Sassetta's Madonna della Neve. An Image of Patronage

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LOCATION AND APPEARANCE
OF THE CHAPEL OF SANTA MARIA DELLA NEVE

The inventory of 1423 gives a good impression of the crowdedness of the chapels in the cathedral. Besides the altars with their equipment, their immediate surroundings were enlivened by other pictures and sculptures, while all the chapels in the transept also had choir stalls or at least two benches. The fifteenth-century altars were, of course, much smaller than the present baroque ones. Still, the space available for the altar of Santa Maria della Neve was so exceptionally restricted that it deserves our special attention. The peculiarities of its narrow, packed accommodation and its architectonic surroundings will in the end explain some puzzling features of the extraordinary construction, format, optical devices and innovative appearance of Sassetta’s altarpiece and its frame. We shall also have to adjust the current opinion as to the exact location of the altar with regard to the Porta del Perdono.

The inventorisors of the cathedral, starting at the east end, list the chapel of Santa Maria della Neve between the chapels of the Crucifix and Visitation on the one hand, and the altar of San Jacomo Interciso on the other (fig. 2 nrs. 13-16). The descriptions of the altar in the Turino-Ludovica documents, as well as in the inventories, place the altar in relation to the Porta del Perdono, to which the altar is either preso, a lato, dinanzi, pene, iuxta, prope or coram (see Appendix I, docs. A.II, A.III, A.V-A.VII, B.I, B.III, B.IV, B.XII, C.I). Two other records, one from the archival papers that belonged to the chapel, the other from the Opera administration, and one following and the other pertaining to the removal of the altar, mention somewhat more extensively that the altar was situated to the right of the Porta del Perdono, presumably for those facing the wall from the inside (Appendix I, docs. B.XVI, C.II). The written evidence indicates that the altar of Santa Maria della Neve rested against the entrance wall. We shall see shortly that circumstantial evidence better corroborates this conclusion, in spite of the fact that previous literature mistakenly located the altar against the eastern Campanile wall, still in the same corner.

This error has been prompted for the most part by the chronicle of Ventura, prone to the confusion surrounding the two Boniface-altars.

113 On the choir stalls for the chapels of the patron saints, made by Domenico di Niccolò in the first decade of the fifteenth century, see BUTZEK 2001, p. 53.

In fact, a niche to the left of the Porta del Perdono, for the spectator confronting the entrance from the inside, is discernable on Giovannelli’s designs (figs. 9a-b). This must have been the decorative niche of Flaminio del Turco that housed the statue, as is also suggested by the description in LANDI 1655, p. 51: “Dentro alla porta... immediatamente dalla parte di sopra”. The statue has been re-baptised as Pope Julius II and is now to be found in the Palazzo Chigi Saracini. The removal of the altar of Santa Maria della Neve in 1591 (Appendix I, doc. C.I) therefore seems to have been only indirectly associated with the project for the papal statues.

SETTING 39
Ventura draws attention to the Opera Madonna, which in his time hung against the Campanile wall without an altar of its own. Secondly, he discusses the Madonna del Voto in the chapel of San Bonifazio, which he confusingly situates near the Campanile. This Campanile-altar must actually have been the altar just abandoned by the Opera Madonna and just taken by Sassetta's Madonna della Neve 'all'altare che oggi si chiama di Santo Bonifiatio in duomo longo il campanile la quale si chiama la Madonna delle Gratie'. When coupling this notice to the snow-altar, which Ventura actually described, it can again be deduced that it was positioned against the entrance wall to the right of the Porta del Perdono for those facing the wall from the inside, 'longo', that is 'flanking', not 'against' the Campanile as it has been commonly interpreted.  

On top of the written evidence for the original location of the altar, the original architectonic setting and other practical issues can be taken in consideration. For a start, those attending mass at the altar of San Bonifazio, later of Santa Maria della Neve, would have blocked the entrance if the altar were positioned perpendicular to the run of those entering and leaving the cathedral. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, Florence Cathedral too possessed two altars in between its main entrances, against the counterfaçade.  

It is interesting to discover that altars would not have been necessarily placed in the middle of walls and in fact quite often shared their stretch of wall with an entrance. The Siene situation would have resembled the situation at Santissima Annunziata in Florence where the faithful still attend mass or pray in front of the miraculous fresco of the Annunciate, in its temple-like chapel to the side of the entrance, desired by Piero de' Medici in 1447. Nor was such a disposition unfamiliar in Siena where, in the church of Sant'Agostino, an altar dedicated to the Annunciate adorned the counterfaçade from 1528 to the end of the sixteenth century and where, in the church of San Francesco, an altar of the Tolomei was similarly positioned against the counterfaçade. In the Sienese cathedral itself at least two other altars were positioned off-centre in their bays. The altar of the Crucifix co-divided its bay with a minor entrance to the cathedral up to 1407, while the Piccolomini altar of Saint John the Evangelist would later be tucked to the side of the entrance to the Libreria Piccolomini (fig. 5). An early fifteenth-century example can be found just outside Siena in Abbadia Isola (fig. 13). The logic of the placement next to the Porta del Perdono also transpires when inserting it into the symmetry of altar dispositions in the cathedral, which makes the chapel of Santa Maria della Neve a spatial pendant to the altar of Santa Caterina in the opposite transept-arm (fig. 2 nrs. 7, 15). Such a conspicuous location must have seemed particularly desirable to Ludovica, as it would have helped to keep the memoria alive.  

By considering the other spatial peculiarities of this area of the cathedral, we may be able to confirm the position through a process of elimination and, at
5. **Lorenzo di Mariano, known as il Marrina**, entry to the Libreria Piccolomini, with the altar of Saint John the Evangelist, 1497, cathedral, Siena.

6. **Reconstructed ground-plan of the situation in the corner between the Campanile and the Porta del Perdono at Siena Cathedral in the fifteenth century.**
the same time, approximate the original entourage and dimensions of the chapel (fig. 6). This bay of the church, just over the brink of the outside world, bustled with activities. By the other side of the cathedral door (‘a lato’) stood a chest where candles were sold: ‘uno banchetto a gofano covertato di tavole dove si vendan le candele allato alla porta del Perdono’ (Appendix 1, doc. B.IV). In 1446 three new benches around the Campanile first made their appearance in the inventories (Appendix 1, doc. B.II), offering a place to meet friends and to contemplate the beauty of the cathedral. From at least 1446, above the entrance of the Campanile, were affixed two paintings on fabric, one representing a ‘giudicio’ and the other the Annunciation to the Shepherds and the Nativity (Appendix 1, doc. B.III). The Madonna della Neve stood in a draughty place, where beggars played upon the merciful chord of the Sienese. In fact, in 1575 Monsignor Bossio, on his apostolic visit to the cathedral, was appalled by the awkward position of the altar. Celebration of mass had been hampered because alms were distributed very near the Porta del Perdono, while the winds had free play there (Appendix 1, doc. B.XII). In 1446 three new benches around the Campanile first make their appearance in the inventories (Appendix 1, doc. B.II), offering a place to meet friends and to contemplate the beauty of the cathedral. From at least 1446, above the entrance of the Campanile, were affixed two paintings on fabric, one representing a ‘giudicio’ and the other the Annunciation to the Shepherds and the Nativity (Appendix 1, doc. B.III).

This pillar was a stumbling block in the setting of the altar of Santa Maria della Neve and provides further evidence for its original location. The pillar was part of the megalomaniac project for the Duomo Nuovo, begun in 1339 and subsequently silenced by the Black Death in 1348. The Campanile pillar was identical to the pillars that remain on Piazza Jacopo della Quercia, next to the cathedral. The pillar was amazingly constructed in the thickness of the bell tower wall and part of it can still be seen from inside the Campanile. In the fifteenth century its other side protruded into the cathedral space and thus projected from the Campanile wall (figs. 6, 8, 9a, 9b). This design ended with the construction of the Chigi Chapel or Cappella del Voto, realised in 1658-68 (fig. 7). This chapel was to be a new house, by an irony of fate, for the Madonna del Voto, which had remained without a befitting chapel after the destruction in 1658 of the archiepiscopal palace, into which this cathedral chapel had protruded (fig. 1). The pillar was only then made flush against the flat wall. In the elaborate preparatory drawings which accompanied the construction of the Chigi Chapel, the old situation was documented (figs. 8, 9a, 9b). Since the Chigi Chapel would absorb the Porta del Perdono, the latter to be transformed, as it were, into the entrance to the chapel, the architects looked for a solution to make another access to the cathedral from its south

119 The latter canvas may have been similar to a fourteenth-century Florentine embroidery of the same subject, reproduced in VAN OS 1990, p. 114 fig. 116; BEATSON, MÜLLER & STEINHOFF 1986, p. 617, fig. 5.
120 DE NICOLA 1913, p. 283 note 16; POPE HENNESSY 1939, p. 32 note 64, and others after them transcribe erroneously ‘potentes’.
121 versus (= adversus = in front of) seems somewhat awkwardly phrased.
122 KIRCHEN 1999 II, fig. 540; TRAGBAR 1995, p. 164, figs. 4-5; PIETRAMELLARA 1980, p. 32. I thank Monika Butzek and Wolfgang Loseries for letting me consult the as yet unpublished planimetric ground-plans of Siena Cathedral (KIRCHEN 1999 I nr. 4). Their great precision allowed me to make the present reconstruction drawing.
123 See also BUTZEK 1996, p. 247 fig. 14 (ground-plan by Benedetto Giovannelli Orlandi, 1650).
7 Benedetto Giocamelli Orlandi, entry to the Chigi Chapel, 1658-1668, cathedral, Siena.

8 Ground-plan of the Campanile of Siena Cathedral with the Porta del Perdono, 1659, ink and watercolour on paper, 27.1 x 37.6 cm, BAV, miss. Chigiani, P.VII.11, fol. 54.
Benedetto Giovannelli Orlandi, ground-plan of the surroundings of the Campanile of Siena Cathedral, existing situation and several proposals for the restructuring, with a movable piece of paper in opened and closed state, 1660, ink and watercolour on paper, 30.3 x 42.7 cm, BAV, ms. Clignan, P.VII.11, fol. 65.
flank. It proved impossible to open up the Campanile wall for this purpose, since the pillar had already greatly weakened its structure. It appears that the entire height of the pillar could be seen. A slot almost three meters wide had thus been excavated through the Campanile wall.\(^{124}\) Bossio’s discontent concerned the lack of *decoro* of the pillar that probably abutted the wooden altar-step or predella and may have hindered the priest in his acts and those attending mass in their unencumbered view of the altar.

The above-mentioned benches were constructed to the right of the pillar in 1446 (Appendix I, doc. B.111) and were subsequently rebuilt in marble in 1578–79.\(^{125}\) At that date the altar still existed and the pillar still protruded from the wall. The sixteenth-century benches, which are the ones still to be found in the cathedral, in fact end where the pillar would have disturbed the flat wall (fig. 6). The location of these benches at the same time excludes the possibility that the altar of the Madonna della Neve was situated against this stretch of the Campanile wall.

Before the baroque transformations, the wall of the Porta del Perdono was situated more towards the inside of the cathedral than the present entrance of the Cappella del Voto. Only when the construction of the Chigi Chapel had almost been completed in 1661, was the wall of the Porta del Perdono and the adjoining vault pulled down.\(^{126}\) So this bay of the transept was then enlarged by the thickness of the wall of the Porta del Perdono. This change is reflected in the pavement. The stretch of floor in front of the benches or *murelli* had been filled in with the pavement panel of *The Seven Ages of Man* in 1475–77.\(^{127}\) Until the construction of the Chigi Chapel, the pavement in front of the altar of Santa Maria della Neve remained undecorated. Several tombstones could however be found there, amongst them undoubtedly that of Turino di Matteo.\(^{128}\) In 1661 the architect Benedetto Giovannelli Orlandi wrote to

\(^{124}\) BUTZEK 1996, p. 100 nr. 64, 242-243, (letter dated 19th September 1659, from architect Gherardo Silvani of Siena to Prince Mattias de’ Medici): ‘Prima perché nella grosseza del muro, del predetto campanile, del lato della porta del fianco, si trova formata più fa una colonna eguale di altezza a quella, che si dicono del Duomo Vecchio, con un’strappo da alto a basso, di 3 braccia, e con indebolimento tanto considerevole del medesimo campanile, ch’havendo questo pelato in molte parti, fu necessita, anco in quei tempi, incatenarlo in più piani, e per ogni verso.’ In 1389 the Campanile was already in a precarious condition; MILANESI 1854, vol. 1, pp. 318-319 doc. nr. 103, vol. III, p. 280 doc. nr. 8.

\(^{125}\) AOMS, 492/3 (num. Mosc. 357), fol. 168r: on 14th May 1578 the Opera provides stonemason Piero di Benedetto da Prato with the marble for, amongst other projects, the benches around the bell tower: ‘Spese dell’Opera lire quatrocento quaranta sette soldi’, pagati a maestro Piero di Benedetto da Prato, et a maestro Gabriele di Piero detto, scharpellini, sono per la lavoratura de’ murelli intorno al campanile con i schalini sotto, nella chiesa e la porta del campanile con i tre murelli overo sederi, senza li schalini, iar nato, uno dentro la porta del Perdono, uno sopra l’altare della Nave, l’altro acanto l’altare di Santa Caterina, e tutti detti murelli senza li schalini per lire 560 soldi, li schalini ci po’i bracca 29 intorno e sotto la porta del campanile, lire 27 soldi 10... et la porta tutta per lire 114 soldi 10... lire 547’. Transcription by Monika Butzek.


\(^{127}\) ARONOW 1985, pp. 198-206, 438 doc. nr. 101; at the same occasion the tombs and their substructures immediately in front of the Porta del Perdono were reinforced.

\(^{128}\) Before 1406 tombs are already documented in this area of the
Cardinal Flavio Chigi in Rome, asking that something be done about the pavement where once the Porta del Perdono had risen: ‘Rimane lo spazzo avanti alla porta della cappella dove si è demulito il muro senza pietre, et avanti sono alcune sepulture alle quali seguono descritte l’età del uomo’.129 The void strip of pavement was about two to three Sienese braccia wide (circa 1.15–1.75 cm), which roughly corresponds to the thickness of other early stretches of the cathedral’s external walls.130 Giovannelli made the design for the new pavement panels to cover the barren strip, as well as the tomb area (fig. 10). By taking into account these alterations, it again becomes clear that in the fifteenth century the wall of the Campanile between the pillar and the entrance wall could not accommodate an altarpiece of 216 cm wide (fig. 6).

Other Giovannelli drawings with projects for the new chapel also record the old situation with fair precision. They give a good idea of the width of the pavement; see previous note and ARONOW 1985, pp. 60–72, 412-413.

129 BUTZEK 1996, pp. 35-36, 130-131 nr. 108 (19th March 1661), see also pp. 131-132 nrs. 109-110 (20th March and 5th April 1661): ‘Vi va rifatto quanto tiene ’l muro della porta sopra a due in tre braccia il detto pavimento’, and ‘Dello spazzo non ha bisogno di resargimento, altro che le tre braccia accanto alla cappella per essersi allargato in quella parte ’l Duomo’. Turning the panel with the Ages of Man 180° around was considered because, whereas in the past a visitor to the cathedral would have seen it from the right viewing point, the future visitor to the Chigi Chapel would experience it upside down. The operation was at the time judged too hazardous to carry out. Giovannelli’s pavement was redone in 1780, while in 1871 the panel with The Seven Ages of Man was substituted by a copy, which was then given the turn discussed two centuries before; ARONOW 1985, pp. 199-200.

130 BUTZEK 1990, p. 132 nr. 110 (letter by Ansano Zondadari of Vico to Flavio Chigi, 5th April 1661): for the wall thickness, see KIRCHEN 1999, 1, nr. 4.
door opening of the Porta del Perdono. On the basis of the measurements of these seventeenth-century drawings, the preceding situation can be estimated. On a total width of the entrance wall of around 7.80 m, the proportions of the Giovannelli drawing result in a width of the door opening of circa 3.20 m, whereas the flanking walls would each be circa 2.30 m wide. The doorway, which up to 1406 opened in the bay of the chapel of the Crucifix, its walled portal still visible from the outside, was called the 'porticiola piciola' (fig. 11). It measured circa 2.30 m in width. By comparison, the Porta del Perdono, the entrance most frequently used, would have been wider and would have resembled the lateral portals of the façade which are 3.20 m wide. In fact, its gothic portal covered the entire width of the outside wall.

The altar must have been really squeezed in between the stone frame of the Porta del Perdono and the Campanile wall, with little or no free space at all remaining at its sides (fig. 6). The predella of the Madonna della Neve had the same width as the main panel and did not project out to the sides, as was the usual custom. Evidently there was some kind of structure which narrowly enclosed the altarpiece. The Opera Madonna, which stood upon the same altar from 1311 until 1433, was in all likelihood 217 cm wide, that is before the panel was seriously trimmed at a later date (fig. 3). The close match in

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131 See note 204 below.
133 In the 1440s a church had been constructed around the tower where Sant’Ansano suffered his martyrdom. The Opera Madonna, not yet cut down, was transferred there and put on the main altar. The fifteenth-century altar-block has been preserved and measures 217 cm in width. When the Opera Madonna was transferred to the chapel underneath the tower in the same church around 1610/1620, it once again was given an altar of the same width, apparently reflecting the Opera Madonna's original format (it now measures 97 x 67 cm) (I therefore wonder whether the baroque plasterwork frame, whose outer size corresponds to the width of the
width of the two successive altarpieces for the chapel next to the Porta del Perdono once again indicates that the altar was framed on its sides by architectural elements of the cathedral. The corner of the doorway and the Campanile wall formed a natural enclosing niche for the altar and its altarpiece. Two scenarios are possible: either the altar and its altarpiece were closed in by the Campanile wall and a protruding element of the portal, or else additional narrow walls or wooden panels enclosed them, forming an applied niche to the wall, sustaining a crowning feature above and possibly also offering the necessary space to pull aside the altarpiece-curtains. This is an important point, as the architecture which originally must have seamlessly enveloped Sassetta's Madonna della Neve can account for some unusual features of the altarpiece's wooden structure, for instance why its sides have been left undecorated (figs. 16, 17a, 17b). There was obviously no need to embellish the sides as they would have been completely hidden from view, encased in the surrounding architecture.

**'CERTA CHAPELLA DI GIESSO INTAGLIATA'.**

**THE QUESTION OF CANOPIES AND FRESCOS**

The chapel of Santa Maria della Neve was thus confined in space to the altar itself. We can learn more about its appearance from the inventories. The altar had the two compulsory candelabras. It also had a red curtain, substituted by a blue one between the 1450 and the 1458 inventories, and above the altar and its altarpiece was a canopy, mentioned in the fairly elaborate 1458 and 1473 inventories: 'et da capo certa chapella di giesso intagliata' (Appendix I, doc. B.V, B.Vi). A 'chappella del giesso' already existed in the fourteenth century and it is possible that Sassetta conceived his altarpiece to fit the pre-existing structure, which would correspond to the size of the Opera Madonna. However, given the extent to which other chapels were transformed in those years, it is highly likely that Sassetta redesigned or adapted the gesso canopy for his own altarpiece. The new canopy and sustaining brackets or eventual narrow walls would have closely resembled the width of their predecessors, given the restrictions of space. Even though Sassetta’s *chapel di giesso* would have exploited the width of the enclosed altar to the maximum, as did the Opera Madonna, the heights of the two successive altarpieces and therefore of

**altar, is not an addition that post-dates the transference of the Madonna, which possibly entailed the trimming of the panel**. In 1872 it was brought to the Museo dell’Opera del Duomo; **KIRCHEN 1985, vol. I.1, pp. 330, 334, 336.** F. Bisogni, ‘L'iconografia di sant'Ansano’, in ARGENZIANO & BISOGNI 1990, pp. 102-103. The triple recurrence of the size (the two altars in the church of Sant'Ansano, and the almost identical width of the Opera Madonna's successor in the cathedral) suggests it corresponded to the original width of the panel, although one cannot be absolutely certain. An original width of 217 cm for the Madonna is corroborated by a comparison with the proportions of the *Majestas Domini* antependium dated 1215, now in the Sienese Pinacoteca, which measures 98 x 198 cm. The Opera Madonna could have easily been some 20 cm larger, as it has been trimmed at both top (reduced to 97 cm) and bottom and was originally intended for a high altar of importance. *LUSINI 1911, vol. I, p. 321 note 76, citing AOMS, 354 (num. Mosc. 201), fol. 72r, payments of the Opera at the end of June 1374 to the iron-worker Ambrogio di Giovanni, amongst which 30 soldi 'per dodici libre di ferro lavorato avemo da lui che si missero nella chappella del giesso ch'è a lato a la porta del duomo'.

**135 By the end of the fifteenth century elaborate cases with shutters were documented in Italy and these illustrate some similarities in function with the canopies under discussion. They were often executed by the same carpenter and painter who had made the altarpiece itself, GARDNER VON TEUFFEL 2001.**
12 Pietro di Francesco Orioli (attr.), The second bestowal of the keys to the Virgin, Gabella panel, 1483, tempera and gold on panel, 59.1 x 40 cm, ASS, inv. nr. 41.
the crowning canopy cannot have corresponded. The canopy will be seen to complement and at the same time explain the exceptional, straight top of Sassetta's altarpiece.

In an attempt to envisage such a 'chapella di gesso intagliata', quite a few comparables can be found of altarpieces being surrounded, protected and hidden from sight by a variety of structures. Benozzo Gozzoli, for example, painted a wooden, rectangular case hooding over his finto politico in Monte­falco in 1452. Such canopies must have been widely in use to protect the altarpieces from dust, while at the same time providing a convenient way of hanging the curtains that played both a liturgical and a protective role. The altarpieces in the Sienese cathedral were fitted with superstructures and curtains, and on the Gabella panel attributed to Pietro di Francesco Orioli of 1483, the situation can be gauged (fig. 12). The inventories mention many such tabernacoli, sopraciei or cappelle above the altarpieces and the lavish superstructure over the Maestà, clearly visible on the Gabella panel, is called 'sopracielo d'ornato' (1420) or 'voltarella' (1423, 1435). For Simone Martini's altarpiece with the Annunciation, which crowned the altar of Sant'Ansano, payments are recorded in 1333 'per due pontelli che s'adoperaro per la tettoia sopra a l'altare di Santo Sano' and 'per le tavole de la chovertura del altare di Sancto Sano'. In 1400, all four of the patron altars received new voltarelle, sometimes also called wooden tabernacoli. These structures consisted of a hooding element as well as of two 'spallette' panels that may have flanked the altarpiece and sustained the canopy. Voltarella is therefore a term that here probably indicates the more gothic, wooden superstructures.

The canopy over the altar of Santa Maria della Neve was made of tooled plasterwork. In the abbey of Santi Salvatore e Girino at Abbadia Isola (Monte­rignioni) a gesso canopy for an altar in a similar position has been preserved, and this may give us an impression of the original shape of the Madonna della Neve chapel (fig. 13). Immediately to the right of the door upon entering the church is a stucco, round-arched niche, the back of which was frescoed by Taddeo di Bartolo in the first decade of the fifteenth century. It is a unified composition of an enthroned Virgin with Child surrounded by four saints, with Christ the Redeemer and two angels represented in the archivolt. The fresco functioned as an altarpiece, although its altar has now disappeared. The cusped arch of the niche rests on two brackets and is surmounted by a chimney-like triangular superstructure. The presence of similar canopies over altarpieces could be put behind curtains, shutters of cloth or wood or even in cupboards; see previous note and ISRAELS 2001, p. 538; PAARDEKOOPER 1996, pp. 170-176; A. Nova, 'Hangings, Curtains, and Shutters of Sixteenth-Century Lombard Altarpieces', in BORSOOK & SUPERBI GIOFFREDI 1994, pp. 177-190. The comparables can be found of altarpieces being surrounded, protected and hidden from sight by a variety of structures. Benozzo Gozzoli, for example, painted a wooden, rectangular case hooding over his finto politico in Monte­falco in 1452. Such canopies must have been widely in use to protect the altarpieces from dust, while at the same time providing a convenient way of hanging the curtains that played both a liturgical and a protective role. The altarpieces in the Sienese cathedral were fitted with superstructures and curtains, and on the Gabella panel attributed to Pietro di Francesco Orioli of 1483, the situation can be gauged (fig. 12). The inventories mention many such tabernacoli, sopraciei or cappelle above the altarpieces and the lavish superstructure over the Maestà, clearly visible on the Gabella panel, is called 'sopracielo d'ornato' (1420) or 'voltarella' (1423, 1435). For Simone Martini's altarpiece with the Annunciation, which crowned the altar of Sant'Ansano, payments are recorded in 1333 'per due pontelli che s'adoperaro per la tettoia sopra a l'altare di Santo Sano' and 'per le tavole de la chovertura del altare di Sancto Sano'. In 1400, all four of the patron altars received new voltarelle, sometimes also called wooden tabernacoli. These structures consisted of a hooding element as well as of two 'spallette' panels that may have flanked the altarpiece and sustained the canopy. Voltarella is therefore a term that here probably indicates the more gothic, wooden superstructures.

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137 1420: ASS, Opera Metropolitana 28, fol. xlvii; 1423: ASS, Opera Metropolitana 29, fol. 167; 1433: ASS, Opera Metropolitana 30, fol. 171. MERZENICH 2001, p. 107, notes 744-746, mentions early examples of sopraciei.

138 BUTZEK 2001, p. 36; M. Butzek & A. Cecchi, 'Appendice documentaria', in CECCHI 2001, p. 120 doc. nt. IV, 6-7; BACCI 1944, pp. 170-171.

139 BUTZEK 2001, p. 53; M. Butzek & A. Cecchi, 'Appendice documentaria', in CECCHI 2001, p. 131 doc. nrs. XXII, XXIII (the 1420 and 1423 inventories (on the altar of Sant'Ansano f.e.: 'cho' bela tavola in uno tabernacholo di legniamme' and 'voltarella da capo di legname bene tarisiato' respectively)).

140 BUTZEK 2001, p. 59 note 86 (on the chapel of San Crescenzo). The term spalliera or spallerium, derived from the term for high-backed benches, is also used for the back panel of altarpiece case; see GARDNER VON TRUFFEL 2001, pp. 116, 154 note 16.


50 CHAPTER IV
13 Plasterwork canopy, next to the entrance in the church of Santi Salvatore e Cirino at Abbadia Isola (Monteigiumi).

An apparition of Mary peeps out from underneath such a canopy. The structure is fixed against the back wall of the chapel and has the same chimney-like superstructure as in Abbadia Isola. However, instead of an arch, this canopy has a straight cornice. This canopy is described in the 1467 inventory as ‘tabernacolo di marmo in mezo a detta cappella, dove ista la tavola detta de la Nostra Donna, intagliato di marmo e lavorato con più cuori, bellissimo, messo a horo’ and apparently succeeded an inlaid wooden one described in 1458: ‘uno ornato di tavole dipinto tarsiato dove sta drentro’.

We can get a fair idea of the meaning of the term ‘chapella di marmo intagliata’, similar to the phrasing ‘chapella di giesso’ used in 1458 for the then recently re-embellished chapel of San Crescenzio, by comparing it to the chapel of San Calisto, similarly described as ‘con chapella di marmo intagliata con ficure et fogliame bella con uno tondo di marmo dentro la Nostra Donna con angoli dal lato’ in the 1467 inventories. The Renaissance marble frame of the San Calisto Chapel, with an arched niche crowned by a pedimental structure, has been preserved by virtue of its transferral to the Cappella dei Signori in the Palazzo Pubblico. Antonio Casini’s chapel of San Sebastiano of 1430-1437 was also ‘con una chapella di marmo’ which housed a marble lunette (fig. 40) and, underneath, a painted image of the mar-

142 A. Angelini in bellosi 1993, pp. 366-367 cat. nr. 75.
143 1458: ASS, Opera Metropolitana 33, fol. xxviir; 1467: AOMS, 867 (num. Mosc. 1492), fol. 401r (insert 9, fol. 15v), published by KAWS-
tyrdom of Saint Sebastian. This image was an older polyptych which was bereft of its gable in order that it would still fit into the chapel once it was refurbished for Casini, and probably in order to give it a rectilinear top to go underneath the lunette, in accordance with the novel Renaissance taste in the cathedral ushered in by the Madonna della Neve.145

*Capella di gesso* must have been a generally understood term. Bishop Antonio Casini, in the testament discussed below, asks for a ‘*capella di gesso*’ dedicated to the Purification to be constructed in the great hall of the stronghold of the Siennese bishops in Crevole for an amount of 60 ducats (Appendix 1, doc. E.40).146 The ‘cierta chapella di giesso intagliata’ above Sassetti’s Madonna della Neve, the only one of its sort mentioned in the inventories, might well have resembled the surviving canopy in Abbadia Isola, perhaps with an architrave or a rectilinear ending instead of an arch, as in the Madonna delle Grazie nave-chapel. One is inclined to think so because of the unusual carpentry of the altarpiece that went under the *chapella di giesso*. Not only have the sides of the box-frame been left bare but also the sides of the carpentry of the crowning three-arched, baldachin-like structure above the panel which has been set back into the larger box-frame, thus receding almost seven centimetres from the sides (figs. 16, 17a, 17b). These recesses are not only undecorated laterally, but they also lack any signs such as nail-holes, which might indicate that separate wooden parts had once been fixed to the altarpiece. This situation could be explained if narrowly fitting brackets of a gessoed canopy had once filled the spaces left by the recesses in the frame. As was demonstrated above, hardly any space was left at the sides of the altarpiece. Given the absence of any traces of affixion either on the back or on the sides of any supplementary structures like pinnacles and fials, one might presume that the plaster superstructure formed a projecting cornice directly above the altarpiece. This presumption is reinforced by the fact that the top of the altarpiece itself is unprotected (fig. 20). In order to avoid an accumulation of dust in between the various planks, a protective superstructure was indispensable. The shape of the upper part of the canopy may have comprised some sort of arch or lunette, given the similarity of the description ‘*chapella di giesso*’ to the Renaissance lunette-frames of the ‘*capelle di marmo*’. Alternatively, one can imagine a *super coelum*, also frequently encountered over altarpieces with rectangular fields, such as Fra Angelico’s Annunciations, or Andrea di Giusto’s 1437 altarpiece in the Florentine Accademia, with a unified picture field, crowned by three arches against a flat back panel that is in turn sur-

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145 AOMS 867 (num. Mosc. 1492), fol. 400v (insert 6, fol. 14v): ‘La chapella di Sancto Bastiano. Uno alive con tavola dipenta di suo martirio con tenda rossa con Nostra Donna da chapo di marmo et 111 figure di marmo coruna chapella di marmo con più figure Messe a oro con l’arme del reverendissimo cardinale di San Marcello con due candelli di ferro incatenati per li mocholi con grado di marmo.’ In 1446 the pinnacles of the chapel’s altarpiece were transferred to the church of Sant’Ansano in Castelvecchio; AOMS, 867 (num. Mosc. 1492), fol. 290v (insert 6, fol. XLI1R): ‘Una tavola dipinta; fu il colmo della tavola di Saneto Bastiano quando si fece la cappella per lo cardinale di Saneto Marcello.’; from later inventories of the church of Sant’Ansano it appears that in total three pinnacles had been removed; BACCI 1926, pp. 338-339. On the Renaissance practice of adapting gothic altarpieces: HOENIGER 1905, pp. 101-126.

146 The Crevole residence is now as good as destroyed; P. Cammarosano and V. Passeri, in: CASTELLI DEL SENESE 1985, pp. 341-342 nr. 37.6.
14. Sassetti, Saint Francis giving away his clothes and Saint Francis dreaming, 1437–1444, part of the Borgo Sansepolcro altarpiece, tempera and gold on panel, 87 x 52.4 cm, National Gallery, London, inv. nr. 4757.
mounted by a super coelum. Beds also had such superstructures, as represented by Sassetta himself in *The wish of the young Saint Francis to become a soldier* in the Borgo Sansepolcro altarpiece and in the first scene of the Madonna della Neve predella (fig. 14, plate iv). Sassetta's Madonna della Neve may have had a plaster baldachin either in the form of the Abbadia Isola niche, perhaps in a rectangular version, or a *super coelum*-like structure, in his case not integral to the altarpiece-frame, but part of the canopy. The now lost immediate surroundings of the altarpiece should thus be read as supplementary parts of it.

The Salvator requested in the 1430 contract, but missing from the surviving altarpiece, will have found a place as a fresco on or underneath the canopy. It has previously been suggested that the Salvator was depicted on one of the pinnacles surmounting the altarpiece. In the following chapter it will be shown that the construction of the altarpiece absolutely precludes the presence of attached pinnacles. Taddeo di Bartolo painted a Salvator on the archivolt of the gessoed canopy above his fresco of the Virgin in Abbadia Isola. The integrality of the concept of an altarpiece and the frescos surrounding it in its niche can be elucidated by many surviving examples. The fresco of a trompe l'oeil niche in Monticiano, for instance, shows a *finto politico* with a lunette showing the scene of the Annunciation above it. The pinnacles of the frescoed altarpiece project somewhat in front of the Annunciation and the physical implication is that of a wooden altarpiece underneath a fresco. Another such niche can be seen in the afore-mentioned Gabella panel showing the interior of the Sienese cathedral. The second chapel represented there, which would have been the chapel of Sant'Antonio, shows a gothic triptych over the full breadth of the niche and, above it, a discernable monochrome fresco of a Coronation (fig. 12). The same situation is suggested by Sassetta's own predella scene of *Vision of Saint Thomas Aquinas* in his Arte della Lana altarpiece (fig. 15). The vision experienced by the saint is in fact the badly damaged representation of a lunette-shaped fresco over an altarpiece, showing the frescoed Christ, angels and four saints (probably the four Latin fathers of the Church) who have come to life. A design of an elaborate pentaptych without figures fills a semi-circular niche in the church of Sant'Andrea, Siena. Above the arch of the niche is a fragment with a half-length figure of Christ surrounded by angels in a frescoed pediment. On a stylistical basis one may presume that this figure went with the design of the pentaptych datable to around 1370. At a later stage, around 1440, a lunette with the Blessing Christ amidst cherubim was painted inside the niche, partly overlapping the design of the altarpiece. Whereas the function of the impeccable drawing of the bare carpentry is not entirely clear, although it may have been a working plan for an altarpiece in construction, the two subsequent frescos with Christ obviously had...
to supplement an altarpiece below. It is interesting that such a fresco could be placed either inside or on top of the niche. The altarpiece and its surrounding chapel formed part of an integral artistic concept. In this spirit too, Freuler made several reconstructions of an altarpiece and the fresco decoration of its original niche, such as the Malavolti Chapel in the church of San Domenico.

Bartolo di Fredi’s altarpiece, showing the Visitation and the Trinity, was surrounded by eight angels frescoed by Paolo di Giovanni Fei, their gaze fixed in adoration upon the Trinity represented in the upper lunette of Bartolo’s altarpiece. In these cases a close relationship existed between the frescoed chapel decoration and the altarpiece.  

For the reconstruction of the fresco decoration of the chapel of Santa Maria della Neve in Siena Cathedral, there is only circumstantial evidence. The vaults above the Porta del Perdono had been painted in 1415 by Gualtiero di Giovanni and Vittorio di Domenico. As to the chapel of Santa Maria della Neve, this task fell to Sassetta in 1430–32. As we saw in the second *bando* dated 30th December 1432, the price set on Sassetta’s work then covered ‘la dipicatura de la cappela e de le pareti’.  

This fact has been given too little attention in the literature. Pope Hennessy supposed, rather reformedly, that Sassetta had whitewashed the walls. Van Os, however, realised that he had painted frescos around the altarpiece. Up until that point, Sassetta was only known as a fresco painter through the badly damaged angel choirs above the *Coronation of the Virgin* on the Porta Romana. The technique he employed

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15 Freuler 1994, pp. 341–365, fig. 313.
152 See p. 29 above.
there, especially the use of full-scale cartoons, proves him to be a fresco painter of note.\textsuperscript{155} This second example of Sassetta’s fresco work was lost during the construction of the Chigi Chapel. The testimony to the existence of Sassetta’s frescos in the cathedral is an important addition to our knowledge of Sassetta’s versatility as a painter in a variety of media, ranging from small-scale designs for embroidery work to large-scale frescos.

We do not know whether the Neve-chapel frescos covered the entire wall behind the altar or whether they were more modest in scale. The 180 florins that donna Ludovica finally had to pay for ‘la dipictura de la cappela e de le pareti’ must have also covered quite some fresco work. As to subject matter, the only indication is the 1430 commission, where Ludovica asks for the Salvator above the Virgin. It seems extremely likely that the Salvator was realised, not on panel, but on the wall, underneath or on top of its gesso canopy.\textsuperscript{156}