

Walled Choir Screens as a Side Effect of Church Reform (Eleventh–Thirteenth Centuries)

Chancel Enclosures, from the Earliest Christian Age to the Carolingian Age

The need to protect the altar from the exuberance of the faithful was already a concern in the very first phase of legalized Christianity. Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Historia ecclesiastica* (Book x. 4, paragraphs 37–46) transcribes a panegyric delivered around 315 on the dedication of the cathedral of Tyre, in Lebanon. Although the text is rooted in the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition and in biblical models, the description of the church desired by Bishop Paulinus seems to be based on the actual building and its setting.¹ Eusebius describes in order the exterior and interior of the church, and towards the end we read:

Nevertheless, having thus completed the temple he adorned it with thrones, very lofty, to do honour unto the presidents, and likewise with benches arranged in order throughout in a convenient manner; and after all these he hath placed in the midst the holy of holies even the altar, and again surrounded this part also, that the multitude might not tread thereon, with a fence of wooden lattice-work, delicately wrought with the craftsman's utmost skill, so as to present a marvellous spectacle to those that see it.²

From the same period, which preceded the first Christian basilicas in Rome (basilica Salvatoris and St Peter's in the Vatican), the Theodorian south basilica in Aquileia offers evidence of a separation between the laity and the clergy

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- 1 Smith, 'Christian Rhetoric in Eusebius' Panegyric at Tyre'. Schott, 'Eusebius' Panegyric on the Building of Churches', pp. 178–80. De Blaauw, 'The Church Atrium', pp. 35–37.
- 2 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, x.4, paragraph 44, p. 427.

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Figure 4.1. Aquileia, Theodorian south basilica, 3D rendering. Courtesy of Fondazione Aquileia.



Figure 4.2. 'Samagher ivory casket', Venice, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.
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(Figure 4.1). Judging by the traces left on the floor, the fourth bay, that of the altar and the mosaic with the stories of Jonah, was protected by low gates.³ In Tyre, the wooden lattice-work suggests a higher screen, but one that did not obstruct the visual and auditory relationship between the nave and the sanctuary, between the faithful and the celebrants at the altar: this was indeed a fundamental relationship, given that the early Christian rite was performed in the presence and for the benefit of the faithful.

In Constantinian Old St Peter's, a monumental ciborium connected to the apse by two architraves on a total of six twisted columns was erected around the supposed tomb of Peter.⁴ This layout is documented by the Samagher ivory casket (Figure 4.2, probably second quarter of the fifth century), which shows curtains possibly used to screen the apsidal front on either side of the original shrine (*aedicula*).⁵ The movable altar made of silver and gems donated by Constantine was probably positioned in front of the shrine, within the enclosure secured by marble slabs. Under Pope Gregory the Great (590–604), the shrine was incorporated within a podium extending to the apse, while the six twisted columns were aligned in front of the podium, following the example of the *templon* of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. With Pope Gregory III (731–741) this screen, first called *pergula*, was doubled through the addition of six more columns aligned three metres to the east. In the Carolingian period, a further enclosure was added extending towards the nave, the so-called *basso coro* (low choir), with a more articulated system of slabs, gates, beams on columns, icons, silver foils, lamps, vela, and curtains. This enclosure, together with the draperies hanging from the triumphal arch, the low choir, the *pergula*, and the ciborium, certainly filtered access to the chancel, but achieved this without preventing visual and auditory communication between celebrants and the faithful. In particular, the function of the curtains was more decorative than liturgical: they were meant to reveal, not to conceal.⁶

The cathedral basilica of San Salvatore / Santa Tecla in Milan, built at the end of the fourth century or shortly afterwards, had a five-nave layout with a peculiar eastern configuration: between the seventh and eighth bays, two partition walls (*septa*) as thick as the long walls (1.2 m) — and therefore presumably high although not necessarily without apertures — screened the two pairs of aisles, thus delimiting a sort of transept (Figure 4.3). After the mid-fifth century, the apse was demolished and rebuilt further to the east in order to enlarge the sanctuary, while the nave was fitted with raised *solea* and *bema* probably delimited by barriers (*transennae*) connected to the *septa*.⁷ The

3 Bertacchi, 'Il complesso basilicale', pp. 190, 193, 217.

4 On the Constantinian, Gregorian and early medieval layout of the chancel in Old St Peter's: De Blaauw, *Cultus et decor*, pp. 470–85, 548–66; Brandenburg, 'L'antica basilica vaticana', pp. 15–16.

5 Longhi, *La capsella eburnea di Samagher*.

6 In this regard: De Blaauw and Doležalová, 'Constructing Liminal Space?.'

7 Piva, 'Edilizia di culto cristiano', pp. 98–100. On the chronology of the settlement from

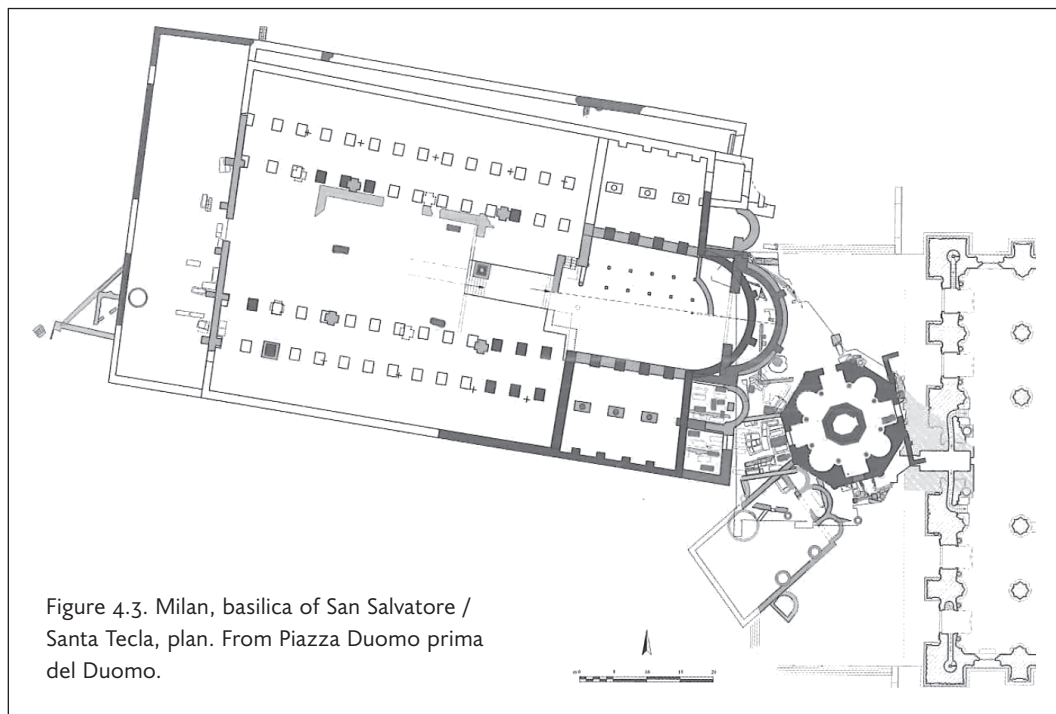


Figure 4.3. Milan, basilica of San Salvatore / Santa Tecla, plan. From Piazza Duomo prima del Duomo.

resulting chancel enclosure was much more protective than those at Tyre, Aquileia, and Rome. On the other hand, for the Gallic area, the Council of Tours in 567 prescribed that, during the mass, men and women should not be allowed to approach the altar except to take communion, attesting to a direct interaction between the laity and celebrants around the altar during the Eucharistic rite.⁸

In the churches of the Carolingian age, screens still generally consisted of marble slabs or low walls, possibly with columns and beams, to ensure visual and auditory communication between priests and worshippers.⁹ There is no lack of more filtered barriers, but these did not prevent this type of communication: in the abbey church of St Gallen (c. 830), excavations have

an archaeological point of view: Neri and others, 'Il complesso episcopale di Milano', pp. 197–99. Finally, on the early Christian episcopal complex: Lusuardi Siena and others, *Milano. Piazza Duomo prima del Duomo*.

8 Piva, 'Lo "spazio liturgico"', pp. 151–52. *Concilia Galliae a. 511–695*, ed. by de Clercq, p. 178: 'Ut laici secus altare, quo sancta mysteria celebrantur, inter Clericos, tam ad vigiliis, quam ad Missas, stare poenitus non praesumant; sed pars illa, quae a cancellis versus altare dividitur, choris tantum psallentium pateat Clericorum. Ad adorandum vero, et communicandum laicis et faeminis, sicut mos est, pateant Sancta Sanctorum'.

9 Piva, 'Lo "spazio liturgico"', p. 155.

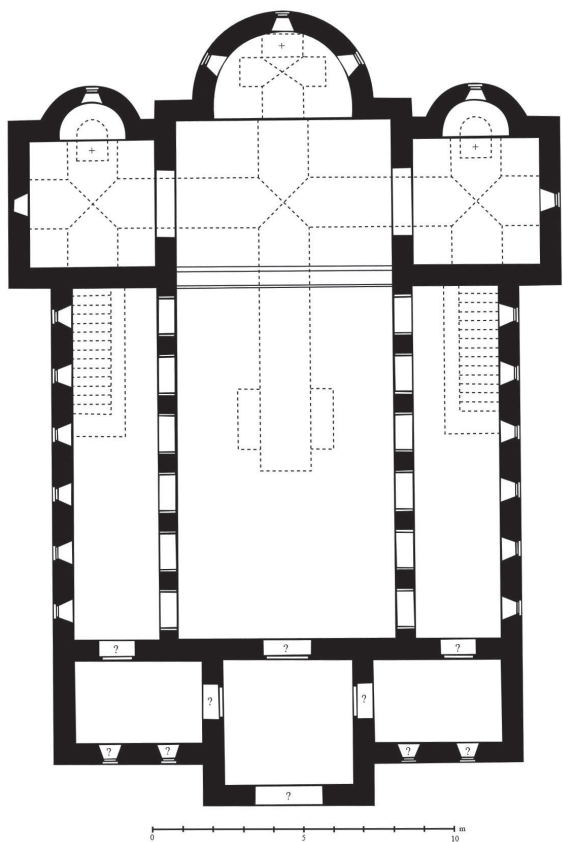


Figure 4.4. Steinbach, Einhardsbasilika. Plan: Wikimedia, CC BY SA; Interior photo: Tillman2007, Wikimedia, CC BY SA 3.0.



identified an arcade; in the church built by Einhard at Steinbach (824–827) the nave still shows traces of a wall 3.8 metres high but of uncertain shape, possibly an arcade (Figure 4.4).¹⁰ In the first half of the twelfth century, in the still-Carolingian nave of Saint-Denis Abbey, Suger lamented a dark wall (*muro tenebroso*) between the nave and chancel:¹¹ archaeological investigations seem to have traced its foundations, but uncertainty remains as to the dating and articulation.

Church Reform and Walled Choir Screens: The Case of Nice and the Ambrosian Area

Current scholarship, which for northern Italy is largely the work of Paolo Piva and Luigi Carlo Schiavi,¹² traces the evidence of a choir shielded by a high wall to the mid-eleventh century, during the first period of the Church Reform (incorrectly known as the Gregorian Reform).

Remains of a walled choir were found in Nice Cathedral.¹³ Based on excavations carried out between 1950 and 1964, Jean Thirion considered the enclosure to be contemporary with the three-aisled building, which had been linked to a consecration of the high altar on 1 May 1049. The chancel, equipped with a masonry seat (*subsellium*), was accessible through a central doorway with jambs built of large blocks, suggesting a lintel portal and consequently a wall no less than two metres high. In addition, the choir was raised above the nave by approximately 0.7 metres (Figure 4.5). Although this reconstruction seemed correct, there was uncertainty about such an early dating of the walled choir. It seemed unlikely that the cathedral of Nice could have been the prototype for such a solution, so one would have to assume that walled choirs were already a feature of more important cathedral and collegiate churches in the first half of the eleventh century. But this would mean that the ‘petrification’ of the conflict had anticipated the conflict itself. New excavations have corrected the sequence of the cathedral’s construction phases, leading Marc Bouiron to move the erection of the walled choir to the beginnings of the twelfth century, in parallel with the establishment of a community of

10 Ludwig, ‘Die Einhard-Basilika’.

11 Suger, ‘De Administratione’, xxxiv, 16–19: ‘In novitate siquidem sessionis nostrae impedimentum quoddam, quo medium ecclesiae muro tenebroso secabatur, ne speciositas ecclesiae magnitudinis talibus fuscaretur repagulis, de medio sustolli feceramus’ (In the beginning of our abbacy we had already put out of the way a certain obstruction which cut as a dark wall through the central nave of the church, let the beauty of the church’s magnitude be obscured by such barriers). Text and translation in Panofsky, *Abbot Suger*, pp. 72–73. On this choir screen: Armi and Smith, ‘The Choir Screen of Cluny III’, p. 562; Jacobsen, ‘Liturgische Kollisionen in Kirchenraum’, p. 204.

12 Piva, ‘Lo “spazio liturgico”’, pp. 154–57; Piva, ‘La chiesa di San Fiorentino’; Schiavi, ‘L’architettura religiosa nel territorio milanese’; Schiavi, ‘Considerazioni su alcune chiese’.

13 Thirion, ‘L’ancienne cathédrale de Nice’.

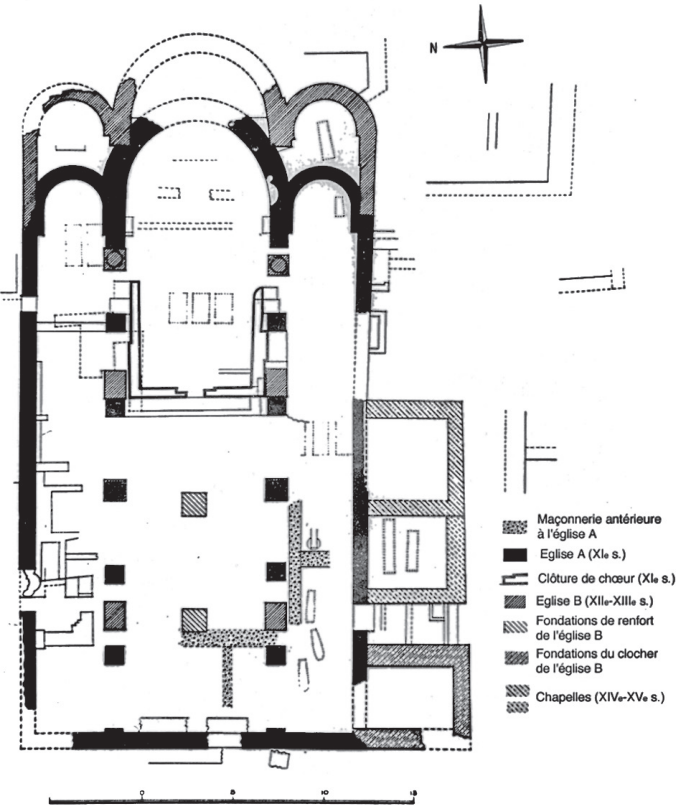


Figure 4.5. Nice, cathedral, archaeological survey of medieval phases according to Thirion, and (below) view of the remains of the chancel (redated to the beginning of the twelfth century). From Thirion, 'L'ancienne cathédrale de Nice'.



canons.¹⁴ This hypothesis fits much better into the historical and institutional context, presenting a solution already adopted in environments more closely affected by the Church Reform.

The first clear evidence of a choir shielded by a wall with a single doorway is provided by Andrea di Strumi for the collegiate church founded in Milan in the early 1060s by the deacon Arialdo.¹⁵

Agitur denique res nova et pene ab eodem loco hactenus inscia. Chorus namque alti circumdatione muri concluditur, in quo ostium ponitur; visio clericorum laicorumque ac mulierum, quae una erat et communis, dividitur.

(In short, this is something new, and from the same place [Milan] almost unknown. The choir is in fact surrounded by a high wall, in which is placed a doorway. Clerics, laymen and women, who used to be able to look at each other, can no longer do so).¹⁶

Andrea specifies that the wall surrounding the choir was *res nova*: it could be said to have 'petrified' the ongoing conflict between the Ambrosian clergy and the Patarinic reformers. The clergy, in accordance with ancient canons and observing strict discipline, allowed priests to marry. The reformers insisted on a celibate clergy, whose chastity was to be guaranteed by living together, thereby clearly distinguishing them from the laity (*ordo coniugatorum*).¹⁷

The strategy of the Pataria would be reaffirmed shortly before 1196 by the theologian Prepositinus of Cremona:

Notandum quod triplex genus veli suspenditur, videlicet quod sacra operit, velum quod sanctuarium a clero dividit, velum quod clerum a populo distinguit [...] Verum tamen hoc tempore suspendebantur vela inter clerum et populum, quasi hoc facto diceretur (Psalms 118. 37): 'averte oculos tuos ne videant vanitatem.' Pro hac etiam recondenda hodie in pluribus ecclesiis ipsi parietes in tantum elevantur quod clerus a populo conspici non potest vel converso.

(It should be noted that three veils are suspended: that which covers sacred items, that which separates the clergy from the sanctuary, that which distinguishes the clergy from the people [...] At this time veils were hung between the clergy and the people, as if it were said (Psalms 118. 37): 'turn away your eyes from seeing vanity.' For this reason, today in many churches the screens are raised to such an extent that the clergy cannot be seen by the people, and vice versa).¹⁸

14 Bouiron and others, 'Nice, la colline du Chateau', pp. 156–58.

15 Piva, 'Lo "spazio liturgico"', p. 155; Piva, 'La chiesa di San Fiorentino', p. 95.

16 *Vita Sancti Arialdi*, ed. by Baethgen, p. 1058, ll. 13–15.

17 Alzati, 'Clero e officium ambroxianum', p. 77.

18 *Prepositini Cremonensis*, ed. by Corbett, I, De officiis ab adventu usque ad parasceven, paragraphs 120–21, pp. 76–77. Partially quoted in Bedros and Scirocco, 'Liturgical Screens', p. 81.

Shortly afterwards (1196–1198), with reference to Notre-Dame in Paris:

Unde notandum est quod tria velamina debent esse necessaria, maxime quadragesimali tempore: unum quod est inter clericos et populum, ante peribulum; aliud velamen quod debet esse inter clericos et sanctuarium ubi est altare; tercium quod tegit sacra, scilicet cruces. Primum quod est inter clericos et populum fuit in signum continentie clericorum, altius factum fuit peribulo ut nec clerus populum, nec populus clericos videret.¹⁹

(It is to be noted that three veils must be necessary, especially during Lent: one which is between the clergy and the people, before the choir enclosure; another veil which must be between the clergy and the sanctuary, where the altar is; the third which covers the sacred objects, namely the crosses. The first one between the clergy and the people was a sign of the continence of the clergy, by means of a high enclosure that prevented the clergy from seeing the people and vice versa).

Unfortunately, no evidence survives of Arialdo's Canonica, as the church was demolished in 1798; however, the simplified church plan drawn on the 1579–1580 map of Milan by Giovanni Battista Clarici shows a hall subdivided by a wall with a central doorway (Figure 4.6). It is possible that this layout reflected the original one, but it may also represent a modification ordered by the Umiliati, who took possession of the canonry in 1257.

In the monastic church of San Fruttuoso in Capodimonte (Camogli, Genoa), archaeological investigation has revealed a walled choir installed during the second half of the eleventh century, and formerly decorated with stucco (Figure 4.7).²⁰ This is a valuable case both for its early date and because the walls are largely preserved (the height is now 1.77 metres for the west wall, 1.59 metres for the south wall, 1.87 metres for the north wall). Access to the choir was from the south, i.e. from the cloister, while the west wall incorporated



Figure 4.6. Plan of the city of Milan by Giovanni Battista Clarici, 1579–1580, detail of the Canonica of Arialdo, Rome, Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, Fondo Mascherino. From www.ritrattidicittà.it.

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- 19 *Prepositini Cremonensis*, *Summa super Psalterium*, fol. 100; *Prepositini cancellarii parisiensis* (1206–1210) *opera omnia*, ed. by Lacombe. Quoted in Hubert, 'La vie commune des clercs et l'archéologie', 1962, p. 108, footnote 48.
- 20 On the walled choir: Piva, 'La chiesa di San Fiorentino', pp. 93–94. On the stucco decoration: Frondoni, ed., *Gli stucchi di San Fruttuoso*. On the monumental complex: Cavana, 'Il complesso monumentale di San Fruttuoso'.

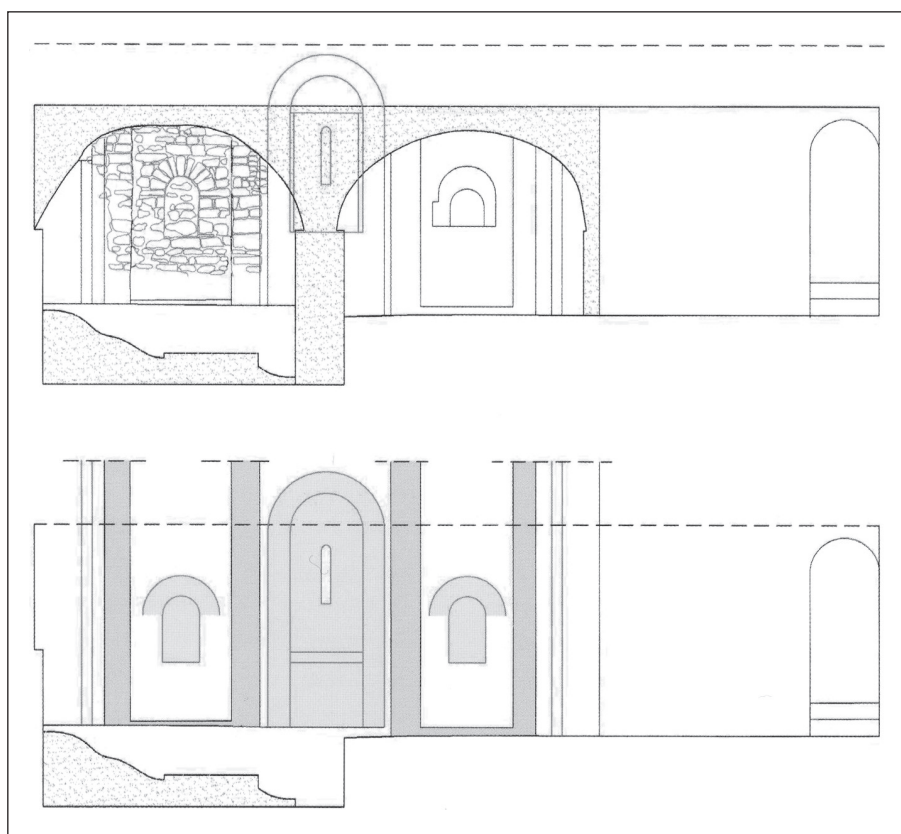


Figure 4.7. Capodimonte (Camogli), San Fruttuoso Abbey, survey of the western wall of the chancel enclosure. From Fiorino, *San Fruttuoso di Capodimonte*.

three niches and a central pillar including a *fenestella* measuring 70×15 centimetres. The sequence of renovations and the current fragmentation of space make it difficult to specify either the original floor levels or the exact configuration of the wall. Nevertheless, the lack of western access to the choir reveals a desire to clearly separate the monks' space from the nave, which was therefore intended for the faithful. The hollow central pillar with *fenestella* suggests the function of a wall-reliquary for the devotional cult of the Tarragona martyrs Fruttuoso, Augurius, and Eulogio.²¹

Returning to Milan, the church of San Vincenzo in Prato was rebuilt in the mid-eleventh century in the context of a monastery under the archbishop's authority. Referring to the plan drawn in the early seventeenth century by Giovanni Angelo Crivelli for the *Mediolanenses Antiquitates* by Giovanni Antonio Castiglione (1625), Schiavi points out evidence of a raised choir

21 Calcagno, 'Un culto mediterraneo: San Fruttuoso'.

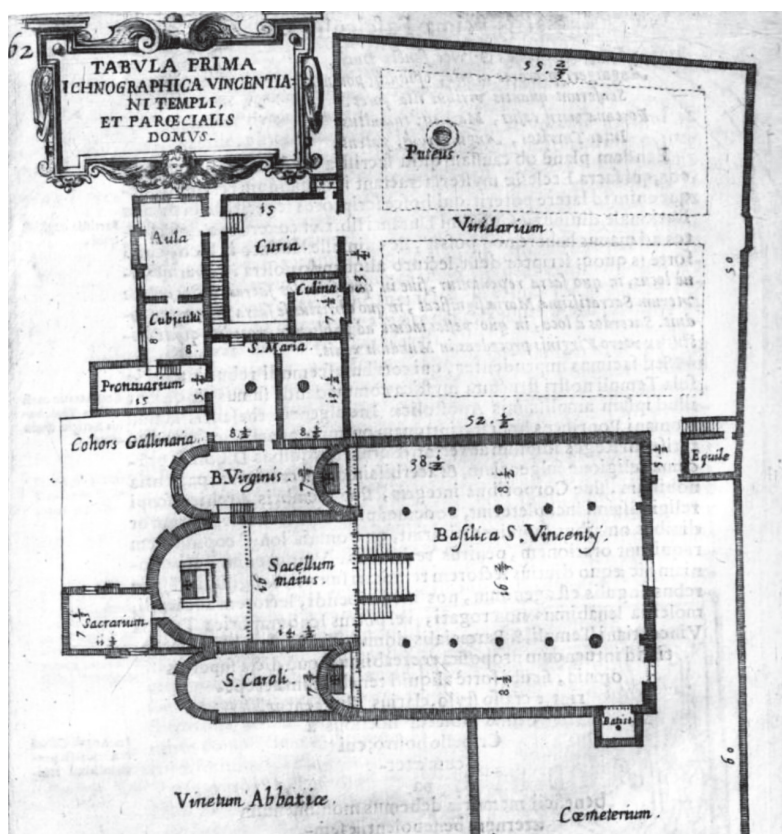


Figure 4.8. Milan, monastery of San Vincenzo in Prato, plan just before 1625. From Castiglione, *Mediolanenses Antiquitates*.

with side walls created by closing off the arcade.²² Additional side apses, built in line with the choir threshold, sealed off the eastern sectors of the aisles, which became spaces accessible only to monks (Figure 4.8). This layout is confirmed by a plan of the Porta Vercellina area (end of the sixteenth century), and partly by Claricio's plan, and implies a need to separate the monks' choir physically and visually from the laity. It should be pointed out that the city monasteries of Milan were installed in ancient basilicas officiated by the decuman clergy, with whom the monks had to coexist for a lengthy period or whose functions they inherited. Among these functions was pastoral care, which suggests daily church attendance by the laity.²³

There is no evidence that allows us to date the enclosure of San Vincenzo in Prato. Nevertheless, the need to make the monastic offices coexist with

22 Schiavi, 'L'architettura religiosa nel territorio milanese', p. 510.

23 Zerbi, 'Monasteri e riforma a Milano', pp. 48–51; Picasso, 'Monachesimo a Milano nel secolo XI'.

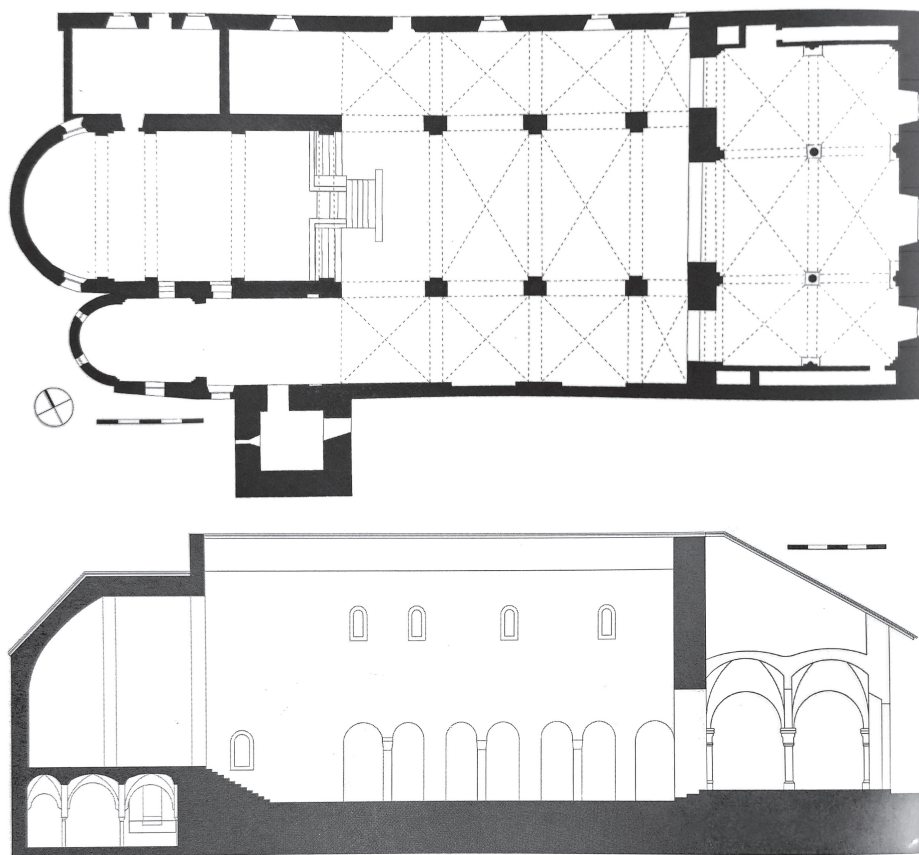


Figure 4.9. Sesto Calende (Varese), abbey church of San Donato, plan, and section of the first phase church. From Schiavi, 'Considerazioni su alcune chiese'.

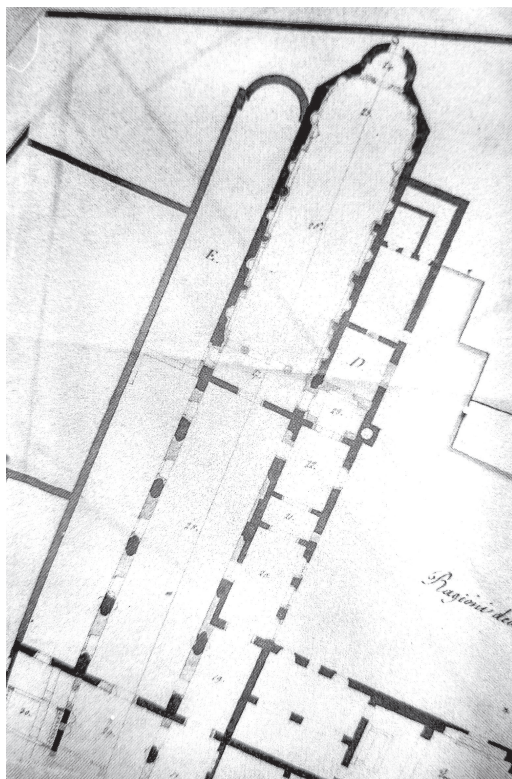
pastoral care, while clearly separating these two spheres, was strongly felt by the ecclesiastical Reform movement, which in Milan was radicalized by the Pataria. It is true that the city monasteries in Milan did not take an active part in this process, since they were bound to archiepiscopal authority and therefore to the traditions of the Ambrosian Church;²⁴ but it is equally true that certain prerogatives of the reformists, starting with the clear separation of the clergy and the laity, were progressively applied almost everywhere. Thus, this rearrangement in San Vincenzo in Prato could well date back to the Romanesque period, as already suggested by Schiavi on the basis of similarities with the

24 Zerbi, 'Monasteri e riforma a Milano'; Picasso, 'Monachesimo a Milano nel secolo XI', pp. 50–54.

Figure 4.10. Mantua, collegiate church of San Paolo, plan just before 1835. From Piva, 'La chiesa di San Fiorentino'.

late eleventh-century liturgical spaces of the abbey churches of San Dalmazzo of Pedona²⁵ and San Donato in Sesto Calende.

The abbey of Sesto Calende was under the authority of the bishop of Pavia. The mid-eleventh-century church is characterized by three deep apses separated by long walls, as was the case in San Vincenzo in Prato. Initially, the choir must have been located at the foot of the chancel, receiving light from the south by a monofora. Several decades later the crypt was lengthened, and the choir was moved to the podium, which led to the filling-in of the monofora (Figure 4.9).²⁶ Again, both solutions imply the need to separate the monastic



space from pastoral care, with the faithful perhaps taking their place in the north aisle, which in the late Middle Ages is documented as a parish room.²⁷

The wall erected in Arialdo's Canonica may have inspired the layout of the collegiate church of San Paolo in Mantua, which was built before 1086 and demolished in 1958 before an archaeological relief survey could be carried out. Following Piva's hypothesis, a screen defined in 1383 as a *murum chori* would have walled up the eastern half of the nave together with the supports and the infilled arcades, delimiting a very deep choir (Figure 4.10). However, doubts remain as to the stratigraphic relationships between the wall, the supports, and the infills, which were detected in 1835.²⁸

The church of Santa Maria Gualtieri in Pavia was founded in the late tenth century by the judge of the Sacred Palace and imperial emissary Vualteri, who possibly also established the community of canons attested from 1182.²⁹ The

25 Micheletto, ed., *La chiesa di San Dalmazzo a Pedona*.

26 Schiavi, 'Considerazioni su alcune chiese', pp. 157–60.

27 Del Tredici, 'I benefici della parentela', p. 316.

28 Piva, *Le cattedrali lombarde*, pp. 123–27; Piva, 'La chiesa di San Fiorentino', pp. 95–96.

29 On the Romanesque layout of the church: Peroni, 'Contributo all'architettura'; Schiavi,

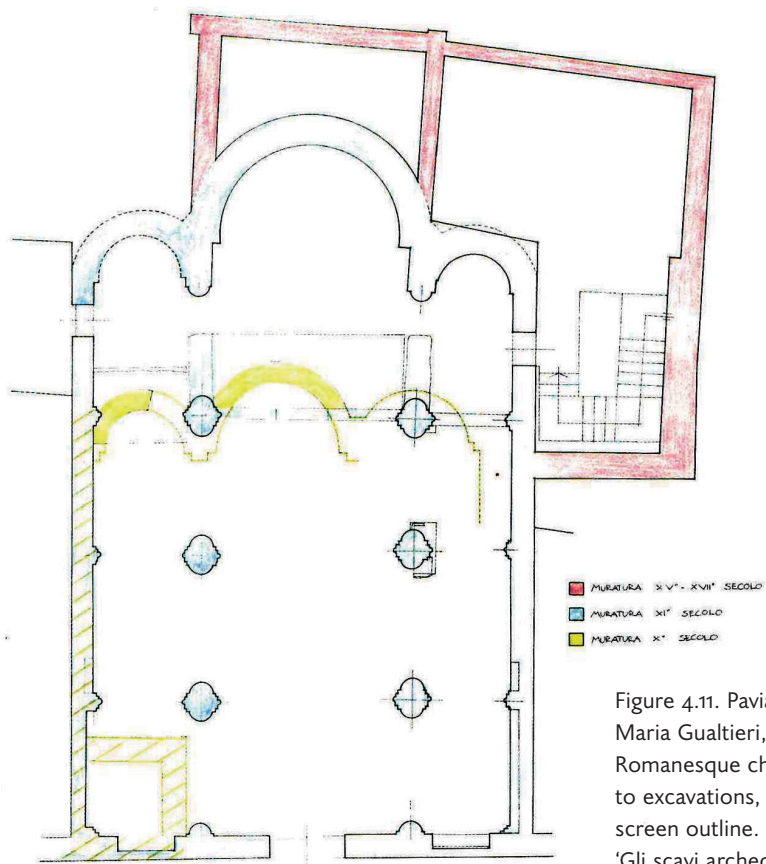


Figure 4.11. Pavia, Santa Maria Gualtieri, plan of the Romanesque church according to excavations, and view of the screen outline. From Hudson, 'Gli scavi archeologici'.



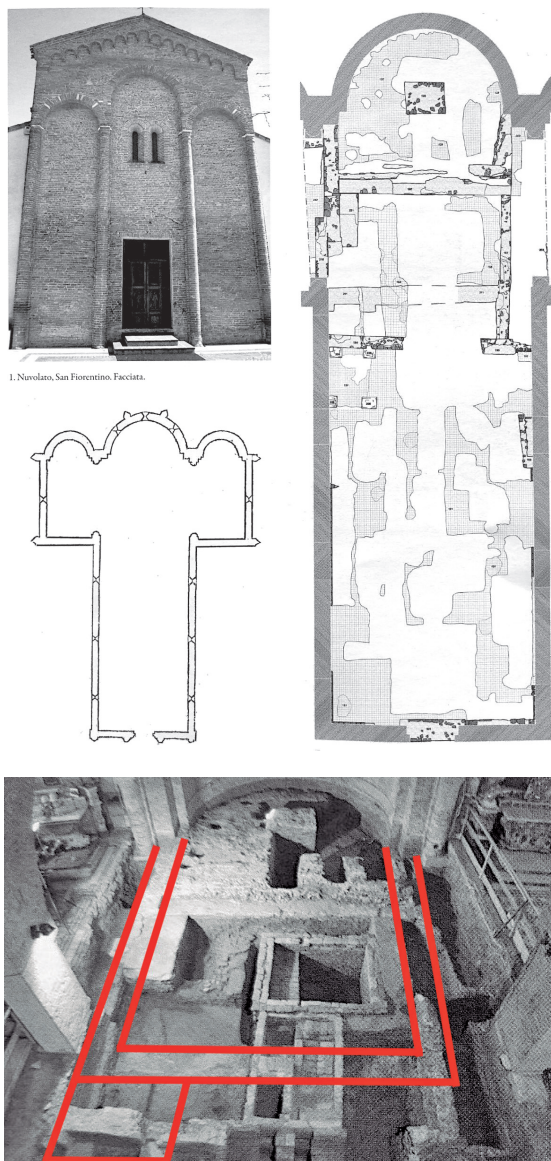


Figure 4.12. Nuvolato (Mantua), San Fiorentino, church façade, plan, archaeological survey, and chancel during the excavations. From Piva, 'La chiesa di San Fiorentino'.

present church was built in the last quarter of the eleventh century and dedicated in 1096 by Pope Urban II. A lengthy restoration, including archaeological excavations, was carried out between 1975 and 1990. Underneath the Renaissance-era chancel, the three Romanesque apses and the bay that housed the choir have re-emerged (Figure 4.11). Piva's analysis based on excavations situates a high wall at the choir threshold, with a central doorway. The wall is believed to have been contemporaneous with the pillars, and the three parts of the church — sanctuary, choir, and nave — were distinguished by changes in floor level of approximately 40 centimetres each. In this case too, one would need to investigate the impact of pastoral care on the arrangement of the church's liturgical spaces in order to try to understand if and to what extent the 'petrification' of the choir depended on dynamics

within the institution, or on a deliberate adherence to the Reform, possibly inflicted by the radicalism of the Pataria.

By the early twelfth century, a three-sided walled choir had been installed in the church of San Fiorentino in Nuvolato, Mantua. Referring to the 2001–2002 excavations, Piva identified a structure of this type that delimited an irregular square in front of the altar.³⁰ The sanctuary, choir, and nave were further marked by differences in floor level (Figure 4.12). Later, the front wall of the

'Santa Maria Gualtieri'. On the excavations: Hudson, 'Gli scavi archeologici'.

³⁰ Piva, 'La chiesa di San Fiorentino', p. 92.

choir enclosure and the integrated ambo were moved further west. The ambo testifies to the existence of pastoral care, but the inclusion of a walled choir in a church intended for the faithful also suggests the coexistence with a community of clerics or monks: neither in this instance is attested by written sources.

Another three-sided wall enclosure, occupying a large section of the nave between the two rows of pillars, has re-emerged from the excavations in the Benedictine church of Sant Quirze de Colera (Girona), in a region with various connections to northern Italy in the Romanesque period (Figure 4.13). The thickness of the walls and cavities in the pillars suggest a rather high screen, but the dating of this structure is unclear: it is possible that it is not Romanesque in origin, and instead dates back only to the fifteenth or early sixteenth century, replacing an earlier choir located on a platform in front of the apse.³¹

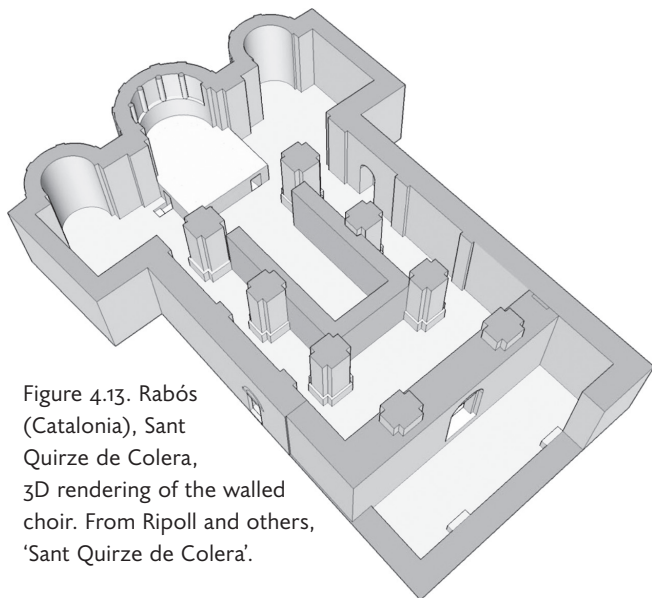


Figure 4.13. Rabós (Catalonia), Sant Quirze de Colera, 3D rendering of the walled choir. From Ripoll and others, 'Sant Quirze de Colera'.

Chancel Enclosures in Central–Southern Italy: The Strength of Tradition

A survey of Romanesque architecture in central and southern Italy reveals a situation quite different from that in the Ambrosian area.³² The point of reference for these churches was Rome, where from the sixth century choir screens were created using marble slabs or low walls that protruded well into the nave, with axial access and the ambo to one side. From the ninth century, in some contexts (e.g. Santa Sabina, Pantheon, Santa Maria Maggiore, Santa Maria in Trastevere, and possibly Santa Prassede) columned screens modelled on the *pergula* of St Peter's in the Vatican were constructed in order to shield the apse, in association with the choir enclosure.

Things do not seem to have changed significantly during the Church Reform, as evidenced by the upper basilica of San Clemente: in the first half

31 Ripoll and others, 'Sancti Cirici de Colera', pp. 620–22.

32 In this regard: Guidobaldi, 'Struttura e cronologia delle recinzioni liturgiche'; Bedros and Scirocco, 'Liturgical Screens', pp. 77–85.

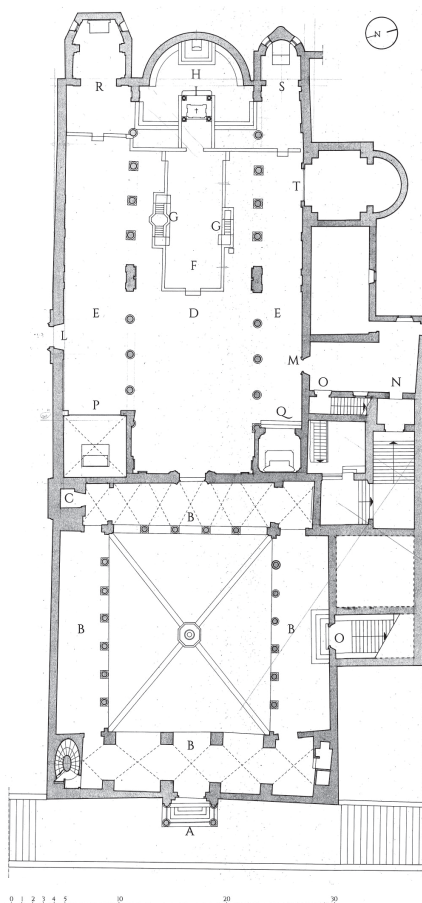


Figure 4.14. Rome, basilica of San Clemente, plan, and view of the choir screen. Wikipedia, CC BY SA 3.0 and 4.0.

of the twelfth century the marble enclosure that dated back to Pope John II (533–535), formerly in the lower basilica, was adapted to the upper one while retaining its layout (Figure 4.14). In fact, the enclosures used in Rome had always guaranteed a degree of separation between clergy and laity, but, in contrast with the Ambrosian area, the need for a sharper distinction was evidently not felt because of different liturgical customs.

A variant of the Roman-type enclosure was constructed in the basilica of Monte Cassino, rebuilt by Abbot Desiderius (1066–1071). According to the account of Leo of Ostia, four marble slabs, six silver columns, and a double beam covered the width of the entire nave, so that the slabs on the long sides were inserted between the two rows of columns. The bronze-covered beam held fifty candelabra and thirty-six hanging lamps. The other beam held thirteen square icons at the top and five circular icons with silver frames at the bottom.³³ We must imagine a veritable iconostasis, but with a certain visual and auditory permeability between the six columns, despite the possible use of curtains.

33 Leone Marsicano, *Cronaca di Montecassino*, pp. 58–59, 70–73; Gianandrea, *La scena del sacro*, pp. 62–64.



Figure 4.15. Sant'Agata de' Goti (Benevento), church of San Menna, view of the chancel screen. Courtesy of Ruggero Longo.

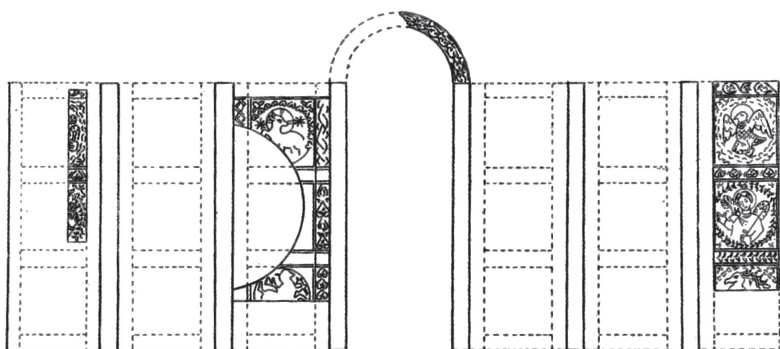


Figure 4.16. Capua, Santi Stefano e Agata cathedral. Reconstruction of the Romanesque choir screen, and (left) two fragments of the sculpted screen. Courtesy of Francesco Aceto.

In turn, Monte Cassino served as a model for the south: a good example, dating from shortly before 1110, is the church of San Menna in Sant'Agata de' Goti (Benevento), where the slabs of both the choir's front and the raised apse are preserved (Figure 4.15). On the two front slabs, the presence of small bases for four columns suggests an iconostasis, inspired by Monte Cassino or perhaps directly by the *pergula* in Old St Peter's.³⁴

For evidence of walled choirs, we must wait until the late twelfth century, when they appear at the cathedral/abbey of Monreale and the cathedral of Salerno.³⁵ The cathedral of Capua would seem to be an early exception. Starting with four long-forgotten stone fragments distributed between the Museo Provinciale Campano and the altar of the Immaculate Conception, Francesco Aceto has virtually reconstructed a wall of six vertical panels around a central doorway (Figure 4.16). Measuring at least 2.15 metres in height and 7 metres in width, this wall would have screened the Romanesque nave at the choir threshold. Aceto traces the style of the figurative

34 Longo and Romagnoli, 'La chiesa di San Menna', pp. 74–79; Gianandrea, 'L'arredo liturgico medievale'.

35 Scirocco, 'Liturgical Installation in the Cathedral of Salerno'; Longo and Scirocco, 'A Scenario for the Salerno Ivories'.



Figure 4.17. Nohant-Vic (Indre, Centre-Val de Loire), priory of St Martin, with the painted wall connecting/separating the nave and chancel. Photo by CESC M Poitiers.

parts — archangels and symbols of the evangelists — to the episcopate of Arveo (1073–1088), possibly inspired by Monte Cassino. This would have been a true *murum chori*, worthy of the rigour of the Pataria. Aceto's hypothesis is both accurate and plausible, but it is based on only a few fragments — less than a quarter of the wall surface — so that other configurations would be possible. Moreover, in late eleventh-century southern Italy a walled screen of this type would have been an anomaly. A date similar to those of the Monreale and Salerno enclosures would be more consistent with the development of the Romanesque in central–southern Italy, and — it seems to me — would be matched with the style of the reliefs, which may appear archaizing.

Walled Choir Screens: Surviving Examples

To obtain a more concrete idea of the clear division of medieval liturgical space by a masonry screen it is useful to provide some examples of surviving structures, leaving aside the different typology of Gothic rood screens.³⁶

The church of St Martin at Nohant-Vic (Indre, Centre-Val de Loire) is a case in point, illustrating a recurring trend in the churches of central France, as Marcia Kupfer has shown.³⁷ The church was built towards the end of the eleventh century or shortly after, and it still retains much of its Romanesque layout, including the pictorial decoration.³⁸ The nave is connected to a narrower chancel by a full-height wall with a central doorway (Figure 4.17). The west face of this wall-diaphragm shows the Majesty of Christ in a mandorla and the Lamb of God among the twelve apostles, depicted above four scenes from the life of Christ: The Annunciation/Visitation, the Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation in the Temple, and the Deposition from the Cross. The latter is painted above one of the two altars positioned against the wall, suggesting that the Cross Altar — usually intended for lay masses — was originally located there. On the other side, the image of the Presentation in the Temple enables a triple relationship with the altar below: a typological one since the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem is a prefiguration of the Christian altar; an analogical one between the Child Jesus elevated on the Temple altar and the body of Christ elevated on the Christian altar during the mass; and a specular one between the doves offered on the Temple altar for the redemption of the Child Jesus and the body of Christ offered on the Christian altar to redeem humanity.

According to written sources, the church at Vic appears to have belonged to Déols Abbey,³⁹ but there is no record of the establishment of a priory.

³⁶ Jung, *The Gothic Screen*.

³⁷ Kupfer, *Romanesque Wall Painting*, pp. 194–95.

³⁸ Polack, *Les fresques de l'église Saint-Martin de Vic*.

³⁹ There remains a degree of uncertainty due to the existence of another village in the area called Vic (*vicus*), that also has a church dedicated to St Martin.

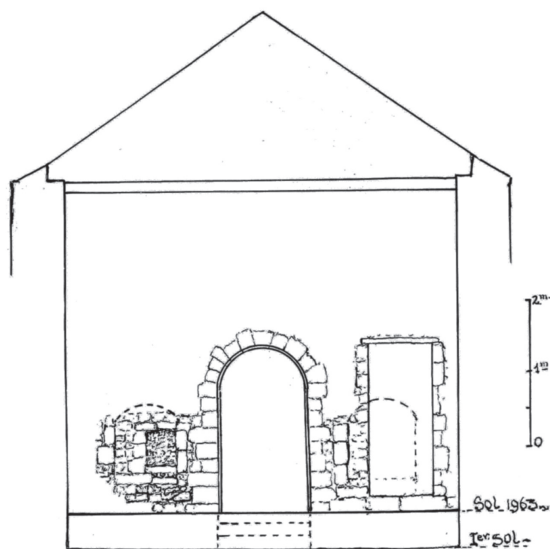
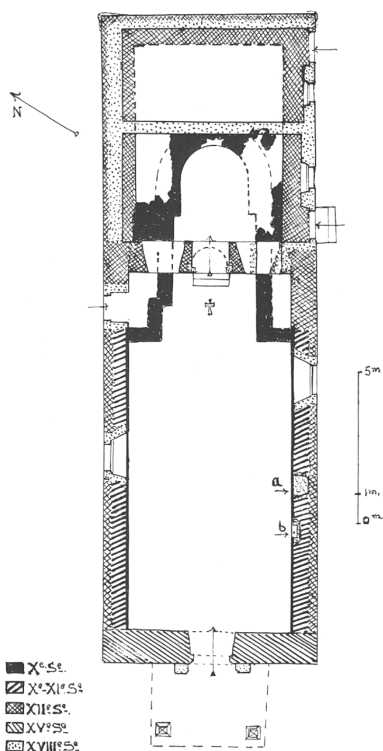


Figure 4.18. Malval (Geneva), priory of St Mary Magdalene, archaeological survey, and outline of the wall connecting/separating the nave and chancel. From Blondel, 'Un prieuré inconnu'.

However, the simultaneous presence of the parish and the priory seems to me the only plausible explanation for the clear division between the hall (for pastoral care) and the chancel (choir and monastic sanctuary).⁴⁰ Originally, the doorway must have been screened by wooden shutters or curtains, but it is difficult to speculate how much the faithful would have been able to see through it: they might perhaps catch a glimpse of and hear the ritual at the high altar. In any case, the case of Nohant-Vic is invaluable as it still preserves the original painted decoration and its connections with the liturgical space.

A further high screen is to be found in the former Cluniac priory of Malval (Dardagny, Canton of Geneva).⁴¹ The St Mary Magdalene chapel is mentioned in 1272 as a parish and in 1275 as a priory. In 1300, no monks resided in Malval, while in 1344 the priory was attached to the priory of Asserens, itself linked to the Cluniac abbey of Nantua. The church is the result of several phases of construction. According to Blondel, the apse revealed by the excavations

40 Kupfer, *Romanesque Wall Painting*, p. 195, thinks otherwise: 'Although the screenlike effect of the transverse wall may invite the idea that the church accommodated both a parish and a priory, the extant archival record in no way indicates that a conventual priory ever existed at the site. The cordoning of the sanctuary and the dramatic sense of closure this creates cannot therefore be attributed to monastic occupation of the choir'.

41 Blondel, 'Un prieuré inconnu'.

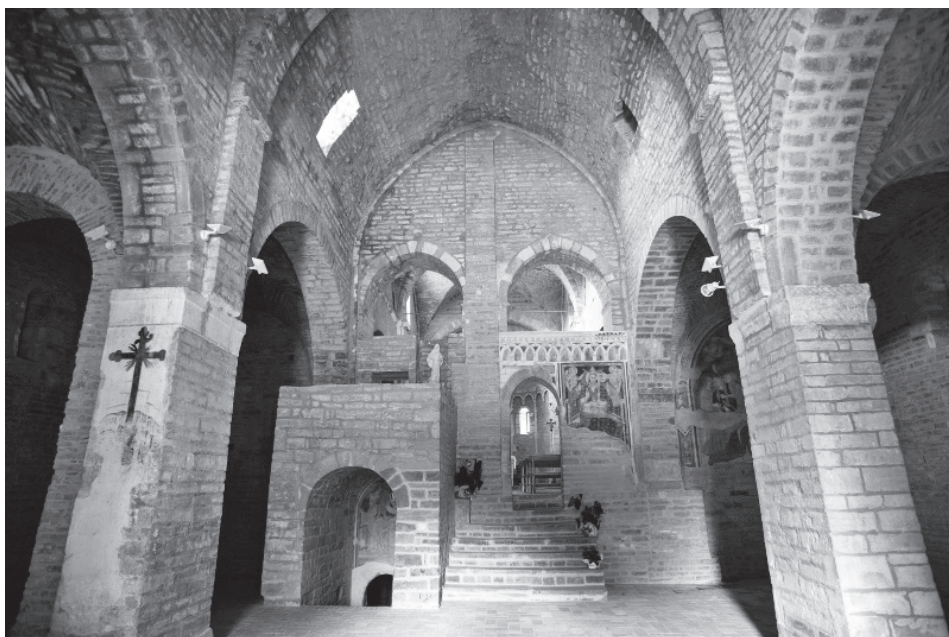


Figure 4.19. Sant'Urbano all'Esinante abbey (Macerata), view of the chancel screen. From Piva, *Marche romaniche*.

would be contemporary with or slightly later than the long walls of the nave, placing it somewhere within the tenth century. Probably in the twelfth century the long walls were widened, and the apse was replaced by a square room raised on three steps and screened by a wall with a central doorway. The screen is 1.15 metres wide and reaches to the roof, but according to what could be seen before the restoration plastering, a split in texture means that the primitive wall stopped at the top of the long walls (Figure 4.18). While we lack written sources, the material history of the building suggests that the walled choir was required by the church's new status as a priory offering pastoral care, in order to separate the monks from the faithful. Here too it was a question of 'petrifying' not a conflict proper, but rather a social and institutional separation.

Moving on to the thirteenth century, high walls dividing the nave and the choir can still be seen in the Lateran rectory of San Vittore al Monte in Bologna, and in the Benedictine church of Sant'Andrea in Flumine in Ponzano Romano (Rome).⁴² An even better example is that of the abbey of Sant'Urbano all'Esinante (Epiro, Macerata): here, the laity were separated from the monks by a full-height wall with openings for the diffusion of monastic chant, complete with a protruding pulpit framing the access to the crypt (Figure 4.19).

42 Guido and Vittori, 'L'abbazia di Sant'Andrea'; Voss, *Die Benediktinerabtei*; Parlato and Romano, *Roma e Lazio*, pp. 293–94. The church was rebuilt shortly after the mid-twelfth century, but the walled screen is certainly later because it covers thirteenth-century mural paintings.

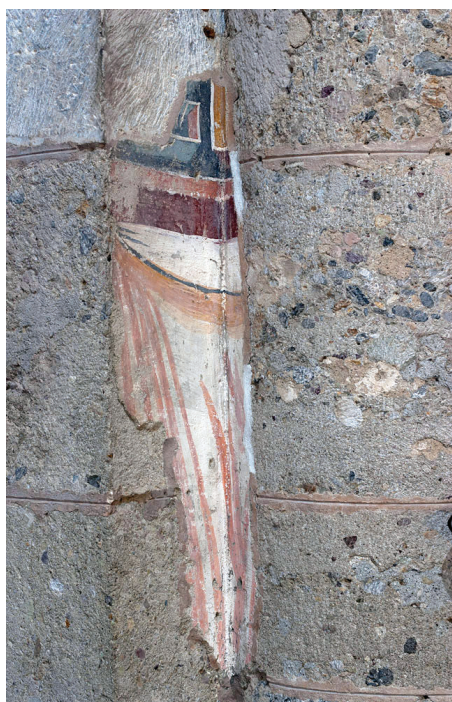


Figure 4.20. Milan, basilica of Sant'Ambrogio, bay of the Golden altar, and fragments of the painted velarium hanging from the polychrome meander. Photos by the author.

The current configuration may date back to 1226, but it must have replaced an earlier barrier. In any case, from the late eleventh century the privacy of the monks was ensured by the raising of the choir over the crypt.⁴³

The Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan: Framing the Golden Altar and the Choir

I shall conclude with a note on the basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan (Figure 4.20).⁴⁴ Regarding the partitions inside the church, it is customary to focus on the wall that from the thirteenth century screened the *tribuna*, i.e. the raised platform over the crypt. Instead, here I would like to concentrate on the four pillars at the corners of the bay that frames the Golden Altar of Vuolvinus, under the dome.⁴⁵ Fragments of painted plaster are preserved on three of the four pillars (north-west, north-east, south-west): all three show a white velarium with ochre folds, virtually hanging from a band framed by yellow/red ribbons with rows of white rings and fusaroles and containing a polychrome meander on a dark blue background. The style suggests a twelfth-century chronology.

The association between the meander band and the velarium presupposes a linear unfolding on a continuous surface, certainly not around individual pillars. Therefore, these fragments allow us to surmise a wall enclosure about 1.5 metres high protecting the Golden Altar as well as the choir.⁴⁶ In Sant'Ambrogio, therefore, the liturgical furnishings materially and symbolically 'petrified' the potential conflict between the exuberance of the faithful and the need to safeguard the Golden Altar and guarantee peace to the canons and monks gathered in the choir.

43 Piva, *Marche romaniche*, pp. 107–19.

44 The literature on Sant'Ambrogio is impressive. Recently, on the eastern area, with useful references to the previous literature: Schiavi, 'Le chevet de Saint-Ambroise de Milan'.

45 I have already mentioned this issue in 2011: Scirea, 'Il decoro murale del romanico lombardo', pp. 26–27.

46 On this issue, see the essays of Luigi Carlo Schiavi and Marco Rossi in *Medioevo. Nuove prospettive*, ed. by Corgnati, published while this book was in press.

ABSTRACT The contribution examines the choir screen, a liturgical element that in the second half of the eleventh century becomes a walled enclosure to hide visual communication between the nave and the chancel, and thus between the clergy and the laity. Firstly, chancel enclosures from the early Christian age to the Carolingian age will be discussed. Then, we will focus on Ambrosian contexts from the second half of the eleventh century, where the raising of high walls to protect the choir seems to have been a consequence of the Pataria, a radical reform movement intended to regulate the life of the clergy and limit their contact with the laity. By contrast, in Romanesque central-southern Italy patrons continued to prefer marble slabs and lintel on columns, *more romano*. Having set out these cases, we will present some contexts in which walled screens are still preserved. Finally, a starting point for research will be offered about the basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan.

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