

SAN VINCENZO MAGGIORE AND ITS WORKSHOPS

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Introduction

The search for San Vincenzo Maggiore took fourteen years. It was in August 1980 that the excavations at San Vincenzo began. At that time it was believed that the celebrated early medieval monastery described in the *Chronicon Vulturnense* had stood where the modern abbey is to be found. The famous crypt in which Abbot Epyphanus is depicted was believed to be part of a solitary church, located beside the river Volturno, on the east-facing slope of Colle della Torre. Many believed that this was San Lorenzo in Insula, one of the two churches which the *Chronicon Vulturnense* tells us were built by Abbot Epyphanus (824-42). Nevertheless, the then mayor of Castel San Vincenzo, Angelo Iannotta, convinced us that a large church lay beneath the terraced slopes of Colle della Torre. He urged us to look at the high terraces located 200 m south of the crypt. A medieval wall, still standing some 4 m high, retained the south side of the terrace. On the terrace itself, in amongst the lines of vines, the farmer had just planted a number of olive trees in deep holes. Most of the holes had produced prodigious quantities of pottery and ancient tile, but one had produced a fine travertine block with painted plaster (collected in September 1981 by Alison Borthwick). Angelo Iannotta believed that here were the remains of Santa Maria in Insula, which, like San Lorenzo in Insula, had been built by Abbot Epyphanus (Hodges 1981; Hodges 1993: 19, figs. 3:8 and 3:9).

A year later, Rosalina Iannotta, an old citizen of Castel San Vincenzo, visited the excavations by the crypt. She invited us to accompany her around the hill. This old lady was virtually blind and walked with difficulty. Nonetheless, we proceeded directly to the site that she also called 'Santa Maria in Insula'. "*Ecch ce sctèven' gl' riesct' de na grossa città, e sct posct seva la parte chiù importante*", she said in Molisano dialect, "Here the ruins of a great city once stood, and here was its most important part". Then we walked westward up the fields, perhaps 100 to 200 m, and she stopped and proclaimed that this was 'the valley of the martyrs'. This was where the Saracens had killed hundreds of monks. It was as though she had been there on 10th October, 881. We were in receipt of an oral tradition that was then exactly 1,100 years old. As we later discovered, Rosalina had paused to tell us this close to the great apsidal west end of San Vincenzo Maggiore, which contained the shrine to San Vincenzo himself.

During the excavations of 1981-82 it became evident that the early medieval monastery did indeed lie around the flanks of Colle della Torre. In other words, the monastery had only occupied its present position since the early 12th century. In which case, we began to surmise, the abbey-church of San Vincenzo Maggiore, consecrated in AD 808, must have been located close to our excavations. The following summer, in 1983, we cleared the overgrown vegetation on terraces 1 and 2 which ran at right angles to the well-preserved south-facing wall of 'Santa Maria in Insula'. The line of a monumental wall running north-south was revealed once the vegetation was removed. At intervals along the wall were situated large ashlar blocks with vertical pilaster strips. Don Angelo

Pantoni, monk, architect and archaeologist of Monte Cassino and foremost authority on the monastic remains at San Vincenzo, was fascinated – the new evidence was hard to square with his conviction that the early medieval monastery was situated some half a kilometre to the east, on the opposite bank of the river. We were convinced that this wall formed part of San Vincenzo Maggiore. To find out more, however, was not possible until August 1986 when, encouraged by the Soprintendenza Archeologica del Molise, we made a deep excavation, Trench PP, to trace the westward line of the terrace wall ascribed to 'Santa Maria in Insula'. This deep trench revealed the remains of a massive wall retaining a high terrace to the north, with a fine floor at a much lower level on its south side. The size of the wall left us in no doubt that this was part of the abbey-church of San Vincenzo Maggiore, one of the great new churches of 9th-century Italy.

We began exploring San Vincenzo Maggiore in 1989. With support from the Provincia of Isernia, as well as the British Academy, the British School at Rome and the Soprintendenza Archeologica del Molise, we started to make trial excavations of the eastern terraces identified in 1983. During six months of digging in 1991-92 we exposed the full extent of the east end of the church (eastwork and part of the atrium), revealing a monumental tunnel which ran beneath the front of the building. In the August of 1992, test-pits were excavated in a line proceeding westward. To begin with, we surmised that the church was between 60 and 80 m in length; but, in a test-pit some 100 m or so from our excavations at the east end, the curve of the south apse of the abbey-church was identified. From that moment it became clear that this was a gigantic building. The following spring, with the help of David Jordan, a full-scale geophysical survey was made of the entire area using a proton magnetometer. The computerized plot of the results revealed the broad outlines of a building that lay below ground (Jordan 1993). In August 1993, in order to test the geophysical survey, three trial trenches were excavated in the apsidal area. The south trench (SVM 1) located the floor of the south aisle. The west trench (SVM 2) located the main apse and because a splayed window was found in the short exposed section of the apse wall, it became evident that there was a crypt here. The north trench (SVM 3) located the north wall of the church, and the extravagantly painted side wall of a stairway leading down to the crypt. There could be no doubt now. San Vincenzo Maggiore was a huge building, and inside its western apse there were well-preserved remains of its magnificently painted crypt.

In 1994 a new plan for San Vincenzo was instigated, financed by the *regione* of Molise, using European Union funds. His Eminence Don Bernardo D'Onorio, Abbot of Monte Cassino, was in charge of the project, and Arch. Franco Valente was the chief engineer. The 1994-96 project made possible the full-scale excavations described here and launched the aspiration to incorporate the archaeological discoveries made since 1980 into a park accessible to the public. Sadly, as yet in 2007, despite further funding, the park is still not yet open.

The volume, that is to accompany this archival report, elaborates and, as best we can, completes the interim report first summarised in *The basilica of Abbot Joshua at San Vincenzo al Volturno* (Hodges and Mitchell 1996; see also Hodges 1997). Without access to the full records and as a result of limited access to the excavations themselves, there

are inevitably limitations to this fuller account. Nevertheless, we have set out to describe the results of the excavations of San Vincenzo Maggiore and the associated workshops. The workshops were excavated over the course of many campaigns – in 1982-83; in 1989-93; and finally in 1996-97 (see Hodges 2005 for an earlier interim report on the Collective Workshop). Only in the final seasons were we able to distinguish the complex history of these buildings and show that the history of the Collective Workshop, constructed alongside the atrium of San Vincenzo Maggiore, was inextricably linked to the history of the monastic church itself.

Our aim is not only to report the archaeology of these three different areas (i) the annular crypt and basilica, (ii) the atrium and eastwork; (iii) the Collective Workshop, but also to use these discoveries to reassess the archaeology, art, architecture, economy and society of this major 9th-century Beneventan monastery. As such, the volume will conclude the series (Hodges 1993; Hodges 1995; Mitchell and Hansen 2001; Bowes, Francis and Hodges 2006) describing the San Vincenzo Project launched in 1980. In the context of the on-going Suor Orsola Benincasa excavations, this description of course belongs to another era and most definitely reflects the debates that took place in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, the new excavations provide a body of information that was unimaginable in the 1980s and 1990s, so we intend to propose many new interpretations that were simply not possible in the earlier interim report. This said, though, from its inception, the San Vincenzo Project proceeded through the painstaking delineation of arguments and the construction of frameworks of inference. We aim to make explicit the assumptions and the inferences which sustain the argument, eschewing any interpretive leaps, not least because no other example of a major early medieval monastery occupying an open field is known to exist in western Europe (cf. Renfrew 1994: 11). Essentially we have adopted this processual (as opposed to post-processual) approach because we recognise the singular privilege granted to us to excavate and address the history of this unique place.

The report concludes after a detailed study of the stratigraphy, finds and historical context that San Vincenzo Maggiore was conceived to serve a purpose that harnessed the new reforms and ideals of Benedict of Aniane to be a modest proprietary monastery. It was conceived of as the sacred centrepiece in an expansive gesture that almost certainly belonged to the brief period when, under Prince Grimoald III, the Beneventans not only were sympathetic to Charlemagne and the Carolingian revolution but also rich. Like neighbouring Monte Cassino, it served as a bulwark to deter the wilful attempt by Pope Hadrian to acquire these northern regions of the Principality. More to the point, San Vincenzo and Monte Cassino were colossal *ex novo* enterprises in bald contrast to Pope Hadrian's programme of refurbishment and renewal in Rome. The rhetoric of Abbots Joshua and Gisulf's architecture (and ornament) at San Vincenzo and Monte Cassino respectively cannot have been lost on the papacy. A generation later, the insertion of the annular crypt – probably a direct result of acquiring the relics of St. Vincent – belongs to the moment when San Vincenzo considered it strategically important to attract minor donors and pilgrims. Its model this time was Pope Paschal's campaign to build new basilicas in Rome. Now Rome once more set the standard in the rhetoric of church-building. San Vincenzo embarked on its imitative venture either in the early 820s, or more probably under Prince Sicardo in the 830s, as the Beneventan court actively

attempted to alter its political and economic directions. Finally, in the 840s, as the principality succumbed to civil war, Abbot Toto and his successors invested in aggrandizing the facilities for donors and pilgrims. Fascinatingly, fresh paintings, the prominence of literacy and memorials as well as the production of such items as glass lamps were no longer considered important. Indeed, the earlier decoration of the monastery seems to have been considered perfectly satisfactory and merited only modest repair in the forty or so years prior to the sack in AD 881. A cultural shift with profound social and economic outcomes was in process. So, to this period, we surmise, the Collective Workshop was producing counter-gifts as tokens for benefactors, and providing a managed solution to the practise of making donor's possessions inalienable. Here, in the midst of Beneventan political upheaval was a strategy connecting workshop output to the cult of St. Vincent and the annular crypt in San Vincenzo Maggiore that prefigured a new era for the Benedictines.

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