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# **SANT'ANGELO IN FORMIS**

## **Diana's Temple The Basilica**

### **Guide-book**

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## PREFACE

The Benedectine Basilica of Sant'Angelo in Formis lies in an everlasting holy area, which belongs to Campania's legend and religious history, both pagan and christian.

### **Where does the name of the place come from?**

*Mons* ( 1 ) *Tifata* is the name of the mountain where the temple-basilica was built. The appellation *Mons Dianae Tifatinae* depends on the local spreading of the cult to Diana, goddess of woods and hunt, in pagan times.

*Vicus*(2) *Dianae* and *Pagus* (3) *Dianae* come from the group of sacred or private buildings, thermal baths and villas built around the temple and at the foot of the mountain.

*Ad formam Dianae* derives from the borders, established by Augustus and later recomposed by Vespasian, to protect the goddess' estates.

The term *in formis* relates to the aqueducts that carried water from Tifata hills to the ancient and to the new Capua.

*Ad Arcum Dianae* relates to the arch built by Capua's citizens in honour of Septimius Severus in 196 A.D.

In christian times, when the church was consecrated to the Archangel Michael, the all area was called *S. Angelo de Monte*, *S. Angelo ad formas* and finally *S. Angelo in Formis*.

(1) *Mons*, lat. = mountain      (2) *Vicus*, lat. = place      (3) *Pagus*, lat. = village

## DIANA'S TEMPLE

### LEGEND AND HISTORY

In the past, Tifata bleak hills were covered by dense woods with a rich different fauna. The name "**Tifata**" should infact come from the big oaks growing there. The area was also rich of springs and medical waters. For this reason the **cult to Diana** (P. 7; 8; 9), goddess of woods and hunt, spread in that area.

According to Caius Silius Italicus, during Hannibal's war, the Roman proconsul Fulvius Flaccus, in order to propitiate the victory, immolated Diana a wonderful hind, given as a gift to Capua citizens by Capys (the mythic founder of the city). It is reported that the hind was one thousand years old, therefore the cult to Diana must be very old.

**The temple is maybe as ancient as the cult to the goddess.** In the first centuries, the history of its construction is still rather unknown.

Between the end of the IV century B.C. and the beginning of the III one, thanks to the rich treasury of the temple, mostly consisting of oblations and estates, the building work was very active. In 135 B.C. a wall of protection was built by Fulvius Flaccus, perhaps grandson of the consul that had immolated the hind in 211 B.C. In 99 B.C. the administrators of the treasury built a staircase leading to the front terrace, a portico, a vestibule, walls of protection and other works for improving the functional character of the temple. In that occasion, statues were built to Castor and Pollux, too. According to an inscription, still visible on the floor, in 74 B.C., with the money of its treasury, the temple was, if not totally rebuilt, surely enlarged: the podium was extended, the floor was decorated with mosaics and marble columns were added.

### **And what is left today?**

Thanks to the excavations of the last years, location, typology and plant of the temple are now perfectly known.

**Diana's temple and the church of Sant'Angelo cover mostly the same area.** Level and floor of the Basilica are the same of the temple; the perimeter of the church corresponds to the one of the podium; instead, the front area is now higher than the old one.

Diana's sanctuary arose along the slope of the mountain on terraces and flights of steps, typical Roman system of the Republican age. Its style was probably italic-etruscan, in its ancient part. It was west-orientated and raised to the ground around, on the southern and western sides.

The temple stood on a **podium**, that is still partly visible: outside, near the bell tower, and inside at the entrance, protected by a glass. Built in **two different phases**, the podium was probably begun when Capua got in touch, first time,

with Rome between 340 B.C. and the second Punic war. Its shape was rectangular, 17.40 m. large (like the Basilica) and about 20.40 m. long (from the entrance to the first step of the altar). In a second phase (maybe in 74 B.C.) the podium was extended (8 m.) towards the mountain. At the same time, the temple was adorned with columns, statues and a **mosaic floor**.

According to De Franciscis' "Templum Dianae Tifatinae", an hardly visible inscription on the floor (5.60 m. from the entrance), consisting of black inlays (see right near the second column), subsequently replaced by white ones, probably quotes the names of the masters that had improved the temple in 74 B.C.

**Two kinds of mosaic** decorated the **floor**. One, made of white rectangular tesseras, can be observed in the area in front of the altar and it maybe decorated the floor of the goddess' cell, too. The other, made of irregular tesseras, decorates (still today) the largest area of the floor; we can see traces of it under the columns, behind the altar on the right and in front of the door to the Holy of Holies' chapel.

As for **the columns**, 14 of them may be dated at the beginning of the first century B.C. and have Corinthian capitals; two Corinthian capitals are also on the stone-semicolumns, leaned on the wall, near the entrance; two medieval capitals are instead on the pillars by the sides of the absidal triumphal arch.

In the regional museum of Capua (**Museo campano**), there is a room (sala X), on the upper floor, where mosaics of defferent origins are collected. The ones from Sant'Angelo stand out. They are five, now. Other three were lost when a part of the museum was bombed in 1943. They all maybe belonged to wide decorations of civilian or religious buildings. In 1880 they were sold by private owners to the museum's administrators at the price of 2200 italian lire. The most interesting one is the mosaic "della scuola" or "coro sacro" (138 x 175 cm., P. 13). It represents young girls in four lines and the choir-master in the background, framed by a polycrome braid.

A 387 B.C. inscription lists the feasts in honour of Diana.

The last mention to the goddess is represented by a metric inscription (IV century A.D.), in which Dematius Laetus, freedman, offered Diana a marvelous votive statue. After this, no other mention to the goddess has been found.

## THE BASILICA

### HISTORY

According to a literary tradition lacking historical evidence, the Longobards built a church consacrated to the Archangel Michael on the site of Diana's temple, about the VI century A.D.

Many documents about the present church, found in Sant'Angelo's Register and in Cassino's Chronicon, call in question the date of the construction and the name of the customer, usually considered Desiderius.

According to these documents, in 925 Peter I, Capua's bishop, gave the monks from Montecassino, living in Capua, S. Michael's church ad arcum Dianae in order to build there a

monastery. But in the following years, mysteriously, Capua's bishops still seemed to be the owners of the small church of S. Angelo.

**In 1065 the Norman Richard I**, earl of Aversa and prince of Capua, decided on building a monastery, for his own spiritual salvation. Being interested in the ancient sacred area, he obtained, from Capua's bishop, Hildebrand, the church of S. Angelo in **exchange** for St. John of Landepaldi's church. In this way he could build his monastery there. Six years later, Richard went to Montecassino and, through the medium of the **abbot Desiderius**, offered St. Benedict not only the church "de monte tifata", but also the monastery and other dependent churches. The abbot Desiderius had the task to create there a community of monks, following the Benedictine rule, and directly depending on Montecassino's mother abbey.

In 1078 the clergy from Capua tried to impugn the exchange (13 years later!). But Pope Gregorius VII confirmed that the church of S. Angelo belonged to Montecassino. In 1080 and 1089 Jordan I, Richard's son, reconfirmed what his father had done. Afterwards other Norman princes did the same.

Although this news is official, it does anyway not say when exactly the church was founded and who was its costumer.

On the subject of the costumer, Fernanda Maffei, in her research into this topic ("La data del complesso monastico ed il committente nell'ambito del primo romanico campano"), supposed convincingly that Richard has to be considered planer, financier and therefore customer of the church; whereas Desiderius was organizer and manager of the religious community, following the Benedictine rule.

As a matter of fact, beginning from 1072 Richard and Desiderius co-operated with one consent, for arranging the church and the monastery's buildings.

Consequently, as for the date of the foundation, it can be settled that Richard I built the church after 1065 or that in 1072 Desiderius began the construction of the new church together with monastic buildings.

The new church, adorned with frescos, was surrounded with a monastery -built for a community of 40 monks-, guest-quarters, an hospice, an hospital, a sacristy and, later on, a chapel consacrated to St. Nicholas from Mira. During the following years these additional buildings fell down or into decay, or became private houses.

*Honours*: the hexameters, engraved on the portal at the entrance, and Desiderius' image with the church in his hands, painted in the central apse, attest that the abbot cared for the construction and the decoration of the Basilica; the portraits of David and Salomon, dressed as Normans, painted between the pendentives of the first two left columns, at the entrance, are instead in homage to Richard I and his son Jordan.

## THE BELL TOWER

On the right side of the Basilica, there is the Bell Tower. (In the model of the church, painted in the central apse, in Desiderius' hands, the bell tower is instead on the left side of the Basilica.)

It has two floors, square base and it is about 19 m. high.

The first floor consists of huge marble blocks. On one of those forming the entrance-vault, a **curled head** (P. 24) is carved, symbol of Capua citizens (they had been portrayed, in the same way, by Cicero in his work "de lege agraria").

The cornice, dividing the first and the second floor, is decorated with vegetable, animal and fantastic motifs (P. 23).

The second floor consists of a wall structure, covered with red bricks. On each side there is a narrow mullioned window with a round-headed arch and a small column in the middle. Every column has a different capital.

Another cornice with vegetable motifs, on the north-western side only, marks the end of the floor.

On the top, there is a very small wrought iron tower with two small bells. Some time ago, these bells had been part of a clock.

## THE PORTICO

The present portico was built in the first decades of the XII century, since the old one, contemporary to the church, had collapsed.

It consists of five archs supported, at the side, by two tufa pillars and four different columns with Corinthian capitals. The central round arch is much taller than the painted-archs, which in a way recall the musulman style. Behind the central arch there is a rectangular, white marble portal, on its sides two granite columns with Corinthian capitals.

On the architrave an inscription, addressed to the faithful, commemorates Desiderius: "*(from Latin)* If you know thyself like Desiderius did, you will go to Heaven. Overflowing with holy inspiration, in compliance with the *pact*, he built a house to the goddess, in order to carry off a never-ending prize".

Above the architrave there are two lunettes: the lower one portrays half-length the archangel Michael (P. 26) with Byzantine dresses, a thin staff in his right hand and a globe in his left; the upper one portrays **two angels** holding a medaillon with the image of the **praying Virgin** (P. 1), richly dressed and decked with precious stones and a crown.

On the walls four ogives represent scenes of Abbot Saint Anthony and Saint Paul's lives.

## THE INSIDE

**Basilican plan**, without transept.

Two lines of columns with Corinthian capitals divide the church into 3 aisles, each one of them lead up to a semicircular apse. The nave is longer, taller and broader than the aisles.

The **high altar** (P. 28) is a roman sarcophagus; next to it a quadrangular pulpit (P. 29), supported by four octagonal columns, shows an acephalous eagle, on a side, holding in its claws the gospel-book according to St. John ("In principio erat verbum", -in the beginning was the word-, its first verse, can be read); in front of the pulpit stands the **Paschal candle**, made up of a marble column leaning on a capital.

Near the sacristy, built around 1838, there are an **inscription** commemorating Giuseppe Renato Imperiale, Presbyterian Cardinal, that restored and improved the church in 1732, and a rectangular roman slab of marble, with a mosaic decoration.

At the entrance, on the right side, a roman altar (P. 10) with vegetable motifs and, on the left side, an upside down medieval capital, leaning on a column shaft, are used as holy water fonts. Again at the entrance, on the right, a **plate-glass** (P. 11) protects tufa blocks belonging to the podium of the temple, two loculi, and a 2000-year-old original rock.

## THE FLOOR

The floor is not homogeneous. Somewhere it is paved with **mosaic** (both regular and irregular tesseras); somewhere else with slabs of marbles; in front of the side-apses it is instead partially paved with a "**cosmati masters'-style** mosaic (P. 30). In front of the left-apse, a picture of the **Good-tree** and the **Evil-tree** stands out (P.31).

## THE FRESCOS

Unfortunately, the frescos got part lost. They originally covered all the walls.

Episodes from the Old Testament are painted on the side-walls, on two horizontal lines, each one divided in separate panels by flexuous trees.

Episodes from the New Testament are instead painted on the central walls, on three horizontal lines, each one divided in separate panels by different small columns.

The most remarkable episodes fill more panels (e.g., the parable of the good Samaritan and the Crucifixion).

For the decoration as well, Richard I and Desiderius appear respectively as financier and doctrinal planner.

**The frescos were carried out in a few years**, during the building of the church: between 1072 (date of the donation) and 1078 (year of Richard's death) or between 1072 and 1087 (year of Desiderius' death).

As for the painters, **several masters worked in the church**. None of them had a great personality. But they did not copy pedantically. They all knew well the Byzantine art and technique, directly and indirectly, and interpreted it in a new personal way.

Some experts suppose the painters to be locals, others instead think they were outsiders. Anyway, their work in the Basilica can be considered the starting point of the romanico painting in the South of Italy.

Two Byzantine features were nevertheless kept: juxtaposition of the figures and absence of perspective depth.

Although no painter excelled, it is possible to recognize the *hands* of different artists: the master of "Maestas Domini" in the apse, the master of "Judgment" in the back façade, the master of the Portico, the master of the Aisles

## READING GUIDE TO THE PAINTINGS

An exact reading of the frescos should comply with the following steps: central apse, side-walls (anti-clockwise direction, first and second line), columns' piers, nave (starting from the area near the central apse), back façade, side-apses.

### Central apse: Majesty of God

Right in the centre of the apse, the big Christ in glory (p. 33-34) stands out; around him the four Evangelists are symbolically portrayed (Eagle= John; Lion= Mark; Angel = Matthews; Bull = Luke); and on him lands the dove of the Holy Ghost.

Sitting solemnly as a King, Jesus Christ blesses with his right hand and with his left one holds a book, with the famous sentence "Ego sum Alfa et Omega, primus et novissimus".

Inside the hemicycle of the apse: Desiderius, offering the model of the Basilica; the archangels Gabriel, Michael (P. 2) and Raphael, with open wings and richly dressed; Saint Benedict, with the book of his rule "ausculta o filio", in his hand.

### Old Testament

1. Right side-wall, first level: totally lost.
2. Back wall, right side, first level: Adam and Eve banished from Heaven, the offer of Cain and Abel (P.35)
3. Back façade, left side, first level: Cain kills Abel, God brands Cain, God calls Noah.
4. Left side-wall, first level: the building of the ark, ark on the waters, Noah sacrifice, the tower of Babel, Abraham hospitality, Abraham meets Melchisedech, Abraham sacrifice (P. 36), Isaac before dying; the last panel is missing.
5. Right side-wall, second level: totally lost.
6. Back façade, right side, second level: Gideon vocation, Gideon offers in sacrifice.

7. Back façade, left side, second level: unclear episode of the Old Testament.
8. Left side-wall, second level: totally lost, except for a fragment with the inscription "Quod...T.T."

## **Prophets and Saints**

According to the medieval symbolism, the church on the earth represents the spiritual one.

The columns, supporting the building (the church on the earth), symbolize the earthly forces that support the spiritual church. These forces are the prophets, that announced God's plan, and the saints, that tested it through their life experience. For this reason prophets and saints are all portrayed on the columns.

On the third column the crucifix, prophet of prophets, is painted. At the base of the cross, the sentence "Morti vita datur, sed mors moriente necatur (life is given to death, which is killed by the dying)" symbolizes God's gift, the salvation. The prophets stand and hold a scroll with verses referring to the Messiah.

9. Column-piers, nave, left side, starting from the first semi-column: Sibyl, David (P. 15), Salomon(P 16), Crucifix, Hosea, Zephaniah, Daniel, Amos, lost.
10. Near the prophets: eight saints with halo.(P.38)
11. Column-piers, nave, right side, starting from the column near the apse: Isaiah, Ezekiel,Jeremy, Micah, Balaam, Malachi, Zacharias, Moses, Obadiah.
12. Near the prophets: eight female saints.(P.39)

## **New Testament**

13. Nave, right wall, first level: totally lost.
14. Nave, left wall, first level: the edict of Herod, slaughter of the Innocents, Jesus at the temple with the doctors, the preaching of John, Baptism of Jesus, First Temptation (bread), Second Temptation (vainglory); Third Temptation (riches).
15. Nave, right wall, second level: partly lost.
16. Nave, left wall, second level: the Transfiguration, the census, the pitiless servant, the offering of the widow, the parable of the good Samaritan (p. 41), the parable of the rich man and the poor man (P. 42), the liberation of the madman, the Ascension.
17. Nave, right wall, third level: Jesus and Zacchaeus, Jesus and the woman from Samaria (P. 17), Jesus and the adulteress (P. 47), the recovery of the man born blind, the resurrection of Lazarus (P.18), James and John's mather at Jesus' feet, the dinner at Simon's and the Magdalene, the entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper and the washing of feet (P. 37).
18. Nave, left wall, third level: Getsemani, Judas kiss, the accusation against the priest, Jesus is mocked, Pilate washes his hands, the Calvary, the Crucifixion (P. 40), the Deposition , the limbo, pious women at the Sepulchre, on a journey to Emmaus with two followers, Apparition at Genezaret lake, Disbelief of Thomas, the Ascension.
19. Back facade:

## **The Last Judgment (P. 43)**

In the centre, in an almond-shaped pattern, Christ (acephalus), is sitting on his throne.

Up between the windows, angels play trumpet and, under their feet, eight sweetbreads leave the grave.

At the second and third level, angels and apostles (P. 20-21) are around Jesus. Under him three angels hold scrolls. The scroll in the middle says: "Et tempus iam amplius non erit". In the left scroll the Blessed (grouped in two lines: in the upper one, the authorities; in the lower one the common people) are called: "Venite benedicti patris mei". The right scroll rifers to the Damned

(grouped in two lines: in the upper one, the authorities; in the lower one, demons, flames, Lucifer and Judas chained): "Ite maledicti in ignem aeternum".

20. Right small apse: (upper level) the Virgin with blessing Child and two angels, (lower level) female martyrs.
21. Left small apse: (upper level) Jesus (only his head is left) and two Saints, (lower level) male martyrs.

### **Other frescos**

22. Right small apse: at the top of a small plaster altar, there is a baroc painting, portraying the Virgin between St. Anastasia and St. Magdalene.
23. Right small apse: at the top of a small plaster altar, there is a baroc painting, portraying John the Baptist between St. Peter and St. Paul.
24. Right side-wall, at the bottom: oil painting portraying St. Benedict between his followers St. Placid and St. Mauro.
25. Left side-wall, at the bottom: a fresco of the XVI century portraying St. Lucy (in the middle), St. Apollonia (right) and St. Barbara (left). It was painted by Cesare Martucci in 1568 (see the latin inscription at St. Lucy's feet).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

For the experts, the Basilica of Sant'Angelo in Formis is an important work of art. Their interest lies mainly in the frescos, whose colours, style, connections to other cycles and differences have been deeply analysed.

Besides an artistic experience, in this church it is possible to find the message of God. According to some Councils and to Gregorius Magnus (about 540 - 604), art has to be considered in its educational function. As a matter of fact, Gregorius Magnus wrote that painting was used in churches in order to let those, who cannot read, read the Bible, by watching it on the walls.

In this Basilica, the "picta" or "pauperum" Bible (the painted Bible or the Bible of the poor) tells the tragedy of mankind, from its origins to its end, and comforts the faithful with the hope of Jesus Christ, coming not to condemn but to rescue.

1. Praying Virgin (fot. n. 1)
2. Archangel Michael ( fot. n. 2)
3. Nave (fot. n. 3)
4. Desiderius (hemicycle of the central apse) - (fot. n. 5)
5. Diana (Museo campano, Capua) - (fot. n. 7)
6. Roman altar (fot. n. 10)
7. Podium of the temple (fot. n. 11)
8. Coro sacro (Museo campano, Capua) - (fot. n. 13)
9. King David (fot. n. 15)
10. Jesus and the woman from Samaria (fot. n. 17)
11. The resurrection of Lazarus (fot. n. 18)
12. Decorative motifs (first cornice of the bell tower) - (fot. n. 23)
13. Roman head (entrance-vault of the bell tower) - (fot. n. 24)
14. Archangel Michael (portal lower lunette) - (fot. n. 26)
15. High altar (Roman sarcophagus) - (fot. n. 28)
16. Pulpit (fot. n. 29)
17. Cosmati masters-style mosaic (fot. n. 30)



18. Good-tree and Evil-tree (fot. n. 31)
19. Central apse (fot. n. 33)
20. Last supper and washing of feet (nave, right wall) - (fot. n. 37)
21. Abraham sacrifice (left side-wall) - (fot. n. 36)
22. The good Samaritan (nave, left wall) - (fot. n. 27)
23. The rich man and the poor man (nave, left wall) - (fot. n. 28)
24. Deposition (nave, left wall) - (fot. n. 29)
25. Crucifixion (nave, left wall) - (fot. n. 30)
26. Last Judgment (back façade) - (fot. n. 31)
27. Apostles (back façade) - (fot. n. 33)
28. Jesus and the adulteress (nave, right wall) - (fot. n. 35)