



ALONG THE MONK'S TRACK

Abbeys and hermitages amongst Orcia, Chiana and Amiata

From Montalcino



to S. Casciano dei Bagni

S. ANTIMO (Montalcino)

At Castelnuovo dell'Abate (Montalcino), in a small valley containing the tributary of the river Orcia, the Starcia, we find the Abbey of S. Antimo, an ancient Benedictine monastery. It was founded by the Benedictines in the Longobard era, on the site of a Roman imperial villa (there are original elements still remaining such as the Carolingian columns and on the north side a relief depicting a winged genius with cornucopia) and a posterior martyrdom dedicated to the saint. In the 9th century the monastery was already flourishing and very politically influential: the abbot of St. Anthony was a palatine count and a councilor of the crown. Nothing changed until the beginning of the 13th century, when the Sienese expansion began its decline. The abbey passed to the control of the Guglielmiti (a branch of the Benedictines) in 1291 and in 1462 it was suppressed by Pope Pius II. It was restored after the unification of Italy following centuries of abandonment and recently returned to the Olivetani (another branch of the same religious Order).

The church, built in the Lombard-Burgundian Romanesque style, dates back to the 12th century and was constructed using travertine and translucent alabaster onyx. The building has three aisles with an ambulatory and radial chapels. The unfinished salient façade is crowned by blind arcades and balanced by additional blind arches over some doorways; the portal has bas-reliefs and an inscription by Azzone Porcari, the monk-architect of the complex. Also notable are the half capitals with a double bodied monster and stylised lions, situated just inside the entry.

On the north side is a smaller portal with Lombard friezes with interlacing patterns. The mighty Lombard square bell tower has older bas-reliefs with geometric



motifs, weavers, monsters and a Byzantine *Theotókos* (“Mother of God”). The apsidioles of the half-circular corridor have shelves decorated with geometric and phytomorphic motifs or animal symbols of sin. To the south-east is the sacristy, which preserves the Carolingian sacristy and the underlying chapter hall (710-720), which cannot be visited.

The side aisles have vaulted ceilings; the central roof has wooden trusses and rises with three registers: at the bottom there are columns alternating with pillars supporting arches; in the middle band there is a matronaem; and at the top there is an upper level of arched windows.

Your visit starts from the right aisle. Amongst the beautiful capitals of onyx alabaster one in particular stands out, it is the second one and it depicts the prophet Daniel in the lions’ den (about 1150) created by the Cabestany Master, a sculptor coming from the Roussillon province, who also has been attributed to some work in the presbytery, e.g. the base of the Paschal candelabrum with scenes of Jesus’ childhood. Just beyond is a venerated Madonna on the throne with a child in polychrome wood (1250-1260) by an unknown Umbrian sculptor. In the ambulatory, on the right of the main altar, is the portal of the sacristy, which has jambs and lintels from the eighth century; just below, between the blind arches, the Saints Sebastian and Gregory the Great are frescoed (1400-1420).

The main altar is dominated by a monumental wooden Crucifix (XIII century) by an anonymous Burgundian sculptor. In the tiny Lombard-Carolingian crypt, the base of the altar is a Roman burial slab from the 4th century AD; and the backdrop is a fresco from the sixteenth century illustrating the Deposition of Christ.

Silvia Menchetti

English Translation: **Sara Picciafuochi/Gillian Maggs**



Montalcino and its surrounding areas

are famous in the world for producing excellent wines: in particular Brunello, Rosso, Moscadello; in the last few decades, however, the town has become well known for its delicious honey, and an important international exhibition is held in its honour



HERMITAGE OF S. BARTOLOMEO AT VIVO D'ORCIA (Castiglione d'Orcia)

On the edge of the Val d'Orcia on the slopes of Monte Amiata you will find the small village of Vivo. In the Middle Ages there were numerous farmers, shepherds and woodmen living here amongst a forest of imposing chestnut trees. Today the place is famous for its splendid Cervini palace, a masterpiece by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger: here Pope Marcello



II was born, whose pontification in 1555 lasted only 21 days, and was the shortest in history. In 1022 the founder of the Camaldolese Order, St. Romuald, erected a hermitage in these forests for a religious community whose structure is typical of the Camaldolese complexes. In the monastery the monks practiced community life, particularly hermitic meditation. Today, only the latter, the *Ermicciolo* (or Hermitage of St. Bartholomew) survives, because the Cervini palace was erected on the site of the original monastery: its architectural features are of an archaic and simple Romanesque style. The structure is rectangular, with a semicircular apse crowned with blind arches and symbols of the Evangelists. The lower part of the façade has oblique stone blocks at the front of the entrance door, framed by slender columns. At the top are other blind arches and a window between the columns. Simple side-by-side windows illuminate the interior enchantingly. Only a few traces of the hermitic cells remain and these are found in two small buildings just a short distance from the church.



Giulio Lizio Bruno

English translation: **Gillian Maggs**



THE HERMITAGE OF S. FILIPPO (Castiglione d'Orcia)

Along the road that leads from Campeglia d'Orcia to Bagni di S. Filippo, set amongst unspoilt forests, is the Hermitage of St. Filippo Benizi. It is a small oratory excavated from a gigantic mass of travertine so as to look like a natural cave. In 1268, Filippo Benizi, a priory of the Order of the Servants of Mary, took refuge here in order to escape to become the successor of Pope Clement IV. Legend has it that the healing thermal water that still feeds the natural pools of Bagni di S. Filippo sprang after that the saint hit the rock with his stick to thank the inhabitants for the help they had given him. Afterwards, in his honour they built firstly a chapel and then a hermitage for the Servants of Mary, who occupied it at least until the end of the 16th century.

The troglodytical structure is fascinating. A small door leads to the tiny interior, which still preserves the original, spiritual and austere atmosphere; and where we can admire an eighteenth-century plaster bust of the saint. A tabernacle houses a wooden crucifix carved by Benizi himself.

Gaia Costantini

English translation: **Ludovica Beccari**

S. Filippo Benizi, eremita e mistico

Thirteen year old Filippo Benizi (Florence, 1233 - Todi, 1285) was sent by his family to Paris to study medicine; at nineteen he received his doctorate in medicine and philosophy at the University of Padua and worked as a physician in Florence, devoting himself to the study of the Bible and Patristics in his free time. In 1254, in Fiesole, he received a miraculous call to "become a servant of the Holy Mother" and went to Monte Senario, where he was initially admitted as a lay brother of the Servants of Mary to take care of the garden, to go begging and to make other humble jobs, and otherwise devoting himself to spend his time in humility and prayer. In 1258 he was sent to the convent served by Siena, where he was soon consecrated and four years later he became a master of novices and vicars. He became General Prior of the Order in 1267 and composed its rules and constitution. In 1274 he took part in the Second Council of Lyon; in 1279 he was ordered by Pope Nicholas III to solve diplomatically the conflict between Guelphs and Ghibellines. He was canonized in 1671.

Sofia Bazzoni

English translation: **Carlotta Bernardini**

Cookery on the Mount Amiata

Exquisite brown sweet chestnuts and other types of chestnuts, chestnut flour and, for the best part of the year, good quality mushrooms can be bought at the Vivo d'Orcia, as in the rest of the Amiata area. The delicious spring water is free to taste, and you will appreciate its minimal concentration of minerals.

ABBADIA S. SALVATORE

The road that leads from Bagni di S. Filippo to Abbazia S. Salvatore will make the tourists discover, right at the edge of the Medieval town centre, a beautiful, imposing architectural structure built with gray trachyte square blocks. It is the Benedictine monastery of SS. Salvatore, founded around the middle of the 8th century on the site of a



miraculous apparition. The abbey prospered since the Carolingian age, spreading its long political influence on southern Tuscany, Umbria and Latium; in 11th century it was rebuilt in Romanesque style and kept along its immense prestigious presence despite the incursions of the Aldobrandeschi and emperor Friedrich I Hohenstaufen, and fighting against the hegemonic projects of Siena and Orvieto over the Amiata area. It was reconfirmed as a Reichskloster (Imperial Abbey) by Henry VI in 1194, but afterwards went into a slow decline. In 1228 Pope Gregory IX entrusted it to the Cistercians, who kept it until 1782. The complex has come back to host Cistercian monks since 1939.

The church dates back to the first third of the 11th century (it was consecrated in 1035). On the façade there is the only Italian example of Westwerk, a sort of imperial tribune built above the entrance from west, a typical feature of Carolingian and Othonian architecture. The façade is enclosed between two towers (the one on the right is uncomplete) with decorated pensile arched frames and mullioned windows; in its higher part is a 14th-century window with three mullions and twin columns. The severe structure displays a Lombard-Romanesque style. The Latin-cross-shaped layout includes a single nave, apse and transept; the windows are only on the southern side and in the apse.

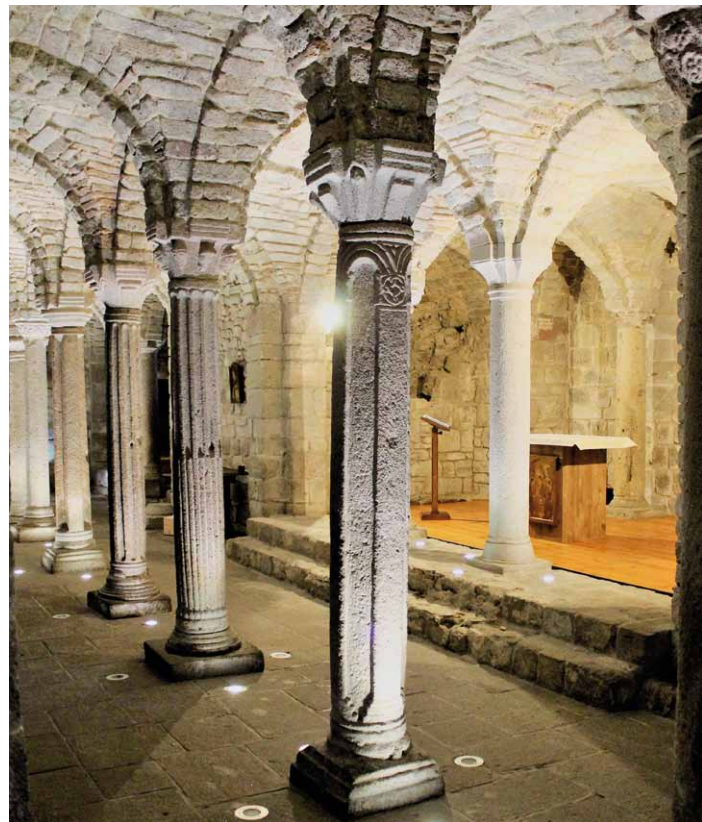
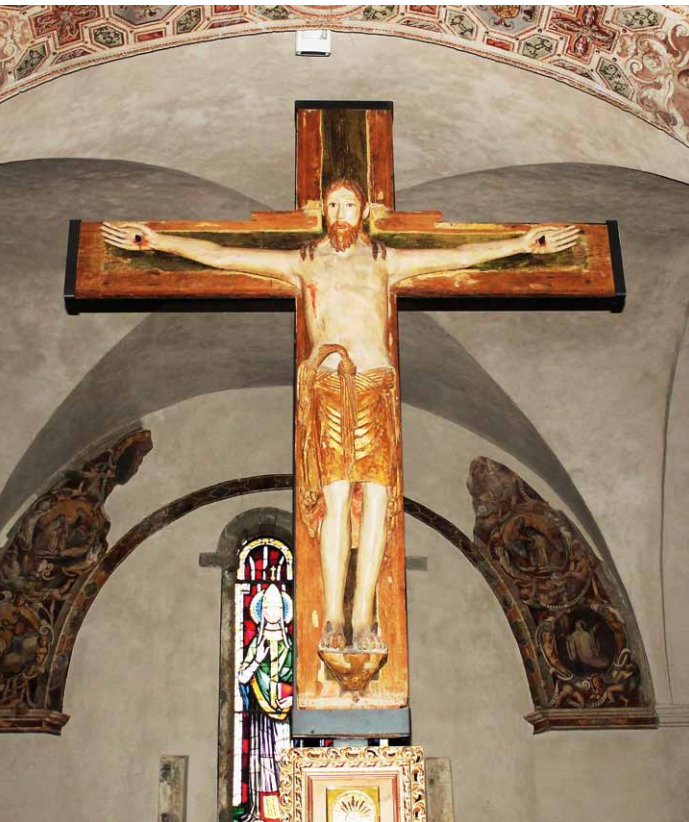
The hypogeal crypt is splendid, being one of the largest and oldest in Italy. It stands right in the place where king Ratchis saw the Saviour during a hunting trip, he appeared on the top of a fir tree in shape of a threefold flame (the

symbol of Trinity): a forest of columns (24 out of 35 are original) creates a labyrinth of lights and shadows under cross-vaulted ceilings. The shafts are cylindrical, polygonal or grooved and alternate with beautiful capitals decorated with zoomorphic, phytomorphic and geometric figures. One of them has a looped square, a symbol of God's eternity and of the inextricable complexity of the Christian faith; the capital has vines that allude to the Eucharist. At the centre of the

fourth row, a capital shows the alleged portraits of the abbey founders: the king, bearded, and his wife, both crowned; the first abbot, Erfo, with the monastic skullcap; the Lombard finance minister bringing a casket - all divided by horse heads, symbols of nobility. Next to the church, on the north side, are the remains of the monastery with an inner cloister (16th century).

Martina Baldelli

English translation: **Sara Mosci**



The presbytery stands above the crypt and demarcates the hierarchy between the priests officiating and the faithful worshipping. Three arches divide the space and accentuate its perspective depth; the apse ends in a polygonal choir. On its left wall is a beautiful artwork, *The Holy Virgin's Marriage*, by the 17th century Florentine painter, Lorenzo Lippi. The frescoes on the arches are by Francesco and Annibale Nasini, also from the 17th century. Francesco, the more famous of the two, produced the frescoes in the chapel of SS. Salvatore, southern transept: on the right is painted *The King Ratchis Hunting*; under the altar, a luminous *Deposition of Jesus in the Sepulchre*; to the left, *The Miracle of the Fir*. No doubt the masterpiece is the Crucifix dominating the main altar. An anonymous Burgundian sculptor's artwork which came here in 1140 from Vézelay (France). It is the traditional image of Christ triumphant, raising his head, opening his eyes and mouth as signs of his victory over death. The simple expressionism of the face, with a proportional body and realistic drapery gives a very realistic appearance.

Carlotta Gonzi

English translation: **Maria Alessia Vicol**



Abbadia S. Salvatore's best products

are mushrooms and precious sweet chestnuts, which are available in local shops in various forms - such as chestnut flour - throughout the town. Not to be missed is also the excellent wild game caught in the area, and also a huge selection of products including those made from the various breeds of pigs famous in this area, like the 'Cinta Senese'.



ABBEY OF S. PIERO IN CAMPO (Radicofani)

Along the ancient Roman and Medieval road named *Cassia-Francigena* you can reach Radicofani. Down in the valley, along the road to Pienza, the altered remains of the Benedictine abbey of S. Piero in Campo are included in a private farm from the road. The church is now consecrated to the Ascension of Jesus.

The abbey was founded in 1031 on the right side of the Orcia valley. It went under the Camaldolesi in 1147, who laid this monastery and the hermitage at Vivo d'Orcia under the protection of the Republic of Siena in 1231 and passed it to the Municipality of Montepulciano in 1243. Eighty years later, both Camaldolesi communities were dispersed and integrat-

ed within other monasteries, thus the decline started and rapidly led to abandonment and ruin, so that little remains of the original structure can be seen only from outside, having the place become private property.

The original entrance of the church, which had a basilica-shaped layout, was closed and a new one was set on the northern side. The interior has undergone considerable and drastic transformations for non-religious use. Outside, some elements are interesting, like the half-columned apse with its upper frame of hanging blind arches, which dates back to the 12th century.

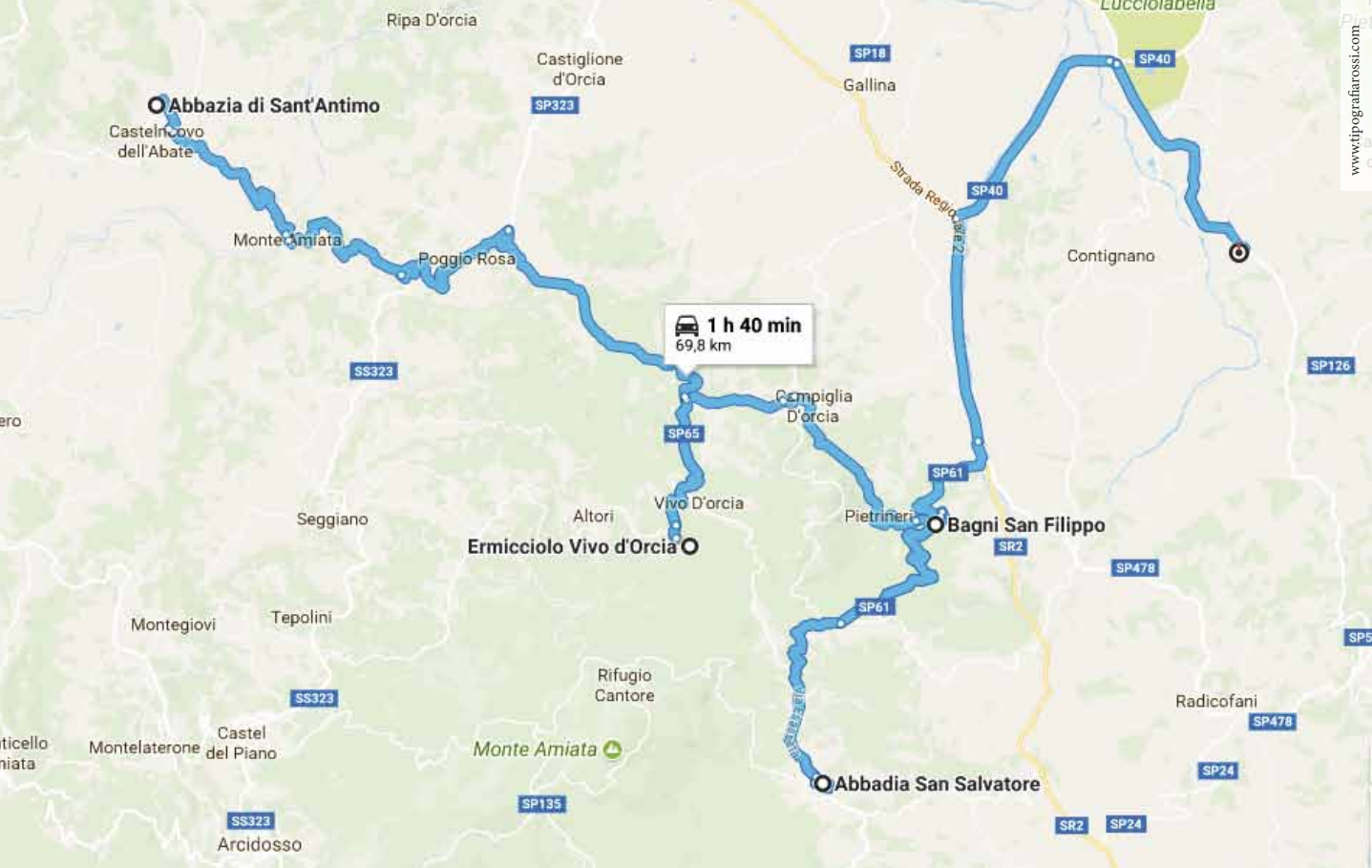
Emiliano Marrocchi

English translation: **Gillian Maggs**



Radicofani's Pecorino cheese

The most characteristic product of the vast territory of Radicofani is Pecorino cheese (made from sheep's milk), one of the best in Tuscany, which can be found fresh, semi-seasoned and seasoned at small farms in the area and in the local cooperative dairy.



Rotary



Club Chianciano T.
Chiusi - Montepulciano



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Abbeys and hermitages amongst Orcia, Chiana and Amiata
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