

MARIA FRANCHINI AND VALERIO CEVA GRIMALDI



SECRET CAMPANIA

CAPRI, POMPEII, VESUVIUS, AMALFI COAST AND SURROUNDING AREA



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

THE STRAW OBELISKS OF IRPINIA

⑤

Towers of wheat that predict the future

Rione carro, 83036 Mirabella Eclano – Third Saturday in September at 3pm
 Piazzale De Sanctis, 83040 Flumeri – 8 and 15 August at 5:30pm
 Piazza della Misericordia, 83040 Fontanarosa – 14 August at 6pm
 83030 Villanova Battista – 19 and 27 August at 5pm
www.unplicampania.net/unpliavellino/



Although the dates, shapes and ritual programmes associated with the straw obelisks (“obelischi di paglia”) of Irpinia vary, their content is identical. These votive “monuments” made of wheat and straw (see also p. 15 and p. 62) embody the act of thanksgiving to the Virgin Mary (or sometimes to a saint) for the harvest, in the hope that it will be repeated the following year.

At Mirabella Eclano, the 25 metre-tall wooden obelisk structure, which is stored dismantled and carefully looked after throughout the year, is reassembled for the festival. Decoration made from wheat from the last harvest is added once the tower has been hoisted onto a float and balanced using ropes manipulated by hundreds of experienced men, the “funaioli”. The men must then keep it upright while the float is pulled along the 5-hour route by six pairs of long-horned oxen. If the obelisk were allowed to fall, the town would be struck by great misfortune. The fall of 1881 was followed by a terrible famine, and that of 1961 by a devastating earthquake.

The obelisk at Flumeri (following the example of the other two towns) is dressed while lying on the ground and an ingenious system of ladders, increasing in length as the tower is raised from the ground, is used to move it into an upright position: a technique involving the work of the “funaioli”, who pull from the opposite side. The operation, which lasts approximately three hours and requires both skill and physical force, is carried out to the sound of special drums built from agricultural containers. On 15 August the obelisk is transported across the town. Here, the skill of the “funaioli” involves preventing the obelisk from leaning toward the left, which would be a very bad omen. The archives make no mention of any falls.

During the pre-Christian era, bunches of crops were offered to the Great Mother Goddess and carried with great pomp to the temple. Over time, the clusters came to be transported on carts or altars decorated with flowers and ribbons, eventually transforming (particularly from the 17th century) into monumental “festival machines”. The structure of the tower, as well as the physical force involved, also recalls the phallic rituals used to ward off sterility (see p. 143).

Mirabella Eclano, inhabited since the Iron Age, was a large Roman colony until the 7th century. The remains of the Roman town are very extensive and highly interesting (Via Nazionale delle Puglie; free entry; sar-cam.mirabellaecclano@beniculturali.it).

THE THEATRE-TEMPLE OF PIETRAVAIRANO

③

*One of the most extraordinary examples of
Greco-Roman architecture*

*Teatro Tempio di San Nicola - 81040 Pietravairano
Open: For guided tours contact Mario Ibello
Tel: +39 333 771 8337
Email: info@aptmatese.it*

Constructed on the side of a mountain, on an artificial terrace reaching a height of 409 metres, the theatre-temple of Pietravairano is enclosed by a megalithic surrounding wall. It is considered to be one of the most remarkable examples of Greco-Roman architecture, typical of southern Italy. Yet despite current archaeological excavations, the deity worshipped in this sanctuary remains unknown.

Situated in a remarkable natural location, this ancient complex was built between the 2nd and 1st centuries BC and discovered by an aviation enthusiast who flew over the site in 2001. Constructed away from the cities, it appears to have been used for the performance of sacred rituals.



NEARBY

*The Virgin of the vineyard and the legend of the
guardian ox* ④

*Convent of Santa Maria della Vigna
Piazza Agostino Castrillo Vescovo - 81040 Pietravairano
Open: Sunday 9am-11am or by appointment
Tel: +39 082 398 4169 / 082 398 4097 / 082 398 4932*

The underground chapel of the Church of Santa Maria della Vigna contains three 14th-century paintings discovered during restoration work carried out in 1982. They depict the crucifixion, Saint Julian, and a Virgin offering a grape to a bird perched on the finger of the infant Jesus. According to tradition, this Virgin is described as being "of the Vineyard", since it was discovered in the vineyard belonging to an old man in 1384. This date was given in 1687 by the Bishop of Teano, who reported this miraculous discovery: as soon as it had finished working, an ox, which was being used to plough the fields, went to rest under a cherry tree planted in a vineyard. Despite refusing to move and feed itself, the ox remained in perfect physical condition. The entire village waited for a response from heaven to this miracle, which soon arrived in the form of a young girl, who dreamt that the Virgin had identified the cherry tree as the place where her image would be found.

THE CAVE CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA IN GROTTA

⑦

An incredible gallery of medieval painting behind an insignificant façade

81037 Rongolise (Sessa Aurunca)

Open: Visits by appointment only

Tel: (Tourist office) +39 392 108 2779

Email: curia@diocesisessa.it

Although the modern façade is of debatable appearance, nobody will regret making the detour to Rongolise in order to admire the superb frescoes (executed between the 11th and 13th centuries) decorating the two cavities cut into the tuff hillside that form the cave church of Santa Maria in Grotta. The strong point of this pictorial decoration is undoubtedly the Dormition of Mary. Taken from the apocryphal gospel attributed to Saint John, this subject stands out for its strong affinity with the Hellenic world, which is confirmed by the Greek inscription found below the painting: *KOIMHΣHΣ THΣ ΘEOTOKOΨ* (*koimesis theotokoi*, meaning

Dormition of the Mother of God). The body of the Virgin, surrounded by the worshipping apostles, lies unaltered on its catafalque while waiting to rejoin its soul, which, having already ascended to heaven, is depicted in the arms of Jesus. Near to this scene there is another, less well preserved, depicting the weighing of souls by Saint Michael (a theme dear to Egyptian tomb painters). The Devil can also be seen pulling the tray holding the soul downwards. Visible on the opposite wall are a number of rare images: the prophet Esdras, Saint Margaret, and Saint Onuphrius the hermit, patron saint of weavers, covered with no more than a worn loincloth and his own hair. The cave is overflowing with votive images of saints and the Virgin, images commissioned by the faithful, some of whose names can still be read below the paintings, accompanied by the Latin comment *ego pingere feci* (I had this painted). One Virgin, dating from the 13th century, stands out in particular; she is portrayed in the guise of a queen, and her striking resemblance to the eastern icons does not go unnoticed. The very obvious Byzantine influence indicates the Cassinian origin of this church, which was located below a building used as a hermitage until the early 20th century and did not form part of a monastery. It was in fact a popular stopping place for travellers, who passed along this route in significant numbers. While repair works were being carried out in the 17th century, the entire lower section of the frescoes was covered with Baroque decoration.



PALAZZO MONDO

17

A painter devoted body and soul to Baroque splendour

Via Domenico Mondo, 6

81020 Capodrise- Open: Visits through GIA.D.A. Association

Tel: +39 082 344 2710 – Mob: +39 333 404 0198 / +39 335 609 9462

Email: associazionegiada@yahoo.it

By appointment, it is possible to visit the first floor of the remarkable Palazzo Mondo (18th century), which has a number of astonishingly sumptuous rooms, such as the reading room, dining room, “picturesque” salon, a room decorated on the theme of matrimonial union, prayer room and the study, whose wall paintings are surrounded by motifs inspired by Etruscan art. In the midst of these splendours, the corner salon is the very archetype of the Baroque: the pictures, frescoed on the walls, are surrounded by majolica and the ceiling, covered with *trompe l'œil* architectural motifs, is truly breathtaking. These were created by the Magri brothers, specialists in

this type of scenography, designed to “enlarge” space to infinity. Domenico Mondo (1723-1806), who lived in this palace until 1789, is responsible for the eight feminine figures representing the virtues; they complement the already fabulously lavish decoration in the salon. The superb internal garden is worth seeing in its own right, with its vigorous aralias, which, together with other magnificent plants, form a theatre set, framing sculptures and architectural features. The colours in this setting seem to embody the spirit of Campania and create an ambiance tinged with mild nostalgia. Domenico Mondo, a pupil of the painter Francesco Solimena, was also involved in the task of decorating the Royal Palace of Caserta, where he created the fresco of the *Triumph of the Bourbon Arms* in 1785. In 1789 he was appointed co-director of the Neapolitan Arts Academy. The current owners (the Tartaglione family) have decided to restore the building and transform it into a museum devoted to this cultured and sophisticated painter-poet who swore unending devotion to the magnificence of the Baroque, refusing to subscribe to the austerity of the nascent neoclassical style, which led him to live frugally until his death in Naples in 1806.



VILLA LYSIS

31

A delightful location

Via Lo Capo, 12

Capri

Open: April, May, September, October 10am–6pm; June to August 10am–7pm;

November and December 10am–4pm. Closed on Mondays

Email: info@villalysiscapri.com / apeironcapri@gmail.com

www.villalysiscapri.com



Still relatively unknown, Villa Lysis is an absolutely wonderful location, ideal for a moment of relaxation. Visitors may walk through the lush gardens, enter the fascinating rooms of the villa and admire an astounding panorama, which is even more spectacular at dawn and during sunset.

The overall project of the villa, which was originally called La Glo-riette before it was renamed Lysis (a name said to derive from that of a young disciple of Socrates, or simply from “lily”), was completed by Édouard Chimot, a decorator and engraver, for his friend Count Jacques d’Adelswärd-Fersen. In fact, building was supervised by the count in person, who began work in 1904 and saw it through to a successful conclusion in July of the following year.

In Paris, 1903, Fersen had been involved in a sexual scandal. Declared persona non grata in the Parisian salons, he withdrew to Capri, the island that he had discovered and enjoyed several years previously during a brief stay.

The site of the new building (at a place called Lo Capo) was not chosen randomly; the count wanted his residence to be erected at precisely this location, hugging the rocks below the villa of the Emperor Tiberius who had selected Capri before him as his place of voluntary exile. Until the 1920s, the dandy count and his villa were at the centre of culture and society life on Capri.

In November 1923, Fersen committed suicide by swallowing a large dose of cocaine mixed with alcohol. His remains were interred in the non-Catholic cemetery of Capri, where they lie today. The count’s preferred room was that known as the “opium room”, which he nicknamed the “Chinese room”. Fersen spent much of his time alone in this room, but he also hosted friends, to whom he would introduce the Eastern pleasures, involving them in his wild pursuit of an artificial paradise on Capri. In the upper part of the room, the decor is filled with symbols such as the lotus flower, the Star of David and the circle, while in the centre a swastika, symbol of rebirth, adorns the paving and alludes to the new life that Fersen sought to embrace on the blue island.





HERMITAGE OF SANTA MARIA DI CETRELLA

32

A jewel embedded in the rock

Sea resort of Marina Piccola

Capri

Open: Visits on special occasions only, especially in summer. Contact warden.

Access: From Via San Michele (at Anacapri) down a narrow road that becomes a mountain path. After 20 minutes, arrive at the hermitage. Alternatively, take the chairlift up Mount Solaro and walk down for about 20 minutes to reach the hermitage. Walking boots recommended

Tel: 339 784 0287 (warden Carmine Russo)

Email: postmaster@cetrella.it

Far from the crowds and the most well-trodden paths, the Hermitage of Cetrella is reached after a spectacular walk through the woods of Capri above the cliffs overlooking the sea. Built on a precipice above Marina Piccola, the site dates from the 15th century. It was especially popular with the sailors of Capri who would make pilgrimages to the little church of Cetrella before undertaking dangerous expeditions to harvest coral. It is a place that inspires peace and contemplation, which is why it is important to find out beforehand about the access arrangements and to be discreet while visiting.

The church is located at ground level, along with the refectory and kitch-

en. The former monks' cells are on the first floor. At the end of the corridor, the visitor arrives at a natural terrace that appears to be suspended in mid-air. From here, one can enjoy a breathtaking view over Marina Grande, Monte Tiberio, Marina Piccola and the *Faraglioni*, the Sorrento Coast and even, in fine weather, the Gulf of Salerno and Amalfi Coast, the hills of the Salerno hinterland, and the southern coast as far as the lighthouse at Punta Licosa. The church is composed of two naves, each of which has an altar. The typical 17th-century sacristy is located immediately behind and has a small, quaint window that looks out towards the *Faraglioni*. The second altar, of masonry construction, is crowned by a painting depicting Saint Dominic, testifying to the presence of Dominican monks in this church in the 17th and 18th centuries. According to famous archaeologist Amedeo Maiuri, the altar dates from the first half of the 14th century. It was later restored and enlarged in 1500 as the result of a donation. Today, the church is still consecrated and celebrations are held there throughout the year.

Why "Cetrella"?

According to some, the name comes from a plant, lemongrass, which perfumes the surrounding air. However, it is more likely to be an allusion to the temple of Venus of Cythera, which stood at this location.



LIBRARY OF THE ABBEY OF CAVA ④ DE' TIRRENI

The splendours of an abbey that has endured for centuries

Abbazia Benedettina Santissima Trinità

Via M. Morcaldi, 6 – 84013 Badia di Cava

Open: Guided tour of the abbey by appointment only. Library access reserved for researchers 8:30am–12:30pm (working days). Visits also allowed during special openings (especially in May)

Tel: +39 347 194 6957 – Email: Visiteguide@badiadicava.it

The only abbey in Campania, along with the monastery of Montevergine (see p. 42–43), to have escaped the plundering of the Napoleonic and then Piedmontese troops, the Abbey of Santissima Trinità houses one of the most remarkable libraries in Europe. In addition to the 80,000 volumes (a large collection of incunabula and 16th-century books) preserved in three vast rooms, there are two more superb halls, entirely restored in the 18th century, containing the precious archives that are the real trea-

sure of this abbey: 15,000 scrolls, the oldest of which dates back to 792 AD, famous manuscripts such as the Visigoth Bible (9th century), the Lombard Legal Code from the 9th century (the only existant volume that contains portraits of the Lombard kings), *De Temporibus* by the Venerable Bede, a volume that is all the more precious since the monks annotated the margin of each page with all the major events of the period (11th century). The diplomatic room is devoted to public and private writings spread over several centuries (papal bulls and episcopal decrees, diplomas issued by emperors and great aristocrats). The Abbey of Cava is known as the Italian Cluny because of its power, which extended as far as Rome and Naples. Following his recovery from a serious illness, Alferio Pappacarbone (930–1050), a Lombard aristocrat responsible for its foundation sometime around 1011, became a monk in the Abbey of Cluny. Weary of undertaking diplomatic missions, he withdrew to the Arsicia cave with two companions. His growing fame led Alferio (who died at the age of 120) to construct a monastery. Over time the monastery became the wonderful abbey that we see today. In an excellent state of preservation, the building is a genuine repository of artistic and architectural treasures; the chapter hall is a delight for the eyes, as are the church, the cloister dug into the rock, and many other remarkable rooms.



THEATRE OF VEGETATION 13 IN THE PARK OF THE VILLA D'AYALA

A spectacular amphitheatre filled with stone spectators

Piazza del Calvario – 84020 Valva

Open: Guided tour Saturday, Sunday and holidays 9:30am–12:30pm and 3:30pm–6:30pm. Working days by appointment only

Entry fee: €5

Tel: +39 349 094 6232 (Antonio Cuozzo) / +39 338 918 3218 (Lorenzo Falcone)

Situated at the edge of the historic centre of Valva, the walled park surrounding Villa d'Ayala covers an area of 17 hectares. It consists of a small forest, two Italianate gardens and a spectacular “theatre of vegetation” formed of box trees pruned into rows of seating, interspersed with sculpted heads that serve as the audience. The park is adorned with statues, fountains, ponds, small buildings and channels that were probably constructed during the Roman period. Several caves, one of which is called the “Monsters' Lair” (it contains sculptures of frightening appearance), complete this extraordinary example of outdoor architecture. By

the pathway leading to the castle there are two large statues representing Meleager and Hercules, along with others representing the arts (music, dancing, singing, painting and sculpture) and the three Graces (Roman goddesses representing Mirth, Good Cheer and Splendour).

The castle in the park, with its crenellated tower, was probably erected in the 11th century by the Norman lord of Valva, whose first name was Gozzolino. In the 18th century, one of his descendants, Marquis Giuseppe Maria Valva, Superintendent of Civil Engineering in the Kingdom of Naples under Ferdinand IV, built his summer residence on the ruins of the medieval castle, of which only the crenellated tower remained in good condition (and can still be seen today).

For the creation of his park, the marquis relied on the greatest botanists and gardeners in the kingdom, while imposing Mannerist and Baroque styles that had become completely outmoded. At that time, neoclassicism had become dominant, a style born in Naples following the discovery of Herculaneum, which then spread throughout the whole of Europe.

On the death of the marquis, the estate passed to his daughter, who had married a member of the d'Ayala family. In 1959 the last heir of this lineage bequeathed the property to the Order of Malta. Severely damaged by the earthquake of 1980, the castle was restored in 2005.



RAFTING ON THE UNDERGROUND 16

RIVER NEGRO

A first in Europe: cave rafting in the Cave of the Angel

Campobase

84030 Pertosa

Tel: +39 338 866 6875

Email: info@campobase.org

www.campobase.org/le-nostre-attivita.html

A good level of physical fitness is required



In the Cilento National Park, at Pertosa, the Campobase guides offer an exciting adventure that combines rafting and potholing, a completely new activity in Europe.

Boarding takes place at the entrance to the Pertosa-Auletta Cave, known as the “Cave of the Angel”, at the point where the perennial, navigable underground river (the Negro) surfaces before disappearing into the bowels of the earth. After navigating underground for 300 metres, visitors disembark and travel on foot to a prehistoric site dating back to the Middle Bronze Age (1500-1200 BC), where the remains of the piles used to support dwellings can still be seen.

Visitors return to the raft to complete the underground navigation, stopping at the Paradise Waterfall. This is where the caving course begins, including some quite athletic stages that involve climbing, abseiling, crossing trenches, etc. The concretions encountered include all the types found in other caves, such as stalactites, stalagmites, columns and opaque curtain-like concretions. Visitors then make their way towards the spring, passing by the remains of a small electric power plant abandoned in the 1950s. Classed as archaeological artefacts, the giant siphon and other structures have been left on the site.

The Cave of the Angel was probably named as such during the Middle Ages by the monks who celebrated rites here in honour of Saint Michael, to whom most of the cave churches throughout the region were dedicated. The finds uncovered by archaeologists in this location date from several periods of antiquity, which suggests that religious ceremonies have been held here for a very long time.

The Negro and the above ground River Tanagro and its valley have been classified by UNESCO as unique sites in terms of biodiversity (geology, botany and fauna). Most recently, biospeleologists have discovered a new species of shrimp living in the Negro.

The Campobase guides offer other excursions, including rafting and canyoning on the Tanagro, giving visitors an opportunity to enjoy an extraordinarily rich natural environment. The waterfall known as the “Bridal Veil”, undoubtedly the highest in Italy, is remarkable.

