Raphael’s Ansidei altarpiece in the National Gallery


It is a paradox of scholarship that works of art long in public collections may sometimes be neglected precisely because they are so familiar. Raphael’s Ansidei altarpiece (Fig.1), ‘saved for the nation’ for an unprecedented sum in 1883, is a case in point. It had been bought directly from the Servite friars of S. Fiorenzo in Perugia in 1764 by Gavin Hamilton, acting for Lord Robert Spencer, who subsequently presented it to his brother, the 4th Duke of Marlborough. As an altarpiece by the ‘divine’ Raphael, the Ansidei Madonna was quite exceptional in a British collection, and became ‘the object of a constant pilgrimage to the palace of Blenheim’ in Oxfordshire. When in 1883 the picture was offered for sale together with Van Dyck’s Equestrian portrait of Charles I to cover the 8th Duke’s mounting debts on the death of his father, an appeal by Royal Academicians led by their president, Frederic Leighton, moved Gladstone’s government to offer a special grant of £87,500 to secure the acquisition of both pictures, of which £70,000 went towards the Raphael.

The altarpiece’s passage from S. Fiorenzo, where it had remained for over 250 years, through the Spencer–Churchill family to the National Gallery was remarkably direct: effectively the painting has only changed hands twice, thus avoiding the vicissitudes of the art market and any urgent need to enhance its appearance and impeccable pedigree with campaigns of restoration and historical research. The only serious attempt to elucidate the picture’s early history remains Lino Manzoni’s 1890 article for a local Umbrian periodical. Manzoni unearthed crucial material on the altarpiece in the Ansidei family archive but, through a combination of piecemeal transcriptions and his own puzzling deductions, he made several unfortunate errors regarding the identity of Raphael’s patron, the location of the altarpiece in the church, and the original construction of the predella, all subsequently perpetuated in the scholarly literature. Preparations for the National Gallery’s current exhibition Raphael: From Urbino to Rome provided the impetus to study the Ansidei altarpiece afresh. Parallel campaigns of technical and archival research led to a number of new discoveries regarding the production, original setting and patronage of the main panel and its predella. These were briefly summarised in short entries in the National Gallery exhibition catalogue and Technical Bulletin but are published here fully for the first time.

In his testament of 12th October 1490 (see Appendix 1 below), the prosperous wool merchant Filippo di Ansideo di Simone, called ‘de Catrano’ (documented 1458–90), bequeathed money for his burial in the parish church of S. Fiorenzo, located some fifty metres from his house on what is now Via Alesi, in the quarter of Porta Sole, Perugia. He also made a bequest of one hundred florins for the endowment of a chapel dedicated to St Nicholas of Bari which he had erected in the church in 1483. Filippo regarded this saint as ‘nostro avvocato’, and an inscription commemorating his original foundation once carved in stone above the chapel read: ‘To St Nicholas Bishop of Bari, erected in humility by Filippo Ansidei de Catrano, 1483’ (see Appendix 6). Filippo almost certainly died of the illness alluded to in his testament since he ceases to appear in surviving documents after 1490. His chapel must therefore have remained without an altarpiece until Raphael was approached to provide one, probably at some point in 1503 or 1504.

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7 Filippo Ansidei served several times as chamberlain of the Perugian wool guild; see Mancini, op. cit. (note 5), p.57. He acquired the house on the site of the present Palazzo Ansidei in 1467; Perugia, Archivio di Stato (hereafter cited as ASP), Famiglie privati: Ansidei, carte miscellanea, no.65 (Contabilità privata a creditori e debitori di Filippo Tomaso Ansidei), fol.21r; ‘Compa de la casa nostra’. Filippo’s political connections are unclear, but he served as a go-between between Guido Baghioni and Simone degli Oddi on the eve of the latter’s ejection from Perugia in 1488; see P. Pompeo: Dell’Historia di Perugia, Venice 1664, III, p.851.
8 Recorded in the early eighteenth century, this vital piece of evidence was destroyed when the church was remodelled in the Baroque style on the designs of Pietro Carattoli in 1768–70: ‘Divo Nicolao Epo. Baren. Philippus Ansidei de Catrano humiliter orint. 1453’; in 1466 Filippo acknowledged receipt of his inheritance from his father Ansideo in the name of God, the Virgin Mary ‘e del beato S.o Nicholo nostro avvocato’, cited by Manzoni, op. cit. (note 5), p.645; St Nicholas of Bari was particularly venerated by merchants on account of the legend of his body’s translation by nostrum'. 9
10 Ibid., p.628–31, gave Filippo’s year of birth as 1434 without citing his source, but he also accepted the tradition dating Filippo’s initial acquisition of the chapel to 1442 (see Appendix 5), when he would only have been eight years old; for further comments on these discrepancies, see note 34 below.
RAPHAEL’S ANSIDEI ALTARPIECE

1. The Madonna and Child with St John the Baptist and Nicholas of Bari (The Ansidei Madonna), by Raphael. c.1504–05 (dated 1505).
Panel, 245 by 157 cm. (National Gallery, London).
When Raphael received the commission, he had been working in Perugia for over two years and had established a reputation there, filling the vacuum created by Pietro Perugino’s frequent absences in Florence and elsewhere. As well as producing many small paintings of Madonnas and saints, Raphael had also painted the monumental altarpiece of the Coronation of the Virgin for the Degli Oddi chapel in S. Francesco al Prato (see fig.42 on p.743). If one accepts the hypothesis that the Betrothal of the Virgin now in the Brera, Milan (dated 1504), was painted in Perugia and transported to Città di Castello, its remarkable sophistication would also have contributed to Raphael’s standing in Perugia. By December 1505, when the Clarissan nuns of Monteluce were looking for a suitable candidate to execute a new altarpiece for the high altar of their convent church, Raphael’s name emerged as ‘the best master, who had been recommended by the most citizens and also our reverend fathers, who had seen his works’. The Ansidei altarpiece, which is dated 1505 in the border of the Virgin’s mantle below her left arm (Fig.2), would certainly have contributed to this assessment, together with another Perugian sacra conversazione, the so-called Colonna altarpiece, painted contemporaneously for the female tertiaries of S. Antonio.

The Ansidei altarpiece pays homage to works in Perugia by the two artists whose styles Raphael most admired, Signorelli and Perugino. All the figures reflect his careful study of Signorelli’s Vagnucci altarpiece of 1483–84, painted for the chapel of St Onuphrius in Perugia cathedral (Fig.5). When reversed, the poses of the Ansidei Virgin and Child are almost identical to those in Signorelli’s painting. Raphael’s Baptist, with his impossibly slender rock-crystal cross, is a creative reinterpretation of the same saint in Signorelli’s work, while his contemplative St Nicholas echoes Signorelli’s aged bishop, St Herculanus. Furthermore, infra-red reflectography reveals additional correspondences between Raphael’s initial under-drawing and motifs from Signorelli’s altarpiece: the Virgin was originally barefoot like Signorelli’s (Fig.4), while St Nicholas was bare-headed and balding like St Herculanus (Fig.3). For the architectural setting, elevated throne and air of perfect order, Raphael turned instead to Perugino’s

Decemviri altarpiece of 1496–97 in the Palazzo de’ Priori in Perugia (Fig.7), a composition he had studied and characteristically improved upon in a slightly earlier drawing (Fig.8). Before addressing the finished altarpiece, it is worth considering this compositional sketch, now in Frankfurt (Fig.8), in greater detail. It shares many features with the Ansidei Madonna, including the overall structure of the Virgin’s throne, and details such as the arrangement of the rosary beads and the Christ Child’s firm grasp on the material that enfold him. The vaulted colonnade behind the throne is taken from Raphael’s ambiguous treatment of St Nicholas of Bari’s episcopal regalia in the for S. Maria degli Angeli in Perugia, now in the (The Vagnucci altarpiece), by Luca Signorelli. For the Colonna altarpiece and its lunette, see F. Zeri and E. Gardner: Although the altarpiece is dated 1505, the appearance of its underdrawing and the architecture in Raphael’s final painting is closer still to another altarpiece by Perugino’s Decemviri altarpiece and the drawing is datable on stylistic grounds to about 1503–04. Several elements suggest a connection with the Ansidei commission: the lighting from the top right matches that in the final painting and the overall proportions are identical, with a height to width ratio of 3:2. The principal reason why the drawing has not generally been accepted as a preparatory study is that the saint to the left of the throne is clearly identifiable, from the sunburst on his breast, as the Augustinian saint Nicholas of Tolentino and not Nicholas of Bari. But no known commission of Raphael’s during these years included the former saint, so one may at least entertain the hypothesis that the artist began designing the Ansidei altarpiece with the ‘wrong’ St Nicholas in mind, perhaps thinking back to the subject of his earlier St Nicholas of Tolentino altarpiece for S. Agostino in Città di Castello. The fact that the Frankfurt drawing does not elaborate the right-hand side of the composition indicates that it was an early proposal, devised before an overall design was settled. Irrespective of the relationship between the Frankfurt drawing and the completed altarpiece, a great deal of information regarding Raphael’s working method can be gleaned from the picture surface of the Ansidei Madonna. The configuration and iconography of the altarpiece can appear deceptively straightforward: the Virgin is seated in majesty on a carved wooden throne with the Christ Child on her lap; with poignantly solemnity she draws his attention to a passage in an open book, presumably alluding to his predestined sacrifice. The volutes on either side of the throne draw the eye upwards to a delicate coral chaplet suspended from the canopy above the throne, terminating in jewelled crosses: a transparent prompt, reinforced by the Latin inscription ‘Salve Mater Christi’, for the recitation of the rosary. All four figures incline their heads gracefully to the right, their eyes raised in premonition of divine providence or lowered in contemplation of scripture. The Baptist gazes up at his crystal cross, simultaneously pointing to Christ in prescience of his crucifixion. St John’s gesture also draws attention to the landscape behind him (Fig.6); its oblique view of a bridge over a river may recall composition of the Ansidei Madonna rather than Perugino’s tavola quadra; for the relationship between the two altarpieces, see G. Dalli Regoli: ‘Raffaello “Angela Farfalla”: Note sulla struttura e sulle fonti della pala Ansidei’, Paragone 309 (1983), pp.14–15. For the Frankfurt drawing, see most recently Chapman, Henry and Plazzotta, op. cit. (note 6), pp.110–31, no.31. Although the altarpiece is dated 1505, the appearance of its underdrawing and many elements of its style (the morphology of the Virgin’s facial features and fingers, the simplified hourglass shape of her own and St Nicholas’s upper bodies) indicate a protracted genesis and a date of 1504–05 is preferable. For the relevance of St Nicholas of Tolentino in a Servite context, see D. Ekserdjian’s review of J.P. Cuzin’s Raphael, vie et amour, and K. Oberhuber’s Raffaello, the Burlington Magazine 126 (1984), p.440. Raphael’s ambiguous treatment of St Nicholas of Bari’s episcopal regalia in the underdrawing on the altarpiece may not be irrelevant to this argument. No other preparatory drawings for the main panel have been identified, but a red chalk drawing closely related to the head of the Christ Child in the painting has recently come to light (sold Sotheby’s, London, 8th July 2004, lot 23). Because the head is lit from the opposite direction and the angle of the body is somewhat different, the drawing is unlikely to be a direct study for the Ansidei Madonna, but it must have been made at exactly the same moment, and would thus constitute Raphael’s earliest surviving work in red chalk. Christ’s head in the altarpiece was modified during the course of painting, with his ear and right eye being adjusted to conform much more closely to the drawing. It may be that the Sotheby’s sheet was a life study made to correct some of the anatomical idiosyncrasies in Raphael’s first design.
the main crossing of the Tiber below Perugia, appropriately known as Ponte S. Giovanni.\(^{22}\) In contrast to the Baptist’s dynamic and rhetorical stance, St Nicholas withdraws slightly behind the throne, absorbed in his book.

Recent technical analysis has established that the satisfying geometry of Raphael’s altarpiece was carefully calculated. Scrutiny reveals that the picture surface was prepared with a grid nine squares high by six squares wide incised into the gesso with a stylus (Fig.9).\(^{23}\) The composition is therefore based on a simple geometric construction of a square topped by a semicircle of the same diameter resulting in a height to width ratio of 3:2. The overall dimensions of the painted area are roughly equivalent to six by four Perugian feet.\(^{24}\) Raphael subdivided each half of the picture vertically into three, the individual squares thus measuring 24.5 cm., the equivalent of eight Perugian inches (‘once’), or two thirds of a foot; the same principal of subdivision is also applied horizontally.\(^{25}\)

Raphael often squared up his drawings for the purpose of enlargement, but the grid here is probably too open to have served to transfer the design. Instead he appears to have used it as a guide for aligning major elements, such as the sides of the throne, the horizontals of the steps (including the exact centre of the Greek key pattern), the top of the Virgin’s head and the level of her knees, and the heads and ankles of the saints (Figs.9 and 10). Infra-red reflectography has confirmed that some of the figures’ outlines were pounced (spolveri were found in the head and hands of the Virgin and Child), a clear indication that cartoons were used to transfer key features to the panel, and the grid would have helped Raphael position these individual templates.\(^{26}\) The figure of St Nicholas on the other hand appears to have been drawn freehand with long sweeping lines in a liquid medium and with one altered outline incised, suggesting that the artist used a mixture of techniques when assembling the various elements of his composition. The saint’s episcopal regalia seems to have been improvised at a late stage: his mitre was painted over the improvised at a late stage: his mitre was painted over the painted architecture (itself a late addition) and he initially wore a much shorter tunic beneath his surplice, so that his feet and ankles were visible (Fig.3).

Although Raphael frequently prepared his drawings (including Fig.8) and smaller paintings with vertical and horizontal axes, such a comprehensive grid has not been found on any of his other altarpieces; nor did he adopt such a strict proportional system for other compositions in this arched format (the Mond Crucifixion and the Degli Oddi Coronation are both relatively taller and the Betrothal of the Virgin is wider).\(^{27}\) Given the care with which the altarpiece was prepared, it is surprising to discover that an important aspect of the picture’s composition – the pale grey architectural setting – represents a later change of plan.\(^{28}\) Technical investigation demonstrates that the fictive barrel vault, which infuses

\(^{22}\) For the bridge, see P. Lattaioi, A. Pinna and G. Riganella: Ponte San Giovanni dal Tevere alla città, Perugia 1990, pp.30–54. The quarter of Porta Sole affords a distant view of Ponte S. Giovanni down the Fossa di S. Margherita, although the medieval bridge was almost totally destroyed by retreating German forces in 1944.

\(^{23}\) A note of 1938 describing the grid together with a diagram is in the National Gallery history dossier on the painting. Some of the incisions are clearly visible in raking light.

\(^{24}\) The Perugian piede (foot) was equivalent to 36.4 cm. for Woodward and building purposes (‘da legname e fabbriche’). It was subdivided into 12 inches (‘once’) of about 3 cm.; see A. Martini: Manuale di metrologia ossia misure, pesi e monete in uso attualmente e anticamente presso tutti i popoli, Turin 1883, reprinted Rome 1976, p.518. Slightly different values are given in Tavole di ragguaglio sia le misure e pesi dello stato pontificio, Rome 1817, pp.651 and 655–56. We are grateful to Jo Kirby of the National Gallery Scientific Department for supplying this information.

\(^{25}\) A note of 1938 describing the grid together with a diagram is in the National Gallery history dossier on the painting. Some of the incisions are clearly visible in raking light.

\(^{26}\) A drawing for the Baglioni Entombment includes a scale marked with a ‘z’ to indicate a unit of measurement. Since the composition’s width is three times its length, it was intended to be six units wide; see P. Joannides: The drawings of Raphael, Oxford 1983, no.127 (with the suggestion that the unit used in this case is the Roman palmo).

\(^{27}\) No spolveri were found in the figure of St John, but the underdrawing here is similar to that describing the features of the Virgin, implying cartoon transfer for this figure as well. Pouncing is much more clearly visible beneath the underdrawing of the single surviving predella scene, St John the Baptist preaching, and is best illustrated in a detail of the infra-red reflectogram mosaic reproduced in Roy, Spring and Plazzotta, op. cit. (note 6), p.6, fig.2. Raphael usually made cartoons for his small-scale
the picture with such geometrical lucidity, was not planned by Raphael from the start, but added after painting had begun (it is incised and painted on top of the first layer of blue sky and parts of the landscape background). Raphael used the pre-existing grid to position the parapet (one third of the way up) and the front of the mouldings (approximately two thirds of the way up). This helps to explain why the architecture appears so integral to the composition and why the revision has never been noted before.

works of this period, including predella scenes. An intriguing reference to a drawing – the artist unfortunately unspecified – of similar proportions and subject in a 1771 inventory of the Palazzo Ansidei may suggest that Raphael’s cartoon remained in the family’s possession (although its whereabouts are unknown today): ASP. Famiglie privati: Ansidei, carte miscellanea no.81 (Inventario di beni mobili di Casa Ansidei, 1771), fol.104v: ‘Sotto al detto un disegno lungo piedi 2:1/2 alto piedi 1 rappresentante S. Gio: che predica, con cornice dorato, e uno cristallo.’

One other case of Raphael squaring up a composition in this painstaking way, using the same 3:2 proportions, is his modello for the Holy Family with a pomegranate, a design he made for Domenico Alfani to execute; see Joannides, op. cit. (note 25), no.174r.


The Colonna altarpiece gives an idea of how the Ansidei altarpiece would have appeared without the architectural backdrop mediating the view of the landscape.
The earliest witness for Raphael’s Ansidei altarpiece is Vasari, who in 1568 observed the painting ‘in the church of the Servite friars in the chapel of the Ansidei’. The present inscription to the left of Nicola Monti’s copy of Raphael’s altarpiece 1777 in S. Fiorenzo claims to record the location of Filippo Ansidei’s altar, but this post-dates the comprehensive rebuilding of 1768–70 (Fig. 11, I).

A small cache of memorie, copied in the early eighteenth century from much older records then in the convent’s archive, provides the most important documentation for the Ansidei chapel (see Appendix 2–6). The Servites of S. Fiorenzo had been asked by Cardinal Marco Antonio Ansidei, bishop of Perugia from 1726 until his death in 1730, to compile what information they could find in their archive on his family’s chapel in order to support the cardinal’s desire to move ‘so noble a picture to a better chapel and to construct there an appropriate frame and ornament’ (see Appendix 2). The resulting transcriptions formed the basis of Lino...
Manzoni’s 1899 article, but his reading was deeply flawed, for some of the passages do not refer to Filippo Ansidei’s chapel at all, but to another Ansidei foundation within the church.

Much of the confusion stems from two closely related texts copied for Cardinal Ansidei (see Appendix 3 and 4). In both versions the Ansidei chapel is described on the left side of the church from the entrance ‘con ornamento di legno dorato’, accompanied by family stemmi, a merchant’s emblem (Fig.17), and an inscription recording the dedication of the altar in 1515 by ‘Antonius, et Haeredes Bernardini de Catrano’. Manzoni identified this ‘Bernardino de Catrano’ with one of Filippo’s younger sons of that name, who was frequently documented in Perugia at the beginning of the sixteenth century. He argued that this Bernardino di Filippo had commissioned the chapel’s altarpiece from Raphael, an assertion of patronage that continues to be routinely repeated in the literature. The inscription also mentioned a certain ‘Antonius’, whom Manzoni identified as Bernardino’s grandson of that name (by his eldest son, Cesare). But several aspects of the passage are puzzling. The chapel described was dedicated to the ‘Madonna delle Grazie’ rather than St Nicholas, while the 1777 inscription commemorating the location of Raphael’s altarpiece is today on the right-hand side of the nave, not the left-hand side (Fig.11, I). The date of inscription of 1515 is also too late to be connected with either the foundation of the church (1483) or the completion of the altarpiece (1505).

In fact, both Manzoni’s identifications are demonstrably incorrect. The reference to ‘Haeredes Bernardini’ requires Bernardino di Filippo to have died by 1515, and Manzoni assumed this to be the case, but both the Ansidei papers and the Perugian notariale document his presence long after this date. Furthermore, Bernardino’s grandson Antonio di Cesare had not even been born by 1515. Alternative candidates for the 1515 inscription are suggested by the Perugian catasto accounts for this period. In the early years of the sixteenth century the brothers Antonio and Bernardino di Piergiovanni de Catrano were assessed for the quarter of Porta Sole, having earlier subdivided their property with a third brother, Federigo. The same symbol from the chapel in St Fiorenzo is prominently emblazoned beside their names, leaving little doubt that these brothers from the Benincasa branch of the family, second cousins to Filippo, were those commemorated in the 1515 inscription (Fig.18). In his Scorta Sagra, Ottavio Lancellotti cited the 1515 dedication, not in his description of the St Nicholas chapel in St Fiorenzo, but in a separate entry for the chapel of Beato Filippo Benizzi in the same church: ‘The [chapel’s] panel is not deemed an average work. It formerly belonged to the Catrani family, having been founded in 1515 by Antonio and the heirs of Bernardino Catrani, today it belongs to the Timotei.’ This information must derive from the same inscription recorded by Manzoni’s source, but the chapel was evidently not Filippo Ansidei’s foundation, which Lancellotti recorded elsewhere in his compendium.

Lancellotti’s text establishes beyond doubt that there were two Ansidei chapels in St Fiorenzo in the sixteenth century:

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38 ASP, Scritture disposte per alfabeto, no.25 (La Madonna degli Ansidei a S. Fiorenzo).
39 Manzoni, op. cit. (note 5), p.630, believed the copies to date from the years of Cardinal Ansidei’s episcopate. The cardinal, together with Fulvio Antonio and Aldegonda Ansidei, wanted to clarify which branch of the family now held the patronage of the chapel, and for this reason ‘desiderano pertanto tutte le notizie che abbino i PP. di S. Fiorenzo circa la detta cappella, come sta descritta nei loro libri’. None of the passages can be traced in the surviving documents from the archive of S. Fiorenzo, much of which was lost during the Napoleonic suppression.
40 See, for example, Meyer Zot Capellens, op. cit. (note 5), p.165.
41 Manzoni, op. cit. (note 5), p.632, claimed both Bernardino and his son Cesare were dead by 1515. For Bernardino, see P. Ansidei: Degli Antichi Signori e Conti di Catrano nobili penigini, Rocca S. Caciano 1884, p.31, recording Bernardino’s birth in 1479, together with a notarile reference to him from 1523, when he divided his estate with his elder brother Niccolò to establish his own household, and his death in 1557. E. Agostini: Famiglie penigini, Perugia, Archivio Storico di S. Pietro, MS CM 201, fol.304r, cites a notarile record concerning Bernardino di Filippo di Ansidei from 1533. ‘Bernardino di Filippo Ansidei’ is documented in February 1515 before the Col-
Filippo Ansidei’s 1483 chapel dedicated to St Nicholas, and another founded by the Benincasa branch of the family in 1515. Furthermore, Lancellotti glossed his judgment of the Benizzi altarpiece with a marginal note: ‘It being a work by the Perugian Sinibaldo Ibi, disciple of Raphael Santi of Urbino.44 This painting is identifiable as Sinibaldo Ibi’s Virgin and Child enthroned with St John the Baptist, Joseph, Fiorenzo and the Blessed Filippo Benizzi in the Galleria Nazionale dell’Umbria in Perugia (Fig.13), which was first linked by Giuseppe Vermiglioni in 1837 to a 1515 commission by Antonio and Bernardino Catrani for their chapel in S. Fiorenzo, on the basis of a riordanza then in the convent’s archive.45 The iconography of Ibi’s altarpiece, with Filippo Benizzi kneeling before an enthroned Virgin and Child, reflects both the altar’s official Marian dedication, and its role as a devotional focus for the Servite Benizzi, who was never canonised.

Having discounted the references to the 1515 foundation, the remaining passages in the 1720s fondo that actually concern Filippo Ansidei’s chapel can be reassessed (see Appendix 5 and 6). The most important of these described the St Nicholas chapel ‘in the body of the church, opposite St Joseph, by the pilaster’ (see Appendix 5). This information, combined with the memorial to the altarpiece in the church today, allows us to establish the location of the Ansidei chapel within the interior of S. Fiorenzo. The 1777 inscription ‘in eius altaris locum’ is immured to the left of the rebuilt Ansidei chapel, which incorporates a copy after the main panel of Raphael’s altarpiece by Nicola Monti (now the second altar on the right-hand side of the nave; Fig.11, I and A2). Moretti believed that the St Nicholas chapel was originally situated directly behind this altar, in the more eastern of the two gothic side chapels that were closed off from the nave in Pietro Carattoli’s rebuilding of the church (Fig.11, A3).46 However, a recessed chapel of this kind would hardly correspond to the description of the altar in the 1720s, ‘nel corpo della chiesa . . . nel pilastro’ (see Appendix 5).47 The discrepancy can be resolved by a ground plan of the church and its altars drawn by the friars around 1650, the only source of its kind that predates Carattoli’s radical alterations (Fig.12).48 The church is drawn in schematic fashion, but the major architectural features — the double portal, Latin cross and rectilinear cappella maggiore — are all recorded accurately. The two side chapels on the right side of the church are included as autonomous structures, but another altar is shown at the head of the nave (Fig.11, A1), to the left of the entrance to the chapel which Moretti identified as that of the Ansidei.49 The isolated location of this altar would explain the description of the St Nicholas chapel on a pilaster in the main body of the church (see Appendix 5).50 It can also be reconciled with the location specified by the present commemorative inscription (Fig.11, I).

Once this reconstruction is accepted, several otherwise puzzling aspects of the Ansidei altarpiece fall into place. The late addition of the fictive barrel vault and arch would have rendered the free-standing St Nicholas chapel more imposing in relation to the other two altars on the right side of the nave, both of which were placed within separate groin-vaulted chapels. The steeply raked lighting of the altarpiece from the upper right reflects the principal light source for the nave, the window high on the west façade.51 The exposed yet restricted location of the St Nicholas chapel between the transept and the entrance arch to the middle chapel on the south side of the nave may explain several ambiguous comments in the sources concerning the superstructure and ornament of the altar. Lancellotti praised the chapel ‘at least for the panel if not for the ornament’52 while Cardinal Ansidei’s sources were unsure whether it should be termed ‘un altare o cappella’ (see Appendix 5). The cardinal’s own desire to move Raphael’s altarpiece to a better (‘migliore’) chapel within S. Fiorenzo and to construct a new frame may likewise reflect the restricted nature of the chapel’s original setting and its lack of ornament (see Appendix 2). The brilliance of Raphael’s solution was to create the illusion of a vaulted, chapel-like space where none may have existed.

The recognition that the Ansidei family patronised two chapels in S. Fiorenzo in the early sixteenth century also helps to resolve the problem of the reconstruction of the altarpiece’s predella. Overlooked by Vasari, it was first described with ‘many beautiful little scenes, worthy of such a man’ by Cesare Crispolti the Elder in his 1597 account of outstanding works of art in Perugia.53 Today, only one scene from the predella survives, the National Gallery’s St John the Baptist preaching (Fig.14), which was bought from S. Fiorenzo with the altarpiece by Gavin Hamilton for Lord Robert Spencer.54 The extracts copied for Cardinal Ansidei (see Appendix 5 and 6) indicate that the predella took the form of a gradino (literally ‘step’), a box-shaped construction that was standard...
in contemporary central Italian altarpiece production. One of the passages describes ‘A St John the Baptist preaching in the desert on the right, and a shipwreck on the left’ (see Appendix 5); the first scene can be identified with the National Gallery panel, the latter with the well-known posthumous miracle of St Nicholas of Bari saving a ship in a storm. However, Manzoni asserted that the predella was divided into three scenes, with a Sposalizio, or Marriage of the Virgin, at the centre, notwithstanding the difficulties posed by the dimensions of the surviving Baptism panel. In fact, the Sposalizio tradition depends entirely on a note appended to one of the eighteenth-century transcriptions describing the 1515 altar: ‘beneath the altarpiece... there is painted on wood the Marriage of the Virgin by the hand of Pietro [Perugino] or Raphael’ (see Appendix 4; the reticence regarding the attribution is not without significance). This Sposalizio scene must have formed part of the predella for Sinibaldo Ibi’s Virgin and Child enthroned with saints of 1515 (Fig. 13), and it may be safely discounted from the reconstruction of Raphael’s altarpiece.

This lends much greater credibility to the other early eighteenth-century description of the predella cited above which claimed that it showed the panel of St John the Baptist preaching on the right and a shipwreck on the left (see Appendix 5). Right and left may be confused here, or else perceived from the Virgin’s point of view, for the arrangement of the narrative scenes would surely have corresponded with the figures in the main panel, that is with St John the Baptist preaching to the left and the St Nicholas shipwreck scene to the right – indeed, the Baptist’s emphatic gesture in the surviving predella scene seems to acknowledge his identically attired counterpart in the main panel above. J.D. Passavant later described a predella with three scenes devoted to the life of the Baptist, but this reconstruction should be rejected, together with the same author’s related claim that the National Gallery’s predella scene was the central image. Passavant was writing some eighty years after the altarpiece had been sold and did not specify his source. Moreover, a predella wholly given over to the Baptist’s life would have been eccentric for an altar dedicated to St Nicholas. Any central predella image must have been smaller than the two flanking narrative scenes from the lives of the saints, and may have doubled as some form of tabernacle. Whatever the precise arrangement of the narrative scenes, the predella also incorporated ‘dipinti nel gradino sotto del quadro’, two Ansidei coats of arms (Fig. 15; see Appendix 6), and the need to accommodate these in any reconstruction (presumably at the extremities of the predella) must be a further argument against the existence of a third narrative scene.

One final problem remains to be resolved: the identity of Raphael’s patron. The chapel had been erected by Filippo Ansidei in 1483, and his testament of 1490 charged his direct heir, Thomas Ansidei in 483, to buy back for his family the altarpiece. The first panel to be acquired was the altarpiece; Gould, op. cit. (note 1), pp.162–65, no.48. The altarpiece itself is painted on a substantial poplar panel made up of six vertical boards, and measures almost 6 cm. at its thickest point. A broad unpainted border at the bottom, 20 cm. deep, would have slotted behind the predella construction. At the top, the longest boards extend well beyond the paint surface, presumably to help secure the painting to the wall and into the structure of the frame. The conflation originates in Manzoni, op. cit. (note 5), p.637: ‘Era divisa in tre parti in cui erano figurate tre storie’; most recently this is perpetuated in Meyer Zur Capellen, op. cit. (note 5), p.165. The likelihood that any central predella scene must have been smaller than the two lateral scenes, owing to the Baptism preaching being more than one-third the width of the painted area of the main altar panel, was raised by Braham and Wyld, op. cit. (note 51), p.16, note 6.

St Joseph (‘Incontro S. Giuseppe’), which is likely to be the chapel of St Joseph patronised by the Gregori family, recorded in S. Fiorenzo by Lancellotti, MS cited at note 34 above, fol.88v. Its location is not specified, but the Marianum plan does depict an altar directly opposite the suggested location of Raphael’s altarpiece. The chapel proposed by Moretti, on the other hand, does not have a symmetrical altar on the left nave wall. The same disposition of altars is recorded on the version of the ground plan in the Vatican; see note 48 above.

This was originally a rose window but was converted by Carattoli into a rectangular opening topped by a segmental arch. The location of this light source confirms an earlier oculus are still visible in the masonry of the façade. Ansidei in 1483, and his testament of 1490 charged his direct heir, Thomas Ansidei in 483, to buy back for his family the altarpiece. The first panel to be acquired was the altarpiece; Gould, op. cit. (note 1), pp.162–65, no.48. The altarpiece itself is painted on a substantial poplar panel made up of six vertical boards, and measures almost 6 cm. at its thickest point. A broad unpainted border at the bottom, 20 cm. deep, would have slotted behind the predella construction. At the top, the longest boards extend well beyond the paint surface, presumably to help secure the painting to the wall and into the structure of the frame. The conflation originates in Manzoni, op. cit. (note 5), p.637: ‘Era divisa in tre parti in cui erano figurate tre storie’; most recently this is perpetuated in Meyer Zur Capellen, op. cit. (note 5), p.165. The likelihood that any central predella scene must have been smaller than the two lateral scenes, owing to the Baptism preaching being more than one-third the width of the painted area of the main altar panel, was raised by Braham and Wyld, op. cit. (note 51), p.16, note 6.
heirs to execute the terms of the bequest (see Appendix 1). One of the documents copied in the 1720s described two coats of arms ‘in pietra da piedi’, with that on the right (‘in Cornu Epistolae’) bearing the initials ‘F.I.’ (see Appendix 6, the arms were then sketched below; see Fig.15).59 The initials in these stone stemmi (not to be confused with the arms painted on the altarpiece predella) surely stand for Filippo and his wife Giovanna (or Iohanna) and indicate that the altar mensa and the part of the chapel ‘da piedi’ dated from 1483.60 Passavant claimed that Raphael’s altarpiece was painted for Filippo’s heirs and, to judge from his will, one would expect this to have been the case. As we have seen, there is no reason to connect Filippo’s younger son Bernardino with the commission, as Manzoni attempted to demonstrate.61

Mancini, rejecting Manzoni’s Bernardino hypothesis, believed that the choice of saints depicted in the altarpiece pointed instead to the involvement of two other family members, Niccolò and Giovanni Ansidei. Mancini’s proposal, however, was marred by several misunderstandings of the family’s genealogy. He claimed that Niccolò and Giovanni were Filippo’s brothers, whereas Niccolò was in fact his eldest surviving son. Filippo did have a brother named Giovanni, although there is no reason to think he was directly connected with the altarpiece commission.62 Filippo also had a son of the same name, but this Giovanni had already died in 1478 at the age of six.63 Nor do we know if either Giovanni was christened in the name of the Baptist rather than the Evangelist. Instead, the connection with the Baptist probably came through Filippo Ansidei’s eldest son Niccolò, whose own son was baptised Giovanni Battista and would have been about nine years old when the altarpiece was painted.64 Furthermore, in 1505 Giovanni Battista was Niccolò’s only surviving male child (his siblings Filippo and Eusebio had already died in childhood).65 This reinforces the impression that Niccolò Ansidei, as Filippo’s direct heir, was the prime mover behind the commission. Niccolò continued his father’s book of memory after Filippo’s death in 1490 and resided with his family in the Palazzo Ansidei on Via Alessi.66 There is some circumstantial evidence that other members of Filippo’s wider family contributed towards the cost of the chapel, but Niccolò must have determined the major aspects of the altarpiece’s imagery.67 The finished panel thus illustrates with startling directness the succession of the Ansidei generations from father to son, as Niccolò’s patron saint cedes pride of place by the Virgin’s right hand to the vigorous young Baptist, representing his son and heir, Giovanni Battista.

The particular setting of the St Nicholas altar prompted Raphael to conceive the most resolved altarpiece of his early career. Technical examination has exposed a complex genealogy; having first considered Perugino’s vaulted arcade in the Frankfurt drawing, Raphael designed the main panel without architecture, before finally introducing an arched opening with barrel vault, a structure he had previously used in the altarpiece of the Coronation of St Nicholas of Tolentino of c.1500–01.68 In this respect, Raphael’s compensatory setting for the Ansidei Madonna carries wider implications for our understanding of contemporary altarpiece design, where fictive architecture is commonly considered to respond to existing space. The ingenious solution Raphael devised for the modest surroundings of the St Nicholas chapel anticipates the choices he later made when creating a much grander spatial illusion for his School of Athens within the confines of the Stanza della Segnatura.

56 The heraldry conforms to the stemmi that accompanies Filippo Ansidei’s catasto entry; see Fig.16.
57 It is unclear why Manzoni, op. cit. (note 5), p.629, read the ‘I’ as for ‘Isabella’. He also connected (p.612) the initial to Bernardino di Filippo’s wife Elisabetta, or alternatively Isabella (based on a misreading of Appendix 5; see note 61 below). Filippo’s will of 1490 names ‘Dominam Vannam eius uxorem sibi heredem universalem’, ASP, Archivio Notarile, Scritture disposte per alfabeto, no.25, La Madonna degli Ansidei a S. Fiorenzo.
60 Passavant claimed that Raphael’s altarpiece was painted for Filippo’s heirs and, to judge from his will, one would expect this to have been the case. As we have seen, there is no reason to connect Filippo’s younger son Bernardino with the commission, as Manzoni attempted to demonstrate.61

Aurelio di Simone Ansidei, Filippo’s nephew, willed one hundred florins to the church of S. Fiorenzo. The money had been left to him by his uncle Gaspere, another of Filippo’s brothers; see ASP, Archivio Notarile, no.529, Ser Vittorio di Ser Mattei, fol.78v. Returning to the Frankfurt drawing (Fig.8), it is conceivable that St Nicholas of Tolentino may have had some significance as a second name saint for Niccolò Ansidei.
Appendix

Documents concerning the two Ansidei chapels in S. Fiorenzo, Perugia

1. Extract from Filippo Ansidei’s will, stipulating a bequest of one hundred florins for his chapel dedicated to S. Nicholas in S. Fiorenzo, 12th October 1490. (ASP, Archivio Notarile, no.226, Ser Francesco di Ser Iacopo, fol.365v–v; published in Manzoni, op. cit. (note 5), pp.630–44, with some errors and misdated to 12th December).

In nomine domini amen. Anni Domini milleseimo ccc.xxx. indictione optava tempore domini Innocenti pape optavi die xx. octobris. Actum Perusii in domo infrascripti testatoris in camera ubi iacet infirmus sita in porta Solis et parochiae sancti Florentii in suos confines presentibus Antonio Nicolai alias el Patriarcha, Baulio ser Tholomei ser Nicola, Antonio Bartolomei Antonio, civibus perussini porto Solis, Bonafito Melchioris Fini perusio porto sancte Suzanne, Guidone Cristofori Vignatelli di Perusio porto sancti Angelo, Antonii Nicolai di Asio habitator Perusi et Egidio Menenchi(d) dicit el Camerlenghe, de castri Sancti Fortunati testibus ad infrascripta habitis vocatis et ab infrascripto testatore rogatis.

Cum hominibus vita libalis sit et caduta et ni certius morte et ni incertius hora mortis id circito spectabilis vir Filippus Ansidei Simoni de Perusi, porto Solis et parochiae sancti Florentii, sanus, per gratiam domini nostrui Jesu Christi, mente, senere et intellecut, licet corpore languens, in bona et recta scientia et memoria constitutus, tennis mortis caeum, noles intetestatus decedere, ne de susi bonis et rebuis aliqua inter aliquos valeat excutiri discordia, hoc ipsis testamentum nuncupavitum, quod dictit . . . (?) in infraelection modum facere procuravit et fecit.

In primis quidem commendando animam suam omnipotentis deo, a quo creata extitit, iudicavit corpus suum sepulturam eligere, et supra sui corporis sepolturam eligit, et supra sui corporis sepoltura expendi illum quantitatem pecuniae, quam videbitur et placetur infrascriptis suis fideicommissariis.

Item iudicavit et relinquit ecclesie sancti Florentii et fratrum ipsum ecclesie florenos ad rationem ex bolognometum pro quolibet florento pro dote capelle ipsius testatoris eripere in dicta ecclesia sub nomine sancti Nicolai . . . (?) pro infrascriptum eius heredem et convertendos in emptione bonorum stabilium; que bona sic emendet quantitatem pecuniae, quam videbitur et placebit infrascriptis suis fideicommissariis.

Item iudicavit et relinquit in infrascriptum modum facere procuravit et fecit.

2. Cardinal Ansidei requests information from the friars of S. Fiorenzo regarding the chapel of his ancestor Filippo Ansidei, c.1726–30. (ASP, Scritture disposte per alfabeto, no.25 (La Madonna degli Ansidei a S. Fiorenzo), no foliation; published in Manzoni, op. cit. (note 5), p.630, described ‘In altro foglietto, di carattere di mano di Raffaello d’Urbino’).

Filippo Ansidei figlio di Simone Ansidei ascendente comune delle tre Famiglie Ansidei ora esistenti fece la Cappella di S. Nicola nella Chiesa di S. Fiorenzo col Quadro dipinto da Raffaello di Urbino l’anno 1483.


Antonio, et Haeredes Bernardini di Catriano Deo Optimo Maximo dedicaverunt 1515.

3. Description of the chapel dedicated to the Madonna of the Grazies founded by Antonio and Bernardino de Catrano in 1515 with Ansidei stemmi, text copied c.1726–30. (ASP, Scritture disposte per alfabeto, no.25 (La Madonna degli Ansidei a S. Fiorenzo), no foliation; excerpts published in Manzoni, op. cit. (note 5), pp.630–31; described ‘In un foglietto volante dell’ambulio domesti’c). Nella chiesa di S. Fiorenzo a man sinistra nell’entrare vicino al pulpito vi è una Capella detta la Madonna delle Grazie, et è una delle sette Altari privilegiati con ornamento di legno dorato, et a man dentro di detta Cappella vi è dipinta nel legno l’Arma Ansidei con il campo rosso, et una benda gialla d’oro, et a man sinistra vi è un altro arm a campo bianco, con questo segno = Èsssi dall’una come dell’altra parte laterale vi è vedute descritte [le medesime] queste parelle, cioè è = Antonio, et haeredes Bernardini de Catriano Deo Optimo Maximo dedicaverunt 1515.

4. Description of the chapel dedicated to the Madonna of the Grazie founded by Antonio and Bernardino de Catrano in 1515 with Ansidei stemmi and the Marriage of the Virgin represented in the predella, text copied c.1726–30. (ASP, Scritture disposte per alfabeto, no.25 (La Madonna degli Ansidei a S. Fiorenzo), no foliation; excerpts published in Manzoni, op. cit. (note 5), pp.630–31).

In S. Fiorenza alla destra del Pulpito vi è una Cappella chiamata della Madonna Santissima delle Grazie con ornamento di legno dorato, et è uno degli sette altari, a man destra [del quadro] vi è dipinto l’arma Ansidei con il campo rosso, et una benda gialla d’oro, a man sinistra, vi è un arma con il campo bianco, con questo segno = ¶, et sotto il quadro, che è coperto, che solo dimostra la faccia della Madonna e del Bambino, vi è dipinto in legno lo sponsorizzata [della Madonna] di mano di Pietro, o Papa.

Antonio, et Haeredes Bernardini di Catriano Deo Optimo Maximo dedicaverunt 1515.

5. Description of the chapel dedicated to St Nicholas founded by Filippo Ansidei with images of the Baptist preaching and a shipwreck in the predella by the hand of Raphael, text copied c.1726–30 (the 1442 foundation date may be an error, but see note 34 above). (ASP, Scritture disposte per alfabeto, no.25 (La Madonna degli Ansidei a S. Fiorenzo), no foliation; published in Manzoni, op. cit. (note 5), pp.630–31).

Nel corpo della Chiesa, in contro S. Giuseppe nel Pilastra, vedi due altare o cappella con un’Ancona, dove è dipinta la Madonna con S. Giovanni Battista e un S. Nicola, e però si chiama la Cappella di S. Nicolò, nel cui gradino vi è un S. Giovannì Battista predicante nel deserto a man dritta, e a man sinistra un Naufragio, il tutto di mano di Michelangelo d’Urbino.

Questa Cappella sino all’anno 1442 fu eretta da Filippo Ansidei quale vi fece descrivere il suo nome, e imprimere l’arme della Casa Ansidei, nella quale vi hanno, e conservano il nasi il Signor Persiano Ansidei, la Signora Isabella Ansidei moglie del già Bernardino Ansidei, di cui resta solo la Signora Angela, Moglie del Signor Dionide dell’Oddi, figlia di detto Bernardino, e il signor Francesco figlio di Don dolfo Ansidei fratello di Persiano.

Fra l’obblighi della Chiesa di S. Fiorenzo:

Item sono obligati dire una messa il giorno all’Altare di S. Nicolò per l’anima di Filippo Ansidei, e nel giorno della Festa di detto Santo la Messa Cantata, quale sino all’anno 1490 lasciò alla Chiesa di S. Fiorenzo forni cento, qual obbligo fu ridotto alla Messa Cantata il giorno della Festa e due Anniversarj l’Anno, e così si osserva.

6. Description of the chapel dedicated to St Nicholas founded by Filippo Ansidei in 1483 incorporating Ansidei stemmi with F.I. monogram, text copied c.1726–30. (ASP, Scritture disposte per alfabeto, no.25 (La Madonna degli Ansidei a S. Fiorenzo), no foliation).

Andare a S. Fiorenzo all’Altare di S. Nicolò, che è degli Ansidei, notare il marmolato, che par che vi sia ed in qual parte dell’Altare, e se oltre il nome di Filippo Ansidei, vi sia altro scritto.


[three Ansidei shields are sketched below, two containing the F.I. monogram; see Fig.15]

17. Emblem from the Bernardino de Catrano inscription of 1515 (ASP, Scritture disposte per alfabeto, no.25, La Madonna degli Ansidei a S. Fiorenzo).


Si dice poi da i PP. di S. Fiorenzo, che dieci anni sono Lucchesesi loro Generale, ordinarne vi fosse posto in detta Cappella un quadro della Madonna tenuta in gran venerazione, e fosse levato il quadro, che vi era pure con l’Imaginare della Madonna opera d’un scolaro di Pietro, che poi fu posto nel Refettorio.

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