

MONTECASSINO



The monastery of Montecassino

The monastery was constructed on an older pagan site, a temple of Apollo that crowned the hill, enclosed by a fortifying wall above the small town of Cassino, still largely pagan at the time and recently devastated by the Goths. Benedict's first act was to smash the sculpture of Apollo and destroy the altar.

He rededicated the site to John the Baptist. Once established there, Benedict never left. At Monte Cassino he wrote the Benedictine Rule that became the founding principle for western monasticism. There at Monte Cassino he received a visit from Totila, king of the Ostrogoths, perhaps in 543 (the only remotely secure historical date for Benedict), and there he died.

View across the valley. Monte Cassino became a model for future developments. Unfortunately its protected site has always made it an object of strategic importance. It was sacked or destroyed a number of times.

In 584 the Lombards sacked the Abbey, and the surviving monks fled to Rome, where they remained for more than a century.

During this time the body of St Benedict was transferred to Fleury, the modern Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire near Orleans, France. A flourishing period of Monte Cassino followed its re-establishment in 718 by Abbot Petronax, when among the monks were Carloman, son of Charles Martel; Ratchis, predecessor of the great Lombard Duke and King Aistulf; and Paul the Deacon, the historian of the Lombards.

In 744, a donation of Gisulf II of Benevento created the Terra Sancti Benedicti, the secular lands of the abbacy, which were subject to the abbot and nobody else save the pope. Thus, the monastery became the capital of a state comprising a compact and strategic region between the Lombard principality of Benevento and the Byzantine city-states of the coast (Naples, Gaeta, and Amalfi).

In 883 Saracens sacked and then burned it down. Among the great historians who worked at the monastery, in this period there is Erchempert, whose *Historia Langobardorum Beneventanorum* is a fundamental chronicle of the ninth-century Mezzogiorno.



The monastery of Montecassino: the Bramante cloister

The façade of the church: it was rebuilt and reached the apex of its fame in the 11th century under the abbot Desiderius (abbot 1058 - 1087), who later became Pope Victor III.

The number of monks rose to over two hundred, and the library, the manuscripts produced in the scriptorium and the school of manuscript illuminators became famous throughout the West. The unique Beneventan script flourished there during Desiderius' abbacy. The buildings of the monastery were reconstructed on a scale of great magnificence, artists being brought from Amalfi, Lombardy, and even Constantinople to supervise the various works. The abbey church, rebuilt and decorated with the utmost splendor, was consecrated in 1071 by Pope Alexander II. A detailed account of the abbey at this date exists in the *Chronica monasterii Cassinensis* by Leo of Ostia and Amatus of Monte Cassino gives us our best source on the early Normans in the south.

Abbot Desiderius sent envoys to Constantinople some time after 1066 to hire expert Byzantine mosaicists for the decoration of the rebuilt abbey church. According to chronicler Leo of Ostia the Greek artists decorated the apse, the arch and the vestibule of the basilica. Their work was admired by contemporaries but was totally destroyed in later centuries except two fragments depicting greyhounds (now in the Monte Cassino Museum).



"The abbot in his wisdom decided that great number of young monks in the monastery should be thoroughly initiated in these arts" - says the chronicler about the role of the Greeks in the revival of mosaic art in medieval Italy.

The Polish flag flying over the rubble of Monte Cassino, 1944. An earthquake damaged the Abbey in 1349, and although the site was rebuilt it marked the beginning of a long period of decline. In 1321,

Pope John XXII made the church of Monte Cassino a cathedral, and the carefully preserved independence of the monastery from episcopal interference was at an end.

In 1505 the monastery was joined with that of St. Justina of Padua. The site was sacked by Napoleon's troops in 1799 and from the dissolution of the Italian monasteries in 1866, Monte Cassino became a national monument.

There was a final destruction on February 15, 1944 when during the Battle of Monte Cassino (January - May 1944), the entire building was pulverized in a series of heavy air-raids.



The Abbey was rebuilt after the war, financed by the Italian State. Pope Paul VI reconsecrated it in 1964.

The archives, besides a vast number of documents relating to the history of the abbey, contained some 1400 irreplaceable manuscript codices, chiefly patristic and historical. By great foresight on the part of Lt.Col. Julius Schlegel (a Catholic), a Vienna-born German officer, and Captain Maximilian Becker (a Protestant), both from the Panzer-Division Hermann Göring, these were all transferred to the Vatican at the beginning of the battle

The monastery of Montecassino: the garden



Cassino: the ancient street "Latina"



Cassino: the cemetery