CHAPTER 18

Orsanmichele: An Anomalous Grain Loft

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When one looks down on Florence from the Piazzale Michelangelo, Orsanmichele is one of the tallest buildings on the skyline (fig. 18.1 and fig. 18.2). The only higher civic building is the Palazzo Vecchio but not by much. While the Palazzo Vecchio has three main stories it also has several mezzanines and an attic area, Orsanmichele has only three very tall stories, two vaulted and one with an open truss ceiling. (fig. 18.3 and fig. 18.4). The ground floor houses an elaborate tabernacle dedicated to a miraculous painting of the Enthroned Virgin and Child. The upper two stories were built to store grain and house the *Sei della Biada* ("the six of the grain"), or grain distribution officers, but do not seem appropriate for housing grain because they have huge Gothic windows. The elaborate tracery would not have been filled with glass but perhaps oiled cloth, called *impannata*. In the fourteenth century, glazing was quite rare for non-religious buildings. The upper stories of Orsanmichele were conceived for a utilitarian function. It was to be an urban barn, largely open to the elements.

Figure 18.1: Copy in the Palazzo Vecchio of the so-called Catena print of Florence, dating from 1471-1482. Orsanmichele located in the center of the photo and slightly to the left of the Palazzo Vecchio. Both buildings are approximately the same height. The towers behind Orsanmichele are those of the Badia and the Bargello. Photo by the author.

Figure 18.2: The upper story of Orsanmichele viewed through a window in the Sala dell'Udienza on the top floor of the Palazzo Vecchio. Photo by the author.

Figure 18.3: Palazzo Vecchio. The windows below the crenellations are in a covered walkway that is part of the defense system. The actual attic story of the palazzo is not visible. Francesco Bini, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons.

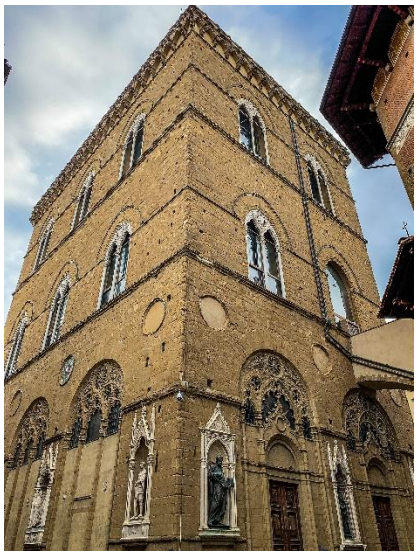

Figure 18.4: Orsanmichele. The two upper stories of the building are extremely tall. Photo by the author.

Procuring and Storing Grain

How was grain stored in the antique and medieval Mediterranean world? There were two methods: in pits underground called silos and in above ground shelters made of wood or masonry. The silos tended to be used for long-term storage. Their openings could be covered and hidden. Sometimes caves were used, as we can still see in the underground passages below the town of Orvieto, where wine, grain and other food stuffs were stored from the Etruscan period on. Above-ground storage was for more immediate use and was often in a fortified area because grain was a valuable commodity and could be pilfered or stolen. Storage facilities from the Roman imperial period survive around the empire, for example in North African countries such as Morocco and Tunisia. They were built in dry wall stone or dried bricks and were usually vaulted, at least on the ground floor. The storage rooms were lined up around a courtyard and were in walled enclosures with housing for soldiers.[1]

Highly populated cities like Rome were not able to procure enough grain in the surrounding agricultural areas and had to import large quantities from Sicily, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and other countries in the Mediterranean basin. The grain was transported in ships and landed in coastal ports such as Puteoli, near Naples; and Portus, just north of Ostia--built by Claudius and enlarged by Trajan. The grains and cereals were temporarily housed in warehouses or *horrea,* which were not significantly different from the African configurations. Then they were transported by small boats up the Tiber to Rome, where they were again placed in warehouses

[1] For Roman warehouses in Africa see Amadori 2016 and Papi 2007.

along the river. Special rooms for grain storage in the warehouses often had raised floors to cut down on humidity spoilage. The floors would have been held up on small supports much like the caldarium of Roman baths, where hot air circulated below the raised floor.[2] While liquids such as wine, olive oil, and garum were transported in terracotta containers called amphoras, grain seems to have been placed in sacks or simply dumped loose into the hull of a boat or piled up in the storerooms (fig. 18.5).

Figure 18.5: Model of a Roman boat with a compartment for grain displayed at the excavation site of the Roman port of Vada, located south of Livorno. Photo by the author.

After the fall of the Roman Empire and a drastic drop in population, there was less need for large-scale storage. The emerging organization of the Christian church sometimes stepped in to manage supplying the poor with grain. In the eighth century, Pope Adrian I founded the *domusculta*, a large agricultural complex outside of the Rome, meant to furnish grain for the city. Bishops were often large landholders and supervised the storage and distribution of grain within their diocese. The so-called Granary of the Cardinals was a three-story, four-bay grain vault constructed in the twelfth century inside the porch of the Temple of Minerva in the Forum Nerva. Weather conditions and war constantly created famines and therefore an abundant supply was a necessary responsibility for the prevailing authority. During the sparsely populated Early Middle Ages, there was more local storage, individual or in small communities. Imperial Lombard and the Carolingian representatives sometimes provided grain storage in their castles. Benedictine monastic houses founded by receiving grants from imperial benefactors accumulated large land holdings. In the beginning they set up small farms no further than a day's journey from the mother house but eventually acquired property much further away. The produce from the agricultural activities was stored in warehouses at the main monastery or other locations and then sold not only locally but also to grain merchants. These centralized farming organizations were called *grancias* ("granges"). Originally the term *grancia* referred to the building where grain was stored but then was extended to the warehouse and surrounding buildings and even to the whole farming operation. An example would be the abbey of Nonantola, located outside of Modena, which was founded in 752 by the monk Anselm on land granted to him by his brother-in-law the Lombard king Aistulf. We will return to Nonantola further on.

Where did Florence store and sell grain in the eleventh to fourteenth centuries? The earliest and most rudimentary system was based on individual landowners who brought their produce into the city, housed it in buildings they owned or rented and then sold the grain in a market. Not until cities became more populated from the second half of the 1200s did the need

[2] I first learned about these raised floors for grain during an archeological tour of the Etruscan and then Roman port of Vada on the Tyrrhenian coast just below Livorno. The excavations of the port had uncovered a set of warehouses where you could see the supports for the raised flooring.

for civic storage emerge. Local supplies were not sufficient and cities began to import from southern Italy, Sicily and Africa, much as their Roman ancestors had done. Transport and storage changed little. Ships brought their cargo to ports along the coast, whether it be Naples, Ostia, Pisa, where it was either stored until needed or transferred to pack animals to be carried inland or onto smaller boats which could navigate rivers. In the case of Florence, barges pulled by oxen or mules were dragged up the Arno as far as the river was navigable, which was from the fourteenth century on Lastra a Signa, about 15 kilometers west of Florence. Between there and Florence, the river was filled with mills and *pescai* ("fish weirs"), which impeded boat travel. The Porto a Signa was on the west bank of the Arno, the so-called left bank. All produce and building materials were unloaded there and then controlled, taxed and carried on wagons into the city, passing through the Porta San Frediano and crossing the Arno by one of the two existing bridges on the southwest side of the city. The *Ponte alla Carraia*, the second oldest Florentine bridge, was first built in wood in 1218–1220 to service the wool production of the Umiliati monks at Ognisanti. In order to get to the market area in the center of the city the carts would have passed from the *Ponte alla Carraia* up the *Via della Vigna Nuova* and then along the *Via Strozzi* or from the *Ponte Santa Trinita* along the *Via Tornabuoni* and then turning into the via Strozzi. These roads were narrow and filled with shops and stalls, so it is difficult to imagine how carts would have passed through the confusion. The main road leading to the north gate in the walls was the old Roman cardo. It was narrow and difficult to navigate, so between 1322 and 1325 the road to its east, which originally ended near the corner of the Medici Palace, was extended and enlarged to facilitate the transport of grains from the countryside to the market at Orsanmichele.[3]

Figure 18.6: Detail of the Piazza San Marco and surrounding area, from the first state of the View of Venice (1500). Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota. Jacopo's De Barberi View (Veduta) of Venice, also known as the de' Barbari Map shows the Piazza San Marco and surrounding area, including the Granaries of Terranova located just above the points of the trident. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/View_of_Venice#/media/File:Jacopo_de'_Barbari_-_View_of_Venice__Google_Art_Project_(cropped).jpg. View of Venice, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

In fact, it is difficult to understand why the Florentine market was located in the old Roman forum about six blocks in from the river and not closer to one of the bridges or embankments. Pisa's first grain market, "Platea Blade" was situated in the 1200s in the area later occupied by the Sapienza or University, one block in from the Arno riverfront. It was moved in the mid-1300s to the *mercato dei porci* ("pork market"), which became the *Piazza del Grano* and then *Piazza Vettovaglie*. This market was also a block from the Arno, thereby facilitating unloading and transport.

Venice's grain *fondaco* ("warehouse") was built in 1343–1345 right on the waterfront at the end of the Grand Canal, a block west of the Ducale Palace

[3] See Friedman 1988: 205–212 and Paolini n.d.a.

Figure 18.7: Detail of "Il Bacino di San Marco" by Canaletto showing the Granaio di Terranova at center left.
https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-bacino-di-san-marco-venice-seen-from-the-giudecca-131958
Canaletto, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 18.8: The fourteenth-century fortified granary of Cuna, south of Siena. The actual storage area is the tall part on the right. Other buildings behind and to the left housed laborers and soldiers who guarded the grain. Used until the early twentieth century, it then fell into disrepair and the roof is now being reinforced. Photo by the author.

(fig. 18.6 and fig. 18.7).[4] This enormous brick building, known as the Granaio de Terranova ("Granaries of Terranova") was four stories high and extended from the embankment to the *Piazza San Marco* behind, where markets were held. Three huge entrances led into four sections. In addition to grain it housed various administrative offices: the salt magazine, the Zecca or mint and a wood deposit. These granaries were torn down in the 19th century and replaced by the royal garden.

In Siena, the *Ospedale della Scala* was the richest institution in the city state and had extensive land holdings, which were farmed and produced huge amounts of grain. One of the main storage enters was the *Grancia di Cuna*, situated on the *Via Francigena* in the Sienese countryside and surrounded by many farms (fig. 18.8).[5] The grain was transported into Siena and stored in appropriate containers in the underpinnings of the hospital. Procurement of grain for Siena was predominately controlled by the hospital. In Naples, the grain market, along with other markets, was located outside the walls and near the port.

From Monastery to Grain Market

A church dedicated to San Michele in Orto ("Saint Michael in the vegetable garden") seems to have existed in the eighth century. St. Michael was a popular saint in the Lombard period and sparsely populated Florence was more garden than buildings at that point in history. The church and its monastery belonged to the large Benedictine monastic house of Nonantola, which had holdings in both Emilia/Romagna and Tuscany. Nonantola improved the road leading across the Apennines from Modena to Pistoia and from there would have connected with the pilgrimage route, the *Francigena* connecting Rome and France. From Pistoia another road led to Florence, which was one of the seats of the itinerant Lombard and Carolingian rulers. Along the route, the mother house built various pilgrimage hospices and the small monastery of San Michele in Florence probably catered to pilgrims and perhaps distributed grain to the needy from another Nonantola property outside the city. In the early twelfth century, the church had become a *Popolo* ("Parish"), i.e., a religious and civic jurisdiction and the center of a neighborhood. Its courtyard and the area around the

[4] On the public granaries of Tera Nova in Venice, see Peris (n.d.)
[5] Coscarella 1983.

complex were used for judicial activities, which were usually carried on in an open space because meant to be public. By the thirteenth century, Nonantola was in decline and it seems that San Michele's ties with the mother house had deteriorated significantly, because the monks made several unsuccessful attempts to regain control. The church and monastery were in poor condition and in 1239 the emerging communal government had them torn down to make a piazza. From 1249, the area was dedicated to the sale of grain and other cereals.[6]

The main Florentine market, the *Mercato Vecchio* ("Old Market"), was located at the crossing of the old Roman *cardo* ("main north-south oriented road") and *decumanus* ("main east-west oriented road"). It dealt primarily with foodstuffs and inexpensive household items. Moving south along the *cardo* towards the gate in the walls, which led to the *Ponte Vecchio*, the only bridge across the river until 1220, was a small piazza and a second market, the *Mercato Nuovo* ("New Market"), which catered to more expensive products such as silk, gold, furs. Many moneychangers had their *banche* ("changing tables") there. San Michele and its piazza were located halfway between the two markets, one block to the east. Presumably, the grain trading established in the ex-San Michele piazza took place in the open air or under awnings. In 1284, the communal government constructed a portico consisting of brick pillars and a wooden roof and the area was paved in brick. From 1250–1280, the *Capitano del Popolo* had been in charge of food provisioning, but in 1284 a committee called the *Sei della Biada* was constituted.[7] Its task was to commission merchants to sell all imported grain in the portico and to oversee grain commerce in general. This was a period of huge population expansion and economic growth for the city. As old feudal estates broke up, peasants migrated into cities and worked at crafts, and, particularly, in the production of wool. The population in 1240 was approximately 50,000, but by 1300 it has been estimated at 90,000–100,000.[8] The first Guelf government not controlled by the old magnate families, the Prima Popolo, lasted from 1250 to 1260. The Guelfs then lost to the Ghibellines at the Battle of Montiperti in 1260 but regained control of the city in 1267. The priorate of the guilds was established and the ordinances of justice, which tried to curtail the power and bellicose activities of the old noble families, were promulgated in 1293. We have to see the building of the covered market as a product of the new Guelf government, which was trying to give some kind of order to the city and to promote the welfare of the citizens.

Saints and Grain Sharing a Portico

As an homage to the evicted saint, a representation of St. Michael was painted on one pier and on another there was an image of the Virgin. It is possible that this painting of the Virgin was saved from a wall or pier of the destroyed church and incorporated into the new portico. On June 11, 1289, the feast day of Saint Barnabas, the Florentine Guelfs won an important victory over the Ghibellines at the Battle of Campaldino. In 1290, an altar to honor Saint Barnabas, the new protector of the Guelf faction, was set up inside the market portico. Therefore, the religious

[6] See Zervas 1996a and 1996b. This is my main source for this study. Zervas' work, which has both an Italian and English text, is a masterful study based on extensive research in the archives. She published all the documents separately. The work makes important contributions to understanding the historical context of the building and its political and religious significance. It is lavishly illustrated with spectacular photographs.

[7] Zervas 1996a: 18.

[8] Zervas 1996a: 14.

significance of the site was not eliminated by the encroaching commercial activity and on August 10, 1291, a religious confraternity, the *Compagnia Beata Vergine pura Mad. S. Maria di Sanmichele in Orto detto Laudesi*, was founded to pay homage to the image of the Virgin and to combat heretics.

Fighting heretics, especially Cathars, had become an issue in the mid-thirteenth century. The Dominican friar St. Peter Martyr came to Florence and founded several confraternities meant to stamp out heretics by persuasion or force. In 1245, while preaching on a corner of the Mercato Vecchio, the saint managed to calm a runaway horse and this miracle was commemorated by a large tabernacle on the spot, housing an altar and a painting of the Virgin and Child. Both the painting and tabernacle were remade in Gothic style in 1325–1350. Three confraternities were spinoffs of Peter Martyr's *Società della Fede* ("Society of the Faith"), founded on Ascension Day in 1244. One was *La Società Maggiore di S. Maria*, dedicated to looking after orphans. The confraternity also ran a hospital, called the *Bigallo*, outside of the city. It had its headquarters in the church of San Bartolo al Corso, two blocks from San Michele. In 1352, it moved into a building that belonged to the Macci family on the corner of *Piazza Orsanmichele* and *via Calzaiuoli*.[9]

Therefore, in this neighborhood there was, prior to 1284, a shrine in the old market dedicated to a miracle and the *Bigallo* confraternity, which handled orphans but also ran a pilgrimage hospice outside the city. The new confraternity at Orsanmichele was a *laudesi* organization, similar to one established by St. Peter Martyr at Santa Maria Novella. In 1292 the painting began to perform miracles and the confraternity eventually became the largest in the city, attracting members from all four quarters. The officials set up a stall to sell candles and wax figures near the image. They also had a shop and offices across the street from the corner of the portico that housed the image. The organization became very wealthy and distributed alms to the poor.

A New Building

On June 10, 1304, a fire, set by a member of a local family who was backing the Black faction of the Guelf party, burned down a large part of the city. It destroyed the wooden roof and a good part of the portico, which had to be repaired and a new image of the virgin and child made. We have to imagine a covered loggia with an area around the Virgin's image sectioned off and turned into what was at the time called an oratory. Domenico Lenzi, a member of a family of *biadaioli* ("grain merchants"), wrote a diary which recorded the price of grains sold at the Orsanmichele market from 1320–1335. [10] An elaborate copy of the book, referred to as *il Biadaiolo* ("grain merchant") was handwritten on parchment around 1329-1330 and illustrated with colored miniatures by an anonymous artist from the school of Giotto. The first of the two illustrations shown in Fig. 18.9 depicts the market in a time of plenty when merchants and buyers are busy making transactions, overseen by a protective angel. The second shows the market during a period of famine. Armed guards try to control the chaotic assault on the market by hungry citizens. On the right are depicted the painting of the Virgin in its tabernacle and the stall selling

[9] Earenfight 2009 and Saalman 1969.

[10] Pinto 1978 and Pezzarosso 2005, In the mid-1600s the volume was in the collection of the Florentine Tempi family. In 1839 the Tempi donated it to the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziano di Firenze, il Laur. Tempi, 3.

candles. During market days the loggia would have been filled with piles, baskets, barrels and sacks of grain and various cereals and legumes. In the evening and on feast days people would congregate to make offerings and sing praises.

There was another fire in 1331 and then the devastating flood of 1333 damaged most of the area. The portico must have been in terrible condition. In 1336 the commune decided to commission a new building, which would not only provide shelter for the sale of grains and the tabernacle/oratory, but would also include two upper stories, one for grain storage and another for the offices of the *Sei della Biada*. The work was to be organized and overseen by the Silk Guild, whose headquarters were in the nearby *Mercato Nuovo.* The funds were to come from gabelle ("indirect taxes"), in this case the tax on grains. In 1337, there was a ceremony to celebrate the beginning of the project. Most scholarship on Orsanmichele has listed Neri di Fioravante, Benci di Cione, and Francesco Talenti as the architects. Diane Zervas points out that they were all still fairly young in 1336 and she thinks that Andrea Pisano was involved with the first stages of the project. [11] He was a member of the silk guild and belonged to the confraternity. In the 1330s, Pisano worked on the Duomo building site. He built the second level of the campanile from 1334,

Figure 18.9: Two pages from the *Specchio umano* or *Il Biadaiolo* by Domenico Lenzi (1328–1330) on which an unknown Italian miniaturist has depicted the market at Orsanmichele. The scene on the left shows the market functioning in prosperous times and the one on the right during a famine. The image on the right includes the oratory housing the miraculous image.
Left: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e8/14th-century_painters_-_Libro_del_Biadaiolo_-_WGA15968.jpg?uselang=fr.
Right: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/98/14th-century_painters_-_Libro_del_Biadaiolo_-_WGA15969.jpg?uselang=fr.
Domenico Lenzi, Specchio Umano, co. Temp 3,1340ca, Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana. Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Public domain, via Web Gallery of Art, Wikimedia Commons. {PD-US}.

[11] Zervas 1996a: 50.

was involved with rebuilding the Ponte Vecchio after the flood and had just finished his bronze doors for the Baptistery in 1336.

What would have been the prototype for the new Orsanmichele? Certainly not a modest wooden or masonry barn. The huge Sienese warehouse at Cuna, built in the 1320s, was a multistory building in brick with small windows.[12] The main market in Florence was a large one-story basilica type shed with stalls inside and outside. The architects did not look to agricultural models but to civic buildings. The early thirteenth century *broletti* ("town halls" or "civic buildings") of northern Italy have been suggested as models. They were open loggias on the ground floor, used for markets and for legal activities. They had upper stories with windows but these floors were used for civic purposes and not to store grain.

A possible prototype could be a building found in Volterra, located in Tuscany not far from Florence. Volterra had started to provide a *palazzo* ("palatial building") for its priors as early as 1208. This building, known as the Palazzo dei Priori ("palatial building of the Priors") was the first *palazzo pubblico* ("public palatial building") in Tuscany and has been seen as a prototype for Florence's Palazzo Vecchio, started nearly a hundred years later. The site of the Volterra Palazzo dei Priori was an area behind the cathedral called the *Piazza del Olmo* ("Plaza of the Elm tree"), where the market took place. Just past the Palazzo dei Priori was a building referred to in the fourteenth century as the *Vendita* ("Place where things are sold").[13] It was also called the *Loggia del Grano* ("Gallery for Grain") (fig. 18.10). Archeologists say that traces of the original construction seem to indicate a date in the late 1200s. The ground floor consists of a series of four arched openings creating a portico. Under the portico there is a large basement space where there are still remains of four huge underground grain deposits or silos but there were probably quite a few more. Documents from 1330 and 1338 made provisions for digging holes for silos. The communal grain distribution took place in the portico, which was also used for other commercial activity and by notaries stipulating contracts, sales and wills. The floor above served as an archive for the communal documents and housed the committee controlling the *grascie* or grain administration. In 1472, Florence conquered Volterra and built a fortress on the site of the bishop's palace. A new episcopal palace was built next to the cathedral and the grain loggia was incorporated into it. Although the façade was given an early sixteenth-century update the building still has the arched openings on the ground floor and two upper stories with a series of windows. The top floor may have been a later addition. The essential elements of the Orsanmichele project are there, the open ground floor portico carrying upper

Figure 18.10: Volterra. The Palazzo of the Priors is on the left and the vaulted grain loggia is on the right. Photo by author.

[12] For more information on the Grancia *di Cuna* in Siena, see Giorgi 2014. For a reproduction of a drawing of the Grange by Girolamo Macci (1649–1734), see Martelucchi 2021: https://www.noiframmentidisiena.it/rubriche/quattro-passi-con-maura/586-la%09grancia-di-cuna-il-granaio-del-santa-maria-della-scala.html

[13] Furiesi 2003: 72–75.

floors for accommodating offices. However, the grain was stored below ground and not on the upper floor.

The windows of the new Orsanmichele (fig. 18.11) were designed larger than any of those seen on any of the prototypes and on the scale of the huge tracery window at the Bargello (fig. 18.12), which was being made in the 1340s by Neri Fiorovanti, one of the Orsanmichele architects.

Figure 18.11: Orsanmichele has large windows on all sides opening onto the huge spaces of both upper floors. Photo by the author.

Figure 18.12: The Bargello with its one large window in the main council chamber. Photo by the author.

Figure 18.13: The door which leads to the staircase in the north/west pier or the ground floor of Orsanmichele. Note the opening above it, which could have been for protective purposes or for hauling up the grain. Photo by the author.

Figure 18.14: The opening of the grain chute in one of the piers of the ground floor. The grain would have been poured into the chute from the floor above and exited into a container held by a recipient. Photo by the author.

It is true that air circulation was important for avoiding mold attacking the grain but windows that large would allow wind and rain to enter. However, it is clear that the first upper story was destined for grain because there are hollow passages in the two middle north piers for pouring grain down chutes into containers below. In the northwest pier there is a spiral staircase providing access to the upper floors. Above it is an opening which has been interpreted in two ways: a sort of machicolation to defend the opening to the stairs from starving people trying to raid the grain deposit or an opening through which bags of grain could be hauled up to the next floor. The opening seems rather inadequate for the latter. There must have been intended a pulley system outside from one of the windows (fig. 18.13 and fig. 18.14).

There is little information on how and where grain was stored before the new building was designed. References are to warehouses in private buildings, either for individual merchants or rented by the commune. The period in which the new construction was conceived was one of frequent famines, recently serious ones in 1328–1329, and it was essential for the city to provide enough grain for its citizens to prevent uprisings. The huge population of 90,000–100,000 would explain the need to centralize storage and to control distribution on a large scale and eliminate hoarding as much as possible. It does not explain the need for such large windows with intricate tracery. Perhaps it was considered indecorous to design a simple utilitarian building which was on the main road leading from the new cathedral and the recently built Palazzo Vecchio and which housed a miraculous image--a question of civic honor. Following the foundation ceremony in 1337, the ground floor piers of the new building were made and already in 1339 the commune ordered that each guild make a niche in the face of a pier and fill it with a painting or statue. The wool and silk guilds complied immediately with statues of their patron saints, Saint Stephen and Saint John Evangelist. The other guilds took much longer to act.

On July 26, 1343, Gualtieri (Walter VI) of Brienne, called the Duke of Athens, was driven out of Florence. He was a member of the Anjou regime ruling Naples at the time and had been called in as an outside ruler, whose task was to eliminate feuding factions and bring peace to the city. However, the Florentines soon rebelled against his despotic tactics and ousted him on Saint Anne's Day. Anne then became one of the patron saints of the city, an altar was set up in the portico to worship her and a city ordinance established that each year on July 26, her feast day, all of the trade guilds were to bring their identifying banners to Orsanmichele in order to commemorate the day the city banished the tyrant. Thereafter, there were four cults housed under the portico along with the grain: Mary, Michael, Barnabas and Anne. During the plague of 1348, many Florentines left large sums of money to the image and the confraternity became even richer. In 1347, it had commissioned Bernardo Daddi to paint a new version of the miraculous image and in 1349 it devolved much of the plague windfall to a new mosaic encrusted tabernacle commissioned from Andrea Orcagna.

Progress had been slow on the new building, which was funded by the commune and not the confraternity. Matteo Villani recounts, in his additions to his brother Giovanni's chronicle, that after the plague from 1349 to 1352 little work was done on the building.[14] He says the piers were covered with a temporary wood roof. In 1350 the confraternity petitioned the commune to get on with the building and offered to contribute funds towards making the vault that would be over its new tabernacle. From 1360 to 1366, construction was brought up to the level of the parapet

[14] Villani, Matteo 1980: 55 and 93–95 and Zervas 1996b: 30.

under the first-floor windows. In the meantime, however, the commune had decided that the commercial activity and dust from the grain was disturbing the religious functions of the sumptuous new tabernacle housing the miraculous image.

In 1357 a decision was made to move the grain market to another area. Consequently, before the upper floors were built and the building was roofed it was obsolete. In 1380, Carrara marble was finally ordered for the tracery of the upper-floor windows. It is possible that when building activity resumed in 1360 the original project was altered and the large windows were designed then. Neri Fioravanti had just finished vaulting the main upper room at the Bargello and had installed his huge tracery window. He may have decided to incorporate his skills into a more ambitious design for the upper floors (fig. 18.15, fig. 18.16 and fig. 18.17). In fact, the lower arched openings of Orsanmichele, without the later addition of tracery and before the niches had been made and decorated, would have had a more utilitarian aspect. Perhaps the original project had smaller openings more appropriate for grain storage. By the 1360s, Orsanmichele's ambiguous dual role as a grain warehouse and an oratory had been resolved. The grain had been eliminated.

Figure 18.15: Large tracery window on Orsanmichele. Note its similarity to the Bargello window in Figure 18.16, Photo by the author.

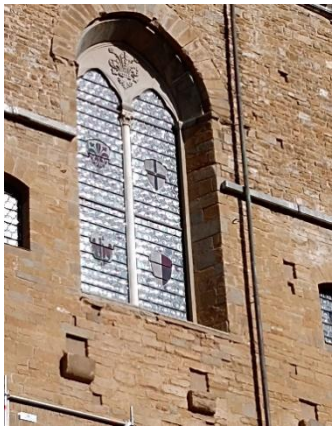

Figure 18.16 Council chamber window on the Bargello. Photo by the author.

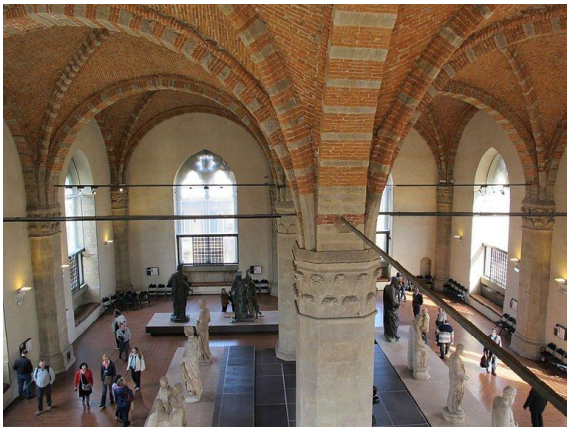

Figure 18.17: The luminous, vaulted upper floor of Orsanmichele. Note the opening to the grain chute in the lower part of the left pier. Photo by the author.

Grain and Religion

Gods have always been associated with the natural elements: grain with Ceres, Bacchus with wine, Vertumnus with fruit. Grains were the basis of everyday consumption and annual feasts were dedicated to the various agricultural activities such as harvests. As early as the Republican period Roman rulers realized that some parts of the population were too poor to procure enough food. The first *Lex Frumentaria* ("Grain Law") was established in 123 BC by the tribune Gaius Sempronius Gracchus, providing a dole of grain to poor citizens and the practice continued into the late imperial period. The area where the distribution took place was to the east of the Republican temples in the Largo Argentina and between the present *Via delle Botteghe Oscure e Corso Vittoria Emanuele*. The Porticus Minucia, founded by Minucius Rufus, was an open space

surrounded by porticoes and it enclosed a temple dedicated to the nymphs, nature deities associated with hills, trees, springs and also grain.[15] After the fire of AD 80 Domitian restored the portico and the temple. Two of the columns of the temple are still standing. Inside were bronze panels inscribed with the names of the citizens entitled to receive the dole, which was handed out once a month from 45 distribution points in the *Porticus Minucia* ("Minucian Portico"), located in the *Campus Martius* ("Field of Mars"). Grain and nymphs shared a space.

Zervas points out that the association of the grain market at Orsanmichele and the cult of the Virgin would not been incongruous. The Eucharist host is Christ in the form of bread. The Virgin nourished Christ with her milk and was sometimes associated with grain.[16] As we have seen, another tabernacle housing a painting of the Virgin overlooked the main market area. Earthly and Heavenly food were inseparable in Mediterranean culture.

Grain and Politics

Zervas also shows how the area around Orsanmichele became a political center during the late 1100s and the 1200s. The residents of the surrounding area were old families but did not have imperial titles like the powerful Guidi and Alberti. On the north side of the piazza were the Abati and the Macci, to the east the Galigai, to the south the Cavalcanti and to the west the Compiobbi. These families lived in enclaves which consisted of tall towers, lower palazzi, service buildings and loggias which clustered around a sort of internal piazza.[17] In the 1100s, the court system would have been primarily ecclesiastical or imperial, but as the artisan and merchant guilds gained power and formed the first Popular government in 1250, more and more civic judges took part in the judicial system. There were three main areas where courts convened: San Martino, Santa Cecilia and San Michele in Orto.[18] Cases were heard primarily in open spaces or under loggias to accommodate the public. Earlier trials had taken place in episcopal palaces and castles but in the thirteenth century these were replaced by church courtyards or steps and private residences. After the church of San Michele was torn down, the Macci and Galigai accommodated judicial hearings in their loggias or courtyards. The Podestà, a foreign judge who was called in to act as a sort of impartial police force, was sometimes housed in a Macci palace. The fledgling guild government did not have a set meeting place and rented space from various families, including the Macci, Galigai, and nearby Cerchi. These families also provided grain storage in their properties and were important grain importers and merchants. In 1298, the Cerchi were not only storing grain for the commune but also housing government meetings in their palaces. A project to extend a street, on which Cerchi palaces were located, was proposed by the communal government so that it would be easier to bring grain into the center of town. The extension would have gone through part of the Badia's monastic property and the monks managed to abort it.[19]

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[15] See Zevi 1993.

[16] Zervas 1996a: 24–27 and 48.

[17] Ito 2014. In Chapter 2 of this thesis Ito provides a new analysis of the political and economic role of the families in the Orsanmichele neighborhood. In Chapter 3 the procurement of grain, its market value and its distribution is treated in detail.

[18] Zervas 19946a: 131–138.

[19] See Preyer 1985.

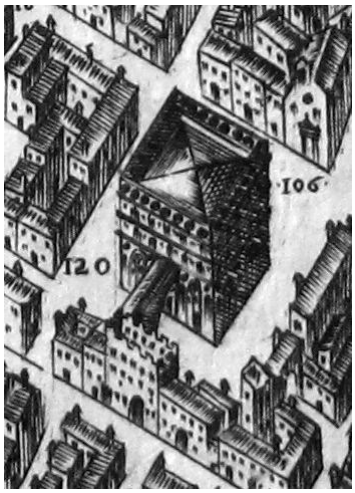

Figure 18.18: Detail from the Bonsignori map of Florence, 1584 depicts Orsanmichele surrounded by its piazza and connected to the Wool Guild house by an elevated passageway added in the mid-sixteenth century. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6b/Pianta_del_buonsignori%2C_dettaglio_120_orsanmichele.jpg. I, Sailko, CC BY-SA 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

Figure 18.19: The Wool guild headquarters in the foreground and Orsanmichele behind. Photo by author.

In its attempt to free itself from the power of the old, often feuding families, the guild government decided to stop renting and to build its own civic buildings. The first was a palace for the Capitano della Popolo and his retinue of judges, notaries and soldiers. The Podestà represented the older factions with noble origins, while the Capitano was supposed to protect the middle and lower classes. Both held courts and heard similar cases. In 1255, property was bought along the via Proconsolo, where the old Roman and the eleventh-century walls had been replaced in 1172–1175 by walls further to the east. Around 1257, a series of houses and towers were cobbled together to house the Capitano. Later he shared it with the Podestà and the building was enlarged to become what is now known as the Bargello. In 1299, the Palazzo Vecchio was begun to house the priorate government, which had been using Cerchi residences. By 1337, when the new Orsanmichele building was started, the population of Florence was about 100,000 and huge amounts of grain were needed. It is easy to see why a large central storage area was essential and the three-story project was a great civic undertaking of the Popular government. An ambitious concept for an ambitious period before the mid-century disasters. Some of the most powerful grain importers were the Bardi and Peruzzi, who we usually think of as wool merchants and bankers. Their bankruptcies due to unpaid loans to the English and French kings started a financial crash. Then the plagues culminating in the crash of 1348 halved the population. Dust and commercial activity were probably not the only reasons for the 1357 decision to renounce storing grain at Orsanmichele and to move the market. Given the drastic reduction of the “mouths to feed,” the term used by the Florentines to list their family members in their tax declarations, and the financial crisis after the Peruzzi and Bardi bankruptcies the huge, elevated space may not have seemed necessary. The arches of the ground floor portico of Orsanmichele were closed with tracery and the building was slowly finished, with no function for the upper stories. It was not until 1569 that a use was found for them. Grand Duke Cosimo I moved the archive of contracts and wills there, which entailed adding intermediary stories to the high-ceilinged rooms. Now restored to their original, light-filled height, they provide protection for the marble and bronze statues, which have been removed from the exterior niches and replaced by copies.

Already in 1317, the powerful Arte della Lana, the wool guild, had bought Compiobbi properties on the west side of the Orsanmichele piazza and built its guild house there (fig. 18.18

and fig. 18.19). It was the first guild to place an image of its patron St. Stephen on the new building and contribute funds to the confraternity. Over the first decades of the fifteenth century, the outside and inside of the ground story became a showcase for the guilds, where they placed images of their patrons and organized celebrations on the saint's day. The Guelf party was given the most prestigious position for its niche, in which it placed the bronze figure of its patron St. Louis of Toulouse by Donatello. The building lost its commercial role and acquired a political one. Religion and politics had replaced religion and grain. The Guelf Party had its headquarters near the Mercato Nuovo. Around 1434 it commissioned Brunelleschi to design a new meeting room over an addition it had been building.[20] He created a tall story with corners defined by pilasters and created five huge round-headed windows—two on the south side and three on the east. Above, he placed large roundels, which probably were to hold the Guelf Party emblems and those of the civic authorities. Placed side by side, the council room and Orsanmichele share several similarities: smooth sandstone masonry, an abundance of tall windows and the circular frames, which at Orsanmichele display the coats-of-arms of the various guilds. Clearly, Brunelleschi looked at Orsanmichele as a civic prototype.

Epilogue

The commission to build a new market behind the Palazzo Vecchio was given to Benci di Cione in 1361 but funds were not found until 1365, the year Talenti was commissioned to close the Orsanmichele arches with tracery. Finished in 1368, the new covered space, or *Magazzino dei Grano* ("Grain Warehouse"), was a small two-bay portico in wood built next to an older building where wool was stored on the ground floor and some grain on the floor above.[21] The office of the *Ufficiali della Gabella delle Porte* ("Gate-tax Officials"), who supervised the import taxes previously handled at the various gates, was also located behind the new Palazzo Vecchio. A small vegetable and wine market was nearby. Just up the street was the Palazzo del Podestà. In 1338, a house and loggia behind the Palazzo Vecchio, belonging to the Manieri family, had been bought for the Capitano del Popolo. To the north of the Palazzo Vecchio were the new *Mercanzia* ("Merchandise") headquarters—a sort of chamber of commerce—and the salt administration offices. The civic center of the city has shifted and the grain market with it. In addition, the new market building was only one long block from the river and a few blocks from the Ponte alle Grazie, first built in 1237, upriver from the Ponte Vecchio. Now carts could follow the road through the Porta San Frediana along the west bank and cross over the Ponte alle Grazie without going through the center. At first, the market was supervised, like the old market at San Michele, by the silk guild, but in 1373 a municipal grain administration took over.

This rather small portico survived until 1619 when Duke Cosimo II had Giulio Parigi replace it (Fig 18.20). He designed a porticoed market three bays wide and two deep, with grain storage above--a more substantial building but modest compared to Orsanmichele. Another story was added in 1868 and, after being a theater and then a department store, it is now a restaurant (Fig. 18.21).

[20] Zervas 1987: 202.

[21] See Paolini n.d.b and Battilotti 2011: 105–106.

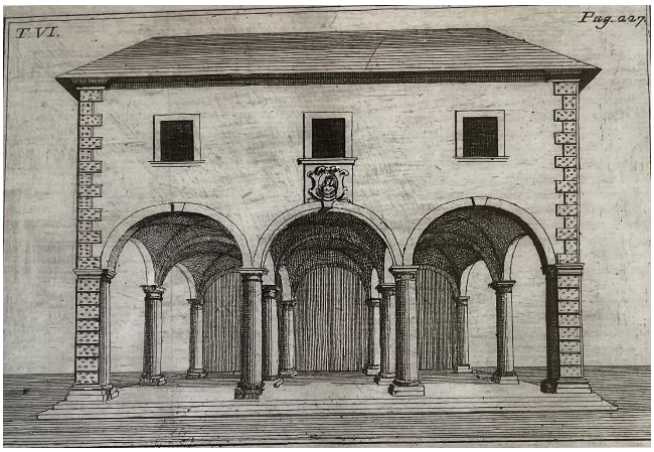

Figure 18.20: A print from the Follini and Rastrelli *Guide to Florence*, 1795, showing the Mercato del Grano, built in 1619 before the upper stories were added in the mid nineteenth century. Photo by author.

Figure 18.21: Loggia del Grano. The photo was taken in 2021, before a restaurant took over the lower loggia. Sailko, CC BY 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>, via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 18.22 Two photos of the Granaio dell'Abbondanza: on left, the façade facing the Piazza Cestello and, on right, a corner of the front and the side. Photos by author.

In 1695, Duke Cosimo III commissioned yet another grain warehouse, which did not combine sales and storage. Giovan Battista Foggini produced a huge building for storage alone on the other side of the river, only a few blocks from the Porta San Frediano gate. This was a fairly unpopulated area where some of the medieval wool cloth drying sheds were located. One was torn down to make space for the new building referred to as the *Granaio dell'Abbondanza* ("Granary of Abbundance"), intended to stockpile enough grain in times of good harvests for periods of scarcity.[22] The grain was stored in huge, round, vaulted brick containers, the old silos system used for long-term storage. A Tuscan *staio* was very approximately 50 pounds. Each of the 122 silos held 1000 staio of grain or 50,000 pounds.

[22]Paolini n.d.c.

The *Granaio dell'Abbondanza*, too, is an ambiguous building. On the front, facing the piazza del Castello, the facade in stucco resembles a seventeenth-century country villa. The large entrance is flanked by square windows; above are another series of residential style windows, followed by small oval ones in an attic story. The sides and back are in brick and were treated like a seventeenth-century fortress, with few openings and scarped walls (fig.18.21). The administration and the custodian's residence are in a three-story palace, while the fortified storage area behind is much lower and filled with silos, or grain containers.[23]

Unlike Orsanmichele, the grain storage area was not given the more elegant treatment. The utilitarian part was hidden behind the institutional part. Clearly, seventeenth-century Florentine sensibilities required that a barn be disguised. Religious and civic buildings were stages for ceremonies, which required a certain decorum and appropriate decoration and symbolism. A utilitarian grain warehouse had no place in the Renaissance and Baroque city center. Exiled to the other side of the Arno, it still had to be camouflaged. The building was used for housing soldiers during the Napoleonic period and in 1848 it was turned into a bakery for the military. In 1865-1871 it was remodeled to adapt to this new function and most of the silos were removed. The remaining silos have been recently restored and doors have cut into the sides to connect them, in order to use the spaces as small rooms for exhibitions.

The Granaio dell'Abbondanza has recently been completely renovated and now houses a bank, technology start-ups, co-working space, restaurants and cocktail bars.[24]

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[23]For a photograph of one of the remaining silos, see https://www.premio-architettura-toscana.it/cache_img/tt.php?src=https://faf-pat-live.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/fafpat/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/14998-06.jpg&w=900&h=810&zc=1&q=100. During a recent remodeling of the building, openings between the silos were added in order to use the space for exhibitions. Originally, there was only a round opening at the top into which the grain was poured.

[24] For additional information about the granary and its recent renovation, including a photo gallery, see Florence Architects Foundation n.d.

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