

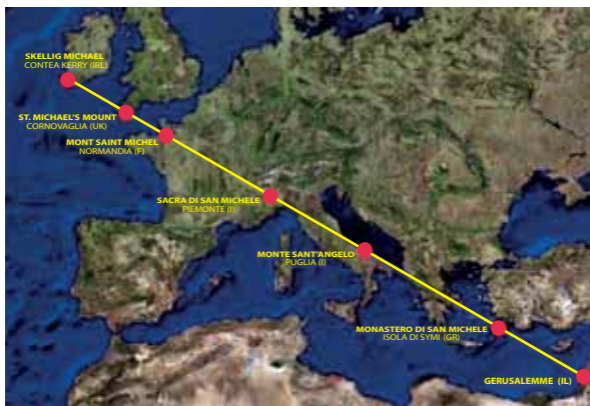


Sacra di San Michele

CULMINE VERTIGINOSAMENTE SANTO

C. Rebora





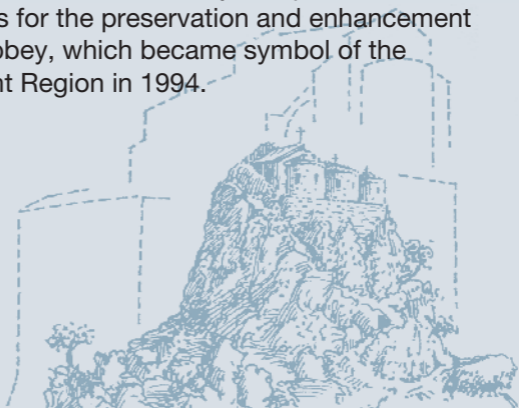
The Sacra di San Michele clings to the rocky summit of Mount Pirchiriano at 962 m (3,100 feet) above sea level, near the entrance to the Susa Valley: one of the routes which, since ancient times, has connected Italy to Northwest Europe. The Pirchiriano is one of the oldest places of worship dedicated to the Archangel Michael and it occupies the geographical centre between the Sanctuary of Monte Sant'Angelo in the Apulian Region and the Sanctuary of Mont Saint Michel in Normandy (France).



HISTORICAL NOTES

The abbey came into being between 983 and 987 with the donation made by Ugo of Montboissier, a wealthy French noble. It was built above and around three small pre-existing chapels, already dedicated to Saint Michael the Archangel.

Originally it was a Benedictine monastery which became, towards the 12th century, a spiritual, cultural and hospitality place for nobles and pilgrims from all over Europe. Decline started in the 14th century due to economic and political factors that culminated with the suppression of the Benedictine order, in 1622. During the following two centuries, neglect and looting reduced the buildings to partial ruin. Rescue came in 1836 with King Charles Albert of Savoy who called the Sacred Congregation founded by the great priest-philosopher Antonio Rosmini (Rovereto, 1798 - Stresa, 1855). The monument became property of the Italian State in 1866. Today, the Rosminian Fathers are still the custodians of the Sanctuary and promoters of initiatives for the preservation and enhancement of the abbey, which became symbol of the Piedmont Region in 1994.



FOUNDATION AND ENTRANCE

The Sacra di San Michele is one of the largest architectural and religious complexes of the Romanesque period in Europe, result of interventions and expansions developed over the centuries. The imposing facade (26 mt high – 86 feet), built in the first half of the 12th century, supports the eastern part of the church with the three green stone apses. The entrance portal, symbolically guarded by carved lions on the capitals of the jambs, marks the beginning of the physical and spiritual journey that leads to the church.



STAIRCASE OF THE DEAD

It is the space in which the powerful features of Romanesque architecture are most evident. Around the central pillar is built the Staircase of the Dead, a burial place for monks and benefactors of the abbey, as can be seen from the traces of frescoes under the large window. The wall on the right, in which there are two niches, was built to support the three primitive chapels, later integrated into the building and become underground places.



THE DOOR OF THE ZODIAC

Located at the top of the steep Staircase of the Dead, it is the work with the greatest artistic value of the abbey. It was built in the early decades of the 12th century by the architect and sculptor Maestro Nicolao. On the right jamb, rising, are carved the signs of the zodiac and on the left side the sixteen constellations.

On the inner side of the two jambs, there are decorations of flowers, animals and small human figures that symbolize the harmony of Creation. The capitals represent biblical subjects (such as Cain and Abel, Sansone and Dalila) and subjects typical of medieval iconography (women nursing snakes, some mermaids, hawks) symbols of sin.



THE FLYING BUTTRESSES

Beyond the Portal of the Zodiac is the last ramp to the church: it is a solemn green stone staircase, under the yoke of four impressive flying buttresses, result of the restoration work to consolidate the church, started at the end of the 19th century, under the direction of the architect Alfredo d'Andrade. The staircase leads to the elegant Romanesque portal of the church, formed by columns with floral capitals and protected by a drip tray that ends, on the right, with the head of a monk (on the opposite side the head of a young man, has been lost). The doors of walnut, donated by Carlo Felice of Savoy in 1826, show the weapons of St. Michael the Archangel and the devil in the shape of a snake with a human face.



THE CHURCH

It is partly built on the foundations (area of the presbytery) and partly on the mountain, whose summit is visible under the column nearest the tomb of Abbott William. Built in two times and modified over the centuries, it is the most magnificent result of the last restorations, completed in 1937, with the reconstruction of the central cross vault. The large pillars that separate the three naves and the 139 capitals, show the changing of the stylistic taste - from the Romanesque to the Gothic - in the long years of construction, from 1160 to 1230. The sculptures that frame the apse window, belong to the first period: The Virgin Mary, the Archangel Gabriel and the four prophets; while the frescoes that adorn the walls, date back to the early 16th century. The back part of the church - which belonged to an older building called "Old Choir" - houses some important paintings from the 16th and 17th centuries. The Triptych of Defendente Ferrari from 1520 stands out among all of them. The large stone sarcophagi, placed along the perimeter of the church, contain the remains of some members of the Savoy family, transferred in 1836 from the Cathedral of Turin by the will of King Carlo Alberto.



THE RUINS AND THE TOWER OF BEAUTIFUL ALDA

Only ruins now remain of the impressive monastery built between the 12th and 14th centuries to accommodate over 60 monks and it makes difficult to understand the location of the various monastic environments.

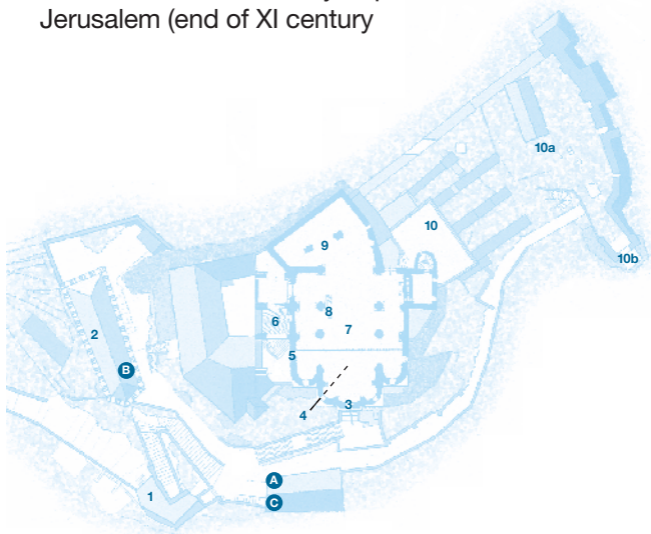
However, it has been partially saved from destruction (earthquakes, fires and looting), the angular construction called “Tower of the Beautiful Alda”. According to the legend, a beautiful girl, to run away from some soldiers, would have thrown herself from the tower of the monastery reaching unharmed the ground, through the intercession of the angels. For vanity and money, she attempted the flight a second time, but crashed on the rocks below.

The recent conservation work in this part of the abbey, have restored an icehouse, once used for storing food and a cistern for collecting rainwater.



SEPULCHRE OF THE MONKS

Situated 200m away from the Shrine, these remains of a Romanesque octagonal building are dedicated to the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem (end of XI century)



A→ Ticket office and sales point

B→ Meeting room

C→ Rest rooms/WC

1→ **IRON DOOR** Access to the abbey's sacred precincts

2→ **PILGRIM'S HALL** For receiving guests and pilgrims (XI-XII century). Now a conference room

- 3→ **BASEMENT AND ENTRANCE** The basement wall supports the church apses and culminates in the Loggia dei Viretti
- 4→ **GRAND STAIRCASE OF THE DEAD** A steep staircase from the entrance to the Zodiac Doorway
- 5→ **THE ZODIAC DOORWAY** Artwork by the sculptor Nicolao and local workers. (Beginning of the XII century)
- 6→ **ASCENT TO THE CHURCH** Under four flying buttresses (the work of Alfredo de Andrade from the end of the XIX century), a staircase leads up to the door of the church (first half of the XII century)
- 7→ **CHURCH** The architecture of the interior shows the transition between the Romanesque style towards the apse and the Gothic style of the arches towards the west side. This work dates from between the XII and XVII centuries
- 8→ **THE PRIMITIVE (OR EARLY) CHAPELS** These shrines, located under the church's floor, are the original focus of devotion to St. Michael. They were transformed into funerary chapels for certain members of the Savoy family in the XIX century.
- 9→ **OLD CHOIR** This area dating from the beginning of the XI century now contains frescos and paintings as, for example, Defendente Ferrari's Triptych and the Virgin Enthroned (beginning of the XVI century)
- 10→ **TERRACE** The Monks' Door (XIII century) leads to the terrace with views over the ruins of the new monastery (XII-XIV centuries) **(10a)**; as well as the Tower of Beautiful Alda **(10b)**; and an unfinished bell-tower (XIII century)



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