

The Abbey of Cantignano

A little jewel in the Lucca countryside



Badia di Cantignano is a village in the town of Capannori, in the province of Lucca. It is located at the entrance to the Vorno valley, at the foot of the Pisan mountains, about 4 km from Lucca. The word *badia* means abbey.

Since ancient times, the rural territory of Cantignano was important for Lucca's defense, as it guarded one of the roads which, passing through the *Valle Romana* or *Romagna* of Vorno and the Moriglione pass, reached the lower Valdarno, Volterra and Pisa regions. This road was actually a fork off the Roman road from Lucca to Cantignano. The Roman road came out of Porta S. Pietro di Lucca (then called Porta Pisana), continued towards the village of S. Salvatore in Silice where the Roman baths were located, crossed a branch of the Serchio (then called Ozzeri), and divided at the village of Trebbio (Trivium). While one branch went straight south towards S. Maria del Giudice, climbing to Dante's Pass, descending to *Acquae Pisanae* (Bagni di S. Giuliano) and reaching Pisa, the other turned left and passed through the locality of *Le Piastre*, crossing Cantignano and Vorno, to reach the Monti Pisani and Valdarno.

The link with the Roman era is still very much alive today, starting from the place-name, from Cantinius, a Roman colonist who for his military merits would have been assigned the lands now known as Badia di Cantignano. In the Roman imperial era, the nearby villages of Vorno, Guamo and Coselli were part of the Cantignano district, which, on the other hand, was given a name and importance only after the fall of the empire, at the time of the Lombards.

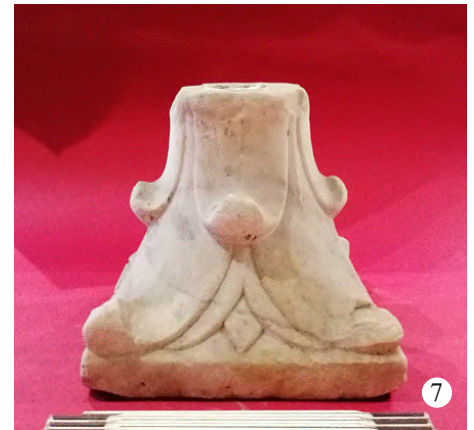
Traces of a thermal complex were uncovered during the excavations of 1965-66, in the area currently occupied by the church. These excavations were carried out at the behest of Don Pasquale Picchi, parish priest of Cantignano Abbey since 1957. These traces can be seen in the mosaic on the left transept door of the church, mosaic fragments found two meters below the presbytery, remains of Pompeian frescoes, church columns no doubt taken from the bath complex, as well as from thirteen unadorned tombs, of simple construction. The discovery of two caskets at the base of the old altar – one of lead containing a human heart, and one of stone, containing a wooden chalice and a seal –

has given rise to a series of hypotheses regarding the era of the aforementioned tombs and relics, which are still undated. In addition to the thermal baths, to the south of the convent the remains of a Roman aqueduct were found in 1836, and in 1969, a 120-meter long gallery connected to the aqueduct was found in the lock of the old abbey.

Another important time period for which evidence has been preserved is from when the Benedictine abbey was built, when Benedictine rule was spread through the work of the monks of Bobbio – together with the annexed church dedicated to San Salvatore, dating back to the 7th century. Traces of this period are preserved in the precious and rare apse decoration, datable to the first half of the 8th century, showing rare examples of geometric and phytomorphic decorations, and in the representation of a king and a queen attributable to Lombard iconography. In addition, parapets and marble columns from the quarries of Santa Maria del Giudice were found, enclosing the presbytery. The unique inlays with symbolic motifs are typical of the 8th century.

At the beginning of the 12th century, Cantignano Abbey was granted to the Camaldolese Order. Over the course of three centuries, from 1113 to 1433, the Camaldolese carried out a series of interventions, including the construction of the new convent and the new church. The Camaldolese – as the Benedictines had already done through reclamation and water canalization – dedicated themselves to land cultivation and forestry. This was the most important period for the abbey. It was surely a productive place; in fact, within the enclosure was a series of buildings intended for monastic life: bathhouses, artisan workshops, ovens, mills, etc.

In the second half of the 14th century a series of territorial wars led to the gradual abandonment and decline of the convent. It suffered extensive damage during the Pisan wars, so much so that its management was entrusted to a commendatory abbot. The Abbot Bartolomeo, canon of San Frediano di Lucca in 1401, carried out a series of restorations on the damaged buildings, as well as rebuilding and consecrating the new church, which was given the name of San Bartolomeo in addition to that of San Salvatore.



The splendid altarpiece by the Lucchese painter Agostino Marti, dating back to 1520, was commissioned by Abbot Silvestro Gigli. It depicts the Virgin and Child flanked by San Bartolomeo and San Martino. The church underwent other interventions in the 18th century, with the construction of the vaulted ceiling – still visible today – and of the façade, which was later joined by a portico.

The abbey complex also included the "Palace of the Hundred Windows" built by the Camaldolese abbot Traversari between 1434 and 1450. He decided to restore the ancient convent following the wars that had devastated it. The palace was given its name starting from the second half of the 16th century, when it became the property of Matteo Gigli, who sold it to Nicolao Franciotti in 1632. Franciotti in turn sold it to Alessandro and Pietro Massei, in 1642. In 1685, the palace passed into the hands of Bonviso Bonvisi, who married Bianca Teresa Massei, and then finally to their descendants, who lived there until the second half of the 19th century. At the end of the 19th century the building was used as a school, then later divided up among various owners.

Roman villa, the frescoes of the apse, the *plutei* (dividing screens), and the 8th century capitals.

In recent years, thanks to the interest of Tullio Della Longa and the Superintendency of Fine Arts, with the contribution of the Banca del Monte di Lucca Foundation, eight sundials have been found in the cloister. One has been restored and made functional.

Various initiatives are underway to enhance the abbey complex. Among these, an association named after Carlo Piaggia, a well-known explorer originally from Badia di Cantignano, has been set up. The association's primary task is that of making the historical and cultural heritage of the area better known, through thousands of activities and events. In addition, thanks to the contributions of the Cassa di Risparmio di Lucca Foundation, renovations are underway in the rectory, adjacent to the church. The idea is to transform it into a hospice for pilgrims. The parish priest is still looking for sponsors to complete the work, in order to offer travelers a refuge and a home where they can refresh themselves. Finally, thanks to the interest of the municipal administration of Capannori, Badia is part of the cross-border route of the Via di Santa Giulia and the Itinera Romanica.

– contributed by Don Emanuele Andreuccetti

Images:

1. Abbey of Cantignano. In the background the Pisan hills.
2. The columns of the Roman villa. In the background the painting by Agostino Marti.
3. The interior of the church.
4. Detail of frescoes from the Lombard era: royal head.
5. Mosaic remains from the Roman villa.
6. Fragments of plaster from the Pompeian era.
7. Capital from the 9th century.
8. Abbey of Cantignano. In the distance the bell towers of Lucca.



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