

Morphological and urban context

Gravina stands on the limestone bank of the Bradanica pit, in the northern sector of the Pedemurgian area on the border between Puglia and Basilicata. The city takes its name from the karst phenomenon of the ravine, which, with its stream, has always provided the fundamental elements for the anthropization of the territory: water and stone. Populated probably since the middle Pleistocene (400-120000 years ago), at the time of the withdrawal of the waters from the highest peaks of the Appulo-Lucanian karst corrugation, the site of Gravina reveals in the evident stratigraphy of the ravine's ridges, the progressive settlement of man. The caves and natural terraces have provided an intuitive means for protection and housing. The unconscious ancestral values of the cave-womb provided the necessary symbolic and spiritual equipment of rock anthropology.

The settlement developed harmoniously on the two sides of the ravine between the Botromagno hill and the canals almost perpendicular to the course of the stream around which the medieval quarters of Fondovito and Piaggio grew. The city is like descending towards the river and then rising from the other side up to the fortresses on which it has then extended until today. Rock architecture was its language: from the exclusive presence of quarried structures, or rather partially excavated in the tuff, of the archaeological area of Botromagno and Madonna della Stella, we move on to the semi-caved and semi-built structures of the Piaggio and Fondovito side, up to the fully architectural structures of the upper districts.

In this context of adaptation more of man to the environment than of the environment to man, the city has taken on a local identity that it has kept well recognizable until the twentieth century, when modern urban development has severed any link between places and identity. In the course of such a long and complex history, different civilizations have alternated, from prehistoric to historical, from pre-Christian to Christian. And, in an extraordinarily syncretic way, the natural civilization of quarrying and belonging to the earth was mixed with the culture of the spirit turned to the sky typical of Christianity. The horizontality and diffusivity of the rocky habitat are integrated with the verticality and concentration of the ancient and Christian city, ensuring continuity to the settlement both in the periods of flowering and in those of crisis.

Among the many testimonies of this world, the rupestrian churches stand out, gathering places for rural and proto-urban Christian communities. Quarried or partially quarried, they adapt natural places of refuge and spiritual meditation, without depriving themselves of the atmosphere of ascetic elevation typical of Christian spirituality, through the construction of colonnades, altars, niches and apses that offer shelter to the faithful, the deceased, and statues, to the frescoes or altarpieces of saints and sacred scenes, but also a forward and upward flight movement, peculiar to the colonnades of sacred places.

The territory of Gravina is dotted with rupestrian churches, which go from the countryside to the heart of the historic center. We can quote: San Vito Vecchio, San Michele Arcangelo alle

Grotte, San Marco in Fondovito district, Santa Maria del Chiancone, San Basilio Magno al Piaggio, Santa Caterina in Rione Piaggio, San Demetrio on the ravine, San Domizio, San Leo in the park, S. Andrea church, Santa Maria la Nova in the San Francesco district, San Nicola della Tufara, San Primo and Feliciano, San Salvatore, Sant'Andrea, Sant'Arcangelo or Angeli, Santa Maria della Stella, Sant'Angelo, Santa Maria degli Angeli at the viaduct-aqueduct bridge on the Gravina, Sant'Elia at the "Vattanieri", Santa Croce, Santa Maria della Porta on the edge of the Gravina ravine to the south-east, Santa Maria Maddalena on the ravine, Deesis or Padre Eterno in the La Stella district, San Giorgio, Cripta Tota or Sant'Elia.

Among these, San Michele Arcangelo alle Grotte and San Basilio Magno al Piaggio stand out for their location and structural complexity.

Saint Basil the Great at Piaggio

In the fantastic rocky landscape of the "Lama Piaggio or Chiascio" district on the ravine, the cave church of Saint Basil the Great is located in the highest ring of the north-west of the district. Although partially integrated into other buildings, and today still clearly legible in the complex between the entrance facade and the bell tower above it, up to the street level of Via Calderoni.

It originated with the other rock churches of the Piaggio district(Santa Maria della Neve - later integrated into the church of Saint Lucia - Saint Maria del Chiancone, Saint Catherine, Saint Andrea) at the time of diffusion of Christianity in the territory of Gravina between the eight and ninth centuries.

From the documentation of the ecclesiastical and civil administration it is possible to ascertain the sacred functionality of San Basilio Magno from the fifteenth century to the early twentieth century. It served as a church and place of spiritual encounters. Later, and for many years, it unfortunately remained unused and therefore deconsecrated, unknown to the people of Gravina and to the scholars of the local crypts. The existence of this was known only thanks to the small tuff bell tower, which stands out in its simple structure recently restored above the church. Thanks to the work of the "Cultural Association Friends of the E. Pomarici-Santomasi Foundation" and the protection of the remains made by the Marchetti family, owner of the site, today it is possible to relive at least in part the spirit of these places, reopened for viewing and enjoyment of the public as architectural and artistic symbols of the history of the Gravinese past, on the occasion of the Jubilee of 2000.

The cave churches were considered the center of aggregation and the nucleus of the small villages of the cliffs of the "Gravina". It is an original and typical presence of the Apulian and Lucania territories. Inside, there are images, colors, precious inscriptions that activate contemplation; they transmit warmth and comfort, which satisfy the soul of the people involved in the environment. Many of these have disappeared, many have been transformed into cellars or common abandoned caves. The church of San Basilio had been a point of reference for bringing together many families who developed a real urban center with a square and service roads.

From the historical-administrative documents, we get the following description of the church of San Basilio: "existing under the bishop Riccio, it was entirely '*excisa in petra*' by the Maurelli family. The rough vault was supported by eight small columns and it received light from two holes and 'you walked over the vault, having opened a public road'. The street in question is the current 'via M. Calderoni' and the church, or more exactly what remains of it, is recognizable by a late bell tower and by remains incorporated into the house below "(AAVV, Gravina, through the streets, Bari, 1984, p. 70).

Cardinal Orsini, visiting this church in 1714, stated: "This Church of the Mansella family is hollowed out in a tuff, with eight columns, irregularly smoothed when the cave was excavated. For windows, two holes are needed: the floor is uneven, and in front of the altar is sunken. "Over the vault you walk, as a public road has opened there ". (F. Raguso, M. D'Agostino, San Basilio Magno al Piaggio. Rock habitat, church, benefit, Tragni, Altamura, 1999, 21).

After the period of general flowering of the Piaggio district in the fifteenth century, we learn that in the age of the Counter-Reformation the church was in a state of decay. Since then there have been documents attesting that between the end of the 16th and the mid-19th centuries, San Basilio was the subject of constant maintenance and decoration, thanks to the commitment of the Bishop and the faithful to keep this important place of spiritual aggregation open. However, the financial commitment of the wealthiest families residing in the neighborhood, such as Marculi, Deserto, Manzella was prevalent. It was their commitment, through donations, reconstruction of the altar and conferral of benefits, to ensure the continuity of the cult, the maintenance of the church and its embellishment over time, also in order to protect the tombs allocated there of the most illustrious members of the respective families.

To them, for example, are ascribed the works that, starting from 1579, Lucio Francullo and Francesco Deserto of Gravina created to avoid the desecration of the church, where many ancestors and relatives were buried. The Francullo and Deserto families undertook to transform it into a chapel with all the necessary amenities through: the construction of the access door; the reconstruction of the bell tower; the leveling of the road in front; the construction of the staircase that connects the entrance to the church with the Via Calderoni above; the financing of the celebration of two masses a week at one's own expense.

From the documents of the visits of Monsignor Giustiniani of 1595, 1599, 1614, not at all benevolent towards the management of the Francullos, we derive that the church, defined underground, had three naked altars, a source of holy water placed on a column, a bell and accompanying the main altar, an icon with three images: San Basilio on the right, San Leonardo on the left, the Virgin Mary with Child, in the center, nowadays partially rebuilt by the painter Saverio Perrini. The body of Dr. Francullo was in a pit near the church door. While the two altars on the sides of the central one were not used for the celebration. From the defensive deposition of Lucio Francullo, however, useful information is obtained about the evolution of nearby buildings, from which the current state of the places is clearer, which sees the construction of the church almost indistinguishable from neighboring buildings. Despite numerous attempts to dismember it and use it for private use, fortunately the aforementioned families in the old regime and the current owners managed to safeguard the site.



Side perspective of the old altars



Old altar on the left



Enlargements of the shelf of the old central altar



Source of holy water



Ancient front door



Old altar on the left

From the records of Monsignor Baldini's visit in 1629, other information can be obtained relating to the altars and, above all, to the images that accompanied it. We learn of a painting on the high altar that depicted Santa Maria degli Angeli with the Child surrounded by two Angels in a cloud. Below appeared the images of the Blessed Lorenzo Giustiniani, of the Blessed Carlo Borromeo, of the Blessed Basilio, of St. Vincent Martyr, with figures of children of the Manzella family at their feet, with the family insignia and the heraldic coat of arms of Monsignor Vincenzo Giustiniani. In support of the altar, there were two ancient wooden candlesticks, and sacred vestments. There is also mention of alia tabula dedicated to San Basilio and San Leonardo tempora collapsa, now partially rebuilt by the painter Saverio Perrini.

Again in 1686, Monsignor Valvassorio found the church in good condition, he confirmed the furnishings and equipment of the visit of 1629, with the addition of the presence of a statue of Jesus Christ depicting the Ecce Homo placed on the right side of the main altar.



Picture placed on the main altar

In the aforementioned visit by Cardinal Orsini in 1714, however, we read: "De unico altare: we approve the two modillions of tuff called trofino, with its table made of a piece of the same stone, the step of the candlesticks, and the frame of the picture likewise of the same stone; the canvas stragola: the Cross and the two secret tables; the picture of ancient painting [...] Caret sacristia "(F. Raguso, M. D'Agostino, *San Basilio Magno al Piaggio*, op. cit., p. 21). Finally, in the acts of Cardinal Orsini, the instrumentum for the consecration of the new altar is preserved, built in the church of San Basilio, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, to San Basilio Magno, San Lorenzo Leucita Martire, San Carlo Borromeo, San Lorenzo Giustiniani , which are depicted on the canvas painting, made by the Manzella family. Later, the new altar turned out to be the only one used for worship.

The new late Baroque altar, much richer than the three presumably medieval altars, led to the change in the plan of the Church because it is placed on the right aisle. Furthermore, unlike the eighteenth-century testimony, two sacristies appear: one attached to the main altar of the central nave, and the other to the new altar. Both, however, have no doors and a particularly humid environment, so much so as to justify the claim relating to the difficulty of keeping sacred vestments and vestments inside San Basilio.

In light of the evidence, therefore, it appears that the church has had more lives. Until the end of the sixteenth century, it most likely appeared completely quarried, it was larger than the current one because it was not yet affected by annexes to other properties and without entrance doors. The plan had three naves, divided by eight between columns and rough pillars, with three altars, one for each nave, and an apsidal chapel on the right aisle. This structure is legible even though the plan is not clearly rectangular.

Starting from the end of the sixteenth century, masonry structures appeared to define the openings and insert the entrance door, to protect the sacred place. The front churchyard would have been leveled and the access stairway from the upper road would have been built.

Starting from the eighteenth century, with the construction of the new altar, however, the Church took on an orthogonal plan to the previous one, with a single altar, resting on two shelves and a frame for sacred painting, forming a complex entirely carved in "tuff called trofino ". At the same time, the Church would have been reduced by the annexation to another property of a portion falling on the left with respect to the current entrance. In any case, the care of the church would have remained constant over the following decades until the middle of the century, apart from the problems related to the custody of vestments and sacred furnishings.

Unfortunately, in the second half of the eighteenth century, reports of neglect and degradation of the site resulting from the interruption of regular religious services became frequent again. Even in 1824, the church was not suitable for worship.

However, in the 19th century, the cure for the benefit passed to the De Leonardis family. And in 1842 Francesco De Leonardis had a new altar dedicated to San Pasquale Baylon built, subsequently consecrated on 8 December 1848, restoring the celebrations deriving from the right of benefit.

After this date, there is no more certain information about the continuity of the cult, the date of desecration, or the last passage of ius patronatus and property. In 1788, the crypt was purchased by the Marchetti family because it was annexed to the house above which was the object of the sale. And thanks to the will of the Marchetti family it was subsequently excluded from subsequent alienations and made available today for recovery.

LINK VIRTUAL GUIDED TOUR OF THE CHURCH:

<https://wetansfer.com/downloads/e24ce0ed45df49dbe0f3c9fcb46d9b6920220325061713/4ce33ea85f419851d9d11364ac17042320220325061749/d39c3e>

LINK PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN IN THE CHURCH-CAVE:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1oqIE5HHKrPH5VnqzDZsrqSs_y9YG2SZN?usp=sharing

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