

THE PRONAOS OF SANTA MARIA DELL'ALIZZA IN ALEZIO (LECCE, ITALY): FROM 3D SURVEY TO HISTORICAL-STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

1. INTRODUCTION

The church of Santa Maria dell'Alizza in Alezio (Fig. 1a) is a very important example of late medieval religious architecture in the Puglia region of southern Italy: located on the western side of the Salento peninsula, approximately 6.5 km E of Gallipoli, its tall turreted pronaos dominates a vast territory overlooking the Ionian Sea (Fig. 1b). The building was completed in 1331 on a previous place of worship dedicated to the Virgin Mary built on the hill of Alizza or Lizza, a toponym deriving from the ancient Messapian-Roman settlement of *Aletium* (FERRARI, SCARDOZZI 2016; LEUCCI *et al.* 2019; FERRARI *et al.* 2023). This study is part of the Scientific Collaboration Agreement signed between the Institute of Cultural Heritage Sciences of the National Research Council (ISPC-CNR) and the Municipality of Alezio, aimed at enhancing the cultural heritage present in the area, and it continues a specific line of research on the study of the structures of the church of Santa Maria dell'Alizza that began in 2019 (DE GIORGI *et al.* 2021).

The pronaos is one of the most iconic elements of the monumental complex and was built later, around the mid-14th century, inspired by French models: despite this, it has never been the subject of specific study. This research aims to fill this knowledge gap by carefully examining its historical context, tracing its original function along with its symbolic/political role, and retracing its transformations over time by identifying the various construction phases. This was made possible through both rigorous historical research and a careful survey of the building's metric data, conducted by laser scanner and photogrammetry.

I.F., F.G.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

An important element in understanding the historical dynamics that led to the construction of Santa Maria dell'Alizza was the internal struggle in the diocese of Gallipoli between the Greek rite and the Latin rite components. Tradition indicates saint Pancras as the first bishop of Gallipoli in the 1st century, but the oldest historical source in this regard is a letter from Pope Gregory the Great attesting to the Latin bishop Saviniano in 599 (NORBERG 1982, 766-767). In the following centuries, Salento remained under the influence of

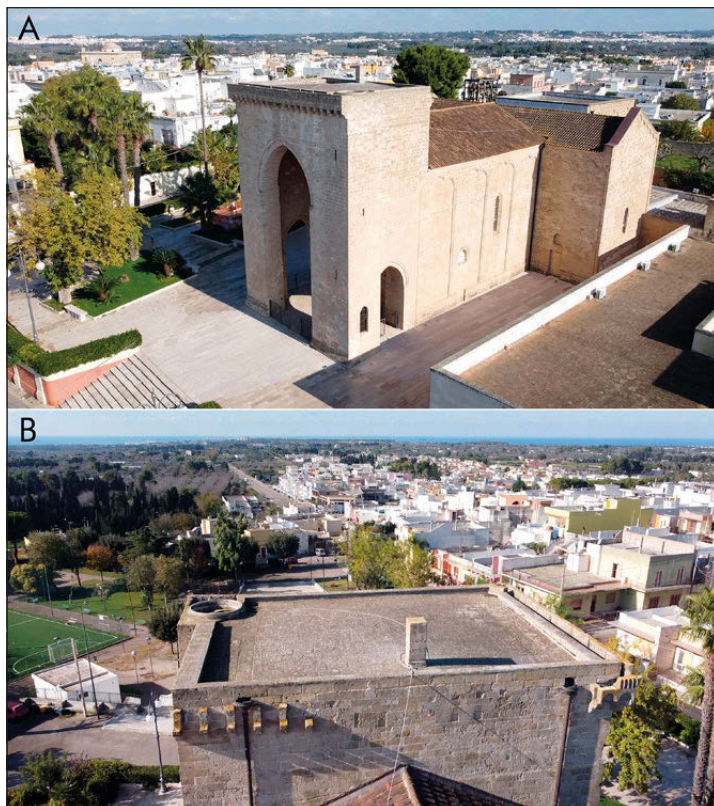


Fig. 1 – The Church of Santa Maria dell'Alizza in Alezio. Aerial views of the pronaos: a) from SW; b) from E.

Byzantium, but a real Byzantine colonization took place between the end of the 9th and the beginning of the 10th century (VON FALKENHAUSEN 1978): in this period King Basil I made Gallipoli a military fortress (JACOB 1977, 229-235; 1989, 281-282) and in 886 he included the diocese in the ecclesiastical province of Santa Severina in Calabria to consolidate it with Greek worship (LAURENT 1964, 76-183) and granting it the privilege of autonomously choosing the bishop from among the members of the curia (NATALI 2007, 27). As a consequence of these events, in the first half of the 12th century the Greek abbeys of San Mauro and San Salvatore were founded in the Gallipoli hinterland (VAGLIO 2019, 47).

With the Norman conquest of Salento and the birth in 1130 of the Kingdom of Sicily and Apulia under King Roger II, a political-administrative reorganization took place that also affected the ecclesiastical structures

(BURGARELLA 1989). The aim was to re-Latinize those territories that – like Salento – remained dominated by Byzantium for a long time, with a gradual replacement of Greek prelates with Latin ones (POSO 1988, 82-83): Gallipoli anticipated this process already in 1115 with the Latin bishop Baldrico (PASTORE 1962, 56-57). Later, Pope Alexander II (1061-1073) freed the diocese of Gallipoli from S. Severina and assigned it to the metropolis of Otranto (RICCIO 1977, 13).

But in 1172, a document from the monastery of San Mauro attests to the restoration of the Greek hierarchy with bishop Theodosius, a unique event in the history of the Church in southern Italy, explainable only by the strong pressure exerted on the civil and religious authorities by the clergy and the city's inhabitants themselves, almost all Greek-speaking. In response, the papacy worked to weaken the power of the new Greek incumbents, stripping them of the substantial revenues from the territory of the Abbey of Santa Maria di Nardò. During the Swabian period, Gallipoli was politically close to Frederick II due to his hostility to the Church of Rome. However, with the conquest of the Kingdom by Charles I of Anjou, Gallipoli paid dearly for its loyalty to the old ruling house and, after a harsh siege, fell in 1269. The Angevins executed the rebel barons by hanging who had taken refuge there, confiscated their property, imprisoning their wives and children, and harshly punished the city, particularly targeting the clergy. They first devastated the Cathedral of Sant'Agata, rendering it unusable, and then expelled the clergy and all those families who had most supported the Swabian cause: an exile that oral tradition reports lasted about a century. The heavy tax burden imposed on the city aggravated depopulation, pushing further families to voluntarily abandon it.

The clergy initially moved to the monastery of S. Mauro, as suggested by the definition of «maiorem ecclesiam S. Mauri» used in 1325 by the papal tax collectors (VENDOLA 1939, 120). During this period, there was a first attempt to replace the Greek clergy with the appointment of the Latin Goffredo between 1324 and 1325. The election, however, was spoiled by the absence of eight of the fourteen members, fearful of the reaction of some nobles in support of the newly elected bishop. Given the evident irregularity, the election was annulled by Luca, Archbishop of Otranto, and Meletius, a Greek monk of Calabrian origins, was appointed bishop. Meletius worked to remedy the precarious economic situation of the diocese, which – sixty years after the diaspora – still lacked a suitable episcopal seat. His request for help to Pope John XXII materialized in 1330 with three letters from Avignon: one reassured him of the requests he had made, another invited the archbishop of Otranto to allocate the revenues of four rural churches to the diocese of Gallipoli, and the last invited the faithful to make donations to complete the construction of the new cathedral of Sant'Agata di Alicia on the site known

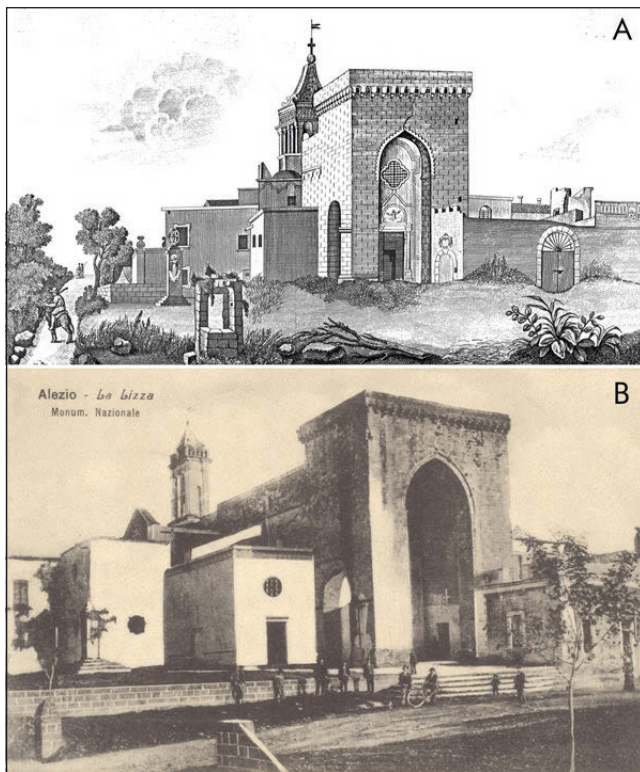


Fig. 2 – The Church of Santa Maria dell'Alizza in Alezio. Historical images: a) old 19th century print (from RAVENNA 1836, 411); b) photo from the early 20th century (from FERRARI 2010, 30-31).

as *Sancte Marie de Cruciata* in exchange for indulgences. Once the work was completed in 1331, Meletius moved to his new seat, becoming according to tradition «bishop of Lizza and parish priest of Gallipoli» (FRANZA 1836, 110). The architectural and stylistic similarities with Santa Maria del Casale near Brindisi date the beginning of the work to the early 14th century, like other churches dedicated to the Virgin with strong ties to the sea: S.M. del Casale near Ugento, the Assunta of Castellaneta and S.M. della Giustizia near Taranto, all dating between the end of the 13th and the first half of the 14th century during the rule of the Angevins of Taranto.

But what still characterizes S.M. dell'Alizza today is the large turreted pronaos built around the mid-14th century, also closely linked to the Angevin influence and more generally to medieval French architecture (FALLA CASTELFRANCHI 1991, 229-233). It is a monumental vestibule with a dual

function, traceable in the account of the pastoral visit of monsignor Pelegro Cybo of 10 November 1567: «... in the same church there is a large tower ... in which there is a bell tower with a bell for the use and service of the sacred rites weighing about a cantharus» (PINDINELLI 2023, 134).

With the return of the curia to Gallipoli, likely at the end of the 14th century concurrently with the rise of the Latin clergy (JACOB 1989, 298), the church lost the title of Sant'Agata and regained that of Santa Maria dell'Alizza, but continuing to be used as a summer residence. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, the bishops intervened, adapting the church to the new Baroque style and building a new bishop's palace and a new bell tower. These transformations dramatically changed the interior and exterior appearance of the church itself (GUERRIERI, DE SANTIS 1997) (Fig. 2a-b) until the 1950s, when restorations were carried out recovering the original late medieval appearance, removing all the additions and giving them their current appearance (MONGIELLO 1974).

I.F.

3. ARCHITECTURAL SURVEY: TOOLS AND METHODOLOGY

The instrumental survey of a cultural asset can be carried out using various technologies or acquisition methods, the use of which is related to a number of factors: from the characteristics of the site to environmental conditions and, above all, the purpose of the digital model. 3D laser scanner systems and digital photogrammetry are the main applications in the field of archaeology. Integrating these two technologies allows the acquisition process to be optimized, making the most of their individual potential. The complementarity of the systems, which implies the control of different data and the possibility of merging heterogeneous data, is able to offer more accurate geometric and colorimetric information in a significantly shorter time. Furthermore, data redundancy should not be underestimated as a resource and as a means of quality control.

The survey methodology, as already adopted in other contexts (SCARDOZZI *et al.* 2023; FERRARI 2025; FERRARI, GIURI 2025) and conducted according to a procedural logic that responded as closely as possible to the specific characteristics of the site, involved the integrated use of Terrestrial Laser Scanner (TLS), Terrestrial and Aerial Photogrammetry by Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV), and Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS), with the aim of producing a synthetic three-dimensional model. It allowed us to understand the original architectural development of the monument and its evolution over time, defining its morphology and the relationships between each element, which are essential for the documentation, but also for their possible remote use in virtual reality applications (Russo *et al.* 2011).

3.1 Laser scanner survey

The TLS survey was performed using a Leica P20 (Leica, Wetzlar, Germany) and covered not only the church with its high pronaos, but also the adjacent buildings, the surrounding churchyard, and several underground spaces. Seventy-eight station points were used to cover the interior of the church and the entire exterior space. Given the large size of the monument and the presence of significant decorative details, a resolution of 6.3 mm was selected on a 10-m radius sphere. Coverage of the entire underground area was achieved by planning a total of 40 station points, including part of the external area facing the two underground entrances for a precise connection with the church structures. Given the small size of the spaces, a resolution of 12.5 mm was selected on a 10-m radius sphere.

The acquired data were initially processed using Cyclone software (version 8.1.1, Leica, Wetzlar, Germany) to align the point clouds (Fig. 3a) and export them to Geomagic (Studio version 2003, Morrisville, NC, USA), where redundant and irrelevant points (trees, lampposts, hedges, other buildings, etc.) were filtered and deleted. The final point cloud was transformed into a polygonal mesh (Fig. 3b), imported into Maxon® C4D R19 and processed to obtain a vectorized general plan (Fig. 3c). The laser survey made it possible to update the published surveys of the church dating back to the 1970s

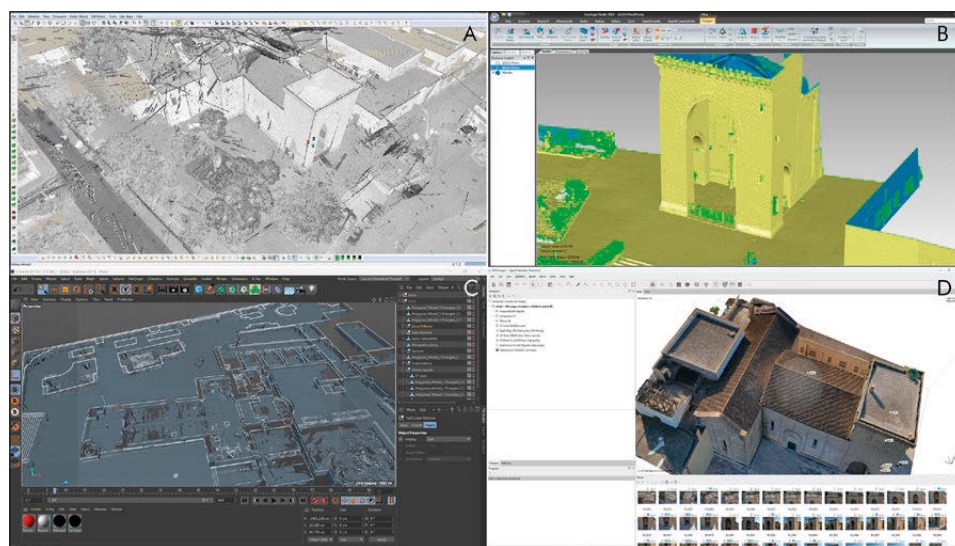


Fig. 3 – Screenshot data processing: a) point cloud processing in Cyclone; b) polygon mesh processing in Geomagic; c) vector floor plan processing in Maxon Cinema 4D; d) photogrammetric processing in Agisoft Metashape Pro.

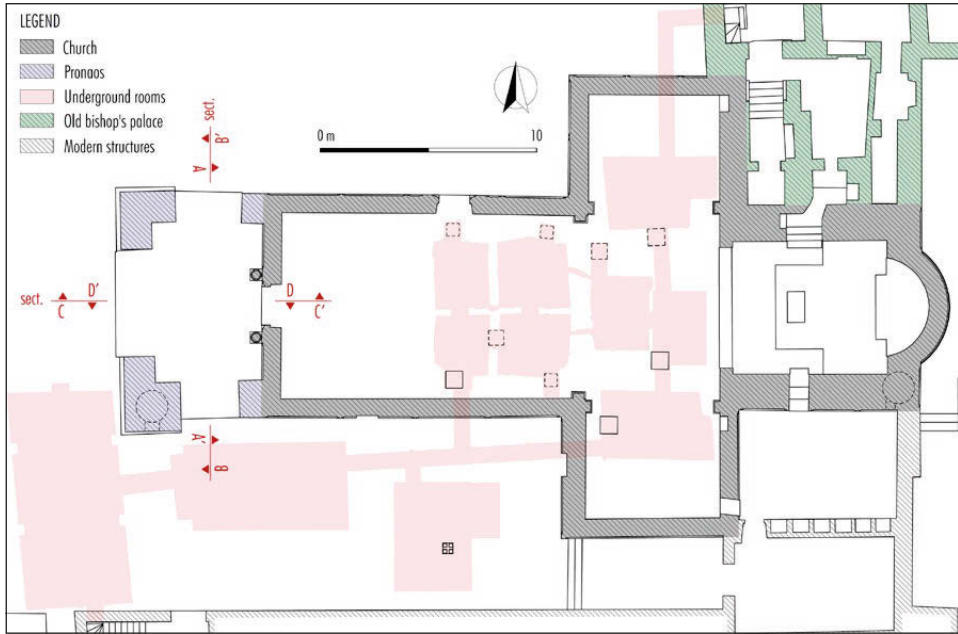


Fig. 4 – The Church of Santa Maria dell'Alizza in Alezio: general plan drawn up by laser scanner survey.

(MONGIELLO 1974), highlighting several inaccuracies but also demonstrating the spatial relationship between the structures of the church and those of the previously undetected underground spaces, providing a unified vision of the entire monumental complex (Fig. 4).

3.2 Photogrammetric survey

The photogrammetric survey focused on producing a 3D model with high-resolution, photorealistic textures of the exterior of the church and the pronaos, achieved through aerial and ground-based acquisitions to obtain images at different scales and resolutions, then processed by Agisoft Metashape Pro® (Fig. 3d). A DJI Mavic 2 Pro drone equipped with a high-resolution RGB camera (20 MPx) was used for aerial photography. To cover the entire area, two flights were planned at an altitude of 25 m (above ground level), the first with a nadir camera and the second with a double grid with the camera positioned at a 45° angle. To georeference and to ensure high model accuracy, 6 ground control points (GCPs) were positioned, marked by specific targets (80×80 cm) and surveyed with an Emlid Reach RS2 multi-frequency GNSS receiver based on RTK differential corrections directly from the Hexagon

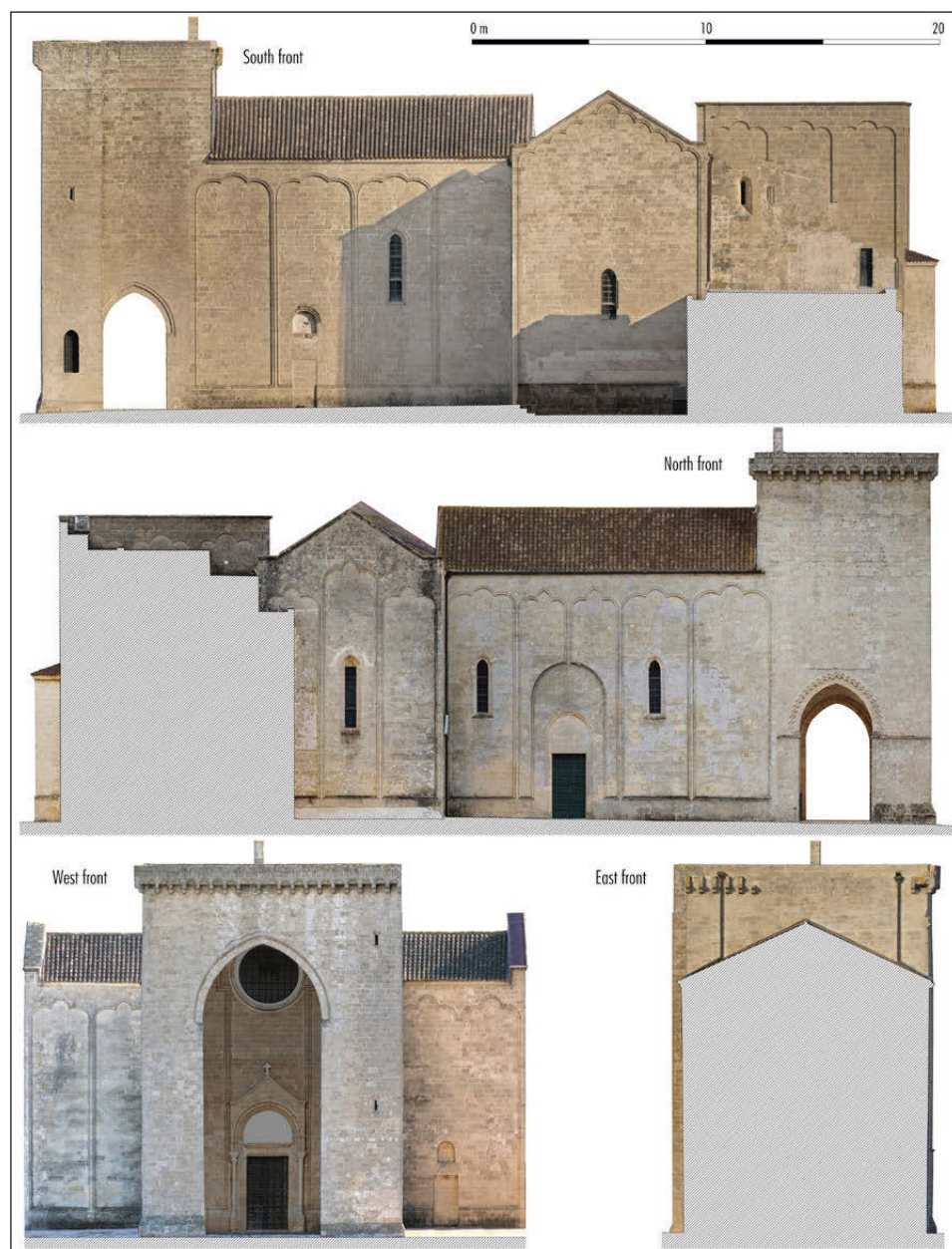


Fig. 5 – The Church of Santa Maria dell'Alizza in Alezio: metric survey of the fronts of the pronaos.

SmartNet network. The resulting 3D model was imported into Maxon C4D and further cleaned of irrelevant data for the scaled rendering of the external elevations of the pronaos in relation to the church (Fig. 5), and of the internal ones obtained by sectioning the structure along the axes (Fig. 6).

Further manual flights were aimed at specifically capturing the decorative elements present at altitude in the pronaos, which were impossible to detect in detail with other instruments, such as the capitals and the corner sculptures at the base of the internal crossing. Starting clockwise from the NE corner there are respectively depicted: the head of an ox upside down, an eagle whose head has been lost, a lion and a man with his legs bent backwards (Fig. 7a-d). The same methods were used for the 3D survey of the external corbel positioned at a 45° angle on the NE corner of the pronaos. This revealed a perimeter decoration on the lower section, consisting of a sequence of small leaves that must have framed a central element that was later removed: chiseling marks are visible. Above the corbel is a small pillar with a square protuberance at the top, likely designed to accommodate another sculptural element (Fig. 7e).

A detailed close range photogrammetric survey was also carried out for three wall sections, all located on the western sides of the SW, NW and NE pillars of the pronaos, where several engravings, probably made by pilgrims, were identified. To better analyze the walls, once the 3D photogrammetric model was imported into Maxon C4D, it was stripped of its texture, displayed in shaded mode, and illuminated by a grazing light. It was therefore possible to document on the NE pillar several crosses of Greek and Latin form (Fig. 8a). On the SW pillar, there is a small Greek cross and a large Papal Cross: the latter is recognizable by its Latin cross with the three barred ends – recalling the pope's triple role as bishop of Rome, patriarch of the West, and successor of St. Peter – above a three-stepped base symbolizing the Holy Trinity (Fig. 8b). On the NW pillar there are three elements, from left to right: a board recalling the nine men's morris game – often engraved on the walls of churches with an apotropaic function –, a coat of arms featuring an oblique band decorated with a checkerboard pattern, and an eight-pointed star (Fig. 8c).

F.G.

4. TECHNICAL-STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE PRONAOS

The metric survey was crucial in analyzing the architectural features of the structure, both structurally and decoratively, highlighting those elements that contributed to understanding the construction methods and subsequent restoration interventions. The pronaos is a 16 m high structure, which is configured as a successful fusion between the heavy forms of the Romanesque style and the slender forms of the Gothic style, given by the ogival arches of the three openings. The construction technique is the same as the church: a



Fig. 6 – The Church of Santa Maria dell'Alizza in Alezio: sections of the pronaos with the location of the holes for the cantilevered scaffolding (white circles) and the ones for the support of the centerings (black circles).

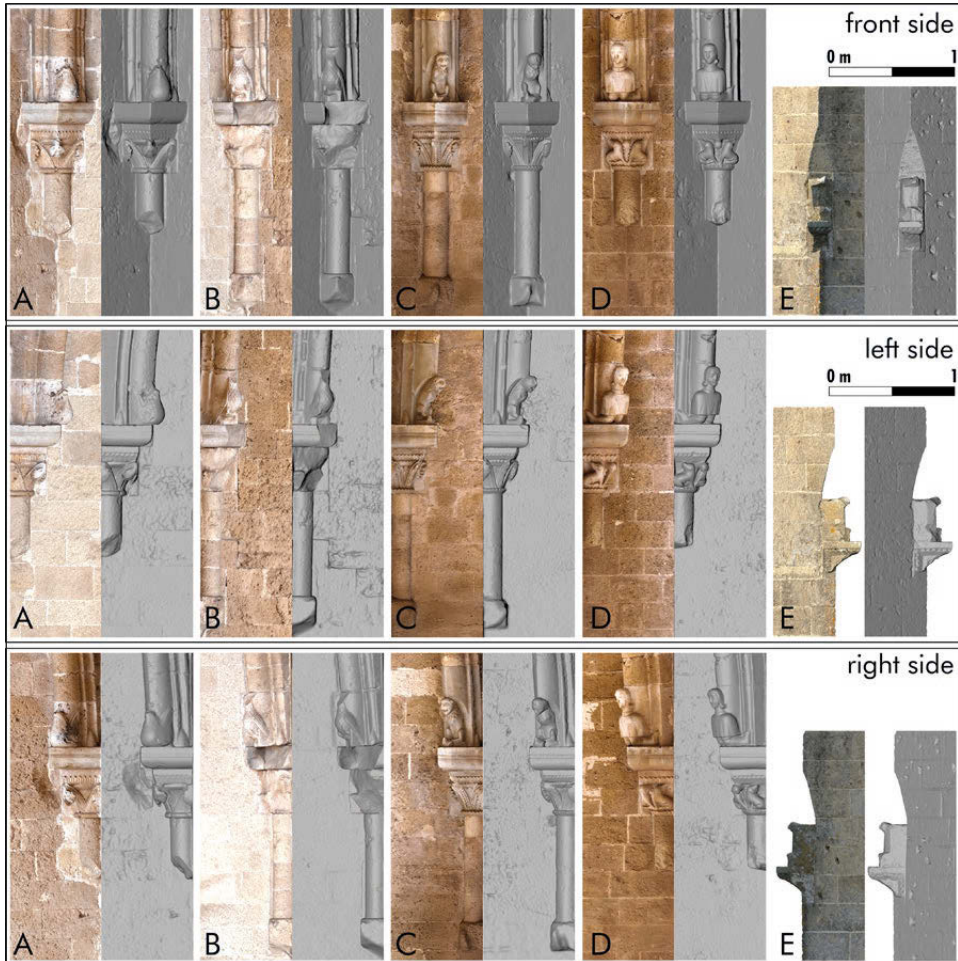


Fig. 7 – Santa Maria dell'Alizza in Alezio. 3D photogrammetric surveys of the decorative elements of the pronaos in textured/shaded mode: a) NE foot of the cross vault; b) SE foot of the cross vault; c) SW foot of the cross vault; d) NW foot of the cross vault; e) external corbel on the NE corner.

bag-fill structure with two curtain walls made of square blocks of carparo, a calcareous stone typical of Salento and widespread in the Gallipoli area. In plan, the vestibule is 6.6 m deep, 10.4 m wide on the E side – as the nave of the church which it adjoins – and 11.1 m wide on the W side, whose greater width gives the southern side a bayonet profile. The contact lines between the two buildings on the N and S sides are perfectly vertical up to the level of the gable, beyond which the new structure rises above the thickness of the

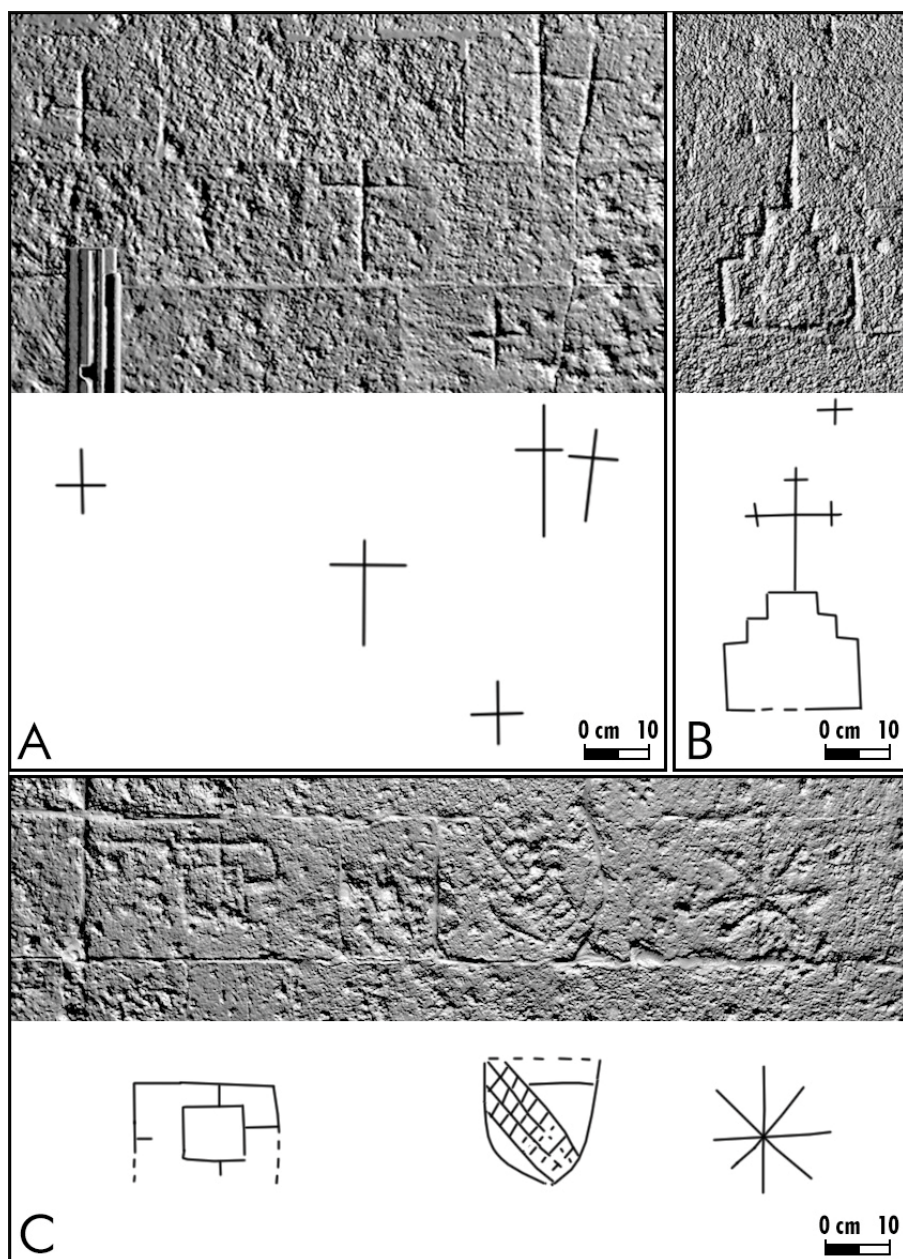


Fig. 8 – Santa Maria dell’Alizza in Alezio: the pronaos. Detailed 3D photogrammetric survey of the engravings in shaded mode: a) western side of the NE pillar; b) western side of the SW pillar; c) western side of the NW pillar.

façade wall. Through the three ogival openings – the central one 12.5 m high, the northern one 6 m and the southern one 5 m – you enter a central space of approximately 7.3×5 m, covered by a valuable 15 m high ribbed cross vault.

In plan, the four pillars have slightly different shapes and sizes. The rectangular eastern ones measure 1.37×0.98 m (the northern one) and 1.7×1.05 m (the southern one), leading to the church's entrance being off-center. The western pillars are L-shaped and have a sloping profile at the bottom. The N one (2.65×2.55 m with a recess of 1.2×1.15 m), has its N side misaligned by 2.5 degrees with respect to the nave. The southern one (3.4×2.6 m with a recess of 1.23×1.15 m) is wider to have inside it a spiral staircase leading to the terrace (1.5 m in diameter), which causes the bayonet profile of the S side of the pronaos and makes the front arch off-axis. The entrance to the stairs (0.65×1.85 m) is on the S side at a height of 1.7 m from the floor, and it is closed at the top by a pointed arch having hammer-shaped blocks and a T-shaped keystone. The helical staircase rises counterclockwise, and it is illuminated by three small rectangular windows measuring 10×40 cm: two are on the W side at heights of 4 and 11 m, and the last on the S side at a height of 8 m.

The current flooring of the pronaos, made of squared limestone slabs, was created in 1920, when a trapdoor was discovered that gave access to a vaulted underground room used as an ossuary. Geophysical surveys conducted in 2021 revealed this space, linking it to other, as yet unexplored, areas of the underground cemetery that extends under the church (DE GIORGI *et al.* 2021): it can be dated from the 18th century, coinciding with the birth of the modern center of Alezio. The central pointed triumphal arch (5.1×3.2 m) has two rows of overlapping cuneiform blocks: the lower one is flat and slightly recessed, the upper one has a linear decoration composed of diamond elements on the outside turning inside at the impost, and on the opposite side has a linear, recessed molding with a quarter-circle profile. The impost is marked by a frame (20 cm high) that protrudes only on the internal sides at 9 m from the floor. Instead, the impost frame of the northern arch turns on the three sides of the piers to conceal with its overhang the misalignment of the north side of the western pillar: comparing the masonry above and below the cornice, in fact, reveals a 2.5° difference in orientation. The arch has a flat, recessed lower ring on both sides, while the upper one on the outside features toric moldings forming a double zigzag cornice turning inside at the impost: on the opposite side a simple toric molding follows the pointed profile. This last solution is mirrored on the two sides of the southern arch (measuring 2.7×2 m), located at a height of 3 m and without impost frame.

Inside at 9.3 m height, there is a ribbed cross vault with a small rosette at the keystone, on elegant hanging columns having finely decorated capitals. The feet of the vault are decorated with figures that recall the Tetramorph,

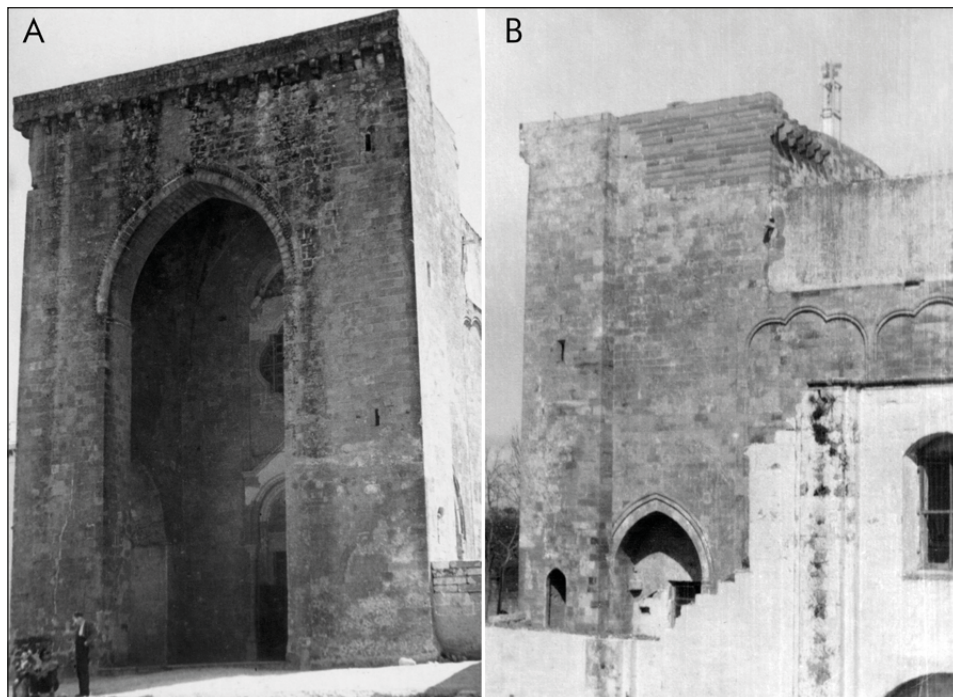


Fig. 9 – The Church of Santa Maria dell'Alizza in Alezio. The pronaos in two images from 1960: a) the W side; b) the S side.

a medieval iconographic figure composed of four creatures, each of which is associated with the four evangelists: the ox for Luke, the eagle for John, the lion for Mark, the man for Matthew. These, together with the underlying corbels and capitals, are of *pietra leccese*, a soft, grained limestone quarried in the strip of land between Lecce and Poggiardo. A sequence of corbels runs along the upper part of the pronaos on the W, N and S sides, supporting a projecting crowning wall with machicolations, 80 cm high and divided into three bands: the lower one having architraves decorated by semicircles enclosing trilobate arches, the central one having a sawtooth motif and the upper one flat.

On the façade of the pronaos, the regular sequence of corbels is interrupted in the central portion by an ancient restoration, which saw the replacement of two corbels with only one in the center: on it rest two longer architraves which are not perfectly reproduced, because they lack the trefoil decoration. In the NE corner of the pronaos, two other architraves, lacking trefoil arches, have also been restored. The southern façade is the worst preserved, because

it is completely missing the coping wall and most of the corbels. As already described in the previous chapter, on the NE corner of the pronaos, at a height of 13 m, stands a corbel positioned at a 45° angle with a small pillar above it. This pillar originally supported a further element, likely compatible with a coat of arms: a nail-shaped angular recess facilitated its insertion. Even in the NW corner there was a mirrored solution, as deductible from an identical nail-shaped corner recess, placed at the same height: a photo from 1960 shows the gap – later filled – left by the complete removal of the shelf (Fig. 9a).

The metric survey also highlighted several aspects of the carpentry related to the structure's construction methods. The scaffolding holes, although blocked, reveal that they were installed in a cantilevered manner exclusively on the internal sides of the pronaos. The masonry texture of the intrados of the architraves reveals the positioning of two parallel beams supporting the centering: they are located at the impost of the central arch and at the jambs of the northern arch. The absence of this evidence in the southern arch suggests the use of a ground-fixed centering (Fig. 6).

At the same time, some construction defects also emerged, which add to the misalignment of the NW pier already described, such as the out-of-plumb progression of the lateral elevations, which was corrected in the northern one by a progressive recess in the upper half, creating an almost barrel-shaped profile, and in the southern one simply by moving the blocks back a few centimeters. Furthermore, in the wall texture of the eastern front, a meeting of workers is visible, determined by the misalignment of the rows, levelled above by low cuneiform ashlar (Fig. 5). Regarding the bell tower, no useful elements remain to help us understand its original appearance; from the report of the pastoral visit, we can only understand that it had a single bell weighing approximately 100 kg. The only element still present on the terrace of the pronaos is a pillar with a square base (40×40 cm) 1.1 m high, which, as documented by a photo from 1960, supported a metal cage with an antenna, most likely used for the radio and television communications of the time (Fig. 9b).

I.F.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Alizza pronaos is a rare example of a turreted vestibule of French-inspired religious architecture in southern Italy, the only one of its size. Its military appearance is such that some have considered it a true defensive tower (PEPE 2009), but in reality the system of corbels and machicolations is more decorative than functional; furthermore, there is no internal space for a possible garrison, the terrace lacks a parapet, and the access stairway is located on the apparently less defended side. Based on archaeological and monumental evidence, however, comparisons are possible. The pre-Romanesque cathedral of Bitonto (Ba)

in the 11th century had a portico having a bell tower structure aligned to the entrance, with a floor mosaic depicting a griffin (DI PAOLA, MILELLA 1996; SPAGNOLETTA 1999). Even in the ruined cathedral of Fiorentino, dedicated to the archangel Michael in the municipality of Torremaggiore (FG), there was a similar structure placed in front of the façade with a pointed arch, as depicted in an engraving from 1844: likely an addition to the Byzantine church dating back to the proto-Angevin period (CALÒ MARIANI 1992). In Bitetto (BA), the Franciscan church of S. Maria Veterana has a portico-tower leaning against the entrance, built between the late 13th and early 14th centuries (AMBROSI 1983). The most structurally similar example, however, is in France, in the monumental turreted vestibule with a high pointed arch of the church of Saint Amand de Coly in Dordogne, built between the end of the 12th century and the beginning of the 13th century: an architectural model that likely arrived in Puglia via the Angevins themselves (CALÒ MARIANI 2002).

The pronaos takes on the same layout as the church in relation to the ancient road – which still flanks the northern side of the site (Fig. 2b), emphasizing the E, N, and W sides exposed to pedestrians. For example, the N side of the transept has the same decoration as the nave, with slender pillars that join at the top to form trefoil arches, with a single-lancet window in the center originally decorated with a motif that traced the ogival window at the top, traceable in the different stone material. Conversely, the S side of the transept has a less elaborate decoration composed of small hanging arches that follow the profile of the tympanum and a simpler single-lancet window (Fig. 5). The same is true for the secondary side entrances, the northern one is set in the external decoration of the nave, not so the southern one.

The pronaos follows this pattern, emphasizing the arch on the N side but not the S side, where the upper crown is also absent. The two external corbels – which originally supported sculptural elements – are only on the northern corners, and it is no coincidence that the entrance to the spiral staircase is on the side not visible from the street. From an architectural perspective, the presence of this staircase in the SW pier serves to widen the façade, making it more imposing. Regarding the construction imperfections – however also frequent in other turreted structures (FERRARI *et al.* 2025; FERRARI, GIURI 2026) – such as the slightly divergent orientation of the NW pier and the out-of-plumb in the structure elevations, it can be said that they do not lead to static complications but only aesthetic ones.

However, the structures show the signs of structural failures that occurred in the past, such as the central portion of the façade's crowning wall, restored in ancient times, or on the north side where it is entirely absent: they are probably linked to the earthquake of 20 February 1743, which also caused extensive damage to homes and churches in the nearby town of Nardò (DE CUPERTINIS *et al.* 2021). As documented by the sources, in fact, in 1746 the

municipality of Gallipoli decided to pay the sum of 20 ducats to the parish priest of the Alizza as compensation for the damage suffered by the church from the earthquake (BARLETTA 1980). Another restoration, clearly visible on the southern side in photos from the mid-twentieth century, can also perhaps be traced back to the earthquake, as can further cracks in the NW pillar which, having worsened over time, according to oral sources forced a consolidation intervention on the foundation structure in the first half of the 20th century.

As previously mentioned, the pronaos was erected approximately around the mid-14th century, shortly after the completion of the church itself, commissioned by the Curia of Gallipoli as a new cathedral and episcopal seat due to the forced exodus from the city. However, the idea that the new structure was also financed by the Curia seems a weak hypothesis, considering its severe financial difficulties in completing the church, which was only possible thanks to papal intercession and the generosity of wealthy faithful. About the origin of the latter, it is probable that alongside the local noble families – in economic crisis due to excessive taxation – there were also those of the new French nobility, as can be deduced from the fresco with heraldic coats of arms in the SW corner of the nave/transept intersection: one of them, in fact, coincides perfectly in shape, composition and colours in one published in the Le Breton Armorial (Fig. 10) (DE BOOS *et al.* 2004).



Fig. 10 – The Church of Santa Maria dell'Alizza in Alezio. Heraldic coats: a) detail of the fresco in the SW corner of the nave/transept intersection; b) detail of the Le Breton Armorial (from DE BOOS *et al.* 2004).

However, it is difficult to imagine their further efforts to finance the construction of the pronaos without a new, strong institutional motivation. From these considerations, one can advance the hypothesis of intervention by the Angevin family, not only because Gallipoli was a state city (PINDINELLI 2003, 29-30; INGROSSO 2004, XLI, 253), but above all for a further symbolic affirmation of their power over the territory. In fact, the construction of the new cathedral of Sant'Agata on the Alizza hill – a strategic landscape position that dominated the city of Gallipoli, its coast, and the entire hinterland from above – could represent a revenge for the Greek-speaking clergy. This is a sign of how the relations between the French sovereigns and the Greek church of Gallipoli were far from being resolved and of how its return to the city – which likely took place in 1374 with bishop Domenico and the transition to the Latin rite – still remained prohibited (JACOB 1989, 298). So the pronaos can be interpreted as a way to obscure the success of a Greek curia still considered rebellious and anti-government. A work of patronage in which two main elements shine through: the religious spirit, perceptible in the symbolic representations of the four evangelists within the pronaos, and a warrior spirit outside, as an affirmation of political and military power.

Evidence, however, shows that the structure lacks any elements attributable to the customers of this work, perhaps placed on the two external corner corbels that once existed on the northern side of the pronaos, the only remaining one of which shows clear signs of disfigurement. If the hypothesis put forward regarding the commissioning of the work is true, then their absence/damage can therefore be considered the result of a deliberate intervention, which would constitute a form of heraldic *damnatio memoriae* against those responsible for one of the darkest periods of the city of Gallipoli.

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ABSTRACT

The monumental turreted pronaos on the façade of the church of Santa Maria dell'Alizza in Alezio (Lecce, Italy) represents a unique structure in the panorama of Late medieval religious architecture in Southern Italy. This paper illustrates the results of a historical-architectural study conducted on the structure, based on a careful instrumental metric survey. This study allowed us to better examine the construction techniques, highlight their peculiarities, document the transformations that occurred over time, and analyse in detail the decorative elements present. At the same time, the historical research helped contextualize the individual interventions, offering a new perspective on the circumstances that led to the construction of the pronaos, the relationship between it and the church, and its original function.