The Sacro Monte of Varallo as a Physical Manifestation of the *Spiritual Exercises*

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Still an active religious institution, the Sacro Monte, or Sacred Mountain, of Varallo in Italy's Piedmont region is the culmination of more than four centuries of construction, intention, and use. The complex now consists of forty-three chapels set within a forested park traversed by pathways (Figure 1). Each chapel displays a scene from the life of Jesus composed of three-dimensional polychromed figure groups, illusionistic frescoes, and assorted props, such as tables, chairs, and table settings (Figure 2). The created scenes resemble *tableaux vivants* in their lifelikeness, a quality enhanced by the original freedom of a pilgrim to physically enter the chapels and walk through the scenes, becoming, in effect, a participant in the action. First designed to be a surrogate Holy Land, the intention changed during the sixteenth century to one of Christological narrative. Following the dictates of the Council of Trent and the catalystic presence of St. Charles Borromeo (1538-84), archbishop of Milan, the pilgrimage site metamorphosed into a physical manifestation of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556).

The most recent literature dealing with the Tridentine period of the Sacro Monte has interpreted the site as a manifestation of the *Exercises*. Pier Giorgio Longo in his article "Il Sacro Monte di Varallo nella Seconda Metà del XVI Secolo" explains Borromeo's relationship with both Varallo and the *Exercises*.[1] The *Spiritual Exercises* were a tool used by Jesuits during and after Trent to reaffirm the faith of Christian believers. It required a practitioner to meditate on scenes from Christ's life, relying on realistic details to create a believable image in the mind's eye and inspire a relative degree of devotion.[2] Borromeo himself practiced the *Spiritual Exercises* on a regular basis, including a two-week practice at the mountain in 1584. Longo relates the responsibility of the archbishop for approving and encouraging a plan which followed the intentions of the *Spiritual Exercises* for the future construction of the Sacro Monte.[3]

Despite Longo's insightful discussion, scholars have failed to examine the most significant alteration made at the Sacro Monte during the sixteenth century, the addition of grilles. To aid in the implementation of Borromeo's plan, gates and grilles were added to all of the chapels, barring a pilgrim from entry and restricting his participation in the scene to that of distanced observer. This paper examines the addition of the grilles in terms of how it affected the spatial experience of the viewer as dictated by Post-Tridentine doctrine. Specifically, it considers these barriers in terms of the *Spiritual Exercises* and what Loyola termed the meditative "composition of place."[4]

Beginning with a brief discussion of the origins and early years of the Sacro Monte will serve to relate its history before Borromeo became involved with the project. This background will show how the early chapels used transitive devices to create liminality. The article next turns to the changes initiated by Borromeo as represented by the grilles. This section looks at the *Entombment* (1601-3) by Caravaggio (1573-1610) as a comparison for devotional works of art after the Council of Trent. The comparison allows for a proper understanding of how the pilgrimage site now functions as a devotional experience informed by the decrees of Trent. The article concludes with a discussion of how the spatial characteristics of the Sacro Monte, when interpreted through an understanding of Henri Focillon's discussion of space, work to enhance the experience as a physical representation of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

The Sacro Monte of Varallo began as the creation of the Franciscan monk Bernardino Caimi (1425-1500) in the 1480s. Caimi sought to create in Italy a surrogate Holy Land since the actual Middle Eastern sites were becoming inaccessible due to Muslim rule.[5] Caimi's ambitious plan called for reproducing the organization of the Holy Land sites and their physical appearances as closely as possible, though on a smaller scale. Caimi utilized the topography of the Sacro Monte in the organization of the site. For instance, the simulacrum of

1 Pier Giorgio Longo, "Il Sacro Monte di Varallo nella Seconda Metà del XVI Secolo," in *I Sacri Monti di Varallo e Arona dal Borromeo al Bascapè* (Novara: Interlinea s.r.l. Edizioni, 1995) 41-116.

2 Antonio T. de Nicolas, *Powers of Imagining: Ignatius de Loyola: A Philosophical Hermeneutic of Imagining through the Collected Works of Ignatius de Loyola with a Translation of Those Works* (Albany, N.Y.: State U of New York P, 1986) 41-2; H. Outram Evennett, *The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation: The Birkbeck Lectures in Ecclesiastical History Given in the University of Cambridge in May 1951*, ed. John Bossy (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968) 48, 54.

3 For Borromeo's two-week practice of the *Spiritual Exercises* at the Sacro Monte, see Longo, "Il Sacro Monte," 98-9. For the plan and Borromeo's alterations see Longo, "Il Sacro Monte," 45-81, 85-7.

4 De Nicolas, *Powers of Imagining*, 116.

5 Caimi inscribed his intention on the chapel of the Holy Sepulcher, built in 1491. Roberta Panzanelli, "Pilgrimage in Hyperreality: Images and Imagination in the Early Phase of the 'New Jerusalem' at Varallo (1486-1530)," diss., U of California, Los Angeles, 1999, 11.

Mount Calvary was located on a natural hill within the boundaries of the Sacro Monte. In addition, the spatial relationships of the replicated holy sites matched those of the actual Holy Land using scaled-down, proportional distances.[6]

About 1513 the artist Gaudenzio Ferrari (1475-1546) began to change the Sacro Monte both conceptually and formally.[7] He added more chapels, and, within the chapels, created scenes composed of sculpture groups and illusionistic frescoes, as can be seen in the Arrival of the Magi (1520-28) (Figure 2). Visitors were now actually invited into the depicted scene. With no counterpart for the new chapels in the Holy Land, Varallo lost some of its topomimetic qualities.[8] The artistic additions meant the beginning of a change in focus to one of Christological narrative.[9]

The participatory space of the Ferrari manifestation of the Sacro Monte is highly liminal. Here I borrow the definition of liminality given by John Shearman in *Only Connect.* It is the space connecting the viewer to the artificial space of the artwork, an effect achieved through the use of transitive devices, such as gestures and eye contact.[10] In creating such an artistic experience, Ferrari furthered the participatory nature of the pilgrimage. His use of transitive devices to engage the viewer as a participant within a constructed liminal space can be clearly seen in the chapel of the Crucifixion (*c.* 1514) (Figure 3). The walls and ceiling of the chapel were entirely decorated, encompassing viewers and scene alike. The frescoes opposite the scene offered a vista of the local landscape while doors and windows looked out over that same landscape. The surrounding decoration expanded the space of Calvary to include the visitors and mixed it visually with the real space outside the chapel.[11] The scene was created by an extensive and lifelike sculpture group consisting of thirty-four figures and animals placed upon the living rock, with a large, clamorous group of onlookers painted on the wall behind the sculpture. Upon entering the chapel, viewers first saw a composition of St. John and the three Marys serenely leading others to the Crucifixion. As the pilgrim moved further into the chapel his gaze was directed counterclockwise towards the center of the composition by the gazes of both sculpted and painted figures. On its sweep to the left, the viewer's attention first encountered naturalistic, informal elements such as children and dogs, commonly used as transitive devices to guide a spectator's eye. The emotion of the onlookers, both sculpted and painted, builds in intensity, affecting the empathy of the pilgrim, to reach a climax when the gaze reaches the Crucifixion.[12] Ferrari's blending of the interior and exterior spaces and his use of figures to engage the viewer informally and empathetically subsumes the viewer within the scene.

The temporal and spatial ambiguities inherent in Ferrari's version of the Sacro Monte ran counter to the later precepts on art mandated by the Council of Trent in 1563. In addition to prescribing how works of art should function with respect to aesthetic considerations such as creative invention and decorum, Tridentine decrees sought to reaffirm the church hierarchy, including the position of the congregant to that of the clergy. In the decree of the twenty-fifth session, Trent demanded the historical accuracy of, and eschewed ambiguity in, sacred works of art. It also affirmed the role of the bishop in approving sacred works of art.[13] Both of these precepts were meant to ensure that viewers received only the proper information, thereby avoiding any possibility of heresy which might result from leaving the artwork's subject open to interpretation by a lay believer.

The Council of Trent's decree contained little regarding the application of its precepts to sacred art, leaving elaboration to later authors. Borromeo was one of the first to publish a treatise regarding sacred art and architecture. His *Instructiones fabricae et supellectilis ecclesiasticae*, written in 1577, dealt with divisions of space and defined hierarchies of sacrality. Here Borromeo applied the Tridentine ideas to architecture, an area not dealt with by Trent. In order to divide the space of a church and define the sacredness of each division, the archbishop relied in part on railings, gates, and grilles.[14] A representation of his directives can be seen in the lay hall of San Maurizio al Monastero Maggiore in Milan, begun *c.* 1503 but modified at Borromeo's insistence in 1577-

6 Panzanelli is currently the most thorough source for a history of the beginnings of the Sacro Monte of Varallo, especially its origins and founding. For Caimi's topomimetic intentions, see Panzanelli 47.

7 Exactly when Ferrari began working at Varallo is not known. Scholars generally agree that he started working there about twenty years after its founding. Panzanelli 191-2.

8 Panzanelli 196-202, 240.

9 Panzanelli 132-3.

10 For Shearman's discussion of transitive effects see John Shearman, *Only Connect…: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts,1988, Bollingen Series XXXV, 37 (Washington, D.C.: The National Gallery of Art; Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992) 33, 39, and Chapter 1; for his discussion of liminality see 59-60, and Chapter 2.

11 Panzanelli 201.

12 For the discussion of the Crucifixion chapel, see Panzanelli, "Pilgrimage in Hyperreality,"198-202. For children as transitive devices see A. W. A. Boschloo, *Annibale Carracci in Bologna: Visible Reality in Art after the Council of Trent*, vol. 1, Kunsthistorische Studiën van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome Deel III - Band I (The Hague: Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Recreation and Social Welfare, Government Publishing Office; Maarssen: Gary Schwartz, 1974) 90-1.

13 *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, ed. and trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848) 233-6.

14 E. Cecilia Voelker, "Charles Borromeo's *Instructiones fabricae et supellectilis ecclesiasticae*, 1577: A Translation with Commentary and Analysis," diss., Syracuse U, 1977, 127. For the railings see for instance chapter 14, 179.

8 (Figure 4).[15] The more sacred spaces, such as the altar area, were clearly delimited by railings from the less sacred space of the nave, where the congregation gathered. The railings effectively created an authority of place. In addition Borromeo wrote on the use of sacred art in chapter seventeen of the *Instructiones*. He further emphasized the need for conformity and accuracy of sacred images, and insisted that art must also move the viewer to piety.[16] Post-Tridentine ideology, therefore, had allowed little to no room for artistic license, yet still demanded that a work of art inspire and edify. Under this new attitude towards sacred art, the compositional inventiveness and spatial ambiguity of Ferrari's chapels would no longer have been tolerated, yet alone embraced.

Caravaggio's painting of the *Entombment*, originally in S. Maria in Valicella in Rome, demonstrates how post-Tridentine sacred art acted on the layperson as viewer. The *Entombment* strikes a balance between didacticism, historical and visible reality, and clarity, while remaining strongly affective. In the painting, Nicodemus lowers the dead body of Jesus into the tomb. With the *Entombment* hung in its original position over the altar, the officiating priest would appear to stand in the tomb ready to receive the body of Christ, an act laden with Eucharistic implications. Caravaggio uses the transitive device of Nicodemus, who exists within the pictorial space, looking directly at the priest, standing in the chapel space, to create liminality.[17] The transitiveness of the painting reinforces the ecclesiastical hierarchy of priest to congregant, and thereby the ecclesiastical reality of priestly intercession.

Here, the image functioned in concert with Borromeo's directives. Railings separated the congregant from the altar area, already demarcating the position of the congregant in relation to the church and its privileged representatives. Since Caravaggio's painting hung behind the altar, the priest would be the only figure allowed to interact with it and thus participate actively in the mysteries of the church. The congregant, who is not allowed to interact with the painting, finds his place in the hierarchy as one of passive dependency. He receives the symbolic body of Christ—the eucharistic wafer—from the priest, while the priest implicitly receives the actual body of God's son. In other words, through this image and its placement within S. Maria in Valicella, the congregant learns of the historical act of the entombment, the mystery of the Eucharist, the authoritative place of the priest as the mediator between secular reality and spiritual reality, and of his own subordinate role within the church.

The grilles in the Sacro Monte function in the same way as the railings in Borromeo's treatise on architecture and, ultimately, the architectural space in which Caravaggio's *Entombment* was placed (Figures 1 and 5). They create a division between the interior of the chapels and the surrounding exterior and create a new hierarchy of sacrality within that division. The chapels' off-limits inner space becomes more sacred, while the outer space of the pilgrim is less sacred, just like the divisions of nave and altar in a church set forth in Borromeo's *Instructiones*. The liminality and ambiguity of Ferrari's Sacro Monte has disappeared. Nonetheless, the life-like naturalism ensures the ability of each chapel to inspire a high degree of devotion, just like the later *Entombment*. Through the addition of the grilles the Sacro Monte becomes a Tridentine work of art, reinforcing ecclesiastical hierarchy while remaining didactically affective.

By turning now to the definition of space as provided by Henri Focillon, one can see how the Sacro Monte in its new form as Tridentine artwork functions as a manifestation of the *Spiritual Exercises*. According to Focillon, space can be understood as an area lacking in physicality that is defined by surrounding physical contours. Forms that inhabit and move through a void create the contours of space. But the space contains those forms within itself, in effect acting to define the limit of the forms just as the forms limit the space.[18] The Sacro Monte space, then, can be understood in terms of its contours and the void, or volume, within those contours. The boundary of the site, the ground, the walls of the chapels and other buildings, and the visitors who move within the site are the forms that create the contours. The volume contained within those contours is the space.

The separation by the grilles of the participatory space of the pilgrims and the non-participatory space of the chapels creates pockets of voids in the overall space of the site (Figure 6). The participatory space becomes the real space, through which the pilgrims move from chapel to chapel. The non-participatory space becomes an unreal space, only recognized when a pilgrim comes to rest before it and peers through the grille. By following the course of the *Spiritual Exercises* by which the chapels are laid out, pilgrims continually alter the contours of the real space. Yet because they move through it in a prescribed direction, they always modify the real space in the same way. The pilgrims have become a part of the work of art in its form as *Spiritual Exercises*. They move along the points of meditation outlined in the *Spiritual Exercises*, from

15 Giovanni Battista Sannazzaro, "The Architecture of San Maurizio," in *Bernardino Luini and Renaissance Painting in Milan*, ed. Sandrina Bandera and Maria Teresa Fiorio, trans. Rhoda Billingsley, Adrian Hartley Cook, Andrew Ellis, and David Stanton (Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A., 2000) 20, 22.

16 For chapter 17 of the *Instructiones* see Voelker 1977, 228-32; for Voelker's comments on the chapter summarizing and clarifying what Borromeo was saying, see 233-5.

17 Georgia Wright, "Caravaggio's *Entombment* Considered *in Situ*," *Art Bulletin* 60 (1978): 35, 36, 38-9, 41.

18 Henri Focillon, "Forms in the Realm of Space," in *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Charles Beecher Hogan, George Kubler, and S. L. Faison (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948. Reprint, New York: Zone Books, 1989) 65-94. See particularly 70-1, 79.

scene to scene, continuously kneeling and rising, just as they would if following the four-week practice of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

As a pilgrim comes before each chapel, he activates the unreal space inside the chapel. By focusing his meditation on the scene inside the chapel, the scene assumes reality.[19] When the pilgrim finishes the meditation and rises to move on to the next chapel, the scene loses its reality, returning to its non-real status. This corresponds with Loyola's directives in the *Spiritual Exercises* to picture the meditation as realistically as possible. Through Borromeo's initiative, each chapel of the Sacro Monte has become one of Loyola's "compositions of place," activated only when a visitor looks through the grilles, and otherwise existing only as a void in the space.

The addition of grilles was a profound physical alteration in the fabric of the Sacro Monte, and represents a significant change in both its intended purpose and its function. The original intention—a surrogate Holy Land—used a space which mixed the Varallese countryside with Middle Eastern locations in order to recreate the physical journey for a pilgrim. Ferrari's *invenzione* furthered the transformation by designing scenes that incorporated the viewer as participant, creating an enhanced liminality. The Tridentine focus on didacticism and authority, however, necessitated a change in the way the site operated. Borromeo sponsored a plan to turn the Sacro Monte into a physical manifestation of the *Spiritual Exercises*, which included alterations to the chapels to meet the demands of Trent. The grilles supported the authority of the church by delimiting the place of the pilgrim, dissolving the previous ambiguity. At the same time, the grilles heightened the experience of the Sacro Monte in its *Spiritual Exercises* configuration by transforming the chapels into physical foci for Loyola's recommended meditative practice.

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19 Here I am distinguishing between the reality of the sculpture and painting making up the scene, and the scene itself, since it is not a real scene actually happening with real people in a real place. The scene only becomes real when given the focus of meditation by the viewer.

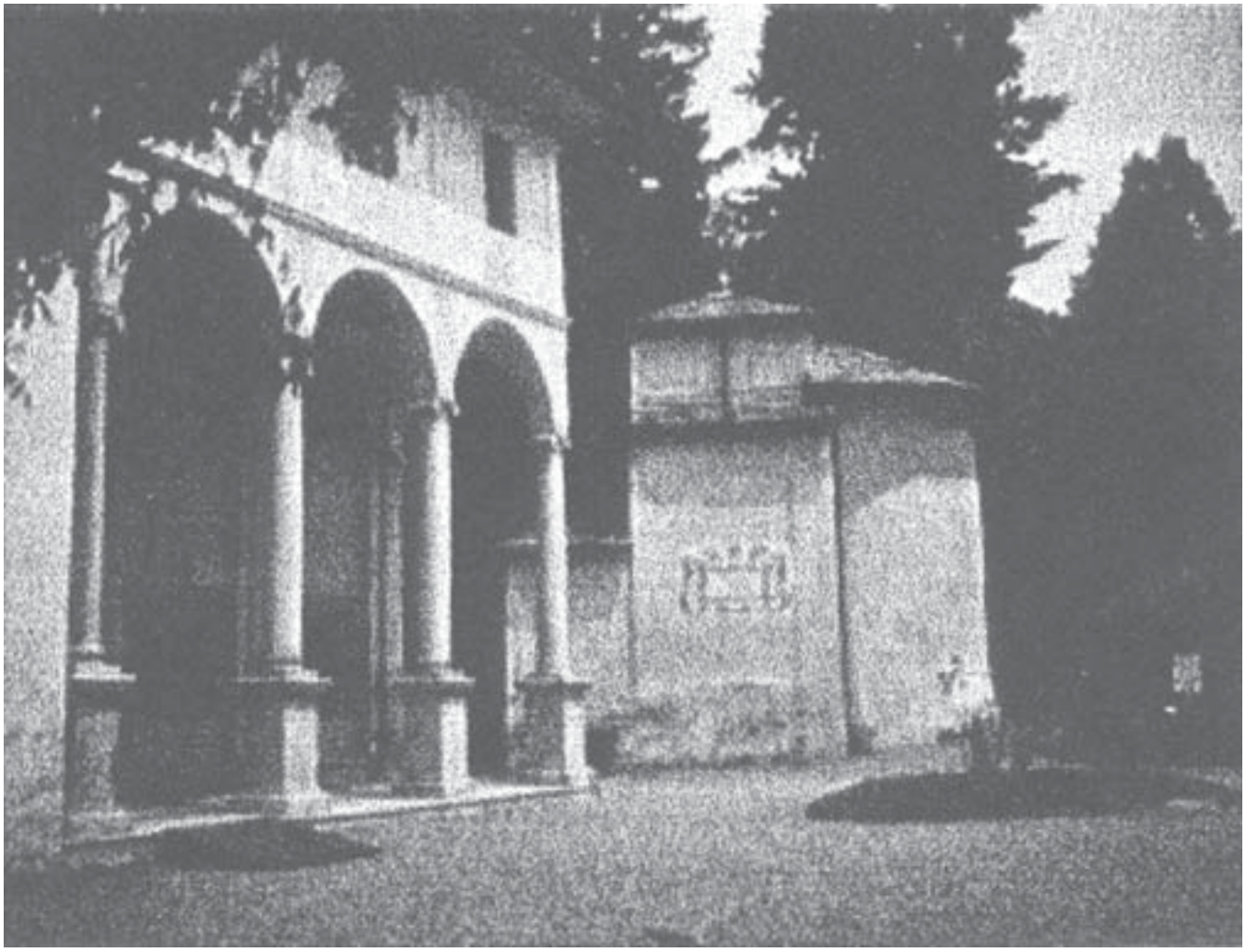

Figure 1. View of Sacro Monte chapels, The Sacro Monte of Varallo, Varallo, Italy. Photograph courtesy of Barbara Johnston.

Figure 2. Interior, Arrival of the Magi chapel, Gaudenzio Ferrari, mixed media, *c.* 1520–28, The Sacro Monte of Varallo, Varallo, Italy. Photograph courtesy of Barbara Johnston.

Figure 3: Interior, Crucifixion chapel, Gaudenzio Ferrari, mixed media, *c.* 1514, The Sacro Monte of Varallo, Varallo, Italy. Alinari / Art Resource, NY.

Figure 4. Lay hall, San Maurizio al Monastero Maggiore, *c.* 1503 and 1577–78, Milan, Italy, from Sandrino Bandera and Maria Teresa Fiorio, eds., *Bernardino Luini and Renaissance Painting in Milan*, trans. Rhoda Billingsley, Adrian Hartley Cook, Andrew Ellis, and David Stanton (Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A., 2000) 119.

Figure 5. Grille and interior, The Last Supper chapel, unknown artist and Antonio Orgiazzi, mixed media, late 15th century and 1780, The Sacro Monte of Varallo, Varallo, Italy. Photograph courtesy of Barbara Johnston.

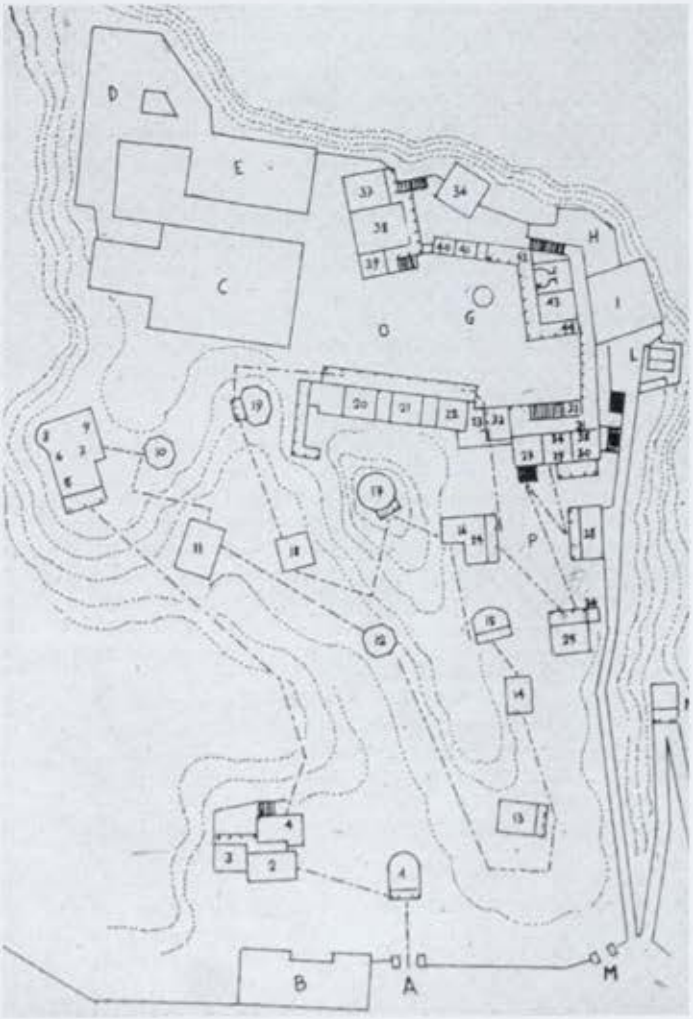

Figure 6. Map of present-day Sacro Monte, from Galeazzo Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri: Progetto di pianificazione urbanistica, architettonica, e figurativa del Sacro Monte di Varallo in Valsesia (1565–1569)* (Bologna: Arnoldo Forni Editore, 1974) 1: plan no. 8.