

Cocconato - English Version

COCCONATO Church of the Madonna della Neve

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The Madonna della Neve church was built on a hillock between Cocconato and Montiglio, about one kilometre east of the town. The hill, now mainly covered with vineyards, is located between the Versa and Marcellina valleys. In the Marcellina valley, several archaeological discoveries of Roman remains and materials have taken place since the nineteenth century.

The site's historical importance was reaffirmed in medieval times, by its vicinity to a road that partially retraced the route of the existing road between Roman Hasta Pompeia (Asti) and Industria (Monteu da Po). The events that led to the church of Madonna della Neve becoming home to the pieve were rather complex. In this regard it is worth remembering that, until the Council of Trent, rural territory was divided into dioceses, and diocese into parishes, which were headed by a church in which baptisms could be administered.

In the middle of the tenth century the territory south of the Po belonging to the religious jurisdiction of the "ultra Padum" Vercelli diocese appears to have been divided into 12 parishes. The closest of these parishes to Cocconato were Montiglio, Pino d'Asti, Industria (today known as Monteu da Po, a large parish dating back to the Roman municipium to which the Cocconato churches originally belonged) and Moncalvo. Subsequently, in the period between 1216 and 1247, due to its separation from the church of Industria, Madonna della Neve took on the role of the parish church of Cocconato.

The first documentary evidence of the "plebs Cochonati", in the diocese of Vercelli, is in 1250 when Pope Innocent IV gave instructions relating to the conflicts taking place in the area due to the dispute between Church and Empire. The area was above all at the mercy of local quarrels and alliances between various members of the Marquis of Monferrato and the lords of Cocconato Radicati, Aramengo, Monteu da Po, Cavagnolo and San Sebastiano Po.

The parish of Cocconato which lay narrowly between the diocese of Vercelli, to which it belonged, and the diocese of Asti, was very limited. In 1299 it was the head of only five churches: San Pietro de Tovo, San Cristoforo di Banengo, and another three which have, to date, not been identified.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the churches under the control of Madonna della Neve were the same as those in the list of 1299 with the addition of St. Martin de Zongo, San Bartolomeo di Cocconito and Santa Maria di Giustinito in the territory of Cocconato (which was destroyed in 1556 during clashes between French and imperial forces) and Saint Peter de Oregio, San Zeno and Santa Maria de Parola in the territory of Robella. Subsequently, in 1474, Madonna della Neve passed into the hands of the diocese of Casale, which had largely broken away from that of Vercelli. At this time it appears to have been bordered to the west by the head church of Industria, to the north by the church of Cortiglione, to the east by the parishes of Montiglio, Pisenciana (Montechiaro) and Cunico and to the south by the parish of Meirade (Piovà) and the powerful pieve of Pino. In 1564 the churches of

Santa Maria Succiarum and San Sebastiano were added to this list, creating considerable heritage value and power. However, from the end of the sixteenth century, the church gradually decreased in importance and, following the common fate of many other churches, it declined and succumbed to the power of the parish church at the top of the village, close to the castle. This historical process is evidenced by the findings of the archaeological excavations carried out inside the building in 1989 during renovation works. During these works it emerged that the original church, extensively remodeled and rebuilt over the centuries, may even date back to the tenth century, due to the discovery of columns with cubic, three-sided capitals and with early medieval characteristics: swirls in very low relief, decorative circles adorned with stylized flowers and a sequence of small leaves. The building probably had three naves concluded by apses. One of these apses, small and semi-circular, was found during the excavation. The constant reuse of materials on site that took place during the building's various reconstructions does not allow for further assessment of the characteristics of the church. The present appearance is attributable to the most recent reconstruction that took place in the early twentieth century in which the side chapels were demolished and the presbytery of the seventeenth-century building was reduced.

However, looking at the church, solitary on the hill, looking towards the east, it is not difficult to imagine its turbulent, rich historical journey.

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