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**THE ALTARSTEPS OF ST. PETER'S AND THE VATICAN BASILICA  
AS A MODEL**  
**LA ESCALERA DEL ALTAR DE SAN PEDRO Y LA BASÍLICA VATICANA  
COMO MODELO ARQUITECTÓNICO**

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**ABSTRACT**

Since the 1940's, it has become common knowledge that the Vatican basilica of St. Peter's served as an inspiring example and model in medieval church architecture, regarding building type and decorative system as well as liturgical disposition. In scholarship on the so-called Gregorian liturgical arrangement, dating from 600 AD ca., most attention has been paid to the characteristic annular crypt. In this contribution a more differentiated approach is expounded, on the one hand with an analysis of the various 'imitable' elements of St. Peter's Early Medieval presbytery as a prototype, and on the other with a brief investigation of their reception in other churches during the Early and High Middle Ages. The layout of the steps giving access to the raised presbytery is still an uncertain element in the reconstruction of St. Peter's lost presbytery, but the reception history turns out to shed more light on its original design.

**KEYWORDS:** St. Peter's basilica Rome; Liturgical disposition; Raised altar platform; Iconography of architecture.

**RESUMEN**

Desde la década de 1940, es sabido que la basílica vaticana de San Pedro sirvió de ejemplo y modelo inspirador en la arquitectura eclesíástica medieval, tanto en lo que respecta al tipo de edificio y al sistema decorativo como a la disposición litúrgica. En los estudios sobre la llamada disposición litúrgica gregoriana, que data del año 600 d.C. aproximadamente, se ha prestado la mayor atención a la característica cripta anular. En esta contribución se expone un enfoque más diferenciado: por un lado, con un análisis de los diversos elementos «imitables» del presbiterio altomedieval de San Pedro como prototipo; y por otro, con una breve investigación

de su recepción en otras iglesias durante la Primera y la Alta Edad Media. La disposición de los escalones que dan acceso al presbiterio elevado sigue siendo un elemento incierto en la reconstrucción del presbiterio perdido de San Pedro, pero la historia de la recepción resulta arrojar más luz sobre su diseño original.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Basílica de San Pedro de Roma, disposición litúrgica, plataforma de altar elevada, iconografía de la arquitectura.

The model-function of St. Peter's for other churches inside Rome and far into Latin Europe during the early and high Middle Ages is a well-known phenomenon that has been studied intensely<sup>1</sup>. In most cases, this faithfulness to the Vatican basilica as the highest conceivable place of worship appeared to be inspired by a desire to connect, for political, ideological and for spiritual reasons, with the apostle Peter, the city of Rome and the papacy. Herbert Kessler has always been fascinated by this obsession with the princes of the apostles – both Peter and Paul – and the nostalgia for Rome as the centre of faith, power and civilization<sup>2</sup>. Whereas the 'imitation' of St. Peter's has predominantly been dealt with from the perspective of Richard Krautheimer's "Iconography of architecture", Herbert Kessler has contributed substantial insight into the mechanism of reception and imitation of a certain monument – in this case of "the oldest, largest and most powerful church of latin Christianity"<sup>3</sup> – as a holistic process, comprising many aspects on different levels, among them the effect of mural paintings. When I return to my own continuous interest in the basilica of St. Peter's, this understanding prompts me to reconsider another aspect of the reception history of St. Peter's, one regarding its liturgical disposition. What Herbert Kessler observed about painted programs, also applies to the question I will discuss in this contribution, namely that "the medieval 'copies' must themselves be used to reconstruct their common model".<sup>4</sup>

#### THE 'GREGORIAN' PRESBYTERY OF ST. PETER'S

The layout of St. Peter's presbytery realized in the late sixth century was widely known throughout the Middle Ages. It survived largely intact until the Constantinian apse was demol-

<sup>1</sup> For brief overviews of the topic with further references see W. JACOBSEN, "Die Renaissance der frühchristlichen Architektur in der Karolingerzeit", in *799 Kunst und Kultur der Karolingerzeit: Karl der Große und Papst Leo III. in Paderborn. Beiträge*, Mainz, 1999, pp. 623-642; C. McCLENDON, *The origins of medieval architecture: Building in Europe, A.D. 600-900*, New Haven-London, 2005, pp. 159-161. For a recent contribution: J. EMERICK, "Building more romano in Francia during the third quarter of the eighth century: the abbey church of Saint-Denis and its model", in *Rome Across Time and Space: Cultural Transmission and the Exchange of Ideas, c.500-1400*, C. BOLGIA, R. McKITTERICK, J. OSBORNE (eds), Cambridge, 2011, pp. 127-150.

<sup>2</sup> Most of these contributions are collected in: H.L. KESSLER, *Old St. Peter's and church decoration in medieval Italy*, Spoleto, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. xii, but cf. p. xiii: "my own steady movement away from using the medieval churches simply to reconstruct the lost decorations".

ished in 1594. Even after its disappearance, largely thanks to relatively good documentation, it remained clear in the memory of devotees and specialists. In that perspective, its fragmentary physical remains discovered during the excavations in the 1940's were confirmations of consistent knowledge. Yet, the tangible evidence of its remnants still enabled a more precise reconstruction of the design and history of the Vatican high altar area.<sup>5</sup> I will summarize the relevant facts briefly and discuss the main issues of interpretation.

The erection of a ciborium surmounting the high altar in the pontificate of Gregory the Great (590-604) must have been the completion of the construction of the new presbytery.<sup>6</sup> The concept, probably, originated with his predecessor Pelagius II (579-590), so that dating the project between 588 and 604 is plausible.<sup>7</sup> Since the excavations the appellation 'Gregorian' has become commonplace in scholarship to identify the new presbytery. It was at the same time both a basically conservative and a far-reaching innovative enterprise. On the one hand, the Constantinian monument enveloping the still older *memoria* of the apostle Peter's supposed grave was carefully preserved at the chord of the apse, and the materials of the Constantinian disposition were reused as far as possible. Conversely, the presbytery created out of the unique circumstances surrounding the apostle's tomb was an inventive design. Its crucial feature was the physical unification of the sacred tomb and the main altar of the basilica, which in turn lead to the 1.45 m high platform laid out surrounding the memorial monument on three sides. An annular crypt underneath gave access to the rear of the ancient monument, and a window (*fenestella*) axially in the front of the platform towards the nave continued the visibility and accessibility of the original niche in the apostolic monument, the *confessio*. The upper part of the monument now could serve as the altar allowing the pope to celebrate directly above the resting-place of the apostle, whose successor he claimed to be (Fig. 1).

The design was a specific solution for the conditions and requirements of the sanctuary of St. Peter's. While the venerated tomb monument was preserved in its entirety, a liturgical complex was realized, which allowed the celebration of the papal mass in a classical Roman disposition, with the altar in front of the apse and the cathedra, with its flanking benches, axially behind it at the apse wall. It proved to be the ideal answer to the inconveniences of celebrating the Eucharistic liturgy - which was more and more frequent in St. Peter's - in the original constellation with an altar subordinate to the tomb. Whilst the raising of the level of liturgical action may have been a necessity, it must also have turned out to be a benefit, by excellently accommodating to visibility and the increasing hierarchical character of the papal performance. The newly arranged *pergula* of the six precious twisted vine scroll columns from the Constantinian disposition framed not only the niche of the apostolic tomb, but also con-

<sup>5</sup> B. M. APOLLONI GHETTI et al, *Esplorazioni sotto la confessione di San Pietro in Vaticano: eseguite negli anni 1940-1949*, 2 vols, Città del Vaticano, 1951, pp. 173-188; R. KRAUTHEIMER et al., *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae. The Early Christian Basilicas of Rome (IV-IX Cent.)*, 5 vols, Città del Vaticano-Roma-New York, 1937-1977 (henceforth: CBCR), 5 (1977), pp. 195-199, 259-261; S. DE BLAAUW, *Cultus et decor. Liturgia e architettura nella Roma tardoantica e medievale: Basilica Salvatoris, Sanctae Mariae, Sancti Petri*, 2 vols, Città del Vaticano, 1994, pp. 530-534.

<sup>6</sup> L. DUCHESNE, *Le Liber Pontificalis. Texte, introduction et commentaire*, 2 vols., Paris, 1886-1892 (henceforth: LP with number of Vita and chapter): LP 66. 4.

<sup>7</sup> DE BLAAUW, *Cultus et decor*, pp. 533-534; different accents in CBCR, 5 (1977), pp. 277-278.

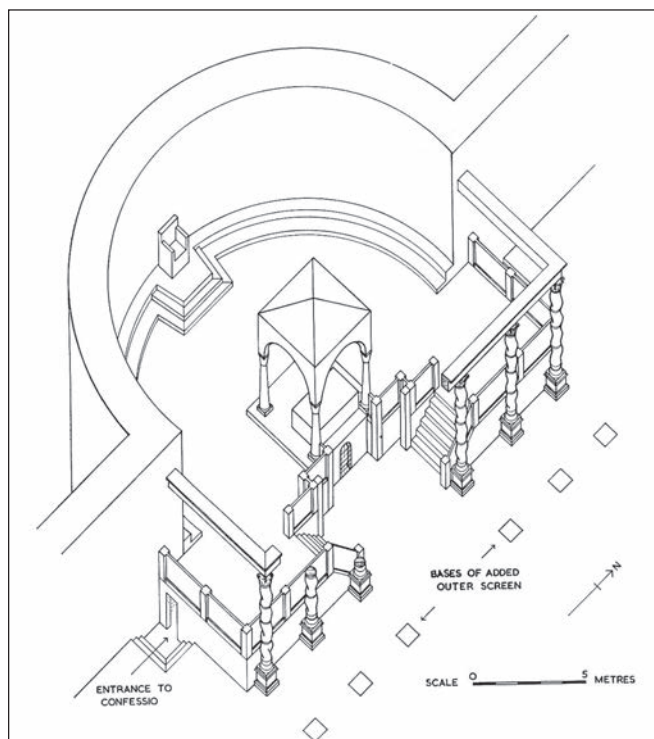


Fig. 1. St. Peter's. Gregorian presbytery. Reconstruction after Toynbee – Ward-Perkins 1956

stituted a beautiful and effective stage setting for the pope at the altar and on his throne. The crypt made it possible to spread out the practices of devotion, which were accordingly not only focused on the *confessio* niche, but also included the rear of the apostolic monument as a destination of pilgrimage. In this way, the split-level of the Gregorian sanctuary accommodated a differentiation of use between pilgrims in veneration of the tomb and the clergy officiating in papal liturgy. The conservative features of the operation were no less effective. The niche of the *confessio* remained intact, and the marble revetment of the Constantinian monument remained visible from the crypt. The reuse of the vine scroll columns was perhaps self-evident, but because of their clear identification in the *Liber Pontificalis* as donations of Constantine, they had a special expressiveness as bearers of memory. Historical awareness and piety led to the treatment of older architectural members as semi-relics. Consequently, the ingenious 'Gregorian' disposition incorporated the past and the continuity of worship so successfully that it was considered to be the original Constantinian arrangement, until, that is, the excavations in the 20th century.

The ensemble of St. Peter's presbytery soon revealed itself as a model for other churches. Although it was a particular creation for the conditions of the apostolic basilica, it appeared to be imitable in churches with different functions at various locations. In view of its reception elsewhere, it is necessary to determine and offer a possible rank order of the distinctive

elements and motifs that were 'susceptible' to imitation (Fig. 2). The foremost characteristic was the elevated platform in the apse of the church and on it the concentrated placing of altar and cathedra. The second was the position of the altar at the front edge of the platform, with a relic chamber underneath and a window opening in the front of the podium. The third was the ring crypt, with its unique layout of a semi-circular corridor following the inner curve of the apse giving access to a straight central corridor leading to the rear of the tomb chamber under the altar. In scholarly literature on the topic, these three characteristics have been regarded as essential in viewing the Gregorian presbytery as a prototype, but have not been placed in this rank order. Above all, the annular crypt has been emphasized as a decisive constituent.<sup>8</sup> Other elements like the ciborium and the *pergula* were certainly characteristic, but may have been less exclusive to the St. Peter's sanctuary. There was, also, a fundamental circumstance: the Vatican basilica had its apse on the west side. Only with this 'occidentation' could the celebrant face east when standing at the altar, following deep-rooted liturgical custom.<sup>9</sup>

Amidst all the characteristics considered in the studies regarding the influence of the presbytery as a model there is one aspect that has hardly been taken into account: the layout of the steps giving access to the raised floor on both sides of the *confessio* window. Admittedly of secondary nature in the functional concept, it was nevertheless a distinctive attribute of the visual effect of the Vatican presbytery. The steps of St. Peter's sanctuary including their relation to the *pergula* may, therefore, be a clue to its history of perception and reception.

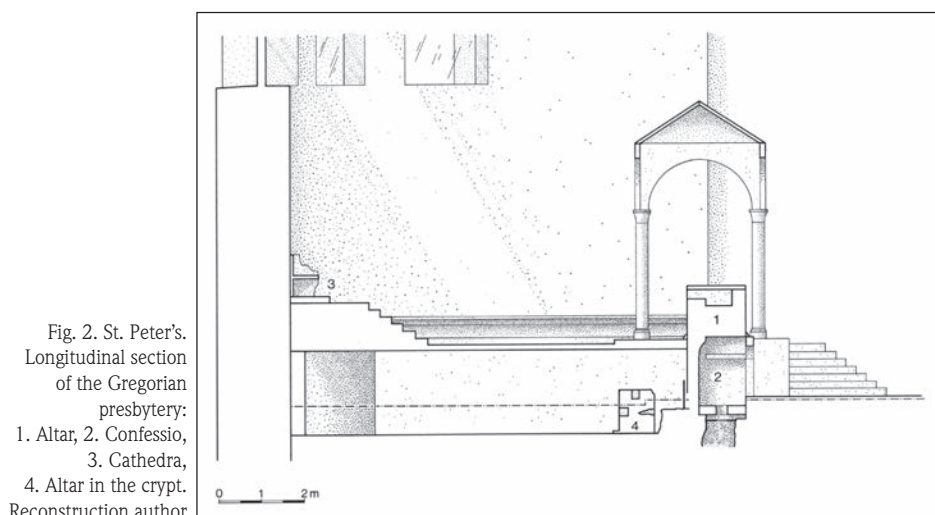


Fig. 2. St. Peter's.  
Longitudinal section  
of the Gregorian  
presbytery:  
1. Altar, 2. Confessio,  
3. Cathedra,  
4. Altar in the crypt.  
Reconstruction author

<sup>8</sup> E.g. M. CECHELLI, "La cripta semianulare vaticana e le sue derivazioni romane", in *L'Orbis christianus antiquus di Gregorio Magno*, L. ERMINI PANI (ed.), Roma, 2007, pp. 105-120; F. GUIDOBALDI. A. SABBI, "Cripte semianulari e altri ambienti devozionali ipogei o semipogei delle chiese di Roma dall'età paleocristiana al Medioevo: aspetti tipologici e cronologia", *Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia – Rendiconti*, 88 (2015-2016), pp. 443-566.

<sup>9</sup> S. DE BLAAUW, "In view of the light: A hidden principle in the orientation of Early Christian church building", in *Medieval Art*, P. PIVA (ed.), s.l. (The Folio Society), 2012, pp. 15-45 (also in Italian and French editions 2010).

## THE PODIUM FRONT AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

Since the remodelling, in about 600 AD, the six spiral columns, supporting an entablature, of the Constantinian donation, were lined up at the foot of the projecting lateral wings of the apse podium. The central columns stood 6.90 m from each other (heart distance) and thus enabled a spacious view from the nave to the *confessio* and altar. The excavators discovered that not only the columns, but also their ancient cubic pedestals had been reused to build the Gregorian *pergula*. Three of them are preserved in situ and reveal a spacing of about 3 m for the lateral intercolumniations of the *pergula*. The wide central intercolumniation thus divided the columns into two groups, as was described in the *Liber Pontificalis* during the doubling of the *pergula* in the years 731-741, when six columns were added in front of the others “three on the right and three on the left”.<sup>10</sup> With a total length of 19.70 m it was slightly wider than the apse arch. It is probable that at the ends of the original Gregorian *pergula*, the entablature made a quarter turn in order to bridge, at right angles, the distance to the shoulder walls of the apse. The structure must have been slightly more than 6 m high.

The duplication of the *pergula* with a donation from the Byzantine exarch Eutychius in Ravenna (ca. 727-751) is stunning in itself. The exarch managed to find a series of six ancient columns of the same highly unusual design and of the same dimensions as the spolia columns imported from Greece 400 years earlier by Constantine. In Constantine's footsteps, he made them available to the church for the embellishment of St. Peter's tomb. The *Liber Pontificalis* clearly emphasizes the ambition to create a balance with the older *pergula*: the new twisted columns are set up as opposite pairs (*filopares*) close to the six old ones.<sup>11</sup> The distance between the two rows of columns was about 3 m. Since then, the Vatican *pergula* has consisted of twelve antique columns, each column made of one piece of white marble including the capital, of the same type, but not completely identical in design.<sup>12</sup> Due to their unique shape the spiral columns attracted the attention of visitors. The tradition of believing them to be spolia from Jerusalem first popped up in the eleventh century, but only became popular in the late Middle Ages.<sup>13</sup>

The term *pergula* appears in the *Liber Pontificalis* for the first time in the life of Gregory III (731-741) and then for more than a century becomes a *terminus technicus* for a striking element in churches and chapels: a row of columns supporting an entablature, which obviously served to enclose and to mark the altar area and could be used to hang and fix lamps, images and curtains.<sup>14</sup> Whether the Gregorian *pergula* represented a new typological creation in Rome is not certain, but it is highly probable that the imperial *fastigium* in the Lateran Basilica was a source of inspiration.<sup>15</sup> In design, placement, proportion and function, however, the Vatican

<sup>10</sup> LP 92. 5 (Gregory III).

<sup>11</sup> LP 92. 5 (Gregory III).

<sup>12</sup> A. GAUVAIN et al., *La Colonna Santa. Museo Storico Artistico del Tesoro di San Pietro*, Città del Vaticano, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> J.B. WARD-PERKINS, “The Shrine of St. Peter and its twelve spiral Columns”, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 42 (1952), pp. 21-33, esp. 31-32.

<sup>14</sup> However, the term is used only to a very limited extent, with the vita of Leo III as the highlight (8 times from LP 92.7 to LP 112.10). See also A. BALLARDINI, “Die Petersbasilika im Mittelalter“, in *Der Petersdom in Rom. Die Baugeschichte von der Antike bis heute*, Petersberg, 2015, pp. 34-75, esp. 56-57.

<sup>15</sup> DE BLAAUW, *Cultus et decor*, pp. 553-336.

*pergula* also exhibits a close relationship with the contemporary Byzantine templon. That being said, the double row of spiral columns made St. Peter's *pergula* a distinctive, immediately recognizable device.

Whereas the central intercolumniation corresponded to the recessed east front of the *confessio* and the high altar, both lateral bays of the *pergula* tallied more or less with the projecting wings of the apse platform. The Gregorian *pergula* stood slightly more than 5 m in front of the apse chord, while the *confessio* front was only 1.50 m from the apse. The flights of stairs that provided access to the platform were located in the lateral wings. Unfortunately, all pertinent archaeological traces have disappeared due to the building activities surrounding the high altar of New St. Peter's, leaving the layout of the steps as an open question.

The excavations only produced some scant indications. The most important one was the walling up of the lateral intercolumniations of the *pergula*. The wall, directly behind the pedestals of the columns, was only parapet-high and could reasonably be explained as the retaining wall of the apse podium (Fig. 3).<sup>16</sup> Its structure was originally hidden from view by marble *plutei* (parapet slabs) on 43 cm high plinths between the columns. The plinths of reused marble pieces are fairly carelessly fashioned. Of the *plutei* only two imprints in the mortar revetment of the wall are preserved. One slab was smooth, but the other one left a sharp impression of its relief showing a decoration of spirally fluted colonnettes framing stylised date palms.<sup>17</sup> The dating of the slab with its characteristic design ranges between Gregory I around 600 and Gregory III (731-741).<sup>18</sup> If it had been a slab with double-sided reliefs, it may have been in its original position, since the measurements of preserved *plutei* of the same type as that of the imprint correspond to those of the clear width between the *pergula*'s columns.<sup>19</sup> If one-sided, it was evidently reused back to front at a moment of renovation and rearrangement. Its then obviously old-fashioned relief disappeared against the retaining wall and perhaps a 'modern' design was created on its new front face. In either case, it is hardly imaginable that the retaining wall was part of the initial plan. Most plausibly, the retaining wall is a later addition to the Gregorian layout. It would seem that the insertion of the wall, its lining of reused marble slabs and the roughly cut architectural members constituting the bases of the slabs are of one building period.<sup>20</sup> The date of this remodelling of the presbytery front is open to question, but at the least, the issue of the preceding original design has to be reconsidered.

The excavators did not question the date of the retaining wall, and saw it as a part the original Gregorian platform. Even if the widely accepted reconstruction of Ward-Perkins and

<sup>16</sup> Wall m-n: APOLLONJ GHEITI et al, *Esplorazioni*, pp. 182, 185. It was only found in the south section, but its structure obviously could not be investigated: *CBCR*, 5, pp. 197-198.

<sup>17</sup> *CBCR*, 5, p. 198: the smooth slab has been in the southernmost bay of the *pergula*, the decorated one in the flanking bay of its south stretch.

<sup>18</sup> APOLLONJ GHEITI et al, *Esplorazioni*, pp. 187-188 (Gregory I); EUGENIO RUSSO, "La recinzione del presbiterio di S. Pietro in Vaticano dal VI all' VIII secolo", *Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia – Rendiconti*, 55-56 (1982-1983/1983-1984) [1985], pp. 3-33, esp. 24-33 (Gregory III); BALLARDINI, "Petersbasukuja", p. 61 and p. 329 note 156 (Gregory III). Cf. A. GUIGLIA GUIDOBALDI, "La scultura di arredo liturgico nelle chiese di Roma: il momento bizantino", in *Ecclesiae Urbis*, F. GUIDOBALDI, A. GUIGLIA GUIDOBALDI (eds.), Roma, 2002, 2, pp. 1479-1524, esp. 1512-1521.

<sup>19</sup> Similar slabs preserved in the Grotte: 2.20 m wide and 1.15 m high. If the flanking smooth slab was in its original position, this would speak against a double-sided decoration.

<sup>20</sup> It is not clear whether the retaining wall itself is also (partially) resting on the marble members.





Fig. 3. St. Peter's. East face of Gregorian presbytery, south stretch with pedestal of pergula column, parapet supports and imprint of parapet slabs (left and right). Photo per gentile concessione della Fabbrica di San Pietro in Vaticano

Toynbee adopted this proposal, it is rather unconvincing as an 'initial' plan.<sup>21</sup> The front wall and the surmounting parapet would have blocked both lateral intercolumniations of the *pergula* for almost half of their height: an extremely unpleasant effect for classical eyes. I suspect an original situation with an open *pergula* – that is: not partially obstructed by an abutting podium wall – and two parallel flights of stairs behind both lateral bays. From the slightly raised floor at the foot of the platform, 1.27 m had to be bridged to the level of the sanctuary, which required seven steps.<sup>22</sup> The frontally positioned stairs are likely to have turned at right angles towards the front of the *confessio*, thus forming an L-shaped layout of steps on both sides (Fig. 6).

The practical reason for a later remodelling of the access to the elevated presbytery can be easily imagined. The elimination of the frontal steps and the erection of a straight front wall directly behind the *pergula*, would enable the enlargement of the surface area of the platform by about 12 square meters, whilst taking into account the conservation of the steps perpen-

<sup>21</sup> First publication of the restoration drawing by WARD-PERKINS, *Shrine*, p. 25 and then taken up in J. TOYNBEE, J.B. WARD-PERKINS, *The Shrine of St. Peter and the Vatican Excavations*, London, 1956, p. 215.

<sup>22</sup> This number is confirmed by G. SEVERANO, *Memorie sacre delle sette chiese di Roma*, 2 vols, Roma, 1630, 1, p. 111 (see note 30 below). On the raised level of 18 cm in front of the platform: DE BLAAUW, *Cultus et decor*, p. 478.



dicular to the *confessio* front. From this moment onward, the only access to the sanctuary was via these opposite perpendicular stairways flanking the square re-entrant space in front of the fenestella. The steps will still have been more than 3 m. wide: enough for their practical purpose, but leaving a less 'solemn' aspect of the podium front than before.<sup>23</sup>

When could the frontal steps have been removed? In theory, a wide span of time has to be taken in consideration. The first occasion could have been during the addition of the second *pergula* under Gregory III, which may have given cause for additional rearrangements. It is however highly improbable that at that time, the plutei with the design of the imprint were already regarded as *démodé*. A last occasion might be connected to the renovation of the high altar in 1123. In that year, pope Calixtus II consecrated the renewed high altar of St. Peter's, which encased the altar of Gregory the Great. According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, the works of Calixtus included "pavimenta".<sup>24</sup> For this reason, it is likely that he also renewed the surroundings of the altar, i.e. the *pergula* and the chancel in front of that. Two conspicuous 'Cosmatesque' chancel slabs that have been preserved can be dated to around 1120, and may represent a modernization of the décor. On the other hand, it is hardly conceivable that these self-assured Cosmatesque marble workers would have left the bases of the parapets in the messy state discovered by the excavators.

In between these termini one particular moment arises as a plausible occasion for the remodeling. It is the extensive renovation of the presbytery by pope Leo III around 800, as documented in the *Liber Pontificalis*: "he had the presbytery elegantly set up afresh, all of it with beautiful shaped marble".<sup>25</sup> Later sources confirmed that these beautiful marbles included lavish pieces of porphyry, both in the revetment of the *confessio* front, the steps, the floor between the stairs and the balustrade.<sup>26</sup> The latter was probably the new parapet lining the extension of the raised presbytery floor at the rear of the *pergula*.<sup>27</sup> This upper railing occurs every now and then in high medieval sources, when they refer to two prominent silver crosses standing on top of it and to the lining up of singers during certain papal celebrations directly behind it.<sup>28</sup> The "purple marbles in front of St. Peter's body" were expressly mentioned around 860.<sup>29</sup> The steps to the presbytery were removed during the demolitions in the sixteenth century and are described as massive porphyry members. They were reused as the steps to the presbytery in the west apse of the new basilica and have been preserved there to this day.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Corresponding steps at the outer sides of the projecting platform wings abutting the shoulders of the apse opening cannot be excluded. See DE BLAAUW, *Cultus et decor*, pp. 741-742.

<sup>24</sup> LP vol. 2, p. 323; P.C. CLAUSSEN, *Magistri Doctissimi Romani. Die römischen Marmorkünstler des Mittelalters*, Stuttgart, 1987, pp. 10-12.

<sup>25</sup> LP 98. 28: *fecit eiusdem nutritori suo presbiterio noviter totum in marmorum pulchritudinis sculptum compe erectum*. Translation: R. DAVIS, *The lives of the eighth-century popes (Liber Pontificalis)*, Liverpool, 1992, p. 193.

<sup>26</sup> DE BLAAUW, *Cultus et decor*, pp. 550-553, with references.

<sup>27</sup> The older reversed plutei protruded only up to 31 cm above the floor level of the platform.

<sup>28</sup> DE BLAAUW, *Cultus et decor*, pp. 650, 690, 730-731, and 740, with references.

<sup>29</sup> LP 107. 80: *in purpureis marmoribus, quae ante corpus beati Petri apostoli rugulas retinent*.

<sup>30</sup> SEVERANO, *Memorie sacre*, 1, p. 111: *Si saliva ad essa [tribuna] per sette scalini di porfido, che erano dall'una, e l'altra parte del medesimo altare; i quali insino a i tempi nostri si sono visti salire da i devoti inginocchiati [...]. Si vedono hora questi medesimi scalini posti, e distesi avanti alla Tribuna maggiore della nuova Chiesa*.

The total length of all the reused porphyry pieces is 47 m, exactly enough to have formed 14 steps of well over 3 m wide<sup>31</sup>. The accumulation of these fragmentary data suggests that the fully developed perpendicular stairways of the presbytery were in existence in the high Middle Ages and may plausibly have been created around 800 (Fig. 1).

The ritually highly important area in front of the *confessio* – where Charlemagne was probably crowned in 800 AD – distinguished itself by sumptuous appointments, especially in Carolingian times, but certainly continued to echo down the centuries. The ‘porphyrisation’ of the sanctuary of St. Peter’s fits into the cultural and political context of the papacy in Carolingian times coinciding with the coronation of Charlemagne.<sup>32</sup> It testifies to the intention to aesthetically enhance the partially decayed Early Christian basilicas of Rome in that period. The loss of the frontal stairs in St. Peter’s seems to have been counterbalanced largely by the ennoblement of the material fittings with porphyry slabs and silver claddings now forming a stylish ensemble with the ancient vine scroll columns, hung with precious textile curtains.

### MODEL AND PROTOTYPE

The excavators of 1940-1949 noticed in the ‘filiations’ of St. Peter’s presbytery two possible step layouts: one “frontali”, the other “a rampe contrapposte”.<sup>33</sup> They had no doubt, however, that the Vatican prototype fell into the second category from the outset. Following the publication of the excavation results, only one author has called into question the front design of the Gregorian presbytery. In his 1957 article Alejandro Marcos Pous advances good reasons for proposing that the retaining wall is a secondary addition.<sup>34</sup> He suggests that frontal stairs with perpendicular steps towards the *confessio* front form the original disposition. His reconstruction is convincing, and quite a lot more aesthetically pleasing than that of the excavators. On the other hand, his late dating of the retaining wall, and as a consequence the disappearance, in the sixteenth century, of the frontal steps, is less compelling.

In only very few studies on the widespread take-up of St. Peter’s presbytery, has the design of the access to the platform been taken into account.<sup>35</sup> It has to be admitted, that in many cases the front of the raised presbytery has not survived in its original shape, and archaeological traces are frequently missing completely. Yet some outlines can be sketched of a reception history that may shed more light on the working of St. Peter’s presbytery as a model.<sup>36</sup>

The earliest known ‘copy’ of St. Peter’s presbytery is the nearby extramural basilica of S. Pancrazio (625-638). Archaeological, literary and graphic evidence converge to create an im-

<sup>31</sup> The longest preserved piece is 3,435 m. Measurements: DE BLAAUW, *Cultus et decor*, p. 552, n. 213.

<sup>32</sup> S. DE BLAAUW, “Papst und Purpur. Porphyry in frühen Kirchengestaltungen in Rom”, in *Tesserae. Festschrift für Josef Engemann*, Münster, 1991, pp. 36-50 esp. 40-46.

<sup>33</sup> APOLLONJ GHEITI et al, *Esplorazioni*, pp. 183.

<sup>34</sup> A. MARCOS POUS, “Consideraciones en torno al aspecto del presbiterio realizado de la Basilica de San Pedro in Vaticano”, *Cuadernos de Trabajos de la Escuela Española de Historia y Arqueología en Roma*, 9 (1957), pp. 145-165.

<sup>35</sup> One of them is C. MANCUSO, “Genesi e sviluppo della cripta semianulare in Italia: spunti e riflessioni”, *Quaderni del Centro Studi Lunensi*, N.S. 2 (1996), pp. 143-166, esp. p. 151, who differentiates between tipo 1 with *rampe affrontate* and tipo 2 with *rampe frontali rispetto all’aula*. Cf. table *Ibidem*, pp. 158-159.

<sup>36</sup> This is not the place to be exhaustive and to discuss details of reconstructions. Only brief references to the most relevant literature will be given.

age of a precise imitation of the then recent Gregorian disposition in St. Peter's, even if here, as in all other imitations, there was no pre-existing saintly tomb to be the nucleus of the layout underneath the altar, but a 'created' grave of the saint or a deposition of relics. Two flights of stairs at the front and flanking the *confessio* provided access to the platform, but without the typical L-shape of the prototype.<sup>37</sup> Also S. Crisogono (731-741) follows the prototype faithfully, but here unambiguous information about the placing of the stairways is missing. Apollonj Ghetti did find some small remnants that he interpreted as indications for frontal stairways.<sup>38</sup> The series of 'Carolingian' church foundations in Rome match consistently with the earlier cases: all are aligned with the apse more or less to the west and all retain, architecturally, early Christian typology and style. Regarding the steps of the presbyteries provided with an annular crypt, we are quite sure that S. Prassede (817-824) had a frontal flight of stairs on both sides of the *confessio* front.<sup>39</sup> S. Cecilia now has perpendicular stairways, but this is the result of a complete remodelling in around 1600. There are reasons to suppose frontal steps in the original disposition, although this cannot be proven.<sup>40</sup> Until the eighteenth century, S. Marco (827-844) had a high flight of frontal stairs, with recessing perpendicular stairs towards the *confessio*, which seems to have been the original arrangement.<sup>41</sup> A similar disposition may be supposed in the contemporary new presbytery of S. Maria in Trastevere.<sup>42</sup> S. Martino ai Monti (844-847) also had frontal steps until a radical early modern renovation of the presbytery.<sup>43</sup> It has also been ascertained, that in this church, there was a *pergula* in front of the steps. The last example in the city of Rome series is SS. Quattro Coronati (847-855). Here the original disposition has, in the same way, disappeared due to a seventeenth century restoration, but the deeply buried annular crypt indicates that the platform was only a few steps higher than the paved floor in the nave.<sup>44</sup> Two frontal steps may have been sufficient in this situation. The chrono-

<sup>37</sup> CBCR, 3 (1967), p. 174, cf. ground plan by Carlo Rainaldi in 1633, *Ibidem* p. 160; GUIDOBALDI, SABBI, "Cripte semianulari", p. 460., p. 160.

<sup>38</sup> B. M. APOLLONJ GHETTI, *S. Crisogono*, Roma, 1966 (CRI 92), figs. 19-20; GUIDOBALDI, SABBI, "Cripte semianulari", pp. 460-461.

<sup>39</sup> M. CAPERNA, *La Basilica di Santa Prassede: il significato della vicenda architettonica*, 3d ed, Roma, 2014, pp. 84-85. On the disposition of the churches built under Paschal I see S. DE BLAAUW, "L'assetto liturgico delle chiese romane e il culto dei martiri promosso da Pasquale I", in *Grata più delle stelle. Pasquale I (817-824) e la Roma del suo tempo (817-824)*, S. AMMIRATI, A. BALLARDINI, G. BORDI (eds.), 2 vols, Roma, 2020, 2, pp. 255-277.

<sup>40</sup> This depends among other things from the interpretation of a description of the remodeling in 1599: A. BOSIO, *Historia passionis B. Caeciliae virginis, Valeriani, Tiburtii, et Maximi martyrum*, Roma, 1600, p. 167: *Exinde vero spatium illud ab Ara maiore ad circuitum absydis, quod antiquitus Presbyterium vocabatur clausi, remotis anterioribus circa Aram gradibus, quibus eo prius e navi mediana patebat ascensus, muroque inibi ad planitiem pavimenti superioris exaequato: cuius muri faciem peregrinorum lapidum è variis coloribus in diversas formas... vestivit.* For a recent reconstruction (with frontal steps) see C. GOODSON, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I: Papal Power, Urban Renovation, Church Rebuilding and Relic Translation, 817-824*, Cambridge, 2010, p. 174 fig. 36.

<sup>41</sup> *Die Kirchen der Stadt Rom im Mittelalter 1050-1300*, vols 1-4, Stuttgart 2002-2020, D. SENEKOVIC, pp. 48-51, cf. plan 1660 p. 51.

<sup>42</sup> K. BULL-SIMONSEN EINAUDI, "L'arredo liturgico medievale in Santa Maria in Trastevere", *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome*, 59 (2000), pp. 175-194.

<sup>43</sup> GUIDOBALDI, SABBI, "Cripte semianulari", p. 463 (probability of an original annular crypt); *Kirchen der Stadt Rom* 4 (2020, A. KLEIN), pp. 515-517, cf. plan 1555 p. 516.

<sup>44</sup> CBCR, 4 (1970), pp. 24-26; GUIDOBALDI, SABBI, "Cripte semianulari", p. 464.

logical placing in this series of S. Stefano degli Abessini behind St. Peter's is not settled, but it is clearly of Carolingian date and once had a ring crypt in its western apse.<sup>45</sup> The actual presbytery, however, is a complete reconstruction by Giovannoni (1931-1934), and it is doubtful whether his narrow perpendicular stairways correspond in any way to the original situation.<sup>46</sup>

In all the above-mentioned early medieval churches, the deposition of important relics must have been the impetus for the construction of an annular crypt after the prototype of St. Peter's,<sup>47</sup> whereas the alignment of the apse to the west allowed an integral imitation of the type of presbytery in the Vatican basilica. The urge to follow the model of St. Peter's was not only motivated by the wish to appropriately venerate relics. Churches without significant relics under the altar could also adopt the disposition of St. Peter's whilst refraining from constructing a crypt. This situation seems to have occurred in S. Maria in Domnica (817-824) and in S. Maria Maggiore.<sup>48</sup> As a prominent papal basilica, the latter may be considered to be the most important case of an urban church adopting the liturgical disposition of the Vatican prototype.<sup>49</sup> The foremost characteristic features of the presbytery of S. Maria Maggiore, most probably realized under Paschal I (817-824) and well documented in early modern sources, were the high frontal stairways, with perpendicular steps flanking the recessed space in front of the *confessio* and high altar. A monumental *pergula* – whose porphyry columns now support the baroque altar canopy – and an altar ciborium with reused porphyry columns from the Vatican high altar, further complemented this ostentatious allusion to the Gregorian disposition of St. Peter's.

Some derivations from St. Peter's presbytery in the early medieval era outside Rome provide corresponding information.<sup>50</sup> One of the most authentic ninth century examples is S. Maria Assunta in Otricoli (province of Terni), where the altar, *confessio* and frontal steps seem to be a faithful imitation of St. Peter's on a drastically reduced scale.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, the abbey church of Farfa (late eighth century) is likely to have had frontal stairways to its raised presbytery with an annular crypt in the west apse.<sup>52</sup> One of the most extensive imitations of the Vatican presbytery in the period was the disposition in the western apse of the large monastery church of San Vincenzo al Volturno, including a richly decorated annular crypt and an imposing *pergula* (ca. 800-817). Even if only scanty remains of the front of the raised presbytery have been dis-

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 467-468.

<sup>46</sup> *CBCR*, 4 (1970), pp. 182, 191.

<sup>47</sup> Emphasized by C. GOODSON, "La cripta anulare di S. Vincenzo Maggiore nel contesto dell'architettura di epoca carolingia", in *Monasteri in Europa occidentale (secoli VIII-XI): topografia e strutture*, F. MARAZZI, F. DE RUBEIS (eds), Roma, 2008, pp. 425-442, esp. 425.

<sup>48</sup> GOODSON, *Rome of Paschal*, pp. 123, 134-135, groundplan, p. 146; S. Maria in Domnica: *Kirchen der Stadt Rom* 4 (2020, C. JÄGI), pp. 278-280.

<sup>49</sup> DE BLAAUW, *Cultus et decor*, pp. 382-394; IDEM, "L'assetto liturgico", pp. 262, 266-267, 271.

<sup>50</sup> On Italy: MANCUSO, "Genesi e sviluppo"; more in general: J. CROOK, *The architectural setting of the cult of saints in the early Christian West c. 300-1200*, Oxford, 2000, pp. 80-106.

<sup>51</sup> The four steps flanking the *confessio* front are modern, but an alternative initial layout is hardly conceivable. Even if a high medieval renovation is obvious, the layout may date from the ninth century.

<sup>52</sup> S. GIBSON, O. J. GILKES, J. MITCHELL, "Farfa revisited: the early medieval monastery church", in *Encounters, Excavations and Argosies: Essays for Richard Hodges*, J. MITCHELL, J. MORELAND, B. LEAL (eds), Oxford, 2017, pp. 137-161, esp. 146-148.

covered, the first proposal of reconstruction embraced frontal stairways, whereas the latest proposed perpendicular steps.<sup>53</sup> The latter is based on a stone footing north of the *confessio* window, but this could easily be evidence of perpendicular steps in a L-shaped layout with frontal stairs. As long as further evidence is missing, this layout seems the most logical for San Vincenzo and, with which, it would be a perfect replica of the archetype.<sup>54</sup> Both Apollinare-basilica's in Ravenna, which were supplemented with a ring crypt in the ninth century, could not be integral 'copies' of the Roman model, since their apses were orientated to the east. Yet, as far as we can know, their raised presbyteries were accessible over frontal stairways.<sup>55</sup> A similar situation could have occurred in Seligenstadt (construction started 830-834), after the translocation of the relics of Peter and Marcellinus from Rome. The annular crypt was clearly inspired by St. Peter's, but the altar must have been more centrally placed on the presbytery platform of which only the foundation wall of the western front, without indication of the ascending steps, has been discovered<sup>56</sup>. In general, no further evidence relating to the presbytery front is available for the ring-crypt arrangements north of the Alps, whether in an east- or a west-apse.

St. Peter's continued to be a model for church architecture and liturgical disposition in the high Middle Ages, but the synthesis of characteristics, which was so typical for the Carolingian period, tended to disintegrate. This process had already started with the adoption of a St. Peter's presbytery scheme in churches with an east apse, as in Ravenna and Seligenstadt. Far from Rome however, conscious imitations of St. Peter's continued into the later tenth century. They were realised but regrettably not preserved, in Petershausen (Bavaria) and Canterbury Cathedral, where a disposition was created explicitly "after the example of the *confessio* of St. Peter's".<sup>57</sup> Fortunately the later reception history in Rome itself and its direct surroundings still enables some complementary insight in the model working of the Gregorian presbytery.

A first observation concerns the annular crypt: by the Carolingian period, it had already revealed itself to be none essential to the process of imitation, and this tendency continued and accelerated in the following centuries. Obviously the visible layout of St. Peter's presbytery above ground was decisive. Where the ring crypt was still constructed, this occurred, at

<sup>53</sup> D. FIORANI, "L'architettura della cripta di Giosue in San Vincenzo al Volturno", in F. MARAZZI, *La Basilica Maior di San Vincenzo al Volturno: scavi 2000-2005*, Cerro al Volturno, 2014, pp. 85-96, esp. 87-96 (including reconstruction Hodges – Mitchell 1994).

<sup>54</sup> The archaeological evidence for the steps is not yet published in the volume of 2014 (FIORANI, "L'architettura della cripta", p. 87). The reconstruction of the front with isolated flights of stairs at right angles to the *confessio* front, leaving a wing of the platform between it and the straight front with the pergola is according to me problematic.

<sup>55</sup> For S. Apollinare Nuovo: G. BOVINI, "L'antica abside e la cripta di S. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna", *Felix Ravenna* Serie III fasc. 3 (1950), pp. 14-30. The original situation of S. Apollinare in Classe is not known, but the present frontal steps may recall the older disposition.

<sup>56</sup> *Vorromanische Kirchenbauten. Katalog der Denkmäler bis zum Ausgang der Ottonen*, F. OSWALD, L. SCHAEFER, H.R. SENNHAUSER (eds), München, 1966-1971, pp. 309-311; *Nachtragsband*, W. JACOBSEN, L. SCHAEFER, H.R. SENNHAUSER (eds), München, 1991, pp. 382-383. The *confessio* in the centre of the central corridor plausibly corresponds to the position of the altar.

<sup>57</sup> Petershausen: J. BRAUN, *Der christliche Altar in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, 2 vols, München, 1924, 1, p. 415; Canterbury: A. WILMART, "Edmeri Cantuariensis cantoris nova opuscula de sanctorum veneratione et obsecratione", *Revue des sciences religieuses* 15 (1936), pp. 184-219, 354-379, esp. p. 365: "...quadam parte ad imitationem aecclesiae beati apostolorum principis Petri... and ...ad instar confessionis s. Petri.



the most, in a loose connection with the other features of the model. S. Nicola de Calcarariis, S. Adriano and S. Saba – the latter two from the early twelfth century and both with the apse to the east – show evidence of this trend.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, the prototype produced several offshoots in Rome and in Latium, mainly in the twelfth and early thirteenth century, that demonstrate an incessant zeal to imitate the visible features of the model as close as possible.

Frontal stairs, sometimes L-shaped towards the *confessio* could be found in SS. Giovanni e Paolo, S. Eustachio, SS. Marcellino e Pietro and certainly more urban churches<sup>59</sup> Well preserved examples of this layout are still to be found in S. Giorgio in Velabro (Fig. 4) and in S. Clemente. In S. Clemente, two perpendicular steps go up to a narrow landing behind the frontal parapets, from where three wide frontal steps lead to the presbytery platform. Outside Rome in Latium, the scheme of St. Peter's occurs in various churches with the apse towards the west, like the cathedral of S. Maria in Vescovio,<sup>60</sup> S. Pudenziana in Visciano (Fig. 5) and S. Maria di Castello in Tarquinia. In all these cases, the stairways to the platform are in a fron-



Fig. 4. Rome, S. Giorgio in Velabro, view of presbytery with confessio and altar from the nave (2019)

<sup>58</sup> GUIDOBALDI, SABBI, "Cripte semianulari", pp. 468-471.

<sup>59</sup> For the details on the churches mentioned here see the alphabetical volumes of *Kirchen der Stadt Rom*.

<sup>60</sup> P. AEBISCHER, "S. Maria in Vescovio: la cripta dell'*antiqua ecclesia cathedralis sabinorum*", *Palladio*, 16 (1995), pp. 15-30.





Fig. 5. Visciano (Narni),  
S. Pudenziana, view of  
presbytery with confessio  
and altar from the nave.  
Photo Justin Kroesen and  
Regnerus Steensma 2000

tal position, flanking the *confessio*. S. Andrea in Flumine in Ponzano Romano has the same mixed variant as S. Clemente, but here also, the frontal steps are visually dominant. The same is true for the modern interpretation of the presbytery front in Anagni's cathedral. Today, only the cathedral of Ferentino has perpendicular flights of stairs and they appear to be a creation of the twentieth century 'in medieval style', with authentic materials, but without unambiguous medieval precedent regarding its layout.

A monumental *pergula* seems to disappear from the imitation repertoire during the high Middle Ages. Still more or less essential in the Carolingian period – although never in the dou-

ble version of the prototype –, no prominent *pergula* is known to have been erected in Rome and environs in the church building boom after 1100. Instead of that, the parapets in front of the raised presbytery tend to become higher and more conspicuous. Sometimes they are crowned by a slender set of columns carrying a thin architrave. All this may recall the visual impression of the front of St. Peter's presbytery in the Middle Ages, with parapets reaching a height of more than 2 m behind the lateral intercolumniations of the *pergula*, but the *pergula* did not return as an autonomous element.

A last observation concerns the fading of St. Peter's exclusivity as a prototype, just when there was a period of rampant orientation on early Christian models in Roman church building. In the twelfth century, the prototype of St. Peter's met with competition from the Lateran basilica.<sup>61</sup> The Lateran scheme lacked the concentrated disposition in the apse, but had already integrated the *confessio* front after the type of St. Peter's under the altar. This more spacious and flexible layout also proved to work best in churches aligned towards the west, for instance S. Crisogono, new S. Maria in Trastevere, S. Nicola in Carcere and S. Bonifacio ed Alessio.

## EPILOGUE

Even if the evidence presented in this brief paper is by no means complete, I am inclined to conclude that the Gregorian presbytery of St. Peter's, for many centuries after its creation, was perceived in the way envisaged by A. Marcos Pous (Fig. 6)<sup>62</sup>. The L-shaped frontal steps appear time and again in its filiations and seem to reflect the most complete reproduction of the prototype. Other than this, the only design that can be traced consistently in the process of reception and imitation is that with frontally positioned stairs. No unambiguous examples of 'copies' with exclusive perpendicular steps are to be found in the early and high Middle Ages. This is surprising if our dating of the transformation of the Vatican prototype from a frontal to a perpendicular placing of the stairways is correct. Nevertheless, I see no alternative for the assumption that after 800 AD St. Peter's presbytery remained, for a long time, the only example with exclusive perpendicular steps. The imitations in and outside Rome referred to its older state, which obviously continued to be rooted in collective memory, perhaps supported by early derivations of some fame. The stronger aesthetic quality of the initial design may also have contributed to this. Even Tiberio Alfarano, the author of a systematic description of the old Vatican basilica before its complete demolition, envisaged the presbytery with L-shaped frontal steps, in blatant contradiction to the reality he could see with his own eyes.<sup>63</sup> The actual situation, with eye-catching perpendicular steps, was documented for the last time by the

<sup>61</sup> S. DE BLAAUW, "The Lateran and Vatican Altar Dispositions in Medieval Roman Church Interiors: A Case of Models in Church Planning", in *Cinquante années d'études médiévales. À la confluence de nos disciplines*, C. ARRIGNON, M.-H. DEBIÈS, M. GALDERISI, E. PALAZZO (eds.), Turnhout, 2006, pp. 201-217.

<sup>62</sup> Only in one of the reconstruction proposals after Marcos Pous frontal L-shaped steps reappear (but without explanation): A. Prandi, "La tomba di S. Pietro nei pellegrinaggi dell'età medievale" in *Pellegrinaggi e culto dei Santi in Europa fino alla 1a crociata. Convegni del Centro di Studi sulla Spiritualità Medievale IV*, 8-11 ottobre 1961, Todi, 1963, pp. 283-447 esp. figs. 121 and 123.

<sup>63</sup> Original manuscript 1582 with ground plan: TIBERIO ALFARANO, *De Basilicae Vaticanae antiquissima et nova structura*, D.M. Cerrati (ed.) Roma, 1914.

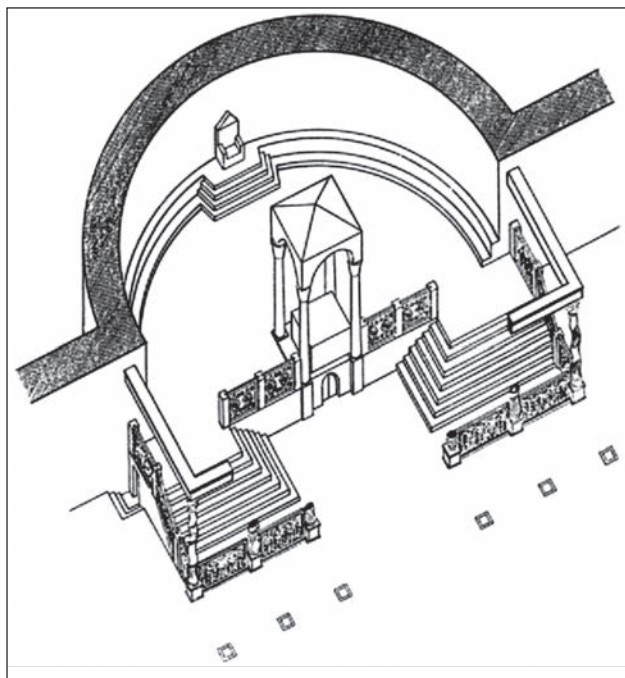


Fig. 6. St. Peter's. Gregorian presbytery. Reconstruction after Marcos Pous 1957

German traveler Sebastian Werro in a sketch he made of the presbytery in 1581.<sup>64</sup> It was this disposition, which started to become a model for historicizing Roman church interiors in the last decade of the sixteenth century just at the time that Old St. Peter's apse was razed (1594). Inspired by early Christian antiquarianism, cardinal Cesare Baronio created 'ancient' dispositions, following the model of Old St. Peter's and using recycled high medieval marble pieces, in the churches of SS. Nereo ed Achilleo (1596-1597), S. Cesareo (1600 ca.) and S. Gregorio Magno (1603).<sup>65</sup> In all cases, he opted for perpendicular steps behind frontal parapets to ascend to the raised presbytery. In the same years, the Carolingian presbytery of S. Cecilia was remodeled with the introduction of perpendicular stairways. It seems that the architects of the early twentieth century who restored S. Stefano degli Abessini and the cathedral of Ferentino were more inspired by Baronio's suggestive pastiches than by the numerous offshoots of the original Gregorian presbytery.

<sup>64</sup> E. WYMAN, "Die Aufzeichnungen des Stadtpfarrers Sebastian Werro von Freiburg i. Ue. über seinen Aufenthalt in Rom vom 10.-27. Mai 1581", *Römische Quartalschrift*, 33 (1925), pp. 39-71.

<sup>65</sup> *Kirchen der Stadt Rom* 4 (2020), pp. 567-569 (A. RACZ); *Kirchen der Stadt Rom* 1 (2002), pp. 271-280 (P. C. CLAUSSEN); *Kirchen der Stadt Rom* 3 (2010), p. 200 (D. SENEKOVIC).