



## ON THE ANCIENT CHURCH OF MOMPILIERI

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### **Abstract**

Aim of the present paper is to get a better historical knowledge about the Church of “Annunziata” in Mascalucia.

According to researches and our studies “in situ”, this work try an historical description of the church with a hypothesis of three-dimensional graphic reconstruction of the building and a cartographic localization of the main artificial hollow strictly connected to the church.

The site is the main church of Mompilieri, dedicated to “Maria SS. Annunziata”, that has very ancient origins: there are historical news about it since the half of the XV century.

Its history is tightly linked to the eruptions of the vulcano Etna: the sacred building has been licked up by the lava casting of 1537 and subsequently covered with the country of Mompilieri from the eruption of 1669.

Since the beginnings of XVIII century, were builded artificial galleries (Eremita’s Cave) in order to reach the rests of the ancient church and subsequently the famous simulacros.

Worthy of mention is the recovery of the cult statue dedicated to the “Madonna delle Grazie” that was discovered, in good condition, under a deep lava layer.

### **Purpose and location**

By the critical analysis of the historical signs, this work wishes contribute to a deepest knowledge of the Church of SS. Maria Annunziata, covered by the Etnean eruption of 1669, and placed in the territory of Mascalucia, in Catania.

The building, which is the main cult site, was located in Mompilieri Village. The origin of the name "Mompilieri", which can be written in different fashions, comes from the homonymous mount located in the north side of the village.

The Mompilieri Mount rose in 693 B.C. during an ancient eruption (Romano and Sturiale, 1982), which started at an altitude of 650 m, just 1 Km SW from Nicolosi, and went on South.

We have proceeded to a hypothetical reconstruction of the church; in particular of its plan and elevation, and of the location of the holy statues, through an accurate detection of the existing signs, keeping in mind all the historical witnessess.

The site we are concerned with consists of a set of tunnels, for the most part artificial, at height of 610 m above sea level. It is an amount of artificial galleries which were built in order to find the holy statues, beginning from 1689 by Duke Giovan Andrea Massa, then in 1704, when the statue of the "Vergine delle Grazie" was found by local people, and recently in 1955 when some sculptured heads from the marble-made group of the "Annunziata" were found.

In this site there are also natural galleries, created by the lava flow above mentioned.

The Church is quite similar to the Mother Church of the old Misterbianco, which was also covered by the lava in 1669, in an area referred to as "Campanarazzu".



Table 1 Chronology of Mompilieri historical events

Date	historical event
1446	First confirmed news: Eugenio IV, designating the Church of "Maria SS. dell'elemosina" as a collegiate one, mentioned the Church of "Nunziata in Mompilieri".
1524-25	The marble-made group of the "Vergine con l'angelo", from the Gagini school, was placed on the main altar.
1537-1582	Etnean eruptions: there are some informations on the old church from historical writers. The church was partially damaged.
1669	The building was completely covered by Etna's terrible eruption.
1689-1704	After many attempts, the undamaged statue of "Madonna delle Grazie" was found and carried out: in fact, the lava river had created such as a bubble around the statue.
1704	A little church was built in 50 days over the place of discovery.
1898	Full description of the history of the Church, written by Rev. G. Lombardo.
1923	The Church was designated as Diocesan Sanctuary by Card. G. Francica Nava.
1954	The hypogeum was in part allowed to the pilgrims by the reconstruction of the entrance.
1955	Discovery of a part of the sculptured group attributed to A. Gagini.
1999	Restoration works of the sanctuary framework: new cult chapels and meeting points for pilgrims.

### Historical overview

The old church, consecrated to Maria SS. Annunziata, was the "matrice" of Mompilieri Village, which rose at the foot of Etna Volcano, just under the homonymous mount.

The exact building date of the church is almost unknown and its origin is lost in the mists of the past. There are certain informations in 1446 when Pope Eugenio IV enriched the Church of Maria SS. dell'elemosina in Catania by designating it as collegiate church and giving it some benefits such as the Beata Annunziata in Mompilieri.

This Church, which was already a prestigious cult centre, was further embellished between 1524 and 1525 when a marble sculpture from Gaginian school, dedicated to the "Annunziata con Arcangelo Gabriele", was placed on the major altar.

In fact, the sanctuary was very famous, but the holy pictures of the Arcangelo Gabriele, the Annunziata (attributed to Antonello Gagini) and the "Vergine delle Grazie" which were inside, were much more appreciated, as Massa wrote in his work "Etna in prospettiva"; he says: "Tra i più venerati Santuari della Sicilia accontavasi la Chiesa Maggiore di Mompilieri, che sorgeva sul rialto di un Colle, pertinenza del Monte Etna; quivi esposte all'adorazione dei popoli, tre grandi statue di finissimo marmo..." and then "erano sì belle che, non vi ha forse storico delle cose Siciliane, il quale ragionando di questo monte e di Catania, non ne faccia memoria...".

*("Among the most venerated sanctuary of Sicily, there was the Major Church of Mompilieri, which rose on the top of a hill, close to the Mount Etna; here there were three big statues made of very pure marble, exposed to the adoration of the people..." and then " these were so beautiful that every historical writer on Sicilian things keeps them in mind while talking about this mount and Catania...").*

In May 1537 between an altitude of 1800 and 1500 m, some fractures opened and from these ones a particularly fluid magma outcame; this reached Nicolosi just in 4 days running for 10 Km and then going on.



Different authors talked about the eruption of 1537 which touched the church of Annunziata: authors as Carrera, Fazzello, Filoteo, Selvaggi and others.

In particular, there is a clear vision of all what happened thanks to a report written by Gaetano Motta in 1582 in Mompilieri (from "Ricordi storico-religiosi di Mompilieri e dell'omonimo Santuario", G. Lombardo, 1898): "Nello anno del Signore 1537 e nel mese di Maggio,... la Montagna scassò come haveva scassato lo hanno avanti 1536; lo foco che calava camminava pello nostro paese. Fu granni lo timore che si haveva, spingennosi a la aria le fiamme più di 40 palmi. Camminò tanti giorni lo foco e la xara arrivò alla detta Chiesa... Lo nostro Vicario D. Bartolomeo Macrì, presenti gli habitanti dello nostro paese, prese lo Velo miracoloso della Annunziata Maria e lo mise dinnanzi la porta della Chiesa, ... Hallora lo foco si appoggiò allo muro di tramontana di detta chiesa, e non passò havanti...".

*("In A.D. 1537, in May, the Mountain erupted in the same way it did the year before, 1536; the lava river flew through the village. Everyone was really worried because the fire was 40 roughly "hands" high. The lava river kept on flowing for many days, coming very close to our major church in Mompilieri. It burnt few houses and fields and then grazed the Church. So our Vicario Bartolomeo Macrì, at the presence of the local people, took the Holy Veil of Annunziata Maria and placed it just before the entrance of the church. The lava river stopped its run, after having touched the west side wall and did not go on.")*

The greatest eruption was on March 11<sup>th</sup> 1669: it touched the southern side of Etna. From a fracture located at N of Nicolosi the lava river came down and covered many etnean villages and swept down to Catania.

Among the injured villages, Mompilieri and Misterbianco were completely destroyed by lava which covered them with a 10 m thick layer in some points.

Step by step an handwritten text of the chaplain of Mompilieri, Rev. Antonino di Urso, written in 1688 (from "Ricordi..."), deals with the development of the eruption. In particular he focused his attention on the fact that the inhabitants of Mompilieri considered themselves safe for the presence of Mount Mompilieri that could have saved the village but actually nothing could have saved them: "Copertò la strada che portava alli Nicolosi e poi lo foco camminando forte e senza risparmiare quello che incontrava, pervenne nella Chiesa maggiore e cominciò a copertarla e a diroccare il tetto, ch'era forte e solido... La lava dopo di havere covertato la Chiesa della Annunziata in poche ore covertò ancora tutte le case, ..."

*("The lava river covered the way to Nicolosi and then, running and destroying everything it met, reached the main church. It demolished the strong roof and covered it all. After having buried the Church of Annunziata, the burning river covered all houses in few hours.")*

Besides Lombardo reported an accurate description of the church: "A Nord-Ovest di Mompilieri sorgeva la Chiesa Maggiore, sacra alla Vergine Annunziata. Aveva la forma di una Basilica a tre Navate, con colonne e pilastri di lava che ne sorreggevano la volta. La porta maggiore, prospiciente a Est, era contigua alla strada che conduceva in Nicolosi e Pedara. Un'altra porta più piccola della precedente trovavasi nella Nave di mezzogiorno, dirimpetto alla strada che conduceva a Malpasso ed a San Pietro Clarenza. Secondo il costume dell'epoca, il Cimitero era dietro il coro a ponente, osservandosene sino al presente le vestigia; a Nord del Tempio sorgeva il Campanile su cui tra le altre, trovavasi una campana denominata dell'Annunziata, che dopo tredici anni dall'eruzione etnea del 1669, fu rinvenuta sopra la lava, lungi alquanti metri dal sito dove ergevasi il Campanile. A destra di chi entrava nel tempio, su d'un Altare posava la bellissima marmorea Immagine della Vergine SS. delle Grazie, e dietro l'Altare maggiore trovavasi l'edicola dove conservavasi le due divine Statue di Alabastro della Vergine SS. Annunziata e dell'Arcangelo Gabriele, in un unico gruppo. A Sinistra dell'Altare maggiore, trovavasi l'Altare del SS. Sacramento...".

*("The Major Church, dedicated to the Vergine Annunziata, rose in NW side of Mompilieri. It had the plan of a twin aisled Basilica, with columns and pillars, both made of lava, which supported the vault. The major gate, East oriented, was near the way to Nicolosi and Pedara. Another gate, smaller then the main one, was in the southern nave, in front of the way leading to Malpasso and*



*San Pietro Clarenza. According to the usage of that period, the Cemetery was placed behind the West side choir and we can still observe its ruins. The Bell Tower was located in the N side of the Temple, where, among others, there was a bell referred to as Annunziata Bell; this one was found over the lava just 13 year after the eruption of 1669, right some metres far from the place where rose the Bell Tower. On the right side with respect to one who entered the Temple, on an altar there was the beautiful marble sculpture of the "Vergine SS. delle Grazie" and behind the major altar there was the aedicule where the two holy alabaster statues of Vergine SS. Annunziata and of Arcangelo Gabriele were kept together. On the left hand of the major altar there was the SS. Sacramento Altar... ".)*

In 1689 Duke Massa began to search the three famous statues, but with poor outcomes: just some fragments were found, so he thought that the statues had been destroyed by lava.

At last, in 1704, after numerous attempts, the beautiful statue of Vergine SS. delle Grazie was found undamaged by a miracle. The statue was found right where it had been originally placed: entering the main gate on the right side on the altar.

After different attempts at carrying it out, the statue was placed on the major altar of a little church built in 50 days beside the place of the discovery.

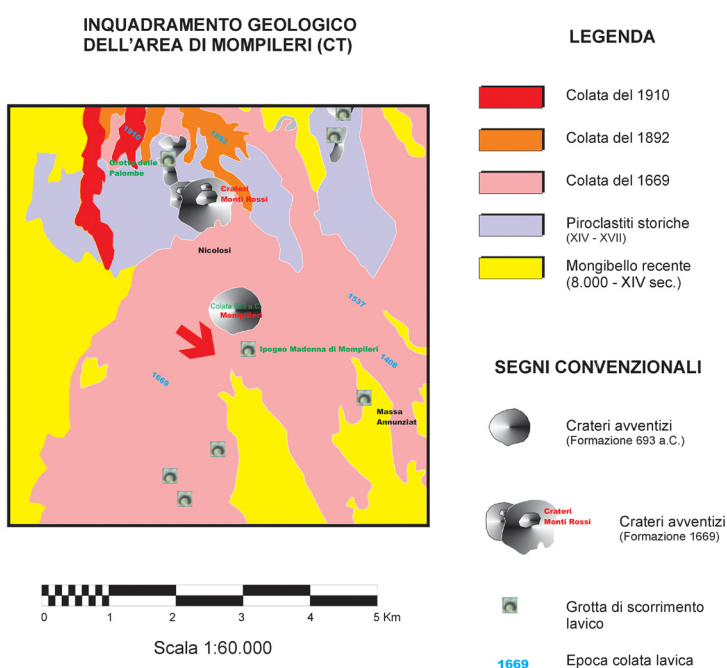
In 1898, Rev. Giuseppe Lombardo decided to publish a volume about the history of the Sanctuary entitled "Ricordi storico-religiosi di Mompilieri e dell'omonimo Santuario": this book, as known, is the first and most complete one still published.

According to Card. Francica Nava's will, in 1923 the ecclesiastic building was referred to as "Sanctuary".

Later, in 1954, the hypogeum was allowed to visitors by building stairs to the cave of discovery, accessible by an old gate built on that occasion; during the excavations inside the underground site, two marble heads of the Madonna and the Arcangelo Gabriele were found in 1955. These belong to the marble group referred to as "dell'annunciazione".

In 1999, during the rectorate of Rev. Incognito, some restoration works of the whole sanctuary were done on the occasion of Jubilee: the building of a room for cult purpose under the present church and different restoration works of the church itself are now under way.

## Research contribute



The "Mompilieri Cave" took its origin from the lava flow of 1669 (fig. 1), on March 12<sup>th</sup> (D'Urso). This eruption, which completely destroyed the villages of Mompilieri and Misterbianco, touched, among others, also the city of Catania.

Therefore the Mompilieri Village, which numbered almost 600 inhabitants, was completely covered by the lava river: the major church, dedicated to "Nunziata" was covered too.

Based on the historical knowledge, a systematic exploration of the hypogeum, which includes the ruins of the church has been developed.

Fig. 1 – Geological map of the area



At the present time the entrance (fig. 2) to the tunnels is allowed by a gate in the main area, recently built, beside the ecclesiastical temple. Here there are two flights of stairs going down for about 8 m. The entrance, as it is today, was built in 1954 in order to partially allow the view of the hypogeum. Going down, we are in a narrow room just in front of the ruins of an half-destroyed pillar, made of lava, and on the right side (towards NE direction) we can see the "miracle-altar", right where the statue of *SS. Maria delle Grazie* was found: this one is now kept in the upper part of the sanctuary. On the left side of the stairs, we can see the length of the fence, high up to the vault, placed there to protect the following rooms.

According to our recreation (fig. 3), this "lavic room" was supposed to be in the north Nave.

A set of galleries starts from this point; they are in part dugged in the lava stone and the other ones are natural.

Going on West, through an entrance on the N side, we get into a narrow tunnel that surrounds the NW corner of the church, near the hypothetical apsidal area. Bones were found among the ruins in the gallery that surrounds the West side; so it is easy to believe that there was the cemetery of the church in this area, according to the historical sources.

Inside the Church, on the N edge wall, there are the remains of a wall painting in bad conditions, not easy to identify; they let us suppose that the picture represents the "Madonna".

Proceeding on West, we get to the NW outside corner of the building, where a great amount of reddish lava touches the N side wall.

By the Rev. G. Motta's witness, we had believed to find the lava of 1537 inside the hypogeum, but a deepest analysis has made us think different.

The sample, referred to as H (taken from NW outside corner), has been submitted to a petrographical analysis, through a thin section, which has showed the main features.

The petrographical features have revealed that the sample belongs neither to the eruption of 1537 nor to the one of 1669 (Corsaro R.A., Cristofolini R., 1993); it has an older origin.

In the sample we are concerned with there are almost only tabular-shaped *plagioclase* phenocrysts, which are uncoloured, generally idiomorphic (limited by well-formed crystal faces) and can be 5-6 mm long and clearly shows compositional zones.

The difference between this sample and the one analysed before, from now on named sample A, selected from the lava of 1669, close to the only altar still existing, comes out from the content of phenocrysts, given by the value of Porphyritic Index, which has been assessed in about 20-25% in volume for the sample A, and in 15% for the sample H. In particular the two samples are different by the nature of their own phenocrysts.

Besides *plagioclase*, the most abundant mineral, whose size is seldom longer than a millimetre, there is also *clinopiroxene* in the sample A. This one, green-yellow coloured, generally appears as idiomorphic prismatic-shaped samples, whose length is up 4 mm; this mineral often includes oxides and forms an aggregate together with other piroxen crystals. *Olivine* crystals are more uncommon; they appear uncoloured, strongly prominent, without any sign of cleavage, sub-rounded shaped and from 0.5 mm up to 1 mm long.



Fig. 2 – The entrance

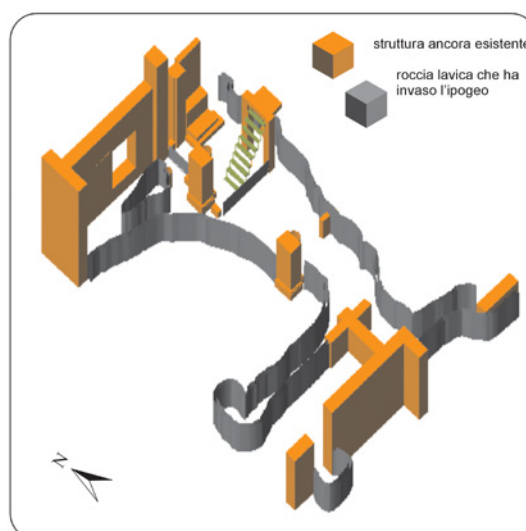


Fig. 3 - A complete survey of the "actual state of things".

There are also some *matte oxides* which appear dark to an observation by the white-polarized-light microscope. They are less than 0.5 mm in length and they are sub-rounded shaped.

Going back to the altar zone and proceeding on S direction for about 15 m, right where the vault of the lava cave is gradually lower, there is a column, the same as the one mentioned before, almost covered by lava (fig. 4). This bounds the nave by partially coming out.

Going on, we get to the S wall; the gallery forks nearby a pillar and proceeds on W direction, ascending for about 10 m, ending with a round excavation which is about 1 m deep.

Near the pillar, found by the S wall, a little door to the church covered by lava was supposed to be (A. D'urso in "Mompilieri", pag 57, of Rev. Padalino). This entrance was also supposed to lead to the room in front of the southern side of the church, perhaps the sacristy. From the S wall, through a hole, the gallery keeps on going southward, and finally enters in a rectangular room through a breach in the W side wall. On the lavic "floor", which partially reveals an earthen floor (certainly the old floor of the church), a very regular rectangular excavation (maybe a tomb) was found, with traces of bones, on the bottom of the "lavic room" at the foot of the E side wall.

A complete survey of the "actual state of things" has been carried out both of the plan and of the elevation (fig. 3). A hypothesis of recreation of the building has been proposed too (fig. 5).

By the observations and by the detailed plan-altimetrical survey, we have obtained a set of useful information on the recreation of the church; we have noticed that the church had really three naves, it was about 15 m long and the pilasters were 4 m high.

The ceiling of the church presents "false vaults" made of canes and gypsum plaster – this hypothesis has been confirmed by the traces of this material in the hypogeum –; probably the highest part of the ceiling was built by wooden trusses, burnt by the lava flow.

By the numerous remains of roof tiles, we deduce that the top of the roof was supposed to be made of earthen tiles, maybe a double-pitch roof, while the inner part was supposed to be plastered, as we can see by the great amount of plaster still present, and the floor of the church consisted of 30 x 30 earthen-squared tiles.

The border walls are made of lava stones of different sizes, kept together by mortar, while columns and pilasters consists of well-squared and smoothed lava stones. Inside the building we have found traces of such as a hole in the N side wall, but historical sources do not confirm this.



Fig. 4 – A column covered by lava

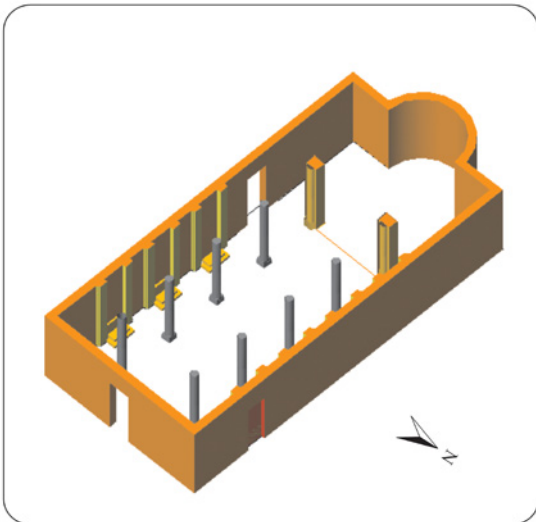


Fig. 5 - A hypothesis of recreation of the building.

## Wishes

We hope for an excavation in order to a sistematical analysis of this hypogeum (and others like this one) which makes it possible to acquire a deepest knowledge of those underground "treasures" and then enables more visitors to view it, not only urban speleologists.



Besides it should be interesting to develop a deepest study about the overall area of Mompilieri Village; this could give us an historical profile of the Etnean village before the fatal eruption of 1669.

### Special thanks

We would like to thank all the people who have collaborated to write this paper. In particular we thank the previous rector of the Sanctuary Rev. G. Padalino for his help in the historical part and the present rector of the Sanctuary Rev. S. Incognito for his kindness in having opened to us the cave of Mompilieri at any hour. We wish to thank Prof. Renato Cristofolini of the University of Catania because he has allowed us to use facilities to find the data relating to the petrographical exam of the lava-stone samples.

We thank also Dr. Rosanna Corsaro, geologist and researcher by the International Institute of Volcanology of Catania who gave her contribute to the scientific part of this work by writing much of the paragraph entitled " Research contribute"; right where we have talked about the outcomes of the analysis executed on the lava samples. Besides we thank Dr. Rosanna Corsaro for having helped us by analysing the lava-stone samples.

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