

**Leo of Ostia. *The Chronicle of Montecassino*. Trans. from O. Lehman-Brockhaus, ed. *Schriftquellen zur Kunstgeschichte des 11. und 12. Jahrhunderts für Deutschland, Lothringen, und Italien* (Vol 50. Berlin, 1938. 476-80, 681-82) by Herbert Bloch: *A Documentary History of Art: The Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Vol. 1. Ed. Elizabeth Gilmore Holt. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1957. 9-18. The biographic note on Leo has been excerpted from pp. 8-9 of the English edition.**

**Leo of Ostia** (1046?-1115), the son of a princely family, entered the celebrated Benedictine Monastery of Monte Cassino as a boy of fourteen. The famous abbot Desiderius had gathered there a group of important churchmen, scholars and artists until the monastery had become the center of learning and art of the time, and in these surroundings Leo received his education. Later, as librarian and archivist, for the convent's great library, which had been increased by Desiderius, he was prepared for the writing of his *Chronicle of Monte Cassino*. He was named Cardinal Bishop of Ostia by Pope Pascal II, and played an active and important part in the struggles between Henry V and the Pope. These activities prevented his continuing the *Chronicle* beyond 1075.

The *Chronicle of Montecassino* differs from other chronicles in its qualities of organization and reliability and is, on that account, among the first documents which can be classed as history. The third book is devoted to Desiderius, especially his building activity. The section given below describes in detail the construction and dedication of the great abbey of St. Benedict, undertaken under the abbot's direction. It records that he imported from Constantinople craftsmen not only to carry out the decoration of the church but to instruct the abbey monks in their techniques and skills. The new wave of Byzantine influence which was introduced into the arts of Italy at this time may be traced, at least in part, to this conscious attempt by Desiderius to make available the artistic achievements of Byzantium. For this present document remains the principle source of our knowledge.

### *The Chronicle of Monte Cassino*

Book III, §26. In all happiness and peacefulness, through the merits of the Holy Father Benedict, God installed the venerable abbot Desiderius. He was held in such great honor by everyone around that not only all the people of modest origin, but even their princes and dukes eagerly rendered him the same obedience and ready response to his wishes that they rendered their sires and lords. Thus, not without divine inspiration, Desiderius planned the demolition of the old church and the construction of a new, more beautiful and august one. To most of our leading brethren this project seemed at that time entirely too difficult to attempt. They tried to dissuade him from this intention by prayers, by reasons, and by every other possible way, believing that his entire life would be insufficient to bring such a great work to an end. But trusting in God, he was confident of God's help in everything done for God. Therefore in the ninth year of his office, in March of A.D. 1066, after having built near the hospital the not sufficiently large church of St. Peter, in which the brethren of course should assemble for divine service in the interim, he proceeded to demolish to its foundation St. Benedict's church which, because of its smallness and ugliness, was entirely out of keeping with so great a treasure and so important a congregation.

And since the old church had been built on the very top of the mountain, and had been exposed in every direction to the violent buffeting of the winds, and as it had often been hit by lightning, Desiderius decided to destroy the ridge of stone with fire and steel, to level a space sufficient for the foundation of the basilica, and to make a deep excavation where the foundations should be laid. After having given orders to those who were to execute this work with the greatest dispatch, he went to Rome. After consulting each of his best friends and generously and wisely distributing a

large sum of money, he bought huge quantities of [ancient] columns, bases, epistyles, and marble of different colors. All these he brought from Rome to the port, from the Portus Romanus thence by sea to the tower at the Garigliano River, and from there with great confidence on boats to Suium. But from Suium to this place he had them transported with great effort on wagons. In order that one may admire even more the fervor and loyalty of the faithful citizens, a great number of them carried up the first column on their arms and necks from the foot of the mountain. The labor was even greater [than it would be now] for the ascent then was very steep, narrow, and difficult. Desiderius had not yet thought of making the path smoother and wider, as he did later.

Then he leveled with great difficulty the space for the entire basilica, except for the sanctuary, procured all the necessary materials, hired highly experienced workmen, and laid the foundations in the name of Jesus Christ, and started the construction of the basilica.

It was one hundred and five cubits long, forty-three cubits wide, and twenty-eight cubits high.<sup>1</sup> On each side he erected on bases ten columns nine cubits high. In the upper part he opened rather large windows: twenty-one in the nave, six long ones and four round ones in the choir, and two in the central apse. He erected the walls of the two aisles to a height of fifteen cubits and provided each aisle with ten windows. He then started to reduce the level of the sanctuary to that of the basilica—a difference of about six cubits—but at a depth of not even three *ulnae*, he suddenly found the venerable tomb of St. Benedict.<sup>2</sup> He expressed the opinion to his brethren and to other men of good judgment that he should not venture to change the tomb in the least, and in order that no one could snatch away anything from so great a treasure, he re-covered the tomb where it was with precious stones and above it, running north and south at right angles to the axis of the basilica, he built a sepulcher of Parian marble five cubits long—a wonderful work. By this device, the sanctuary remained in great eminence, so much so that one has to descend from its pavement to that of the basilica by eight steps under the large arch which is, of course, above the sanctuary. In the main apse, toward the east, he erected an altar to St. John the Baptist, in the same place where St. Benedict had built an oratory in honor of this saint. In the south apse he erected an altar to the Mother of God and in the north apse an altar to St. Gregory. Beside this [north] apse, he built a house with two rooms for housing the treasure of the church service. This house is usually called the sacristy; and he connected this house with a similar one in which the ministrants of the altar should prepare themselves. As he had taken away not a small part of his house to create space for the basilica, he made the same house which connected with the sacristy wider and more beautiful than the former one. On the side of it, near the aisle of the main church, he built a short [narrow] but very beautiful chapel with a curved wall to St. Nicholas. Between this chapel and the very front of the basilica he constructed in the same type of work, a venerable oratory to St. Bartholomew. At the front, near the portal of the main church, he erected an admirable campanile of large square stones.

Before the church he also built the atrium, which we call in the Roman fashion, “paradise.” It was seventy-seven and a half cubits long, fifty-seven and a half cubits wide, and fifteen and a half cubits wide, with four columns on square bases at each end and eight columns at each side. On its south side he installed below the pavement of the atrium a large vaulted cistern of the same length. Before the entrance to the basilica, he constructed five arches, which we call “cross-vaults,” and five before the entrance to the atrium as well. At each of the two corners of the west wing of the atrium he built a beautiful chapel in the form of a tower. The right in honor of the Archangel Michael, and the left one in honor of the prince of apostles, St. Peter. The interior is accessible by five steps from the atrium. Since the ascent to the church was very difficult and steep, he made an excavation sixty-six

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<sup>1</sup> A **cubit** is 18 inches, a little under 50 cm.

<sup>2</sup> An **ulna** is about 42 inches, a little over 106 cm.

cubits square and seven cubits deep in the mountain itself outside the vestibule of the atrium and the two chapels, and built there the twenty-four marble steps thirty-six cubits wide by which one ascends to the vestibule of the atrium.

§27. Meanwhile he sent envoys to Constantinople to hire who were experts in the art of laying mosaics and pavements. The [mosaicists] were to decorate the apse, the arch, and the vestibule of the main basilica; the others, to lay the pavement of the whole church with various kinds of stones. The degree of perfection which was attained in these arts by the masters whom Desiderius had hired can be seen in their works. One would believe that the figures in the mosaics were alive and that in the marble of the pavement flowers of every color bloomed in wonderful variety. And since *magistra Latinitas* had left uncultivated the practice of these arts for more than five hundred years and, through the efforts of this man, with the inspiration and help of God, promised to regain it in our time, the abbot in his wisdom decided that a great number of young monks in the monastery should be thoroughly initiated in these arts in order that their knowledge might not again be lost in Italy. And the most eager artists selected from his monks he trained not only in these arts but in all the arts which employ silver, bronze, iron, glass, ivory, wood, alabaster, and stone. But about that in another place; now we shall describe how he decorated and finally consecrated the basilica.

§28. He covered the whole basilica, the choir, and both aisles as well as the vestibule with roofs of lead. The apse and the major arch he faced with mosaic. He ordered the following verses to be written in large letters on the arch:

In order that under Thy Leadership the just may be able to  
reach and take possession of the heavenly home,  
Father Desiderius founded here this hall for Thee.<sup>3</sup>

In the apse, under the feet of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Apostle, he ordered the following verses to be written:

This house is like Mount Sinai which brought forth sacred laws.  
As the Law demonstrates what was once promulgated here.  
The Law went out from here which leads the minds from  
the depths and having become known everywhere, it  
gave light through the times of the age.<sup>4</sup>

He filled all the windows of the nave and the choir with plates made of lead and glass and connected with iron; those in the sidewalls of both aisles he made of mica, but of similar gracefulness. After having installed below the timber work the ceiling admirably decorated with various colors and designs, he had all the walls painted a beautiful variety of colors. He laid the pavements of the entire church including its annexes, the oratories of Sts. Nicholas and Bartholomew, and his own house with an admirable number of cut stones hitherto quite unknown in these parts—particularly the pavement near the altars and in the choir. The steps leading to the altar were incrustated with precious marbles. The front of the choir which he built in the center of the

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<sup>3</sup> These lines copy the inscription which Constantine the Great had set on the *arcus maior* [large or main arch] of the Vatican basilica.

<sup>4</sup> The first two lines are in imitation of the verses which decorated the walls of the Lateran basilica. Desiderius' borrowing is testimony of his conscious attempt to establish a relationship with the most venerable churches of Christianity.

basilica, he fenced with four marble plates, one was red, one green, and the remaining plates around the choir were white. He further decorated the arches above the entrance and the vestibule of the church with beautiful mosaics. He had the whole façade of the basilica plastered from the arches to the pavement. Also he had the outside of the arches covered with mosaic and the verses of the poet Marcus inscribed there in golden letters. He ordered the remaining three wings of the atrium painted outside and inside with various scenes from the Old and New Testaments, and all the wings paved with marble. Moreover, he covered them with ceilings and brick roofs. The vestibule of the atrium with its two towers was paved, painted and covered in the same way.

§29. After all this had been completed, with God's help and through His grace, within five years, Desiderius resolved to dedicate the basilica with the greatest solemnity and with an immense festival for eternal memory. He petitioned and devoutly invited Pope Alexander II to come to the dedication. When he found the Pope eager and willing, he also invited the latter's archdeacon, Hildebrand, the other cardinals, and the Roman bishops [...].<sup>5</sup> On the first day of October of A.D. 1071 [...] the basilica of St. Benedict with its five altars was dedicated by the most reverend and angelic Pope himself. The altar in honor of the Virgin in the southern part was dedicated by John, Bishop of Tusculum, the altar in honor of St. Gregory in the northern part was dedicated by Hubald, the Bishop of Sabina, and that in honor of St. Nicholas was dedicated by Erasmus, Bishop of Segni [...].

§32. After the dedication of the church it may be fitting to report Desiderius' other contributions to its decoration. [...] He sent one of the brethren to the imperial city [Constantinople] with a letter to the emperor and thirty-six pounds of gold, and had made there a golden antependium decorated with beautiful gems and enamels. In these enamels he had represented some stories from the New Testament and almost all the miracles of St. Benedict.

The Emperor Romanos IV Diogenes received our brother very honorably and treated him and all his companions honorably and reverently as long as they stayed, and he granted him all possible facilities for whatever he wished to have executed. He had made four barriers of bronze to be placed before the altar, between the choir and the sanctuary; also a beam of bronze with fifty candlestick in which, on the principal holidays, as many candles were to be stuck; and thirty-six lamps which hung down on bronze books from the beam. This beam of bronze was supported by arms and handles of bronze. It was connected with [or: put in] a wooden beam which was beautifully made and decorated with gold and purple at Desiderius' order. It was placed upon six columns of silver—each four and a half cubits high and weighing eight pounds—in front of the choir. He had six round icons hung under the beam. Above it he had set thirteen square ones of equal size and weight, ten of which the above-mentioned brother had made of solid silver and gilded in Constantinople. Each of them weighted twelve or fourteen pounds. The round icons had only a silver frame and were painted by [one with] Greek experience in colors and figures. Three other square icons were made of the same metal, size, and way at the order of Desiderius by his own artists. Another round icon covered on both sides with embossed and gilded silver, and surrounded by silver buds on the outside was sent to St. Benedict from Constantinople at that time by a noble. Later on Desiderius has a similar one made and both were suspended in the ciborium of the altar. Moreover, Desiderius had made and gilded another beam of silver weighing about sixty pounds. This was placed under the major arch before the altar of four silver, partially gilded, columns, each five cubits high and weighing ten pounds. He also had made two large silver crosses, each weighing thirty pounds, on which the images were of beautiful embossed work. These he put on marble bases between the columns and below the above-mentioned beam. The three other sides of the major altar he faced with chased and gilded silver [plates] each weighing eighty-six pounds. The sides of the other three

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<sup>5</sup> The long list of guests and the description of the festivities are omitted.

altars are decorated on three sides with old plates. For the ciborium of the altar he had made four beams with the outer sides likewise covered with embossed, gilded silver, while he had the inner sides decorated with plates and colors. Two of the beams are six cubits long and weigh twenty pounds. The other two beams are four and a half cubits long and weigh twelve pounds. He also had made six large candlesticks of chased silver plates, three cubits high and each weighing five or six pounds. On the principal holidays they were to be placed in a straight line before the altar and lighted with great torches. He also had made a wooden pulpit for reading and singing, far more excellent and eminent than the former one. It has six steps. Out of a beautiful pulpit he made a most beautiful one [decorated] with various purple colors and gold plates. In front of it he set up on a base of porphyry a partially gilded silver column, six cubits high. Upon it is placed the huge candle, the blessing of which is solemnly celebrated on Easter Sunday. He had made in the form of a huge crown of silver a chandelier, twenty cubits in circumference and weighing about one hundred pounds, with twelve projecting towers and thirty-six lamps hanging from it. From a heavy chain of silver gilded balls, he suspended the chandelier outside the choir in front of the cross.

§18. While visiting Amalfi, Desiderius saw the bronze doors of the cathedral of Amalfi and as he liked them very much, he soon sent the measures of the doors of the old church of Monte Cassino to Constantinople with the order to make those now existing. As he had not yet resolved to renew the basilica, the doors are for this reason so short as they have remained until now.