

The screen (or *jubé*, French deriving from the exhortation “*jube Domine benedicere*” from the preacher to the faithful), is a rare sculptured structure built across the nave at the third bay. It is made of painted grey sandstone from the Monferrato region. Five bays of arches rest on stone columns with leaf capitals. A double row of polychrome base reliefs depict scenes from the *Dormitio Virginis*, *The ascent into Heaven* and the *Coronation* of the Virgin amongst scenes of the Tetramorph and the series showing the Virgin’s ancestors sitting and holding a scroll with their own name on it.

The question arises why only 35 of the 40 ancestors are represented in base relief, the remaining five being shown in frescos on the columns at either end of the screen. In addition, other observations concerning the geometry of the architecture support the hypothesis that this structure was adapted to a new position, thus shortening considerably the length of the sculpted frieze. There just remains the question of the date, 1189, found on the dedication (*Anno ab incarnatione Domini MCLXXXVIII regnante Federico Imperatore, completum est opus istud sub proposito Vidone*), too early if it refers to the style of the sculptures and the screen itself, which the art critics date to not earlier than 1230. The exceptional artistic value of this work, due in part to the splendid colours and use of costly lapis lazuli brought from the mountains of the Caucasus (for the cloaks of the Virgin and Christ) – lead to presume a prestigious patron (maybe the Emperor Federico Barbarossa). Restoration and cleaning in 2003 brought to light the original colours, showing this work to be an extremely rare example of polychromatic medieval sculpture.



Screen or *jubé*.

Although the frescos of the cloister show some damage, they form a distinct body of work in the framework of medieval painting in Piemonte, in a period from around 1240-50 (third and fourth bay) to 1354, when the “Adoration of the Magi” was carried out by the painter known as “Maestro di Montiglio”.

On the same wall, in the lower section, we find a contraposition between The three living and The three dead. In this particular scene, a monk points three terrified riders to three skeletons and a church. Formerly, this painting was said to illustrate how Charlemagne participated in the founding of the church; the story relates how he was taken ill while hunting in the woods around Vezzolano and made a vow to the Virgin that he would build a church in that place. This is pure legend and this image, of which we find a rather damaged version in the Chapel of the Radicati, belongs to the chivalrous tradition upheld by Federico II, in which all lordly qualities were expressed in the art of hunting: the three skeletons are placed as a religious warning in contrast to the courtly values.



CLOISTER, fresco from the family tomb of the Rivalba (detail).

Info:

Sito Museale +39 0119920607 - www.vezzolano.it

inCollina turismo nel cuore del Piemonte
Associazione di accoglienza turistica
Colline Chieresi e Basso Monferrato

+39 3331365812 - infopoint@turismoincollina.it

Revision 2015 arch. Cristina Lucca.

Photos Lino Di Gioia.

Translation Isabelle Patterson Greenwood.

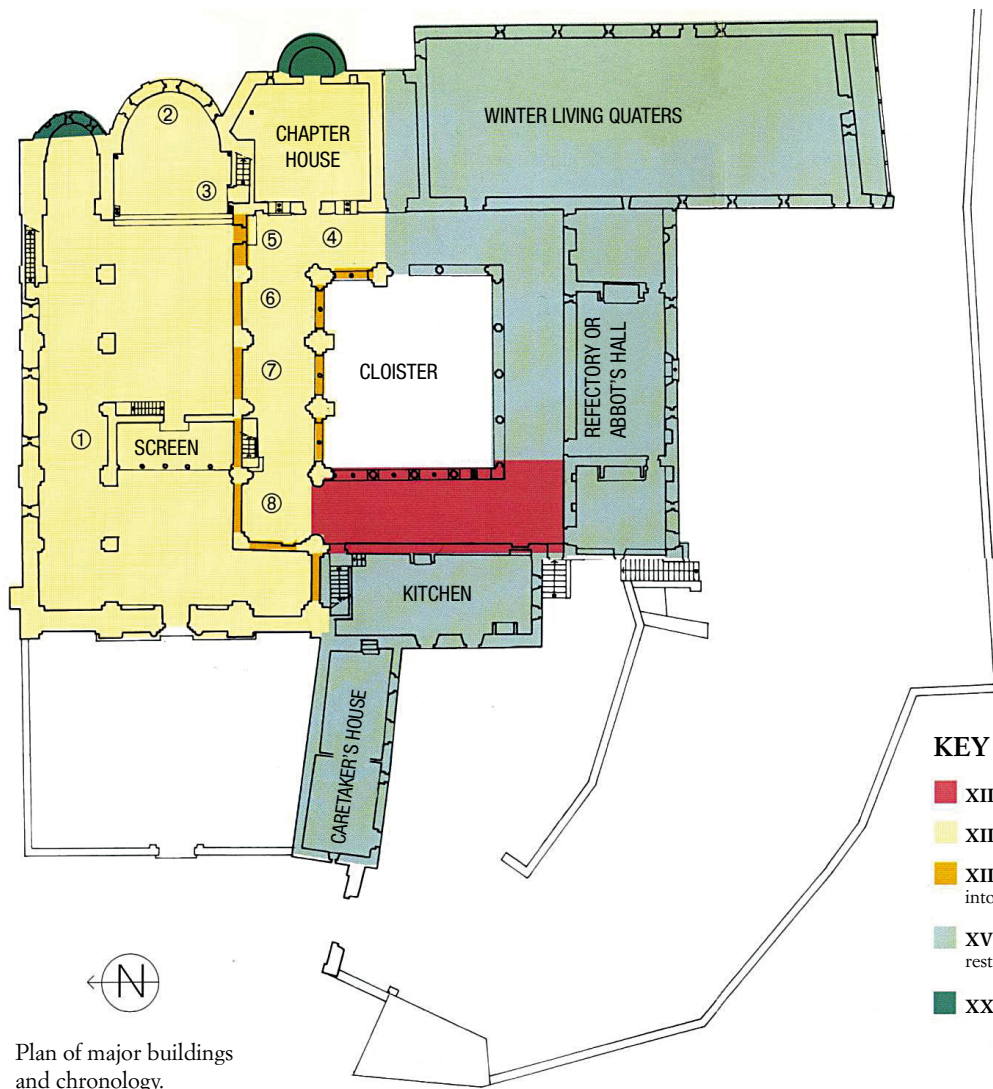
Canonica Regolare di SANTA MARIA DI VEZZOLANO



The *ecclesia* of Vezzolano began towards the end of the XI century as a canonical church of the Augustine order. The first known document is the act of investiture (17 February 1095) of Theodulus and Egidio by some local lords. The initial fifty years of activity of the monastery are shrouded in darkness, although it must have been a very lively place, judging by the rich donations it received in that period and its renown for the probity of its men.

The church is dedicated to the Virgin Mary. It seems that the reformed Augustinian canonical order was particularly devoted to the cult of Our Lady and we find a rich Marian iconography preserved within the edifice. The façade has columns that divide the three orders of blind loggias decorated with sculptures organised in a hierarchical scheme: in the centre there is a wide double loggia with a statue of a Blessing Christ between the archangels Rafael and Michael; in the third order, two seraphim on wheels are below a bust of God the Father, placed at the pinnacle of the tympanum.

Within the entrance portico, which has a semi-circular arch and cable moulding on the recessed order, there is a *lunette* (Virgin enthroned with the Holy Spirit speaking into her right ear).



Plan of major buildings and chronology.

The church is a basilica, a central aula with two naves and two semi-circular apses: the third nave (right side) is partly incorporated in the square cloister, against the south side of the church. A great bell tower with a square base rises out of the north nave. Inside, the central nave is divided into three bays under ribbed vaults. The floor is covered in terracotta tiles and *cocciopesto*.

The building inside is enriched with polychrome sculptural decorations: the screen with the central arch in the apse shows the Annunciation of the Virgin. The altar has a large painted terracotta altarpiece (Crowned Virgin with Carlo VIII and St Augustin).

The four sides of the cloister date back to various periods (XII - XIII - XV and later). The earliest is the west side with alternating stubby bi-colour columns and slim sandstone columns which support pointed arches; the north side, built into the south nave of the church, is divided into five bays with cross vaults with narrow cable moulding tinted red with arches that are divided in two by slender stone columns. There is a well-preserved cycle of frescos (XII - XVI century). A number of rooms give onto the cloisters but the changes that have happened over time make it difficult to state what was their original purpose, apart from the square Chapter House which ends in a small apse and probably belonged to the original construction (rebuilt in the 1950s).

KEY

- ① Capital: *Samson fighting with a lion*.
- ② Window: *Annunciation* (XII century, 2nd half).
- ③ Solomon playing the lute.
- ④ Capital: *Legend of the Virgin*.
- ⑤ Window: *Virgin on the throne* (XIV century).
- ⑥ Tomb of the Rivalba: *Nativity; Contrast between the Living and the Dead* (XIV century).
- ⑦ *Virgin and Child*, below, an angel presents a priest, (a Radicati), offering a model of the church (1250-1260).
- ⑧ Tomb of the Radicati: *Christ in mandorla, the Virgin between St Peter and St John the Baptist*; on the back wall, a *Crucifixion, Contrast* (late XIII century).

KEY COLOURS OF THE MAP

- XII century - Remains of the earlier church.
- XII century - Base of the actual church.
- XIII (second half) - Transformation of the side aisle into the north side of the Cloister.
- XV century and later - Modifications of existing structures, restored in the XX century.
- XX century - Rebuilding of the apses on original remains.

After a flourishing period, born out by the ambitious building programme for a basilica with three naves and the rich array of sculptures, the church went into a period of decline in the early 13th century for unknown reasons (the death of the Emperor Federico or natural calamities?) and the fabric became smaller.

Continued decline in the XIV and XV centuries give us the buildings as we know them today; further decay continued until 1805 with the suppression of religious orders under Napoleon, when the structure moved into private hands. During all of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, sources and ex-votos show that believers continued to visit the site.

The most interesting example is a painting by Giuseppe Rollini from 1867 marking the end of the cholera epidemic which had struck the population of Castelnovo Don Bosco. Since 1937 the entire complex has become state property under the jurisdiction of the Ministry for Heritage which is responsible for its upkeep. In 1998, an apple orchard was planted with fourteen old varieties in a rear meadow.



CLOISTER, capital showing the Story of the Virgin (detail).



APSE, detail of simple aperture.