Early medieval Benedictine settlements and monastic landscape n Italy. A shared path and a case study

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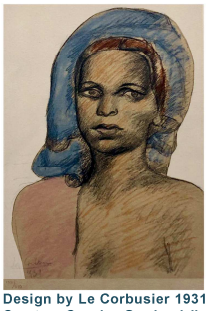
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Early medieval Benedictine settlements and monastic landscape in Italy. A shared path and a case study

Ruggero LONGO[1], Enrico MONCALVO[2]
(1) Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History. Rome, Italy. longo@biblhertz.it
(2) Department of Architecture and Design, Politecnico di Torino. Turin, Italy. enrico.moncalvo@polito.it

Abstract.
The UNESCO nomination process of *Early medieval Benedictine settlements and monastic landscapes in Italy* represents an opportunity for the preservation and the cultural promotion of a global heritage originating in Italy. This heritage stands out for a strong relationship between the intangible cultural phenomenon and its influence on the material shaping and arrangement of natural places and architectural spaces in Medieval Europe. The monastic landscape reveals its multiple facets and meanings: a natural, specific environment inspiring the anchoretic life and favoring monastic settlement; and a *cultural landscape*, shaped by the coenobitic organization of space and marked by the territorial arrangement of the anthropic settlements. The benedictine landscape, intended as a "contaminated" natural environment, emerges as a palimpstest to be preserved in its *authenticity of the becoming*.
The monastery of San Michele della Chiusa offers a relevant case study, due to the contamination between the two extremes of anthropic landscape: the early medieval monastic one, which forms the backbone of the ancient domain of the abbots; and the Modern industrial one that determined the phisical and conceptual bases of the current connective layer. Abandoned after the seventeenth century and recovered by the late Romantic Culture as a picturesque place of neo-medieval fantasies, the monastery takes on a peculiar role of intangible heritage, assuming the role of a brilliant historical beacon with respect to the surrounding diachronic landscape. These elements, with their contaminations and contradictions, need to accounted for in any rereading of the historical environment according to a cultural landscape management plan.

Keywords: Monastic landscape; Benedictine monasticism; Contaminations; Sacra di San Michele; Landscape planning

1. Benedictine settlements and monastic landscape in Italy. What heritage to preserve?

In 2016 *The cultural landscape of medieval benedictine settlements in Italy* was included within the Italian UNESCO Tentative List [1]. The submitted document reports: «The proposed site includes eight medieval Benedictine settlements, selected throughout Italy, which, as a whole, represent a cultural phenomenon born in the Italian peninsula and spread out through the medieval Europe. The nomination focuses on medieval monastic experience in Europe and the decisive role of Benedict of Norcia and his *Rule*. This rule radiated from Italy throughout the Latin West and gave birth to a monasticism that deeply affected Europe's intellectual and political formation, the development of the continent's cultural heritage, landscape and artistic tradition.
The *Benedictine Rule* prompts monks to an open confrontation with 'Creation' and the Earth. These great abbeys - with their inseparable combination of prayer and work on which the Benedictine tradition synthesized its characters - had an effective impact on the landscape and on the rural populations throughout the Middle Ages, spurring forms of civilization and life conditions. [...] Fitting harmoniously into the natural environment, the monasteries - outstanding complex in themselves for architectural and artistic quality - offer a model of coexistence, sustainable development and

conservation of the environment, providing a valuable message for the contemporary society and for the future generations, who can draw the essential values for their human and intellectual formation.
The great abbeys also constituted important cultural centers, in which the universal heritage of knowledge was recovered, preserved and spread through exchanges and acquisitions as the primary investments for the construction of the future» [2].
Since the beginning the nomination project's guiding concept has been that Benedictine monasticism as a cultural phenomenon has had a significant impact on the shaping of a specific cultural landscape in Europe. By delving deeply into the historical context within which Benedictine monasticism initially arose, it became evident that, even before it began to affect the environment and create the cultural landscape, the phenomenon was indeed *predicated* on the perception of the natural environment and on the usage of preexisting sacred landscape and topography [3].
As the nomination project progressed, the preeminence of the landscape in the monastic phenomenon emerged ever more prominently, but at the same time all attempts to circumscribe the related cultural landscape inevitably failed, questioning both the criteria through which an authentic Benedictine monastic landscape, if one ever existed, might be identified, and the concept of circumscribing such a landscape today. Indeed, the elaboration of a related a thematic study, titled *Benedictine monasticism: Settlements and landscape* [4], which aimed to map and analyze the cultural phenomenon in its global dimension and chronological extension, led to a modification of the working title of the nomination project, which now changed in *Early medieval Benedictine settlements and their landscapes in Italy*.
In the first part of the present essay, we will briefly explore: 1) how the natural environment contributed to the emergence of the universal phenomenon of 'Western' monasticism [5]; 2) the multiple identifications and the possible definition and categorization of Benedictine monastic landscapes; 3) the contamination of the monastic landscape as a positive character defining the diachronic life of the cultural landscape.
In the second part, we will turn to consider a single case study, that of San Michele monastery, at the mouth of the Val di Susa.

1.1 The purity of the hybrid

Monasticism as a universal religious phenomenon is linked with the idea of living alone (from the ancient Greek word «μοναχός», meaning *who lives alone, monk*), free from earthly-material things and far from social contacts, searching for a spiritual (ascetic) vision of life [6]. In what we often call the 'Western' world, while there were specific cases of anchoretic and eremitic life occurring before Christ, monasticism spread in Christian era between the 3rd and the 4th centuries, traditionally starting in Egypt with the ascetics Antonius the Great and Pacomius [7]. In order to carry on their solitary life (Greek word «ἐρημία», *eremitism*), they abandoned the social environment, moving to desert places [8]. Significantly, although the desert simply constituted the natural environment these hermits encountered far from towns or other kind of social groups, this space represented the perfect lonely place: uninhabited, therefore savage, an uncontaminated natural environment that stood in clear opposition to a cultural landscape, being unaffected by any kind of anthropic activity. This is the essential condition for a place to be elected as a monastic place [9]. Therefore, we can assume that monasticism as a cultural phenomenon and landscape as a natural environment with specific features are two poles inextricably linked one to the other. Indeed, as soon a natural location is selected as a place for eremitism, that location immediately transforms into an anthropic place. Thus, the presence of the hermit transforms the natural landscape into a cultural one, and, later and often, into a sacred place. Indeed, both Antonius and Pacomius were followed by a great number of devotees. Pacomius in particular is known as the founder of the first *coenobia* (from the Greek word «κοινόβιον», *place to live in community*), also promulgating the first rules of communal life. Hence, during the very first phase of the cultural phenomenon, we witness a shift in the meaning of the term *monakos* – who lives in contemplation, but not necessarily alone – and a concomitant shift in the concept of *desert* – which, being immediately contaminated by the presence of men, is transformed into an anthropic – and hence cultural – place. This melting of elements, this hybridization between natural environment and the human presence, is what precisely gives rise to an, ideal, "pure" monastic landscape. One of the clearest and amazing instances of this combination, albeit much later (11th-15th centuries), can be found in the monastic settlements of Meteora in Greece (Fig. 1), where the interaction between human and natural environment is crystallized in a mesmerizing natural landscape, its characteristic rock towers selected as perfect eremitic

Fig. 1: Greece, Meteora, orthodox monastery (Wikimedia commons)

Fig. 2: Valle dell'Aniene (Subiaco) with the Saint Benedict Monastery (Sacro Speco). (Photo: Ruggero Longo)

places, on top of which the coenobia/monasteries are built. In this essential monastic landscape, a superlative natural phenomenon offers the objective framework to a unique way of monastic life.

According to Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, written around 593-594, some monks from the East (especially from Syria) moved into the Italian peninsula between the 5th and 6th centuries. Among them were Spes, Eutizius and Florentius [10], whom we could consider among the fathers of monasticism in the Latin West. These monks, escaping from the persecutions in place in their homeland, pursued an anchoretic life, finding in the central Italian Apennines their own 'deserts', and among its valleys and cliffs, forests and woods, rivers and creeks, their own eremitic places. As in the case of Meteora, this process can be identified as a pure, endemic hybridization of the anchoretic concept of the desert in the Italian peninsula, an endemic conception of what we have defined as the "pure" monastic landscape.

This process was, in truth, a common way for every monk to find their own monastic identity everywhere, creating replicable monastic spaces characterized by such recurring features as private cells for rest and seclusion, a place to share meals, a sacred area for prayer, the presence of water – a creek or a spring – in order to ensure the autonomy of the monastery, and finally a wall or natural barrier to separate the coenobium from the rest of the world [11]. In this sense, in comparison to the natural environment, anthropic activity seems to be prominent in creating monastic spaces, and indeed monasticism itself, in any location regardless of geography [12]. However, the initial choice of site was always conditioned by the morphology of the landscape, with primacy given to locations that would have guaranteed the separation, if not the inaccessibility, of the place. Therefore, the process of monastic settlement can be always considered as the endemic creation of a monastic landscape.

Thus these monks from the East established their eremitic places in the Apennines, specifically in the Valnerina (Umbria), and it seems quite likely that Benedict from Norcia, father of the Benedictine order, was inspired by the presence of these monks as he established his own monasteries in Subiaco and Montecassino in the first quarter of the 6th century [13]. Indeed Benedict, searching for his own *desertum*, was attracted by the cliffs and valleys of these same central Italian Apennines, and it is the Valle dell'Aniene in particular, with his monasteries at Subiaco, that represents one of the most emblematic natural environments for the birth of an authentic Benedictine landscape (Fig. 2). Still one of the best preserved monastic landscapes of Italy, Subiaco harbors at its core the so-called *Sacro Speco*, a cave, thus a natural space, where according to tradition Benedict used to stay and pray, effectively turning it in a sacred place [14].

Indeed, about fifty years later, Gregory the Great devoted the entire second book of his *Dialogues* to Benedict's life, thus including the saint among other hagiographies and accounts of miracles of *viri Dei* (men of God) scattered across the Italian Peninsula. As Alison Perchuk suggests, «*cataloguing recent saints – primarily male bishops, abbots, and monks – and placing them firmly in relation to readily identifiable sites in central Italy, typically areas of wilderness adjacent to the consular roads* [...] *one objective of the Dialogues was to demonstrate that Italy had become a sacred topography on par with* [...] *the Holy Land*» [15]. In so doing, Gregory would have used the Christian cult to re-establish geographical and political connections in the Italic peninsula in the wake of the fall of the Roman Empire, effectively creating a new cultural identity based on the topography of the sacred [16].

The result of Gregory's work was that the Italian peninsula, with its Apennines and valleys, became a privileged geographical area for the birth of Benedictine monasticism, not only for its characteristic natural environment, but also for the presence of a sacred topography. The combination of these two elements, or perhaps better, the contamination of the natural landscape by a sacred topography, gave rise to an endemic cultural landscape, and as such was the origin and the authentic principle of the Benedictine landscape and its related universal phenomenon.

1.2 Monastic landscapes categories

The short analysis concerning the inextricable relationship between natural environment and cultural phenomenon in monastic landscapes permits us to identify three different categories of Benedictine landscapes. To facilitate this analysis, let us keep in mind the emblematic case of Subiaco.

1) Valle dell'Aniene represented for Benedict a suitable natural environment for his eremitic settlement, one corresponding to the first category of landscape we can individuate:

A natural landscape, as long as appropriate and satisfying definite conditions, is the primary circumstance for the anchoretic individual or group to meet their ascetic needs.
In a word, this is the *desertum*, an inhabited space. However, a peculiar aspect of Benedictine landscapes is that the desert is not always *uncontaminated*; rather it is *abandoned*, since the settlement is often established in places of ancient occupation, for instance, Roman villas or other places of pre-Christian cult. This was the case for Subiaco, Benedict's first monastery, built over the ancient Villa di Nerone, as well as for his subsequent foundation at Montecassino, where the ancient Roman acropolis was transformed in a monastery and the temple to Apollo converted into a church [17]. A later case is the abbey church of San Michele Arcangelo in Sant'Angelo in Formis, built upon the temple of Diana on Mount Tifata [18]. Besides the economic convenience of repurposing ancient buildings to house a new monastic settlement, this habit also attests to, on the one hand, the continuity of cult places, and on the other, the desire to convert pagan or secular sites into Christian (and sacred) sites. Thus the natural environment, even at the moment of its primitive accommodation of the monastic presence, reveals itself as already contaminated by anthropic activities, thus, more than a primary landscape, it is already, to a certain extent, a cultural landscape.
2) Moreover, as suggested by our exegesis of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, the natural site elected to be an eremitic place, not only immediately transforms into an anthropic place and thus a cultural landscape but, often, it later becomes a sacred place. In the case of Subiaco, the so-called *Sacro Speco*, a cave – a natural *space* – where, according to tradition, Benedict used to stay alone and pray, quickly became a sacred *place*. Later, between the last decades of the 12th and the 15th centuries, a sacred *space* (a Sanctuary and the Saint Benedict Monastery) was in fact created around it [19]. This anthropic process, which began with the simple occupation of a *natural* place, culminated in the construction of an *artificial* sacred space.
This situation corresponds to the second category of landscape we can individuate:
The essential monastic cultural landscape, which is the authentic condition of the former late antique Benedictine landscape, and while it has a higher level of contamination of the natural environment, the anthropic level of this category can be considered as tenuous, resulting only from the presence of the monastery itself: architecture in close relationship to and in harmony with nature.
Due to the intrinsically ephemeral character of any landscape, being as it is subject to a considerable number of natural and anthropic factors [20] including specific factors discussed below that are common to Benedictine cultural landscapes, it is rare to find the original essential condition of a Benedictine monastic landscape today, and only a few cases in Italy are satisfying. Besides Subiaco, we can point to San Pietro al Monte Pedale near Civate (Lombardy), a Benedictine abbey founded between the 8th and 9th centuries [21] in the Valle dell'Oro, a valley in the Prealps Mountains. The only way to reach the site is on foot or by horse, via the ancient mule track which linked the upper monastery with the monastery of San Calocero below, at the edge of Civate. Indeed, the upper monastery, dedicated to St. Peter, the most symbolic figure of the Roman church, was intended as the final destination of a penitential path rooted in a local rite and tradition. The only thing one encounters today around the isolated Romanesque monastery is the wildness of uncontaminated nature (Category 1), while the monastic landscape is marked only by the presence of the abbey, defining a perfect essential Benedictine landscape (Category 2).
3) The physical and esthetic presence of the monastery is not the only factor shaping, modifying and contaminating the natural landscape. Indeed, the monks were encouraged to work the earth for their own sustenance [22]. Moreover, the same sustenance needs determined the implementation and improvement of other types of economic activity. As a consequence, the land around the monastery was organized and cultivated, the water was regimented and canalized, the forest controlled, etc. Thus we can identify a stronger level of anthropic intervention, our third category of landscape:
The diachronic Benedictine cultural landscape, as the customary condition of every Benedictine landscape determined by the natural historical process of diachronic and stratified transformations and *contaminations* that every monastery underwent during its long existence. The magnitude of the anthropic level is directly proportional to the historical fortune of the given monastery and the consequent dimension of its impact of the surrounding territory on socio-economic and administrative levels. Simultaneously, the architectural transformations and renovations layered over the original construction phase of the monastery during the medieval and modern periods are also proportional to the degree of fortune and historical importance of the Benedictine settlement across the centuries.
Because of the level of complexity introduced by this third diachronic category of landscape, we will devote a final section to an analysis of the historical principles determining the *contamination* of what we identified as the essential Benedictine monastic landscape. This contamination can be seen as a positive characteristic defining the diachronic life of the Benedictine cultural landscape. The second part of this essay is dedicated to exploring the Sacra of San Michele as a case study in the diachronic socio-economic and cultural development of a Benedictine landscape.

1.3 Transferred deserts and contaminated landscapes

Paragraph 1.1 discusses the possibility of finding monastic entities everywhere, on the basis of some recurring features, regardless of geography. Indeed, the universal success of Benedictine monasticism resulted in the precocious and wide dissemination of the phenomenon over the Medieval Western world, especially the European continent [23] (Fig. 3). Throughout Christendom, monks were finding or creating their own deserts in (almost) uncontaminated natural landscapes or in less contaminated cultural landscapes. The importance of the cultural phenomenon of monasticism was acknowledged in the Carolingian period, and the fortune of Benedictine monasteries increased enormously. Benedict of Aniane was appointed to evaluate the most effective among the rules followed in that period by the monks spread across North Europe. After a trip lasting several years, he found and tested about 22 different monastic rules. In the end, Benedict's *Regula* was acknowledged by the 816, 817 and 818-819 Aachen synods as the only one to be pursued in the Carolingian Holy Empire [24].

This universal pronouncement legitimated the concrete intervention of Benedictine monasticism in the political and socio-economic administration of the territories pertaining to the Empire and under direct monastic control. The Rule itself was really an ensemble of rules, if not a real jurisdictional system, which found its legal basis primarily in divine faith and the dignity of the faithful Christian person, and secondarily in Roman law [25]. It provided the basis for administrative organizations that aspired to equity and harmony among men and between humanity and Creation, thus fostering eco-friendly/sustainable socio-economic systems of management. Among others, cases in point are the *Charta Caritatis*, the foundation of the juridic structure regulating Cistercian monasticism [26], or the *Codex forestalis camaldulensis*, which moderated the sustainable exploitation and cultivation of woodland [27]. While the first, a jurisdictional system created before 1119, can be seen as anticipating the *Magna Charta Libertatum* (1215), the second represents one of the earliest sustainable management systems that sought to control landscape resources by preserving the natural environment.

Especially in the Italian peninsula, between the 10th and 13th centuries Benedictine monasticism worked as the main cultural factor catalyzing political control and territorial administration, thus contributing in a significant manner to the shaping of the cultural and socio-economic landscape [28]. Thus, the disruptive force of the Benedictine phenomenon was deeply and inextricably intertwined with the shaping of the Italian and European cultural landscape before the Industrial revolution and, sometimes, even after it.

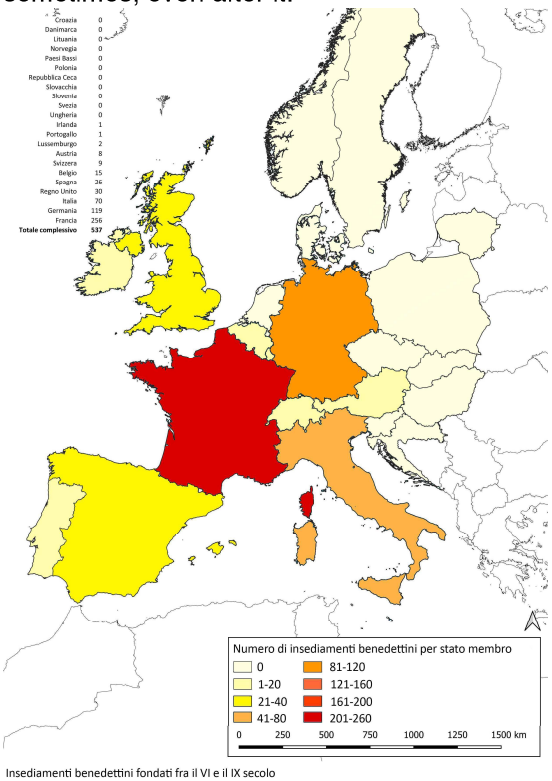

Fig. 3: Distribution of Early medieval Benedictine settlements in Europe (VI-IX centuries). (From the Thematic Study. Graphics: Politecnico di Torino)

The essential synchronic monastic landscape of the moment of origin (Category 2) has been "contaminated" by diachronic anthropic stratifications and activities which were formerly and inherently connected with monastic culture itself (Category 3), but which have subsequently become common and shared cultural practices. In this way, the Benedictine monastic landscape merges and becomes confused with the cultural and social-economic landscape, which has also had an outstanding cultural influence on the development of the whole European landscape up to the present day. In other words, the Benedictine cultural phenomenon is so pervasive in the European cultural system as to be often confused with that system as a whole. This means that it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to identify the boundaries with which to circumscribe a given diachronic Benedictine landscape. At the same time, the *contamination* of the essential Benedictine landscape should be evaluated and promoted as the *authenticity of becoming*: something already born as hybrid contaminated the natural environment, creating its landscape to be in turn contaminated. Nevertheless, this diachronic landscape remains authentic in its state of palimpsest, and deserves to be preserved, especially in those cases in which it has retained its more authentic and symbolic values. These values are not to be identified as existing in original symbolic features only, but rather in the preservation of the authentic principles of the phenomenon, principles

that are at the base of the ongoing shaping of the landscape itself and its identity [29]. Only by preventing the disappearance of these principles is it possible to ensure the preservation of the Benedictine cultural landscape.
To conclude, while the first individuated category is only the ideal and potential natural environment, representing the suitable background (objective framework) for the preliminary monastic settlement or agent, the two poles required for the generation of an actual Benedictine landscape, the second category represents the essential, synchronic/medieval Benedictine landscape, which is definitely rare, if it still exists at all, for in most cases it was destinated to be contaminated and overwhelmed by the diachronic stratifications of the landscape of the third category. When and where this third category of a diachronically becoming landscape does not obscure the authentic principles which gave shape to a given Benedictine landscape of the second category, this second category is to be preferred for the representation of the authentic early medieval Benedictine monastic landscape. **(R. L.)**

2. Contaminations

When the Swiss industrialists Pietro and Augusto Bosio commissioned Camillo Riccio – an acclaimed professional of the subalpine entrepreneurial milieu – to complete the prospect of their knitwear factory in 1898 [30], six hundred metres higher up, Alfredo d'Andrade had already been working on the meticulous refurbishment of the ancient monastery for about a decade. The architectural arrangement of the work reflects two different angles of the 19th century project: that of reconstructive reinvention used for the monastery and the romantic-picturesque angle adopted for the industrial installation. Both exemplary, both uniquely out of tune with our current sensitivity: with respect to the dilapidation of the abbey - onto which a reinterpretation of the Middle Ages *based on analogy* was superimposed, and with respect to the *alpine* setting of the factory - comparable to other examples of *Rundbogenstil*, in this case characterised by the picturesque alpine style in vogue at the time. The industrial complex, however, exploited the hydraulic energy of the canal built by the monks who lived in the abbey, which still flows through the adjacent village. We have no idea how much the proximity of the monument, a veritable *convitato di pietra* (stone guest) which overshadows both village and factory, conditioned the design choices; what we do however know is that, after the National Architecture Exhibition (Turin, 1890), there was a definite interest in the definition of a *Reklame-Architektur* which would be clearly visible from the *Valigia delle Indie*, the railway that linked London and Calcutta, travelling through the Frejus tunnel: the opening of the tunnel (1871) coincided with the first installation of the business, at the foot of Mount Pirchiriano, and with the pervasive expansion of the manufacturing premises in the Lower Valley [31]. In this context, the Sacra had long-since consolidated its reference value and its status of landmark, and this had influenced – and probably contaminated – the settlement and factory below. The tourist imagination of the time, following the widespread model of *Voyage en Suisse*, then proposes the achievement of this Italian Rigi-Kulm (even today, and quite rightly so, the regional landscape plan confirms the peak of Mount Pirchiriano as a panoramic viewpoint) with a comfortable rack railway, which was never built; the completion of the restoration works really needed a carriage road, the opening of which overturned the visual perspectives and access to the monastery. As it is today.

2.1 The Sacra di San Michele, a possible beacon asset for a complex territory.

In the series selected to form the site, the monastery of San Michele represents an interesting case study, the particular features of which have been the subject of dossier studies in accordance with UNESCO criteria. In specific terms, it is interesting to note the contamination between two overlapping cultural landscapes in the construction of the manmade landscape on the valley floor [32]: the monastic landscape, which formed the ridge of the ancient domain of the abbey between the 10th and 14th centuries; and the industrial context which was a consequence of post-unification policies, laying the modern foundations for today's territorial links. The integration of this feature is important if we are to understand the current layout, not only of the core zone but of the Lower Valley in general: a territory identified from the outset by the Benedictine settlement, with the presence of three contiguous communities of monks, the Abbeys of Novalesa, San Michele della Chiusa and San Giusto of Susa. The Sacra and the visible signs of the ancient monastic landscape, which are part of this cultural context, cannot therefore be relegated to the status of high-standing but isolated testimonies; they must be incorporated into a

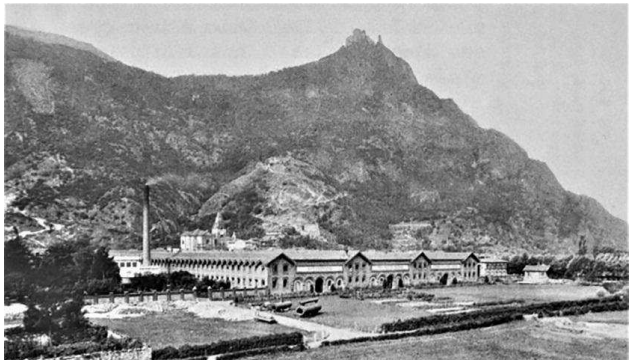

Fig. 4: The factory and monastery, early 1900's

Fig. 5: Carlo Bossoli, the entrance of the Susa Valley with mounts Pirchiriano (left) and Caprasio (right), c.1853

broad territorial-historical knowledge which also includes – with appropriate distinctions – the testimonies of industrial archaeology. For better or for worse. If "worse" prevails, we can imagine intervening with reorganisation and mitigation works: local planning operations would have to take this into account of course. Without this incorporation, the view of the territory would be incomplete: we have to consider this contamination as an asset, beginning with a small piece (the area of influence of the Sacra, our beacon asset) to try out ways of presenting a more extensive view.

2.2 The monastery of San Michele della Chiusa between legend, Benedictine foundation and decline.

The monastery originally included (as it had been for Cluny [33]) a small territorial buffer which guaranteed its autonomy. An abbey village (Sant'Ambrogio) destined to house administrative activities, the collection of taxes and provide hospitality for less important pilgrims, gradually developed on the valley floor; it was characterised by the presence of towers, a *broletto*, a hospital, a cathedral and a castle. This little enclave gradually expended between the 10th and 13th centuries, occupying some scattered parts of the Susa Valley floor toward the west, in the east it touched the town of Avigliana, ruled by the House of Savoy, and spread across the hills in the south towards the area ruled by the Acaia family, as far as Giaveno and Valgioie in the neighbouring Valsangone. The abbot exercised the authority of *dominus loci* over this area via the presence of two castellans, one in the abbey village of Sant'Ambrogio and one in Giaveno, this too fortified and later surrounded by walls. The estates were separate from the domain and extended from the Gargano to the Po Valley, from French to Iberian areas: donations from high ranking pilgrims who ascended the monastery during their passage along this branch of the Via Francigena. These estates - complicated to manage because they were so far away and subject to other territorial seigniories - with the material traces of the Benedictines' presence could constitute an ideal and diaspora-induced cultural landscape in their own right. Rumiz notes, for the mountainous ridge of central Italy, an intrinsic holiness rooted in Etruscan and Roman mythology [34], overlapped by Christianity. The places formed an ideal *monastic landscape*, which inspired the presence of small groups of anchorites and, later, coenobites. Here, as in the other offshoot of the Benedictine series (San Pietro al Monte, above Civate), the original *desertum* of the Egyptian hermits, evoked by the solitude of the Apennine mountains, there is a harsh alpine declination. The Italic and Etruscan-Roman deities of the Apennines correspond to the Roman-Celtic worships in the Western Alps. The Lombards, christianised at the end of the seventh century, had then extended the veneration of Saint Michael, the warrior archangel, likened to Wotan (Odin), to this area too: dedicating a sign of worship on the ruins of the castrum guarding the Chiuse.

The first chronicle of the abbey [35], written over a century after it was founded, records another contamination: between anchoretic presence and coenobitic community, between history and mythology, between angelic worship and the veneration of saints. The crags and woods of Mount Caprasio, which faces Mount Pirchiriano at the extremes of the Cisalpine territory [36], had been an ideal *desertum* for the anchorite's settlement before the year 1000: among these ascetics, a certain Giovanni, Archbishop of Ravenna, acquired veneration and fame of holiness. Like Benedict, who had fled from Rome to Subiaco - he had left the cares of the world behind him and retreated to the caves of the Susa Valley.

The abbey's chronicle laid claim to this figure - much venerated by pilgrims on the same site as the hermitage at the time - to make him the mythological founder of the monastery. Once the construction of a church on the north side of the valley had begun, following angelic instructions the hermit of Caprasio transported the construction to the opposite summit, creating the two subsequent *sacella* that were to be incorporated into the Benedictine monastery: the myth and etymology of the site assign consecration with divine fire to the angels. Later, the monks also laid claim to the reliquaries of Giovanni Morosini [37], (*vincens* over worldly temptations and therefore made saint with the name of Giovanni Vincenzo), to move them from the eremitic cave (where he died on January 12 of the year 1000) to the abbey village, to encourage closer and more profitable attendance by worshippers. The legend of the angelic foundation, coenobites and anchorites come together between myth and reality in the name of Michael, archangel, who mediates between man and God. His worship is, naturally, between heaven and earth, *on high*: alpine *desertum* but also angelic culmination.

Within the Benedictine community, the worship of Michael and that of the bishop of Ravenna were united, with the foundation of a *lower*, lesser but well attended place of worship, the small cathedral of Sant'Ambrogio. The church, the façade of which opened along the walls, could be easily accessed by the abbot and his followers from the monastery and the castle, without entering the village.
The vicissitudes of the Abbey make use of a particularly rich bibliography, which cannot be described here in detail. The Benedictine presence left an important mark on the territorial structure, with the progressive transformation of the *desertum* from *locus horribilis* to *locus amoenus*; the structure of the monastery - firmly rooted in the rocks on which it stands - was defined in parallel in three successive phases between the 11th and 13th centuries. An extreme offshoot (along with Susa and Novalesa) of the Benedictine settlements in the north-western Italian territory, the abbey marks an important liaison with French culture and architecture, via the presence of monks and abbots from the Languedoc and via the link with Cluny Abbey. The abbey domain maintained its integrity until 1381 [38], when it was suppressed for political reasons and transformed into a commendation; subsequent events saw the monastery run by Priors, stripped of its spiritual and cultural prestige and finally adapted as a military outpost during the conflicts between France and Piedmont: a situation that led to its material destruction and suppression (as a monastic presence) by its most prestigious commendatory abbot, Cardinal Maurice of Savoy. A collector and patron of the arts, influenced by the late Mannerist culture in Rome and founder of the Accademia dei Solinghi in Turin, the cardinal, with lucid realism, permanently closed the monastery of San Michele in 1622 and transferred its prerogatives and archives to the collegiate church of the canons of Giaveno: a site with a *locus amoenus* character which he accentuated by transforming the abbey castle into a delightful summer residence. This brought the Benedictine season in the monastery and the village below to a definitive end. The village maintained its vocation as a resting place for travellers to and from France; once the abbots' rule had fallen and the worship of the Archangel ceased, the community of Sant'Ambrogio kept the identity and veneration of Giovanni Vincenzo alive, radically transforming the church, directing its access to the village, and definitively turning its back on the old monastery. This was the work of Bernardo Antonio Vittone [39].

2.3 The romantic reinvention, the valley floor industrial landscape and the restoration work.
The reinvention of the Abbey of San Michele as a Sacra preceded the completion of the railway network (1871) and the establishment of the industrialised landscape on the valley floor by a few decades. The intangible value acquired in the Romantic period by its captivating position on Mount Pirchiriano, and its presence as a recognisable landmark, have contrasted with the progressive urbanisation of the territorial context between the manufacturing city and the mountains ever since, fulfilling the function of reference point in terms of identity and visual impact, while remaining somewhat detached. The Sacra is recognised for its wonderful panoramic position, solemn architectural magnificence and legends, yet there is a widespread lack of awareness and knowledge of its potential and relations with the underlying territory.
Following the trend of the whole of Napoleonic Europe, the canonical community of the collegiate church of Giaveno was suppressed in 1803. About ten years after the Restoration, two modern hermits settled among the ruins: two Carthusian monks in search of spiritual ascesis. The presence and the place, in full romantic mood, intrigued the court of Carlo Felice and Maria Cristina and, shortly afterwards, that of Carlo Alberto: in the mid-1820s, people began visiting the ruins of the abbey, the pictorial efforts of amateur *demoiselles* appeared, along with evocative and picturesque representations by De Gubernatis, Bagetti, Bossoli and Massimo D'Azeglio, who immortalised it, with its ruin-like charm, and the late legends of maidens saved by angels, in a successful book for which he created *illustrations and descriptions* [40]. In that artistic and literary milieu, the old Benedictine monastery of San Michele della Chiusa, consecrated by the angels, became the Sacra *tout court*. In 1836, after many reflections, the complex, seeking, as we would say today, a function, was entrusted by Carlo Alberto to his philosopher friend Antonio Rosmini so that he could make it a place of new spirituality: for new hermits, high-ranking personalities who, tired of the cares of the world, could find spiritual care and refreshment for the soul up there. The massive structure - designed in troubadour style by the royal architect Ernest Melano - was, providentially, not built. Melano was also the author of more successful neo-medieval adjustments for the court of Turin, from the abbey of Hautecombe to the castle of Pollenzo: following the ideological line of the reinvented Savoy mausoleum, along with the Sacra, the king also entrusted him a sign of dynastic legitimation of the newly established Savoy Carignano line, making the Rosminian complex the repository of the burials of 28 members of the family [41].
The restoration work began fifty years later, taking advantage of the earthquake of 1886, which imposed the consolidation of the church roof. Alfredo d'Andrade's intervention is rooted in the late-romantic and positivist contradiction of the restoration practice of the second half of the 19th century,

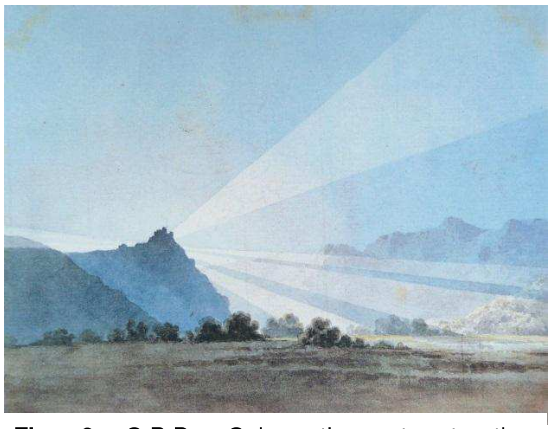

Fig. 6: G.B.De Gubernatis, entry to the valley,1805

just a few years after the successful exhibition in Turin in which, together with a motivated group of architects, engineers, writers and painters, he had created a scenic but philologically documented *Medieval Village* on the banks of the River Po. The studies and reflections on the Sacra are a very enjoyable anthology of the authority, investigative curiosity and reconstructive fantasies of the Genoese restorer, and were to open the way to a practice that was to continue, essentially in methodological adhesion, until the site of 1937: an important contamination that testifies to an identity-related aspect of late 19th-century subalpine culture. An authentic expression of that cultural milieu, it left a fourth phase for the monument (after three medieval phases) that streamlined and transformed the damaged skyline, giving us the profile we know today [42].

The romantic reinvention took place in two distinct phases: one of artistic-literary suggestion, reintroducing the religious function in compliance with the French model (Solesmes [43]); the second, of integrative restoration, ending with the construction of the road. These reconstructions created the current still-criticised skyline, with the recognisable addition of the buttresses and the with the failure to build the Gothic spire that would have slendered and distorted the structure of the stumpy, unfinished bell tower. A now historicised integration which is interesting as a whole, in its incongruities and its dynamics, materially highlighting the

complex intangible value acquired by the monument over a period of ten centuries, corresponding to what has been defined above as 'authenticity of the becoming' (see paragraph 1.3).

2.4 The Sacra in the peri-urban and post-industrial context of the lower valley. Notes surrounding a possible "beacon asset". The following considerations are valid as notes, which can be obtained very selectively from the above analysis: although not out of place, it is too soon to look at the Management Plan, which will have to be referred to the serial site as a whole, extended through five regions.

A first reflection can start from the specific keyword "contamination", which has generated a certainly excessive excursus compared to the *telos* of the candidacy. The two themes should not be confused: a territory so rich in tangible evidence (a feature common to most of the national case studies) cannot be sieved with a mesh that is too wide. We have to think that inclusion by UNESCO on its WHL, based mainly - for the territorial area - on the identification of the tangible evidence of medieval the monastic landscape (category 2) or on its documentary memory, will illuminate the complex stratified characteristics of the long path of landscape construction (category 3) with a new focus. The prerequisites will have to be compared with existing protection and planning instruments (regional, metropolitan and local).

In addition to the nucleus of the monastery with its pedestal, the original territorial buffer that was the abbey domain, in its diachronic variability (the becoming), is a reference to be considered. A first step in this sense was the establishment (2019) of an open and inclusive non-profit organisation ("Terre di Sacra"), which does not want to identify with an improper reconstruction of the ancient monastic territory, but which includes the four municipalities directly impacted by the access routes to the monastery, as well as the two mountain unions and private associations that stress the widespread participation at territorial level. In short, "Terre di Sacra" and the area of influence of the asset (core/buffer zones, to use outdated terms) do not necessarily have to coincide. Indeed, it is better that the former be bigger than the latter.

Within this context, the abbey village of Sant'Ambrogio offers a justified opportunity for inclusion, but also due to the inadequacy (surmountable) of the urban planning system with respect to the historical framework, and the severe impairment of the medieval structure with poor quality interventions. The theme is made interesting by an evident contradiction: the village stands at the foot of the Sacra but is for many reasons now evidently detached from the impaired urban fabric and the monastery that overlooks it with its skyline: an explicit inclusion in the core zone would be very challenging in this sense but would offer a tangible opportunity for integration between abbey and surroundings, and vice versa.

The involvement of Giaveno, with its ancient nucleus enclosed within the walls of the abbots, reinvented in recent years as a prestigious residential suburb of the city nearby, seems alluring, but should be considered in relation to the areas of influence of the other settlements within the site.

Another opportunity is to extend the area of influence of the asset from Mount Pirchiriano to Caprasio, including the hermitage of Giovanni Vincenzo. This would be offset by the ribbon-like structure of the valley floor and in particular by the new railway line.
Then there is the problem of the industrial area between Avigliana and Sant'Ambrogio (historically attributable to Alfred Nobel's investments after 1871), with the presence of an Ecomuseum but problematic “from above” in terms of visual impact. The current post-industrial milieu would also, sooner or later, pose the specific problem of making it wholly or partially an area of urban transformation.
After the topic of most direct interest of the candidacy, the Chiusa monastery’s context presents multiple stratifications: the network that studies it will have to be finely filter the elements that are congruent with the goals of interpreting the site, but will have to be so open as not to prevent - as a secondary consequence - opportunities for interpreting, understanding and improving the landscape of the Lower Valley that the UNESCO candidacy has triggered, taking advantage also indirectly of the regulatory adaptations of the mitigation works that would be required. (E. M.)

Bibliographical References

[1] The nomination, promoted and sponsored by Fondazione comunitaria del Lecchese and Istituto Treccani, is pursued by a scientific national committee constituted on purpose and coordinated by Ruggero Longo. See: http://www.treccani.it/monasteri_benedettini/index.html
[2] From the Tentative List document (http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6107/), elaborated by the scientific national committee and submitted by arch. Francesca Riccio, MiBACT, Ufficio UNESCO, on March 18th, 2016. The eight selected settlements componing the serial site are: Subiaco, Montecassino, Farfa, San Vincenzo al Volturno, San Pietro al Monte, Sacra di San Michele, San Vittore alle Chiuse, Sant’Angelo in Formis.
[3] On the concept of ‘cultural landscape’, the earliest modern definition is in SAUER, Carl O. *The Morphology of Landscape*, in *University of California Publications in Geography*, 2, 2, p. 19-53,1925, especially 39-40: «*The cultural landscape is fashioned out of a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape the result*». On cultural landscape theories and definitions: ARMSTRONG, Helen. *A New Model for Cultural Landscape Interpretation*. Brisbane: Cultural Landscape Research Unit, Queensland University of Technology. BRN. 2001, with bibliography. Cultural landscapes intended as “the combined works of nature and man” have been acknowledged as a cultural heritage to be preserved since 1992 UNESCO World Heritage Convention. The European Landscape Convention entered in force in 2004. See FOWLER Pete J. *World Heritage Cultural Landscapes*, Paris: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2003; MYGA-PIĄTEK, Urszula. *Cultural Landscape of the 21st Century: Geographical Consideration between Theory and Practice*, in *Hrvatski geografski glasnik*, 73(2), 2011, p. 129–140, especially p. 134-135. On the sacred landscape, see footnote 15 and below in this text.
[4] The Thematic Study has been carried out to provide a new instrument of analysis for the evaluation of the outstanding universal phenomenon and an efficient tool to carry on the most reliable selection of Benedictine settlements componing the UNESCO site. The work will be published on-line by Istituto TRECCANI.
[5] We will limit our investigation to the so-called western world, leaving aside the monastic phenomena which also born in the East, such as Buddhist monasticism, Hindu, Zen, etc.
[6] See «*monachesimo*» in *Dizionario di Storia,* Roma: Treccani 2010:
http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/monachesimo_%28Dizionario-di-Storia%29/
[7] On the origin of Christian monasticism see: PENCO, Gregorio. *Il monachesimo*, Milano: Mondadori, 2000.
[8] On Antonius life: http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sant-antonio-abate_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/ and https://it.cathopedia.org/wiki/Sant'Antonio_abate consulted on May 1st, 2020.
On Pacomius life, see: http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/santo-pacomio/ and https://it.cathopedia.org/wiki/San_Pacomio.
[9] This condition corresponds to what has been defined as *objective framework of the cultural landscape*, being the subjective one the way in which individuals interact, perceive and understand their cultural and phisical environment. See HIRSCH, Eric. *Landscape between Space and Place*, in HIRSCH, Eric, O’HANLON, Michael (eds.). *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspective on Place and Space*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995, p. 1-23.
[10] SIMONETTI Manlio e PRICOCO Salvatore (eds.). *Gregorio Magno, Storie di santi e di diavoli,* Milano: Mondadori, 2006, vol. II, pp. 62-73. On the origin of Christian monasticism in Italy, see: PENCO, Gregorio. *Storia del monachesimo in Italia. Dalle origini alla fine del medioevo*, Milano: Jaka Book, 1995

[11] On the construction of monastic space and identity: MARAZZI, Federico. *Le città dei monaci. Storia degli spazi che avvicinano a Dio*. Milano: Jaka Book, 2015, especially chapter 4th, p. 83-117.
[12] Different forms of monastic settlements spread out accross the European continent between the 4th and 5th Century. Among the most famous cases are Martino di Tours and Colombano in Ireland.
[13] Among the considerable bibliography on Benedict, see: *Gregorio Magno. Vita di San Benedetto e la Regola*, Roma: Città Nuova, 1975, ed. 2017, with essential biblioraphy.
[14] On Sacro Speco: CERONE, Roberta. *Architettura e decorazione fino al XIV secolo*, in «Bollettino d'arte», Serie 7, anno 101, 29, 2016, pp. 118-123.
[15] LOCKE PERCHUK, Alison. *Paesaggio culturale degli insediamenti benedettini dell'Italia medievale. Aspetti sincronici del paesaggio culturale: sacralità, modificazioni, sfruttamento*. Contribution for the Thematic Study delivered on June 23rd, 2019. See also: *EAD. Landscapes of St. Gregory: Topography and Hagiography in Early Medieval Italy*, in BAADER, Hannah, RAY Sugata, WOLF Gerhard. *Ecologies, Aesthetics, and Histories of Art*, Berlin: Degruyter, 2020.
[16] See also LAGHEZZA, Angela. *L'Italia meridionale nei* Dialoghi *di Gregorio Magno: le ragioni di un'assenza*, in «Auctores Nostri. Studi e testi di letteratura cristiana antica», 11, 2012, pp. 247-259.
[17] On Montecassino Abbey: D'ONOFRIO, Mario, PACE, Valentino, *Italia Romanica. La Campania*, Milano: Jaka Book, 1981, pp. 41-73.
[18] On Sant'Angelo in Formis church: D'ONOFRIO-PACE 1981, pp. 143-170.
[19] On its monumentalization as a case of Benedictine 'revivalism' in the Middle Age, see RIGHETTI, Marina. *Il Sacro Speco di Subiaco e l'architettura dei Crociati in Terra Santa*, in BELTING, Hans (ed.). *Il Medio Oriente e l'Occidente nell'arte del XIII secolo*, Bologna 1982, p. 129-135.
[20] MYGA-PIĄTEK 2011; ARMSTRONG 2001.
[21] On Pietro al Monte a Civate: GATTI, Vincenzo. *Abbazia benedettina di S. Pietro al Monte Pedale sopra Civate*, Milano: Grafiche Cola, 2011.
[22] See for instance *Regula*, XLVIII, *De opere manuum quotidiano*, ed. 2017, p. 196-199.
[23] The Thematic Study (footnote 4) benefits of a number of maps and graphics derived from a census and a screening carried on more than 2150 medieval Benedictine monasteries in Europe.
[24] See SKUBISZEWSKY, Piotr, *s.v. Benedetto di Aniane, Santo*, in Enciclopedia dell'Arte Medievale, 1992).
[25]STENDARDI 1975, p. 30-32.
[26] VAN DAMME, Jean-Baptiste, *La "Summa Cartae Caritatis" source de constitutions caconials*, in *Citeaux*, 23, 1972, pp. 5-54.
[27] Originated in the 11th century and decreeted in the 13th century rules. See: CARDARELLI, Francesco (ed.), *Il codice forestale camaldolese. Legislazione e gestione del bosco nella documentazione d'archivio romualdina*, Bononia University Press, 2009.
[28] On the shaping of historical landscapes, see in general: TOSCO, Carlo. *Il paesaggio storico: le fonti e i metodi di ricerca tra medioevo ed età moderna*, Roma: Laterza 2009.
[29] LOWENTHAL, David. *Past Time, Presence Place, Landscae and Memory*, in *Geographical Review*, 65(1), 1975, pp. 1-36.
[30] For 1898, C. Riccio's curriculum vitae indicates: *Fabbrica dei signori Bosio a Sant'Ambrogio*. (CASELLI, Crescentino. *Camillo Riccio, commemorazione detta dal Socio Ingegnere Prof. C. Caselli. In* Atti della Società degli ingegneri e degli architetti in Torino, 1899). A subsequent operation is attributed to G. Salvadori di Wiesenhoff. (Details from bibliographic references as the actual designs hasn't been found).
[31] On this point see in particular CASTRONOVO, Valerio. *Il Piemonte*. Torino: Einaudi, 1977.
[32] About the monastic and the cultural landscape, see above in the text and footnote 3.
[33] Hugo de Montboissier, the pilgrim from Auvergne who founded the abbey of the Chiusa in 987 on the advice of Pope Sylvester II, acquired a first territorial settlement from the Arduinici as a gift for the monastery.
[34] The subject of *desertum* as an inspirational element of the monastic landscape on the Apennine mountain ridge and subsequently in the Alps is introduced in the first part, as a distinguishing element for the identification of the series. In the literary field, see RUMIZ, Paolo. *Il filo infinito*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 2019.
[35] *Chronicon Coenobii Sancti Michaelis de Clusa*, written by the monk Guglielmo, end of the 11th century.
[36] On the valley floor near Avigliana was the *statio ad fines* for the collection of *quadragensima Galliarum*,
[37] See SAVIO, Fedele, *Vita di San Giovanni Vincenzo*. Torino: Libreria Salesiana, 1900. (2nd ed. Torino: Il Leone Verde, 1999).). Other sources identify Giovanni archbishop and hermit with a Giovanni di Besate

[38] One of the antecedents of the decline of the monastery was the differences between Filippo d'Acaia and Amedeus VI of Savoy. In the related events, which involved the sacking of the abbey village, Filippo was supported against his cousin by abbot Peter III of Fongeret. Following a trial held in absentia, in 1381 Amadeus VI requested the suppression of the abbot's authority from Pope Urban VI and this was granted.
[39] The intervention dates back to 1765 and the commendatory abbot was Cardinal Carlo Alberto Guidobono Cavalchini (1683-1774), who had come, seven years earlier, extremely close to being elected Pope. The baroque transformation kept the Romanesque bell tower intact: from the study of Vittone's site, it would be interesting to see if this is linked to a symbolic value (as was the case for the *donjons* of the ancient manor houses, kept as a testimony of ancient nobility), to precocious medieval sensitivity or to budget restrictions..
[40] D'AZEGLIO, Massimo. *La Sacra di San Michele disegnata, e descritta*. Torino: Chirio e Mina, 1829.
[41] The survey of the Swabian-Aragonese tombs commissioned by Ferdinand IV of Bourbon is of similar value. (DANIELE, Francesco*. I regali sepolcri del duomo di Palermo*. Napoli: nella stamperia del re,1784).
[42] A thoughtful and extensive intervention on the complex, aimed at overcoming architectural barriers, was carried out in the 1990s by Studio Vinardi, with the consultancy of Luciano Re.
[43] The rebirth of the monastery as Sacra, in a neo-medieval cultural context, finds singular correspondence -also chronological - with that of Solesmes by dom Prosper Gueranger, 1831.