

# SAN VINCENZO AL VOLTURNO

## THE MONUMENTAL COMPLEX

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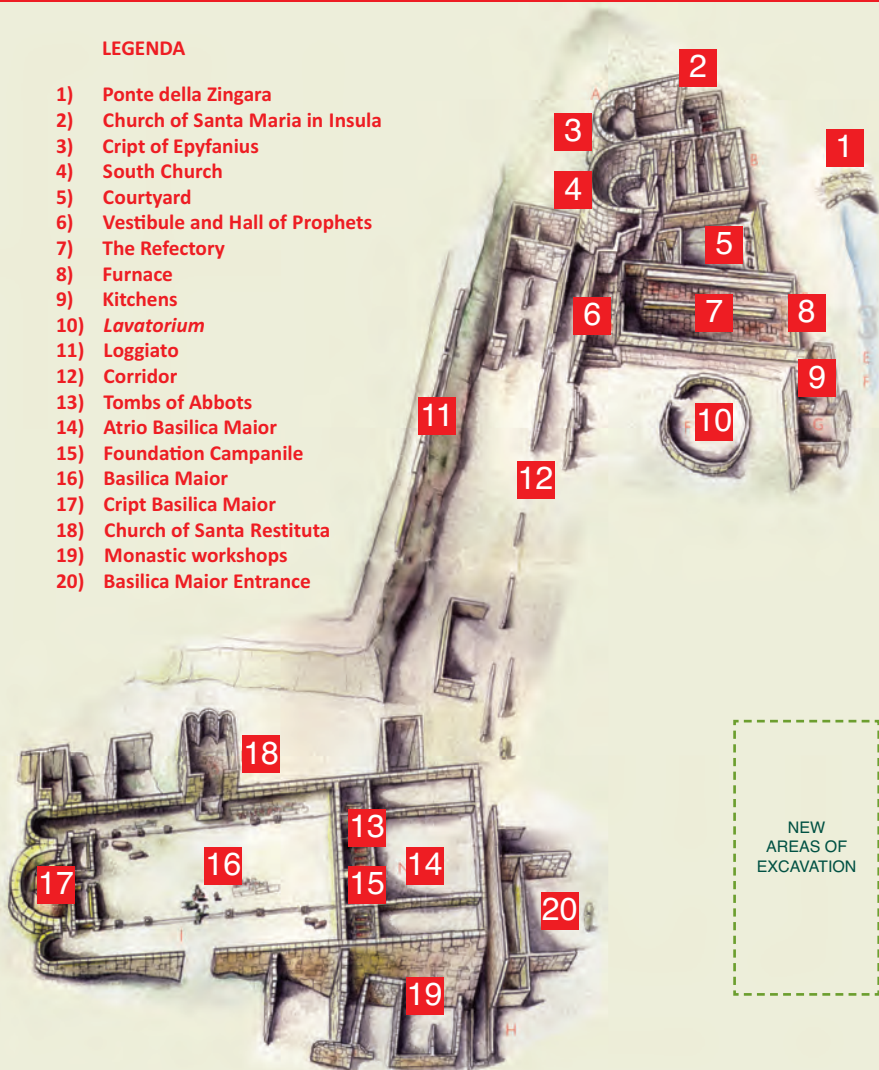


CAMERA DI COMMERCIO  
DEL MOLISE



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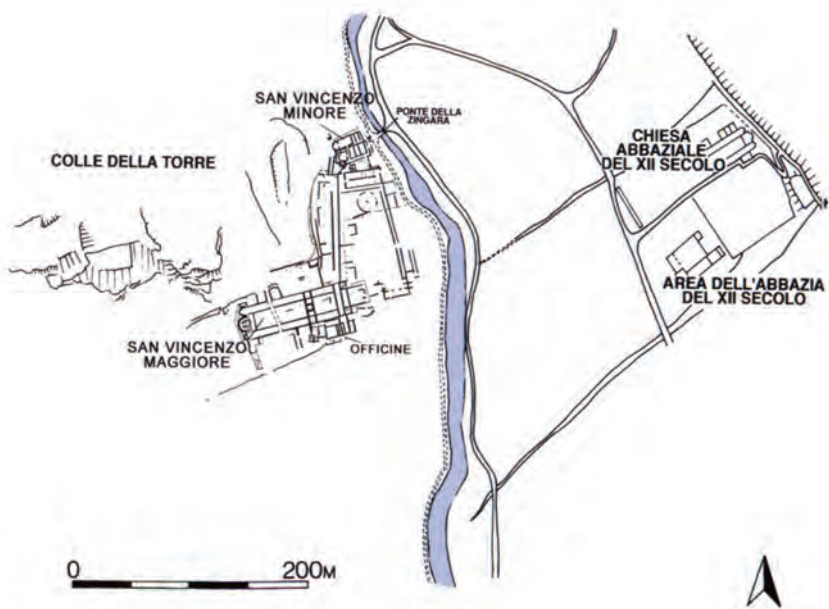
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## SAN VINCENZO BY THE SPRINGS OF THE VOLTURNO RIVER

The Abbey of San Vincenzo al Volturno was founded in 703 AD by three young monks (Paldo, Taso, Tato) from Benevento, who perhaps settled by the late Roman church called San Vincenzo Minore: during the first 80 years it developed under the protection of the Longobard duchy of Benevento, then its rise continued under the protection of the Franco-Carolingian Empire. Under the rule of Ambrosius Autpert (abbot in 777-778) it became one of the most prominent European Benedictine monasteries; with Charlemagne, placed as it is on the southern border of the Carolingian empire, receives protection and privileges, including that of immunity, and the right to the free election of the abbot (787). In the Carolingian age, the abbots Joshua (792-817), Talaricus (817-823) and Epyphanus (824-842) completed the development and embellishment of the complex, transforming it into a monastic city on the left bank of the Volturno, where still today it is possible to

admire the imposing remains of the Basilica of San Vincenzo Maggiore and the extraordinary frescoes of the Crypt of Epyphanus. Because of its riches, in 881 the Abbey was attacked, plundered and destroyed by the Saracens. Rebuilt after 913, as of year ca. 980 it promoted the birth of a series of small human settlements in the neighbouring area, which will give rise to the nowadays communes of the upper Volturno valley. Faced with the growing perils of the local feudal lords, the Abbey was transferred and rebuilt to its current location, more secure, and re-consecrated in 1115 by Pope Pasquale II. In 1139, the most insidious attack came from Roger II, king of the Normans who, seeing that the monks refused to appoint a trusted abbot, deprived the Abbey of its treasures and authority, making it pay its autonomy and loyalty to the Church of Rome.

*Below: Illumination from the Chronicon (BAV, Barb. Lat. 2724, c35v): the abbot Thomas of Morienne shows the three Beneventan princes the way to their final destination in Molise. Beside: Tremissis, coin of the Lombard period - 750 AD. On the opposite page: The Rocchetta plain: in evidence, the two archaeological areas and, at the bottom, their plan.*



## ITINERARY IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AREA

### Ponte della Zingara

Is a bridge made of a single arch m. 5,30 wide, resting on shoulders built with large travertine blocks, probably connected to a system of stone quays that delimited the course of the river. All the adjacent works that completed it have disappeared, concealed by the successive spaces and by the road that runs along the right bank of the Volturno. The structure now appears to have been altered by recent interventions on extrados asphalt. Its dating is certainly later than the early Middle Ages, since its foundations were built over the collapse of the monastic buildings in origin overlooking the river, which had been destroyed in 881. Once over the bridge, you enter the archaeological area and, in particular, the group of buildings gravitating around the "Southern Church" and the "North Church".

*On this page, below: The Ponte della Zingara in a current photo and one of the early twentieth century (photo Trombetta). Beside: External view of the Northern Church or of Epiphanius.*



### Church of Santa Maria in Insula

The Church of Epyphanus or "Chiesa Nord" is a small religious building (11.00 m long and 6.50 approximately wide) consisting in a single-nave hall, originally covered with a trussed roof, ending in the west in an highly elevated apse (about 1.50 m above the floor of the nave) and a trilobate presbitery. The facade of the building was preceded by a narthex, in which some burials were obtained. In this form the building dates back to the interventions made during the abbey of Epyphanus (824-842), since they are connected to the construction of the Crypt below the presbitery, certainly datable to that moment.



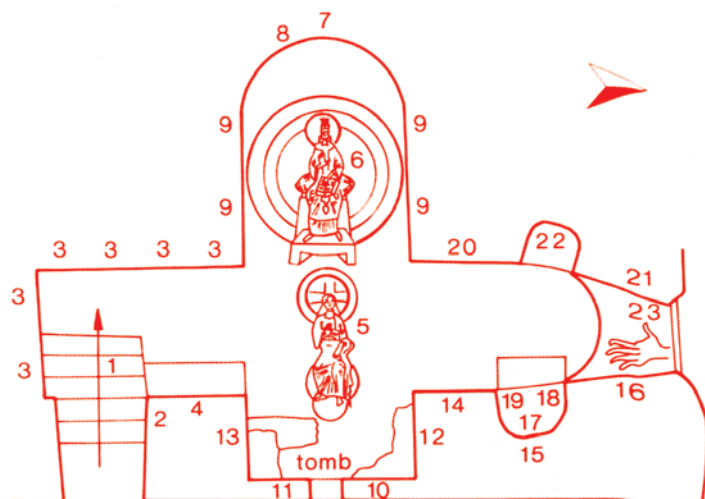
## The Crypt of Epyphanus

The monument associated with the name of abbot Epyphanus, is the frescoed crypt made in the "North Church". However famous, in origin it was only one of the many new constructions elevated in this period in the northern part of the monastery. The Crypt and the sanctuary above were built simultaneously. The first seems to have been conceived as a funerary chapel for a rich patron of the monastery: his burial must have been placed under a small *fenestella confessionis*, a narrow window through which the inside of the crypt could be looked at from the church nave. Above, in the sanctuary, an elegant triconch was inserted in the pre-existing Late Antique apse. The nave, with its decorative scheme dating back to the 9th century, would seem to have remained unchanged, but in front of the church an atrium was built in which a



small cemetery was inserted. The reading of the frescoes executed in the Crypt is something very complex. According to the overall sense of the representation, the whole cycle of frescoes is permeated by the profound influence that the abbot Ambrosius Autpert and his studies on the Apocalypse of St. John had on the figure of Virgin Mary. The window located opposite to the entrance is the only source of natural light inside this space. Above

*On this page, below: Plan with the position of the figurative scenes in the Epiphanius Crypt. Above: View of the Crypt in a 60s photo of the 20th century.*



- |   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1 - accesso                               | 12 - gravidanza di Maria            |
| 2 - discesa di Cristo al limbo            | 13 - lavaggio del Bambino           |
| 3 - teonia di martiri                     | 14 - Crocifissione e Abate Epifanio |
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| 5 - Cristo Pantokrator                    | 16 - le Marie al Sepolcro           |
| 6 - Madonna in trono                      | 17 - Cristo risorto                 |
| 7 - S. Arcangelo (Gesù)                   | 18-19 San Lorenzo e Santo Stefano   |
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| 9 - Arcangeli                             | 21 - martirio di santo Stefano      |
| 10 - Arcangelo Gabriele                   | 22 - diacono orante                 |
| 11 - Vergine                              | 23 - mano dell'Eterno               |







*On this page, from top to bottom: Window opposite the entrance; the hand of the Eternal Father; the Christ Pantokrator; Mary's Pregnancy. On the side: Crucifixion with Epyphanius.*

this opening, an extended hand, intended to be that of God, alludes to the supernatural origin of this light and accentuates its power. By tearing the darkness of the Crypt, which represents those of the human soul before the mystery of death, it symbolizes the revelation of Truth. On the beam of light is Christ seated on a throne corresponding to the globe, as he is portrayed as Pantokrator, i.e. the Lord who rules everything. He is placed at the

crossroads between the wall towards the nave, where the mystery of the Incarnation is represented, and the wall towards the apse, where everything ends in a synthetic, but explicit allusion to the day of the Last Judgment. A few, symbolic scenes of the life of Christ are pictured, emphasizing the role of the Virgin as the medium through which the Son became human and came to announce the salvation. The Crucifixion, when Christ's earthly experience ends, is also the moment when whomever believed in Him, gathers revelation and bears witness to it. This aspect is deepened in the sequence on the opposite wall, where the sacrifice of the



Roman Protomartyrs Lawrence and Stephen is represented. In their testimony, they reach the extreme sacrifice of themselves, which is immediately transformed into a new life of eternal glory and bliss from God. In the representation of the martyrdom of Lawrence, the death of the Saint is portrayed in the moment when the Angel sent from God who picks up his soul. On the other side of the apse, the procession of female Martyrs carrying the crown in their hands, symbol of the extreme sacrifice, represents the eternal sharing of the glory of the Lord by those who have given witness to it. In the apse the moment of the end of days is represented through brief but intense allusions. The four Archangels (Michael, Raphael, Gabriel and Uriel), after having stopped the winds and extinguished the stars, whose

light is symbolically enclosed in globes, witness the coming, from the West, of the Fifth Angel. He is none other than Christ himself, who came to cast the Final Judgment on humans, choosing the just and the damned. The Virgin is in an intermediate position - an instrument of mediation on behalf of the human race - between the Christ Pantokrator and the Christ Judge. Whoever had been buried in the Crypt, on the day of the final awakening, would therefore have symbolically found in front of him the image of the One who, raising from the West,

*On this page, above: Scenes depicting the Martyrdom of Saints Lorenzo and Stefano. Below: Theory of Holy Martyrs. On the side, above: The so-called "Quinto Angelo" and the Madonna in Throne.*





would come to judge him. It is particularly difficult to offer a stylistic evaluation of these frescoes, given that they constitute one of the few surviving testimonies of a certain consistency in Italian painting before the year one thousand. However, the progress of the studies has revealed an affinity of these elegant paintings with the art of the Lombard courts during the mature eighth century. Comparisons have been proposed with San Salvatore in Brescia, with Santa Sofia and with the Cathedral in Benevento, with the temple of Clitunno near Spoleto and with the small temple of Seppannibale near Fasano (BR). For over a century, the Crypt has been the only evidence of the splendor reached by the vulturinese monastery. The cycle of frescoes it shelters is therefore one of the few surviving examples of Italian painting prior to the year 1000:

*«The majesty of the representations [...] has nothing of the ionic fixity, always too abstract and captious, of the art of Byzantium. [...] The beauty of the Virgin Queen, in order not to distance us from this stu-*

*pendous image-guide, has always such circumstantial traits that one could say it is Asian, even Iranian; an unparalleled specimen, even under anthropological respect, from the same human lineage from which Sem, the great Jews of the Bible, emerged.»*

• F. Bologna - *La pittura dalle origini*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1978, pp. 25-26.

*«The crucifixion has peculiar characteristics: the Christ is clean shaven, the hands fold the thumb over the nails, the loincloth to the waist is very long and passes on the knee: there are anticipations on the successive iconographic developments of the Christ on the cross, while in the shaved face c "It is an unusual fusion of the Cristo Emanuel and the Cristo Cristo type»*

• C. Brandi - *Disegno della pittura italiana*, Torino, Einaudi, 1980, pp. 51-53.

*Below: The archangel Raphael present in the Crypt of Epiphanius. On the next page: The Christ of the Resurrection bearing the open book: EGO SUM DEUS ABRAHAM.*





Ω

EGO AB  
SVM  
ES

### South Church

At the end of the corridor, turning to the right, you go through a passage that cuts, in the sense of length, a building known as the "South Church". During the excavations of the 1980s, it was called "San Vincenzo Minore", considering it as the first abbey church of the monastery, but today this hypothesis can no longer be held true, while it seems more likely that it is to be identified to the Church of Santa Maria *iuxta flumen Volturnum*, built by the abbot Paul I in the 80s of the 8th century.

*Below: The apse of San Vincenzo Minore. Below: Reconstruction of the garden courtyard; in the center: a large marble vase from the end of the 2nd-beginning of the 3rd century AD*

### Courtyard

The garden courtyard is a space with a rectangular plan of 12.65 m by 9.00 m. The northern side, the one from which one enters, and the eastern side, towards the river, are covered by a portico, while the rest of the room was open and embellished by a large marble vase from the end of the 2nd-beginning of the 3rd century AD, placed in its centre and decorated with Dionysiac motifs. The portico was supported by columns, capitals and ancient bases of different origin, as it was typical in the buildings of the medieval period.

### Vestibule and Hall of Prophets

It is a small irregularly shaped room that served as a disengagement towards two different paths: one that led to the upper



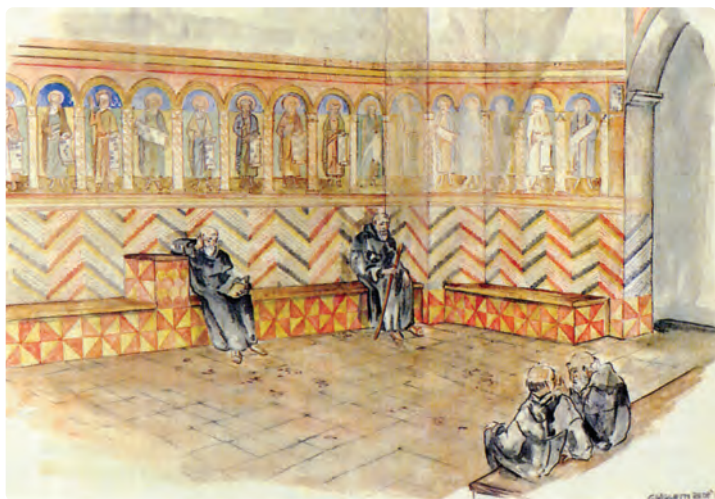


floor of the South Church via a now lost staircase; the other which, through the door opposite to the entrance, led into the Hall of the Prophets and, from here, into the Refectory or into the cloistered buildings. These two spaces, were paved with a careful selection of floor tiles and their walls were richly frescoed.

*Above: View of the so-called "Hall of the Prophets" with the original seats and floors. Below: Reconstructive drawing of the environment with the walls frescoed by effigies of saints at natural height. (C. Sassetti)*

### **The Refectory**

From the Hall of the Prophets, passing an open door on the east wall, one enters the great monastic Refectory. It is a large rectangular room, 31.00 m long and 11.00 m wide. Today is the second largest building of the ancient monastic complex brought to light after the Basilica Maggiore. The large entrance (1.90 m wide) consists of a monolithic threshold in white marble, dating from Roman times, and is architecturally emphasized by two large slabs, in local limestone, recovered from a Roman





funerary monument of the II century. B.C. The one on the left is decorated with a pilaster that culminates in a Corinthian capital, placed upside down and further embellished by a trunk of a scaled column - always in limestone - also placed in the same position and datable to the first century. B.C.

### **Lavatorium, Loggiato and Corridor**

By the corridor flanking the Refectory there is a polygonal structure with 16 sides with a diameter of approximately 14.80 meters. This building has been interpreted as the collective lavatory of the monks or lavatorium. In fact, it is equipped with a water pipe connected to the



### **Kitchens and Furnace**

The kitchens of the Monastery are a series of rooms that flank the side in the direction of the river, which came into operation during the 9th century. The area has undergone numerous renovations and the one brought to light today is the aspect it had acquired at the end of the 9th century. The complex was divided into two areas: the kitchen itself with huge wood-burning kilns for cooking and an adjoining room that was to serve as storage space for food and vessels.

remains of an internal channel that ran along the perimeter of the structure. In it flowed the water introduced by another channel descending from the hill, unfortunately largely destroyed by the demolition activities that affected the area upstream of the same lavatorium. Continuing along the path, it is possible to observe the remains of a loggia that connected the two sides of the monastery

*On this page, from top to bottom: Floor and kitchen of the refectory. On the next page: View of the Lavatorium and its hypothetical reconstruction. (Drawing S. Carracillo)*





### Tombs of the Abbots, Foundation Campanile and Atrio Basilica Maior

Leaning against the Basilica, the atrium was a monumental building with a square plan of 28 meters on each side, erected above a podium about 4.00 m high. The atrium consists of an open space in the center, of about 19.50 m by 14.25 on the side, surrounded by three wings of arcades on the west, south and north sides, to which a fourth on the east side was probably added, sitting above the vaulted corridor that preceded the

structures of the forepart. Under the abbot Hilarius (1011-1045), changes are made that affected its western part, closer to the facade. A tall tower was then built in front of the entrance to the church, probably with the function of a bell tower; its impressive foundations, over a meter and a half thick, are still clearly visible. They incorporate some burials, damaging them, and bits of Roman sculptures are reused inside them.

*On this page: Avancorpo and atrium of the Basilica Maior. Below: Abbot's Tomb placed at the entrance of the church. On the next page, above: Interior of the Basilica with the modern wooden roof of the apses. Below: Reconstructive design of the church and the Cosmatesque floor. (Drawing S. Carracillo)*



### Basilica Maior and Cripta

The Basilica has a nave and two aisles, each completed by an apse, and has no transept. Unlike most medieval churches, it has a façade facing east and the apses looking west, thus reproducing the orientation of the ancient early Christian basilicas in Rome. The building has a total length of 64.40 m, including the rope of the main apse which descends to m. 57.44, excluding the latter. From the

apse area of the two side aisles one can access the annular crypt. It is a partially subterranean space, placed under the presbytery of the church, consisting of a corridor with a curved course that follows the profile of the central apse, covered by a vault with flat stone slabs. Along the walls of these corridors and of that leading into the central chamber, one can see a rich panoply of painted decorations with geometric motifs.







### Church of Santa Restituta

It is a building with three naves and three apses, almost square in plan. The plan, the interior decoration and above all its relationship with the structures of the Basilica suggest its foundation in the last quarter of the eleventh century, with restorations and additions that prolong its use even beyond the moment of permanent abandonment of the early medieval monastic complex, which occurred during the 12th century.



*On this page, above: Reconstruction drawing of the monastery in the 11th century (Dis. S. Caracillo); in the center and at the bottom: Detail of the floor in "opus sectile" and internal view of the church of Santa Restituta (XI century). On the previous page: Annular crypt of the Basilica Maior, paintings on the walls of the same and detail of a fresco depicting a praying abbot.*

### Monastic workshops

Back on the visit path, you can see the remains of a series of rooms arranged in sequence along an east-west axis. They were part of the monastic workshops of the 9th century, destroyed by the fire of 881 and then razed to the ground at the time of the construction of the atrium and the forepart of the Basilica, starting from the end of the tenth century.

*On the side: Remains of buildings used as workshops for glass and metal working.  
Below: The furnace for glass and bronze.  
Below: "Christ facing the window", glass panel of the 11th century*



**San Vincenzo Nuovo:  
the 12th century monastery**

On the left bank of the river, security becomes weaker and weaker, to the point of inducing the monks to move from one location to the other. The site is a sort of islet with three sides protected by river and canals and one by natural asperities. Furthermore, a high internal wall with 4 towers at the corners closes the monastery like a fortified citadel. The materials used come from the demolition of the abandoned monastery. The elaboration of the floors is very refined, of which remains that of a classroom next to the left aisle. The Basilica was consecrated by Pope Pasquale II in 1115; a chadter issued by the same pope with its own bubble subsequently links the Monastery to the Apostolic See, subtracting it from the jurisdiction of the local episcopate. The Norman king Roger II of Hauteville demanded instead that the new abbot be a person of his indication and to the refusal of the monks, always faithful only to the pope, Norman emisaries assaulted the monastery predicting him of goods (silver cases left for the Palace of Normans). The king himself excluded San Vincenzo from the list of the monasteries of his trust, while the feudal lords who had begun the assaults in the previous century contributed to determining their ruin. These episodes are followed by the long and slow agony of the monastery with its abandonment in the modern age.



*On this page: Central nave of the Basilica of San Vincenzo Nuovo (12th century); in the center: Detail of the remains of the refined floor in the Basilica; below: External view of the abbey church; in the foreground: The characteristic arches of the "Portico dei Pellegrini".*



## THE MONASTERY IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

For its rebirth it will be necessary to wait until 1990, when courageous Benedictine nuns from afar will give new life to the Rule with the rebuilt Basilica and the restored Palace in a corner of the original walls. The architects of this rebirth were Mother Miriam Benedict, Mother Agnes and Mother Filippa Kline Shaw, from the Regina Laudis Monastery in Connecticut (USA). On January 22, 2017, a new Benedictine community settled in San Vincenzo al Volturno from the Benedictine monastery of "Santa Maria delle Rose" in Sant'Angelo in Pontano (MC).

*On this page, from top to bottom: Mother Miriam Benedict and Mother Agnes Shaw, architects of the rebirth of the cenote coulturnus. Beside: Mother Salome Gomez, current prioress. Below: Today's monastic community of San Vincenzo al Volturno*



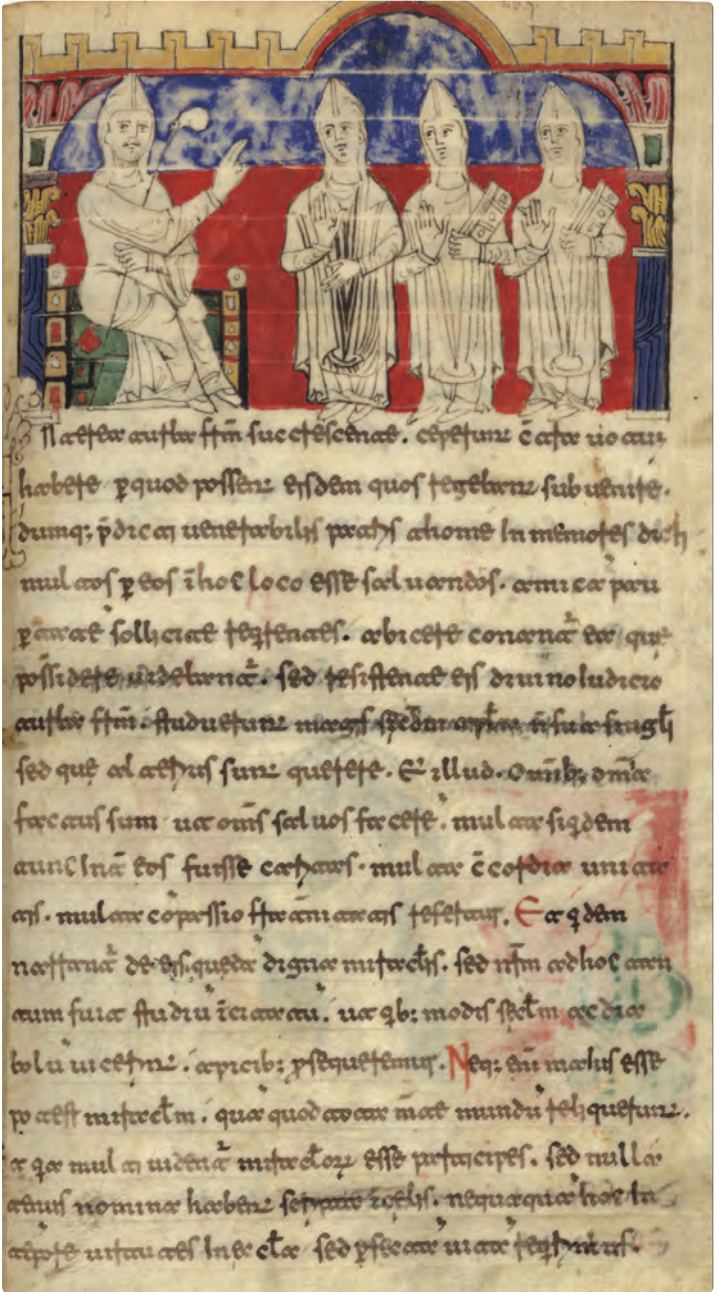


## THE CHRONICON VULTURNENSE

It dates back to the first half of the 12th century and was written by the monk Giovanni with the help of other brethren. It is a document that reconstructs the life of of San Vincenzo al Volturno since its foundation down to its displacement in the XII centuries, when the community moved to the new monastery on the right bank of the river. Preserved in the Vatican Library with the Barb signature. lat. 2724 and damaged by the passage of time and by its journey from one place to another over the centuries, the precious code was restored by the Vatican Library with the help of the Regional Institute for Historical Studies of Molise. The Chronicon remained in San Vincenzo until the second half of the sixteenth century when the librarian rev. Cesare Costa saved it when the monastic library fell into disrepair. Subsequently Camillo Caetani, commendatory abbot, took the manuscript to Rome where it eventually entered the library of cardinal Maffeo Barberini. When this fund was incorporated into the Vatican Library, the Chronicon Vulturnense became part of it. Dimensions: 32.6 x 19.5 cm; parchment sheets n. 341; Beninese type of Cassinese writing; finely decorated and richly illustrated with 37 miniatures, 2 graphics and 29 figures of Abbots..

*On this page, from the top: Cover of the Chronicon in Italian published by the Volturnia Edizioni in 2010. In the center and below: Miniatures taken from the Chronicon depicting the abbot Josue offering the Basilica Maior to San Vincenzo, and Paldo, Tato and Thasos leaving Benevento to go to Farfu.*



THE *CHRONICON VULTURNENSE*

Copy of an original page of the *Chronicon Vulturense*, 12th century illuminated codex preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Library of Rome.

## INFO E NUMERI UTILI

### Monumental Complex of San Vincenzo al Volturno

State Road 158, s.n.c.  
Frazione Cartiera  
of Castel San Vincenzo (Isernia)

The opening and closing hours of the archaeological area is subject to changes during the year. To be updated on visiting hours it is necessary to consult the site:

• [www.musei.molise.beniculturali.it](http://www.musei.molise.beniculturali.it)

send an e-mail to:

• [pm-mol@beniculturali.it](mailto:pm-mol@beniculturali.it)

call the number:

• +39 0874 1865234

Entrance ticket

Full price: € 5.00

Reduced: € 2.00

### Archaeological area guides

Me.MO Cantieri Culturali - Venafro  
[memoventafro@gmail.com](mailto:memoventafro@gmail.com)  
Tel. 389 2191032

### Visit Crypt Abate Epiphanius

According to the use and enhancement agreement stipulated between the Abbey of Montecassino - owner of the hypogeum - and the Director of the Molise Museum Complex, the Crypt is open according to the following schedule:  
from Tuesday to Saturday  
9.30 am - 11.00 am - 12.30 pm  
Sunday 9.30 am - 11.00 am - 12.30 pm -  
3.30 pm - 5.30 pm

Guided tours inside the Crypt are subject to mandatory booking and allowed only with personnel accredited by the Abbey of Montecassino and the Monastic Community. Photographs of the frescoes are not permitted without prior written permission. Maximum number of visitors per access: 5 + companion. Maximum time of stay: 6 minutes.

The maximum continuous opening time of the crypt is 45 minutes.

### For information and reservations

Tel. 333 6972803



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[www.sanvincenzoalvolturno.it](http://www.sanvincenzoalvolturno.it)



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