

The Church of S. Giovanni Battista Decollato at Mensano (Siena): an assessment of the structural condition of the Pisan Romanesque fabric. Initial research findings and an example of analysis of the construction phases of the church

Alessandra Angeloni
Michele Paradiso

The small hilltop town of Mensano, a medieval Siennese outpost in the far western sector of the Upper Elsa Valley, stands on the north-eastern side of one of the hills which form the watershed between the Elsa valley and the Cecina valley. Its existence is attested since 1011 as a centre for property owned by the Bishop of Volterra. No document attests to the foundation of the Pieve (rural church with baptistery) di S. Giovanni Battista Decollato, located outside the fortified site, on the sheer drop at the south-western edge of the site. The Church, unanimously dated to the second half of the 12th century, has its rear (apse) wall facade facing west, and the front facade set at an angle to the perimeter walls (figure 1).

The building has a basilica plan with a central nave and two side-aisles, each terminating in an apse. Inside there are eight massive monolithic columns, with classicizing capitals carved with allegorical subjects.

This is without doubt the most Pisan Romanesque pieve in the Valdelsa, considering three fundamental stylistic features which determine its particular appearance: 1. the minor apses created within the thickness of the perimeter wall (and thus not apparent externally), present only in the Volterra Diocese; 2. the bays marked off by simple columns (there are no pilasters, which are common in contemporary churches in this area); 3. the typically Pisan-style aesthetic in the design of the capitals.

Traditionally ascribed to Maestro Bonamico Pisano,¹ a pupil of Biduino, who was involved in the con-

temporary construction of Pisa Cathedral, and in the execution of the pulpit of Volterra Cathedral, the capitals are without doubt the most interesting decorative elements in the Church: a rare, if not unique, example of Pisan Romanesque sculpture in the Elsa Valley (figure 2).

The walls are generally built of regular courses of well-conserved limestone mixed with unshaped conglomerate blocks. These have been greatly altered by atmospheric agents, giving the building its current appearance of a «random» two-colour scheme.

There are several construction phases, and the building has undergone several transformations over the years of building activity, all of which can be seen in the visible walled sections (figure 3).

On the external walls of the church there are traces of old plaster, as we can see from isolated surviving portions of plasterwork on the facade, in places where the intense deterioration of the surface of the sandstone, or *pietra scura* («dark stone»), required the insertion of «wedges» consisting of fragments of brick or tile, and mortar. It is difficult to know when this restoration work took place; in early 20th century photos we can see the wall of the church can clearly be seen.

From these old photos,² we also learn that, at least until 1915, the outer steps giving access to the church ran parallel to the facade. There is no evidence relating to the dismantling and subsequent re-assembly of these steps, or to the creation of the modern-day small terracotta parvis. The structure of