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The Problem of the Choir  
Of Florence Cathedral

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IRVING LAVIN

THE PROBLEM OF THE CHOIR  
OF FLORENCE CATHEDRAL \*

*Prologue*

In 1294 the leaders of Florence, reflecting the city's explosive growth in power and wealth at the end of the Middle Ages, determined to create a modern religious identity by replacing the ancient cathedral with a structure that would embody their new urban awareness, in terms of content, scale, and form. The building that resulted, while firmly rooted in a variety of venerable traditions, was revolutionary in each of these basic domains.

In the first instance the revaluation of content lay in the new denomination. The city's religious horizon had outgrown the provincial and local Saint Reparata, to whom the earlier cathedral was dedicated, and expanded to encompass the vast, universalizing, rationalizing and humanizing ecclesiastical ideology built by the great thinkers of the Scholastic age. Florence joined the international wave of devotion to the Virgin Mary that swept over all of Europe and resulted in the dedication or rededication of innumerable churches and cathedrals to the Mother of God, who became what might be described as the sophisticated, cosmopolitan religious identification *par excellence*. What distinguished the Florentine rededication, however, was that the new church was not named for Mary *tout court*. At the blessing ceremony in 1296 the Virgin was given an uncannily punning epithet, del Fiore, which conflated the universal motherhood of the Church with local references that in turn resonated far beyond the city limits. The flower referred at once to the city's name and to its heraldic emblem, the lily, symbol of the purity of the Virgin. The lily was traditionally associated with the Annunciation, that is, the inception of the virgin birth, the city's national feast day and the beginning of the Florentine New Year. The flower also referred to the ultimate blossom of the Tree of Jesse, the Virgin's son, Christ himself. This last relationship was actually embodied

\* First presented in March 1997 at a symposium on the choir of Florence cathedral, organized at Harvard University by professor Christine Smith. This essay should be read in conjunction with the author's second contribution, printed in vol. I of these Atti, *La Cattedrale e la città*; they have been published together, morefully illustrated, in Italian as *Santa Maria del Fiore. Il duomo di Firenze e la Vergine incinta*, Rome, Donzelli, 1999.

in the dedication of the new building, which was not devoted exclusively to the Virgin, as might be assumed and as its popular name would suggest. While the memory of Santa Reparata was also retained, the new dedication included the Savior, as well as the Virgin: «for the honor and reverence of our lord Jesus Christ and his mother the Blessed Virgin Mary and also of the virgin Saint Reparata, and to the honor and decorum of the city and people of Florence» («pro honore et reverentia domini nostri Iesu Christi et beate Marie Virginis matris sue ac etiam sancte Reparate virginis, et ad honorem et decus civitatis et populi Florentini»).<sup>1</sup> This double nature, often forgotten or ignored, was in fact central to the conception of the new cathedral from the outset. Christological as well as Mariological, the new formulation extrapolated from the city of Florence and its people the entire process of salvation. No less extraordinary was the program of decoration and church furnishings that served to give articulate expression to the underlying ideology of this astonishing constellation of civic spirituality.

In the second instance, the new church would be on a vastly different scale, several times bigger than its predecessor. The enlargement was not intended simply to accommodate the city's greatly increased population. Rather, the size of the building was in itself an expression of an ideology. The Cathedral of Florence would overshadow the huge cathedrals erected by its rival and sometimes enemy communes, Pisa and Siena, it would actually be the largest church in all Christendom, indeed the largest covered structure in the world. The dimensions served as a measure of civic pride and piety, and as a structural and spatial metaphor for the eschatological universality of Christianity embodied in the new dedication.<sup>2</sup>

These religious and physical aspirations had their counterpart in the design of the building, which is the third factor of the new Florentine equation. The plan as a whole conformed to a standard typology of European church architecture: a cruciform basilica with a dome over the intersection between nave, transepts and choir. Within this basic framework, however, the Duomo embodied a new and surpassing synthesis of the two quintessential forms of traditional Christian church architecture: the static, centrally planned commemorative monument and the ritually and symbolically dynamic cruciform basilica. The design sought to integrate these seemingly incompatible forms through a wholly rational geometric and structural system, an integration or coincidence of opposites perhaps imagined but not realized until the building was completed by its miraculous dome a century and a half after it was begun.

My purpose in the two essays presented in these volumes is to grasp the overarching coherence of these interconnected and interdependent innovations. I

<sup>1</sup> C. GUASTI, *Santa Maria del Fiore. La costruzione della chiesa e del campanile*, Florence, Tipografia Ricci, 1887, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> The sheer ambitiousness of the project must be comprehended in relation to the great secular urban undertakings of the period, the expanded city walls (1284 ff.) and the Palazzo della Signoria (1285 ff.).

believe that alongside economic and religious considerations, we owe the new building to three equally inseparable and complementary aspects of the city's emergent "national" awareness. One development was political, in this case reflected in the body of elected officials responsible for the Cathedral; the second factor was social and was embodied institutionally in such great communal organizations as the Confraternity of the Madonna della Misericordia, whose purview encompassed all classes of humanity. The third factor, which I would call imaginative, concerned the design and construction of the building itself, whose innovations had a profound common denominator in the very process of intellection – *ingegno* was the contemporary term. Brunelleschi formulated the concept succinctly when speaking of his project for the cupola: «... sarà cosa molto difficile. Ma ricordandomi che questo è tempio sacro a Dio et alla Vergine, mi confido che, faccendosi in memoria sua, non mancherà d'infondere il sapere dov'è non sia, et agiugnere le forze e la sapienza e l'ingegno a chi sarà autore di tal cosa». <sup>3</sup> The Duomo was conceived from the outset as a paean to this ultimate definition of the Florentine collective consciousness, and the city's supreme act of devotion – defined *expressis verbis* in the inscription placed at the apex of the dome when its decoration was finally completed toward the end of the sixteenth century: «Ecce Homo».

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An earlier, abbreviated version of this paper was published as an accompaniment to the architect Michael Graves's submission to an international "Consultation" held in 1996 for a restructuring of the choir of the Cathedral of Florence (see *below* and figs. 19-21).<sup>4</sup> The parameters set forth for the Consultation included the following statement by its secretary, prof. mons. Timothy Verdon, concerning what he called the «problem», and the «dilemma»:

The "problem" we face is therefore a true "dilemma". Even in the reduced form in which the nineteenth century left it, the choir enclosure is a barrier. It offends contemporary liturgical and ecclesiastical sensibilities, isolating the celebration in an ideal "sacred space",

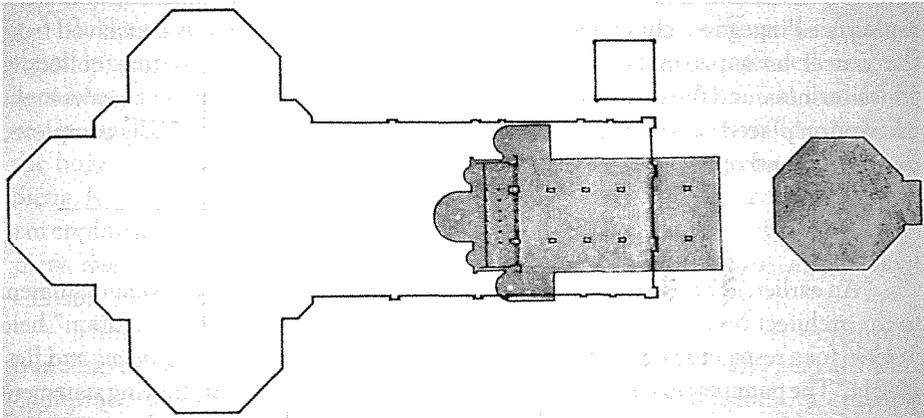
<sup>3</sup> G. VASARI, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, R. BETTARINI and P. BAROCCHI eds., Florence, Sansoni, 1966 ff., III Testo, p. 153 f. «... questions of great difficulty. But when I remember that the church is dedicated to God and to the Virgin, I am confident that what is done in their memory will not fail for lack of knowledge, and that the architect will receive aid in his strength, wisdom, and ingenuity». (G. VASARI, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, transl. A.B. HINDS, ed. W. GAUNT, 4 vols., London-New-York, J.M. Dent & Sons-E.P. Dutton., 1963, I, p. 277)

<sup>4</sup> Besides Michael Graves, the Consultation included the architects Mario Botta, Klaus Theo Brenner, Gabetti & Isola, Hans Hollein, Arata Isosaki, Jean Nouvel, and Aldo Rossi. The projects were published in *Sotto il cielo della cupola. Il coro di Santa Maria del Fiore dal rinascimento al 2000*, ed. T. VERDON, Milan, Electa, 1997 (cf. pp. 142-50).

closed and cut off from the assembly area of the church, which separates clergy from people and impedes full participation of the faithful.

The fact that at the end of the twentieth century the Archdiocese of Florence was dissatisfied with the present arrangement – a much reduced and transfigured legacy of the grandiose choir built in the late sixteenth century to replace the original choir designed by Brunelleschi in the early fifteenth century – seemed to me indeed profoundly symptomatic of a dilemma inherent in the very nature of the building and the functional and symbolic purposes it was intended to fulfill; this was a subject that had long interested me.

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1. Site plan showing Baptistery, Piazza del Duomo, Santa Reparata, Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence

Among the many distinctions of the Cathedral of Florence two seem especially significant of the basic concepts that motivated its patrons and builders (figs. 1, 2). One is that at the time of its construction the cathedral was the largest church in all Christendom and was thus from the outset intended to constitute a supreme expression of civic pride, devotion and gratitude on the part of a city-state that had become a great European power, economically, politically and intellectually. Begun at the end of the thirteenth century at the behest of the city's civic leaders and carried out under their direction, the initial design of the architect and sculptor Arnolfo di Cambio was, in essence, adhered to throughout the construction over the next 150 years.<sup>5</sup> It has been

<sup>5</sup> The subject of the nature of the roles of Arnolfo di Cambio and his successor architects of the Duomo is one of the classic dilemmas of the history of Italian art (for a survey of opinions see F. TOKER, *Arnolfo's*



2. View of Baptistery and Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence

said that the documentary record of the Cathedral, virtually complete and unique in all of Europe, testifies to the fact that the overseers were the real masters of the building, which was thus indeed, in the deepest sense, a reflection of the will of the people of Florence.<sup>6</sup>

The second point is that in its design, also, the Duomo was intended to achieve what might well be described as a supreme expression of architectural pride and devotion. It is indicative of the practical and intellectual ambition of the overseers that they held their architect in highest esteem, not only for his «industriam» and «experientiam», but also for his «ingenium». And indeed, the plan he devised sought nothing less than to combine in a new and perfect synthesis the two main structural types that had dominated church building since the very beginnings of Christianity, the central-plan martyrium and the cruciform basilica.<sup>7</sup> The martyrium was a

*S. Maria del Fiore: a Working Hypothesis*, in «Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians», (1983), p. 106 ff.). I continue to hold the traditional view that Arnolfo formulated the basic concept, which seems to me already implicit in the new basilica's relationship to the Baptistery, in orientation, size, and external revetment, and in the obvious determination to coopt and surpass Pisa.

<sup>6</sup> W. PAATZ-E. PAATZ, *Die Kirchen von Florenz. Ein kunstgeschichtliches Handbuch*, 6 vols. Frankfurt, 1952-5, III, p. 330 and 442, n. 60, citing P. SANPAOLESI, *Il concorso del 1418-20 per la cupola di S. Maria del Fiore*, in «Rivista d'Arte», (1936), p. 323.

<sup>7</sup> The eloquent document concerning Arnolfo's expertise is quoted in my essay in vol. I of these Atti. On precedents and possible prototypes for the plan of the Duomo – none of which approach its majestic

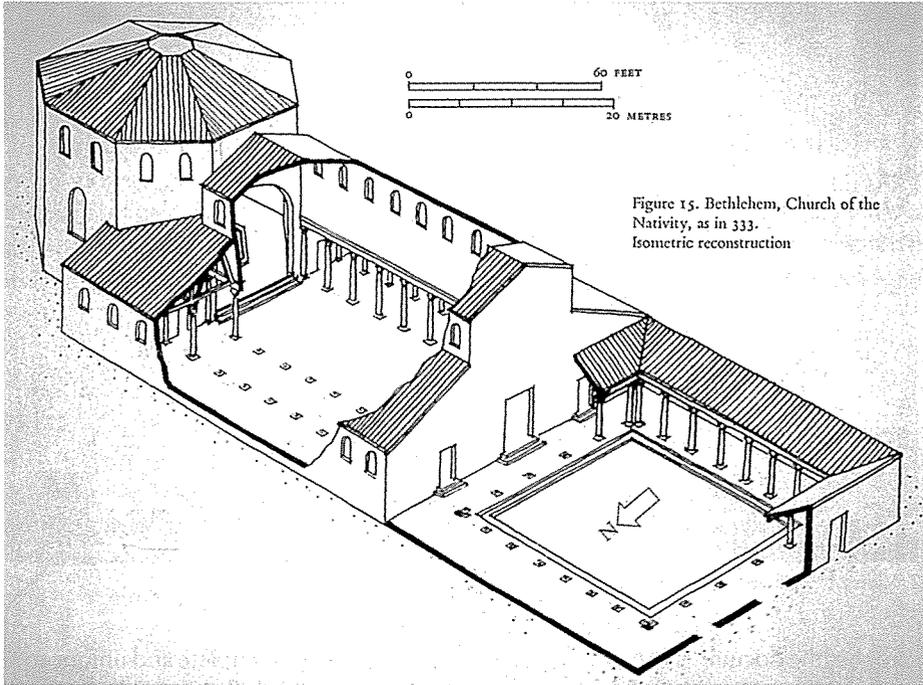
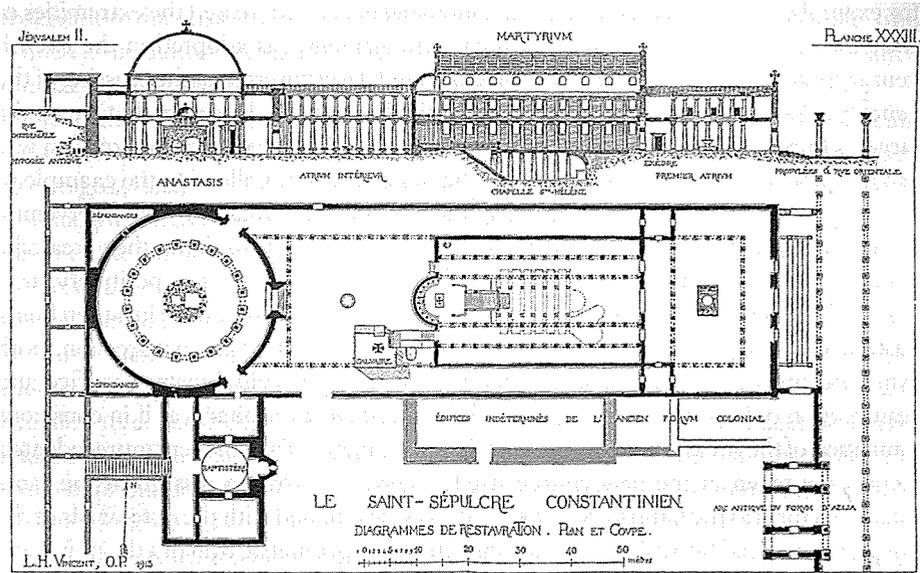


Figure 15. Bethlehem, Church of the Nativity, as in 333.  
Isometric reconstruction

3. Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem, plan

commemorative type *par excellence*, derived from ancient mausolea and placed over a holy place or saint's tomb as witness (this is the meaning of the term martyr) to faith in Christ's mission of incarnation, sacrifice and salvation. Derived from ancient tombs and temples, and based ideally on the Constantinian churches of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem (figs. 3, 4), the martyrium was a domed, centrally planned structure, whose geometrical proportions and numerical harmonies the ancient philosophers and Fathers of the Church considered divine reflections of God's own ideal perfection. The martyrium took on many forms and functions, including especially the octagon, a configuration rife with symbolic and mystical associations; and the Baptistery, since baptism itself, that is, the ritual incorporation of the faithful into the communal body of the church, was conceived as a replication of Christ's own

proportions and geometrical consistency – see PAATZ-PAATZ, *Die Kirchen ... cit.*, III, p. 435 n. 42; M. TRACHTENBERG, *Review of G. KREYTENBERG, Der Dom zu Florenz*, Berlin, 1974, in «The Art Bulletin», (1979), p. 129. Some of the themes involved here and in the following essay were discussed by T. VERDON, 'Forma ecclesiae homo'. *Per un antropologia teologica dell'architettura ecclesiale*, in *Spazio e riti. Aspetti costitutivi dei luoghi della celebrazione cristiana*. Atti della XXIII settimana di studio dell'associazione professori di liturgia, Rome, 1996, pp. 117-122.



4. Church of the of Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem, plan

initiation, which signified the death of the Old Adam and the birth of the New. The baptistery of Florence, which included at its center an octagonal baptismal font, was thought to have originated as an ancient temple of Mars, so that in this case the idea of reincarnation of the old in the new included also pagan antiquity.<sup>8</sup> The basilica, on the other hand, was the communal church form *par excellence*, derived as it was from ancient assembly halls, and adapted to large gatherings and public functions and ceremonies. With transept arms and choir the cruciform type also had rich symbolic value as the emblem of the Cross of Golgotha and therefore the participation of the faithful in Christ's own body, and that of the church as an institution. Most commonly in martyria the altar was placed in the center, while in basilicas the altar was located at the entrance to the apse, in conjunction with the choir for participating clerics.

The challenge of combining these two fundamental ecclesiastical traditions in one building runs like a leitmotif through the history of European architecture. The sanctuaries at Bethlehem and Jerusalem were both preceded by longitudinal basilical naves. More complete hybridizations were sought mainly by articulating the intersection of a cruciform plan as a distinct unit; and/or by echoing a centrally planned shape in the arms of the cross. The Justinianic church that replaced Constantine's Holy Sepulcher,

<sup>8</sup> On the Martian origin of the Baptistery see *La cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore*, 2 vols. eds. F. GURRIERI (I), C. ACIDINI LUCHINAT (II), Florence, Cassa di Risparmio, 1994-95, I, p. 260 ff.

for example, enlarged the crossing to a dominant square and treated the extremities of the cross as semi-circular apses. A similar arrangement was adopted in the twelfth century for the cathedral of Pisa, with an elongated dome inserted at the crossing of the central aisles. When Arnolfo di Cambio and the Florentines determined to create the largest church in the world, the solution they devised to the conceptual problem was as novel and ambitious as was the size of the building itself. Following the example of Pisa they took the Baptistery as their point of departure, enlarging the intervening piazza and orienting the new building on the same line.<sup>9</sup> In so doing they created a powerful urban axis in the heart of the modern city (rather than at its periphery, as at Pisa), whose perimeter walls, as part of a feverish building boom, were just then being vastly enlarged. The new arrangement also clearly articulated the progression, both symbolic and ceremonial on special feast days, from the initial water sacrifice and resurrection of baptism to the ultimate blood sacrifice of the altar – as if in conscious emulation of the ritual practiced in Early Christian times.<sup>10</sup> Two further, unprecedented steps were taken in the new church itself, where the crossing was given the same octagonal form as the baptistery, with its lateral sides aligned with the outer walls of the nave. As an added flourish of centralizing effect and geometric bravura the polygonal motif was echoed at the ends of the transept arms and choir. Polygonal domes over the crossings of cruciform churches were not unusual – the cathedral of Siena, Florence's arch-rival, was an impressive case in point. At Florence, however, the octagonal space of the crossing is vastly expanded, while it is also perfectly integrated into the longitudinal orientation and spatial geometry of the whole, including the Baptistery.

The solution was indeed perfect except for one thing: the polygonal shape and immense size of the crossing made it difficult, if not impossible to cover with a traditional dome. And, apart from his famous method of constructing the dome without centering, it was Brunelleschi's genius to find a way to realize the scheme structurally. Vasari reports that Brunelleschi was inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, an

<sup>9</sup> The Duomo acutally deviates slightly from the center axis of the Baptistery, owing to the presence of the canonry flanking the old church (F. TOKER, *Florence Cathedral. The Design Stage*, in «The Art Bulletin», (1978), p. 217; cfr. M. TRACHTENBERG, *Dominion of the Eye. Urbanism, Art, and Power in Early Modern Florence*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 143).

<sup>10</sup> The coherent geometry, axiality and liturgical significance of the Florentine plan was observed and rightly emphasized by L. CROCIANI, *La liturgia battesimale*, in *Il bel San Giovanni e Santa Maria del Fiore. Il Centro religioso di Firenze dal tardo antico al rinascimento*, D. CARDINI ed., Florence, Le Lettere, 1996, pp. 52-58; on the symbolic progression, also T. VERDON (ed.), *Alla riscoperta di piazza del Duomo in Firenze. 4. La cupola di Santa Maria del Fiore*, Florence, Centro Di, 1994, p. 22, followed by F. VOSSILLA, *L'altar maggiore di Santa Maria del Fiore di Baccio Bandinelli*, in C. DE BENEDECTIS, *Altari e committenza. Episodi a Firenze nell'età della Controriforma*, Florence, Pontecorboli, 1996, p. 37 ff. D. CARDINI (*Il "salto della scala" nella progettazione della città e nuova configurazione del centro religioso ...*, in *Il bel San Giovanni ... cit.*, p. 206 ff.) noted the relation of the cathedral dome to that of the Baptistery, the church of the Nativity at Bethlehem, and the traditional symbolism of the octagon.

observation that has often been taken metaphorically, referring to the scale (the diameters are almost the same) and prestige of the undertaking (the largest dome since antiquity), rather than technically, since the Pantheon dome is made of concrete.<sup>11</sup> Brunelleschi did incorporate the structural stability of the circle, however, by introducing annular reinforcements, while retaining the venerable and by now mystic rationality of the octagonal shape.<sup>12</sup> At least some measure of understanding of what I call the mystic rationality of the Duomo must have been profound and pervasive. A kindred spirit animates the famous motet *Nuper rosarium flores* composed in Florence by Guillaume Dufay for the ceremonial dedication of the cathedral in 1436 by Pope Eugenius IV. To be sure, there is much scholarly debate as to the exact nature of the relationship between the music and the church it was meant to celebrate; but there can be no doubt that the underlying mathematical structure of the motet – which is absolutely unique – was intended to acknowledge the building's unique design. The interconnection is also evident from Brunelleschi's expressive use of the word «terribile» in describing the problem of building the great dome: «... neanco gl'antichi voltassero mai una volta sì terribile come questa».<sup>13</sup> *Terribile est locus iste* are the first words of the introit of the mass for the dedication of a church. This phrase comes from the account in Genesis of Jacob's vision of a heavenly temple: «And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and he said, How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven». The same phrase, *terrible est locus iste*, was used by Dufay for the *cantus firmus* of his motet.<sup>14</sup>

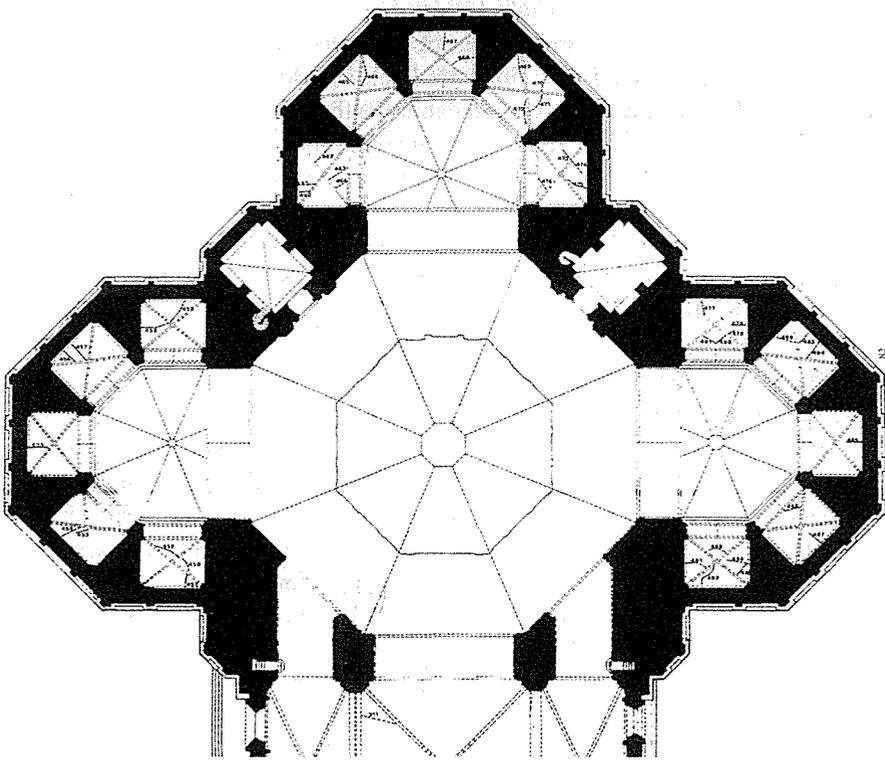
The subsequent history of the Duomo shows that three artists clearly understood the significance and challenge presented by this epochal synthesis and transformation of the two great, seemingly irreconcilable traditions of Christian ecclesiastical architecture. To express liturgically the astonishing coincidence of opposites inherent in the design of the building, Brunelleschi placed the canons' choir directly under the dome, whose octagon it mirrors. In his design of the choir – a parapet supporting a colonnade with an entablature surmounted by candelabra – Brunelleschi seems to have amalgamated a venerable Early Christian precedent, the architectural screen before the

<sup>11</sup> VASARI, *Le vite de' più eccellenti ...* cit., III testo, p. 153.

<sup>12</sup> M. TRACHTENBERG, *Review* of H. SAALMAN, *Filippo Brunelleschi. The Cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore*, Montclair, N.J., 1980, in «Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians», (1983), p. 293 ff., following the work of Rowland Mainstone, also emphasizes the importance of the circular reinforcements and the example of the Pantheon in this respect.

<sup>13</sup> VASARI, *Le vite de' più eccellenti ...* cit., III Testo, p. 153.

<sup>14</sup> Gn 28, 17: «Cumque evigilasset Iacob di somno, ait: Vere Dominus est in loco isto, et ego nesciebam. Pavensque, Quam terribilis est, inquit, locus iste: non est his aliud nisi domus Dei et porta caeli». On Dufay's motet see C. WRIGHT, *Dufay's Nuper rosarum flores, King Salomon's Temple, and the Veneration of the Virgin*, in «Journal of the American Musicological Society», XLVII (1994), esp. pp. 397, 413.

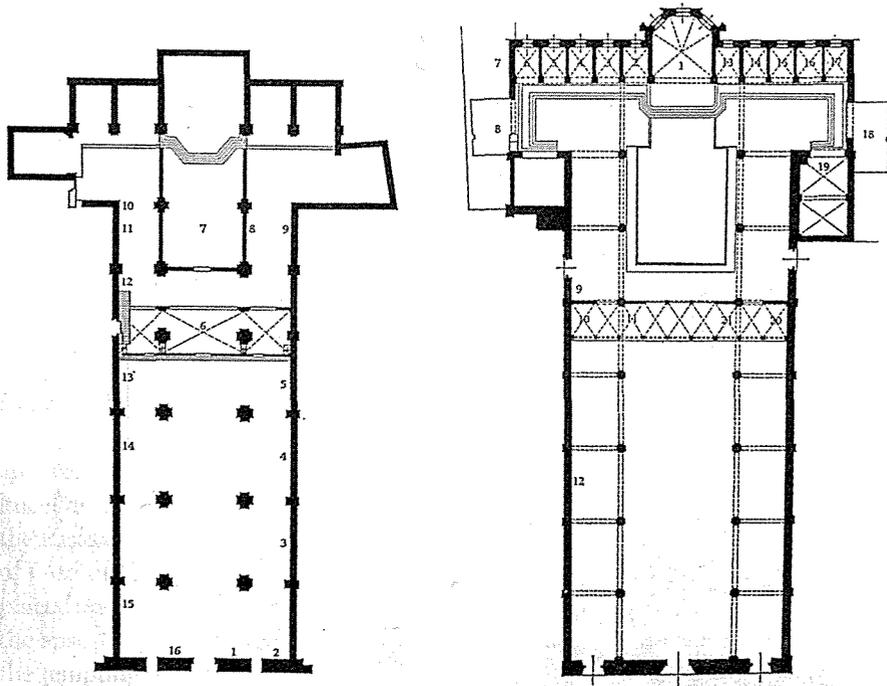


5. Plan of S. Maria del Fiore with indication of the choir

Constantinian choir of Old St. Peter's in Rome, with the octagonal enclosure of the font in the Baptistry, which thus again became the point of departure for the new identity of Florence cathedral.<sup>15</sup> The altar itself, however, was situated not at the center but at the eastern facet of the enclosure. In this way the centrality of the crossing was affirmed, but so also was the longitudinal axis of the church, along which the worshipper had a view past the high altar to the extremity of the apse. That visibility and the position of the altar were prime considerations for the overseers of the Cathedral is evident from their critiques of the three models submitted for the project in 1435, by Brunelleschi, Ghiberti and Andrea d'Agnolo.<sup>16</sup> Ghiberti's project was rejected specifically because

<sup>15</sup> VERDON (*Alla riscoperta ... cit.*, p. 73) noted the relationship with the structure at St. Peter's. The most recent reconstruction of the Baptistry font enclosure is that in *Il bel San Giovanni ... cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> The wording of the famous document recording the deliberations of 1435 (G. POGGI, *Il Duomo di Firenze. Documenti sulla decorazione della chiesa e del campanile tratti dall'archivio dell'opera*, anastatic reprint, ed. M. HAINES, Florence, Medicea, 1988, No. 1176) implies that the octagonal shape was a given in the project («ci pare che facendo il coro a otto angolare sotto la detta cupola maggiore ...»). J. WHITE, *Art*



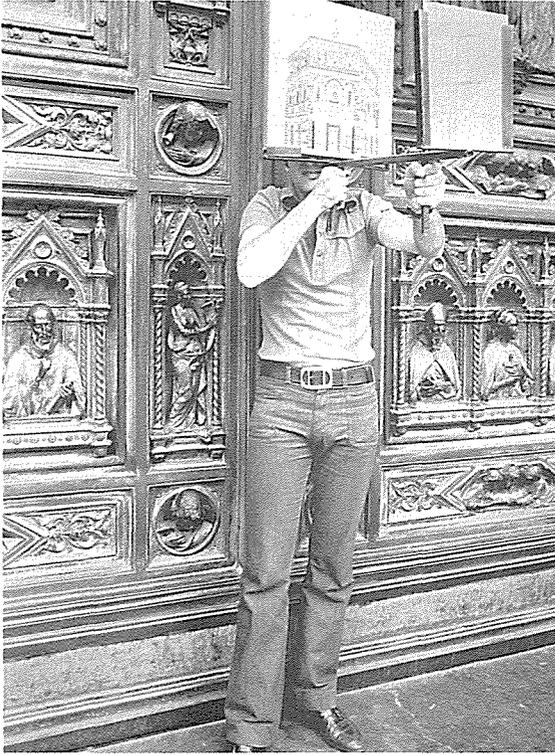
6. Plans of S. Maria Novella and S. Croce, Florence, showing the medieval rood screens across the naves

it placed the altar in the center, and Andrea d'Agnolo's was modified by shifting the altar toward the apse. Brunelleschi was requested to lower the parapet so as not to obstruct the view down the nave, and to enlarge the enclosure to align its lateral facets with the outer faces of the crossing piers, but not beyond, so as not to block the view from the side aisles (fig. 5). The latter arrangement, moreover, gave the choir a diameter exactly half that of the cupola<sup>17</sup> – further evidence of the spirit of geometric regularity and integration that inspired the design of the Duomo itself. The concern for perspective contrasted sharply with other, contemporary Florentine churches, where the view was blocked by high rood screens across the nave (fig. 6).<sup>18</sup> It is tempting to suppose that

*and Architecture in Italy, 1250 to 1400*, Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1966, pp. 321, 324, understood the Duomo as a «compromise» between the centralized and longitudinal plans, but supposed that the high altar was located at the center under the cupola, which actually took place only in 1973 in the wake of Vatican II (*La cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore ... cit.*, II, p. 191).

<sup>17</sup> As observed by L.A. WALDMAN, *From the Middle Ages to the Counter-Reformation: The Choirs of Santa Maria del Fiore*, in *Sotto il cielo ... cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> On this subject see M.B. HALL, *Renovation and Counter-Reformation: Vasari and Duke Cosimo in S.ta Maria Novella and S.ta Croce 1575-1579*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979, ill. p. 197



7. Brunelleschi's perspective view of the Baptistery from the Cathedral portal

Brunelleschi was alluding to these same geometric and axial aspects of the relationship between the Baptistery and the Duomo when he chose to illustrate his new method of mathematical perspective by tracing an image of the Baptistery seen from the central portal of the cathedral (fig. 7); he was surely celebrating the urban axis as much as the illusion created by his new representational system based on the vanishing point.<sup>19</sup>

Baccio Bandinelli understood the guiding principle of the Duomo design when he created a grandiose, marble version of Brunelleschi's installation – an octagonal choir with the high altar shifted to the eastern perimeter – and took a giant step further in the same direction (1547-72).<sup>20</sup> A seventeenth-century observer remarked on the

<sup>19</sup> Brunelleschi's choice of this site for his demonstration, described by his biographers, puzzled E. BATTISTI, *Filippo Brunelleschi. The Complete Work*, New York, Rizzoli, 1981, p. 104, ill. p. 109. In his fundamental work on early modern Florentine spatial thinking, TRACHTENBERG (whose book appeared after the present essay was written) also interprets Brunelleschi's choice of view in this light (*Dominion of the Eye ...* cit., p. 52 ff.).

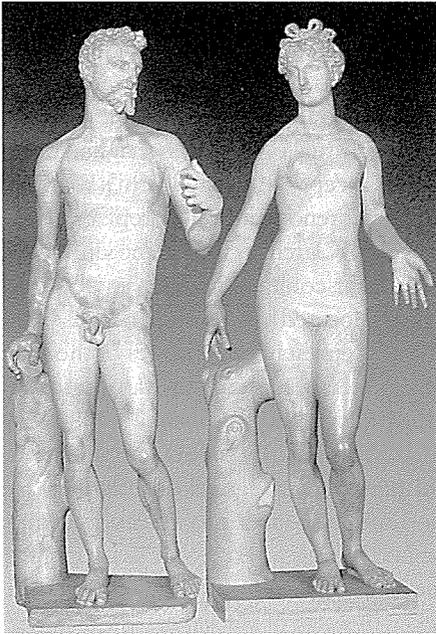
<sup>20</sup> See in R. CORAZZI, *Il rilievo e la restituzione fotogrammetrica grafica ed analitica del coro di Baccio Bandinelli in Santa Maria del Fiore a Firenze*, in this vol. The previously sparse literature on Bandinelli's

irony of Bandinelli creating a choir for the Duomo, while the choirs of other churches were being demolished in response to the requirements of the Council of Trent for greater openness and visibility of the liturgy.<sup>21</sup> Bandinelli was not motivated by a cantankerous spirit of archaism but by a passionate desire to give monumental and permanent expression to the quintessential idea of spiritual progression that had been inherent in the design of the new cathedral from its inception. Brunelleschi's wooden enclosure, which had become decrepit despite several renovations, was replaced by a marble structure designed by Bandinelli's "consulting" architect Giuliano di Baccio d'Agnolo; a chin-high parapet supported an order of columns with an entablature topped by candelabras, while arched openings were located at the four cardinal sides of the octagon.<sup>22</sup> The parapet was to include reliefs representing episodes of the Old Testament framed by figures of prophets, philosophers and saints in allusion to the traditional conception of Christianity as replacing Judaism and paganism. Pulpits were to be placed under the two lateral arches. The high altar was to include on the altar itself an over-life-size group of the dead Christ supported by an angel and flanked by kneeling, candle-bearing angels; in a frieze behind and above a series of reliefs depicting the Passion of Christ; and at the apex, again flanked by angels, a majestic seated figure of God the Father. As if to compensate for the blocked view of the apse, Bandinelli placed under the arch behind the high altar, backed by a slab of black marble and facing the apse, over life-size figures of Adam and Eve flanking the Tree of Knowledge with the tempting serpent (figs. 8, 9); the group was accompanied by a relief showing the creation of Adam and Eve. Bandinelli thus took up the theme of spiritual progression in narrative form, recounting, in effect, the history of salvation from the creation of man to the death of Christ. The project was epic in scale and in concept, surely meant to emulate and even surpass the great undertakings of Michelangelo. The first versions of the four main sculptures, the Pietà, the God Father and the Adam and Eve proved unsatisfactory and he made new versions of each, which were installed. Neither the narrative reliefs, nor the pulpits nor the ancillary angels for the high altar were executed, so that the project as finally installed lacked the full narrative and liturgical context Bandinelli intended. Subsequently, in the mid-nineteenth century, the sculptures of the high altar, never greatly esteemed, were removed and the whole installation was

choir has only recently been significantly enriched. Still fundamental is D. HEIKAMP, *Baccio Bandinelli nel Duomo di Firenze*, in «Paragone», XV, 175 (1964), pp. 32-42, and see now *Per la storia della scultura. Materiali inediti e poco noti*, M. FERRETTI ed., Turin, U. Allemandi, 1992 ("Antichi maestri pittori"), pp. 53-69; *La cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore ... cit.*, I, pp. 168-176, II, pp. 188-191; *Retrospection: Baccio Bandinelli and the Choir of Florence Cathedral*, C. SMITH ed., Cambridge (MA), 1997, pp. 55-68; WALDMAN, *From the Middle Ages ... cit.*

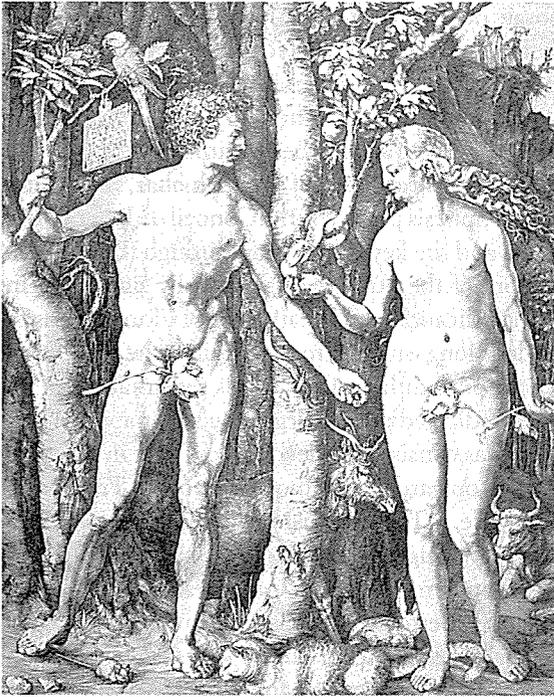
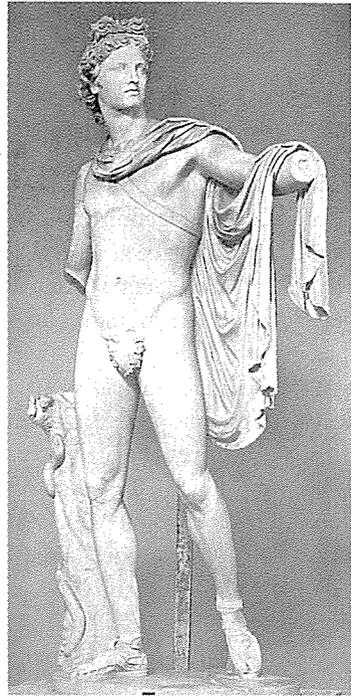
<sup>21</sup> F.L. DEL MIGLIORE, *Firenze città nobilissima*, Florence, Stella, 1684, p. 40, as noted by SMITH (ed.), *Retrospection: Baccio Bandinelli ... cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> The project is described at length by VASARI, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori ... cit.*, V Testo, pp. 263-270.

8. BACCIO BANDINELLI, *Adam and Eve*9. BACCIO BANDINELLI, *Tree of Knowledge*, detail of serpent

decimated: the superstructure was eliminated and the choir reduced in size. Like Michelangelo's tomb of Julius II (for which we still use Vasari's famous phrase, the «tragedy of the tomb»), Bandinelli's choir of Florence cathedral suffered a tragic fate.

We gather from the sources that Bandinelli was a proud and difficult man, and indeed, his sculptures are proud and difficult, as well. Consistently reviled by his contemporaries, and vice versa, he is perhaps the most maligned and, in my view, misunderstood artist of the Italian Renaissance. Defying the traditional, ingratiating norms of beauty and decorum, Bandinelli's works grate upon the soul. Aggressive and austere, they invariably challenge the viewer to think again about the meaning of the images they represent. Adam and Eve are far from the heroic types of Masaccio or Michelangelo, but instead recall Albrecht Dürer (fig. 10), in commingling the mincing air of High Gothic style with a cool classicism derived from the likes of the Apollo Belvedere (fig. 11). They are, indeed, anti-heroes – elegant, aristocratic, yet all-too-human – and pathetically vulnerable to the heavy-lidded, insinuating beauty of the serpentine devil. The dead Christ is neither a muscular athlete nor an emaciated victim, but an Apollonian giant whose extreme agony is vested in his delicate, exhausted visage and elongated, soft-bellied torso. Unlike the noble, dispassionate patriarch usually portrayed as God the Father, Bandinelli's figure is a hard-bodied, irascible and potentially violent colossus, with the pained expression and uplifting gesture of the

10. ALBRECHT DÜRER, *Adam and Eve*11. *Apollo Belvedere*

Laocoon – of which Bandinelli had himself earlier made a remarkable copy. The key to God's demeanor, and to the Counterreformatory spirit in which these works were conceived is provided by the two books, one of which he grasps, the other – signifying heresy – he tramples underfoot. Seen in hieratic isolation these profoundly disturbing figures – the dead Christ lying on the stone of unction placed directly on the altar table and God Father enthroned above – provided an awesome climax, ideological as well as visual, to the view down the nave through the framing screen of columns to the high altar. Taken together with the greatly reinforced central octagon of the choir and the powerful drama enacted at the high altar at the rear, Bandinelli's design gave monumental, narrative form to the fusion of architectural and ideological themes represented by the building itself.

The final step in the process initiated at the Baptistery more than two centuries before was taken when, following the installation of Bandinelli's choir, the interior of Brunelleschi's dome was decorated (1571-79). Vasari and Federico Zuccari covered the vast surface with an apocalyptic depiction of the Last Judgment, toward which, proleptically, Bandinelli's God the Father seems to gesture. Brunelleschi himself had anticipated such a decoration of the dome, and it can be no accident that the fresco takes up again – in more humanistic terms, as it were – the subject and architectural

framework of the great medieval mosaic decoration in the cupola of the Baptistery.<sup>23</sup> The vision here includes at its apex the inscription «Ecce Homo», unprecedented in this iconographical context, as far as I know; it alludes, I feel sure, to him whom God made in his own image, that is, not only to Christ but to human beings generally, to whose ingenuity, labor, and devotion the cathedral itself bears witness.

Bandinelli's choir project, especially his treatment of the high altar, has rightly been seen as a reflection of the renewed emphasis placed by the Council of Trent on the Eucharistic sacrifice as the core of faith and the key to salvation through the Church. However, other factors from the history of the building were equally significant in determining the program. The original dedication of the Cathedral of Florence was to the Savior, a designation that was recalled along with that to the Virgin in the dedication of the new building, was still vivid in the sixteenth century.<sup>24</sup> It is remarkable but no accident that although the church was dedicated to the Virgin she never appeared in the furnishings of the high altar, which was consistently devoted to Christ in the form of monumental crucifixes, and from 1454 onwards by a famous relic of the True Cross that had been brought from Constantinople.<sup>25</sup> These furnishings seem to be echoed in those portrayed in the medal commemorating the murderous assault in 1478 on Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici during mass in the Cathedral, which shows Brunelleschi's choir.<sup>26</sup> This composition by Bertoldo in turn seems to echo the famous medal by Pisanello (fig. 12), which was also related to an earlier True Cross relic from Constantinople.<sup>27</sup> Here the Paleologan Emperor, who came to Florence in 1439 for the Council intended to reunify the Eastern and Western churches under the aegis of the Cross, worships before an image of a crucifix at the far right of the composition. In fact,

<sup>23</sup> Antonio Manetti notes in his biography that Brunelleschi foresaw mosaics or paintings in the Cathedral dome (A. MANETTI, *The Life of Brunelleschi*, ed. H. SAALMAN-C. ENGGASS, University Park and London, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1970, p. 66 ff., line 611). Zuccari also projected a decoration for the crossing piers, for which a drawing is preserved (D. HEIKAMP, *Federico Zuccari a Firenze 1575-1579. La cupola del Duomo. Il diario disegnato*, in «Paragone», XVIII (1967), p. 49, pl. 18).

<sup>24</sup> On the dedication to S. Salvatore see *La cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore ... cit.*, I, pp. 274-276; A. BENVENUTI, *Stratigrafie della memoria: scritture agiografiche e mutamenti architettonici nella vicenda del "complesso cattedrale" fiorentino*, in *Il bel San Giovanni ... cit.*, pp. 98, 110, who also notes the recollection of this tradition in the liturgy of the cathedral. On the dedication of the new church to Christ and the Virgin see below.

<sup>25</sup> On the cross relic, POGGI, *Il Duomo ... cit.*, I, nos. 1201-3, II, nos. 1861-62, 1867, 1898; WALDMAN, *From the Middle Ages ... cit.*, pp. 46 and 63 n. 56; on the current reliquary, which dates from the early seventeenth century, *La Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore ... cit.*, pp. 370, 379; on the crucifixes for the high altar in the 1460's and 1508-10 (Benedetto da Maiano), WALDMAN, *From the Middle Ages ... cit.*, pp. 47, 50.

<sup>26</sup> On the Pazzi conspiracy medal, see *The Currency of Fame. Portrait Medals of the Renaissance*, S.K. SCHER ed., New York, Thames and Hudson, 1994, pp. 129-132.

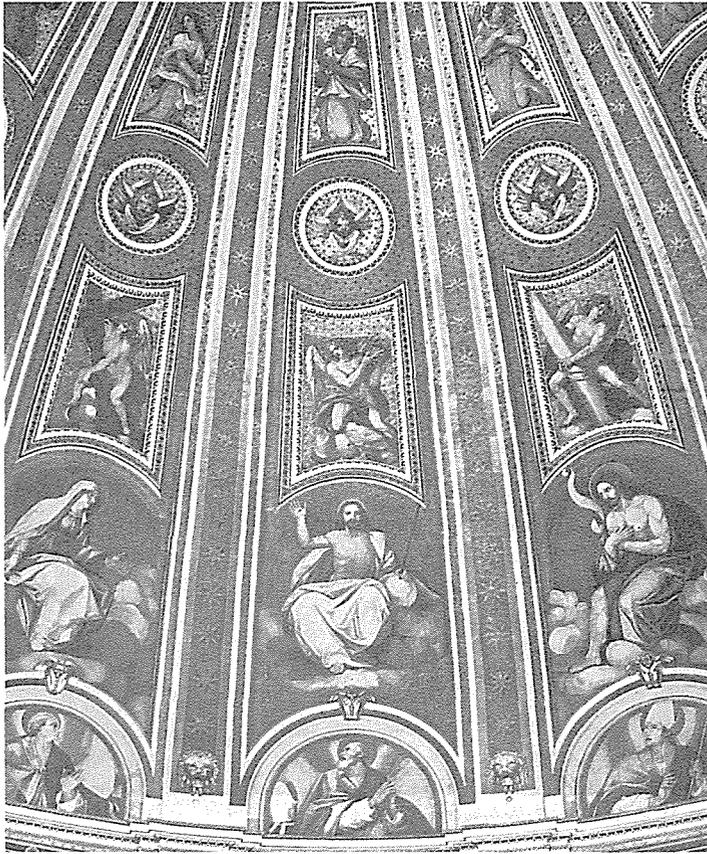
<sup>27</sup> On the medal by Pisanello, see *Ivi* pp. 44-46; on its relation to the True Cross, see I. LAVIN, *Pisanello and the Invention of the Renaissance Medal*, in *Italianische Frührenaissance und nordeuropaisches Mittelalter. Kunst der frühen Neuzeit im europäischen Zusammenhang*, J. POESCHKE ed., Munich, Hirmer, 1993.



12. PISANELLO, *Medal of John Paleologus*

the Orthodox and Catholic churches were declared unified in a ceremony in the Cathedral in 1439, and Brunelleschi's choir, which was intended to be executed in marble, had been temporarily installed in wood for that occasion. The Christological focus of Bandinelli's high altar was thus integral to the tradition of the building and may even have played a roll in the genesis of the original, late medieval project to conflate the martyrrium with the cruciform building types. Certainly the Sacrament was what might well be called the crux of one of Bandinelli's most astonishing ideas, that of placing the figures of Adam and Eve under the arched opening at the back of the choir, facing the apse. The point of the arrangement, indeed the ultimate point of Bandinelli's entire installation, becomes clear when it is recalled that in his time, as still today, the Holy Sacrament was reserved at the altar at the extremity of the apse.<sup>28</sup> Thus, with their

<sup>28</sup> This cardinal observation was also made by C. SMITH, in *Retrospection: Baccio Bandinelli ...* cit., p. 64.



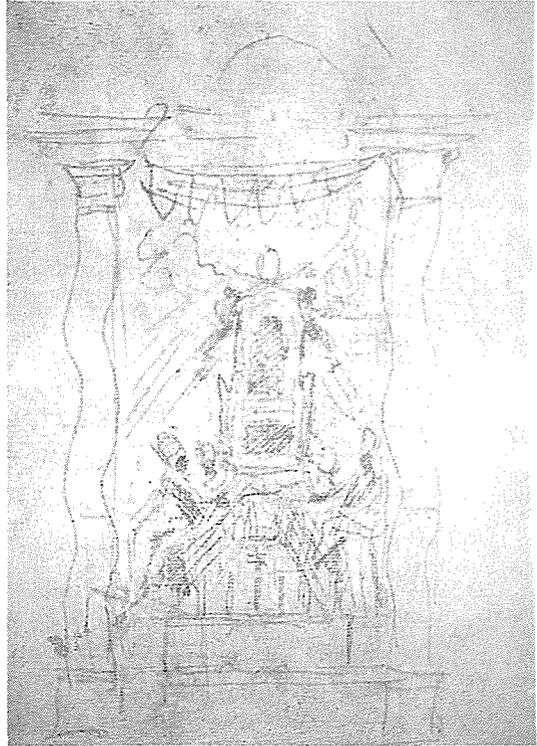
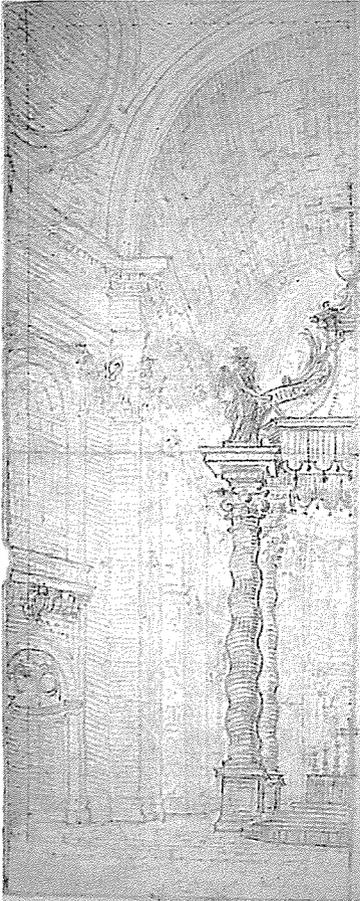
13. View in dome of St. Peter's

backs to the sacred precinct of the choir, from which they are sealed off by a black veil of death, Adam and Eve stand at the threshold of redemption for their "prevarication," as the Council of Trent defined their transgression;<sup>29</sup> they may proceed only through participation in the sacrifice whose substance confronts them. Bandinelli's image exactly paralleled the «bel Cristo» carved from a single stone by his other arch-enemy, Benvenuto Cellini, who also placed his pure white figure on a cross of black marble.<sup>30</sup>

The third artist who understood the Florentine Duomo was Bernini, who applied its lessons at St. Peter's in Rome, which had by then become the greatest church in

<sup>29</sup> T. VERDON, *The Frescoes of the Dome of the Florence Cathedral: History, Meaning, Style*, San Diego, 1995, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> On Cellini's Crucifix, the bitter competition between him and Bandinelli, and the ideal of surpassing Michelangelo, see I. LAVIN, *The Sculptor's "Last Will and Testament"*, in «Allen Memorial Art Museum



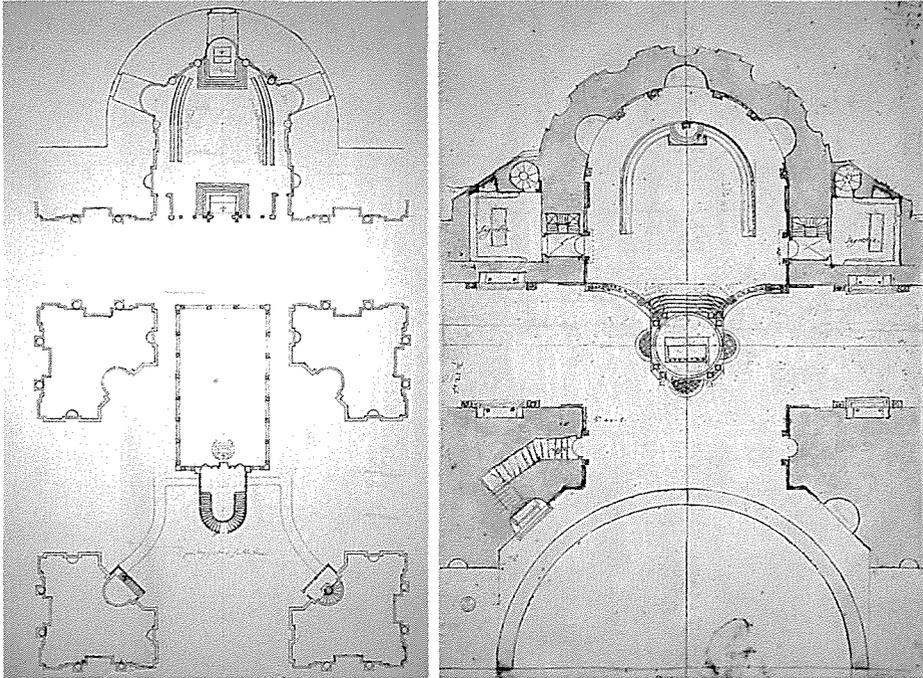
15. GIAN LORENZO BERNINI, *Drawing of baldachin with cathedra*

14. FRANCESCO BORROMINI, *Drawing of baldachin and crossing of St. Peter's*

Christendom.<sup>31</sup> The new building began, as in Florence, with a centrally planned structure, in this case a martyrium over the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles, originally envisioned by Bramante and carried forward by Michelangelo. When the longitudinal nave was added in the early seventeenth century, St. Peter's came to embody the same

Bulletin. Oberlin College», XXV (1977-78), pp. 4-39; and I. LAVIN, *Ex Uno Lapide: The Renaissance Sculptor's Tour de Force*, in *Il Cortile del Belvedere. Der Statuenhof des Belvedere im Vatikan*, M. WINNER *et alii* eds., Mainz, P. von Zabern, 1998, pp. 191-210.

<sup>31</sup> Bernini was reported to have criticized Bandinelli's choir and urged its removal (*La cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore ... cit.*, I, p. 175). Significantly, he objected to the encumbrance of the enclosure, exactly the reason none of the many projects for permanent choir enclosures at St. Peter's were ever executed; see I. LAVIN, *Bernini and the Crossing of Saint Peter's*, New York, University Press, 1968, ("Monographs on Archaeology and the Fine Arts sponsored by the Archaeological Institute of America and the College Art Association of America", XII).



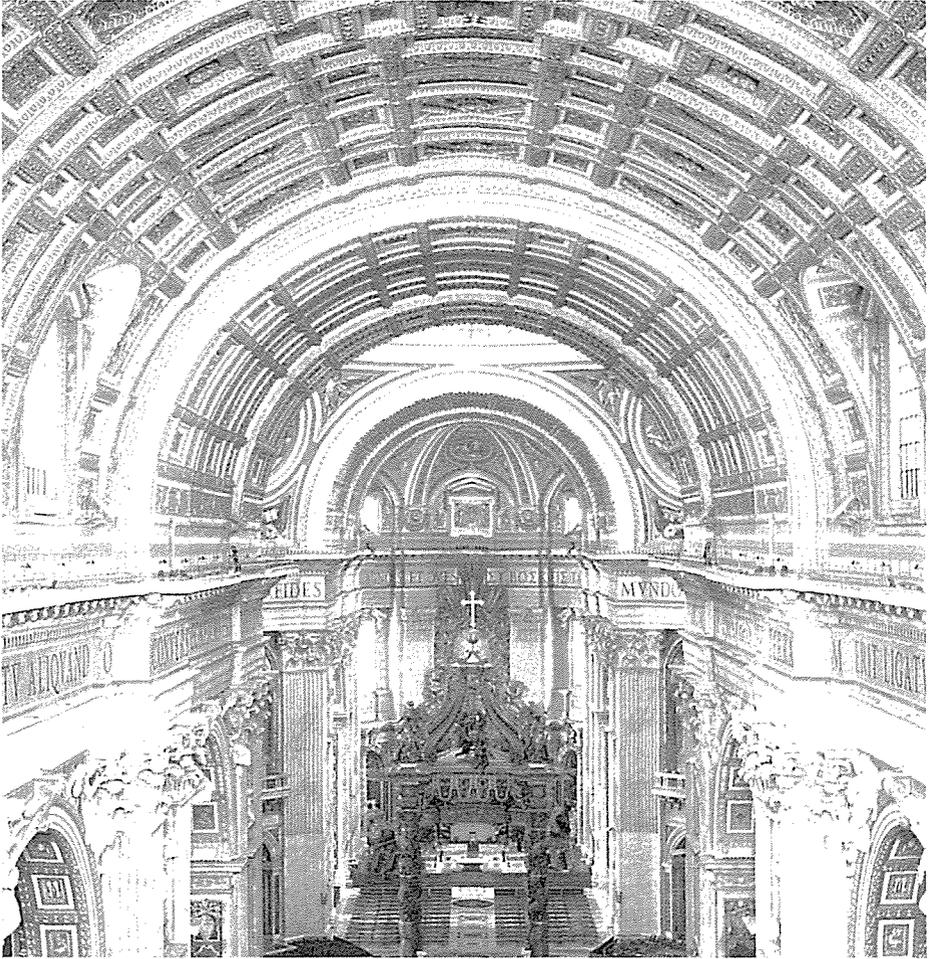
16. CARLO MADERNO, *Project for choirs in the apse and crossing of St. Peter's*

17. LUDOVICO GIGOLI, *Project for a choir in St. Peter's*

fusion of types that had been conceived from the outset at Florence.<sup>32</sup> The way to Florence had already been indicated by the abbreviated version of the Last Judgment with which the interior of Michelangelo's dome had been decorated (1605; fig. 13). Bernini's famous baldachin solved the problem with which many of his predecessors and contemporaries had struggled, that of providing a marker under the dome for the high altar appropriate to the importance of its function and to the scale of its surroundings, while providing a visual focus and spiritual goal for the longitudinal axis of the cross and the view down the nave – these are exactly the issues addressed in a magnificent perspective drawing executed by Borromini under Bernini's direction (fig. 14). Bernini later had the opportunity to add the equivalent of Bandinelli's dramatic high altar, when he created the spectacular vision of the throne of St. Peter surmounted by an aureole with the dove of the Holy Spirit that illuminates its center and the focal point of all Christendom (fig. 15).

In the end, however, it must be said that the problem of the choir was never really solved to everyone's satisfaction, either in Florence or in Rome. In Florence, the choir

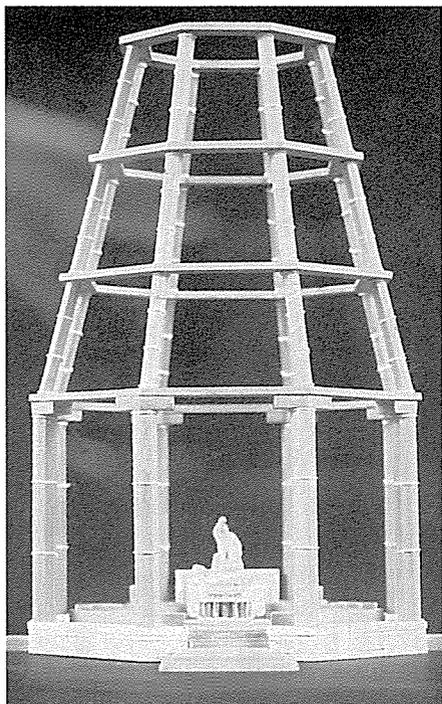
<sup>32</sup> CARDINI (*Il "salto della scala" ... cit.* p. 207) also noted the significance of Florence for St. Peter's in this respect.



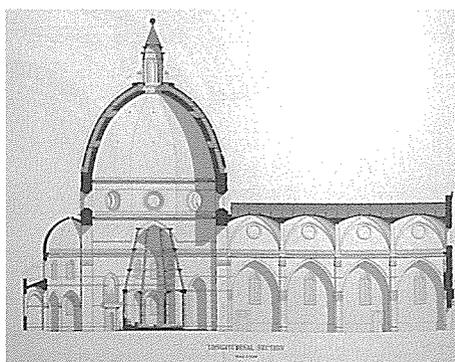
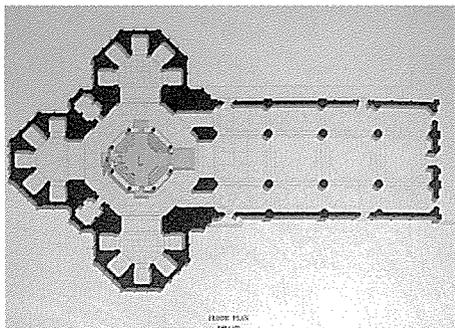
18. Modern provisional choir installation in St. Peter's

was built and it caused trouble ever after. Dismembered, mutilated and despised, it still gets in the way. At St. Peter's the issue of a choir was debated acrimoniously for half a century after the nave was added, and many projects were submitted, only to be rejected until in the end nothing was done (figs. 16, 17) – except that for centuries ever since they have had to erect temporary wooden structures when the occasion demands a choir (fig. 18). The cathedral of Florence and the church of St. Peter seem to be the horns of an ultimately insoluble but infinitely fertile dilemma – the problem of the choir – built into the very nature of these glorious and thoroughbred hybrids.

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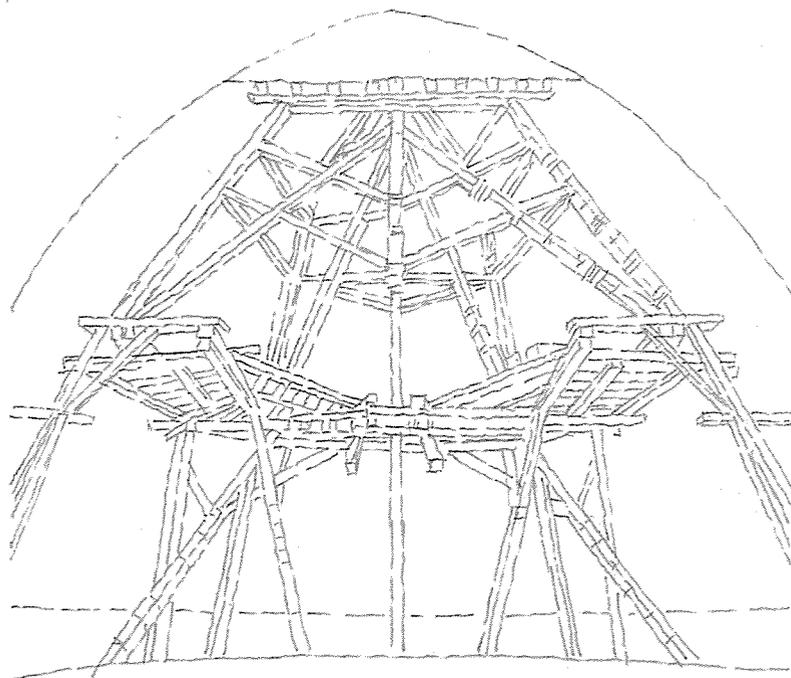
19. M. GRAVES, *Project for choir of S. Maria del Fiore*, Florence



20. M. GRAVES, *Project for choir of S. Maria del Fiore*, Florence, plan and cross-section

When Michael Graves first showed me his project for the choir it was evident that he had responded, consciously or not, both to the inherent logic of the problem and to the history I have traced, from beginning to end, as it were (figs. 19, 20).<sup>33</sup> His perforated octagonal superstructure of wood had its origin in Brunelleschi's own solution, while its grand scale echoed Bernini's transformation of what was for Brunelleschi essentially a piece of church furniture, into an architectural monument analogous to and in proportion with the building itself. Graves's design also gestures upward toward the cupola, its horizontal bands giving external, skeletal form to the encircling reinforcements that were the core of Brunelleschi's method of constructing the dome (fig. 21). Seen as an open framework the project even recalls the light wooden scaffolding that sufficed instead of heavy centering for Brunelleschi's daring feat of structural engineering. It came as a small surprise but as a large gratification that when

<sup>33</sup> For the details of Graves's proposal see *Sotto il cielo* ... cit., pp. 208-211; I am greatly indebted to Rossana Hu, Senior Designer and Project Manager for the Florence Consultation with Michael Graves Architect, for her help in all matters pertaining to the project.



21. M. GRAVES, *Reconstruction of Brunelleschi's system of scaffolding for the cupola* (after G.B. NELLI, *Discorsi di Architettura*, Florence, Eredi Paperini, 1753, pl. II), drawing

Graves asked me to serve as his «consulting historian», he readily accepted my immediate, and only significant suggestion, that he adopt Baccio Bandinelli as his «consulting sculptor» (required by the competition). It took courage. But by daring to restore Bandinelli's daring sculptures to their rightful place at the head of the choir, the project not only contributes to the long-overdue rehabilitation of the masterpiece – Bandinelli himself described it as «fantastic and difficult» – of an uncannily innovative and challenging artist;<sup>34</sup> it also retrieves the bold spirit of that ideal synthesis of centralized and longitudinal building types, commemorative and communal religious forms, in which the Cathedral of Florence was first conceived.

<sup>34</sup> G. BOTTARI-S. TICOZZI, *Raccolta di lettere sulla pittura, la scultura ed architettura scritta da' più celebri personaggi dei secoli XV, XVI, e XVII*, 8 vols., Hildesheim-New York, 1976, I, p. 77.