

FRAMING BENEDICT’S PRESENCE:
STRATEGIES OF FLOOR MOSAIC DECORATION
AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SAINT’S RELICS
AT MONTECASSINO AND FLEURY (9TH-12TH CENTURIES)

Maddalena Vaccaro

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the historical and artistic relationships between the two Benedictine communities that claimed possession of the relics of St. Benedict, namely Montecassino and Fleury. By focusing on the artistic strategies employed in floor mosaic decoration and the veneration of Benedict’s relics, the research uncovers how these elements were used to construct and reinforce their monastic identities. The methodology involves a comparative analysis of the artistic evidence, supported by historical and archaeological documentation. The study highlights the interplay between spirituality and art in shaping Montecassino and Fleury identity and heritage, despite their rivalry over the relics of St. Benedict.

KEYWORDS: Mosaics, Relics, St. Benedict, Southern Italy, France

Inquadrando la presenza di Benedetto:
strategie di decorazione pavimentale a mosaico e significato delle reliquie del santo
a Montecassino e Fleury (IX-XII secolo)

ABSTRACT

Questo contributo indaga le relazioni storiche e artistiche tra le due maggiori comunità monastiche benedettine che rivendicavano il possesso delle reliquie di san Benedetto, ovvero Montecassino e Fleury. Concentrandosi sulle differenti strategie artistiche attuate nella decorazione dei mosaici pavimentali e in connessione con le reliquie di Benedetto, la ricerca chiarisce gli elementi utilizzati per costruire e rafforzare le rispettive identità. L’analisi comparativa considera le testimonianze artistiche, la documentazione storica e quella archeologica. Lo studio analizza dunque l’interazione tra spiritualità e arte, funzionale anche a plasmare l’identità e l’eredità culturale di Montecassino e Fleury, nonostante la rivalità sulle reliquie di Benedetto.

PAROLE CHIAVE: mosaici, reliquie, san Benedetto, Sud Italia, Francia

This article examines the historical, artistic, and cultural ties between two prominent Benedictine monastic communities: Montecassino in Southern Latium, Italy, and Fleury near Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, France. It focuses on their distinct approaches to floor mosaic decoration and the considerable meaning they placed on the relics of St. Benedict. By exploring how these monasteries employed decorative strategies throughout the Middle Ages, the study reveals how these artistic choices were deliberately crafted to emphasize the presence of their founding “Father” – not merely as a spiritual figure but as a tangible presence within their sacred spaces. Given the longstanding rivalry between Montecassino and Fleury over the possession and importance of the saint’s relics¹, this analysis delves into how these strategies evolved to construct and assert the unique identities of each monastic

¹ A. Galdi, “S. Benedetto tra Montecassino e Fleury (VII-XII secolo)”, *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome – Moyen Âge* 201, no. 126-2 (2014), [online] URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/2047>; DOI: 10.4000/mefrm.2047 [accessed 31 July 2024].

community.

St. Benedict is the central figure linking these two monasteries, as he founded his first cenobium on Montecassino around 529, replacing a former temple dedicated to Apollo along with other ancient structures with a church dedicated to St. John the Baptist and the monastic complex. The main abbey church retained its dedication to St. John until the major reconstruction commissioned by Abbot Desiderius in the mid-11th century, when a new church was consecrated in honor of St. Benedict in 1071². This church underwent modifications and partial rebuilding in the 16th century³. However, much of what we know about the church commissioned by Desiderius was uncovered during archaeological excavations following the Allied bombing in 1944⁴. The devastating destruction provided an opportunity to investigate not only the 11th-century phase of the church but also the early medieval history of Montecassino, confirming that the monastery's oldest structures (6th-9th centuries) were affected by invasions from the Lombards (c. 577) and the Saracens (c. 883), leading to the temporary abandonment of the cloister⁵.

It was this critical situation that forged a decisive and lasting connection with the Fleury community. The Lombard historian Paul the Deacon, upon his return from Charlemagne's court between 782 and 787, reports that monks from Le Mans and Orléans stopped at the abandoned monastery of Montecassino and «adportarunt» – either robbed or rescued, depending on the interpretation⁶ – the bones of St. Benedict and his sister St. Scholastica, bringing them, at least in part, to Fleury in France:

Circa haec tempora, cum in castro Cassini, ubi beatissimi Benedicti sacrum corpus requiescit, ab aliquantibus iam elapsis annis vasta solitudo existerent, venientes de Celmanicorum vel Aurelianensium regione Franci, dum apud venerabile corpus se pernoctare simulassent, eiusdem venerabilis patris pariteque eius germanae venerandae Scolasticae ossa auferentes, in suam patriam adporarunt; ubi singillatim duo monasteria in utrorumque honorem, hoc est beati Benedicti et sanctae Scolasticae, constructa sunt⁷.

² For a general knowledge of the monastery, please refer synthetically to the fundamental works by: A. Pantoni, *Le vicende della basilica di Montecassino attraverso la documentazione archeologica* (Montecassino: Miscellanea Cassinese 36, 1973); G. Carbonara, Iussu Desiderii. *Montecassino e l'architettura campano-abruzzese nell'Undicesimo secolo* (Roma: Istituto di Fondamenti dell'Architettura, 1979) [ora anche Roma: Bentivoglio, 2014]; H. Bloch, *Monte Cassino in the Middle Ages 3* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1986); L. Marsicano, *Cronaca di Montecassino* (III, 26-33), eds. F. Aceto, V. Lucherini (Milano: Jaca Book, 2001).

³ M. Cigola, "L'abbazia di Montecassino. Disegni di rilievo e di progetto per la conoscenza e la memoria", *Disegnare Idee Immagini* 14 (1997): pp. 43-52.

⁴ Pantoni, *Le vicende della basilica di Montecassino*, cit.

⁵ *Ivi*; A. Pantoni, "La basilica di Gisulfo e tracce di onomastica longobarda a Montecassino", in *Atti del I Congresso internazionale di studi longobardi* (Spoleto: Accademia spoletina, 1952), pp. 433-42. The archaeological data match the historical documentation: Galdi, "S. Benedetto tra Montecassino e Fleury", cit.

⁶ In the *Historia translationis sancti Benedicti*, written by the monk Adrevald around the mid-9th century, the account of the discovery of the relics is presented as a miraculous rescue, serving as an obvious justification for the removal of the holy bodies: E. de Certain, ed., *Les miracles de saint Benoît écrits par Adrevald, Aimoin, André, Raoul Tortaire et Hugues de Sainte-Marie, moines de Fleury* (Paris, 1858): pp. 1-14 (now also: A. Davril, A. Dufour, G. Labory, eds., *Les miracles de saint Benoît* (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2020), esp. par.VII. On the issue, cf. also below.

⁷ Paulus Diaconus, "Historia Langobardorum", eds. L. Bethmann, G. Waitz, in *MGH, Scriptores rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum saec. VI-XI* (Hannoverae: 1878): pp. 12-192, in part. lib. VI, par. 2, p. 165 and note 3. English translation: «During this period, when a vast desolation had existed for several years in the fortress of Cassino, where the sacred body of the most blessed Benedict rests, some Franks from the region of Clermont and Orléans, having pretended to spend the night near the venerable body, removed the bones of the same venerable father and of his equally revered sister Scholastica, and brought them to their homeland. There, two monasteries were separately constructed in honor of both, namely, of Saint Benedict and Saint Scholastica».

Paulus was undoubtedly aware of the events in the Frankish territories and the ongoing debate over the relics, a matter that sparked contention between the two communities for centuries. For a thorough examination of the mentioned sources, the latest studies by Éliane Vergnolle and Amalia Galdi are particularly insightful⁸. Regardless of how Paulus' text is interpreted, the critical outcome is that the monks of both Montecassino and Fleury consistently believed they held the exclusive possession of St. Benedict's relics. From an art-historical perspective, this context provides a compelling opportunity to analyze the methods of safeguarding relics and their associated artistic decorations as expressions of cultural strategies and institutional assertions by the two monasteries within the broader European political landscape. The artistic decorations and liturgical installations were specifically commissioned to underscore St. Benedict's presence at the center of their respective abbey churches. Now, a comparative analysis of the two cases is facilitated by the availability of parallel data, such as the development of the monastic sites, archaeological discoveries, and the mosaic floors, which constitute key decorative elements of the architectural spaces surrounding the relics⁹. Exploring these aspects can reveal richly layered contexts where artistic and material culture functioned as a means of asserting identity, continuity, and spiritual authority.

Relics and Mosaic Decorations in Montecassino

As previously mentioned, studies on the architecture of Montecassino prior to the bombings, as well as reports on the recognition of Benedict's holy relics over the centuries – most recently in 1950 – are fundamental. During the 1950 verification, it was confirmed that the eastern part of the abbey church, where Benedict was buried alongside Scholastica, remained unaltered during Desiderius' reconstruction and the 18th-century renovations. In fact, both the floor level and the underground sacellum near the main apse were preserved. This sacellum is a narrow space beneath the high altar (2.27 x 0.60 x 0.60 meters) designed to house the urns containing the sacred remains¹⁰ [figs. 1a-b]. Furthermore, according to reports and archaeological studies, this architectural arrangement dates back to the Lombard-Carolingian period, specifically under Abbot Gisulphus (796-817)¹¹. This phase included a church with three apses, the largest of which was painted: «absidam vero maiorem auro diversisque coloribus depingi pulcherrime fecit» (CMC, II, 32).

The relics have always been kept in the aforementioned small underground chamber near the presbytery, a space that has remained inaccessible and invisible to most since the early Middle Ages.

⁸ É. Vergnolle, *Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire. L'abbatiale de Romane* (Paris: Picard, 2018), pp. 51-52; Galdi, "S. Benedetto tra Montecassino e Fleury", cit.

⁹ For in-depth studies of the two cases: M. Vaccaro, "Sous les pieds de la communauté du Mont-Cassin (Montecassino): espaces architecturaux et décor des pavements", *Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa*, no. 49 (2018): pp. 87-104; M. Vaccaro, "De la Romania à Fleury. Le pavement de marbre en *opus sectile* du chœur de Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire", *Bulletin Monumental*, no. 178/2 (2020): pp. 211-243; M. Vaccaro, E. De Feo, C. Ferreyra, "Gli arredi liturgici dell'abbazia di Fleury dall'età merovingia al XII secolo: indagine storico-artistica e restituzioni digitali", *Hortus Artium Medievalium* 27 (2021): pp. 204-14.

¹⁰ The structure of this underground space was already documented during the inspection of 1486; for all the documentation, refer to: A. Ferrua, E. Kirschbaum, A. Pantoni, C. Venanzi, "L'esplorazione archeologica", in *Il sepolcro di San Benedetto*, (Montecassino: Miscellanea Cassinese 27, 1951): pp. 69-94, esp. pp. 78-79 and n. 9; Pantoni, *Le vicende della basilica di Montecassino*, cit., pp. 30-34.

¹¹ Pantoni, "La basilica di Gisulfo", cit.; M. D'Onofrio, "La basilica di Desiderio a Montecassino e la Cattedrale di Alfano a Salerno. Nuovi spunti di riflessione", *Desiderio di Montecassino e l'arte della Riforma Gregoriana*, ed. F. Avagliano, (Montecassino: Pubblicazioni Cassinesi, 1997), pp. 231-46, esp. p. 238.

From the mid-8th to the mid-9th century, the church was exclusively used by the monks; the tomb of the saint was not a pilgrimage destination for the faithful, and only “exceptional” devotees, such as the Lombard Duke Gisulf or King Charlemagne, had the opportunity to approach the place where Benedict was buried – «ubi decenter beati corpus Benedicti humatum est»¹². Archaeological evidence further confirms that the strategy for safeguarding Saint Benedict’s body remained unchanged in the reconstruction plan ordered by Desiderius in the mid-11th century. In the new abbey church, built between 1066 and 1071, the inaccessibility of the underground chamber beneath the presbytery was preserved. However, Desiderius’ decision to lower the new floor level of the naves by 1.85 meters resulted in the presbytery being more elevated¹³.

Regarding the focus of this research, it can already be confirmed that the floor mosaics in the naves and near the saint’s tomb have always been a prominent medium of decoration, although they were particularly emphasized during Abbot Desiderius’ renovations, as admirably celebrated by Leo Marsicanus in his *Chronica*¹⁴. The most extraordinary example of decorated pavement at Montecassino is the ‘lost’ 11th-century nave mosaic, which, though no longer visible, remains preserved beneath the current 18th-century floor. Unfortunately, it is now inaccessible, and only Erasmo Gattola’s graphic scheme, along with Dom Angelo Pantoni’s reports and photographs, provide us with information on its material aspects [fig. 2]¹⁵.

Especially following Émile Bertaux’s concept of the «école bénédictine»¹⁶, most studies have endorsed the idea that this pavement marks the origin of the floor mosaic culture of the central Middle Ages in Southern Italy. However, this notion is a *lectio facilior* that oversimplifies the complexities, beginning with the history of Montecassino itself.

Firstly, it is important to note that the floor mosaic was already a characteristic feature of the early medieval abbey church at Montecassino, as confirmed by the *Chronica*. While details about the church’s interior are sparse, it is known that Abbot Aligerno (948-985) undertook significant improvements following the community’s return to Montecassino after the Saracen destruction. He had the church roof rebuilt, the walls decorated, the altar of St. John adorned with silver plates, and commissioned a floor in front of the altar of St. Benedict made of a manifold variety of stones: «pavimentum etiam ante altare beati Benedicti multimoda lapidum varietate constravit» (CMC, II, 3). This polychrome floor, most likely in *opus sectile*, served to enhance the altar beneath which Benedict’s relics were kept.

When Desiderius ordered a mosaic pavement for the new abbey church, Leo Marsicano reports that he engaged master mosaicists from Constantinople to execute the work¹⁷. However, even the design of the floor is usually classified as “Byzantine” for the presence of quincunxes – well-known in Byzantine art and culture –¹⁸, the overall composition of the mosaic, its pronounced longitudinal

¹² *Chronica Sancti Benedicti Casinensi* [from now on: CMC], ed. G. Waitz (Hannover: 1878): pp. 467-88, esp. par. 21, p. 480 (the information concerning the inhumation of Benedict is omitted in CMC, I, 5, when narrating the same episode). See also: F. Marazzi, “Montecassino e S. Vincenzo al Volturno: ragionamenti sui criteri progettuali dei ‘grandi monasteri’ fra VIII e IX secolo”, in Sodalitas. *Studi in memoria di don Faustino Avagliano*, eds. M. Dell’Omo, F. Marazzi, F. Simonelli, C. Crova (Montecassino: Miscellanea Cassinesi 86, 2016), II, pp. 619-46, esp. pp. 632-34.

¹³ Pantoni, *Le vicende della basilica di Montecassino*, cit., p. 148.

¹⁴ CMC, III, 27, and its critical edition in: Aceto, Lucherini ed., Leone Marsicano, *Cronaca di Montecassino*, cit.

¹⁵ E. Gattola, *Historia abbatiae Casinensis*, (Venetiis: Coleti, 1733); Pantoni, *Le vicende della basilica di Montecassino*, cit., pp. 101-137, 180-198.

¹⁶ É. Bertaux, *L’art dans l’Italie méridionale. De la fin de l’empire romain à la conquête de Charles d’Anjou* 4 (Paris: Fontemoing, 1904): pp. 155-183, esp. pp. 175-177; and A. Carotti, “Aggiornamento” pp. 175-177, in *Aggiornamento dell’opera di Émile Bertaux*, V-VII, ed. A. Prandi (Roma: École française de Rome, 1978), pp. 381-83.

¹⁷ Leone Marsicano, *Cronaca di Montecassino*, cit., pp. 54-57.

¹⁸ D. F. Glass, “Studies on cosmatesque pavements”, *British archaeological reports. International series* 82 (Oxford:

axiality, and especially its close relationship with the church's liturgical installations [see Conant's drawing, fig. 3] indicate that the *opus sectile* pavements were part of a larger, tridimensional, and coordinated project, likely conceived by Desiderius himself, and specifically tailored to the liturgical practices of the Cassinese community¹⁹.

As previously noted, the integrity of the underground relics chamber beneath the main altar has been preserved over the centuries. The floor decoration adjacent to this altar continued to feature mosaics, with updated representations. Pantoni's photographs capture the most recent phase of the medieval decoration: the western entrance to the underground chamber was flanked by two panels depicting dogs with chessboard-patterned coats in white and red tesserae (now in the Abbey Museum) [figs. 4, 5]. These are the only figurative elements and have thus been the subject of recent debate concerning their chronology. Their technique (*opus tessellatum*) differs significantly from the *opus sectile* of the nave, suggesting a possible later execution than the third quarter of the 11th century²⁰. Some studies have proposed an alternative hypothesis based on the technical variation, materials – in fact, they exceptionally include red glass and a specially prepared stone for white tesserae (“stracotto”²¹) – and the presence of figurative elements, suggesting that the panels may date to the 13th century and were originally intended for vertical use, such as plutei or wall decoration²².

On the other hand, the combined use of different techniques within a single floor does not necessarily imply a chronological gap or posthumous variations in decoration. Indeed, there are numerous examples from the 11th and 12th century where geometric designs in *opus sectile* incorporate figurative elements made with coloured tesserae.

For example, in northern Italy, the eastern section of the central nave floor in the abbey church of Pomposa, dated close to the church's consecration in 1026, is organized into panels that employ various techniques. The large central wheel, primarily crafted in *opus sectile*, and the panel featuring animals within knotted bands, executed in *opus tessellatum*, are notable features²³. Later pavements in Venice and its territory are characterized by large geometric wheels, and figurative elements are limited to being inserted within panels (e.g., Venice, San Marco, 1110–1141; San Zaccaria, second quarter of the 12th century) or into residual spaces (Murano, San Donato and Santa Maria, 1150)²⁴.

B.A.R., 1980); A. Guiglia Guidobaldi, “Tradizione locale e influenze bizantine nei pavimenti cosmateschi”, *Bollettino d'arte* 6, no. 27 (1984): pp. 57–72; M. Gianandrea, *La scena del sacro. L'arredo liturgico nel basso Lazio tra XI e XIV secolo* (Roma: Viella, 2006), pp. 57–58.

¹⁹ Vaccaro, “Sous les pieds de la communauté du Mont-Cassin”, cit. On the liturgical uses, refer to: T. Forrest Kelly, *The Ordinal of Montecassino and Benevento. Breviarium Sive Ordo Officiorum, 11th Century* (Fribourg: Academic Press, Spicilegium Friburgense 45, 2008).

²⁰ The dating to the 11th century, as referenced in note 16, is widely accepted and was most recently reaffirmed by G. Pollini, in M. Righetti, A.M. D'Achille, eds., *Roma medievale. Il volto perduto della città*, exh. cat. (Roma: De Luca Editori d'Arte, 2022), p. 195.

²¹ R. Longo, “Per una filologia dei materiali e delle tecniche dell'arredo liturgico tra Roma e il Sud Italia (XI–XIII sec.): i veltri di Montecassino e altri frammenti in *opus sectile* e *tessellatum*”, *Hortus artium medievalium* 27 (2021): pp. 335–347.

²² E. Scaccia Scarafoni, “Note su fabbriche ed opere d'arte medioevale a Montecassino”, *Bollettino d'arte* 3, no. 30 (1936): pp. 97–121, esp. 112–120, first suggested their relocation to the floor in the years of Abbot Bernardus d'Ayglar (1263–1284) in reference to the presence of fleurs-de-lis in Erasmus Gattola's drawing. A similar idea is now supported by Longo, “Per una filologia dei materiali”, cit.

²³ C. Tedeschi, “Cantieri antichi e moderni nei pavimenti musivi della chiesa dell'Abbazia di Pomposa fra realizzazioni e restauri”, in *L'Abbazia di Pomposa. Un cammino di studi all'ombra del campanile (1063–2013)*, eds., C. Di Francesco, A. Manfredi (dir.), (Ferrara: Edizioni Cartografica, 2017), pp. 95–118; E. Russo, “Profilo storico-artistico della chiesa abbaziale di Pomposa”, in *L'arte sacra nei Ducati Estensi*, ed. G. Fallani (Ferrara: S.A.T.E, Pubblicazioni della Pontificia Commissione per l'Arte Sacra 8, 1984), pp. 201–62.

²⁴ X. Barral i Altet, *Le décor du pavement au Moyen Âge, les mosaïques de France et d'Italie* (Roma: École française de

These examples demonstrate how a checkerboard decorative effect could be easily created.

In southern Italy, some examples show the combinatory variety of techniques, influenced by the availability of materials – often sourced locally – and, more importantly, by the floor’s design and the coordination of its components. This is evident in the floor of Sant’Adriano at San Demetrio Corone in Calabria, the main church of an Italo-Greek monastery, founded in the late 10th century, briefly managed by the Abbey of Cava de’ Tirreni (1088-1106) and later directly governed by Rome²⁵. In this case, the use of *opus sectile* in the aisles and the inclusion of tessellated animal panels link directly this work to the grand example of Montecassino. In Sant’Adriano only “traditional materials” such as coloured marbles and stones were employed, yet the resulting aesthetic and decorative effect closely parallels that of the two dogs at Montecassino, sharing the distinctive checkerboard pattern [fig. 6]. Although the mosaic at Sant’Adriano was removed and relaid for conservation purposes, its original execution likely falls within the widely-accepted chronology of the late 11th century – during the period of control by the monastery of Cava – and prior to the architectural transformations following the 1184 earthquake, when new structural and sculptural solutions were inspired by the reconstruction of the Cosenza Cathedral²⁶. The inclusion of tessellated (checkerboard) panels in the *opus sectile* mosaic, in my opinion, echoes the distinctive artistic choices made at Montecassino, reflecting a shared – not far away in time – will to install figured panels on the ground, and effort to adapt the mosaic design according to specific contexts and liturgical spaces.

Another example from Calabria confirms the experimental use of combining in pavement decoration *opus sectile* and *opus tessellatum*. This is the floor of the church of the Italo-Greek monastery of Santa Maria del Patir, completed by 1150 during the tenure of Abbot Blasius, as mentioned in the mosaic inscription. Here, the dual use of *sectile* and *tessellatum* and the qualitative differences in their execution should not mislead us: stratigraphic verifications confirm that the two layers are contemporaneous²⁷. Therefore, we are dealing with a deliberate choice, likely in response to different needs: on one hand, the *sectile*, which has a long and respected history in monastic contexts, serves as an indispensable “base carpet” in the naves. On the other hand, at the entrances, a mosaic executed with a different technique introduces a new and disruptive element: a tessellated, figurative floor that draws more on the tradition of mosaics from France and northern Italy, likely introduced to Calabria through the long-range cultural exchanges facilitated by the Norman court’s patronage. Without the example of Patir, it would be difficult to fully grasp the success of figurative mosaics in southern Italy. This influence extends from the nearby examples in Banzi, Monticchio, and Taranto, all the way to the creation of the extraordinary mosaic in Otranto, which stands as a direct heir to the rich mosaic culture that flourished in the mid-12th century²⁸. The use of dual techniques in Santa Maria del Patir is even more remarkable given its departure from Italo-Greek monastic traditions. This underscores how technical, material, and iconographic choices should be

Rome, 2010), pp. 337-42.

²⁵ M. Tabanelli, *Architettura sacra in Calabria e Sicilia nell’età della Contea normanna* (Roma: De Luca editori d’arte, 2019), pp. 157-160.

²⁶ A. Coscarella, “La chiesa di Sant’Adriano a San Demetrio Corone (CS). Nuove indagini”, in *VI Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Medievale, L’Aquila*, eds. F. Redi, A. Forgione (Firenze: All’insegna del Giglio, 2012), pp. 154-59; Tabanelli, *Architettura sacra in Calabria* cit., p. 160, also referring to the mosaic restoration.

²⁷ A. Coscarella, “S. Maria del Patir dalla lettura stratigrafica alla comprensione di un monumento già noto”, *Daidalos* 1 (2001): pp. 66-72.

²⁸ M. Vaccaro, “Immagine, scrittura e spazio architettonico del mosaico pavimentale di Santa Maria del Patir a Rossano”, in *Calabria greca, Calabria latina. Segni monumentali di una coesistenza (secoli XI-XII)*, eds. M. Tabanelli, A. Tranchina (Roma: Campisano, 2018), pp. 85-98. See also: C. Ungruh, “Das Bodenmosaik der Kathedrale von Otranto (1163-1165). Normannische Herrscherideologie als Endzeitvision” (Affalterbach: Didymos-Verlag, 2013); F. Sogliani, “Paesaggi monastici della Basilicata altomedievale”, *Il capitale culturale* 12 (2015), pp. 421-52.

viewed as cultural statements that showcase the monastery's own rich cultural heritage.

However, another example of combined technique helps broaden this reflection – the pavement of the chapel of the Virgin in the Rotunda of Saint-Bénigne in Dijon, consecrated in 1018 and likely commissioned by Guillaume de Volpiano following his stays in Rome and Ravenna [fig. 7]²⁹. Although the pavement only survives in a watercolour drawing by Dom Plancher from 1722 (BnF, Fonds Plancher, coll. de Bourgogne, t. 14, fol. 123v), it shows a mosaic in *opus sectile* composed of small elements with geometric decoration, within which an interlace pattern and two lions in *opus tessellatum* were inserted, facing each other, seemingly playing the role of guardians of the sacred space³⁰.

This anticipates a theme later chosen for the sanctuary of Montecassino, where it does not seem improbable that the two figured slabs with dogs were originally placed on the ground near the underground tomb, as they serve the purpose of creating a functional decoration in relation to Benedict's presence – guarding the saint, in reference to the classical tradition that regards the dog as a psychopomp creature³¹. Moreover, the material evidence regarding the dimensions of the two slabs does not seem sufficient to suggest their use in a vertical position (the moulding could simply indicate the reuse of the marble piece), and the full-field iconographic subject does not find precise parallels among the mosaic-decorated plutei or altar slabs from the 12th and 13th centuries in southern Italy. In these, more appropriate themes for the function of such liturgical installations are typically found – complex geometric patterns (interlaced, starred, repetitive) or small animals with sacred or Eucharistic symbolism³².

Certainly, for the Montecassino dogs, it is essential to consider the material evidence related to the execution of the tesserae, which reveals the specific characteristics of the workshop involved. The unique choice of materials, including the use of glass paste and a specially prepared white stone, could suggest a slightly later execution of the two panels compared to the nave's floor, but still by the end of the 12th century, and possibly in first half giving the mentioned context of Southern Italy's mosaic productions.

Aside from the specific issue of their dating, and even if the two dogs could date slightly later than the nave's floor, it is important to emphasize not only the clear intention to elevate the space around the saint's underground tomb but also the focus on emphasizing its protection and guarding against possible threats of violation – an ancestral memory of the Cassinese community, facing Fleury's claims and the artistic strategies pursued there.

Fleury and the Display of Relics

In fact, moving to France, at Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, we observe a very interesting process that spans centuries. As previously mentioned, there is a tradition that claims part of St. Benedict's relics were transferred to the Fleury monastery. From the French perspective, the narrative takes on the tone of a genuine rescue, orchestrated by Abbot Mummolus after the Lombard destruction of Montecassino

²⁹ Barral i Altet, *Le décor du pavement au Moyen Âge*, cit., pp. 238-40.

³⁰ Vaccaro, "De la Romania à Fleury", cit., p. 231.

³¹ M. Lurker, "Der Hund als Symboltier für den Übergang vom Diesseits in das Jenseits", *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 35, no. 2 (1983): pp. 132-44.

³² Please refer to the systematic considerations of: R. Longo, "Per una filologia dei materiali", cit.; M. Gianandrea, "Un crosscultural system per la scultura e gli arredi liturgici di Roma. Materiali e tecniche nelle dinamiche di interazione culturale con il Meridione (XI-XIII secolo)", *Hortus artium medievalium* 27 (2021): pp. 348-56.

in 577 ca.³³. Whether this interpretation is true or not, it is certainly emphasized (or exploited) to build Fleury's institutional identity and to justify the choices of liturgical settings within the abbey church since the early Middle Ages. Local sources and archaeological excavations confirm that, initially, Benedict's remains were buried in an underground sarcophagus³⁴. However, after the Norman attacks of 865 and 883, it was decided to place the relics in a proper structure, probably made of stone and referred to in the sources as a tabernaculum or mausoleum, located at the crossing of the transept. This decision clearly reflects the intent to make his presence visibly known³⁵.

Even more noteworthy is the later decoration of the transept crossing, which features a floor mosaic with a central circle (Ø 1.27 m), a frame of tow-coloured triangles, and an outer phytomorphic design. While the outer decoration is a tessellated mosaic, the material used for the triangles in the border is particularly interesting: coloured terracotta, intended to mimic the appearance of marble, which was evidently scarce at the site [fig. 8]. A useful comparison can be made with the decoration of another mausoleum, the sacellum of St. Zeno in Santa Prassede, Rome, commissioned by Pope Paschal I (817-824) for the tomb of his mother, Theodora episcopa³⁶. This Fleury floor is dated between the 9th and 10th centuries, during the abbacy of Wulfade (948-963), who wanted the scrinium containing St. Benedict's relics to be visible at the transept crossing³⁷. The choice to include a mosaic floor with a central composition was likely intended to highlight the display of the remains of the founder of both the order and the monastic community of Fleury.

We might ask whether this choice reflects a desire for ostentation. If we examine the changes made to the Fleury church by subsequent abbots, the answer seems to be yes. From this point onward, there is a noticeable increase in the enrichment of the liturgical installations in the choir, quite literally surrounding the body of St. Benedict.

Abbot Abbo (996-1003) placed the relics in a new reliquary-case adorned with engraved and historiated plaques depicting scenes from the saint's life. This casket was set on a platform (*lectica*), resplendent with gold, precious stones, and illuminated by lamps³⁸. It remained positioned at the transept crossing. The surrounding area also featured the high altar dedicated to the Virgin, with a gold and silver antependium, a monumental silver crucifix donated by a layman (Allaume) in 975, and a precise hierarchical organization of monks' stalls within the choir's enclosure³⁹. This same space was further enriched by Abbot Gauzlin (1003-1030), the illegitimate son of King Hugh Capet, who ordered new bronze liturgical installations and had the monks' stalls enhanced with porphyry slabs from the Lateran, according to the *Vita Gauzlini*⁴⁰. While it's impossible to verify the accuracy of this

³³ De Certain, ed., *Les miracles de saint Benoît*, cit., par. VII.

³⁴ S. Jasset, M. Étienne, "Le sépulcre de saint Benoît à Fleury au Moyen Âge", in *Lumières de l'an mil en Orléanais. Autour du millénaire d'Abbon de Fleury*, eds. A. Bosc-Lauby, A. Notter (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), pp. 173-78.

³⁵ Vergnolle, *Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire*, cit., pp. 52-53; Vaccaro, "De la Romania à Fleury", cit., pp. 211-15; Vaccaro, De Feo, Ferreyra, "Gli arredi liturgici dell'abbazia di Fleury", cit., with 3D models.

³⁶ A. Ballardini, "Scolpire a Roma per Pasquale I (817-824)? L'oratorio di San Zenone", *Hortus Artium Medievalium* 25, no. 2 (2019): pp. 376-91.

³⁷ In fact, Wulfade relocated the relics to the center of the transept after they had been moved for a time to an "external crypt" commissioned by Abbot Odo of Cluny (936-942). However, the liturgical function of this new architectural space did not succeed within the local monastic community, which remained strongly attached to its own local consuetudines: Vaccaro, "De la Romania à Fleury", cit., p. 215.

³⁸ *Les miracles de saint Benoît*, cit., "Miracula sancti Benedicti", book III, par. 2; "Vita et Passio sancti Abbonis par Aimoin de Fleury et pièces annexes", eds. R.-H. Bautier, G. Labory, in *L'abbaye de Fleury en l'an mil* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2004), pp. 42-143, esp. par. 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ André de Fleury, *Vie de Gauzlin, abbé de Fleury / Vita Gauzlini, Abbatii Floriacensis monasterii*, eds. R.-H. Bautier, G. Labory, (Paris, 1969), p. 134: «Primorum vero reclinatoria fagineae materiae compegit tabulis porfiretico marmore a foris indutis, delato ab ipsa basilica sanctae romanae Sedis, quod et lamminis purissimi auricalci ambiri fecit claviculisque

claim, the text clearly uses this information to link Fleury to Rome by emphasizing the materials used. The same text pursues a similar purpose also mentions obtaining *emblemata* – mosaics or mosaic materials – from “Romania” (interpreted as the Ravenna area) to create a new mosaic floor⁴¹ [fig. 9]. Gauzlin’s artistic patronage gains even greater significance when considering the historical context: the abbot acted during a period, starting from the late 10th century, when exchanges between the Italian and Frankish regions were facilitated by the influence of Gerbert d’Aurillac. Trained within the Capetian milieu, Gerbert became a trusted figure at the Ottonian court, ascending to the papacy as Sylvester II in 999 following his role as Archbishop of Ravenna. Throughout his career, he maintained close connections with Capetian circles, the very environment in which the Abbot of Fleury was active⁴². Here, in the church of Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, the mosaic floor imported from Italy covered the entire chancel and monastic choir area (15.60 m x 7.40 m), as confirmed by the discovery of mortar layers during excavations in the 1950s⁴³. Some of these materials have been preserved and incorporated into the current floor, which was restored by 1976.

Despite the challenges in conservation, the historical evidence points to three crucial points.

First, the creation of the polychrome *opus sectile* floor at Fleury was a deliberate act, likely completed before the fire of 1017, contemporaneous with the construction of the western porch tower⁴⁴. Second, the mosaic functions as a precious “carpet” centred on the transept crossing, where the reliquary of St. Benedict has consistently been placed or displayed, symbolizing his living presence at the heart of the monastic choir. Finally, the artistic choices at Fleury, particularly the strategies employed to display St. Benedict’s relics, are revealed to be original, autonomous, and unique.

It is unclear whether the monks of Fleury were aware of the coloured mosaic pavement surrounding the altar and Benedict’s tomb at Montecassino – already in place during the abbacy of Aligerno (as mentioned above). However, the choice to implement such a mosaic in Fleury was certainly unprecedented in the French context, suggesting ambitious and far-reaching cultural connections, particularly with Italy. The commission of the mosaic pavement at Fleury was undoubtedly an extraordinary endeavour. A faint reflection of the significance of this artistic achievement can be found in the now-lost mosaic of the ancient cathedral of Orléans, which may have replicated a similar decorative scheme, albeit in a more limited portion of the sanctuary⁴⁵. Conversely, the evidence remains too tenuous to draw substantial conclusions about the mentioned pavement of Saint Benigne in Dijon, which was created shortly after the one at Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire.

Conclusions

In conclusion, beyond the individual contexts, the analysis of these examples highlights their

diligenter affigi».

⁴¹ For this issue I refer to my previous research in: Vaccaro, “De la Romania à Fleury”, cit.

⁴² F. Crivello, “Gerberto e le arti figurative: opere d’arte e manoscritti miniati intorno a Gerberto d’Aurillac”, in *Gerberto d’Aurillac da Abate di Bobbio a Papa dell’anno 1000*, ed. E.G. Nuvolone (Bobbio: Associazione Culturale Amici di “Archivum Bobiense”, 2001), pp. 191-215; H. Keller, “Identità romana e l’idea dell’Imperium Romanorum nel X e nel primo XI secolo”, in *Three Empires, Three Cities. Identity, Material Culture and Legitimacy in Venice, Ravenna and Rome, 750-1000*, ed. V. West-Harling (Brepols: Turnhout, 2015), pp. 255-82.

⁴³ J.-M. Berland, “Le pavement du chœur de Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire”, *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 11, no. 42 (1968): pp. 211-19.

⁴⁴ Vaccaro, “De la Romania à Fleury”, cit., p. 220.

⁴⁵ I am conducting research on this topic as part of the project *Projet collectif de recherche: La cathédrale Sainte-Croix d’Orléans*, dir. Pierre Martin (Université Grenoble-Alpes).

distinct yet converging strategies in using liturgical and artistic elements to assert each monastery's identity and authority, revealing the intricate and enduring interplay of spirituality, politics, and art. At Montecassino, the emphasis is on the concealed and securely housed relics of St. Benedict, reflecting a desire to demonstrate his continued, inviolate presence through various reconstructions. In this regard, the decorative strategy pursued by Desiderius shortly after the mid-11th century is significant because it not only looks back to Montecassino's history but also seems to look towards European trajectories. Indeed, it cannot be forgotten that in the first half of the century, two monasteries bound to strong political powers were able to foster cultural strategies and wide-ranging artistic commissions.

One is the above-mentioned case of Fleury, which was renewed starting in the last decades of the 10th century during the Kingdom of Hugh Capet and his son Robert the Pious, thanks to whom Gauzlin was appointed abbot. The other case is the powerful monastery of St. Michael of Hildesheim, founded by Bishop Bernward, which benefited from the support of the Germanic imperial court of Otto III and Henry II. In both cases, these two monasteries demonstrate that they sought and knew how to make use, in different ways, of elements of Rome's art in order to reproduce specific features within their institutions, characterising and completing their sacred buildings and liturgical installations. As analysed, in Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, Gauzlin had a western tour-porche built "ex quadratis lapidibus", inspired by ancient construction techniques, and commissioned an *opus sectile* floor to decorate the most sacred space of the church with a floor mosaic that clearly recalled uses well known in Italy and, specifically, in Rome (see above). In Hildesheim, on the other hand, Bernward's commitment to using elements openly derived from Rome is widely acknowledged (the figured doors, the twisted column, the west crypt, to name only the most striking examples), not only reinventing the heritage of the ancient Urbe, but also of the Christian city, in an 'active engagement with the past', as Laurence Nees has made clear⁴⁶.

In this international context, Desiderius' efforts in the second half of the century thus appear to take on greater span: the obtaining of the ancient columns from Rome – net of possible reuse from the dismantling of Gisulphus' basilica – thus appear not only as a material and tangible link with the papal city, but are in line with the artistically demanding choices made by the other aforementioned two great European monasteries.

Considering the previous exchanges between Montecassino and the Franco-Germanic areas in the preceding centuries (see, for example, the circulation of Benedictine liturgical rules⁴⁷, the provenance of the abbots, the distinctive towered architectural solutions⁴⁸), it cannot be excluded that Desiderius was aware of the great enterprises beyond the Alps, especially in the context of a lively and continuous controversy regarding the possession of St. Benedict's relics.

Probably aware of the solutions adopted at Fleury earlier in the century, Desiderius offered a lavish countermeasure – through the engagement of mosaicists from Constantinople – within a broader initiative that intertwines the construction of Montecassino with its deeply rooted devotions. Moreover, as demonstrated by Serena Romano, this includes also the revitalization of the cult of St. Maurus through hagiographic textual narratives⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ L. Nees, "Aspects of antiquarianism in the art of Bernwards and its contemporary analogues", in *1000 Jahre St. Michael in Hildesheim. Kirche-Kloster-Stifter*, eds. G. Lutz, A. Weyer (Petersberg: Imhof, 2012), pp. 153-70.

⁴⁷ Vaccaro, "De la Romania à Fleury", cit., pp. 233-35.

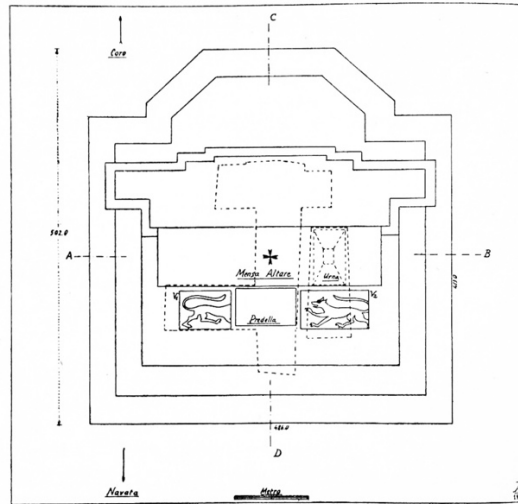
⁴⁸ P. F. Pistilli, "Le chiese monastiche italiane nel quadro dell'architettura abbaziale europea fra VIII e XI secolo", in *Monasteri in Europa occidentale (secoli VIII-XI). Topografia e strutture*, ed. F. De Rubeis, F. Marazzi (Roma: Viella, 2008), pp. 149-80; P. F. Pistilli, "Premier roman et roman dans le choeur oriental de l'abbaye de Farfa", *Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa* 49 (2018), pp. 135-49.

⁴⁹ S. Romano, "La lotta per il primato. Frammenti e fatti sparsi tra Italia e Francia nell'età della Riforma", in *Immagine*

In contrast, Fleury's approach is characterized by the visible and ostentatious display of Benedict's relics, aimed at reinforcing their institutional identity and asserting their legitimacy in opposition to Montecassino.

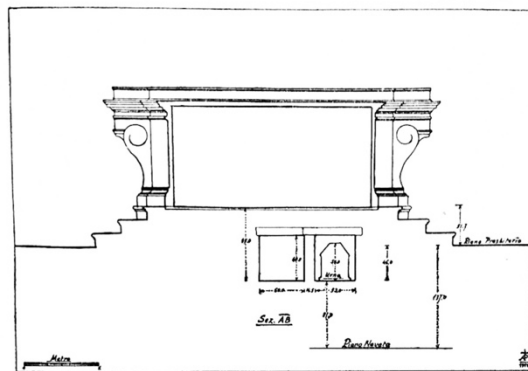
Despite differences in their architectural strategies, both examples reveal significant similarities: in both cases, the liturgical-political theme is central, with artistic choices serving to reinforce this purpose. The creation of precious, polychrome *opus sectile* floors, incorporating ancient materials, reflects a shared need to affirm the monasteries' identities by emphasizing the enduring significance of St. Benedict's relics in shaping monastic artistic heritage [fig. 10].

e ideologia. Studi in onore di Arturo Carlo Quintavalle, eds. A. Calzona, R. Campari, M. Mussini (Milano: Electa, 2007), pp. 167-72.



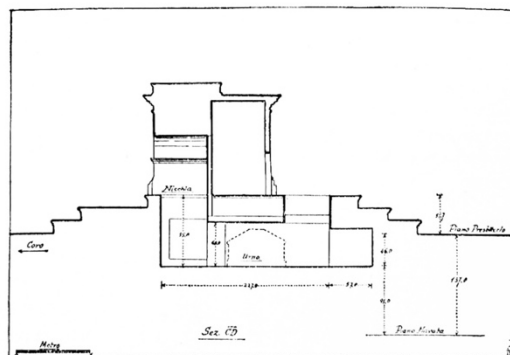
PLANIMETRIA DELL'ALTARE MAGGIORE

La linea tratteggiata indica il perimetro dell'area sepolcrale e l'urna con le reliquie; AB-CD sezioni eseguite: V.V. veltri a mosaico (sec. XI).



SEZIONE TRASVERSALE AB DEL SEPOLCRO

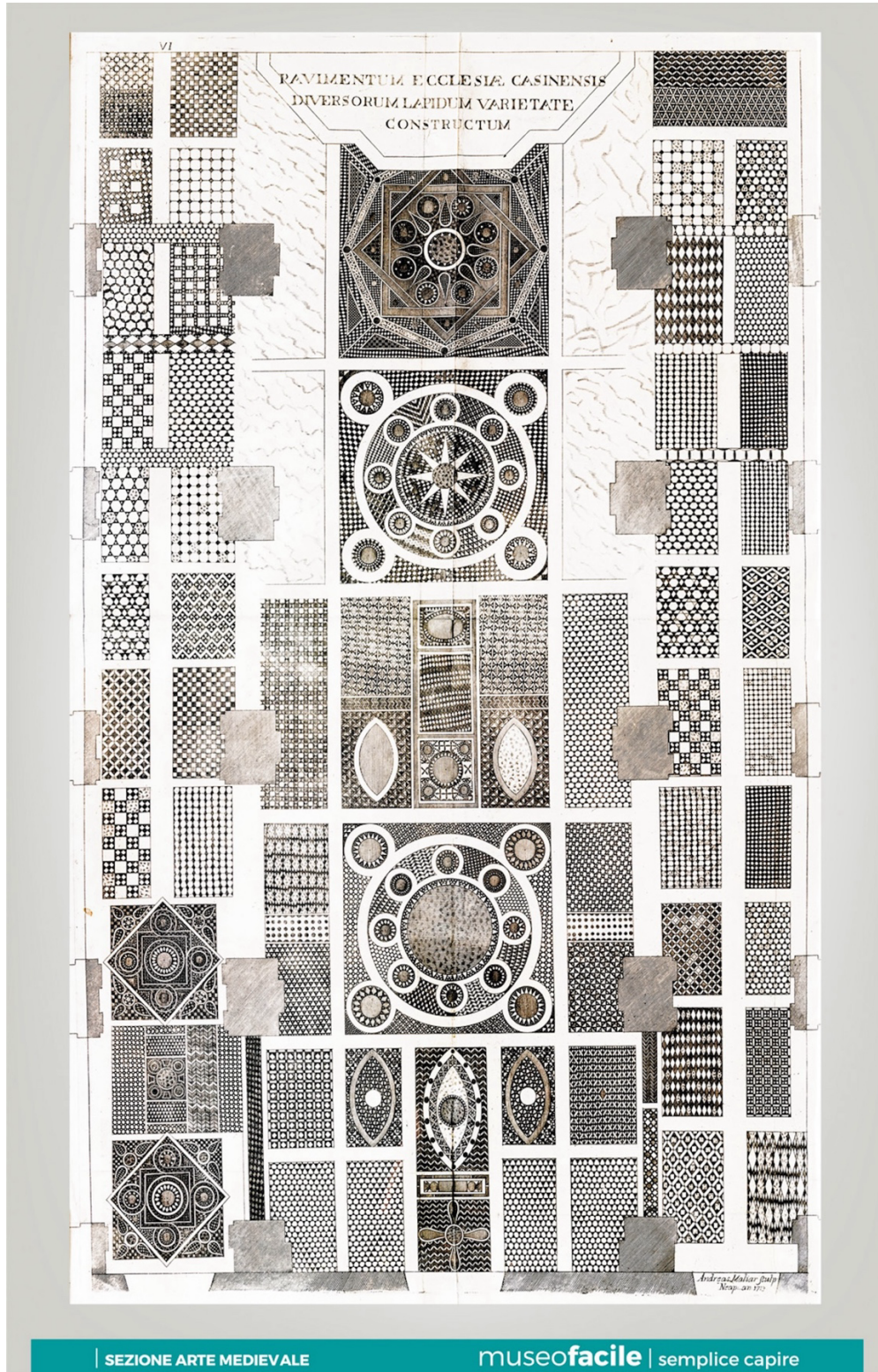
L'altare maggiore è rappresentato solo nelle linee principali. A sinistra del loculo delle reliquie la sezione del cunicolo centrale.



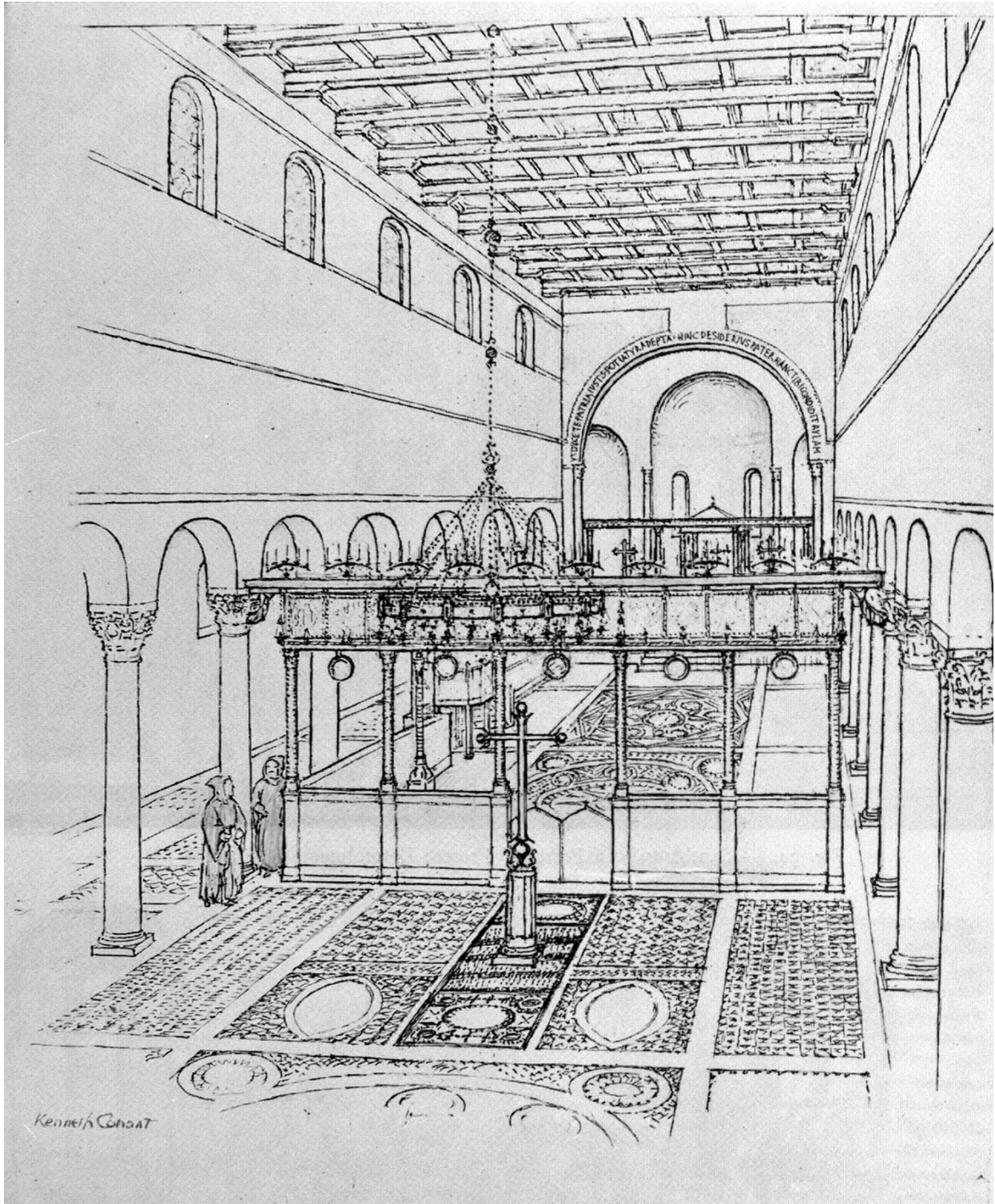
SEZIONE LONGITUDINALE CD DEL SEPOLCRO

Visibile il cunicolo centrale in tutto il suo percorso. L'urna con le reliquie è rappresentata a tratteggio in quanto situata nel centro del loculo.

1a-c. Sections of the sacellum of St. Benedict and St. Scholastica beneath the main altar
(Photo: *Il sepolcro*, cit.)



2. Mosaic floor of Montecassino in the 18th century
(Photo: Gattola, *Historia abbatiae Casinensis*, cit./Museo Facile, Abbey of Montecassino)



3. Reconstruction of the liturgical installations of Montecassino during Desiderius' era
(Photo: K.J. Conant, in Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, cit.)



4. The mosaic of the presbytery with the dogs (or “veltri”), near the west entrance to the sacellum of St. Benedict and St. Scholastica (Photo: Pantoni, *Le vicende della basilica di Montecassino*, cit.)



5. Montecassino, Abbey Museum, Panel with the dogs from the presbytery of the basilica (Photo: Author)

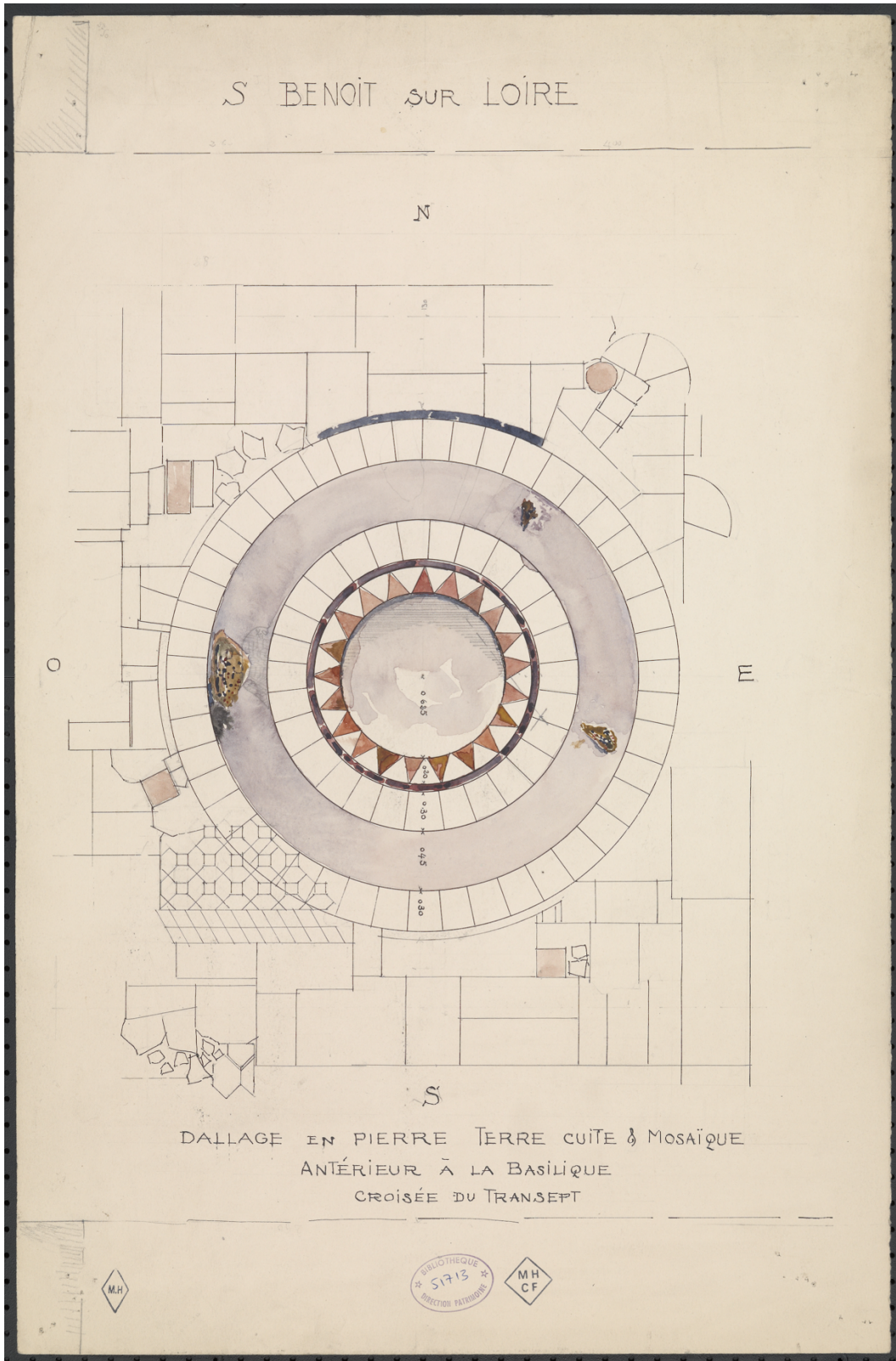


6. Sant'Adriano, San Demetrio Corone
Panel with the lion in the nave floor
(Photo: Author)

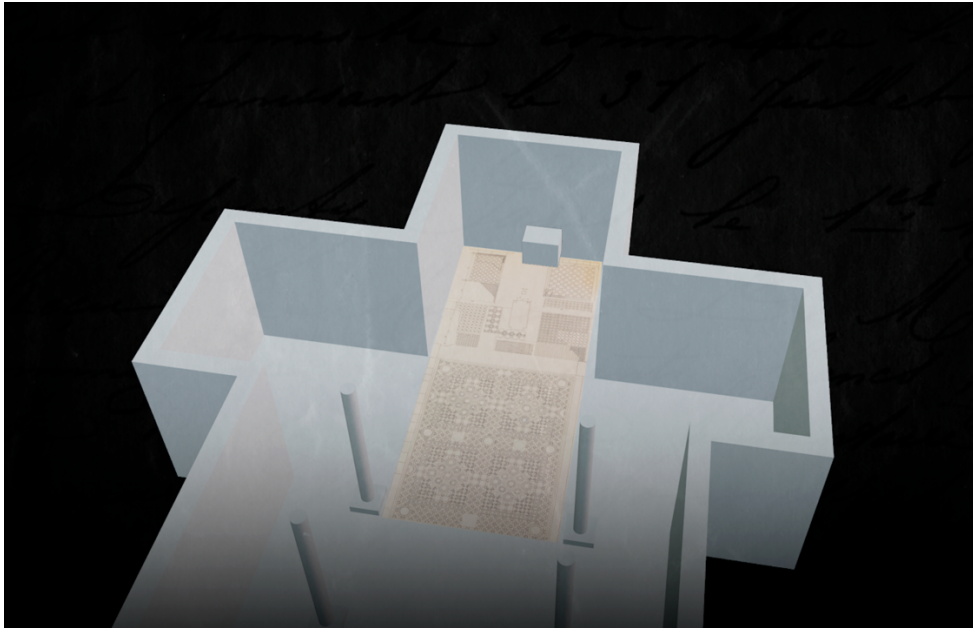


7. Dijon, Saint-Bénigne, pavement of the Chapel of the Virgin,
watercolour by Dom Plancher, 1722
(Photo: Vaccaro, "De la Romania à Fleury", cit.)

FRAMING BENEDICT'S PRESENCE



8. Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, relief of the pavement discovered in 1958 at the transept crossing (MAP, 0082/45/2029) (Photo: Vaccaro, "De la Romania à Fleury", cit.)



9. Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, 3D reconstruction of the sanctuary in the early 11th century with the *opus sectile* mosaic pavement
(Photo: Author, C. Ferreyra)



10. Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, the sanctuary with the mosaic floor after the 1963 restoration
(Photo: Author)