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## The Monastic Architecture of the Order of the Poor Ladies – Later Called ‘Poor Clares’ – in Central Italy between 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries

At the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century a new wind was blowing for men’s monastic orders: introduced by the advent of characters such as Saint Francis (1181/1182–1226) and Saint Dominic (1170–1221), it was identified by an increasing opening of the congregations to the community of believers, contrary to what was the secluded habit of traditional Christian monkhood<sup>1</sup>. In fact, disregarding this spirit of renovation, nuns usually kept preserving their cloistered life as the heritage of the Benedictine monastic custom. Nevertheless, many independent female monastic communities were blooming mainly in Central Italy, pushed by this feeling of renaissance and under the influence of a pauperistic tide that was sweeping all over Europe, preaching monks’ life had to be led in absolute poverty<sup>2</sup>.

In face of these spontaneous and ungoverned movements, the Church of Rome feared they could be a potential threat to its dominion and organized the Council of the Lateran IV in 1215, hoping to come up with a solution to contain the alarming trend [1; 30, p. 383].

One of the key characters of this council was Cardinal Bishop of Ostia Hugolino dei Conti di Segni (1170–1241) who will later become Pope Gregory IX (1227–1241). Under his leadership, it was finally established that those who wanted to found a new monastic congregation had to abide by one of the already existing monastic ways of life officially approved by the Church. Consequently, a new institution needed to be created for the freshly born female independent groups, in order to absorb them into a legitimate monastic body [5, pp. 103–107].

Applying standardising politics, the cardinal worked proactively to reorganize all traditional and recent women’s monastic entities in accordance with the lateran guidelines<sup>3</sup>.

In fact, around 1218 Hugolino first came into contact with the women’s penitential movement while serving as papal legate in Tuscany and Lombardy. With Pope Honorius III’s permission (1216–1227), the cardinal began to regularize these groups, first in Lucca and then shortly in Siena and Perugia. He also imposed a constitution, close to the Rule of Saint Benedict, to bring the disparate groups under one set of norms and he created the first religious order to

<sup>1</sup> There are many studies about these important figures who revolutionised the Christian monkhood, see at least [26; 27; 29; 31].

<sup>2</sup> Both men and women were attracted to the fledgling religious movement associated with Francis of Assisi, who called for a new form of religious life based on the Gospel ideals of humility, penance and voluntary poverty [13].

<sup>3</sup> Pope Gregory IX played a critical role and his action was really strong, see [5, pp. 171–198; 23; 30].

consist solely of women, which he called the “religion of the Poor Ladies of the Spoleto Valley or of Tuscany” [5, pp. 107–112]. The most remarkable point in this *forma vitae* was the severe enclosure of women, for whom every contact with the world outside the cloister was definitively forbidden [24, pp. 153–154]<sup>4</sup>.

Cardinal Hugolino's efforts, also pursued during his papacy, clashed with the action of another main character of the religious scene of the time, Saint Clare of Assisi (1194–1253)<sup>5</sup>. Following the example of Saint Francis — of whom she wanted to be a female *alterego*, — she founded the ‘Damianite’, or ‘Poor Ladies’, movement in 1212 and the principles they were preaching and assistance to the poorest were in strong opposition with the traditional monastic lifestyle<sup>6</sup>.

The Pope and the Saint were therefore engaged in a harsh confrontation, at the end of which Saint Clare accepted the strict rule of enclosure, gaining in exchange a peculiar legal facility to preserve the condition of total poverty, the *privilegium paupertatis*<sup>7</sup>. This crucial requirement wanted by Saint Clare for her order was anyway disregarded after her death. When in 1253 the order was formalised and transformed into ‘Poor Clares’, it was also endowed with properties and lands by the Church [4; 17, p. 7].

Gregory IX and his successors' spiritual upset of the female religious dimension also had a significant impact on the architectural layout and distribution of the already existing and newly built environments of the monastery.

Studies conducted on Damianite order's monastic buildings are an important resource that allows us to understand how monasteries adapted through time to the new laws imposed by the Church. In this case, for instance, the rigid enclosure led to the design of dedicated brand new environments that exclusively nuns could attend to satisfy their spiritual needs.

It is believed that this innovative architecture was initially proposed and realized in the Church of St. Damiano of Assisi, where the order had its first official house, becoming then the template for all the following Damianite's monasteries. In fact, after Saint Clare's advent, renovation of the already existing building — probably a *hospitium* — was made in order to provide nuns with a more comfortable environment. A wooden A-frame roofed space was built as a dormitory over the already existing rectangular room with a barrel vaulted soffit, which is now the church. Furthermore, during the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a building of three floors was added to the former construction; the first floor held the inferior chapel, initially used as a choir and then turned into presbytery as the property was handed over to the Franciscan monks around 1307; the second floor housed the superior chapel; the third floor housed what is believed to have been a workshop for everyday activities of the community. The addition of the latter building to the former one is to be identified in time with the historic moment in which Saint Clare yielded to the Pope's will accepting enclosure, eventually incorporating Poor Ladies'

<sup>4</sup> “Formam vitae vel religionis pauperum dominarum de Valle Spoleti sive Tusciae per dominum Hugnem venerabilem episcopum Hostiensem auctoritate domini pape eidem sororibus traditam”. This name appears in a formulary to be used for the other communities in golino's register, see [28].

<sup>5</sup> About Clare's biography and the birth of her new female monastic order, see [5, pp. 31–56, 82–84].

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent genealogical reconstruction of the different names used to describe the women's religious movement in central Italy focusing on the female Franciscanism, see [3, pp. 165–194]. Talking of the evolution of the Damianite order see at least [1, pp. 203–235; 6; 35].

<sup>7</sup> Clare probably had come to terms with a full enclosed monastic life. In return, the pope granted in 1228 a special poverty privilege for Clare's community [5, pp. 92–101; 32, p. 33].



Fig. 1. Marble frame with toothed bush hammer traces, 13<sup>th</sup> century (?), St. Angelo di Panzo monastery, Assisi. Photo by V. Danesi

order into the benedictine traditional system [33, pp. 21–28; 34, pp. 191–192].

A very interesting discovery is a small opening inside the choir from which the presbytery could be seen and that allowed women to secretly assist to mass without being seen themselves, although the view of the altar available from the opening was extremely reduced and only partial.

The bad and reduced visibility of the altar from these early peculiar liturgical areas was often the trigger for numerous architectural experiments in Central Italy and elsewhere. Different architectonic solutions were proposed to improve the view meanwhile pre-

serving and respecting the habit of enclosure for nuns [11, p. 83].

One of the most primitive and unique example of these experiments can be found in the religious house of St. Angelo di Panzo in the foothills of Mount Subasio, almost 2 km away from Assisi (Ill. 73).

During the canonization of Saint Clare, some nuns told about the fact they had witnessed: in 1212 Clare moved right to the *ecclesia* of St. Angelo in Panzo [5, pp. 78–80; 8, p. 163; 36, pp. 83–112]. Local book references claim that a benedictine monastery was already existent in the place before Clare's advent, but evidences — such as the frequent occurrence of the term *ecclesia* in medieval documents of that time — rather make it more probable to believe that at her arrival Clare found there no more than a lonely building [14, p. 34; 18, p. 398; 25, p. 90; 37, p. 30].

Because of the lack of relevant sources, it still cannot be clarified why exactly this place was chosen for the founding of the monastery. The fact that it was so isolated and no other monastic order had previously settled there probably made it the ideal spot for the nuns to pursue their vocation.

Even then Clare's stay in Panzo did not last long. She was maybe induced to leave because of the extremely isolated location of the site, far too remote from any urban context. In fact, within the same year she would relocate to near St. Damiano, where she would finally settle down, establishing her own religious order [5, p. 207].

Another group of nuns arrived in Panzo at an undefined time afterwards, remaining from about 1232 to 1270. The group joined the order of Poor Ladies and contributed to the creation of the first real monastery in terms of community [36].

Although the building — that today is a private property — has gone through many and consistent alterations across the centuries and no documentary sources mention its construction, nowadays it is still possible to detect some medieval residues and signs, which according to my analysis can be traced back to the moment of the Damianite's settlement in Panzo<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> For more information about St. Angelo in Panzo monastery see my research *Il monastero di Sant'Angelo di Panzo*



Fig. 2. Wooden balcony in the church, 13<sup>th</sup> century, St. Sebastiano di Alatri monastery, Alatri. Photo by V. Danesi

In the room, which now is an entrance, a wall construction made of quite regular limestone blocks is still intact<sup>9</sup> (Ill. 74). So is the barrel vault ceiling above, whose aspect recalls that of some other 13<sup>th</sup> century Umbrian monastic buildings, such as the church of St. Emiliano in Congiuntili [21].

What once was the aisleless church has a rectangular ground plan as in mendicant churches tradition<sup>10</sup>. In the upper section of the western wall a window, now walled with bricks, must have connected the church with an adjacent room that was then probably destroyed to make space for new buildings in the modern age (Ill. 75). As it is the case for St. Damiano, the room into which the window looked out held the choir and allowed the nuns to listen to mass without being seen by other people [11; 33, p. 26].

From a closer view of the marble frame around the window, it can be observed that some toothed bush hammer traces are present (Fig. 1). This tool was only introduced in medieval construction sites at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, so much later in time than the period here investigated, nevertheless if we put in relation the toothed bush hammer traces and the construction of the entrance wall of the monastery with other similar elements present in some Umbrian religious buildings of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, we can suggest the dating of the marble frame to be around the year 1200, close to the arrival of the group of nuns in Panzo [19].

*presso Assisi. Un luogo di memoria di Santa Chiara* presented at a conference organised by the Sapienza University in Rome (in print).

<sup>9</sup> This room was probably the ancient dormitory.

<sup>10</sup> Now this room is a private living room.



Fig. 3. Panoramic view, 13<sup>th</sup> century (?), St. Nicola di Trisulti monastery, Colleparado. Photo by V. Danesi



Fig. 4. Window, 13<sup>th</sup> century (?), St. Nicola di Trisulti monastery, Colleparado. Photo by V. Danesi

These early architectural examples of choirs provided from churches around Assisi clearly show that nuns struggled to have a view of the altar; this was certainly the reason that led to experiments with alternative dispositions of liturgical area, as also can be proved in some convents in southern Lazio. In the monastery of St. Sebastiano in Alatri, already hosting a community of Poor Ladies nuns in 1233, a wooden A-framed roofed room functioning as a dormitory was built over a rectangular room at the ground floor probably used as grange [22; 33].

A chapel is connected to the main building of the church through a door on the eastern wall. Walking from the chapel out of the door, standing on a wooden balcony, a direct frontal view of the altar is possible (Fig. 2).

An alternative solution occurs in St. Pietro in vineis in Anagni, Poor Clares shelter from around 1256. Here nuns would assist to mass inside the church chamber, so the choir is built on an elevated platform with staircase, structured in three naves covered with rib-vaulted transversal rounded arches [7; 9].

It is likely that in the monastery of St. Clare in Assisi, founded towards 1257, nuns assisted to mass from the little chapel built along the northern lateral aisle. The room has a rectangular ground base and is connected to the church aisle by a door, which was built much later during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This operation changed the original connection framework between the church and chapel: in fact, initially the chapel had an independent access and it was only linked

to the church chamber by a small grating in the transept wall and another opening that allowed nuns to take communion [33].

Only during the 14<sup>th</sup> century better solutions were proposed to enhance nuns integration to the liturgical environment. Some first attempts are visible in the church of Donnaregina monastery in Naples. Here the room dedicated to the nuns was established inside the liturgical area of the church on an elevated platform at the entry of the central aisle. The architectural space of the room is recreated by a system of gothic ogival arches supported by octagonal pillars [11; 12; 20]<sup>11</sup>.

In the monastery of St. Clare in Naples, consecrated in 1340, the choir is finally located in an ideal and definitive spot; the enclosure room takes position behind the rectilinear wall of presbytery, opening to it through an apparatus of gratings and slots [16]. This architectural disposition is quite common and can be found in a variety of Poor Clares convents started within the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century such as Vallegloria in Spello, the church of the monastery of St. Maria of Monteluca in Perugia and the monastery of St. Agnese in Perugia.

This last experiment created an efficient and successful solution that was then exported to the conventual churches of other cloistered women's orders, for instance to St. Nicola in Trisulti (Fig. 3), in the province of Frosinone, southern Lazio, a rare case of women Charthusian architectural design. In this case too, the choir is built on two floors and connected to the presbytery by a small opening, which until today is visible on the upper section of the background wall (Fig. 4) [15].

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<sup>11</sup> The church is an important example in Italy of a planned Clarissan space, and combines French tracery and structure with certain spatial concepts perhaps most prevalent in Clarissan churches in Eastern Europe [11, p. 86].

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**Title.** The Monastic Architecture of the Order of the Poor Ladies — Later Called the 'Poor Clares' — in Central Italy between 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

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**Abstract.** At the dawn of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the male monasticism was living a new era, marked by the advent of St. Francis and St. Dominic and characterized by a return to the poorest and humble roots of Christianity as well as by greater openness towards the believers, more than the closed dimension of the monastery. A new female religious movement, known as 'the Poor Ladies', was born in Central Italy in the same years, under the guidance of St. Clare of Assisi. The movement did not join any of the existing monastic rules at the beginning, even though it was strictly bound to the Franciscan experience and had total poverty as its highest and exclusive aspiration. The Church of Rome saw a possible critical issue in the movement and in its lack of control. It tried to regulate it at the Council of Lateran IV in 1215, especially with the Cardinal Bishop of Ostia Ugolino dei Segni (the future Pope Gregory IX), an essential figure for the history and evolution of the female monasticism who imposed the cloistered life on all female monastic orders. The analysis of the architecture of the so-called 'Poor Ladies' is, therefore, fundamental in order to understand the consequences of this imposition. New liturgical spaces for females only, in fact, started to be created in both the existing convents and in the newly built ones with the aim of protecting the daily life of the nuns. The arrangement of the pre-existing spaces in St. Damiano in Assisi — the cradle of the order of St. Clare — was purely random but led anyway to the creation of proper architectural models, later exported in other convents of the same order. The nuns' choir in St. Damiano, in fact, is located outside the ecclesiastical perimeter in order to preserve the cloistered dimension. However, this peculiar position of the choir made it quite difficult for the nuns to assist to the liturgical functions from the beginning, but the issue was solved only during the 14<sup>th</sup> century with the 'migration' of this liturgical space to a new position, after a series of different solutions.

**Keywords:** St. Clare of Assisi; Poor Ladies order; Assisi; monastic architecture; female monastic.

**Название статьи.** Монастырская архитектура ордена Клариссинок в Центральной Италии в XIII — XIV веке.

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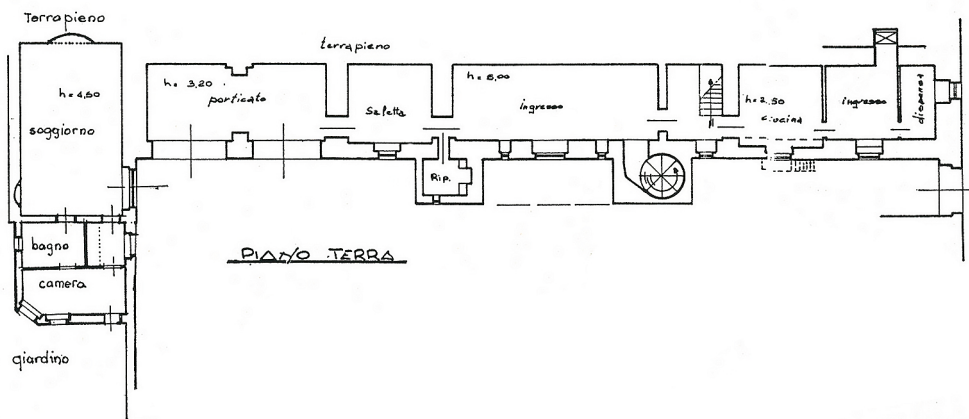
**Аннотация.** На заре XIII века мужское монашество вступило в новый период развития, ознаменовавшийся деятельностью Св. Франциска и Св. Доминика и характеризующийся возвращением к традиции христианской аскезы и бедности, а также большей открытостью по отношению к верующим в противовес традиционно закрытому измерению монастыря. Новое женское религиозное движение, известное как «бедные сестры», зародилось в Центральной Италии в те же годы под началом Святой Клары Ассизской. Первоначально движение не присоединилось ни к одному из существующих монашеских правил, хотя было строго ориентировано на францисканский опыт и приняло абсолютную нищету в качестве главного и высочайшего устремления.

Римская церковь видела опасность в критике со стороны движения и в невозможности его контролировать. Попытка взять движение под контроль была предпринята на Латеранском соборе 1215 г. — особенно усилиями кардинала епископа Остии Уголино ди Сеньи (будущий папа Григорий IX), важной фигуры для истории и эволюции женского монашества, который вменил обычай уединенной жизни в обязанность всем женским монастырским орденам.



Основополагающим для понимания последствий такого решения является анализ архитектурных особенностей монастырей «бедных сестер». Попытка такого анализа предпринята в настоящей статье. С целью ограждения повседневной жизни монахинь от мира как в существующих монастырях, так и во вновь основанных, стали строиться новые литургические пространства, по сути предназначенные только для женщин. Появление их предтеч в Сан-Дамиано в Ассизи — колыбели ордена францисканцев — было случайным, но привело к созданию архитектурных моделей, которые впоследствии будут востребованы в других монастырях того же ордена. Хор для монахинь в Сан-Дамиано находится в действительности за пределами храмового пространства — такое решение должно было гарантировать уединение. Однако подобное расположение хора с самого начала затрудняло монахиням участие в литургии. Проблема была решена лишь в XIV в. с перемещением этого литургического пространства, осуществленным после того, как было опробовано несколько вариантов.

**Ключевые слова:** Святая Клара Ассизская; бедные сестры; Ассизи; орден Клариссинок; монастырская архитектура; женский монастырь.



Ill. 73. Map and panoramic view, 13<sup>th</sup> century (?), St. Angelo di Panzo monastery, Assisi. Photo by V. Danesi



Ill. 74. Entrance, 13<sup>th</sup> century (?),  
St. Angelo di Panzo monastery, Assisi.  
Photo by V. Danesi



Ill. 75. Window, 13<sup>th</sup> century (?),  
St. Angelo di Panzo monastery, Assisi.  
Photo by V. Danesi