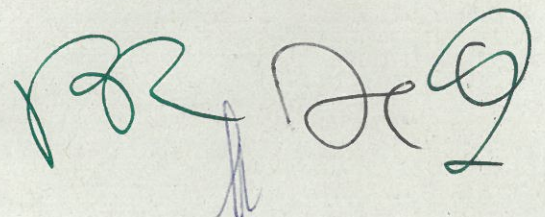


Gruppo 5

1. The most impressive aspect of the abbey is facing us. The solidity of the façade (41 meters high) is emphasised by the steely-grey colouring of the blocks forming the foundation which contrast with the sweeping curves of the greenish church, crowned by the central apse with its impressive gallery of little arches (the "Loggia of Viretti") which is among the best surviving examples of Romanesque apsidal loggias. The Benedictine monks undertook the major task of building the foundations in the first half of the twelfth century, so as to raise above it the enlarged church with its five apses.
2. On 24 September 2005, on an outcrop of rock between the "Old Monastery" and the basement of the church the statue of St. Michael the Archangel was positioned. Created by the sculptor Paul dè Doss-Moroder (click here for more info), a Tyrolean artist, whose most important works are found in Italy, Germany and America, it is without doubt a new and original interpretation of the Archangel Michael, being a work of impressive proportions (height 5.20 m. plus 1.80 m. for the wings, weight 3400 Kg approx). The statue of Saint Michael won the national competition organized by the Sacra for the creation of a contemporary representation.
3. The current library was set up only from October 1836, with the arrival of the Rosminian Fathers on Mount Pirchiriano. Rosmini himself sent a letter from Stresa with the list of books to buy, two days after the arrival of the first religious. The library contained about 300 volumes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and, over time, an important wealth of texts was gathered, up to the current number of about 10,000 volumes all reordered and filed by the patient and constant work of a group of volunteers, following the system of the Vatican Library.
4. The north-west side of the mountain is occupied by impressive ruins of pillars, walls, arches and barbicans for a length of about 50 m. These are the so-called Ruins of the New Monastery, built between the twelfth and fourteenth century during the era of maximum expansion of the monastic community. The imposing 5-storey building, to which was added a new construction towards the north, ending in the so-called Tower of the Beautiful Alda, fell into disrepair due to earthquakes, wars and neglect.
5. The whole area of these ruins has been the subject of works of restoration, conservation and improved accessibility through the years 1999-2002.
A cottage built in the late 1800s can be seen among the ruins of the New Monastery: it was used by the Army Corps of Engineers as a station for an optical telegraph. This system, using Morse code, in flashes of light, allowed the transmission of messages between Turin and the military forts of the Triple Alliance.



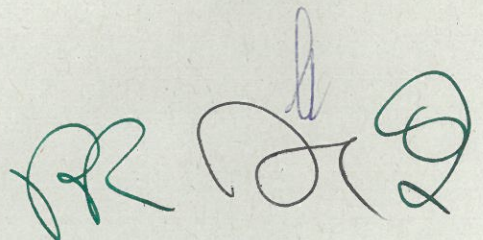
6. The perimeter wall of the ruins ends with a tower overhanging the precipice of the mountain: it is the so-called Tower of the Beautiful Alda, which takes its name from the following legend. It is said that Alda, a peasant girl came to the Sacra to pray against the evils of war; unfortunately, she had the misfortune of being ambushed by enemy soldiers. She tried to escape their assault but, since she found herself trapped at the top of the tower, she threw herself into the ravine whilst invoking the help of St. Michael and the Virgin.

7. She survived, landing unhurt at the bottom of the precipice. Unfortunately, she misused this heavenly favour. Out of vanity and for monetary gain, she imagined herself able to do a second jump and she offered to repeat her flight for the unbelieving villagers, but she then leapt to a horrible death at the scene of her previous miraculous deliverance. The historian Gallizia is the first who speaks of the legend in 1699 and it seems that the event had happened in recent history, as he writes: "That is what old people told us, since they lived at the time in which this happened."

8. From the entrance level the church is reached via a wide and steep grand staircase, which has been dated to the mid-twelfth century. After the first few steps, on the left is a pillar of over 18 meters that supports the floor of the church above; on the right there appears an outcrop of rock that is incorporated into the opposite wall. In the central niche several skeletons of monks were displayed until 1936, hence the name: Great Staircase of the Dead. This "entrance hall" was once much used for the burial of distinguished men, abbots and worthies of the monastery. Some of the tombs were decorated with marble, others were plastered and painted: today there remain only five of these.

9. The Great Staircase of the Dead ends at the Portal of the Zodiac (1128-30), a Romanesque work carved by Master Nicolao, a famous architect and sculptor from Piacenza. It is so called because the jambs on the sides turned towards the staircase, are carved on the right with the twelve signs of the zodiac and on the left with the southern and northern constellations. Most important, from an historical point of view, is the central side of the right jamb where, at the corners of a scene of hare hunting, there are two poems written in Latin, ending with the author's signature.

10. The sepulchre of the monks of the Sacra of Saint Michael are the ruins of an ancient church, called the Sepulchre of the Monks since it was thought to be a cemetery chapel, but it now seems much more likely that this octagonal chapel was a reproduction of the Holy Sepulchre, possibly giving a foretaste to the pilgrims of the original in Jerusalem. The original place of worship, dates back to the Xth century. The church was still intact in 1621 and was dedicated to St. Stephen, but it began to collapse in 1661 and was abandoned soon after.



11. The nineteenth century witnessed a growing interest and a particular attention toward the Sacra from the Royal House of Savoy. They came to regard it as symbolically important, but also as having a diplomatic and political value. The evidence of this attention can be found in the fitting out of a living room, reception and representation rooms, with period decor and furnishings. The Striped Room and the Charles Albert room are in the Old Monastery, whilst the royal apartment, including a panoramic terrace, has been incorporated into the walls of the New Monastery.

12. The Romanesque-Gothic Sanctuary, that today welcomes the visitor on top of the mountain, was built and modified over several centuries. There are three styles of architecture: the first is Romanesque, found in the apse, which is oriented toward the exact spot where the sun rises on the day of the Feast of St. Michael (September 29th), and in the first arch and related windows and columns; the second style is transitional Romanesque in the next two arches with piers and pointed arches; and the third style is Gothic of the school of Piacenza as seen in the decoration of the big window of the central apse and in the two windows of the side aisles.

13. The beginning of the construction of the church is difficult to date, but it is assumed that the project was commissioned by Abbot Stephen (1148-1170). Originally the church was to be topped by cross vaults similar to the current ones. These vaults collapsed and, in the seventeenth century, they were replaced in the central nave by a heavy barrel vault, which exerted a considerable pressure on the side walls, threatening their stability and creating the danger of collapse. In order to face up this threat, during the restoration of the late nineteenth century, the barrel vault was demolished and replaced with a triple cross vault that was completed in 1937.

14. Inside the church there are majestic pillars, a multitude of minor columns, pilasters, corners ... all crowned with intriguing, symbolic capitals: they number 139 in all. The first pillar to the left of the nave is particularly interesting, as beneath it can be seen the top 15 centimetres of Mount Pirchiriano: "summit steeped in holiness," as it was called by the Rosminian poet Clemente Rebora. The three apses are characterized by their covering of red bricks; the two large niches at the sides of the central apse have their own Romanesque window, and over them, a Greek cross is deeply embedded into the wall.

