

## The SS.Pietro and Paolo D'Agrò's Basilica of Casalvecchio Siculo



After the great Cathedrals, this building is the most complex monument built in Sicily in the Norman age: it is a mixture of byzantine, Arabic and Norman art.

It was built in 1116-1117, as can be seen in the diploma issued by Ruggero II in favor of the monastery of the Abbot Geraism, probably on the remains of an existing building. The diploma, of which there is neither the original nor any copy, was translated by Costantino Lascaris and states that along the road from Messina to Palermo, during a break in "Scala S. Alexii", a venerable abbot named Gerasimo, who lived in the ruins of an ancient monastery of the valley came to Ruggero and begged him to give him the license and the means to rebuild the ancient monastery which had been destroyed by the Arabs. The king granted him the necessary sum, an extensive area of the valley and several census rights on agricultural lands.

The planimetric scheme of the Basilica for some scholars was used as a model for the Palatine chapel of Palermo. The entrance with interposed portico between two bell towers is typical of Norman architecture. Preceded by two towers, the plan is divided into three naves that end in apses, separated by columns and pointed arches. The main cupola stands on four strong columns in the middle of the main nave, at the top of a quadrangle on the slightly dissimilar side, while the minor dome stands between the transept and the presbytery. Both domes are supported and pushed upwards with beautiful high alveolar niches of Islamic matrix, the *mugarnas*, that transform the quadrangular plant into a circle. The *muqarnas* are obtained with a suspended brick structure. The external decorative elements are pilasters of Byzantine origin not juxtaposed but connected to the building mass, that intertwine in blind arches, artistic transfer Islamic of derivation that we also find in the Royal Palace of Palermo. The color effects obtained thanks to the use

of bricks, of the lava stone and the red stone of Taormina and the tactile effects of the different wall texture.

The policroma's decoration is typical of the Norman architecture of the province of Messina and some experts attribute this choice to various religious orders, for example the Basilian who practiced the Greek rite.

The building was not only used for cult purposes but also a watch tower to prevent Islamic revolts by the Muslims who lived in the areas nearby. Its layout is of an "ecclesia munita" with turrets and "watching" terraces.

The Greek epigraph engraved in the wedges of the arch of the main portal reads: "this temple was built by the apostles Pietro and Paolo from Teostericto catechumen tauromenita at their own expense. The Lord may remember him 6680 (1171 A.D.).The major Girardo il Franco".

As claimed by several scholars, the intervention of Gerardo il Franco of 1172 was a restoration following the terrible earthquake of 1169 that probably damaged the building, and was limited to the main portal, at the south door and on the part of the northern front above the thresholds of the windows of the first floor, whose weaving has no color effects, limited to the use of brick. These restorations overlapped a previous architectural matrix inspired by the Byzantines, Arabs and Normans. The monastery was a centre for Christianity and culture throughout Humanism. The monastic community moved to Messina in 1794 for health reasons. Then both the monastery and Basilica were taken over by the private families of Crisafulli from Casalvecchio and Guarnera of Forza D'Agrò. In 1904 the (buildings) premises were both bought by the state and later declared National monuments in 1909. The lost library of the abbey is now digitally available thanks to the cooperation between the Lions Club, Archeoclub and the council of Casalvecchio siculo.