

Prospettive
Il patrimonio culturale del Molise
n. 8

The monumental complex of San Vincenzo al Volturno



MINISTERO PER I BENI E LE ATTIVITÀ CULTURALI E PER IL TURISMO
SEGRETARIATO REGIONALE PER IL MOLISE



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Regional Secretary:

Prof. Leandro Ventura

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THE MONUMENTAL COMPLEX OF SAN VINCENZO AL VOLTURNO

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Texts edited by the University of Suor Orsola Benincasa - Laboratorio di Archeologia
Tardoantica e Medievale (L.a.T.e.m.), directed by prof. Federico Marazzi

Editorial Supervision: Susanne Meurer

Printed:

Poligrafica Terenzi snc

S.S. 85 Venafrana, km 19 - 86079 Venafrò (Is)

Tel. 0865.900023 - info@poligraficaterenzi.com

Poligrafica Terenzi Editrice | 2019 | ISBN 978-88-98988-32-7

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"*Perspectives - The cultural heritage of Molise*" comprises a series of booklets to support tourists during their visit to the cultural places of Molise.

It is not the first time that the Polo Museale del Molise, under the Italian Ministry of Culture, has published material about its museums, but this time, it was decided to publish individual volumes, each dedicated to specific cultural realities.

Another pioneering aspect of this initiative is that there will be volumes dedicated to some local museums (non-state museums) and to some old traditions such as the procession of the so-called *Mysteries* of Campobasso during the *Corpus Christi* celebrations.

The series of booklets, which is expected to be progressively expanded, intends to start a reflection on the integrated regional museum system in which the State museums will collaborate with non-state museums, in the attempt to define common cultural tours and give a support to the local communities.

It is therefore a publishing series that will facilitate the collaboration among local institutions, almost a sort of pilot project which will allow Molise to be presented to its visitors in its most significant cultural aspects.

Prof. Leandro Ventura

Regional Secretary of Molise Molise
Director *ad interim* of the Polo museale del Molise

1. THE SAMNITE AND ROMAN PERIOD

The site of San Vincenzo al Volturno was inhabited long before the abbey was founded.



THE SAMNITES

In the area of the New Abbey, on the left bank of the river Volturno, a Samnite cemetery has been discovered, dating to the 6th/5th-century BC (fig. 1.1).

THE ROMANS

On the same side of the river there are remains of a Roman settlement, dating back to the first century AD. Trace of occupation during the Roman period can be found as well on the right bank, although they have been widely superseded by the structures of the Early Medieval monastery.

THE LATE ROMAN PERIOD

Apparently, in the late Roman Period a small chapel was constructed whereas now is the Church of Epiphanius, around which a number of Christian burials gathered, built into the ruins of collapsed Roman buildings.

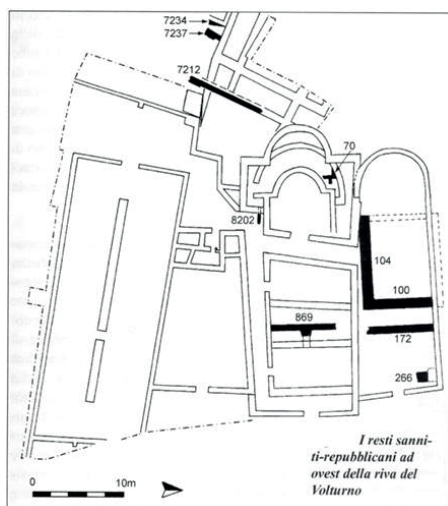
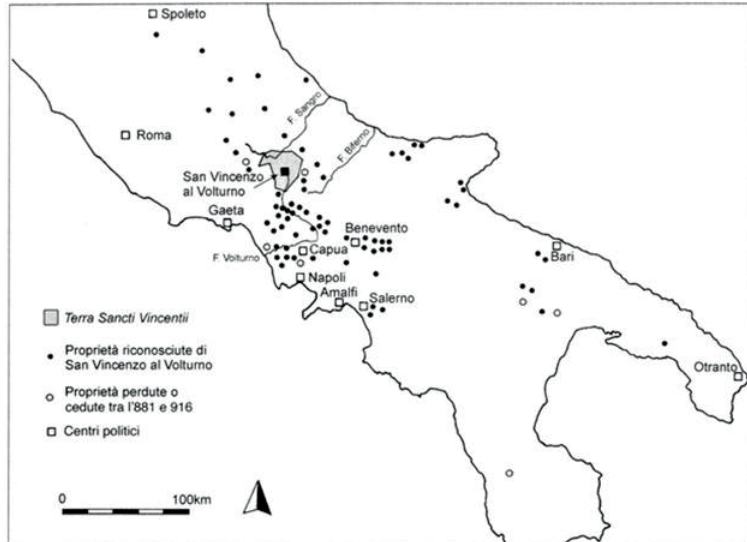


Fig. 1.1 Evidence of samnite remains in San Vincenzo

In fact, the area in which the South Church is located today was previously occupied by dozens of burials (fig. 1.2), while a chapel with a single nave and a large semicircular apse developed where the Church of Epiphanius is now located. Immediately above these buildings, the remains of another Roman construction have been found, of square layout, perhaps used as a dwelling.

2. THE LONGOBARD AND CAROLINGIAN MONASTERY



Le proprietà di San Vincenzo nel IX secolo

Fig. 2.1. Properties of the abbey during the IXth century

FOUNDATION OF THE ABBEY

According to textual sources, the monastery was founded at the beginning of the 8th-century by Paldo, Taso and Tato, three young aristocrats from Benevento who sought to embrace a monastic life.

They settled among previously existing late Roman buildings.

THE APOGEE

During the 9th-century the monastery reached its zenith, thanks to support received by Carolingian emperors.

In this period the monastic complex grew to considerable size, inhabited by a community of several hundred monks.

It ran a landed patrimony spanning several areas of

southern Italy. The monastic buildings of this phase were grouped around an open central space and the main abbey church stood in the southwestern corner (fig. 2.2)

THE SACK

In 881 the monastery was plundered by a band of Arab raiders, who attacked the site from different directions. The excavations have revealed much evidence for this episode. It represented a dramatic turning point for the community, who abandoned the site and fled to the city of Capua, in Campania. On the other hand, it has given archaeologists a unique opportunity to explore a great monastery of the Carolingian Age in its original conditions. This is why San Vincenzo al Volturno has been named the "Dark Age Pompeii".

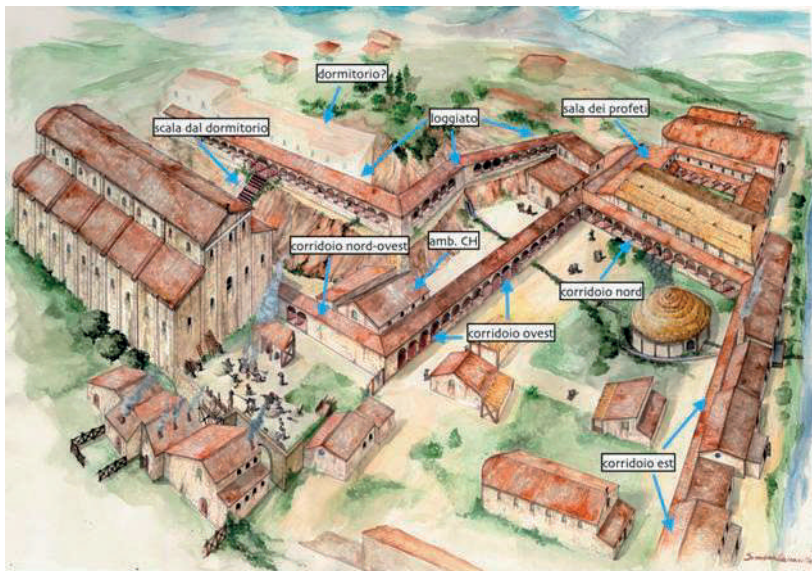


fig. 2.2 The monastery during the time of Abbot Giosuè

3. THE MONASTERY BETWEEN THE 10TH AND THE 12TH CENTURY

THE OTTONIAN AGE

In the aftermath of the Arab sack, a small group of monks came back perhaps around year 915. But it was only towards the end of the 10th century that the old monastery recovered its former relevance.

As of around year 980 the Abbey Church, heavily damaged during the Arab attack, was reestablished and transformed. A square atrium, flanked by porticoes, was built over the remains of the Carolingian workshops. This structure made it possible to have a front entrance to the church and its porticoes hosted the monks' burials (fig. 3.1).

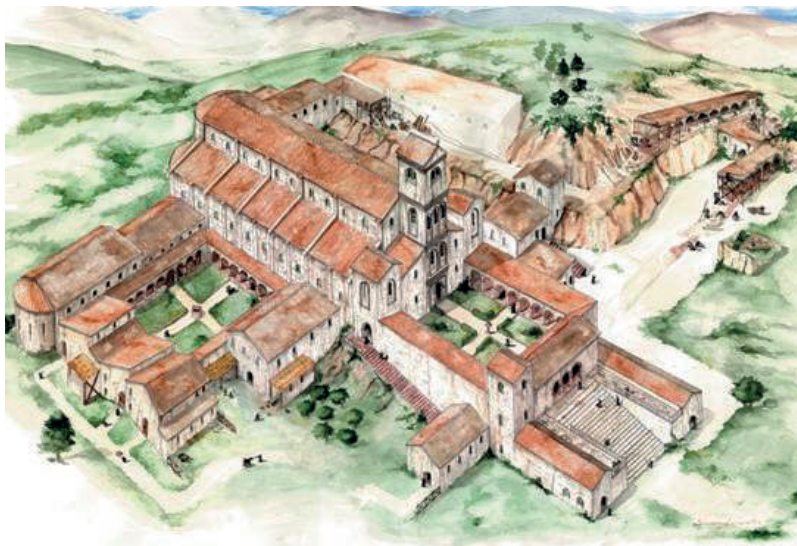


fig. 3.1 Supposed reconstruction of the complex in the 11th century

THE BUILDING PHASE OF CA. 1020 – 1050

Under Abbot Ilarius (1011 – 1044) the reestablishment of the Abbey Church reached its completion with a new painted decoration of the inside and the building of a high tower, flanked by two lower ones, against the church facade wall, following the fashion of contemporary German church architecture. In the same period a cloister was built on the southern side of the church, together with a range of buildings for the monastic community placed on both sides of the church itself.

THE RELOCATION OF THE MONASTIC COMPLEX (END OF THE 11TH CENTURY – BEGINNING OF THE 12TH CENTURY)

At the end of the 11th century the monks took a drastic decision: the site of the Early Medieval monastery was abandoned in favour of a new settlement on the opposite side of the river Volturno.

Much of this new fortified monastery had to be already done by year 1115, when pope Paschal II consecrated its main church (fig. 3.2).

The monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno remained autonomous until AD 1699, when it became part of Montecassino's properties.

A female Benedictine community was reestablished in 1989 and lived here for some 25 years, until 2015.

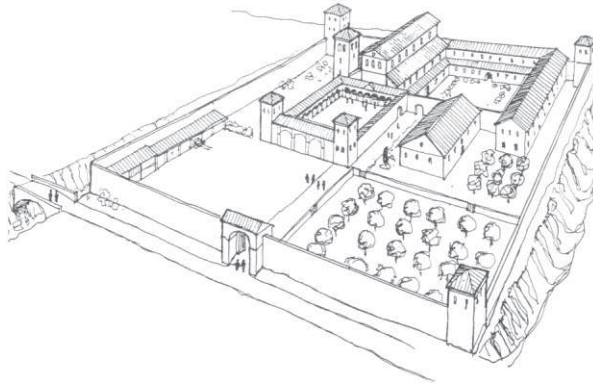


fig. 3.2 Reconstruction of the Abbazia Nuova

4. THE CHURCH OF EPIPHANIUS

THE BUILDING

The so-called Church of Epiphanius is a small church building 11 meters long and 6,5 meters wide. It was a single nave hall covered with a wooden roof, with a raised presbytery and triple apse located in the western end.

THE PRESBYTERY

The presbytery was built above the crypt, itself painted in the 9th-century. On the apse walls, traces of the fresco decoration are still visible. In the centre of the presbytery is the base of the main altar, made with a section of a column shaft.

While the original floor of the Early Medieval church has now disappeared, its level can be reconstructed by looking at the threshold of the door leading to the crypt. In front of the facade there was a small narthex, occupied by some burials of perhaps privileged individuals.

THE PREEXISTENCES

The 9th-century church reused the remains of a late Roman building, perhaps another small church, whose western end had a large single apse.

5. THE CRYPT OF ABBOT EPIPHANIUS

THE BUILDING

The crypt dates to the second quarter of the 9th-century, when Abbot Epiphanius restored the entire church. It was built partially underground and covered with barrel vaulting. Its plan has roughly the shape of a Greek cross. In the short eastern end we find the remains of a burial, placed just under a window through which it was possible to peep inside the crypt from the church nave.

THE FRESCOES

The crypt is decorated with a cycle of frescoes considered among the most important surviving in Europe from the Early Middle Ages (fig. 5.1).

On the eastern side the scenes represent the main episodes of the life of Christ, such as the Annunciation, Mary's pregnancy, the birth of Christ, the Crucifixion, the first bathing of Christ, Mary enthroned with the Christ

Child and the Angel announcing the Resurrection of Christ. On the west side of the main corridor we see, standing from the entrance, a procession of female martyr saints and the martyrdom of the protomartyrs Laurence and Stephen.

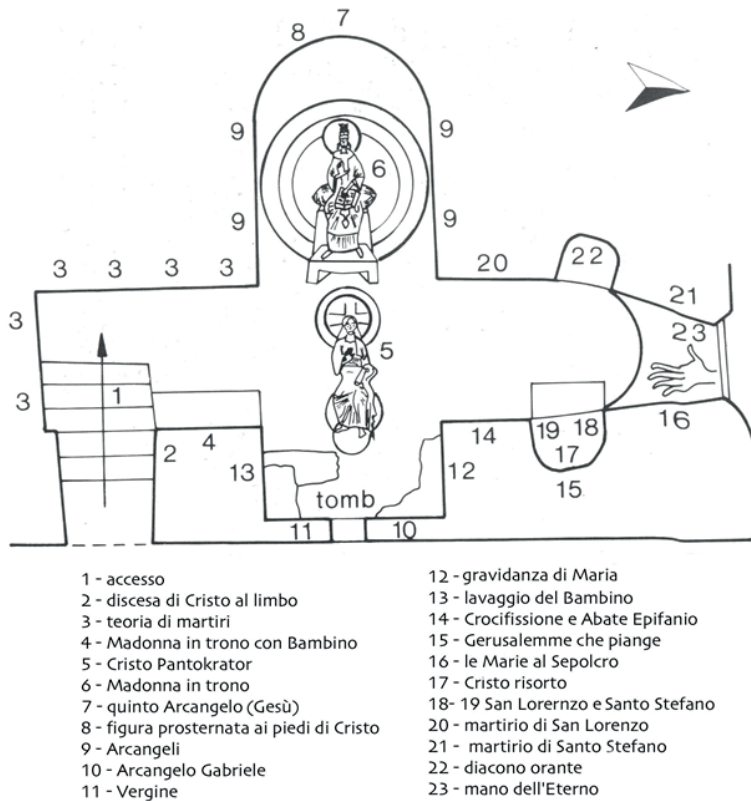


fig. 5.1. scheme of the frescoes

In the apse we find the four archangels introducing the Second Coming of Christ, as imagined in the Apocalypse of St. John, ready to cast his final judgement over mankind above him, Mary enthroned holding an open

book bearing the first words of the *Magnificat*, a song celebrating her pregnancy. At the center of the vaulting, Jesus Christ is represented as *Pantokrator*, the Lord of the Universe, setting on a blue globe, the world.

The portrait of abbot Epyphanius (fig. 5.2), at the foot of the Holy Cross, allows to date the entire cycle to the period between AD 824 and AD 842, when he was at the head of the monastic community.



fig. 5.2 Abbot Epyphanius

6. THE “SOUTH CHURCH” AND THE LATE ROMAN CEMETERY

THE LATE ANTIQUE PERIOD

The so-called South Church was built in the early middle ages above the remains of Roman buildings. These had been reused as a burial ground between the 5th and the 6th-century AD (fig. 6.1)

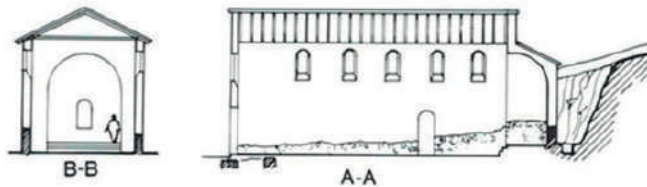


Fig. 6.1 the South Church

The church was erected the third quarter of the 8th-century AD and then heavily transformed in Carolingian times, and may have been dedicated to Virgin Mary. Its apse hosted a painted altar, whose reconstruction is now on display at the Archaeological Museum in Venafrò (fig. 6.2)

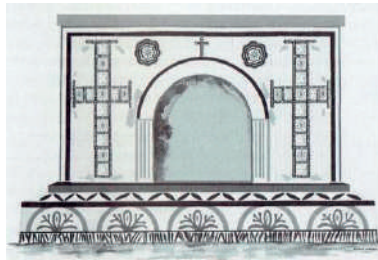


fig. 6.2 Altar of the South Church

THE CAROLINGIAN PERIOD

It originally consisted of a single-apse hall, but at the beginning of the 9th-century it was transformed into a two-storied building, with an hall on the upper floor and the lower floor partitioned into smaller spaces and a corridor linking to the Church of Epiphanius.

Three 9th-century burials (no longer visible) were discovered in the corridor, richly painted in the inside.

7. THE GARDEN COURT AND THE GUESTS' LOUNGE

THE GARDEN COURT

The Garden Court is an open space located between the South Church and the Monastic refectory. The northern and eastern sides were covered by a portico,

whose roof was supported by reused Roman column shafts and bases (fig. 7.1).



fig. 7.1 Corte a giardino

THE MARBLE VASE

The central garden was embellished by an enormous white marble vase dating from the 2nd- century AD, decorated with Dionysian motifs (fig. 7.2).

THE DECORATION

The porticated wings were paved with tiles and the walls were decorated with frescoes with *trompe-l'oeil* motifs of columns and plants which unfortunately are no longer visible.

THE RELATED BUILDINGS

Behind the refectory, towards the river, there was another room, also accessible from the wooden pier built along the river, used perhaps as a lounge room for distinguished guests.



fig. 7.2 The marble vase

8. THE WOODEN PIER AND THE “PONTE DELLA ZINGARA”

THE “PONTE DELLA ZINGARA”

The "Ponte della Zingara" (Gipsy's Bridge), is a single arcade bridge built in the Late Middle Ages or in Early Modern times in order to connect the two sides of the Volturno. When it was erected the monastic buildings had already ceased to exist for a long time.

THE WOODEN PIER

In the 9th Century a complex system of wooden piers made of oak and chestnut timber was built before the buildings facing the river, in order to help people crossing the river and enter the monastic complex. These structures, unfortunately not visible anymore, have represented one of the most surprising discoveries made throughout the excavations at San Vincenzo al Volturno.

THE ENTRANCE CORRIDOR

The wooden pier allowed entering a corridor that, flanking the South Church on the one side and the Garden Court on the other, reached the inner claustral spaces. The corridor was wholly paved with tiles, many of which are still preserved in situ.

9. THE KITCHEN AND THE REFECTORY

THE MONASTIC KITCHEN

The kitchen of the 9th-century abbey was divided into two rooms: one to the north where the ovens and the fireplace were located; another, to the south, used perhaps as a place for storing vessels and tools.

The room to the north has a square plan and was covered by a wooden roof supported by two pillars, a marble column shaft and a timber beam. Through the room passed a small drain, originally covered with wooden planks (fig. 8.1) .

The actual kitchen is a nearly square space, originally paved with tiles, later covered with an earthen floor. The north side was occupied by four ovens which heated a surface, now lost, where food was cooked.

Behind it, stands a Roman stone "*mensa ponderaria*", a table with holes of four measures, used to calculate amounts of food to be cooked. The southwest corner has a vast fireplace, paved with tiles. Along the north wall there is a big drain used to throw food remains into the river.

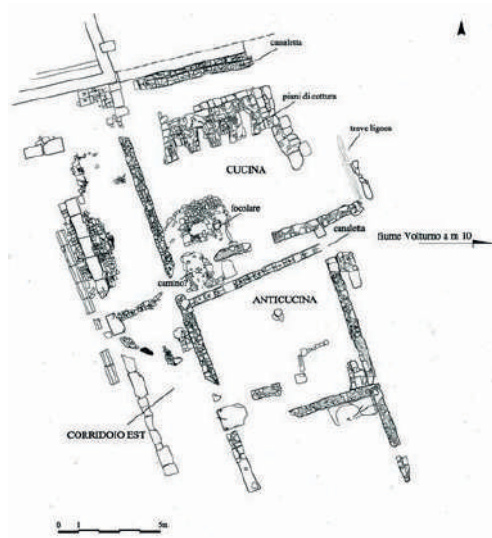


fig. 8.1 Kitchen environment

THE REFECTORY

The Monastic refectory, dating as well to the 9th-century, is a rectangular building 31 meters long and 11 meters wide. The inside was divided into two aisles by a range of columns supporting a pitched roof. Along the walls, and among the central columns a bench was built to allow some 300 monks to sit down and have their meals.

The refectory still keeps in situ a large part of its original tile floor, a feature unique in Europe. At the southwest corner rose a pulpit, from where the brother in charge entertained the community during the meal, reading passages from the Bible or from the Church Fathers.



fig. 8.3 Reconstruction of the refectory

10. THE MAIN CLOISTER – THE “LAVATORIUM” – THE HALL OF THE PROPHETS

THE LAVATORIUM

The Lavatorium, built in the 9th-century, is a building with a central plan and a polygonal perimeter of 16 sides. It was used as a collective washroom where monks could clean before going to the Refectory.

The inside of the building was originally paved with tiles, and the roofing, whose top was held by a central stone pillar, was presumably made of timber and thatch (fig. 9.1).

Along the inner perimeter of the Lavatorium ran a water channel linked to a pipe which brought running water from the hill. Outside the building, along its south side, ran another water channel which brought water right into the kitchen area.



fig. 9.1 Reconstruction of the lavatorium and the corridor

THE CLOISTER

The Lavatorium was located in the northernmost corner of a vast open area, flanked by porticoed corridors that linked together the different groups of monastic buildings and spread over the flat area between the hill and the river. The corridors were paved with tiles and their inner walls were apparently decorated with frescoes.

THE PROPHET'S HALL

Placed at the north-western end of the Cloister, this room allowed to proceed towards the Refectory or the monastery's entrance along the river. Its side walls were lavishly frescoed, and along them ran a stone bench. The benches were decorated with geometrical motifs, whereas the lower part of the walls was decorated with panels painted to look like marble. The upper part of the two side walls were painted with series of Prophets, slightly smaller than life-size (fig. 9.2).



fig. 9.2 Reconstruction of the prophet's hall

11. THE “BASILICA MAIOR” – A GENERAL OVERVIEW

THE CONSTRUCTION

The Basilica Maior, dedicated to Saint Vincent, was built at the beginning of the 9th-century, by Abbot Joshua (792-817). Before it was constructed, part of the hill side had to be removed, and a podium was raised at the eastern end of the area where the church was to be built. The church was internally divided into a main nave more than 15 meters wide and two aisles, both some 6,5 meters wide. Each of them ended with an apse. The whole length of the building was 65 meters and it rose to a maximum height of 21 meters. The building had no entrance from the front in 9th-century, as it was used as a builders' yard for much of this period. The main entrance was thus on the northern side, exactly midway between the facade and the presbytery.



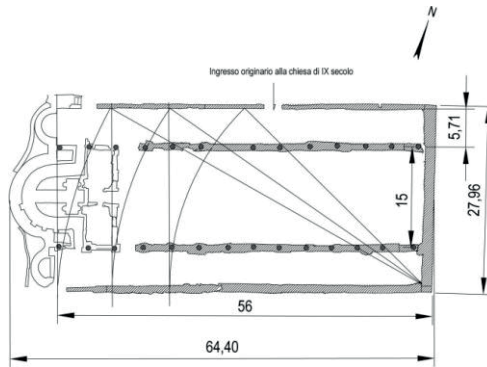
fig. 10.1 La Basilica maior – l'atrio

THE DISTRUCTION

The church suffered severe damage during the Arab attack of 881 and the subsequent abandon of the abbey by the monastic community.

THE RECONSTRUCTION

At the dawn of the 11th-century, the church underwent extensive reconstruction, including the building of a square atrium and a monumental staircase allowing entrance from the front. During the rule of Abbot Ilarius (1011-1044), work was completed with the building of a high tower, flanked by two lower ones, against the church facade wall, following the fashion of contemporary German church architecture (fig. 10.1). In the same period a cloister was built on the southern side of the church, together with a range of buildings for the monastic community.



10.2 Basilica maior

BASILICA MAIOR: THE ATRIUM

The church Atrium, built over a podium some four meters high, was planned as a square area surrounded by four porticated wings, with each side 28 meters long. It was erected between the end of the 10-th century and the beginning of the 11-th, at the same time that a door was cut into the church façade (fig. 10.2).

THE BURIALS

The western wing, by the church entrance, hosted a series of burials for the dead members of the monastic community. The burials were usually placed one meter below ground level for hygienic reasons.

11. BASILICA MAIOR – THE INSIDE AND THE CHAPEL OF ST. RESTITUTA

BASILICA MAIOR: THE NAVE AND THE AISLES

The inside of the Basilica Maior was partitioned into a main nave and two aisles by two colonnades of reused Roman granite columns. Each aisle, as well as the main nave, terminated with an apse. At half the length of the northern wall one can find the original entrance to the church used in the 9th century.

THE CHURCH FLOOR

The church floor was made of marble *tesserae* laid in geometric motifs. The marble *tesserae*, like the columns, were taken from abandoned Roman building. The best-preserved stretch of marble paving is located in the north aisle, and it belongs to the restorations made in the 11th-century to the original flooring of the 9th-century.

THE FRESCOES

The church walls were originally frescoed, though very little remains now; there are little fragments still *in situ* towards the western end of the northern aisle. Nonetheless, many fragments of painted plaster were found during the excavations that have allowed to establish the presence of a huge figure of Christ in Majesty in the main apse and scenes from the New Testament on the nave walls. Portraits of abbots of the *vulturense* community had been painted on the aisle walls.

It is believed that the church received light from a range of Windows opening in the main nave, above the colonnade.

THE CHAPEL OF ST. RESTITUTA

The Chapel of St. Restituta was built towards the end of the 11th-century. A section of the northern wall of the Basilica Maior was used as its facade; the inside is divided into a main nave flanked by two aisles, each one ending with a shallow apse. Two ranges of reused Roman columns divided the main nave from the aisles. A small porch was erected before the door, reusing what was the main side entrance of the *Basilica Maior* in the 9th-century.

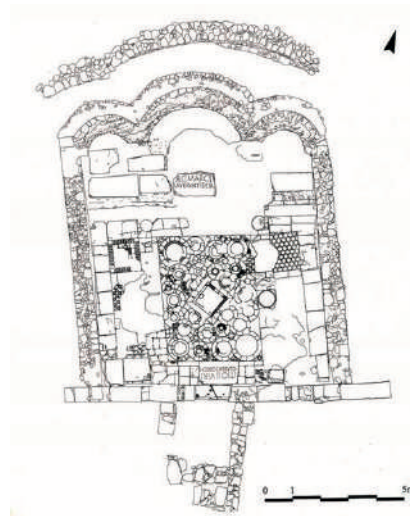


fig. 11.1 Cappella di Santa Restituta – la pavimentazione

The main feature of the structure is the splendid *opus sectile* floor, made of multicolored marble *tesserae*. The layout of the floor is extremely complicated and it

consists of 24 interlaced discs disposed around a central lozenge. The floor fabric is cut with great precision and is the result of the work of extremely experienced masters, perhaps of Byzantine origin (fig. 11.1).

On the walls can be seen remains of a very elegant painted decoration, with fantastic figures depicted inside interlaced circles.

12. BASILICA MAIOR – JOSHUA'S CRYPT

THE STRUCTURE

The annular crypt, built under Abbot Joshua (792-817), is partially underground, placed right under the presbytery (fig. 12.1).

It consists of a curved corridor that follows the profile of the main apse, connected with another corridor stretching from the vertex of the apse to a cross-shaped room, located under the main altar, where relics of holy bodies were preserved. Among these relics, the most venerated were those of St. Vincent, to whom the abbey was dedicated. They were probably kept into a precious Roman reused sarcophagus.



fig. 12.1 La Cripta di Giosuè

THE FRESCOES

The crypt walls were entirely painted with frescoes, of which a large part remains. Two niches in the cross-shaped central room each bear the portrait of an abbot. The two figures, slightly bigger than life-size, are represented frontally, dressed with the typical Benedictine black habit, the two hands open in the attitude of prayer. The heads are crowned by the so-called square halo, meaning that the portraits were taken from life.

Along the corridors, we find panels bearing all sorts of geometrical multicolored decorations, such as lozenges, chevrons, discs and stars, somehow recalling those existing in the marble flooring of the church.

13. THE WORKSHOP AND THE MONUMENTAL STAIRCASE TO THE BASILICA

THE MONUMENTAL STAIRCASE

In the 11th-century, before the atrium, a further projecting architectural element was built, consisting of a monumental staircase, linking the atrium itself with the area towards the River Volturno.

The first step of the staircase is still in situ, and the remains of two vaulted corridors can still be seen, linking the northern to the southern side of the main church.

THE WORKSHOPS

These 11th-century structures are built above an area occupied in the 9th-century by a series of specialized workshops, destroyed in the Arab attack of 881.

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The Benedictine complex of San Vincenzo al Volturno is the largest and best preserved early medieval monastic sites in Europe.

1. Ponte della Zingara (the Gypsy bridge, XVII century)
2. Timber wharves (IX century)
3. Entrance corridor (South church)
4. North Church or Church of Epiphanius
5. Crypt of Epiphanius (early IX century)
6. South church or San Vincenzo Minore (late VIII century)
7. Courtyard and garden
8. Vestibule
9. Hall of the Prophets (early century)
10. Refectory
11. West corridor between San Vincenzo Minore and San Vincenzo Maggiore
12. Lavatorium - collective washroom
13. Monastic kitchens (active in IX century).
14. Basilica of San Vincenzo Maggiore (consecrated in 808)
15. Chapel of Santa Restituta (late XI century)
16. Metal, brick/tile and glass making workshops

