

12. THE CATACOMBS

The many underground cemeteries in Naples are mainly found on the slopes of the Aminei hills and the Sanità-Vergini area, traditionally known as the “**valley of death**”. These sites were chosen because of the quality of the **tuff** which enabled them to dig out large tunnels to extract building materials or make underground reservoirs to store water.

The ancient catacombs lying under the city of Naples include those of **Saint Gaudioso**, but obviously the most famous and imposing are the **Saint Gennaro Catacombs**, which boast some wonderful frescoes and mosaics as well.

The **Basilica dell’Incoronata Madre del Buon Consiglio** stands on the Capodimonte hill. There is a narrow alley to the left of the Basilica and this is where you get in to the upper level of the catacombs. At the heart of the ancient funerary complex lies the tomb of a genteel family dated II century A.D. This is the oldest part of the building which is known as the “**lower vestibule**”, and was built around the end of II century and beginning of III century A.D. There is a large VIII century baptismal font in the centre of the large hall. **Sant’Agrippino**, sixth bishop of Naples, was buried here.

The remains of Saint Gennaro were moved here from his grave at the site of his martyrdom in Pozzuoli in V century. The body was moved some time between 413 and 437 on the wishes of the Bishop of Naples, Giovanni I, and the cult of the Saint has centred around the catacombs ever since.

The upper level developed in different phases but we know that it was originally a primitive tomb as well. It is called the “**upper vestibule**” today. The upper vestibule is smaller and more compact than the lower one which means it belonged to less wealthy and well-to-do people, like the **earliest Christian community in Naples**. It consists of two rooms with tuff benches along the walls. This part is known as the “**Greek area**” because the names of some of the deceased are written in Greek. The paintings on the walls and vaults are of flowers, bunches of grapes, pomegranates, dolphins and other Christian symbols.

The nearby **crypt** comprises 8 arcosoliums and 10 loculi: the lunettes on the arcosoliums are decorated with splendid **mosaics** with effigies of a group of V century Bishops.

It is in this cemetery that the oldest image of **Saint Gennaro**, dating back to V century, was found in one of the arcosolium lunettes. The Saint is pictured in the middle of two other people. To his left is a little girl called **Nicaziola**, and on his right there is a woman called **Cominia**, who is maybe the mother.

Above the Saint’s head we can see the writing **SANCTO MARTYRI IANUARIO**, which is what enables us to identify the subject. The three figures are separated by candlesticks and appear to be praying. In fact, the Saint’s open arms give the impression he wants to protect the deceased.

Lots of old paintings have survived, including the portraits of the apostles **Peter and Paul** in the smaller ambulatory, and those of **Adam and Eve** by the tree in the Garden of Eden on the vestibule vault.

The underground tombs were used as burial grounds during the outbreaks of **plague** in the city. During the second world war, the catacombs were turned into **air-raid shelters** and protective walls and corridors were built.

Other catacombs which are worth a visit are the ones in the Sanità area. In the **Church of Santa Maria della Sanità**, under the presbytery and the apse, you can see the cemetery chapel of Saint Gaudioso whose origins date back to V century A.D.

According to tradition, **Settimio Celio Gaudioso**, who was Bishop of Abitina in North Africa, had been put out to sea in a small boat along with other priests by the King, Genserico. Their boat was washed up on the shores of Naples where they then founded a monastery and where Gaudioso died in 451 or 452 A.D. It is the remains of the mosaics in the cubicles rather than the architecture that makes these catacombs interesting.