

Archive Drawings of the Monastic Complex of Santa Maria della Vita in Naples. Reflections and Visualizations of the Original Plan Layout

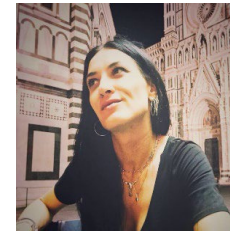
Through the critical analysis and investigation of archive drawings of the Church of Santa Maria della Vita in Naples, and by adopting a multi-scalar approach that integrates data of different nature (cartographic, textual, and graphic), this study aims to reconstruct the original plan layout of the Carmelite monastic complex up to its late 17th-century expansion. Furthermore, the research seeks to provide an initial form of cultural accessibility (information and content) to an architectural complex that remains largely unknown to the local community, as its church is part of Naples' religious heritage

but is currently closed for worship. The objective is to represent the intrinsic values of this religious site and its contextualization within a hillside urban block characterized by different altitude levels. This approach aims to achieve a refined and scholarly survey operation, where the informed and mature management of graphic representation goes beyond mere data accuracy, allowing for hypotheses on the original spatial configuration.



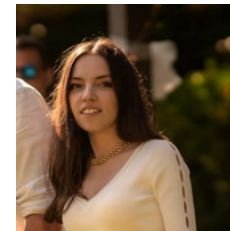
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Keywords:

Archive drawing; Church of Santa Maria della Vita; graphic analysis.

THE REASONS BEHIND A CHOICE: PHYSICAL AND CULTURAL INACCESSIBILITY

This research delves into methodologies rooted in the tradition of the discipline of representation and offers a renewed opportunity to study the architectural history and culture of the city of Naples. Specifically, it examines religious monastic complexes that, starting from the 15th–16th centuries, aimed to expand within the urban fabric by forming *insulae*.

One of the areas most affected by this phenomenon is the Sanità district, located on the northern outskirts of the extra-urban region of *Neapolis*. Here, the terrain becomes hilly, historically shaping a hydrographic system of basins and small alluvial valleys, where water once flowed towards the Foria and Toledo ravines before reaching the sea. The Sanità basin (along with the Vergini valley) is a representative example of this orographic system, remaining outside the city walls until the Bourbon era and only becoming urbanized from the 14th–15th centuries onward with the establishment of some of Naples' most significant religious complexes.

Although situated on the margins of the 16th-century city, the Sanità area has always had a strong religious vocation due to the geological characteristics of its subsoil. Originally exploited for water supply through the use of cisterns, this underground landscape began to house sacred sites as early as the Greek period, including catacombs. Some of the most important entrances to these burial sites, some still accessible today, are found near the monastic complexes of Santa Maria della Sanità, Sant'Eframo, and Santa Maria della Vita. The 'dynamic' apogean condition of the hilly terrain, combined with the hypogean nature of the numerous underground tunnels, has shaped the architectural and spatial configuration of the complexes of Santa Maria della Sanità and Santa Maria della Vita. This configuration is characterized by environments located at different altimetric levels (catacombs, church, cloister, dormitories, etc.), interconnected by specific circulation flows to ensure accessibility.

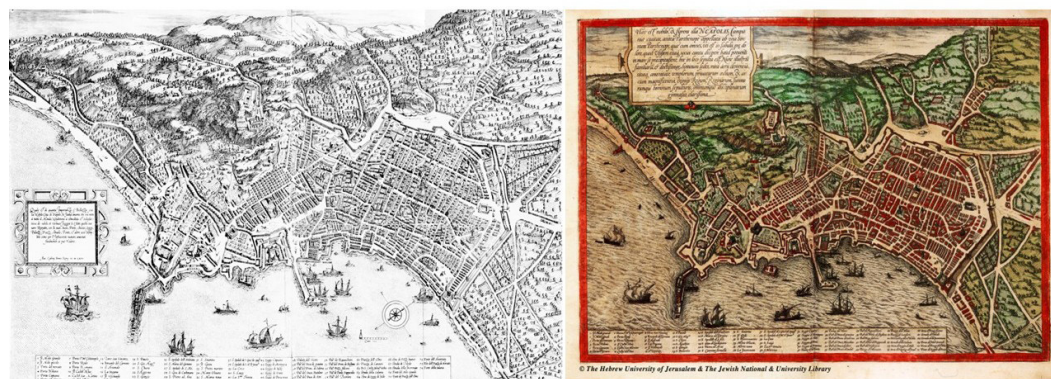
Thus, these religious architectural complexes differ from those located *intra moenia*, which expanded horizontally through the acquisition of adjacent properties at ground level. Instead, they developed vertically, following the natural topography of the terrain, or were carved directly into the tuffaceous rock formation of Capodimonte, where they are situated.

The representation of such spatial complexity proved particularly challenging for the architects and draftsmen of the time. With the analog graphic tools available, they 'topologically' synthesized the spaces into a single two-dimensional plane, the drawing sheet. A masterful example of this approach is the work of the Dominican friar Fra' Angelico Majorino: the *Plan of the Church and Convent of Santa Maria della Sanità*, originally drawn by Fra' Nuvolo (1570–1643) for the design of Santa Maria della Sanità. This plan stands out for the unprecedented and distinct altimetric arrangement of the monastery's spaces and the adoption of innovative planimetric models, such as the oval shape of the lower cloister. This theme has been extensively studied by Ornella Zerlenga and remains a subject of ongoing research, with the aim of completing the understanding of the still-inaccessible spaces within the *insula* (Zerlenga et al., 2024). Maiorino, a Dominican friar of the aforementioned complex, also created project



Fig. 1 - The historical guides of the city of Naples analyzed during the historical research phase, with some descriptive passages on the church of Santa Maria della Vita. From above: Capaccio (1607); Caracciolo (1623); Sarnelli (1625); De Lellis (1689); Celano (1692); Sigismondo (1789); Galanti (1829); Sanchez (1833); De Jorio (1839) (consultation, transcription and critical interpretation by Veronica Tronconi, 2024).

Fig. 2 - To the left: the map of the city of Naples by Antoine Lafrery, dated 1566 (from Hertziana Library <<https://maps.biblhertz.it/map/?name=lafrery>>, accessed on 07/01/2025); to the right: the map of the city of Naples of Hongenberg, dated 1572 (from the General Catalogue of Cultural Goods, <<https://catalogo.beniculturali.it/detail/HistoricOrArtisticProperty/1500321431>>, accessed on 07/01/2025).



drawings of the monastery of Santa Maria della Vita, preserved in the *Naples State Archive*, within the *Suppressed Religious Corporations* collection and the *Plans and Drawings* collection.

The case of Santa Maria della Vita represents an unprecedented study, investigated here due to the inaccessibility of the site and its spatial and formal similarities with those of Santa Maria della Sanità, within a research project funded on the broader theme of accessibility in religious contexts [1]. There are therefore different perspectives from which this research can be considered: historical, as the analysis of the monastery of Santa Maria della Vita allows for a better understanding of the temporal phases of its construction and expansion; documentary, due to the presence of archival documents (Palestini, 2022) that help reveal, within the current process of knowledge acquisition, the thoughts and actions undertaken by the designer; Critical and interpretative, through the re-examination of archival documentation, by virtue of graphic reconstructions (Farroni et AL., 2022) carried out here to determine certain formal invariants of the original architect, on which considerations are presented, useful for expanding knowledge on the subject. Finally, through the reading and critical analysis of the archive drawings of Santa Maria della Vita and through a multi-scalar approach that integrates data of different nature (cartographic, textual, and graphic), the aim of this contribution is to reconstruct the original plan layout of the Carmelite monastic complex before its late 17th-century expansion.

The study also aims to provide an initial form of cultural accessibility to an architectural complex that is little known to the local community (whose church is part of the Neapolitan religious landscape but is closed to worship).

The objective is to restore, through representation, the values that characterize the religious complex under investigation and its contextualization within a hillside insula located at different altimetric levels.

The goal is to carry out an operation of 'scholarly surveying' which, through a conscious and mature management of graphic representation, goes be-



Fig. 3 - Two details of the plants of Lafrery and Hongenberg related to the current area of the 'Borgo dei Vergini - Sanità', where stands the complex of Santa Maria della Vita (in red). In the plan of Hongenberg it is possible to hypothesize the presence of a small architectural complex, indicated with the yellow arrow. (graphic elaboration of Veronica Tronconi 2024).

yond mere data accuracy to formulate hypotheses about the original spatial configuration [2].

SPATIAL AND FORMAL INVARIANTS: SANTA MARIA DELLA VITA THROUGH SOURCES AND ARCHIVE DRAWINGS

In 1577 the Carmelite friar of strict observance Andrea Vaccaro founded the convent with the church of Santa Maria della Vita, in the area of the current Rione Sanità adjacent to the church and the convent of Santa Maria della Sanità. The location chosen to establish the church and convent of Santa Maria della Vita is not random, but is connected to a long tradition of worship based on the presence of cemeteries and catacombs dating back to the Greek era (Piezzo, 2019).

The foundation of Santa Maria della Vita in 1577 is linked to the belief that, in the church and convent places, there was a "sacred cave" dedicated to the

cult of San Vito (perhaps its catacomb): the presence of the Saint, together with the continuous confrontation with the nearby church of Santa Maria della Sanità seem to induce the founding friars to give the name of Santa Maria della Vita to the new foundation. In fact, two of the most eloquent archival documents for the critical-interpretative analysis of the history of the church and the convent, volumes 252 and 257 of the fund *Corporazioni Religiose Soppressate* of the ASNa, read that "...in the said year 1577 the said R.D. Prospero Pignone Rector and Beneficiary of the aforementioned Chapel of San Vito in public testimony constituted renounced and gave to our said Carmelite religion the aforementioned chapel with all its state, at the condition that in the new church erected by our religion the chapel had to be named beyond the title of the blessed virgin mother of God, and had to maintain also the title of Saint Vitus" [3], and also that "...determined that the church be named after Our Lady to distinguish it from many others who are in this city of the same title [...] finally about the nearest church lately entitled of Health [della Sanità n.d.a.], since the Life is base and foundation of Health, [...] agreed that similarly to Santa Maria di San Vito, *Santa Maria della Vita* it should be called" [4].



Fig. 4 - On the left: the view of the city of Naples, named *Veduta Baratta*, dated 1629 (from Biblioteca Hertziana, <<https://maps.biblhertz.it/map?name=baratta>>, accessed on 01/08/2025); on the right: a detail of the view with the facade of the church of Santa Maria della Vita.

The considerations about the choice of the name and the preexistence of a cave and/or catacombs access dedicated to the cult of San Vito are taken up by some authors of the historical guides of the City of Naples [Fig. 1], a literary *corpus* which describes cultic paths and provide information about the complex historical events of convents and monasteries that, especially in this part of the city, formed islands with complex and stratified architectural conformations.

Above all the historical guides analysed for this research, the one by Carlo Celano emerges: "... Having the friars of St. Dominic recalled the devotion of the people to the sacred cave, it happened that in the year 1577 the Carmelite neapolitan friar Andrea Vaccaro had granted by Ottaviano Suardo the territory within which was the chapel, and built a convent; he placed the small church which was named Santa Maria della Vita; and this, because it was without moisture, was not supported to the boulder; or however the chapel was seen inside the cloister at the level of the floor. Having then rebuilt a larger church which is what we now see, the ground was lowered, and the cave or chapel remained high in the boulder"[5].

Some years before, D'Engenio Caracciolo also declared that during the construction of the new church the friars "...united it with the ancient church of Saint Vitus [...] and considering that the

friars were more dear to the Life than of Health, therefore they gave it the name of Santa Maria della Vita in imitation of Santa Maria della Sanità, which is next to her, and maybe alluding to the ancient church of Santo Vito"[6].

The presence of a first construction, although modest in size and not better identifiable in its constructive characteristics, can be confirmed by the comparative analysis of two historical maps of the city of Naples: the first one by Antoine Lafréry dating back to 1566, and another one from Hongenberg dating back to 1572, chronologically closer to the time of the foundation of the monastery [Fig. 2].

With a certain approximation, in both maps the area of S.M. della Vita is identifiable, with two road tracks that seem to go up towards Capodimonte in the upper edge of the sheet. If, in fact, in the first map of Lafréry this site is completely rural, with no indication of construction or architectural trace, in the one of Hongenberg, some years later, at the road of Fontanelle, there is a small architectural environment, perhaps a reference to the preexisting chapel or cave dedicated to the cult of San Vito [Fig. 3].

Returning to the textual data from the historical guides, it seems here interesting to note that Celano makes explicit reference to a "sacred cave" and/ or a "chapel", which "was seen inside the

cloister at the level of the plate" that is to say the altitude level in which the area of the convent with the cloister is currently located, higher than the church, since in fact, always referring to Celano "...then a larger church than the one we now see was rebuilt, and the ground was lowered, and the cave or chapel remained in the high within the boulder". It seems logical to assume that, in the year of its foundation, there was already a cave or chapel, placed on the plate where now is the convent, and that the Carmelite group settled here started the construction of a larger church. However, it was placed in a lower position, by virtue of an operation to lower the ground, which allowed space for the liturgical environment and that "because it was without moisture, it was not supported on the boulder", that is to say, on the tufa ridge that still stands behind the church today. This operation had therefore created two different floors, one higher for the monastery and one lower for the church, although the archive drawings found at the ASNa show a plant representation that reduces spaces to a single level, as revealed by the same analysis conducted on the church of Santa Maria della Sanità [Zerlenga & Miele, 2024: p. 189]. Once defined the coexistence of two different levels, it remains to be hypothesized what was the conformation of the first Carmelite church dedicated to Santa Maria della Vita: also in this case we can start from a comment in volume 257, where the author states that "for the space of just twenty years a new church could be built, once the other chapel of San Vito was abandoned"[7]: it seems therefore that the church of Santa Maria della Vita, founded from 1577, was completed in the span of twenty years and that the first chapel dedicated to San Vito was completely abandoned by the cult. Again, the author of vol. 257 adds that "This church was half of what it is today [year 1677, n.d.a.]. The high altar, and the place capable of six minor altars such as hand in hand were erected not within distincted chapels but in the body of the church itself, and as far as can be gathered from the ancient books of the year 1604 they were dedicated to the Crucifix, the Madonna del Carmine, the Annunciata, the Vittoria, San Gregorio and San

Vito" [8]. The first construction of S. M. della Vita, built lower than the convent in a twenty-year period starting from 1577, was therefore to be constituted by a single room with six smaller chapels, whose position is not specified.

However, this conformation had a short life: the same author of vol. 257 reports that the church of Santa Maria della Vita has a triple history, because the whole convent "was founded three times, and it has been born again more perfect than before. The first foundation must be recognized by Mr. Suardi, the second by the Carmine Maggiore, the third by himself at the time that a closer observance was introduced, the one which is professed in the present" [9].

The simple sacred environment with six chapels built from 1577 in a twenty-year period, which we have mentioned above, corresponds to the "first foundation" made possible by the concession of Ottaviano Suardo, while an intermediate extension of the church, attributed by the author of the *Memorie Storiche* to "Carmine maggiore", had to be realized in the first half of the 17th century under the guidance of Father Jovene. How the "second church" was configured and what its surroundings looked like is testified by some cartographic sources, such as the famous *Veduta Baratta* dated 1629, in which appears the facade of the church of Santa Maria della Vita: in the view, the church directly overlooks the Strada della Sanità and the facade is located in a position behind the convent plant on the left, which develops on higher levels than the floor plan of the church, leaning to it for a large part. However, from the view of the church body, it was not to have any dome (although there seems to be a bell tower on the left, no longer existing), and therefore the apse area must still have small dimensions, the environment had to be unique and without transept [Fig. 4].

Another map evidence can give some indication on the plan of the church in this intermediate stage: it is the drawing by Donato Gallarano dated 1718 and conserved at the ASNa, which is however a copy of the drawings by Francesco Venosa of 1660 [10]. In the lower right corner of the plant appears precisely the Church of Santa Maria della Vita, in



Fig. 5 - From the left: Donato Gallarano, plan of the Stella district of the city of Naples, 1718 (based on the drawing of the plan by Francesco Venosa in 1660) (from Biblioteca Hertziana, <https://img.biblhertz.it/digilib/query/digilib-dark.html?fn=napoliprecat/XII_a19>, consulted on 01/08/2025); to the right: detail of the lower right corner of the Gallarano plant, in which a sketch of the church of Santa Maria della Vita appears.

the form of a sketch, and the authors believe that the state of fact documented in 1660 may coincide to some extent with the view of Baratta of 1629. It is impossible, however, to elaborate more precise indications from this plant, because the church covers an absolutely marginal space in the economy of this representation. So, this was to be the appearance of the "second church", as it is defined in vol. 257: a single nave environment with a modest apse area, without dome or transept [Fig. 5]. However, in the middle of the 17th century a dispute had to start with the ownership of some land behind the church because of the desire of the monastery to carry out a substantial expansion, perhaps as a material witness of a "spiritual" re-foundation of the convent, that, as reported by the author of vol. 257, is born again more "perfect" a third time, and this rebirth is to be attributed to the monks themselves, "at the time when a stricter observance was introduced, the one professed in the present". A re-foundation of religious customs that had to be conveyed externally thanks to a re-foundation of the Sacred spaces: an architecture that interprets and realizes the present time.

In this case, the numerous drawings found within the Fund of the *Corporazioni Religiose Sopresse* and the *Archivi Notarili* of the ASNa allow to make a critical reading of the majestic expansion of the 17th century and its implications in relation to spaces and properties surrounding the monastery.

The starting point is the drawing by Luc'Antonio de Natale which is attached to an agreement between the convent of Santa Maria della Vita and that of Santa Maria della Sanità, dated 10 April 1680 and found in the *Archivi Notarili* of the ASNa [11]. In anticipation of the expansion desired by the Carmelites, which had to necessarily include the removal of the tufa ridge behind the church, which was located inside the Masseria Ramirez owned by the Dominicans from Santa Maria della Sanità since 1633, the two sides agreed so that the Dominicans gave up "415 steps of land behind Santa Maria della Vita" [12]. In this sense, the drawing of the de Natale, of which there is an identical copy [13], defines the project of enlargement and dismantling of the tufa cost actually carried out in the last part of the 17th century, with the realization

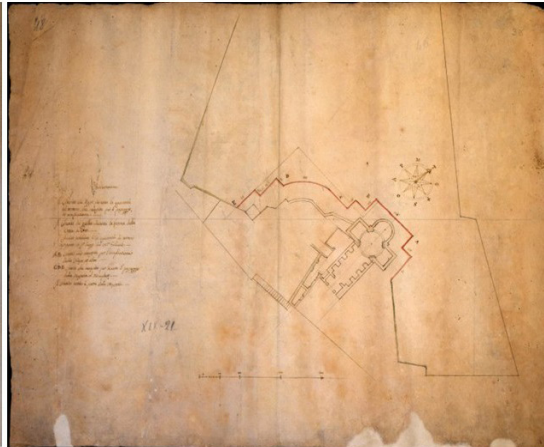
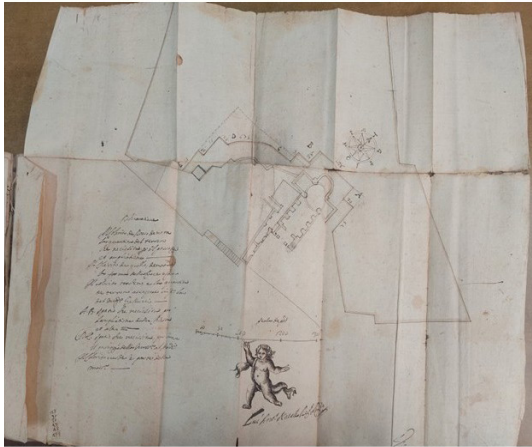


Fig. 6 (Upper image) - From the left: Luc'Antonio de Natale, plan for the project of enlargement of the church of Santa Maria della Vita, resulting in the excavation of the tuff ridge behind it (ASNa, *Archivi Notariali*, Notai del secolo XVII, vol. 484, prot. 13, Notaio Mazzacapo); on the right: Anonimo (perhaps Luc'Antonio de Natale?), plan of the project for the extension of the church of Santa Maria della Vita, resulting in the excavation of the tuff ridge behind it (ASNa, *Plants and drawings*, folder XIX, sheet 21).

Fig. 7 (Lower image) - From the left: A. Majorino, plan with the area to be excavated behind the church of Santa Maria della Vita (perhaps a survey of the state of fact of the complex?) (ASNa, *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresses*, vol. 1027, f.21); A. Majorino, Plant of the Massaria of Casa Ramirez (ASNa, *C.R.S.*, vol. 983, f. 116); A. Majorino, plan with the area to be torn off behind the church of Santa Maria della Vita (perhaps project of expansion of the church?) (ASNa, *C.R.S.*, vol. 1027, f.19).

of a large transept surmounted by a dome [Fig. 6]. In contrast to this first group of drawings, there is other evidence found within the *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresses* Fund and contained within the volumes of Santa Maria della Sanità written by the architect Angelico Majorino [14]. In the drawings identified, Majorino represents the church of Santa Maria della Vita with a single nave plant rather elongated with small entrance atrium and presbyterial area of rectangular shape, and with a green line provides the large area of tuff to remove behind the church. The same slightly revised outcrop forecast appears in volume 983. Another plan of the Majorino contained in volume 1027 presents a different architectural system: here the church is configured as a single environment but with an internal subdivision with side chapels as described in the design drawings of the de Natale [Fig. 7]. A last drawing of Majorino in vol. 995 of the Fund *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresses*, faithfully reproduces the design idea of de Natale: the main nave seems to follow in course and proportions the design of Majorino contained in vol. 1027 until the transept, but from this point the project faithfully takes up the proportions agreed between the two parties in the notarial act already described [Fig. 8].

Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that the first drawings of Majorino constitute 'reliefs' (always made at a single quota) of the state of fact of the "second church", of which it can be confirmed the configuration to single nave without dome nor transept, due to the lack of space given by the presence of the tufa coast. Still, following this logical line, the design of Majorino in vol. 1027 would be a first project idea related to the excavation and expansion of the church, never fully realized, in favor of the de Natale project, which is followed for the shape of the apse area, from the transept to the course of the stripping line.

In this sense, the drawing of Majorino in vol. 995 and the two drawings of de Natale contained in the Archivio Notarile and in the fund *Piante e disegni* are the trace of how the late 17th century extension - or the "third church" described by the author of vol. 257 - had to be configured. The corpus

of architecture drawings dispersed as “leopard spot” in the different funds of ASNa, appropriately gathered through an act of critical-interpretative type that does not forget the written sources, finally gives account of the constructive developments of an architectural complex whose understanding, until now, seemed extremely incomplete.

ARCHIVE DRAWINGS AND GRAPHIC RECONSTRUCTION OF THE MONASTIC LAYOUT OF SANTA MARIA DELLA VITA BEFORE THE EXPANSION

The monastic complex of Santa Maria della Vita, located within the ancient and dense fabric of the Rione Sanità in Naples, represents a remarkable example of architectural creativity and the interaction between sacred space and morphological context, which are characteristic of Neapolitan religious architecture between the 16th and 17th centuries [Fig. 9].

This complex is not merely a monumental ensemble but an architectural organism that embodies a refined dialogue between liturgical needs and the rigid geomorphological characteristics of the territory, marked by significant elevation changes, the presence of tuff, and underground water resources.

The architectural reconstruction of the planimetric layout of this complex allows for a retracing of the evolutionary stages of a structure designed to address the challenges posed by the terrain's orography and religious requirements, while maintaining a deep connection with the geological resources of the Neapolitan soil. Through the study of archive drawings and altimetric maps, the extraordinary complexity of Santa Maria della Vita emerges, revealing a composition of distinct yet interconnected levels, designed to meet the dual need of ensuring structural stability and enhancing the sacredness of various liturgical spaces. Indeed, the critical analysis of the archive drawings, illustrated in the previous section, allows for a detailed depiction of the complex framework of its architectural evolution, highlighting the historical, cultural, and design dynamics that have shaped this site. By adopting a methodological approach that integrates the examination of historical cartographic sources, written testimonies, and graphic surveys, both of realized projects and hypothetical reconstructions, it has been possible to reconstruct the original layout of the convent and the church before their late 17th-century expansion, offering a significant contribution to the understanding of a lesser-known part of Naples'

religious heritage.

The aforementioned documentation, preserved primarily in the *Naples State Archive* within the *Suppressed Religious Corporations* and *Plans and Drawings* funds, presents a stratified representation of the interventions that have affected the complex over time.

The origins of the monastic complex of Santa Maria della Vita date back to 1577, when the Carmelite friar Andrea Vaccaro, with the support of Ottaviano Suardo, obtained a concession for the land where a small Paleochristian chapel dedicated to San Vito already stood. According to Carlo Celano (1673), this chapel “was nothing more than the cavern of one of the usual grottoes excavated for use as a cemetery, as this area was filled with them due to the convenience of the high rock mass that was openly visible” (Celano, 1673, p. 345).

The chapel area, located near one of the entrances to the Cemetery of San Gennaro, was distinguished by the presence of burial niches carved into the walls and remnants of mosaic decorations visible behind the main altar (Celano, 1673, p. 343). This original project not only met specific conservation needs but also reflected a symbolic vision, keeping the chapel in a dominant position relative to the cloister and the lower convent spaces, thus emphasizing its sacred character. The elevated position of the chapel, visible and accessible only through internal pathways, defined it as the focal point of an architectural system designed to preserve its function as the primary liturgical space. The archive drawings, primarily the plans by Angelico Majorino and Luc'Antonio De Natale, provide essential documentation for reconstructing the original plan layout of the complex and its alti-

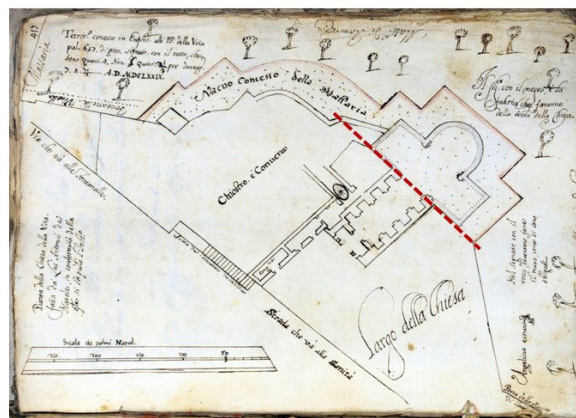


Fig. 8 - A detail of the project design for the extension by Angelico Majorino (ASNa, *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresse*, vol. 1027, f.19) and Angelico Majorino, Plan of the Church of Santa Maria della Vita (copy or implementation of his project with that Luc'Antonio de Natale?) (ASNa, *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresse*, vol. 995, f. 417). With the two red lines, we highlight the limit between the project of Majorino (which has been respected for the nave of the church) and the starting point of the transept, realized as from the project of de Natale (graphic elaboration by Veronica Tronconi, 2024).



Fig. 9 – Graphic representation integrating current surveys of the monastic complex of Santa Maria della Vita with a visualization from Google Earth, highlighting the initial cut of the tuffaceous rock based on archival iconographic representations (Graphic elaboration by Margherita Cicala, 2024).

metric stratification.

Both survey and project drawings reveal a clear functional and symbolic differentiation between the initial chapel (Chapel of San Vito) and the lower church, with the central cloister serving as a distribution hub between the various levels. Positioned at the heart of the complex, the cloister connects the chapel to the lower church through a system of staircases and vertical pathways, ensuring continuous spatial accessibility and facilitating access to the adjacent areas [Fig. 10]. This altimetric organization was not merely a logistical response but reflected a deliberate symbolic intention, with the upper chapel emphasizing the distinction between public and private spaces, as well as between areas dedicated to collective prayer and those reserved for meditation and intimate worship.

The initial structure, verified through the integration of bibliographic sources and archival iconographic records, consisted of the Chapel of San Vito, located in an elevated and isolated position, likely serving as the sole spiritual reference point for the faithful. Celano notes that 'this was one of the entrances to the Cemetery of San Gennaro' and that nearby vestiges of the chapel could be found, including mural paintings and mosaics (Celano, 1673, p. 343). Its separation from the tuffaceous rock formation, aimed at preventing moisture infiltration, further accentuated its sacred nature, preserving it as an autonomous and distinctive place of worship. The chapel, accessible through dedicated pathways, was conceived as a spiritual focal point, distinct from the spaces built in later periods.

In 1577, with the arrival of the Carmelites, the site was transformed through the construction of a convent and a church. Celano describes how "after the Dominican friars rekindled popular devotion to the sacred grotto, in the year 1577, the Neapolitan Carmelite friar Andrea Vaccaro was granted the land by Ottaviano Suardo, within which the chapel stood, and, having built a convent there, he dedicated the small church he erected to Santa Maria della Vita" (Celano, 1673, p. 345).

This intervention brought significant transforma-

tions, including the expansion of spaces and the construction of a larger church compared to the original chapel. However, the Chapel of San Vito retained a central role, remaining visible and accessible within the new layout of the complex [Fig. 11].

Celano also recounts an episode from 1673, when, during the excavation of the tuffaceous rock to obtain stone buildings, a 'small door' covered with iron plates and sealed with a padlock was discovered.

Inside, they found a chamber carved into the rock, measuring twenty palms in length, fourteen in width, and sixteen in height, confirming the existence of hypogeal spaces connected to the chapel and the surrounding cemetery (Celano, 1673, p. 343). This discovery further highlights the site's complexity and significance, intertwining funerary, liturgical, and architectural functions.

From the evidence presented, it is clear that the Chapel of San Vito represents the original nucleus of the Santa Maria della Vita complex, around which subsequent architectural transformations developed. Its sacred function and strategic location, emphasized by the site's morphology and its connection to the Cemetery of San Gennaro, make it a fundamental element in understanding the evolution of the monastic complex.

The original layout developed with a smaller space compared to the current structure, featuring a chapel situated on a higher plane than the surrounding spaces. Celano notes that "the chapel, however, was not attached to the rock, but could be seen within the cloister at ground level" (Celano, 1673, p. 345). This design choice reflects the intention to protect the building from moisture while also leveraging its elevated position to enhance its sacredness. The initial spatial organization of the complex consisted of a multi-level structure, with vertical pathways and staircases connecting the chapel to the lower spaces, a layout designed to accommodate liturgical needs while adapting to the site's geological conditions. The construction of a new church on a lower level marked the second phase of the project, introducing

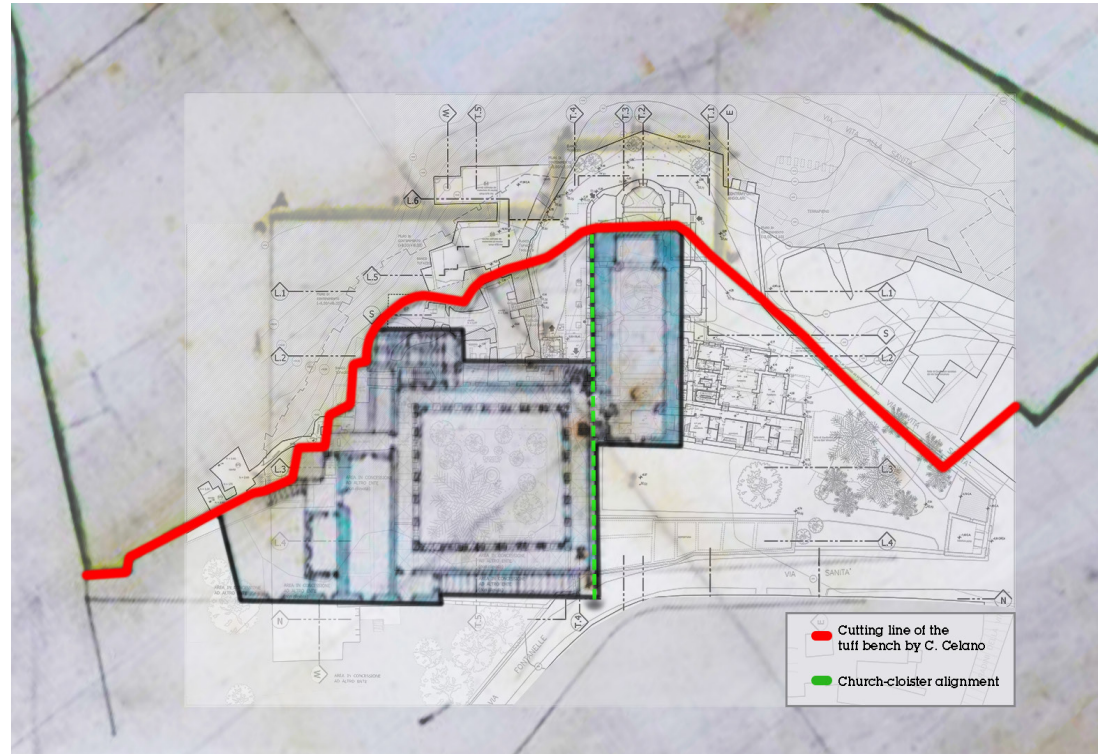


Fig. 10 – Graphic reconstruction integrating the survey of the monastic complex of Santa Maria della Vita (by Renato Carrelli) and the plan with the excavation area behind the church of Santa Maria della Vita by A. Majorino (ASNa, *Suppressed Religious Corporations*, vol. 1027, f.21) (Graphic elaboration by Margherita Cicala, 2024).

a dual-layered structure that symbolically and functionally separated the upper chapel, designated for private prayer, from the lower church, intended for collective liturgies.

As Celano observes, "later, when a larger church than the one now visible was built, the ground was lowered, and the grotto or chapel remained elevated within the rock formation" (Celano, 1673, p. 345) [Fig. 12]. This spatial reorganization was accompanied by technical measures, such as a drainage and natural ventilation system, which ensured the structural preservation of the building and prevented moisture-related issues.

Thus, the current configuration of the Church of Santa Maria della Vita does not correspond to the initial hypotheses derived from iconographic sources. In fact, the early structure was smaller in scale compared to its present form, which originally did not include the current eastern transept and lateral chapels. This is confirmed by Angelico Majorino's first drawing, which consists of a plan indicating the excavation area behind the Church of Santa Maria della Vita (ASNa, *Suppressed Religious Corporations*, vol. 1027, f.19) [Fig. 10]. This representation likely corresponds to an architectural survey of the existing state of the com-

plex as of 1680. Subsequently, the second drawing by the same author, which also highlights a plan of the church with the area to be excavated behind it, probably identifies an expansion of the ecclesiastical structure [ASNa, *Suppressed Religious Corporations*, vol. 1027, f.19]. When compared with the current architectural survey of the church (conducted by architect Renato Carrelli), this drawing illustrates the planimetric correspondences, including the longitudinal expansion, as well as the current eastern transept and the portion of the sacristy that exists today, which corresponds to the space only roughly sketched in Majorino's drawing [Fig. 11].

The analyzed representations indicate that an expansion of the church was already underway, and, as previously hypothesized, its original configuration was likely smaller than its present form. Specifically, the length of the original structure seemed to be limited to the current central nave, excluding the later additions of the transept area, the choir, the presbytery, and the apse. Furthermore, it is plausible that the initial configuration of the sacred structure had an orientation opposite to the present one, with its main axis aligned along an east-west direction [Fig. 14]. The upper levels of the cloister were located above the church, reinforcing the functional and symbolic connection between the two spaces.

The late 17th-century expansion, documented through the drawing attributed to Luc'Antonio de Natale, represents the floor plan of the project for the enlargement of the Church of Santa Maria della Vita, which involved the excavation of the tuffaceous ridge behind it [ASNa, *Plans and Drawings*, folder XIX, sheet 21]. This is complemented by the drawing of Angelico Majorino, consisting of the plan of the Church of Santa Maria della Vita [ASNa, *Suppressed Religious Corporations*, vol. 995, f. 417].

Both documents highlight the introduction of significant architectural elements, including the transept, the majestic dome, and the apse with its ambulatory, which radically transformed the spatial and liturgical configuration of the complex [Fig. 17]. This intervention was accompanied by

logistical and legal complexities, as demonstrated by the disputes between the Carmelites and the Dominicans of the nearby Santa Maria della Sanità regarding the concession of the tuffaceous ridge behind the site.

Angelico Majorino's archival drawings reveal the difficulties of graphically representing such an intricate structure, with altimetric levels that leveraged the natural terrain variations to create a vertically organized complex. The reproduced planimetric reconstructions highlight a layout with precise elevation points recorded at approximately 56 meters above sea level and around 50 meters above sea level, confirming the complexity of an architectural system developed across multiple levels [Fig. 17].

The spatial organization reflects a clear symbolic intent: the upper chapel, isolated and dominant, served as the sacred focal point, while the lower church was designated for collective celebrations. The central cloister, positioned as a distributive hub, connected the different levels through a system of staircases and vertical pathways, ensuring accessibility and spatial continuity between the liturgical spaces. Celano emphasizes how this balance between function and sacredness was an expression of an architecture capable of enhancing the natural resources of the territory.

Through a scholarly survey operation that combines the interpretation of historical sources with contemporary representational tools, it has been possible to propose a rigorous reconstruction of the original layout. The archival documentation and topographic surveys also highlight the use of the tuffaceous rock formation as a structural element integrated into the foundations of the complex, a choice that not only ensured structural stability but also helped preserve the integrity of the spaces and materials. The decision to incorporate the tuffaceous rock into the foundations, as Celano observes, "establishes an indissoluble bond between sacred architecture and the surrounding nature" [Celano, 1673, p. 345].

In conclusion, the architecture of the Santa Maria della Vita complex does not merely address technical or structural issues but assumes a liturgi-

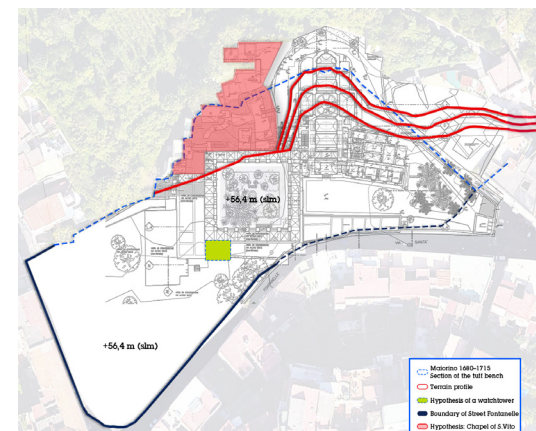


Fig. 11 – Graphic reconstruction integrating current surveys of the monastic complex of Santa Maria della Vita with a Google Earth visualization, highlighting the initial layout of the chapel of San Vito (Graphic elaboration by Margherita Cicala, 2024).

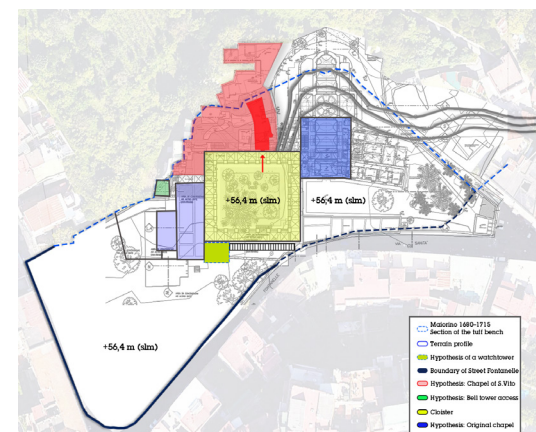


Fig. 12 – Graphic reconstruction integrating current surveys of the monastic complex of Santa Maria della Vita with a Google Earth visualization, highlighting the initial layout of the complex of Santa Maria della Vita (Graphic elaboration by Margherita Cicala, 2024).

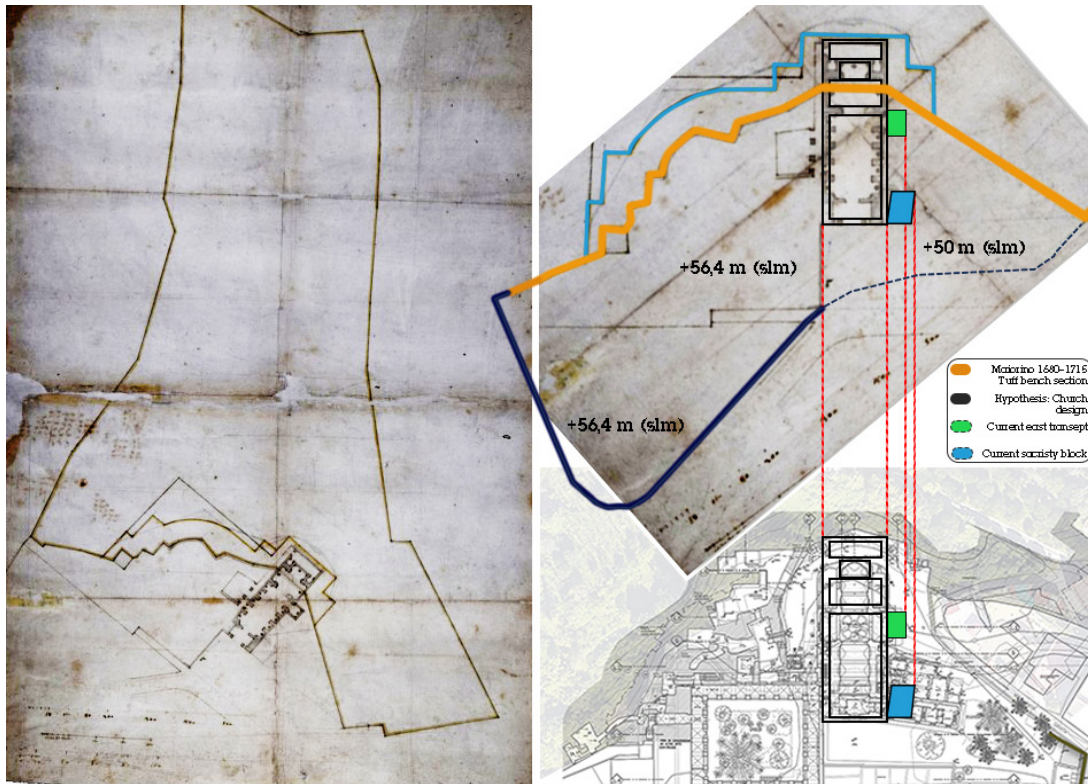


Fig. 13 – Left: Angelico Majorino, floor plan with the excavation area behind the church of Santa Maria della Vita (possibly a project for the church's expansion?) (ASNa, *Suppressed Religious Corporations*, vol. 1027, f.19). Right: graphic reconstruction integrating current surveys of the monastic complex of Santa Maria della Vita with the detail of the church taken from Angelico Majorino's drawing (Graphic elaboration by Margherita Cicala, 2024).

cal and symbolic function that enhances the sacredness of the spaces. The configuration, made possible through the excavation of the tuffaceous rock, reflects the intention to create a structure that valorizes the natural resources of the site, offering an image of continuity between the place of worship and its surrounding environment.

CONCLUSIONS

The investigation conducted on the monastic complex of Santa Maria della Vita has made it possible

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to reconstruct, through a scientific and systematic approach, the key phases of its architectural evolution, highlighting the central role of the Chapel of San Vito as the foundational nucleus. This original element, documented by historical sources and archive drawings, served as a liturgical and symbolic reference point, emphasized by its elevated position and its detachment from the tuffaceous rock formation, a design solution aimed at preserving structural integrity and reinforcing its sacredness.

The subsequent transformations, particularly the

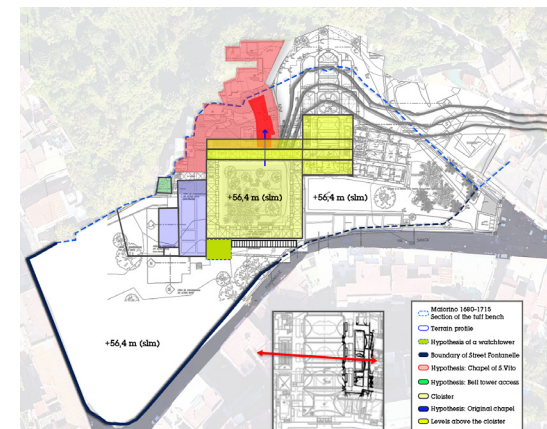


Fig. 14 – Graphic reconstruction integrating current surveys of the monastic complex of Santa Maria della Vita with a Google Earth visualization, highlighting the initial layout of the complex of Santa Maria della Vita with and the first hypothesis of its orientation (Graphic elaboration by Margherita Cicala, 2024).

late 17th-century expansion, introduced a more complex configuration with the addition of the transept, the majestic dome, and the new apse arrangement, which profoundly redefined the original layout. These interventions, documented in the drawings attributed to Luc'Antonio de Natile and Angelico Majorino, reflect an architecture that not only responded to functional and liturgical needs but also represented an act of spiritual and cultural affirmation by the Carmelite community. The integration of the tuffaceous rock formation, not only as a structural foundation but also as a symbolic element, demonstrates a refined design capability in adapting to the geomorphological challenges of the hillside context.

The adopted method, which combines a philological analysis of historical sources with a critical graphic representation, has made it possible to outline not only the original architectural layout of the complex but also its subsequent transformations in relation to the cultural and geographical context. This approach has revealed the site's high spatial and functional complexity, character-

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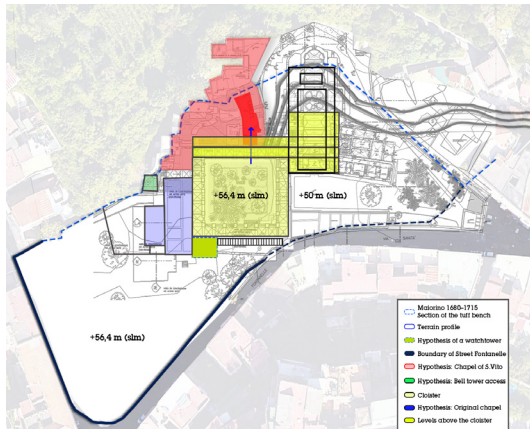


Fig. 15 – Graphic reconstruction integrating current surveys of the monastic complex of Santa Maria della Vita with a Google Earth visualization, highlighting the initial layout of the complex of Santa Maria della Vita along with the longitudinal development of the church (Graphic elaboration by Margherita Cicala, 2024).

ized by interconnections between the cloister, the chapel, and the church, demonstrating an architectural organization designed to enhance the sacredness of the spaces while ensuring an efficient liturgical distribution.

In conclusion, the complex of Santa Maria della Vita emerges as a significant example of Neapolitan religious architecture, capable of blending tradition and innovation by enhancing the unique characteristics of the territory through intelligent and sensitive design solutions. This study, in addition to providing a more comprehensive understanding of the complex's evolutionary phases, helps bridge knowledge gaps regarding a lesser-known historical heritage, offering new insights into the relationship between sacred space, liturgical function, and morphological context [15]:

AUTHOR ATTRIBUTION

The chapters *The Reasons Behind a Choice: Physical and Cultural Inaccessibility* and *Conclusions* were written by Vincenzo Cirillo; the chapter

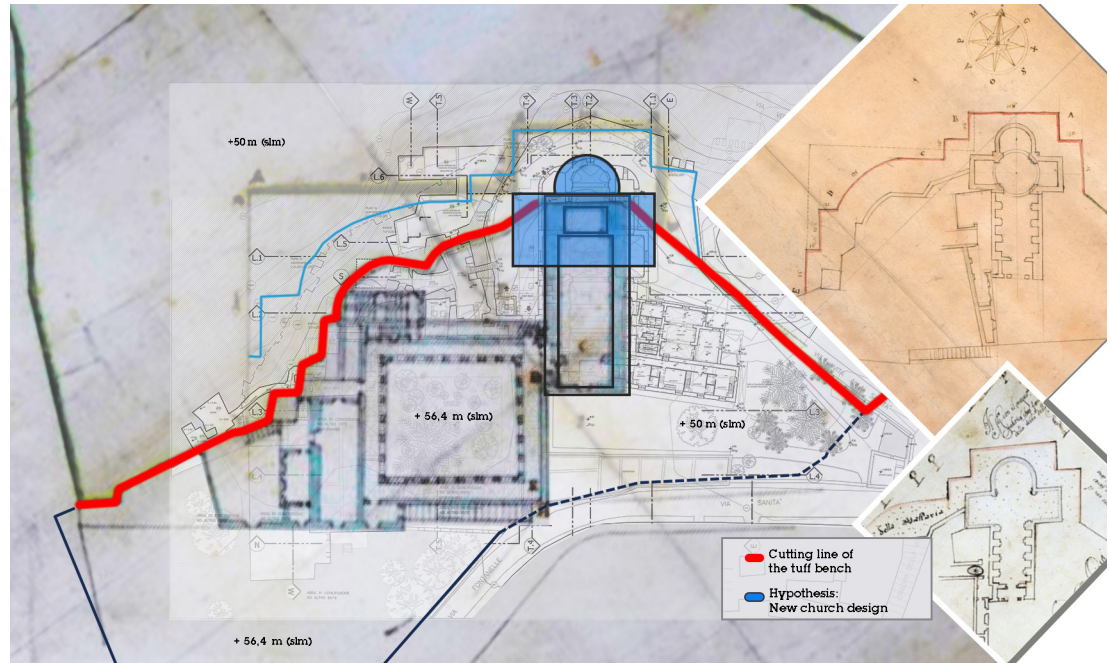


Fig. 16 – Graphic reconstruction integrating current surveys of the monastic complex of Santa Maria della Vita with archival drawings: overlaid on the survey graphics is the floor plan with the excavation area behind the church of Santa Maria della Vita (possibly an architectural survey of the existing state of the complex?) by A. Majorino (ASNa, *Suppressed Religious Corporations*, vol. 1027, f.21); at the top right, the drawing attributed to Luc'Antonio de Natale represents the floor plan of the project for the expansion of the church of Santa Maria della Vita, which included the excavation of the tuffaceous ridge behind it (ASNa, *Plans and Drawings*, folder XIX, sheet 21); at the bottom right, the drawing by Angelico Majorino consists of the floor plan of the church of Santa Maria della Vita (ASNa, *Suppressed Religious Corporations*, vol. 995, f. 417) (Graphic elaboration by Margherita Cicala, 2024).

Spatial and Formal Invariants: Santa Maria della Vita Through Sources and Archive Drawings was written by Veronica Tronconi; the chapter *Archive Drawings and Graphic Reconstruction of the Monastic Layout of Santa Maria della Vita Before the Expansion* was written by Margherita Cicala.

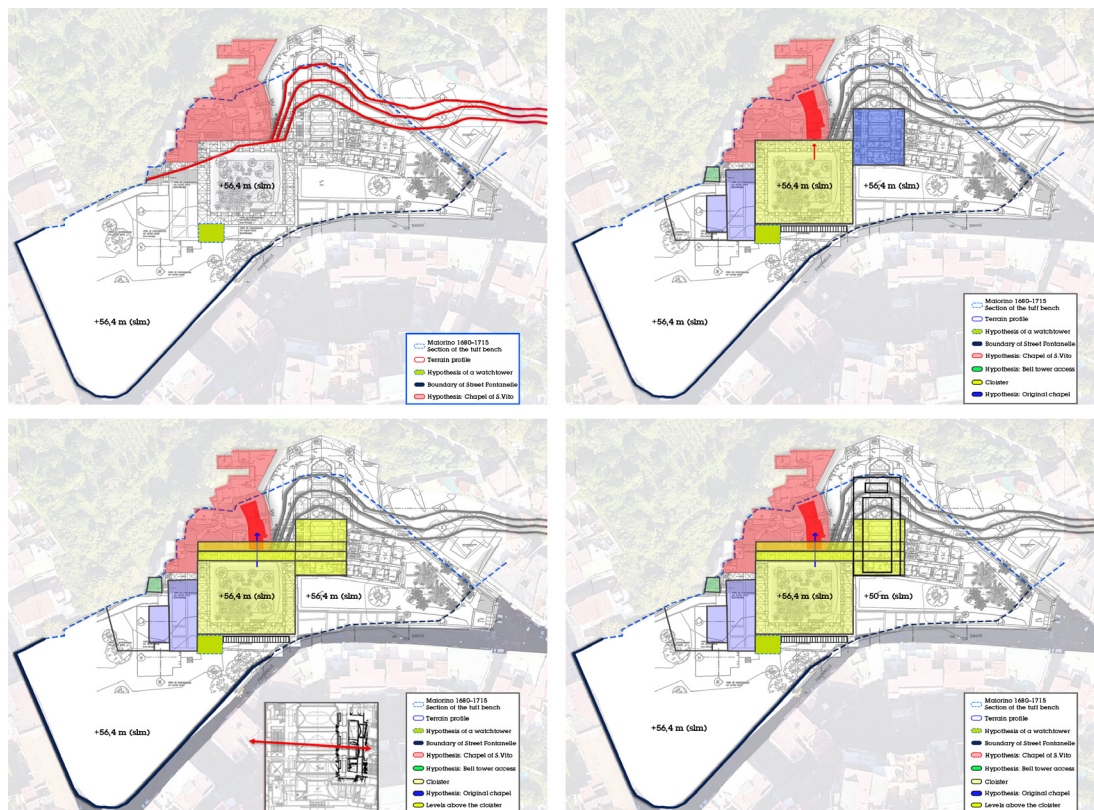


Fig. 17 – Synthetic graphic reconstruction integrating current surveys of the monastic complex of Santa Maria della Vita with a Google Earth visualization, highlighting the different development phases of the church of Santa Maria della Vita (Graphic elaboration by Margherita Cicala, 2024).

NOTES

[1] This study is funded by the European Union – Next-GenerationEU - Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR) – MISSIONE 4 COMPONENTE 2, INVESTIMENTO N. 1.1, BANDO PRIN 2022 D.D. 104 del 02-02-2022 - (TITOLO DEL PROGETTO: *EX-IN_AccessIBILITY - Inaccessible religious architecture. A workflow of knowledge, 'expanded' usability and 'inclusive' accessibility*) CUP B53D23005580006

- Vincenzo Cirillo (Principal Investigator), Daniela Paolba e Alessandra Lardo (Team Leaders).

[2] The complex of Santa Maria della Vita is currently the subject of an integrated digital survey. The considerations made in this paper will then be extended and verified on the basis of the metric data elaborations.

[3] ASNa, *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresses*, vol. 252, Platea, f5.

[4] ASNa, *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresses*, vol. 257, *Memorie storiche riguardanti l'Ordine de' Carmelitani precipuamente in questa città e la fondazione del Convento di Santa Maria della Vita*, f3v.

[5] Carlo Celano, *Notizie del bello, dell'antico e del curioso nella città di Napoli, 1692, con aggiunte di Giovanni Battista Chiarini*, 1860, p. 345.

[6] Cesare d'Engenio Caracciolo, *Napoli Sacra*, 1623, p. 623.

[7] ASNa, *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresses*, vol. 257, f3r.

[8] ASNa, *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresses*, vol. 257, f3r.

[9] ASNa, *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresses*, vol. 257, f2r.

[10] ASNa, *Corporazioni Religiose*

Soppresses, vol. 2819, f3, *Pianta ichonografica del territorio denominato di Fonseca sito nel Borgo della Stella di questa città delineato isola per isola nell'anno 1660 dal fu tavolario Francesco Venosa e da me riveduta*.

Further information on this drawing are in Ferraro, I. (2007). *Napoli. Atlante della città storica*. Vol. 5 *Stella, Vergini, Sanità*. Napoli, Oikos edizioni. pp. 2-5.

[11] ASNa, *Archivi Notarili, Archivi dei Notai del XVII secolo*, vol. 484, protocollo 13 (Notary Mezzacapo, year 1680), ff 56-60. The report concludes with a plan signed by de Natale. The content of the dispute and the agreement between the two convents of Vita and Sanità is also reported in Ebanista, C., Marinaro, S. (2021). *Op. cit.*, pp. 331-379; and in Delli Paoli, P. (1991). *op. cit.*, pp. 229-236

[12] Ebanista, C., Marinaro, S. (2021). *Op. cit.* pp. 348-349.

[13] This is the drawing by Luc'Antonio de Natale (?) representing the floor plan with the area to be carved behind the convent of Santa Maria della Vita, preserved in ASNa, *Fund Pianta e Disegni*, folder XIX, plant no. 21.

[14] ASNa, *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresses*, vol. 983, f. 116; ASNa, *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresses*, vol. 1027, f. 19; ASNa, *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresses*, vol. 1027, f. 21.

[15] Some of the images created for this contribution are based on views from Google Maps or Google Earth (credits @2025, Google). However, their use for scientific purposes complies with the guidelines expressed by the owner (see <https://about.google/brand-resource-center/products-and-services/geo-guidelines/#required-attribution>).

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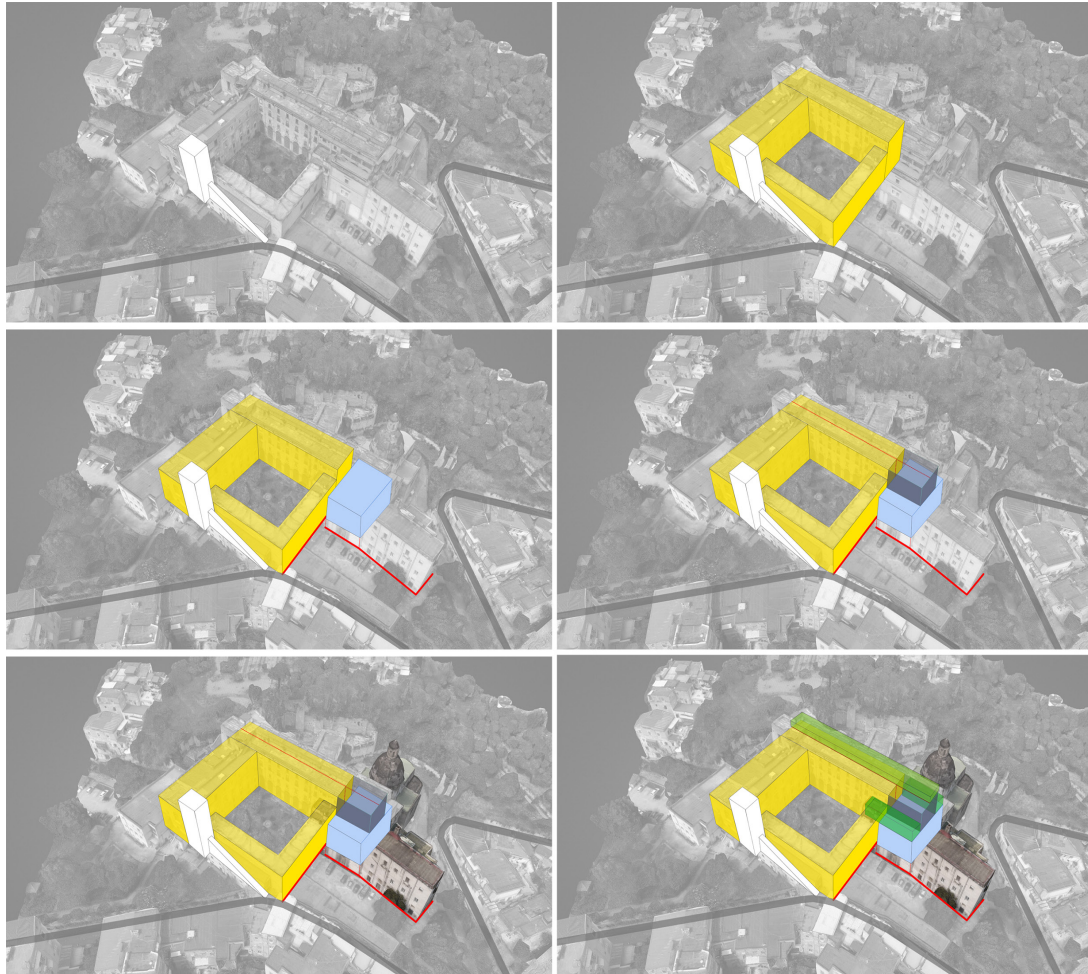


Fig. 18 – Synthetic graphic reconstruction of the evolutionary phases of the monastic complex of Santa Maria della Vita. From the 16th-Century originary configuration up to the present day (Graphic elaboration by Vincenzo Cirillo, 2024).

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