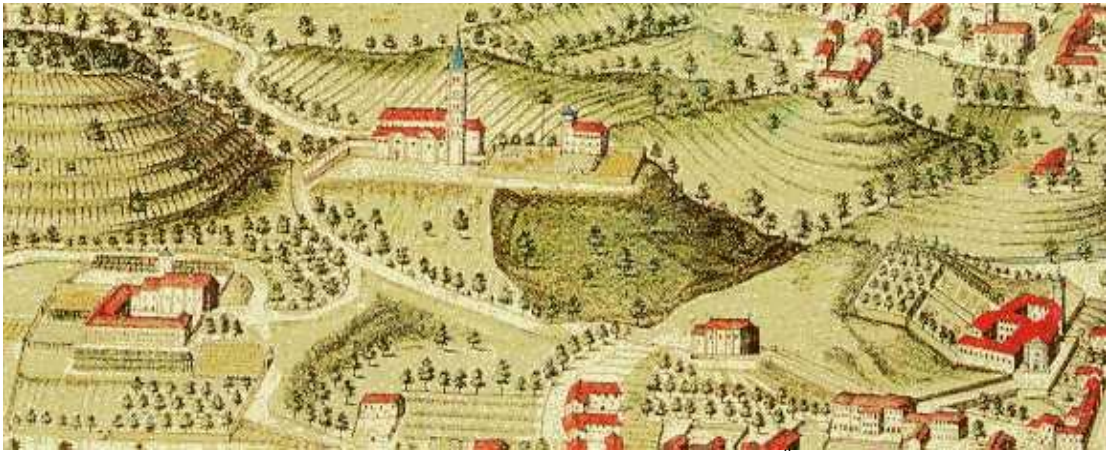


Santa Maria delle Grazie in Andorno: a historical and architectural case study of a benefice of the Malta Order, from the 15th to the 19th century

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The benefice of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Andorno (on top). By the 17th century other religious orders settled on the hill of Santa Maria: Franciscans (on the left) and Cistercians nuns (on the right). Downhill there is an oratory consecrated to S. Rocco.

-Detail from the *Theatrum Sabaudiae, Andurni Marchionatus*-

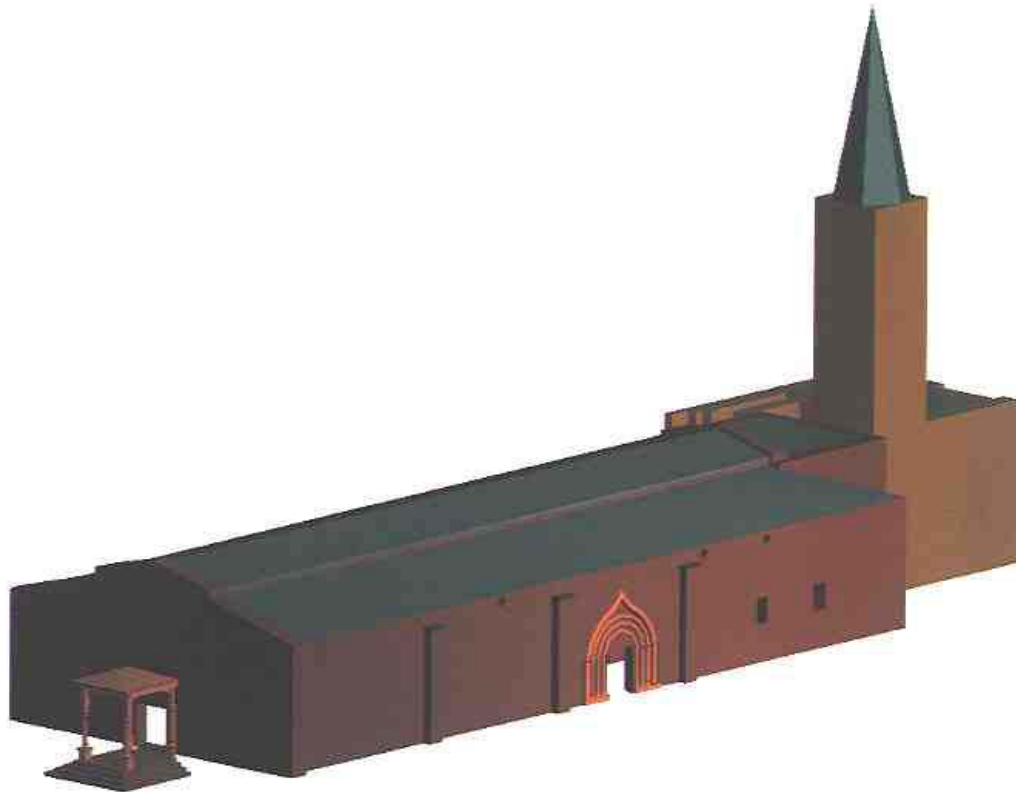
Our study started from a small Middle Age house that was built before the 16th century in the village of Andorno Cacciorna (now Andorno Micca, near Biella). It has turned out to be the last remnant of the benefice of Santa Maria delle Grazie. Its founder was a Guglielmo Berretta, head vicar of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem in the Priory of Lombardy.

We do not know exactly why the Knights Hospitallers decided to settle in the Cervo Valley, far away from the ancient main road network. Moreover they did not exercise on the spot their traditional charitable duties. Probably they simply meant to make a profitable investment, that increased not only the incomes of the Order, but also their influence in Piedmont.

The church of Santa Maria delle Grazie and the modest estates which depended on it were acquired by the first seven years. They consisted of a mill, two dairy-farms, and some lots of land in the plane of Tronzano, on the hills of Ronco and on the mountains of Andorno where the church was going to be rebuilt anew. This building does not exist any more, but according to all the sources it was large and rich in brick decorations, a Piedmont variety of the stone ones common in early French Renaissance.

Among the contemporary construction sites around Biella, only the enlargement of the ancient Gaglianico castle (a resort of d'Amboise French family) and the 15th century parish of San Lorenzo in Andorno offer some analogies; while the churches of San Sebastiano in Biella, of San Gerolamo (outside the town) and the collegiate of Benna were not built after that pattern.

The Order of Malta never matured an architectural style of their own, but were always bound to the traditions of their Nation members. In our case, we can be reasonably sure that local artisans worked to the realisation of Santa Maria delle Grazie following models from areas South and West of Torino, between Rivoli, Trofarello and Saluzzo.



Autocad partial reconstruction of the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie

It is harder to reconstruct the history of the house: in fact it still exists, but no written evidence is known about its foundation. Surely it was since the beginning the dwelling-house for the rectors of the church.

Its distribution of the rooms on three levels is the typical one of Alpine civil architecture: at the ground floor there are cellars, at the first one a loggia with six arcs leads to the living room and the kitchen. By the 17th century another loggia was built at the second floor, that of sleeping rooms. In such galleries tools and harvests founded a practical cover, while the climatic conditions inside the rooms were mitigated.

The beautiful helicoidal stairs in the square eastern tower break the traditional compact system of interior space. Something similar is said to have existed in the areas of Verzuolo and Saluzzo, in South West Piedmont.



The rector's house. South prospect

The masonry, a mix of bricks and pebbles, is coarse and it has an irregular external lay-out; the low vaults are supported by syenite corbels. The whole is in stark contrast with the elegant eastern façade of the building. Double rows of moulded bricks frame the windows of both the tower and the second floor emphasising the slightly ogival curve of the arcs on the first floor, and the cubical capitals later to be hidden when the lower loggia was walled up. They remind some 15th century houses in the centre of Biella-Piazzo. So the church and the house are exemplars of the typical town brick architecture in a mountain area, where stone predominated.

To conclude, the two buildings were remarkable accomplishments in Biella area: many problems remain unsolved, but their analysis can further research on Piedmont early Renaissance.

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