

MONUMENTA

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Sesto Calende, Abbazia¹ di S. Donato^{*}

I. The frazione of Abbazia, in which is situated the ancient abbey church of S. Donato, lies about a kilometre distant from the commune of Sesto Calende. De Darstein³ has studied and illustrated the architecture of the church. The history of the abbey has been made the object of a special monograph by Spinelli in a work which is a serious contribution to the local history of Sesto Calende. The historians Robolini, Giulini,⁴ Bescapè and Ughelli have all treated of the history of the monastery.

II. The exact year of the foundation of S. Donato is unknown. Ughelli has published a bull of Pope John VIII, dated 874, in favour of Giovanni, bishop of Pavia, in which, among other goods, are confirmed to the latter «the monastery of S. Donato founded by your predecessor bishop Luitprando, in the place which is called Scozzola».⁵

* Testo ripreso integralmente da: A.K. PORTER, *The lombard Architecture*, Yale University press-H. Milford, New Haven-London 1915-1917, vol. I, p. 9-11.

¹ This frazione was formerly known as *Scozzola*.

² Milano.

³ 383.

⁴ I, 274.

⁵ JOANNES EPISCOPUS Servus servorum Dei. Reverendiss. Joanni S. Ticinensis Ecclesiae, &c. in perpetuum [...] Igitur postulante a nobis tua reverentia quantum ea, quae ad stabilitatis integritatem, & ad profectum honoris sanctae tunc pertinere noscuntur Ecclesiae [...] confirmamus, tibi, successoribusque tuis; [...] harumque tenore praecipientes [*sic* = praecipientes], ut Monasterium S. Dorati [*sic*] fundatum a Luitprando Epis. decessore tuo in loco, qui dicitur Scogialo, cum omnibus rebus mobilibus, & immobilibus secundum testamenti sui seriem collatis [...] te, successoresque tuos perpetuis temporibus jurisdictionem tenere, habereque decernimus. [...] Datum est hoc nono Kal. Septembris, per manum Leonis Episcopi missi, & Apocrisarii S. Sedis Apostolicae, imperante Dom. Carolo coronato magno imperatore. Et ut certius apparent hoc nostrum Privilegium, & inconcussum permaneat, sigillo nostro jussimus insigniri. Anno II. & post consulatum eius anno II. indict. XI. (Ughelli, I, 1085-1086). This bull has been reprinted in the *Hist. Pat. Mon.*, XIII, 463.

This bull, which is very badly printed by Ughelli, offers several difficulties. According to Ughelli, bishop Luitprando or Liutardo died in 830,⁶ but whence this information is derived I do not know, and I suspect that it is incorrect, since a bishop Liutardo of Pavia is mentioned by Anastasius Bibliothecarius⁷ as a contemporary of Pope Nicholas I (858-867), and of the archbishop Giovanni of Ravenna. On the basis of this evidence historians have been divided as to what year and even as to what time the foundation should be ascribed, and have assigned it anywhere from 822 to 860. At any event, it is certain the foundation must have taken place in the second or third quarter of the IX century.

The monastery, although outside of the diocese of Pavia, depended upon the bishops of that city. In 1105 it is mentioned among the possessions confirmed to the bishop Guido by Pope Paschal II.⁸

The subsequent history of the abbey, so far as it is known, is of minor importance for the study of the architecture. In 1509 the monastery passed into *commendam*⁹ and in 1533 the *commendam* was given to the Ospedale Maggiore of Milan.¹⁰ Subsequently Olivetani monks were introduced. From a passage of the acts of the pastoral visits of the bishops of Pavia, Spinelli¹¹ has deduced that in 1566 the sacristy was placed at the east end of the south side aisle and was vaulted. The church was whitewashed between 1607 and 1613, but the final baroccoization did not take place until after 1616. It was, I presume, at the end of the XVIII century that the monks were suppressed and a parish established in the church, although I have found no explicit mention of the fact. In 1816 the church was removed from the jurisdiction of the diocese of Pavia and placed under that of Milan.¹²

III. The edifice consists of two distinct parts, a church and a

⁶ Ibid., 1084.

⁷ De Vitiis Roman. Pontif., ed. Muratori, R.I.S., III, 235.

⁸ Monasterium S. Donati a Ticinensi quondam Episcopo in Scovilla fundatum (Ughelli, I, 1085).

⁹ Spinelli, 47.

¹⁰ Ibid., 228.

¹¹ 111.

¹² Spinelli, 111.



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San Donato di Sesto Calende.
Due colonne
in immagini scattate da
A.K. Porter (1913)



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narthex. The church comprises a nave four bays long, two side aisles, a raised choir flanked by side aisles, three apses and a crypt of three aisles four or five bays long. The narthex, of about the same width as the church, consists of two bays divided into three equal aisles, which do not correspond to those of the basilica. The campanile rises to the north of the choir.

The narthex is covered with groin vaults, oblong in plan, highly domed and provided with transverse arches of which the extrados is so much loaded as to form a pointed curve. These vaults are provided with wall ribs, also with loaded extrados. The free-standing supports are columns notable for their rather exaggerated entasis. The responds comprise five members, of which the central one is semicircular or semioctagonal.

The nave has been covered internally and externally with barocco stuccos, which make it exceedingly difficult to trace the original forms. The rectangular piers show a very pronounced entasis or inward lean on the side of the nave as well as of that of the side aisles.

The crypt retains to a much larger extent its original character. The groin vaults are not so highly domed as those of the narthex, but have similar disappearing transverse arches.

The façade of the narthex and part of the side walls of the same are constructed of large and carefully wrought blocks of ashlar somewhat crudely laid in courses frequently broken and separated by thick beds of mortar; in parts of the narthex, however, ninth cruder masonry, hardly superior to rubble, is introduced. The campanile and the remainder of the basilica (where the latter has not been remade in the period of the Renaissance) are constructed of very much smaller stones – in the apse many bricks are introduced – for the most part uncut, rather carelessly laid in a manner which suggests rubble construction. In addition to scaffolding holes, there are numerous scaffolding brackets. A distinct break in the masonry of the exterior walls makes it evident that the narthex was added after the nave had been completely finished.

IV. The capitals of the narthex are of a curious type, without, so far

as I am aware, analogy in Lombardy.¹³ The coarse carving possesses a certain barocco quality that recalls the capitals of S. Giorgio in Palazzo at Milan.¹⁴ The design is confused, and one hardly knows whether one is looking at leaves, interlaces or an all-over pattern. The execution is mechanical, and undercutting is avoided, yet the character of the leaf-forms seems rather advanced. One of the capitals¹⁵ of the free-standing columns has a row of uncarved acanthus leaves surmounted by two sets of volutes – a motive Carlovingian in origin, but here treated in the dry manner of the capitals of Fontanella al Monte.¹⁶ The abacus of this capital has a scale ornament, other abaci are decorated with rinceaux, or similar motives. Some of the bases are of Attic character and supplied with griffes. Others have a profile consisting of two square fillets separated by a scotia, in the centre of which is a torus. The capitals of the crypt, on the other hand, are uncarved or merely with corners splayed in the form of a leaf; the monolithic shafts are without bases.

The campanile is decorated with arched corbel-tables grouped three and three resting on pilaster strips. On the west face these pilaster strips are grouped two and two, but here, like the belfry itself, they appear to have been rebuilt.

The central apse is adorned with a cornice of blind niches in two orders. In two orders also are the windows. The north absidiole, still preserved, has a cornice of arched corbel-tables and small, widely splayed windows. Imbedded in the apse as second-hand material are several bits of Carlovingian carving.

V. The narthex, as proved by its ashlar masonry and by the capitals analogous to those of S. Giorgio in Palazzo at Milan (1129) and Fontanella al Monte (c. 1130), is certainly a construction of the XII century, and may be ascribed with confidence to c. 1130. Of the remainder of the edifice, which appears homogeneous, in so far as it has not been remade in the barocco period, it is more difficult to determine

¹³ Plate 1, Figs. 3, 4.

¹⁴ Plate 128, Fig. 5.

¹⁵ Plate 1, Fig. 3.

¹⁶ Plate 93, Fig. 2.

the epoch. There is, it has been seen, conclusive internal proof that the nave is earlier than the narthex, that is to say, earlier than c. 1130. The masonry is precisely analogous to that of the neighbouring church of S. Vincenzo, consecrated in 1102. I therefore assign this portion of the edifice to c. 1100, with the exception of the columns and capitals of the crypt, which are probably taken from an earlier building. I experience, I confess, considerable reluctance in ascribing an edifice in many ways so primitive to so late a date, but the close analogy of the masonry to that of S. Vincenzo seems to leave no other alternative. The singular crudeness of the masonry and the numerous primitive features of the edifice must be ascribed to extraordinary haste and carelessness on the part of the builders.