

The parish church of San Michele Arcangelo in Metelliano: the path of knowledge of a vernacular architecture

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Abstract

The parish church of San Michele a Metelliano, located in Tuscany near the city of Arezzo, is a unique case of vernacular architecture. The building is the result of a synthesis of traditional local architecture and a strong Byzantine influence. It became a national monument in 1907.

Keywords: traditional architecture; restoration; conservation; heritage; traditional techniques.

1. Introduction

Research on parish churches in Tuscany has been ongoing for over a century.¹ The numerous studies that have been conducted are justified by the important role these places of worship have played throughout the ages. For centuries, parish churches have not only collected the material and immaterial records of their surroundings, but they themselves are, for the traditional building techniques and local materials employed, important testaments. Although the construction of holy places rose in the first centuries of the second millennium, many of today's parish churches are the result of stratifications that date back to early Christian and, in some cases,

Roman times.² It is a well-known fact that in Tuscany, more than in any other region, the 9th century saw a radical renewal in the construction of places of worship, which was driven by the strong increase in productivity. In Arezzo, the situation was no different; in fact, numerous places of worship were built, both minor, located mainly in rural areas, and major, for example, the so-called *Duomo Vecchio di Arezzo*.³

This building, erected on the Pionta hill, was demolished by Cosimo I in 1561 for military purposes (De Angelis d'Ossat, 1978). The only information available today is comprised of episodic notes from recognised sources (Pasqui, 1899).

¹For further information on the subject, see the various studies conducted, including the following cfr.: Bracco M. (1971) *Architettura e scultura romanica in Casentino*, Firenze; Canestrelle A. (1904). *L'Architettura medievale a Siena e nell'antico territorio*, Siena; Moretti I., Stopani R. (1968). *Chiese Romaniche in Valdelsa*, Firenze; Salmi M. (1912). *Chiese romaniche in Casentino e in Valdarno superiore*, in "L'Arte"; (1927). *L'architettura romanica in Toscana*, Milano-Roma; (1972). *Chiese romaniche in Val di Pesa*, Firenze; (1985). *Chiese romaniche della campagna toscana*, Milano; Salvini R., Von Borsig A. (1973). *Toscana. Unbekannte romanische Kirchen*, Monaco; (1974). *Architettura*

romanica religiosa nel contado fiorentino, Firenze; (1981). *Romanico Senese*, Firenze;

² Angelo Tafi in *Le antiche pievi. Madri vegliarde del popolo aretino* explains the mixture of peoples and events that led to the formation of the pievi in the ancient context of Arezzo by using a time scale.

³For a more detailed discussion of the subject, see Guglielmo De Angelis d'Ossat in *Atti e Memorie della Accademia Petrarca di Arezzo* N.S. XXXVII, p. XXVI, (cited in De Angelis d'Ossat G. (1978). Il "Duomo Vecchio" di Arezzo, *Paladio*, p.38)



Fig. 1 Territorial outline of the parish church of San Michele a Metelliano.

For the renovation of the episcopal complex in Arezzo, initiated by Bishop Elimperto (986-1010), Maginardo, the architect who would subsequently be known as Maginardo Aretino, was commissioned to build the *Duomo*, known today as the *Duomo Vecchio*, outside the walls of Arezzo. In that same period, Maginardo was also commissioned to build the parish church of San Michele a Metelliano, the object of this study. In order to understand the combination of different elements that the parish church of Metelliano presents today, it was important to study this architect from Arezzo; and it was particularly relevant to know that Maginardo travelled to the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna at the beginning of the 11th century. The reasons for his stay there are made clear in a number of documents, in particular one dated 1026,⁴ which states that the work was commissioned by Bishop Adalbert. The bishop, who was previously the Archbishop of Ravenna, intended to have a new basilica, modelled on the one in Ravenna, built just outside the city of Arezzo. Some texts suggest the existence of study drawings made by Maginardo during his journey, but they offer no more definite information. It is, however, important to note that the Basilica of St Vitale

influenced the architect not only in the construction of the *Duomo Vecchio di Arezzo* but also in his later works.



Fig. 2. In Morelli E. (2007). *Strade e paesaggi della Toscana, il passaggio della strada, la strada come passaggio*, Alinea Editrice, Firenze, p. 59.

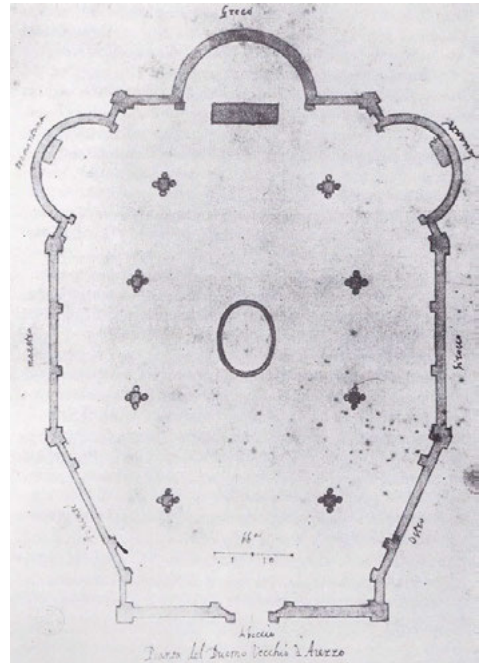


Fig. 3. Giorgio Vasari il giovane, Pianta del Duomo Vecchio (Uffizi, A4788)

⁴ As reported in the document of 1026 (Arch.Capit, N.86) «eo quod ipse architectus Ravennam ivit, et exemplar ecclesiae S. Vitalis inde adduxit, atque solers fundamina in aula b.Donati,

instar Ecclesiae sancti Vitalis primus iniecit» mentioned in De Angelis d'Ossat G. (1978). *Il "Duomo Vecchio" di Arezzo*

2. History of the Parish Church of St Michael in Metelliano

The parish church of San Michele in Metelliano is a summary of Maginardi's Ravenna experience within the framework of minor architecture in the Cortona countryside. The structure is, today, the result of multiple stratifications, which were determined by the needs of the community throughout the ages. The most evident intervention is, today, the one carried out by Maginardi at the beginning of the 11th century. At that time, a radical demolition was carried out, and it was later followed by the reconstruction that gave the building its present appearance. Some studies trace the origins of the structure back to Roman times, and it is hypothesised that an ancient temple, dedicated to the god Bacchus, once rose there. Traces of this previous structure can be found both on the tombstone of a Roman child, which was found during a 20th century excavation and is now preserved in the museum of the Accademia Etrusca di Cortona, and in the etymology of the word *Metelliano*, which derives from the name of an ancient Roman family, the *Gens Metellia* (Tüskés, 2006). One of the earliest references to the building is found in a document dated 1014, in which Henry II confirms that the abbey of Santa Maria in Farneta holds, among other properties, a church dedicated to S. Angelo (Minutoli, Repole, 2018). In 13th century registrations and tithes, the structure is listed as "S. Angelo del Succio," bishopric of the parish of Cortona. The original construction of the church dates back to the 7th century and can most likely be attributed to the Lombards (Tüskés, 2006). The discovery of early-medieval elements in the building confirms this hypothesis. At the beginning of the new Millennium, Maginardi realized the present structure. *The building has undergone major*

transformations over the centuries: in 1439 AD, the bell tower, located at the centre of the façade, was replaced with the present-day bell gable; and in 1674, plaster was added to the façade. During the restorations which began in 1905, and which are documented in the Cortona periodical "L'Etruria" (Pompilj, 1906), important interventions were carried out by Prof. Giuseppe Castellucci.⁵ The plaster was stripped from the building entirely, uncovering, once again, the stone façade that lay underneath. This intervention not only allowed for a better understanding of the structure for purposes of stabilization (Minutoli, Repole, 2018), but it also gave the building its present-day appearance. Without the plaster, the façade is probably as it once was: simple and austere, and more similar to Lombard structures than Tuscan ones. In 1907 it was made a national monument.

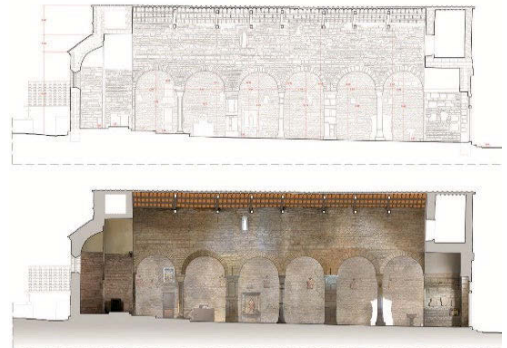


Fig. 4. Two-dimensional survey.

3. Method of analysis

The discovery phase combined an analysis of historical records with a direct analysis of the structure: the former provided a starting point for the understanding of the building and the discovery of known and unknown documentary sources that made it possible to answer the temporal questions that a direct analysis alone

⁵ Giuseppe Castellucci Architect is a well-known figure on the Tuscan scene between the 19th and 20th centuries for the large number of restorations he carried out. For further information see: C. Cresti-L. Zangheri (1978). *Architetti e ingegneri nella Toscana dell'Ottocento*, Uniedit, Firenze, pp.

53–54; Sanguineti C. (2007). *Scheda su Giuseppe Castellucci*, in *Guida agli archivi di architetti e ingegneri del Novecento in Toscana*, a cura di E. Insabato, C. Ghelli, Edifir, Firenze, pp. 113–119.

could not; and the latter, carried out on the materials, involved the use of some of the most modern surveying methods, such as laser scanning and photogrammetry. Together, the two analyses made it possible to study the condition of the structure and elaborate thematic tables for its comprehension and conservation. The realization of the architectural survey, obtained through the two-dimensional restitution of the 3D point cloud, was the base on which further analyses were carried out. Having accurate geometrical-dimensional data makes it possible to elaborate an equally accurate restoration project. In the case of San Michele a Metelliano, in the design phase of the survey, attention was paid to the quality of the data to be acquired, so that it suited the level of detail that needed to be obtained (Pancani, 2017). The subsequent analyses involved, on the one hand, the outline of the state of conservation of the building – through a precise mapping of the materials used and of the relative deterioration and alterations – and on the other hand, an analysis of the static architecture of the church through the identification of both its structural elements and instabilities. Together with the instrumental analyses – and in order to understand the constructive and formal elements that are typical of the architecture of Cortona – comparative analyses of similar buildings were carried out. This made it possible to highlight the discordant aspects and elements in the structures that were analysed.

4. Analysis of the structure

San Michele a Metelliano presents a basilica plan with three naves at the end of which stand three semi-circular apses, and which has no transept. The ceiling alternates barrel vaults, near the apses and the entrance, and wooden trusses. The nave is twice as wide as the side aisles, and it has a slightly raised chancel. The three naves are separated by two massive rectangular pillars alternated by three narrow polygonal columns. From a stratigraphic point of view, the wall face is made of small sandstone blocks arranged in

horizontal and parallel. The Lombard Romanesque façade preserves, above the door, a suspended prothyrum between two single-light windows. The apsidal area is richer: it is made of three apses which are divided by pilasters made from materials that are in part from Roman remains. From the above description, it is clear that some of the constructive and formal elements of the structure are typical of pre-Romanesque (H. E. Kubach, 1978), Tuscan architecture, for example, the basilica plan and the spatial distribution. Other elements, however, are typical of Byzantine architecture. Inside the parish church of San Michele in Metelliano, the alternated pillars and columns are an architectural element taken directly from the basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna. This architectural element is, as Kubach also affirmed, hardly ever the case in Tuscan churches, but it is very common in buildings found in Northern Europe. In the parish church of San Michele, the capitals themselves, which in Tuscan architecture are fashioned in various ways, have a square base and trapezoidal sides, like those on the monolithic columns in the presbytery of the church in Ravenna, which, however, include a pulvino that is absent in the church in Arezzo. The monolithic columns, on the other hand, are octagonal, like in other Tuscan parish churches but absent in S. Vitale. A comparison with what was once the *Duomo Vecchio*, would be of great interest, but, unfortunately, only exterior views and a plan made by Giorgio Vasari can still be found in his book *"Libro delle Piante"* (De Angelis d'Ossat, 1978). The constructive and formal elements that see the parish church of San Michele in Metelliano listed among other important Tuscan vernacular architectures are found in the decorative elements outside the apses. All three apses are divided by pilasters made of terracotta and stone. The lateral ones are also crowned in twin arches. The same construction technique is also present in the parish church of Santa Maria di Confine, in Tuoro sul Trasimeno, where the twin arches are the only peculiar element. In the case of the

parish church in Metelliano, however, the pilasters are also worthy of note for their display of heterogeneous ashlars. This peculiar characteristic is the result of the reuse of remains from the pre-existing Roman temple of Bacchus. What is more, the reuse of material is not limited to the apses: the whole building presents elements re-claimed from Roman structures, mainly travertine (also reworked, like in the façade), and various bricks from the imperial age bearing diagonal incisions (Fatucchi, 1977).



Fig 5. Interior view of the church. (Source: Ghelfi, 2021)



Fig 6. External view of the church. (Source: Ghelfi, 2021)

5. Conclusions

The interdisciplinary approach, carried out by applying a rigorous scientific process, has made a deeper understanding of the architectural peculiarities of the parish church of San Michele a Metelliano possible.

The conservation of this structure becomes inevitable in a measure that is both critical and conscious and must be observed.

The building, unlike a great number of parishes found in Tuscany, stands apart from the rest for characteristics that are difficult to find elsewhere. The blending of essential elements of Byzantine architecture, first and foremost, the alternated pillars and columns, and the constructive elements of the local tradition makes the building an important example of vernacular architecture.



Fig 7. Lunette of one of the side doors of the parish church. (Source: Ghelfi, 2021)

The ties to the territory are present in its every element, from the materials to the stonework, from the decorative elements to the construction. The reuse of building materials has been an integral part of this structure. From when it was first constructed in the 7th century A.D. until more recent interventions, local materials, new or recovered, were used. From the palimpsest that has arisen, it is possible to gain information about the changes that have taken place. Some examples can be found in the walls of the church, where it is possible to identify materials from pre-existing Roman buildings: travertine, used for significant elements, or bricks dating back to the imperial age.

Even the monolithic columns are a synthesis of the alternated pillars and columns found in the architecture of Ravenna and the octagonal ones found in other local churches, for example, the Badia di Petroia, the church of San Pietro in Acqui, the church of San Martino di Pombia (Pardi, 2000). The parish church of San Michele a Metelliano became a national monument in 1907, and today it represents an important testament to be preserved and protected.

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