

2. ABBEY OF SANTA MARIA VALDIPONTE - MONTELABATE - PG

Gerolamo Gaslini Foundation

THE OWNER OF THE MONTELABATE ABBEY is the Gerolamo Gaslini Foundation, a well-known public body with headquarters in Genoa. The Foundation was created in 1949 by Gerolamo Gaslini in order to ensure the continued availability of the funds needed for the Giannina Gaslini Institute, an important and globally respected paediatric hospital. The Institute was founded and opened in 1938 by Mr and Mrs Gaslini for "the care, defence and assistance of infants and children" after their own daughter Giannina died at the age of twelve from misdiagnosed peritonitis. Thus began the activities of the Gaslini Institute, which range from research in the biomedical field to the provision of paediatric healthcare services. The Gerolamo Gaslini Foundation works to advance this institute and the progress of scientific research, while always respecting the ideals of its founder. He himself not only gave the foundation his patronage, but also donated his private residence to become the headquarters of the Foundation.

Historic background

Here we find ourselves in front of one of the most stunning examples of medieval religious architecture that our region has to offer: a church-fortress built in defence of Christianity along the arc that curves its way from Provence throughout the Apennine ridge. We cannot be certain of when this Benedictine Abbey was founded, but documents mentioning it have been found to date from the second half of the 10th century. In the oldest of these documents, the monastery is referred to as "Santa Maria in Valdiponte in Corbiniano", taking its name from the mountain that looms over it to the east. The first document which establishes a certain date for the complex is an ancient notary deed from 993; in this, one Giovanni Gregorio grants the abbots and monks a swathe of land between the Tiber river and the Rio Arno. However, it is possible that the monastery may date back to the 9th century. With its vast possessions, many of which can be identified by studying the numerous documents currently stored at the Perugia State Archives, the Abbey of Santa Maria Valdiponte has one of the richest histories of any abbey in the ancient diocese of Perugia. This begins with the episcopate of Bishop Andrea (1033-48), who exercised his jurisdiction over the abbey even though the abbots themselves had wide jurisdiction over the area. The Benedictines settled in these areas during the darkest period of the Middle Ages. The monks, who obeyed the rule "*Ora et labora*" (pray and work), accompanied their prayers with the recovery of lands which had been abandoned after the fall of the Roman Empire, welcoming all those who were willing to work the land in exchange for protection. The monks granted land for farming to those who wished to work with them, through contracts known as "*emphyteuta*" under which the workers were obliged to give payment in kind to the monastery in the form of goods such as eggs at Easter, a pork shoulder for the Feast of the Assumption, and four heads of poultry for Christmas. These tributes would then be redistributed among the poor; in fact, the rules by which the monks lived forbade them from living on the work of others and

from eating meat. In 1030, Pope John XIX decided to send a delegate to the monastery to re-establish discipline and order there, qualities which had been lacking. The abbot, whose name was Pietro, also restored the churches thanks to donations made during that time to the abbey, which by 1111 had vast possessions. This was the first restoration work carried out on the complex.

Architecture, frescoes and paintings

Over the course of the centuries, various changes were made both to the architectural structure and the internal artworks of the abbey. The Romano-Gothic church, with its single nave and ribbed vaults, is 30 m long and 15 m wide. Below, the three-apse crypt and a large room which served the ancient monks as their cloistral church are still intact. The crypt is the oldest part of the complex, dating back to the 9th century. The façade has a large door surmounted by a rose window. In 1030 Abbot Pietro restored the churches; in 1230, Abbot Oratore built the cloister, which was later demolished, possibly by the Saracens, who were conducting raids in the countryside during that period. In 1281, Abbot Trasmondo rebuilt the abbey church, decorated the choir area with fine paintings including a panel by Meo da Siena in 1285, and embellished other meeting points. The bell tower was built during the years 1267-69, while in 1302 the Perugian Abbot Ugoccione Monelducci had the stunning rose window on the church sculpted. The buttresses which support the abbey church were constructed in 1568-69 by Pier Lorenzo Bernardi. Therefore, by as early as about 1300, the abbey had already taken on its current form and dimensions: the great church on the north side, to the east the dormitories and the refectory, to the west the *scriptorium* and the library, with the guesthouse and infirmary to the south. The great cloister which connects all the parts of the monastery together consists of two arcade-style walkways, one on top of the other, with columns in different styles. To this very day, the church still boasts two large frescoes above the altars positioned close to the entrance. The fresco on the left depicts the Virgin on a throne with the Child between Saint Anthony and Saint Bernardino; at her feet, between Saint Rocco and Saint Sebastian, the people genuflect in prayer. The fresco on the right depicts a crucifixion scene with the Virgin and Saint John the Baptist; below are Saint Sebastian and Saint Rocco, who protect against the plague. The work is attributed to the school of Fiorenzo di Lorenzo (1492). In the Chapter house, used as a meeting-place for the monks, there is not only a crucifixion scene attributed to Meo da Siena but also another painting, presumably by the same artist, depicting the Virgin on a throne with the child, and at her feet Abbot Trasmondo. Beside this, another painting shows Saint Benedict with a book of rules for monastic life in his hand. The same room also holds paintings from later eras, depicting the Madonna of Mercy and an allegory of chastity.