



## RUINS OF ANCIENT “CAMPANARAZZU” BURIED BY 1669 ERUPTION

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### **Abstract**

The work intends to describe a site of speleological interest, denominated “Campanarazzu” by Misterbianco inhabitants. This site is situated in Catania’s province and, granted that a church, it’s very probable that the term “Campanarazzu” (“Big and Ugly Bell Tower”) refers to the imposing dimensions of the bell tower.

These ruins help in knowledge of structures built by man, part destroyed owing to lavic invasions, that preserve some intact subterranean environments with connections to the surface that allow the access and the following research of urban speleology.

Editing this work we didn’t limit to the description of that speleological site, but we did a photographic relief of little-known parts (such as valuable column).

We rebuilt graphically a tridimensional model of the antique church by C.A.D. - processing, assigning explanatory altitudes (to the bell tower, too), that could show up the building parts still existing against the already destroyed ones.

Nowadays, in Etna’s territory, we know few examples with these peculiarities, and, for their singular location and composition, they have not only national, but even international importance.

### **Introduction**

In this work we examine the vulcanospeleological site denominated “Campanarazzu”, consisting of partially subterranean ruins of ancient main church of Misterbianco, a town in the north-west of Catania.

We analyzed the environments existing now and destroyed ones, by an analytical description and a reconstruction in tridimensional graphics, realized according to C.A.D. procedures, that showed how the advancement of flow of lava, after having come across the antique church, avoided it and infiltrated into some weaker environments destroying them and burying other ones.

We catalogued these environments in a table that show up parts existing now and already destroyed ones.

After repetitive explorations, we noticed how the only structure to resist the force of lava was the bell tower, both because of “natural” lavic way and of building tipology of period (very thick walls, cornices, reinforced, utilization of basaltic lavic rocks which have high mechanical resistance).

In planimetry in scale 1:10.000, in Regional Technical Map published by the Councillor’s Office of Sicilian Region Territory and Habitat, we localized the hypogeum, placed in the north-east of existing Misterbianco.

### **The towns hit by 1669 eruption**

The story of vulcanospeleological site of “Campanarazzu” is connected with the imposing 1669 eruption, that hit most of Catania’s province, such as Misterbianco, Mascalucia, Belpasso, Nicolosi, San Giovanni Galermo, Mompileri, San Pietro clarenza, Camporotondo Etneo and part of Catania’s city.



Lava came out from “Monti Rossi” craters, so denominated owing to a dialectic term “M. Rossi” for “Big Mountains”, which developed in Nicolosi’s territory, in Catania’s province at 900 metres above sea-level.

In XIX century it was colonized by a pine wood.

Lava flow allowed the population to save themselves and to move furniture and fittings and church ornaments and vestments to a safe place.

We haven’t reliable news and sources about this vulcanospeleological site, particularly about the origin of Main Church of ancient Misterbianco, placed in country “*Chiesa di Santa Maria De Monasterio Albo*”.

First certain news date back to 1353 and we found them in two parchments: 24<sup>th</sup> January 1353 one and 22<sup>nd</sup> august 1358 one.

Ancient town, Misterbianco, rose on promontory limited by surrounding walls. In the south of it flowed “Amenano” river, which still has great importance because of numerous legends.

According to some scholars, Amenano has its source in Etna slopes, flows underground several kilometers and reaches Jonio Sea in the south of Catania.

### **Description of the famous eruption**

As Tedeschi describes in a masterly manner on 11<sup>th</sup> March 1669, tow craters denominated “Monti Rossi” developed localized in Nicolosi and very soon Catania’s province suffered destruction and terror.

Nowadays the 1669 is considered “Eruption Year”, because its was the eruption per excellence, the most imposing, the most ravaging of recent Mongibello (other name for Etna).

An historical report of frightful 1669 eruption, is described in famous Tommaso Tedeschi’s publication “*Breve ragguaglio degli incendi di Mongibello*” (*Short report about Mongibello’s fires*) Longo edition, napoli 1669, because he was also eyewitness of that natural calamity.

He wrote: “*So on 8<sup>th</sup> March of this year 1669, first Friday of Lent, our Mongibello, with horrible and frightful lows (probably he didn’t refer only to Etna roars, but even to seismic swarm of volcanic origin, that proceded the eruption) began to shake the earth so often and so fiercely, that the people were full of fear, particularly the inhabitants of its towns...*”

Then the descendants, sentimentally bound with their forefathers places tried to know as much as possible about ancient ruins.

In particular, they dug and llok for “finds” of historical past, where part destroyed structures, that probably represented interesting buildings, appeared on the surface.

### **Guide to hypogeum access and its description**

We arrive to the ancient Churh after having gone the way from Catania to Misterbianco and then followed road markings to the ancient town, denominated on signs as “Campanarazzu, ancient Misterbianco”.

We reach by auto the end of Campanarazzu street, and then we distinguish a barrier made by steel cable, so we have to continue on foot, descending a couple of metres in difference in level.

After a short way, a downhill path begins on lava found, where a small votive chapel (of bricks full and tanned of lava stone) is placed on little clearing to remember ancient Misterbianco and in particular its “*Matrice*” (*Main Church*), evidence of “religious feelings” and sentimental bonds to the place, of Misterbianco’s inhabitants.

The site hasn’t any visible sign of realization of tourist / receptive structure, even if there is a legitimate proposal for found a suburban park.



As time went by “Campanarazzu” became so interesting, particularly for young generation, that dilettante-level explorations were organized to recover the ancient church decorative object or fragments, causing sometimes irreparable damage to those ones spared by lava flow.

*“What lava spared, man damaged . . .”*

Neither gates nor barriers are, to enter the partly integral environments. Those environments are narrow in some parts, partially destroyed and with difficulty accessible.

Surrounding landscape is suitable for tourist reception, because it is hilly location, that allows an almost global view of Jonio coast south and of south-east Etna, as if it remembers and warns against its powerful devastating action.

Unfortunately, in these last decades in south-east of site, unauthorized housebuilding and savage cementification developed excessively, without any respect for the “place”.

### *Guide to hypogeum access*



Fig. 1 – The Church ruins

From Catania we reach San Giovanni Galermo, outlying ward in the north of Catania, and we go through the provincial road to Misterbianco, for about 1,5 Km; then we enter Serra Belvedere street and we can see on road markings “Campanarazzu - Ruins of ancient Misterbianco” and “Santuario Madonna degli Ammalati” (*Madonna of the Sicks Sanctuary*).

The way goes on 1669 lavas, crossing an intensely built area. To the crossroads for “*Madonna of the Sicks Sanctuary*”, we enter Campanarazzu street. Once in the street, we can catch sight of squat bell tower ruins among lavas and houses.

Campanarazzu street ends close to Church ruins (Fig. 1). 100 metres before, on southern part, we can see the entrances of two totally spared by lava cisterns. The cisterns aren't accessible owing to their state of preservation, they have about 3 metres diameter and are a couple of metres deep.

### *Description of cavity*

The spared by lava, nowadays known and visitable environments are two: the ruins of Madonna of Graces Chapel and Crucified, and we can enter it from a hidden hole among lavas and excavation materials, that in environment of about 6,30 metres high, with east wall about 4,50 metres and north wall about 5 metres wide, through an antique window placed on high part of east wall; remaining south-west parts is cluttered with lava.

We can see a little well entrance on north wall: in the past it was the preservation and today guarded in the main church of existing Misterbianco.

That environment is about 2,60 metres deep and about 1,20 metres wide. Lava came in from south to north, after having invaded nearly the whole chapel; it stopped few centimetres before the niche, that preserved the marble statue.

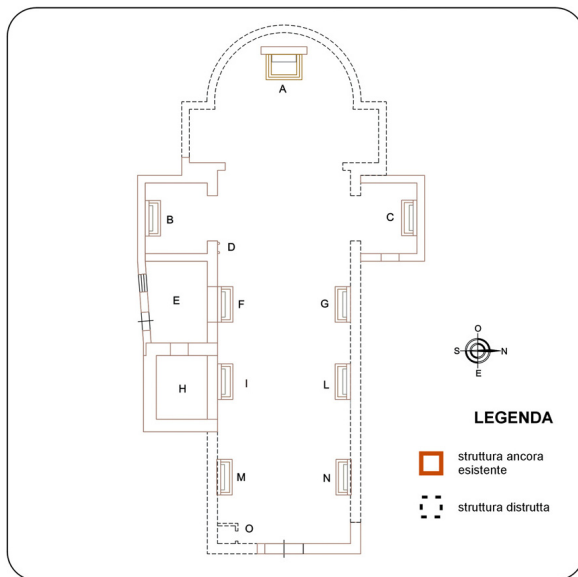
The Crucified Chapel lies on southern part of Main Church, and we enter it from an underground passage that begins from a room (*maybe “sacristy”*) without roof and next to bell tower.



Fig. 2 – A column of the ancient Main Church of Misterbianco

Subsequently his room was artificially widened with some environments. Two semicircular columns (pilaster strips), of calcareous stone, finely historiated with bas-reliefs representing puttos, dragon and flowers interlaced with acanthus leaves, lean on the wall.

Those columns rise from the lava crushed stone floor and penetrate the lavic rocks (Fig. 2). Between the two columns there is a niche with a stucco statue (1,40 metres high), with the head set in rock.



### Legend of accessible and not environments

<b>A</b>	<i>High Altar</i>
<b>B</b>	<i>Crucified Chapel</i>
<b>C</b>	<i>Madonna of Graces Chapel</i>
<b>D</b>	<i>Columns and niche</i>
<b>E</b>	<i>Environments annexed to the Church</i>
<b>F</b>	<i>St. Antonio Abate Altar</i>
<b>G</b>	<i>St. Francesco Altar</i>
<b>H</b>	<i>Bell Tower</i>
<b>I</b>	<i>St. Erasmo Altar</i>
<b>L</b>	<i>Carmelo's Madonna Altar</i>
<b>M</b>	<i>St. Annunziata Altar</i>
<b>N</b>	<i>St. Purgatorio Altar</i>
<b>O</b>	<i>Baptistery</i>

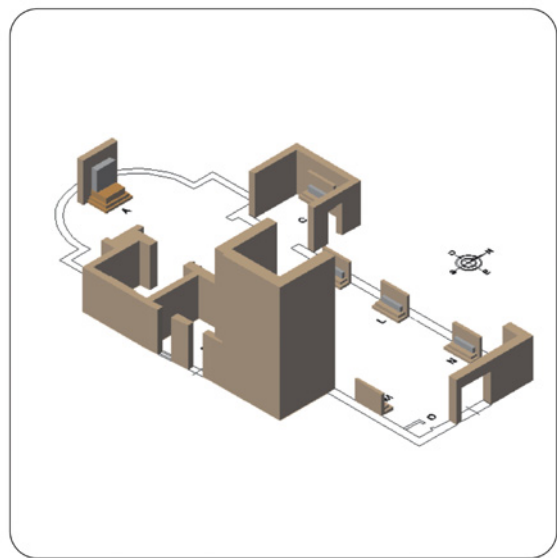
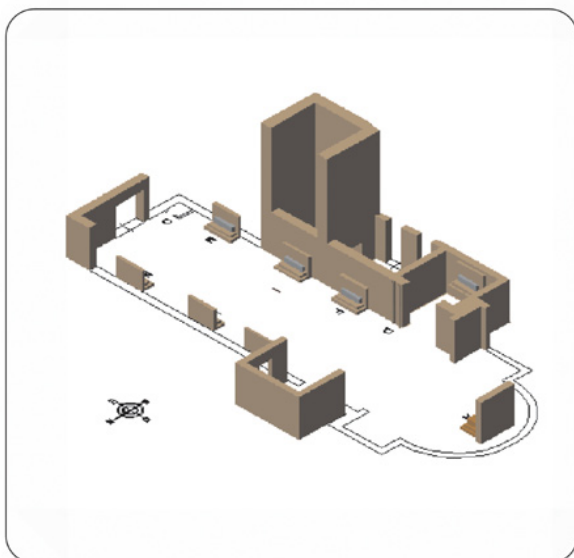


Fig. 3 - Plan and tridimensional modelling of ancient Main Church of Misterbianco



## Conclusions

Not corroborated rumours inform of others environments existence; of these one keeps a wall with Madonna fresco, but its hypothetical entrance are unknown.

The authors hope that in the near future people have more “*respect*” for described before hypogean environments.

They also hope that country “Campanarazzu” may become one day an *Archaeological Reserve* or a sort of sub-urban park at the gates of Misterbianco.

## Thanks

We thank so much for kind collaboration the whole Centro Speleologico Etneo. Photos published in this work were realized by partner Dr. Antonio Marino, and we thank him for his differing availability.

We thank the Councillor’s Office of Sicilian Region Territory and Habitat for concession of Regional Technical Map of Misterbianco.

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