

Castelbasso

CHURCH OF SAINT PETER AND SAINT ANDREW

History and Art

Giuseppe Di Melchiorre

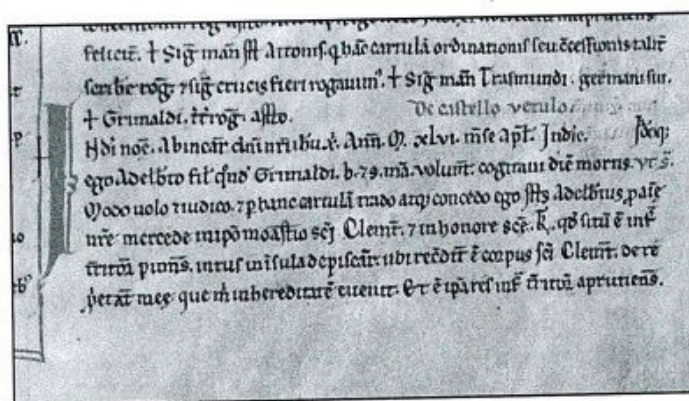
“Heu tempora, heu sacrarum aedium progrediens ruina” “Alas the times, alas, the gradual destruction of the holy temples”. Thus did Mons. Alessandro Berrettini, Bishop of Teramo, bewail those wretched times which inexorably left the churches fall into disrepair in the report made on his pastoral visit to Castelbasso in July 1836.

What his Excellency, who probably had no knowledge of the history of the town and its churches, which had suffered so much damage throughout the centuries, had seen was no isolated case in the history of Castelbasso.

The earliest mention of the most ancient church of Castellum Vetulum, now the town of Castelbasso, is to be found in *Liber instrumentorum chronicorum*, penned by the scribe Giovanni di Berardo at approximately the beginning of the last two decades of the 12th century on the orders of Leonate, Abbot of the Coenobium of Saint Clement in Casauria, now in the rural environs of Torre de' Passeri (PE). This document, better known as *Chronicon Casauriense*, contains transcripts of notary documents and chronicles relating to the illustrious

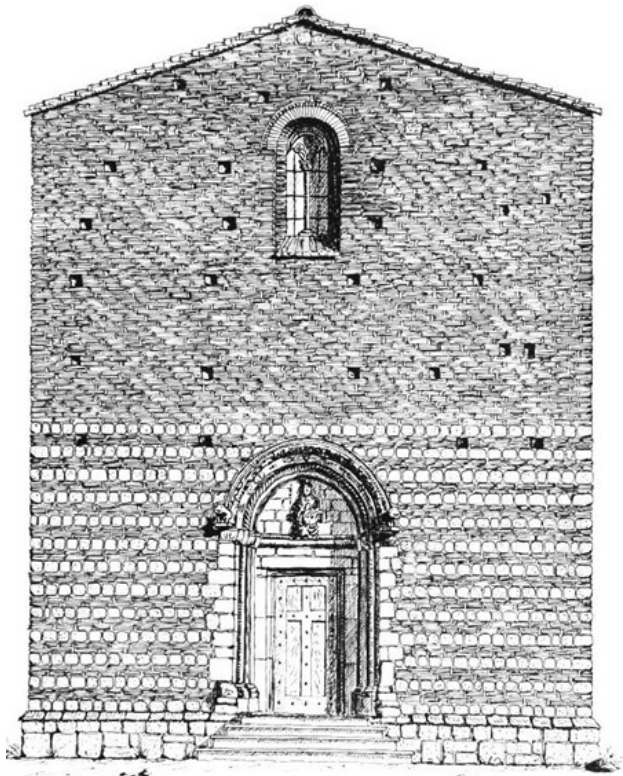
abbey founded three centuries earlier by Emperor Frederick II. In amongst the papers are some which either directly or indirectly concern Castelbasso, or Castellum Vetulum as it was, also identified as Castello Veccio or Castello Becclo: an already ancient castle, some centuries old, whose origins some Medieval scholars trace to the early Middle Ages, due to its being a hilltop settlement. It is an important castle that embraces a church and buildings within its surrounding walls, and is encircled by estates and another church, the Church of Saint Andrew, close by to the east, in addition to the churches of Saint Mary of Melano and of Saint Mary of Arala and yet another church dedicated to Saint George, which probably gave the name to today's Contrada Colle di Giorgio, which lies to the north of Castelbasso. That ancient castle, with all it

contained (church, homes, and inhabitants), together with its adjacent lots *in capite de Acqui, et Melano, et in Egiano, et in Colle Warraccioni, et in Colle Meruir* and other estates elsewhere, was donated by Adelberto and Raimondo, brothers of a Lombard bloodline and



Detail of the *Chronicon Casauriense* with the incipit of the act of donation made by Adelberto in September 1046

sons of the late Grimaldo, in September 1046 and in January 1047 respectively, at the Monastery of Saint Clement in Casauria. From then on, and until 1816, Castelbasso belonged to the diocesi *nullius*, the property of the abbot of that monastery, even though it would have other owners in the course of its life as a town. We have no way of knowing how much longer the church of that old castle, mentioned in *Chronicon Casauriense*, survived. Probably the only part of it which still does survive is the site where the parish church of Saint Peter and Saint Andrew now stands. It is a fact, however, that in 1338 a certain Philippu de Masseo had a new church built in Castelbasso, for which he spent the tidy sum of over 30 once. Was it a lot of money? To have an idea of size of the investment made by Philippu we only have to go back a few years, to 1331 to be precise, in order to discover that the great Giotto had received 35 once from Robert, King of Naples, for himself and his workers, as payment for having painted the frescos of the Cappella Maggiore and Segreta di Castel Nuovo, the Neapolitan Maschio Angioino, and a “cona” (sic: a holy image painted on a wooden board). So it was quite a sum of money for a church which must at least have had a certain architectonic and artistic value even though it was small. And it is, therefore, understandable that the person



Reconstruction of the 1338 facade of the church of Castelbasso (Indian ink drawing by Giuseppe Di Melchiorre)

who commissioned this church should want his generosity to be remembered, having the inscription “QUESTA OPERA LASAO PHILIPPU DE MASSEO PRO ANIMA SUA ONCE XXX E PLUS SUB ANNO DOMINI MCCCXXXVIII VI INDICTIONE” engraved on the overhanging shelves bearing the lion cubs which in turn hold up the archivolt of the portal. This inscription can still be read today because the facade and the portal of the church have survived, incorporated in the right hand side of the church

we can still see today. In-

deed, the difference between the construction of the left hand side of the facade (*opus incertum*) and the right hand side, which consists of regular alternating tiers of white stone and red brick, is clearly visible. Moreover, to the right of the current facade, you can still see the now walled-up space where the portal once stood, mounted by a double arched window which has also been walled up.

From this one can easily deduce that the right hand side of the facade that can be seen today is what remains of the fourteenth century church which probably collapsed, along with part of the surrounding wall to the north-west and to the south of the castle, in the wake of the earthquake of 1456. This earthquake (10-11 on the Mercalli scale) was one of the most catastrophic of the 2nd millennium. Although its epi-



Portal dating to 1338

centre was near Benevento, it affected a large part of central and southern Italy, as well as inflicting untold damage on Abruzzo, destroying churches and

houses in L'Aquila, Rivisondoli, Roccaraso, Castel di Sangro, and Pescocostanzo, and causing 200 fatalities in Teramo. So that terrible earthquake spared little of the fourteenth century church, but the little that does remain contains two jewels: the portal, as mentioned earlier, and a stone high-relief depicting the Virgin Mary sitting on a throne with the baby Jesus, currently walled into the upper part of the facade but probably previously inserted in the lunette of the archivolt. Both the portal and the enthroned Virgin Mary have been de-

scribed as "*arte popolare*" and "*arte paesana*" but, on closer examination, they seem to belong more to the "cultured" figurative tradition with its technical-stylistic rules. And if Ignazio Carlo Gavini, in his "*Storia dell'architettura in Abruzzo*", writes of "exceedingly strange figures, little stars, rosettes, and the odd small palm tree", which "fill the front of the arch in fanciful fashion", a more attentive observer, seeing the dragon and the woman who face one another from the bases of the archivolt might be reminded of the "Woman" and the "Dragon" of the Apocalypse. This hypothesis is confirmed when, raising one's eyes, one notes a two-headed monster above the dragon and an



Archivolt of the portal

angel with a halo above the woman. And even though Galvani complained about the lack of "any kind of connection" between the "many and varied ele-

ments", there must be a symbolic thread in this sequence of allusions if they contain, on the upper part of the archivolt, a kind of winged beetle with an anthropomorphic head. Could it be the soul caught between the dragon and the woman with all that she represents? And even the "rosettes" and the "small palm trees" might not have been placed there randomly if we think of how Solomon raised his temple and decorated the walls and doors "with sculptures and engravings of cherubim, palm trees and blossoming flowers, in the

inner and outer rooms" (1Kings 6,29).

So this is yet another sculptural biblical reference. But what makes the portal of the Castelbasso church unique is one more outstanding feature. In a medieval context, where religious art was conceived as a sort of "figurative sermon" and writing was merely an accessory, the anonymous stonemason in Castelbasso opted for a sermon of words engraved in stone and, what is more, written in the Abruzzo vernacular of that time. After all, with all due respect, hadn't a certain Dante Alighieri finished writing "*Divina Commedia*" fifteen or twenty years earlier in the Florentine dialect, judging the language learnt at a mother's knee to be



Virgin Mary with Baby Jesus seated on throne

nobler than the language of Latin scholars? Our stonemason saw fit to turn to the vernacular in his own dialect and engraved maxims which made and make only indirect references to the divine. Here are some of the maxims exactly as they are engraved



To the left the baptistery and to the right the font

with a translation for each one: a) KISU / MLIA / SISEB / SALTA (He who is mortified is exalted); b) LAVETATE/SECALCEIA / Q.INSESPEC / HIA-TADUPECCA (Truth will strengthen) / He who looks in the mirror commits a sin); c) CONUS /CITE (Know); d) COTE / XIAD / EVOC / CAMUL / TUVALE / POCU / CUSTA (Courteous words are worth a great deal and cost little).

After a careful examination of the church portal we enter the church. Just inside, to the right, we find a stacked font. Constructed with the base and the capital of a stone pillar joined to one another by brickwork and surmounted by a large stone basin, the font, while still elegant, is noteworthy for being completely different, stylistically speaking, from the other

sculptural works of the church. However, taking a step back in order to take in the whole of the church, we discover an unusual square floor plan, from which the architectonic structure is elevated to reveal the Romanesque style of the building, subdivided into three naves by

four mighty brick pillars bearing round arches and rib vaults. The first documentary evidence of this is found in the report of the pastoral visit dated 29th June 1595 of Mons. Vincenzo Montesanto, Bishop of Teramo. This raised objections from the Abbot pro tempore of Saint Clement in Casauria, supported by the Pope. But, in the meantime, the Bishop's secretary had already compiled his detailed, and today useful, report which states that the church had three

large bells, was held up by four pillars, contained a large stone altar with a stone table (which still survives), a wooden choir behind the altar, and a respectable wooden pulpit. Afterwards, His Excellency visited the brick christening font, within which there was a copper vase (it still survives) containing holy water. Near to this was the new christe-



Central nave with presbytery



Altar painting of Our Lady of the Rosary (in the centre with Baby Jesus) with, in the foreground, Saint Dominic to the left, and Saint Catherine of Siena to the right (18th century)



Altar painting of the Clemente family portraying Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Saint Mary Magdalen, Saint Francis, Saint Rocco and donor (below left) (1629)

ning font, elegantly sculpted in stone in the shape of a goblet, which also still survives but which was not then finished, despite having been begun in 1589. It was then the turn of the altar of Our Lady of the Rosary, much admired by the Bishop, who made sure the report contained the following description: "There is a lovely painting with the fifteen Mysteries of the Holy Rosary and in the centre there is a window in the wall where there is a image of the Blessed Virgin Mary cast in relief from gold". The altar of Our Lady of the Rosary is still where it was in the 16th century, that is to the left of the main altar, but instead of the lovely painting admired by the visiting Bishop there is a painting dating from the second half of

the 17th century. Following a recent work of restoration it was revealed to be the work of a talented

artist with a knowledge of the highest forms of Italian artistic production of the age. The iconographic composition of the painting comprises the following: in the centre there is the Virgin Mary with Baby Jesus offering the rosary beads to Saint Catherine of Siena, who stands to the right whilst, to the left, Saint Dominic is taking the rosary beads from the Virgin Mary. In the background, to the left, there is a figure with a mitre (Pope Pio V?) while, to the right, we can see Saint Catherine of Alexandria. Retracing the steps of the Bishop's visit in 1595, we encounter, in the western wall of the church, the altar of the Clementes, who



High altar painting portraying Saint Januarius (1759)

were already Castelbasso barons. At that time the altar was dedicated to Our Lady of the Snows, but all the brickwork was neglected and unadorned to such an extent that the Bishop ordered it to be either restored or demolished. However, it wasn't until 1629 that Ganimede Clemente, a murderer who had been pardoned due to his work fighting bandits, carried out the order and had a new altar built, which was "decorated in gilded wood with two pillars bearing a gothic arch" (described in a manuscript owned by the Clemente family), dedicated, according to an inscription legible beneath the canvas, to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, although the scapular, the symbol that might identify her, is missing from the painting.

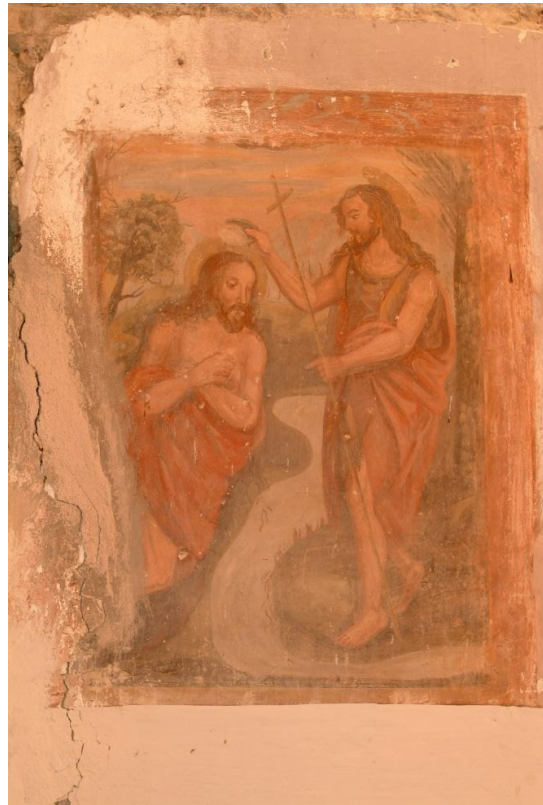
But the altar was so badly damaged that it was removed in 1819 and then replaced and put where it now stands in 1896 following Felice Clementes' decision to have it restored. The new altar lost the gothic arch, which was replaced by a pediment with a tympanum, still supported by two wooden pillars decorated with marmorino, like the rest of the altar's structure. The canvas dating from 1629, a precious painting in the mannerist style, was obviously conserved and, in 2011, it was faithfully restored to reveal the chromatic brilliance of the colours of its rich iconography. Therefore, to this day, one can continue to admire the Virgin Mary with Child, who are portrayed amongst the clouds, which,



Saint Catherine of Alexandria (1550)

le, below and to the left, are portrayals of Mary Magdalene and, to the right, Saint Francis and Saint Rocco. In the left-hand corner, almost as though it were put there to balance the composition, is the portrait of Ganimede Clemente, dressed heroically and holding a small breviary. The second half of the 18th century was highly propitious for the church of Castelbasso. Indeed, in 1759, the third painting depicting Saint Januarius, donated by his namesake Gennaro (Januarius) Emidi, doctor of medicine and philosophy, as well as subdeacon of the Castelbasso clergy, was hung on the wall behind the

main altar. The work was painted by Marche artist Gilberto Todini (1701-1798). Very well-known in Marche and in Abruzzo, he was a prolific painter whose work also took him to Teramo where, in 1753, he produced Baroque-inspired stuccos for the chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary in the church of Saint Dominic, whose vault he painted in 1757. A pupil of the more famous Veneto artist Francesco Trevisani, Todini's style can also be seen in Castelbasso. It is a style which is characterised by his reworking of seventeenth-century motifs that can be seen in his figurative compositions and in his colour choices, which are bright but not lacking in remarkable contrasts of light and shade that lend his work a degree of majesty. The three paintings described above were restored to their former splendour by Valentina Muzii of Teramo. Before touching upon



The Baptism of Jesus (18th century)

other events which marked the history of the Castelbasso church in the second half of the 18th century we must mention two other paintings which further adorn the church. One of these is a fresco portraying Saint Catherine of Alexandria, painted in 1550 on a pilaster on the west wall. It is a clue as to the artworks encountered by Bishop Montesanto when he visited the church. The other work, positioned near the baptistery, is a tempera grassa wall painting portraying the Baptism of Jesus. Its figurative naivety, showing a Jesus who is losing his balance and toppling forwards, adds an element of folk art to the church of Castelbasso.

Yet other works of art were to adorn Castelbasso church in the 1700s and, indeed, it was in the 1750s that the stuccos were produced for the central nave and the altar of Our Lady of the Rosary. Scholars expressing an interest in the church of Castelbasso have, given the Baroque style of the stuccos, dated their production to the 1600s. However, it is plausible that the artist who produced these two works was the very same Gilberto Todini who, as we have already said, had produced the Baroque-style stuccos for the chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary in the church of Saint Dominic in Teramo a few years earlier. Comparing that to the altar of Our Lady of the Rosary in the church of Castelbasso, one notes that the latter only differs in terms of its more modest di-



Organ "Adriano Fedri -1760"

mensions and consequently in small compositional variants regarding the architectonic structure, while the postures of the angels are almost identical. And if one looks up at the vault of the central nave of the church of Castelbasso and at the wall behind the main altar containing the painting of Saint Januarius, one can see how many decorative elements found in the chapel in Teramo are repeated here. This leads to the relatively safe conclusion that the stuccos in the Castelbasso church can be ascribed to Todini, who was inspired by his love of the Baroque. But even experts who have

cleaned the surface of the vault confirm that the pastel colours they have brought to light recall the second half of the 18th century and not the 17th century. The bright colours of the panels and the decorations of the vault and three of the figures in the tondos placed above the arches are, in fact, the result of a renovation carried out in the early part of the 20th century, recalled to this day by the most elderly of Castelbasso inhabitants.

A year after the stuccos and the painting of Saint Januarius, which Todini finished in 1759, the church of Castelbasso began to reverberate with the new



High altar with 16th century stone table and Antonio Di Campli's base (2002)

rich sound of sharp clear notes mingled with deep bass notes. Indeed, it was in 1760 Adriano Fedri, a native of Rocchetta di Camerino (now Corridonia) in the Marche, a leading exponent of the great organ build-

ders of Abruzzo and one of the most admired organ builders in 18th century Italy, put the finishing touches to a new organ, expanding on a seventeenth century *ottavino*, adding lower notes and extending its range. It is a true gem of an instrument, whose meticulous restoration in 2006 revived its eighteenth century timbre. We have mentioned the artistic layers in the church of Castelbasso. And so the layer closest to the surface, or rather the most recent layer, is that of two contempor-

ary works: the main altar and the ambo. We have also touched on the stone altar table documented by Mons. Vincenzo Montestanto on his visit in 1595. That table survives but is now supported on a base of white Abruzzo stone made in 2002 by sculptor Antonio Di Campli who, not wishing to produce a mere replica, instead produced an altar which is an expression of contemporary art sensibility. In the front-facing panel a dazzling Christ, framed by an almond as a mystical symbol of the union between the terrestrial and celestial sphe-



Antonio Di Campli's ambo (2013)

res, holds the cross as a banner of victory over death. In the bright rays which emanate from Him we can just make out the face and hands of Saint Peter, to the left, and Saint Andrew, to the right. The very same Antonio di Campli also sculpted the ambo in 2013, again using white Abruzzo stone and bronze (the dove of the Holy Spirit and the small flames which emanate from it). The work is distinguished by a dynamic sculptural quality

which suggests the force of the

wind of the Spirit which blows wherever it wishes.

These, in a nutshell, are the artistic layers of the church of Castelbasso, the spiritual and civic heart of a medieval town which guards it jealously within its walls. A heart which, together with others, has beaten for centuries in the Valle de Vomano, described with a well-chosen poetic metaphor by the great Japanese poet Kikuo Takano, who has visited Abruzzo several times, as "a sweet divine palm".



Side view of the church - On the walls are the three altarpieces and in the foreground is Antonio Di Campli's ambo and high altar