto ac deaurato vestivit. Nam reliquorum trium altarium facies veteribus tabulis a tribus partibus adornate sunt. Fecit etiam quattuor trabes propter ciburium altaris, quas simili modo celato ac deaurato argento extrin-

secus induens abintus petalis et coloribus decoravit, quarum due habent in longitudine cubitos sex, libras viginti et totidem, due vero alie cubitos quattuor ac semis, libras duodecim et totidem superimposite interim columnis veteribus. Fecit et candelabra magna sex, tres cubitos altitudinis habentia de productis ac sculptis argenti lamminis, ana sex vel quinque librarum, que videlicet in festis precipuis ante altare in directa linea posita accendi cum maximis faculis debeant. Fecit quoque et pulpitum ligneum ad legendum sive cantandum longe priori prestantius et eminentius, in ascensu scilicet graduum sex, idque diversis colorum fucis et auri petalis de pulchro pulcherrimum redderit. Ante quod columnam argenteam viginti et quinque librarum partim deauratam ad modum magni candelabri sex cubitorum in altitudine habens supra basem porfireticam statuit, super quam videlicet cereus magnus, qui sabbato paschali benedicendus est, sollemniter debeat exaltari. Fecit et pharum, idest coronam maximam, de argento librarum circiter centum habens in giro cubitos viginti cum duodecim turribus extrinsecus prominentibus sex et triginta ex ea lampadibus dependentibus eamque extra chorum ante crucem maiorem satis firma ferrea catena septem deauratis malis distincta suspendit". See Leone Marsicano, *Chronica monasterii Casinensis*, III 28, 124–131; 32, 292–340, in Aceto/Lucherini 2001 (note 11), pp. 58, 70–74. An English translation of the *excerpta* from chapters 28 and 32 quoted here can be found in *Literary Sources* 1947, pp. 7–10.

<sup>13</sup> For the critical discussion of the text and its ambiguities: Lucherini in Aceto/Lucherini 2001, *ibidem*; Manuela Gianandrea, *La scena del sacro. L'arredo liturgico nel Basso Lazio*, Rome 2006, pp. 55–75.

<sup>14</sup> Conant's drawing appeared in Herbert Bloch, *Monte Cassino in the Middle Ages*, Rome 1986, III, fig. 27 on p. 1156; Jennifer M. Sheppard, "The Eleventh-Century Choir-Screen at Monte Cassino: A Reconstruction", *Byzantine Studies*, 9 (1982), pp. 233–242, fig. 3 on p. 242.