



THE MONASTERY OF SAN FILIPPO DI FRAGALÀ



“In the heart of the Nebrodi Mountains, where silence preserves centuries of faith, stone and memory, the Monastery of San Filippo di Fragalà still watches over the valley like an ancient sentinel of the spirit: a stone threshold between East and West, between Byzantine memory and Norman Sicily.”

There is a precise moment, along the road that climbs from Frazzanò into the heart of the Nebrodi Mountains, in the ancient Val Demone, in which the monastery comes into view.

It does not announce itself. It cannot be seen from afar. It reveals itself suddenly, while the eye still lingers lazily on the village's last houses, on the hills cultivated with hazelnut groves, vineyards and olive groves, on the cork trees lining the *suarita*, the winding provincial road that goes up the mountain.

Then, in an instant, there it is: perched on the high and verdant Colle Pagano, about 730 meters above sea level, suspended between the Fitalia Valley and the sea horizon. On clear days, the Aeolian Islands seem to emerge from the light as a promise. Above the monastery, in the open sky of the Nebrodi Mountains, the griffon vultures swirl in the sky: silent and solemn presences, like natural custodians of this place suspended between earth and sky.

It is at that precise moment, between the last bend of the road and the first appearance of the eastward-facing apses, that one understands: here, history has not passed. It is a living presence. The light stones, the red bricks, the severe profile of the triborium and the apses tell the story of a complex Sicily, shaped by different cultures: Greek, Byzantine, Arab, Norman and Latin. The history of Fragalà is, on a smaller scale, the history of Sicily itself: centuries of peoples, languages, rituals and powers that have met, clashed and finally intertwined, generating a unique form of identity, beauty and cultural richness.





It is this layering of cultures, languages and memories that makes Fragalà one of the most important Italian-Greek monastic foundations of the Norman southern Italy and one of the best preserved monastic architectures of the Greek rite on the island. Observing it means gaining an insight on the artistic, cultic and cultural relations between Sicily, the Byzantine world and the West at the beginning of Norman rule.

This Monastery was not just a religious building. Being a monastery, it was a place of community life, and at the same time an agricultural centre, *scriptorium*, archive, spiritual stronghold and a tool for the organisation of the territory. For centuries, the monks who inhabited it prayed, copied texts, administered lands, kept scrolls, welcomed travellers and kept the Greek tradition alive in north-eastern Sicily. Among its most valuable

documents are the three versions of hegumen Gregory's testament-typikón, fundamental for understanding the life, organisation and properties of the monastery. Within these papers emerge a world of prayer, work, autonomy, disagreements with ecclesiastical authority and complex relationships with the new Norman authority. Between these walls remarkable destinies crossed: Abbot Gregory, who knew how to dialogue with the Norman conquerors to foster a rebirth; Roger I de Hauteville, the Grand Count who saw in Greek monasteries instruments of government as well as places of faith; Adelaide del Vasto, regent and protector, associated with the oldest paper document in Europe; and Saint Philip of Agira, the thaumaturge whose name the monastery still bears as a fulfilled vow.



Today Fragalà appears as a threshold.



Today Fragalà appears as a threshold. Those who cross it enter a slower time, where fourteen centuries still seem to pulsate in the air: one can almost sense the chants of the monks, the rustling of the parchments in the *scriptorium*, the steps of the abbots along the corridors, the pleas of the pilgrims and the sick, the commands of the Norman rulers. Standing before its walls is enough to understand why this place was worth the climb. And the realisation that Fragalà is not only a place to visit, but a place to listen to. In the wind that touches the apses facing east, in the stone that holds back the light, in the silence of the valley, the monastery continues to tell what Sicily has been: a meeting place, a crossroads, a frontier, a landing, an echo of different cultures and civilisations.





History



One of the oldest and best preserved Greek-rite monasteries in Sicily, Fragalà is the most important architectural testimony to the medieval art of the Nebrodi region. Fourteen centuries of history enclosed in these stones.

Before becoming one of the great monastic centres of Norman Sicily, Fragalà was a small place of Greek-Byzantine worship, rooted in the Nebrodi mountains and in the religious memory of north-eastern Sicily. The complex was most likely built on the remains of a small Greek-Byzantine church dating back to the fifth century AD; according to oral tradition, this first foundation was the work of St. Calogerus of Chalcedon, around 495. Before the Norman re-foundation, the place housed a small Greek monastery, probably dedicated to Saint Nicholas, who also survived during Muslim rule.

A new season opened at the end of the 11th century, with the arrival of the Normans. Around 1090, Abbot Gregory promoted the reconstruction and expansion of the monastery with the support of Grand Count Roger I de Hauteville and Adelaide del Vasto. When the Great Count reached these lands, Abbot Gregory and the few cenobites who lived in the monastery experienced his arrival as a liberation. In his testament, Gregory recalls the massacres and enslavement suffered by Sicily under Saracen rule, and personally confesses that he suffered *"horrible torments in that holy monastery"*.

Under Norman rule, the monastery experienced its period of greatest splendour and soon became one of the most important foundations in eastern Sicily. Roger I granted it privileges, goods, lands, servants, herds and above all autonomy: a condition that the sources define as *autodespotia*, and which protected the monastery from the interference of bishops, officials

and local powers. The monastery was thus able to administer itself and its possessions with ample freedom, even exercising the right to administer justice to the population that depended upon it. This territorial strength was based on a network of *metochia*, small monasteries under Fragalà's authority, distributed over a vast territory.

The very location of the complex was part of its strength. Fragalà stood along a connecting line between the Nebrodi mountains, the Tyrrhenian coast, Randazzo, the Etna area, Troina and the interior of the island. It was not only a panoramic place: it was a strategic outpost, placed in control of a system of relationships, routes and territories. Between the end of the 11th and 12th centuries, the monastery also became a major cultural centre. It possessed a library, a *scriptorium* and a very rich archive.





Greek and Latin texts, archival documents, charters, wills and parchments were produced and preserved here. Among the most important testimonies is the testament of Abbot Gregory, drawn up in 1105 and now preserved in the Tabulario of the Ospedale Grande di Palermo, a unique insight of the internal life of the monastery, its properties, its rules and its relations with power. Of exceptional importance is also the bilingual Greek-Arabic diploma of Adelaide del Vasto, dated 25 March 1109, now preserved in the State Archives of Palermo. Written on cotton paper, it is considered the oldest paper document in Europe and testifies to the extraordinary multilingual society of Norman Sicily, where Greek, Arabic and Latin coexisted in administrative and cultural life. From the fourteenth century, the monastery entered a period of gradual decline, limited in part by the protection of the Archi-



mandrite of Messina, which allowed the abbot of Fragalà, unlike almost all other Italo-Greek monasteries, to retain its administrative autonomy. In 1328, only seven monks resided in the monastery and some had already fallen into ruin. In the following centuries, the commenda system and the reduction in donations weakened community life; in 1491, much of the property was incorporated to the “Opedale Grande e Nuovo di Palermo” and, in 1497, Pope Alexander VI granted the replacement of the Basilian monks with Benedictine friars. Despite this last provision, common to other Italo-Greek monasteries due to lack of vocations, the monks of the Greek rite, however, never abandoned the monastery, nor did they accept to be replaced by their



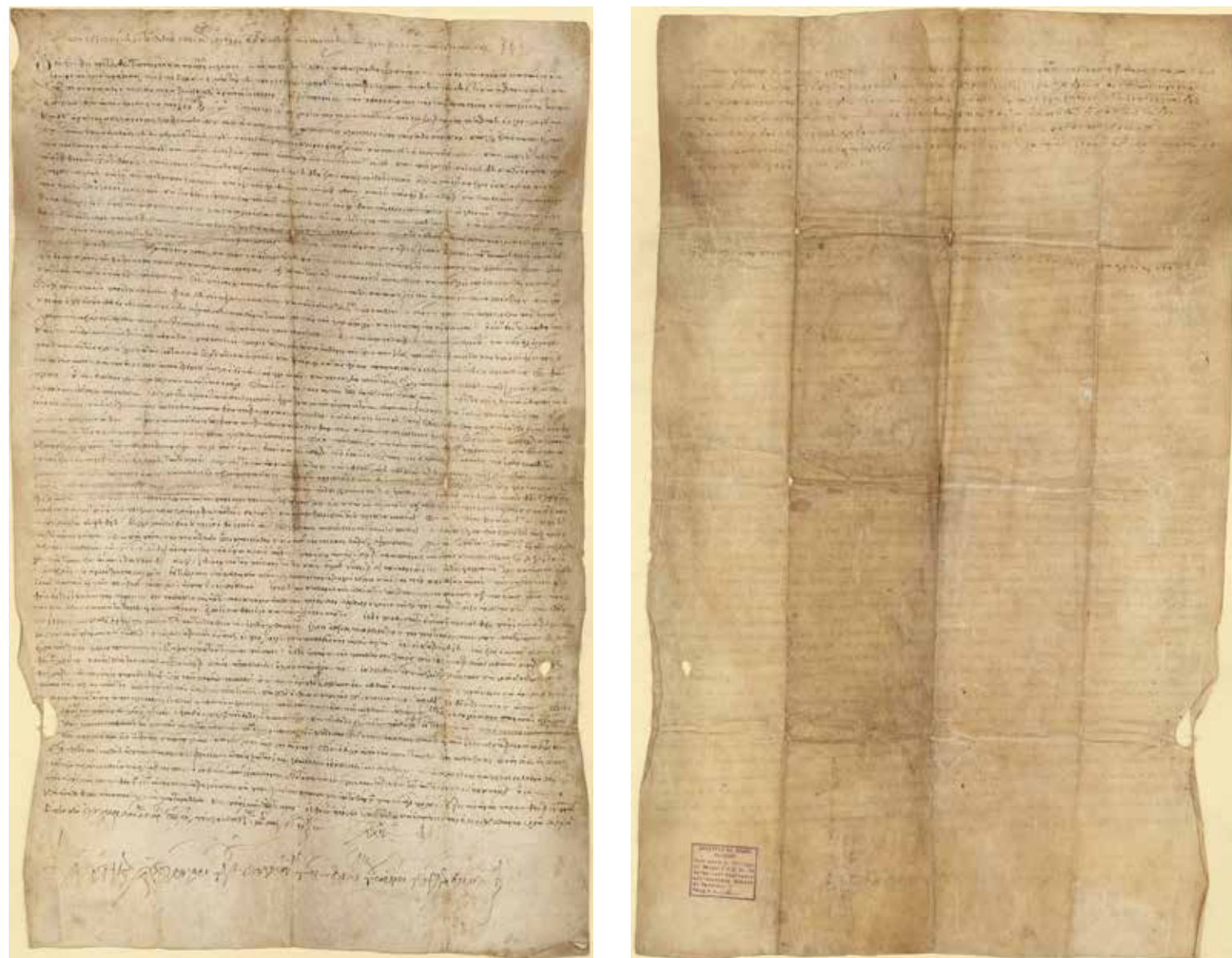


Latin counterparts, and lived in Fragalà until the very last day. Monastic life came to a definitive end in August 1866, with the laws of suppression of religious orders. The complex passed to the Italian Crown; the library was dispersed, while the oldest scrolls of the Tabulario were preserved and are now kept in the State Archives of Palermo. After a long period of abandonment, the monumental value of the complex was recognised at the end of the nineteenth century: in 1887, the monastery was included in the lists of National Monuments. Several restoration and consolidation interventions followed in the twentieth century, until it reopened to the public in 2000 as a place of memory, culture and identity.

The cultural heritage of the monastery



Fragalà was not just a place of prayer. It was a living centre of culture and production of knowledge. In the *scriptorium*, the monks copied and produced manuscripts: sacred and secular texts, hagiographies, books on medicine, music and grammar. Among the works probably produced here are the *Passio* of Saints Alphius, Philadelphus and Cyrinus, called the “masterpiece of the Sicilian sacred novel”, and the *Vita di San Filippo d'Agira* (Life of Saint Philip of Agira), the only hagiographic text on Sicilian subject written after the Arab conquest of the island.



An extraordinary testimony of this heritage remains in the Tabulario, composed of 81 scrolls preserved in the State Archives of Palermo, which document the spiritual, economic and social history of the monastery. Fragalà is the only surviving Byzantine monastery of the Norman era whose entire Tabulario has been preserved: a *unique* piece in the Sicilian cultural landscape, supported by papers and records kept at the State Archives of Messina, which document the vitality of the monastery from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century and the subversive laws of the newly established Italian State. Fragalà's documentation thus makes it possible to reconstruct the life of the monastery from its Norman re-foundation to its expropriation and, by telling its history, to reconnect the events of the entire Italo-Greek monastic phenomenon in Sicily.



Architecture



“Pale stone, red bricks and memory of the East:
Fragalà does not belong to one age, but to many.
Its architecture preserves transformations, traces and
passages that tell the story of the centuries of its life.”

The Monastery of San Filippo di Fragalà appears compact, collected, almost austere. It would be inaccurate to call it a fortress, but its location, the presence of a tower and the arrangement of the buildings around an inner courtyard clearly suggest a need for protection. The complex was born as a closed and orderly organism, capable of preserving monastic life and, at the same time, defending itself from the outside world.

The layout is an irregular quadrilateral, with four wings arranged around a central courtyard. Passing through the main gateway, embellished by an arch beneath which the coat of arms of Saint Basil may still be discerned, though stolen years ago, you enter a space that immediately changes the visitor's pace: the noise of the street remains outside, while the stone, light and silence accompany you towards the heart of the monastery.





Around the courtyard were arranged the spaces of daily life: on the ground floor, in addition to the church, the warehouses, stables, kitchens and laboratories; on the upper floor the monks' cells, corridors, halls, service rooms, terraces and open windows overlooking the valley. Some rooms still retain faded Baroque frescoes, intimate traces of the life that continued here even after the great medieval age.

Before entering the Norman church, the heart of the complex, it is necessary to look out over the ruins of the original building, the ancient and silent memory of the monastery. Within the masonry of the north-western sector, in fact, the remains of the original building are visible: an apse and the ruins of what was probably the first nucleus of the Byzantine monastery. Beneath the altar of this structure, investigations carried out with ground-penetrating radar have detected the possible presence of a human burial: a body that still lies beneath the stone, anonymous and unmoving, perhaps one of the very first monks who prayed in this place, or perhaps Gregory himself, its founder and abbot. The church at-

tached to the monastery, located in the eastern wing, is however the element that more than any other preserves the medieval memory of Fragalà. The plan has a single nave, with a triple-apsed transept in the form of a crux commissa. The building is oriented along the east-west axis: the three apses face east, where the sun rises, recalling light, the Resurrection and Christian hope. Before crossing the threshold, two carved apotropaic symbols recall an ancient function: to leave out evil, protect the entrance, guard the sacred space. At the centre of the courtyard, the design of a sun refers to the light of God, who symbolically guides the path to the entrance and accompanies those who cross this place of prayer and remembrance.

The central apse is the most striking part. Its three round-arched single-light windows, the six red-ochre brick pilasters and the contrast with the light stone create a balance that is both sober and powerful. It is an essential language, but rich in memory: Arabic-Norman in form, Byzantine in spiritual orientation, Sicilian in subject matter.





Among the most precious surviving elements is the northern portal, adorned with four concentric archivolts. The alternation of bricks, mortar, lava stone and yellow-pink lozenges creates a refined geometric design, a sober yet intensely expressive decoration. Engraved upon its bricks is a rare Greek graffiti inscription, dated to the first decades of the twelfth century: *"Protect, Lord, Paul the monk and all his helpers."* It is considered the oldest surviving graffiti inscription preserved in Sicily on the wall of an Italo-Greek monastery.

The interior of the church is now simple, almost bare, yet this simplicity makes the surviving traces stronger. The floor preserves black and white Nasitan majolica from the seventeenth century; in the right arm of the transept remain the traces of an altar and a high marble fountain. Fragments of Byzantine echo frescoes survive on the walls and in the apses, dating between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, of very refined workmanship. In

the central apse basin, the scene of the Ascension can be seen: Christ bestowing a blessing within an almond-shaped aureole of light supported by angels; below, figures of saints and apostles appear, some holding Greek scrolls and inscriptions. At the centre is a female figure, probably the Madonna, depicted with the usual Byzantine features. These are images wounded by time, yet still capable of conveying the theological and visual strength of the Eastern tradition. In the right apse, several figures of holy monks remain visible, including, probably, Abbot Gregory, protagonist of the Norman revival.

The tiburium that rises above the sanctuary probably dates back to the 15th century. The bell tower, located on the northern chapel, is much more recent and may have replaced an older tower mentioned in the documents. Its red cupola, with a vaguely oriental appearance, is probably the result of late interventions, perhaps from eighteenth or nineteenth century.



Over the centuries, the monastery has undergone numerous transformations, renovations and restorations. The Baroque interventions profoundly modified the appearance of the church, which until 1908 preserved five altars inside. The baroque layer was subsequently dismantled in the restorations of the early twentieth century, followed by other interventions in 1937, 1942 and 1976. The wooden furnishings and reliquaries belonging to the monastery were transferred and are now kept in the Mother Church of SS. Annunziata in Frazzanò. What we see today is therefore not the monastery of a single century, but the result of a long stratification process: an architectural body that has lost, transformed and preserved, finding new life each time.





Memory protagonists



Each monastery preserves stones and silences;
Fragalà also preserves the names of those
who shaped its destiny.

Abbot Gregory

He is the central figure in the history of Fragalà. Founder of the early Byzantine monastery, probably dedicated to Saint Nicholas, he donated all his possessions to the monastery and lived through the difficult years of Muslim rule. In his testament, drawn up in 1105, he described the sufferings he endured, the memory of an uncertain age and his determination to rebuild a stable community. He was the architect of the monastery's revival: he knew how to dialogue with Roger I and build a new relationship between the Greek-Byzantine monastic world and the Norman conquerors. From his writings, we gain insight into the organisation of the community, including its monastic regulations, the administration of property and its relationship with the surrounding territory. The monastery's autonomy, described in the sources as *autodespotia*, would be formally attested later, in 1133, but its foundations clearly lay in Gregory's work.

Roger I de Hauteville

The Great Count entered Fragalà's memory as the ruler of renewal. The Norman and monastic tradition remembered him as the protector of the Christians of Sicily, linking his name also to episodes that became legendary, such as the appearance of Saint George during the battle of Cerami. However, his benevolence towards the monastery also reflected a clear political vision: to support the local Greek communities, to promote the rapprochement between the Byzantine tradition and the Latin Church, to control the inner streets of the Nebrodi territory and to consolidate the new Norman authority, presenting himself as the defender of Christianity. Through privileges, immunities and donations, Roger made Fragalà a prominent religious and economic centre. He granted the monastery the exceptional number of ten dependencies, the *metochia*, small monasteries dependent on the parent company, through which lands, pastures, forests and communities were administered between the Val Demone and the Etna area.

Adelaide del Vasto

Wife of Roger I and mother of Roger II, she ruled as regent after her husband's death in 1101 and played a decisive role in the consolidation of Norman power in Sicily. On the death of her eldest son Simon, in September 1105, she became the guardian of her second son Roger II, still a child. Remembered as "protector of the Christian faith", on 25 March 1109 she signed the famous Greek-Arabic bilingual mandate on cotton paper, now preserved in the State Archives of Palermo: the oldest European paper document. With it she ordered her officers to provide every year to the monastery of San Filippo di Fragalà, the salt necessary for the community of monks, extracted from the mines of Castrogiovanni, and not to harass the monastic community in any way. Her life was also marked by sorrow: her marriage to Baldwin I of Jerusalem was soon annulled, despite the legendary dowry she brought with her. Legend has it that Adelaide commissioned the Chiesa Madre della Santissima Annunziata in Frazzanò, in the square that still bears her name today. She died in 1118 and was buried in the Cathedral of the Most Holy Saviour in Patti, founded by Count Roger.

Roger II de Hauteville

The "Little Count" (as he is described in the documents of Fragalà), became the first king of Sicily in 1130 and continued his father's policies, confirming privileges and favouring the role of Fragalà in the monastic and territorial system of Norman Sicily. His figure is also linked to a hagiographic tradition: the miraculous healing that took place in 1105, attributed to the intercession of Saint Philip of Agira and the holy monks of Fragalà. Popular memory associates this episode with the change in dedication from Saint Nicholas to Saint Philip.

Saint Philip of Agira

The saint to whom the monastery was dedicated in the Norman period, is remembered by tradition as a thaumaturge, evangeliser and exorcist. Presumably originating from Thrace, he was ordained a priest in Rome entrusted with the task of evangelising central-eastern Sicily, where the population attributed a demonic value to Mount Etna; he became famous for the power of his preaching and for overcoming evil through prayer. Naming the monastery after Saint Philip meant rooting it in a deeply Sicilian devotion, capable of combining Greek tradition, local memory and Norman spirituality. His feast day falls on May 12.

Saint Lawrence of Frazzanò

Patron saint of the town, he was born in the first decades of the 12th century in the small settlement of the Nebrodi mountains, where the monastery of Fragalà once stood. Ordained priest at the age of twenty in the Basilian Monastery of Saint Michael the Archangel in Troina, around 1155 he entered Fragalà as a monk, where he lived until his death, dedicating himself to preaching. He died on 30 December 1162. His relics are venerated in the Church of Saint Lawrence in Frazzanò, built by his fellow townspeople in the 15th century in his honour. The community celebrates his birth and death on 22 October and 30 December each year, but it is mainly on 10 August that the majestic simulacrum of the Patron Saint is carried in solemn procession through the streets of the village, accompanied by devotional chants and popular devotion. Among the walls of Fragalà, Saint Sylvester of Troina and Saint Cono of Naso also found a home — a sign that the monastery was a spiritual reference point for the whole of eastern Sicily.

Unknown Artist
*Ritratto del Conte Ruggero
il Normanno*
17th century
Cathedral Basilica of Patti,
Messina.



VERA EFFIGIES MAGNI COMITIS ROGERII NORMANNI

MAYBE NOT EVERYONE KNOWS THAT...

Three names, three cultures



In the Norman scrolls, the monastery appears under three different names: Fragalà, Melitiro and Demenna. The name Fragalà is thought to derive from the Arabic Fara Hallah, interpreted as “Joy of Allah”; Melitiro refers to an area near the monastery, inhabited until the seventh century and then abandoned following a devastating landslide; Demenna is the name of the mysterious city that gave its name to Val Dèmone, probably located in the area between San Marco d’Alunzio and Alcara Li Fusi. Three names for one place: three traces of the layers of peoples, languages and memories that crosses medieval Sicily.

“...Roger is afraid
and prays Saint Philip
to free the noble child and
promises
to raise a little church
on the spot...”

One of the best-known legends recounts that little Roger II, son of the Great Count, was tormented by a caterpillar that had entered his ear. His mother, frightened, would pray to St. Philip of Agira, promising to build a church if her son were healed. The caterpillar is said to have emerged miraculously and indicated the place destined for the foundation of the church. The legend belongs to the popular tradition, but is partially reflected in a charter issued by Adelaide, which mentions the healing of his son Roger, which took place in 1105.

The fresco that keeps watch in sleep



In one of the monastic cells, perhaps connected with the abbot's residence, there is a Baroque fresco with a Latin inscription from the Canticle of Canticles: *Ego dormio et cor meum vigilat*, "I sleep, but my heart keeps watch." It is a phrase that seems to guard the very soul of Fragalà: even when everything seems still, memory continues its watch.

The monks made granita!

Among the daily practices that animated the life of the monastery, one has left a surprising legacy: the monks of Fragalà, like those of other Italo-Greek monasteries of the Nebrodi mountains, collected the snow that accumulated in winter on Mount Pagano and stored it in special snow pits carved into the rock. In summer, following a tradition introduced to Sicily by the Arabs, mixed with lemon or orange juice, that snow became a fresh and restorative food — the direct ancestor of Sicilian granita!

The ivory casket



From the rich collection of furnishings and reliquaries of the monastery, now kept in the Mother Church of the Most Holy Annunciation of Frazzanò, an eburnian box of Arab-Sicilian workmanship of the twelfth century stands out, with a truncated pyramid lid and bronze lance-shaped fittings. It was linked to the reliquary of Saint Philip: a small masterpiece that encompasses, in a few centimetres, the encounter between Islamic art and Christian patronage in Norman Sicily.

The “Basilian” monks: a name to use with caution

The term “Basilians”, widely used today, is in fact of later origin: it was developed in the sixteenth century by the papal chancellery to distinguish Greek monasteries from Benedictine ones. The monks of Fragalà followed their own order, the typikón of *Abbot* Gregory, inspired by the tradition of Basil the Great and Theodore the Studite, but personalised and adapted to the needs of the community.

The Network of the *Metochia*



Fragalà was not an isolated place. Its network of *metochia* — small monastic dependencies — included, among others, the dependencies of Santa Maria di Maniace, Saint Talleleus, Saint Peter of Galati, Saint Michael the Archangel, Saint Mark, Saint Nicholas and Saint Hippolytus. A spiritual and economic geography that wove together forests, pastures, roads and faith across a vast territory.





Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri
DIPARTIMENTO PER GLI AFFARI REGIONALI E LE AUTONOMIE



REGIONE SICILIA

ASSESSORATO DELLE AUTONOMIE LOCALI
E DELLA FUNZIONE PUBBLICA
Dipartimento delle Autonomie Locali



COMUNE DI FRAZZANÒ

Special thanks to Pippo Alessandro and Shara Pirrotti