

Enter the “Valley of Lilies.” Spatiality, Ritual and Enclosure in the Convent of Saint Monica, Old Goa

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Introduction

Founded in 1606, the Convent of St Monica was the first enclosed female religious house in the Orient and a central institution of the Portuguese Estado da Índia (fig. 1).¹ At its peak, it housed about one hundred nuns, making it the largest Portuguese convent in Asia. The community followed the Rule of the Hermits of St Augustine and was dedicated to St Monica, the mother of St Augustine. Its foundation formed part of post-Tridentine efforts to regulate and institutionalise female religious life in Asia. The convent brought together women from different social backgrounds, including those without dowries, combining strict enclosure with educational and charitable functions.²

The convent was founded by the Archbishop Aleixo de Menezes (1559–1617), and its first prioress was Filipa Ferreira (d. 1626).³ Construction was directed by Friar Diogo de Sant’Ana (1572–1644), who served as the Convent’s confessor and administrator for thirty-seven years.⁴ His role remains understudied, as scholarship has relied mainly on the accounts of Friar Agostinho de Santa Maria (1699) and Miguel Vicente de Abreu (1882), which remain the main sources for the convent’s foundation and daily life.⁵

The Convent’s decline followed that of the city of Goa. By 1827, fewer than thirty nuns remained, and when Lopes Mendes visited in 1871, only one nun lived there, with her servant. In 1849, the church roof collapsed.⁶ After the death of the last nun in 1885, the community was dissolved, and the complex underwent structural alterations. The surviving fabric still preserves evidence of enclosed female religious life in a colonial context.⁷

Drawing on archival documentation, historic plans, and photographic records, this study reconstructs the spatial organisation of the Convent and analyses its transformations, correcting misidentified spaces in recent literature. The complex differs from other ecclesiastical sites in Goa, reflecting its status as the region’s only female

convent.⁸ Unlike Spanish colonial convents, which followed Castilian urban models linked to elite patronage, St Monica developed within an Augustinian framework adapted to local conditions, materials, and devotional practices.⁹ Although informed by metropolitan precedents, its configuration reflects these conditions and defines a distinct form of enclosed religious life.¹⁰

Today, the former Convent, now partially occupied by the Museum of Christian Art (MoCA), faces conservation challenges, particularly in reconciling current use with the preservation of its fabric, spatial organisation, and historical legibility. Recent work in gender and cultural studies has renewed attention to the site, addressing both its architectural character and its role in Goa's social and cultural life.

Foundation (1606–27), Conflict (1632–35), Fire and Reconstruction (1632–40)

On July 2, 1606, the foundation stone of the Convent was laid on the northern slope of the Monte Santo, overlooking the Mandovi River.¹¹ Situated near the Convent of OL of Grace, the site placed the new house within the established Augustinian landscape of Old Goa. The Convent was established to receive “one hundred virtuous maidens and widows,” offering women in the Estado da Índia a framework of discipline and social order.¹² Its legal and financial structure was gradually formalised. In 1612, Pope Paul V (1550–1621) issued a bull in 1613 confirming the Convent's status. A royal decree in 1620 fixed the number of professed sisters at one hundred and granted an annual endowment of eight thousand cruzados. These privileges were confirmed by Pope Gregory XV (1554–1623) in 1622, and by 1636 the institution had come under formal royal patronage.¹³

The first buildings were modest. A small chapel served as both church and choir, allowing the nuns to attend Mass behind iron grilles. To complete the quadrangular plan, the community acquired forty-two houses and three public streets, a process that generated disputes with local residents.¹⁴ Construction advanced gradually until the permanent church was consecrated on December 19, 1627, marking the completion of one of the largest monastic complexes in the region.¹⁵

Soon after its completion, the convent became involved in political and institutional tensions. Between 1632 and 1635, opposition intensified under the Viceroy Miguel de Noronha as the city council sought to suppress the institution and appropriate its resources. These disputes reflected tensions between civic authorities, religious orders, and the *Misericórdia*, in a context marked by the economic crises of the 1620s and 1630s. Central to these events were repeated attempts to remove Friar de Sant'Ana from his administrative role. Stability was restored in 1635 with the arrival of the succeeding Viceroy, Pedro da Silva (1580–1639), who reinstated royal protection, later confirmed by decrees in 1637.¹⁶ This stability was interrupted on Christmas Eve 1636, when a fire

destroyed the dormitories, upper choir and timber roof structures. The church, sacristy, and novitiate survived, but the extent of the damage threatened the continuity of the institution. The community saved the image of the Holy Crucifix by passing it through the choir grilles moments before the roof collapsed.¹⁷ Reconstruction began immediately under the direction of Friar de Sant'Ana.¹⁸ The community was temporarily housed at the convent of OL of Grace and returned in 1638; the works were completed in 1640.¹⁹ This phase was accompanied by a renewed artistic programme, well studied by several authors.²⁰

Architectural Structure

The convent occupies a position on Monte Santo within the Augustinian network that structured the sacred landscape of Old Goa. Eighteenth-century maps by João António Águia Sarmiento (1777) and José Moraes de Antas Machado (1775) record its footprint, although enclosure prevented direct access for surveyors.²¹ This restriction produced significant gaps and inconsistencies in cartographic representation. Sarmiento omits the complex, while Machado records its perimeter but distorts its internal configuration, depicting two cloisters or altering the proportions of the main volumes. These discrepancies reveal both the technical limitations of early modern surveying and, more significantly, the deliberate spatial opacity imposed by monastic enclosure.

The most reliable record of the internal layout is an architectural plan, at a scale of 1:200, preserved in the Arquivo nacional da Torre do Tombo (ANTT), attributed to Luís Benavente (1902–93) and dated to 1961 (fig. 2).²² As only the church and choir remain accessible today, housing the MoCA, this plan constitutes the main reference for the convent's organisation. Although simplified, as it records only one floor, regularises the geometry into a strictly orthogonal scheme, and omits annexes at the north-east and south-west corners, it corresponds closely with historical photographs, particularly those capturing the complex during its twentieth-century period. These images confirm substantial structural continuity, especially in the main circulation corridors organised around the cloister and the main wings. The survey depicts an approximately square enclosure, measuring about fifty-nine metres per side, structured around a large cloister of eighty arches arranged around a central well.

The convent building adapts to the site's slope through vaulted substructures and terraced levels. As a result, some exterior elevations varied in height, producing an irregular profile. The ground floor follows a clear functional zoning: service areas were concentrated to the east, domestic accommodation to the north, and storage to the west. This arrangement establishes a progression from outward-facing, collective spaces to increasingly restricted interiors, embedding social and spiritual hierarchies within the

built form. The convent was mainly constructed from local laterite, supplemented by other materials such as basalt stone, which was used on the southwest staircase and in various structural and decorative elements throughout the complex and its surrounding enclosure.²³ The masonry was originally finished with lime plaster, now replaced by cement render.²⁴

The Convent's exterior spaces

Within the *cerca* (enclosure), agricultural production, water management, and areas of seclusion were organised in a structured manner. The open grounds contained orchards, vegetable plots, and flower terraces arranged along regular paths (fig. 3). The perimeter wall was high and robust, reinforced with buttresses. To the south, no enclosed wall was required, as the gateway, church, and choir formed a continuous frontage along a broad street. On the eastern and western sides, the walls extended from the corners of the quadrangular complex; to the east, the enclosure bordered a public lane, further strengthening its security. The northern and western walls enclosed extensive grounds, shielding the cells and classrooms from outside scrutiny while allowing unobstructed views over the Mandovi River and the surrounding landscape. The complex thus functioned as a self-contained urban island, bounded by a large square to the south, a public lane to the east, a street to the west, and a secondary enclosure to the north.²⁵

The water infrastructure was highly developed, comprising a network of perennial wells that supplied kitchens, fountains, and cisterns via stone conduits. Structures for use and controlled recreation were distributed at strategic points across the grounds. In the western sector, a large cistern paved in black stone was framed by quadrangular columns and enclosed by walls with arches and doorways, set on a flat terrace that provided relief during periods of heat. A nearby well, operated by a cattle-driven pulley, supplied the tank and other domestic uses. The surrounding terrain was divided into regular plots and pathways planted with fruit trees, herbs, and flowers. A large quadrangular square linked these northern and western fields. Stone benches were arranged along its four sides, facing one another, and at the centre stood a monumental, carved cross of black stone, set on stepped plinths, with radial paths connecting the monument to the benches. Known as Jerusalem, this space was used for gathering and conversation, illustrating how enclosure coexisted with regulated forms of communal life. The main enclosure contained twelve perennial wells, each fitted with rims and balustrades of black stone. The surrounding woodland was kept dense, while the ground below was cleared to allow movement. Access was strictly regulated: the community could walk, dine, and catch birds on Sundays and feast days, or take the evening air after supper during seasonal heatwaves before retiring at dusk. A secondary enclosure lay further north at a lower level. It contained four freshwater

wells, two of which featured covered pulley systems dedicated exclusively to washing the community's laundry. This area has its own service infrastructure and was overlooked by an elevated gallery from which the nuns supervised the activities below.²⁶

Enclosure and Thresholds

The Constitutions of the Convent of St Monica established a framework governing worship, administration and daily observance.²⁷ These prescriptions were expressed in a spatial system that separated public devotion from enclosed religious life. While the nuns were bound to contemplation and strict enclosure, the architecture regulated movement and visibility, allowing participation in the liturgy without exposure. Essential exchanges with the outside world were mediated through controlled thresholds, where confessors, physicians, and craftsmen accessed designated areas under supervision, ensuring that the enclosure remained intact.²⁸ This balance between presence and enclosure is expressed in the design of the church façade (fig. 3). Although it presents a symmetrical, frontal composition facing the main road, access is provided laterally, requiring worshippers to enter and approach the altar without direct alignment with the nuns' choir. Behind this ordered exterior, the interior space extends longitudinally, parallel to the façade rather than perpendicular to it. This divergence corresponds to what Paulo Varela Gomes termed as a "pseudo frontal façade," a device that creates the impression of axial symmetry while concealing a longitudinal plan.²⁹ At St Monica, this configuration allowed the building to assert a commanding civic presence while maintaining the separation required by enclosure.

Varela Gomes also identified two public doors on the main façade, an uncommon feature in Portuguese convent architecture (fig. 4).³⁰ Contemporary accounts by Friar de Sant'Ana clarify their function, indicating a gender division, with one entrance reserved for men and the other for women.³¹ Comparable arrangements are found in Iberian contexts, but St Monica provides the earliest documented example in the Portuguese colonial world.³² A third entrance, separate from the liturgical space, gave access to the gatehouse and locutory, where contact with visitors occurred through iron grilles and curtains.

As noted by Nunes Pereira, the façade reflects characteristics typical of Goan Christian traditions. Organised in two levels and articulated by pilasters and cornices, it establishes a measured rhythm without the use of full entablatures. The ground-level portals, formed by semicircular arches framed by composite pilasters on pedestals, recall the side entrances of the Cathedral of Goa, though differing in scale and ornamental execution: the Cathedral's lintelled portals are framed by Tuscan pilasters. Both structures share upper-level decorative affinities, including voluted pediments embellished with

sculpted drapery, fruit garlands, and central urns, with the upper-storey rectangular windows surmounted by triangular pediments.³³ The façade is organised into five vertical sections. The two public entrances are symmetrically positioned in the second and fourth bays at ground level, while the central bay features a stone inscription commemorating the convent's foundation. Above it, a vertical tabernacle element frames a niche housing the image of St Monica, with voluted scrolls connecting this central feature to the adjacent bays and reinforcing the compositional unity.³⁴ The structure was later reinforced with buttresses, probably after 1849, when the collapse of the nave roof threatened the stability of the front wall. Today, the façade conveys a sense of measured solidity, its restrained geometry expressing both durability and internal order. In photographs by Mitterwallner and Chicó, this interplay between austerity and mass echoes the discipline that once governed convent life.³⁵

Spatial Organisation and Inhabitants

The internal organisation of the Convent of St Monica reflected a hierarchical structure closely aligned with the social order of the colonial world. This arrangement linked spatial distribution translated to function. Each group's location, access routes, and proximity to sacred spaces corresponded to its role in the convent's spiritual and economic life. Architecture regulated movement while reinforcing distinctions of status within the enclosure. This hierarchy was both social and spiritual, reinforcing the renunciation of individuality. The Constitutions of St Monica associated outward singularity with pride and prescribed uniformity, allowing distinction only within the cell.³⁶ Daily life followed this structure, which was reflected in the architectural layout.

The distribution of space organised inhabitants across the three primary floors and in the vaulted subterranean substructures.³⁷ At its apex were the black-veiled professed nuns, drawn from Portuguese and elite backgrounds, responsible for governance and spiritual life. Below them were white-veiled lay sisters, converted local women, novices and young pupils. The convent also depended on a large population of servants, maids, and enslaved women, whose labour sustained daily operations, material conditions, and the aristocratic lifestyle of the elite nuns.³⁸

Professed nuns occupied the main dormitories, directly connected to the choirs and the church, ensuring continuous participation in the Divine Office (fig. 4). Novices were housed in a separate wing, described in early sources as a "beautiful enclosed house," containing twelve cells with windows arranged in groups of four.³⁹ Beneath this wing, a "seminary" for young girls followed an identical plan, providing education and religious instruction (fig. 5).

In the northern sector, these subterranean structures were designed to adapt to the terrain, requiring massive foundations descending twenty-eight palms (c. 6.16 m) into the hillside. To maintain a uniform horizontal floor level across the uneven terrain, a series of brick vaults supported the cloister above. They housed lay sisters, servants, and included three chapels. Free and enslaved women occupied separate quarters within this lower structure. Lay sisters, responsible for domestic work, occupied twenty individual cells formed by low wooden screens within the first of two vast vaulted central halls beneath the northern cloister wing, ending at the Chapel of OL of Purification (fig. 6). Adjacent to this space, a second vaulted hall housed sixty East African servants and enslaved women, with beds arranged along the masonry walls, terminating at the chapel of the Holy Crucifix. Beneath these same high northern vaults, an intermediate mezzanine floor quartered around fifty local Indian servants, referred to as São Tomé (St Thomas), together with the Chapel of St Thomas. The eastern subterranean sector housed the servants' infirmary with barred windows facing the cloister garden, alongside storage linked to the external kitchens. The western wing contained a massive vaulted granary finished with a polished mortar floor over stone flags, positioned next to the cart gateway for receiving incoming provisions.⁴⁰

The Church and Cloister

Early sources describe the church as highly elevated and well-proportioned (fig. 7).⁴¹ It consists of a single nave without a transept, side chapels or bays, making it one of the simplest church plans in Goa.⁴² The façade opens onto a plain, with the nave running parallel to it. Its deep foundations and laterite masonry, sixteen palms (c. 3.52 m) in width and narrowing to fourteen palms (c. 3.08 m) above ground, support a vaulted nave fifteen palms (c. 3.3 m) high, following models used in convent churches in Portugal.⁴³

The upper and lower choirs, accommodating around one hundred nuns, were richly painted and furnished, and measured approximately one hundred and twenty palms (c. 26.4 m) in length and fifty-one (c. 11.22 m) in width (fig. 8).⁴⁴ The lower choir, on the first floor at the end of the southern liturgical wing, was used for professions, processions, and burials.⁴⁵ The upper choir contained ninety-six wooden stalls carved from fine timber. A masonry arch spanning the full width of the church separated the nave from the choirs, secured with iron grilles to allow ventilation while maintaining enclosure.⁴⁶ Above this screen stood a large cross with the miraculous image of the Crucified Christ, flanked by sculpted images of St Augustine and St William, with a projecting gallery supporting the main pipe organs.⁴⁷ Besides that, the choirs also functioned as the centre of musical practice within the convent.⁴⁸

The chancel is constrained in height by a sanctuary built directly above it on the third floor.⁴⁹ It was dominated by a principal altarpiece comparable in scale to those of major churches in Portugal. The gilded high retable was built entirely in solid wood and covered in gold leaf, with no painted panels, relying on high-relief carving and freestanding sculpture. It centred on a Crucifixion group beneath God the Father and the Holy Spirit, surrounded by statues of St Peter, St Paul, St Monica, St Augustine, and other Augustinian figures. The base displayed the Four Evangelists and the Doctors of the Church. At the centre of the high altar stood a spherical silver tabernacle of triple-refined silver, resting on a cherub and crowned by a monstrance containing a relic of the True Cross.⁵⁰

The interior included two collateral chapels facing the nave.⁵¹ On the Gospel side, a chapel dedicated to the Infant Jesus, houses a sculpted image of the Christ Child standing on a globe. The retable includes figures of St Joseph and St John the Baptist, surmounted by a painting of the Wedding at Cana, serving as an allegorical reminder of the spiritual marriage between Christ and the cloistered nuns.⁵² On the Epistle side, another chapel was dedicated to the Queen of Angels and associated with the Immaculate Conception. On the Gospel side of the nave, facing the entrance, an elevated chapel accessible only to the nuns contains the image of the Holy Crucifix.

Above the chancel, on the third floor, a chapel reserved for the Sanctuary of the Blessed Sacrament, was surrounded by tribunals for vigils.⁵³ This vertical arrangement of devotional spaces reflected the layered nature of convent devotion. Based on the manuscript of Friar de Sant'Ana (1632), the vertical distribution of the internal chapels within the Convent of Santa Monica can be structured as seen in Table 1. The locations of the chapels were later confirmed in Santamaria (1699), except for the chapel of the Mother of God, whose name was changed to OL of Grace. Besides that, the chapel of the seminar is only referred to in Santamaria's text. Additional Individual chapels and sacred imagery were distributed across the complex, forming a network of devotional spaces.⁵⁴

The church occupied the southern wing and functioned as the convent's public interface, while the choirs remained enclosed. The nuns attended Mass behind screens: the lower with a narrow opening and the upper with a wider arch, allowing sound and limited visibility. Although the nave vault collapsed in 1849, the imposts remain, marking the original structure's rhythm.⁵⁵ The choir, now housing the MoCA, has been altered, including the removal of its original wooden pillars to accommodate displays, but retains evidence of its former arrangement.

At the centre of the convent, the cloister structured both circulation and communal life. The quadrangle rises three levels above a semi-basement, except on the south side, where the church is located, and the quadrangle has only two storeys. The lower levels

have arches while the upper-level has rectangular windows. The corridor is covered with intersecting barrel vaults forming four-part vaulting, originally decorated with frescoes. At the corners, chapel-arches frame altarpieces with traces of painted hagiographic imagery.⁵⁶ The cloister contained a garden with a central fountain, known as the Valley of the Lilies, planted with fruit trees and herbs, and the courtyard, set slightly lowered than the galleries, maintained an open view from the surrounding walkways. It combined circulation, light and ventilation, while also serving as a symbolic space of enclosure, order and quiet reflection.

Domestic and Communal Spaces

The dormitories extended along the upper galleries, measuring about three hundred and thirty-eight feet (c. 111.54 m) in length and seventy-five palms (c. 16.5 m) in height, to the cornice.⁵⁷ In most cases, each nun occupied an individual cell within a collective arrangement. These dormitories opened onto wide corridors overlooking the cloister, where reading, walking, and meditation took place in silence. On the second floor, the eastern wing comprised twelve large cells, while the northern wing contained standard residential cells opening onto a large circular hall, forty-six palms (c. 10.12 m) in diameter, used for communal labour, music lessons, and embroidery. The western wing consisted exclusively of standard cells overlooking the outer enclosure and the open sea.⁵⁸

The third level did not reproduce the full quadrangular cloister plan, covering only the western and southern wings. The western wing comprised a large dormitory flanked by individual cells, organised along a central corridor running from south to north, and terminating in an open terrace. This terrace, forty-six palms (c. 10.12 m) in diameter, was enclosed by iron railings to provide open views and fresh air. The eastern cells faced the cloister garden, while the western cells overlooked the outer gardens⁵⁹ Access to this level, was provided via a secondary staircase in black stone, leading to a common assembly hall, with a chapel dedicated to St Clare of Montefalco. The southern corridor contained a single row of cells facing the cloister garden, while its outer wall backed onto the upper structure of the church, ending at the Upper Sanctuary.⁶⁰

Adjacent to the dormitories, the infirmaries addressed both care and observance. The convent contained three infirmaries for nuns and one for servants. The main infirmary, near the entrance, allowed physicians and confessors to attend the sick without crossing the cloister.⁶¹ Measuring about one hundred and fifty palms (c. 33 m) in length and thirty (c. 6.6 m) in width, it included a chapel dedicated to OL of Assumption.⁶² Openings connected the chapel to the wards, allowing patients to follow Mass and receive the sacraments from their beds, while windows facing the cloister garden ensured light, ventilation, and visual contact with nature.⁶³

Refectory spaces served for daily meals, taken in silence and accompanied by the reading of sacred texts and were distributed across the convent according to the different groups. The eastern wing of the second floor comprised the *ministra* (serveries), and the primary communal refectory, deliberately centralised within the upper layout to ease access for the community. The dining hall featured windows positioned to provide sweeping northern views of the sea, opening onto the De Profundis hall and an anteroom equipped with a multi-spigot bronze wash basin.⁶⁴

Beneath the cloister, a semi-subterranean level contains a large vaulted hall that the description by Friar de Sant'Ana (1632) has identified as the dormitory for the lay sisters. This space now serves as a refectory for the sister of the Mater Dei Institute. As one of the largest spaces of the convent, this hall opens towards the orchard that now occupies the cloister garden and was connected to the main building through a doorway and five windows. The ceiling is decorated with 119 coffers, arranged in regular rows and painted with busts of saints, martyrs, and Apostles.

Adjacent to this hall is another large space, measuring approximately seventy-two palms (c. 15.84 m) in length and forty (c. 8.8 m) in width, corresponding to what Sant'Ana identified as the dormitory for the slaves. The space is covered by rib vaults, showing traces of polychromy and opens onto a large yard that provided light and air. This area is connected directly to the servants' area via a vaulted stone stairway in the mezzanine, which also allows food and supplies to circulate without disturbing the enclosed spaces.

Beyond the Cloister

Beyond the immediate quadrangle, the western front expanded into the orchard slope through a covered recreation gallery. Supported by eighteen stone columns, this gallery was equipped with benches and tables overlooking the sea. This wing terminated at secure rice and wheat granaries and open, collonaded unloading sheds. Linked to this western front via a bridge overlooking the gardens stood the Novitiate, an independent wing positioned to catch the western winds. This facility ensures the total isolation of novices under a dedicated mistress and included private cells, communal rooms, and the Chapel of the Most Holy Trinity, which featured a gilded retable with a Venetian alabaster relief facing the novices' private assembly space. Beneath the novitiate lay an intermediate gallery housing the secure conventual treasury, where financial transactions occurred across a double-grille system communicating with the external procurator's office. Access required three distinct keys held by the Prioress and two sister treasurers, while the external key remained with the Confessor. The ground-floor corridors below serviced the cart gateway for direct intake of provisions away from the main public porter's lodge.⁶⁵

The eastern exterior flank housed a terraced logistical complex built around private courtyards and connected to the main building by covered walkways. This sector comprised a communal kitchen with twenty-four stoves and an oven, a twelve-stove infirmary kitchen, an upper refectory servery, and the infirmary pantry.⁶⁶ Sanitation and efficiency were maintained by a hydraulic system that flushed wastewater through stone pipes into the sea, while freshwater was drawn by three garden waterwheels and carried through local black stone conduits into an elevated three-*pipa* cistern, which fed pressurised kitchen nozzles. At the outer corner of this wing stood an isolated, vaulted three-storey *secreta* (latrine tower) connected to each floor of the main quadrangle. Heavily ventilated by sea winds, it had overlapping vaults that stepped progressively outward to clear a single vertical waste shaft that flushed through deep subterranean conduits into the sea. At the bottom of the northern valley slope to isolate odours, large covered outhouses with a private well-handled heavy kitchen preparation alongside separate pens for rearing large numbers of pigs, chickens, and ducks.⁶⁷

Final Remarks

The Convent of St Monica in Old Goa constitutes a singular case within the architectural and institutional landscape of the Portuguese Empire. As the first enclosed female monastic foundation in Asia, it established a spatial model in which Tridentine discipline, Augustinian governance, and local conditions were articulated through built form. Its architecture structured religious life, defining hierarchy and shaping daily religious practice, regulating movement and visibility within a rigorously controlled environment.

The analysis of its spatial organisation demonstrates how enclosure operated simultaneously as a physical and symbolic system. From the controlled thresholds of the church to the stratified distribution of domestic and service spaces, the convent translated social and spiritual distinctions into architectural order. At the same time, its construction in laterite, the use of vaulted systems, and the integration of local decorative practices reveal a process of adaptation that went beyond merely replicating metropolitan models.

Rather than a peripheral extension of European forms, St Monica emerges as a site of architectural synthesis, where imported typologies were reconfigured in response to the material, social, and cultural realities of Goa. Despite subsequent alterations and partial loss, its surviving fabric remains a critical source for understanding the relationship between architecture, gendered enclosure, and institutional authority in early modern Asia. It also provides material evidence of women's agency within the spiritual, artistic and social networks of the Portuguese world.

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endnotes

¹ The research for this chapter was funded by the European Union (ERC Consolidator Grant, ID-SCAPES research project, <https://doi.org/10.3030/101125057>). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

² For recent scholarship on the convent of St Monica, see Francisco Bethencourt, “Os conventos femininos no império português: O caso do convento de Santa Mónica em Goa,” *Cadernos da condição feminina* 43 (1995): 631–52; Timothy J. Coates, “The Convent of Santa Monica of Goa and Single Women in the Estado da Índia, 1550—1700,” *Faces de Eva* 8 (2002): 67–81; Maria Amorim and Vítor Serrão, “Arte e História do Mosteiro de Santa Mónica de Goa à Luz da Apologia de Frei Diogo de Santa Ana (1633),” in *Problematizar a História - Estudos em Homenagem à Professora Maria do Rosário Themudo Barata*, coord. Ana Leal de Faria and Isabel Drumond Braga (Colibri, 2007), 677–713; Carla Alferes Pinto, “Género, mecenato e arte: a criação das casas de mulheres em Goa,” *Portuguese Literary and Cultural Studies: Parts of Asia* 17/18 (2010): 51–75; Rozely Oliveira, “No Vale dos Lírios: Convento de Santa Mónica de Goa e o modelo feminino de virtude para o Oriente (1606-1636)” (MA diss., Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, 2012); Miguel Mateus and Vítor Serrão, “Pintura Maneirista do Antigo Mosteiro de Santa Mónica em Goa: Arte, Conservação e Restauro,” *ARTIS* 1 (2013): 57–65; José Artur Pestana, “A Pintura Mural no Antigo Mosteiro de Santa Mónica em Old Goa,” *Artis* 1 (2013): 60–69; Francisco Lameira and Mónica Reis, *Retábulos no Estado de Goa* (Universidade do Algarve, 2016), 92–93.

³ Carla Alferes Pinto, “Female agency and the sculptural object in Agostinho de Santa Maria’s hagiography of Filipa Ferreira (?–1626), the Augustinian Soror Filipa da Trindade,” in *Representing Women’s Political Identity in the Early Modern Iberian World*, ed. Jeremy Roe and Jean Andrews (Routledge, 2020), 1–27; Carla Alferes Pinto, “Notas para o estudo do mecenato de D. Frei Aleixo de Meneses: Os recolhimentos da Misericórdia em Goa,” *Anais de História de Além-mar* 7 (2006): 279–309.

⁴ Agostinho Santa Maria, *História da fundação do Real Convento de Santa Monica da Cidade de Goa, Corte do Estado da Índia, & do Imperio Lusitano do Oriente* (Officina de Antonio Pedrozo Galram, 1699), 141, 459, 474.

⁵ Santa Maria, *História da fundação*; Miguel Vicente de Abreu, *Real Mosteiro de Santa Mónica de Goa. Memória Histórica* (Imprensa Nacional, 1882).

⁶ Pedro Dias, *História da Arte Portuguesa no Mundo (1415-1822): o Espaço do Índico* (Círculo de Leitores, 2008), 93.

⁷ After the death of the last nun, Madre Maria do Espírito Santo, in 1885, the complex closed down. It later served as military quarters. From 1968 onwards, the building housed the Mater Dei Institute. Carlota Oliveira, “A Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian e a intervenção no Património: O contributo do arquiteto Viana de Lima” (Master’s diss., Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto, 2023), 21.

⁸ António Nunes Pereira, *A Arquitectura Religiosa Cristã de Velha Goa. Segunda Metade do Século XVI - Primeiras Décadas do Século XVII* (Fundação Oriente, 2005), 325.

⁹ This foundation marked a significant development within the Portuguese empire. On the establishment of St Monica under the *Padroado Real*, a framework of royal and ecclesiastical

authority distinct from the elite-driven models of the Spanish colonies. Bethencourt, “Os conventos femininos no império português. O caso do convento de Santa Mónica em Goa,” 631-52.

¹⁰ Ana Hilário argues that the perception of the colonial context of Goa as socially unstable made this institutional enclosure particularly necessary. Ana Teresa Hilário, “Do medo da individualidade à exaltação de competências: as freiras de Santa Mónica de Goa no século XVII,” *Revista Língua-lugar* 4 (2021): 49-55.

¹¹ Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 105.

¹² According to Alberto Correia, the convent served “both as a house for the nuns known as the Daughters of St Monica, and as a refuge for widows devoted to the service of God, as well as for women whose husbands had departed for distant lands in the East” (*our translation*). Alberto da Silva Correia, *La Vieille Goa. Aperçu Historique. Récits de voyageurs. Saint François Xavier. Chronique sanitaire. Esquisse archéologique*. (Tipografia Rangel, 1931), 161.

¹³ Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 150–51, 175, 190, 345–46.

¹⁴ Diogo de Sant’Ana, *Apologia do Insigne Mosteiro de Santa Monica de Goa*, 1632, fols. 163, 187, Manuscritos da Livraria (ML) 87, Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, Lisbon, PT/TT/MSLIV/0087.

¹⁵ The total cost of the construction campaign amounted to two hundred thousand cruzados. Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 140.

¹⁶ Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 125–249; João Teles e Cunha, “O insólito no quotidiano goês: Santa Mónica e o milagre da cruz (1636),” 202–03.

¹⁷ Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 455–57.

¹⁸ Pereira notes that there is no documentary evidence indicating whether the convent was built over the 1606 structure or constructed anew. António Nunes Pereira, *A Arquitectura Religiosa Cristã de Velha Goa. Segunda Metade do Século XVI - Primeiras Décadas do Século XVII*, 324.

¹⁹ Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 457–58.

²⁰ Miguel Mateus and Vítor Serrão, “Pintura Maneirista do Antigo Mosteiro de Santa Mónica em Goa: Arte, Conservação e Restauro,” 58.

²¹ António Nunes Pereira, “Três Planos Pombalinos para a Reconstrução de Velha Goa,” *Arte Teoria. Revista do Mestrado em Teorias da Arte da Faculdade de Belas-Artes da Universidade de Lisboa*, no. 10 (2007).

²² Luís Benavente, Índia / Convento de Sta Mónica / Velha Goa [1961], Fundo Luís Benavente, folder 2129, Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, Lisbon, PT/TT/LB/C/002/2129.

²³ Sant’Ana, *Apologia*, fols. 171v, 181v, 183v, 184v.

²⁴ Subrahmanya Rajagopalan, *Old Goa* (Archaeological Survey of India, 2004), 73.

²⁵ Sant’Ana, *Apologia*, fol. 182v–83v.

²⁶ Sant’Ana, *Apologia*, fol. 183–85.

²⁷ Ana Teresa Hilário, “Em busca das mulheres na construção, ocupação e vivência do espaço no convento de Santa Mónica de Goa (sécs. XVII-XVIII),” *VI Encontro Internacional de Jovens Investigadores de História Moderna* (CHAM–Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2019).

²⁸ Sant’Ana, *Apologia*, fol. 168.

²⁹ Paulo Varela Gomes, “A fachada pseudofrontal nas igrejas monásticas femininas portuguesas,” *Conversas à volta dos conventos Évora* (Casa do Sul Editora, 2002), 229-242.

³⁰ Paulo Varela Gomes, *Whitewash, Red Stone. A History of Church Architecture in Goa* (Yoda Press, 2011), 76–80.

³¹ Sant’Ana, *Apologia*, fol. 177.

³² Gomes, *Whitewash, Red Stone*, 76–80.

³³ Pereira, *A Arquitectura Religiosa Cristã*, 325.

³⁴ The inscription, placed beneath the episcopal arms of Friar Aleixo de Menezes, records the circumstances of the foundation: "O S[enhor] F[rei] D[om] Aleixo de Menezes da Ordem de N[osso] P[adre] S[anto] Ag[ostinh]o, Arc[ebisp]o Primaz e G[overnad]or da India e depois Primaz de Espanha, fundou este mosteiro o 1.º de clausura nestas partes, an[o] de 1606, a 3 de Setebr[o]."

Pereira, *A Arquitectura Religiosa*, 325; Gomes, *Whitewash, Red Stone*, 79–80.

³⁵ Joana Chaves, "Representações da Arquitectura 'Indo-portuguesa': Mário T. Chico, Goa, 1951-1961" (Master's diss., Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto, 2026).

³⁶ Meneses, *Constituições*, fols. 56v–66.

³⁷ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fols. 168–172v.

³⁸ António F. Moniz Júnior, "Relação completa das religiosas do Mosteiro de Sta. Monica de Goa," *O Oriente Português* XVI, no. 9–10 (1919).

³⁹ Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 468–69.

⁴⁰ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fols. 172v–75; Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 465–66.

⁴¹ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fol. 177.

⁴² The single nave conventual church reflects the shift in Goa at the end of the sixteenth century when naves with side aisles gave way to single nave plans in large churches. Pereira, *A Arquitectura Religiosa*, 277–78.

⁴³ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fols. 172v, 174v, 175; Pereira, *A Arquitectura Religiosa*, 324.

⁴⁴ Ricardo Michael Telles, *Igrejas, Capelas, Conventos e Palácios na Velha Cidade de Goa* (Imprensa Gonçalves, 1931), 81.

⁴⁵ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fol. 168v.

⁴⁶ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fol. 169v.

⁴⁷ Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 461–62.

⁴⁸ Ana Teresa Hilário, "Do medo da individualidade à exaltação de competências: as freiras de Santa Mónica de Goa no século XVII," 58–60.

⁴⁹ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fol. 172.

⁵⁰ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fols. 177–77v.

⁵¹ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fol. 177.

⁵² Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fols. 177v–78.

⁵³ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fol. 172; Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 463.

⁵⁴ Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 465–66.

⁵⁵ The church nave was originally covered by a coffered barrel vault, which collapsed on 10 November 1849. See Pe. Francisco Xavier Gomes Catão Catão, *Anuário da Arquidiocese de Goa e Damão para 1955* (Goa, 1955); Pereira, *A Arquitectura Religiosa Cristã de Velha Goa. Segunda Metade do Século XVI - Primeiras Décadas do Século XVII*, 325.

⁵⁶ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fols. 169v–70.

⁵⁷ Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 466–67.

⁵⁸ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fols. 169v, 170v–71.

⁵⁹ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fols. 171–71v.

⁶⁰ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fols. 171v–72

⁶¹ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fol. 168.

⁶² Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 465.

⁶³ Santa Maria, *Historia da fundação*, 467–68.

⁶⁴ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fols. 169v, 170v–71.

⁶⁵ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fols. 180v–81.

⁶⁶ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fol. 181v.

⁶⁷ Sant'Ana, *Apologia*, fols. 181–82v.

abstract

This chapter examines the Convent of St Monica in Old Goa, the earliest female religious house established in the Orient. In contrast to the numerous male religious institutions, it formed part of a more restricted network of female foundations, largely composed of *recolhimentos*. Founded in 1606 under the archbishopric of Friar Aleixo de Meneses (1559–1617), constructed over the following decades (1606–27), and rebuilt after the fire of 1636, this Augustinian institution played a central role in reshaping the monastic landscape of Old Goa. It accommodated a large, socially diverse yet strictly hierarchical community, including noblewomen without dowries, novices, servants, and enslaved women, within a spatial system in which architecture mediated between visibility and seclusion.

Drawing on archival records, previously unpublished photographic documentation by Gritli von Mitterwallner (1925–2012), the photographic campaigns of Mário T. Chicó (1905–66), and historic plans such as the survey by Luís Benavente (1902–93), this chapter demonstrates how enclosure and spatial organisation structured daily routines and reinforced hierarchy in early modern convent life. The layout regulated movement between public areas and the strictly enclosed cloister, articulating graduated levels of access and seclusion. At its centre lay the cloister garden, known to the nuns as the Valley of Lilies, which combined practical use with symbolic meanings, expressing ideals of purity, harmony, and detachment central to Augustinian spirituality.

Developed within the ERC project *ID SCAPES: Building Identity, Religious Architecture and Sacral Landscapes of Christian Minorities in India and Bangladesh*, this study situates the convent within broader debates on sacred space, enclosure, and colonial religious architecture.

keywords

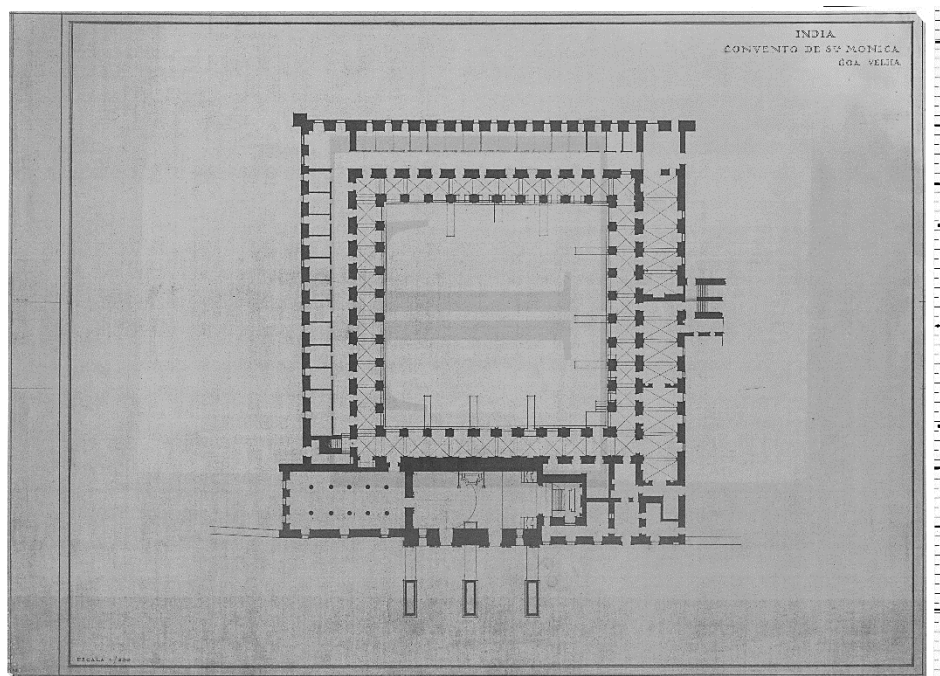
Convent of St Monica; Valley of Lilies; Old Goa; Sacral Landscapes; ID SCAPES.

figures

- 1| Convent of St Monica, south façade, November 1, 1966. Photograph by Gritli von Mitterwallner (Accession no. CI.7.5.23 2, Bildarchiv, Schenkung Gritli von Mitterwallner, AIK – Archiv, Universität Bonn).
- 2| Benavente Gound plan of the Convent of St Monica at the church level. Survey by Luís Benavente, (Índia / Convento de Sta Mónica / Velha Goa [1961], Fundo Luís Benavente, folder 2129, Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, Lisbon, PT/TT/LB/C/002/2129).
- 3| Convent of St Monica, cloister southwest corner, August 7, 1956. Photograph by Gritli von Mitterwallner (Accession no. CI.7.1.16 1, Bildarchiv, Schenkung Gritli von Mitterwallner, AIK – Archiv, Universität Bonn).
- 4| Convent of St Monica, cloister, western corridor, December 1, 1966. Photograph by Gritli von Mitterwallner (Accession no. CI.7.5.12 9, Bildarchiv, Schenkung Gritli von Mitterwallner, AIK – Archiv, Universität Bonn).
- 5| Convent of St Monica, chapel of the “Seminary” room, August 21, 1956. Photograph by Gritli von Mitterwallner (Accession no. CI.7.1.12 8, Bildarchiv, Schenkung Gritli von Mitterwallner, AIK – Archiv, Universität Bonn).
- 6| Convent of St Monica, chapel of OL of Purification and dormitory of the Lay Sisters, December 12, 2025. Photograph by Tiago Cruz (ID-SCAPES Archive, FAUP, Porto).
- 7| Convent of St Monica, church, main altar, August 21, 1956. Photograph by Gritli von Mitterwallner (Accession no. CI.7.1.12 2, Bildarchiv, Schenkung Gritli von Mitterwallner, AIK – Archiv, Universität Bonn).
- 8| Convent of St Monica, church, view towards the choirs, August 25, 1956. Photograph by Gritli von Mitterwallner (Accession no. CI.7.1.26 8, Bildarchiv, Schenkung Gritli von Mitterwallner, AIK – Archiv, Universität Bonn).
- 9| Convent of St Monica, elevation of the south façade without flying buttresses, 2026. Survey by ID-SCAPES team (ID-SCAPES Archive, FAUP, Porto).
- 10| Convent of St Monica, ground level, 2026. Survey by ID-SCAPES team (ID-SCAPES Archive, FAUP, Porto).
- 11| Convent of St Monica, church level, 2026. Survey by ID-SCAPES team (ID-SCAPES Archive, FAUP, Porto).
- 12| Convent of St Monica, second level, 2026. Survey by ID-SCAPES team (ID-SCAPES Archive, FAUP, Porto).
- 13| Convent of St Monica, third level, 2026. Survey by ID-SCAPES team (ID-SCAPES Archive, FAUP, Porto).



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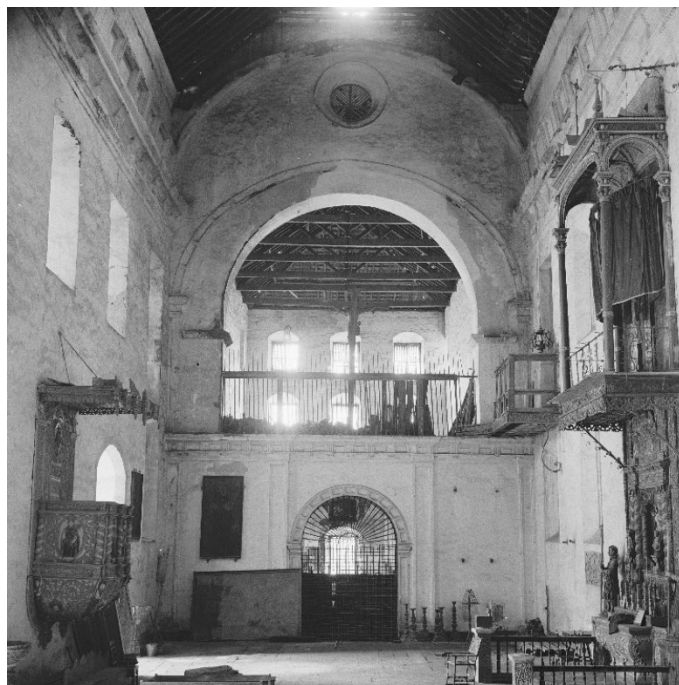
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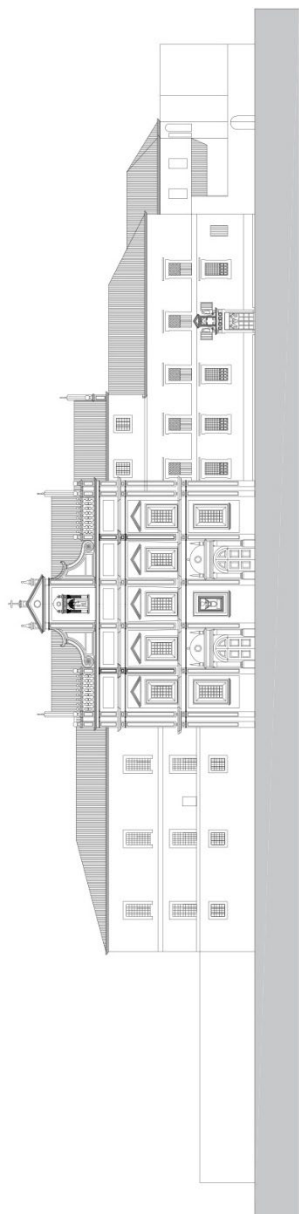
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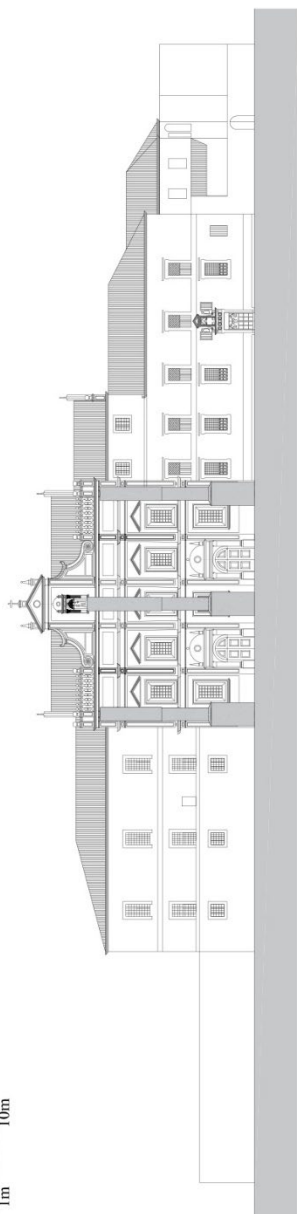
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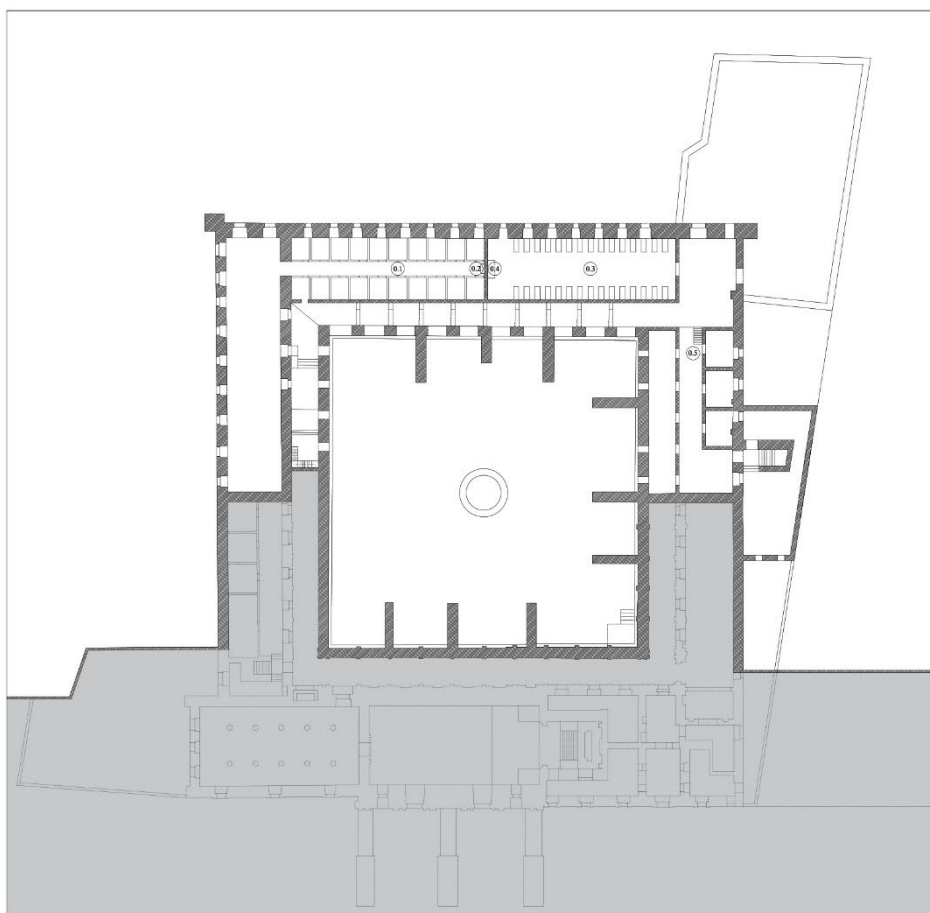
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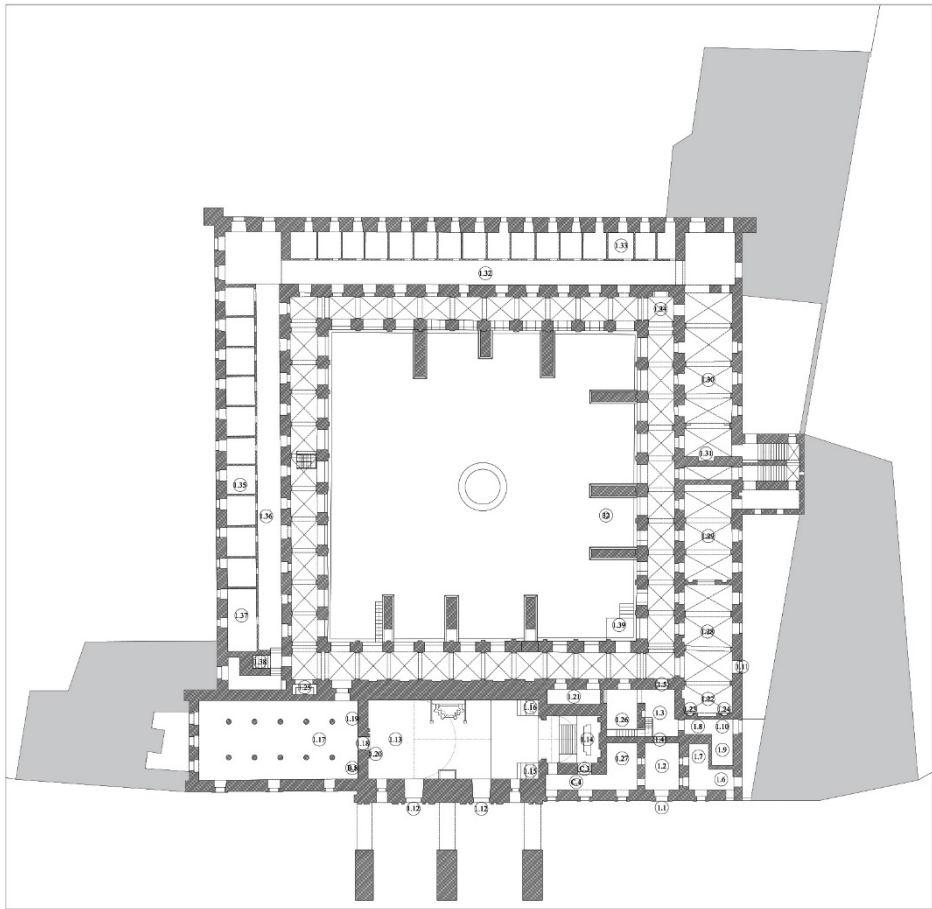
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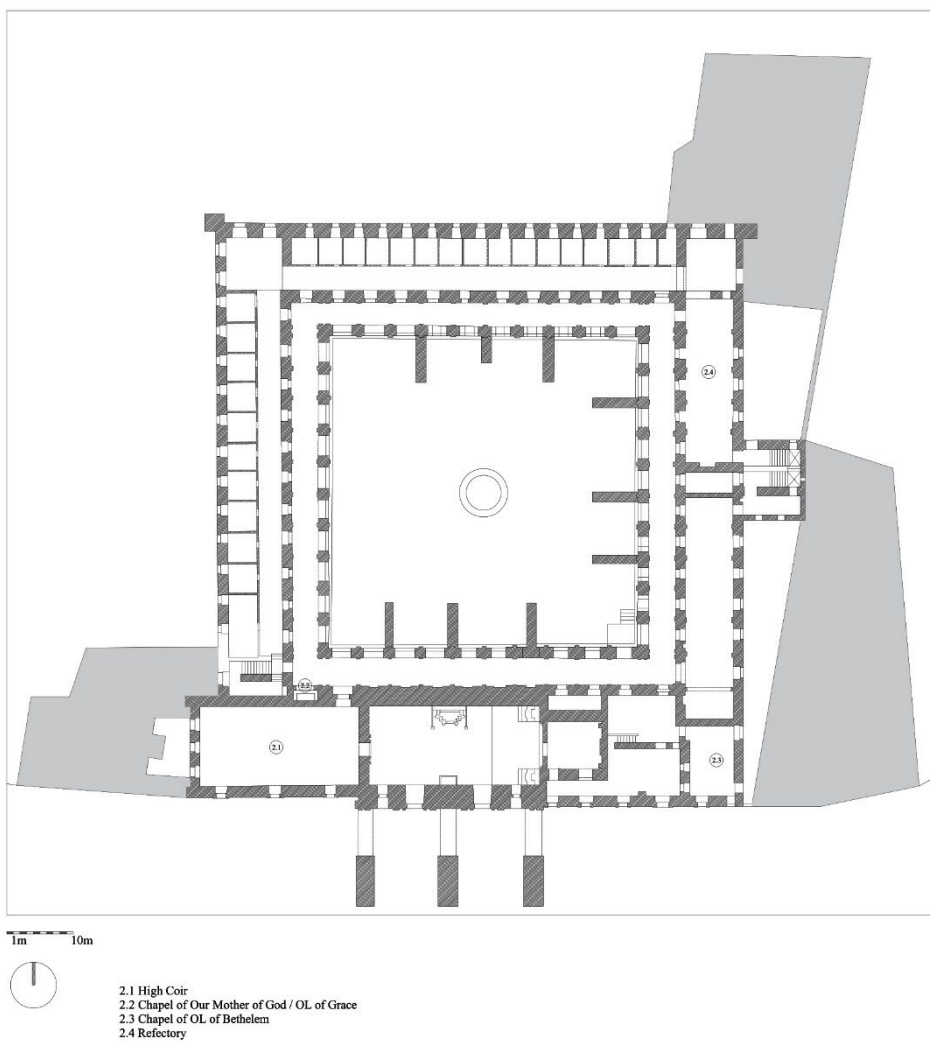
- 0.1 Dormitory of the Lay Sisters
- 0.2 Chapel of OL of Purification
- 0.3 Dormitory of the East African Slaves
- 0.4 Chapel of the Holy Crucifix
- 0.5 Access to the mezzanine over the northern corridor

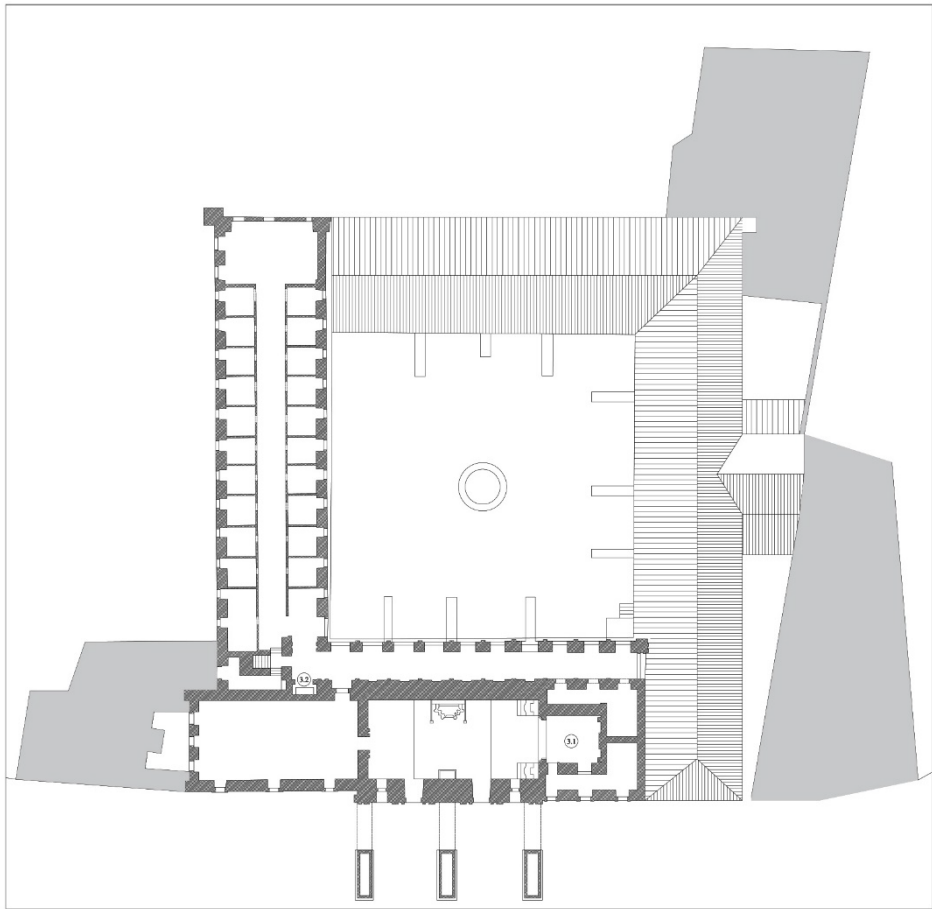


1m 10m



- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1.1 Outer Gate | 1.21 Confessionals |
| 1.2 Outer Porter's Lodge | 1.22 Chapel of OL of the Assumption |
| 1.3 Inner Porter's Lodge | 1.23 Niche on the right wall |
| 1.4 Cloister Porter's Lodge | 1.24 Niche on the left wall |
| 1.5 Gate of Prohibition | 1.25 Chapel of the Holy Saviour of the World |
| 1.6 Outer Locutory | 1.26 Inner Sacristy |
| 1.7 Portress's Quarters | 1.27 Outer Sacristy |
| 1.8 Corridor of the Locutory | 1.28 Infirmary |
| 1.9 Foundling Wheel House | 1.29 Convalescent unit |
| 1.10 Inner Locutory | 1.30 "Seminar" |
| 1.11 Confessor's Door | 1.31 Chapel of the "Seminar" |
| 1.12 Main Church Entrances | 1.32 Corridor of St Augustine |
| 1.13 Church of Saint Monica | 1.33 Cells of St Augustine |
| 1.14 Chancel | 1.34 Chapel of St Augustine |
| 1.15 Chapel of the Divine Jesus | 1.35 Savior Dormitory |
| 1.16 Chapel of the African Virgins | 1.36 Saviour Corridor |
| 1.17 Lower Choir | 1.37 Saviour Classroom |
| 1.18 Grille of the Lower Choir | 1.38 Black, Polished or Saviour Staircase |
| 1.19 Confessionals of the Lower Choir | 1.39 Rough Staircase |
| 1.20 Great Stone Arch | |





1m 10m



3.1 Saint Sepulchre
3.2 Chapel of St Clare of Montefalco