

Built between the Middle Ages and the early modern period, frequently mentioned in archival pastoral visits, and linked to episodes that profoundly shaped local history, the Church of the Ascension is a rare example of architectural and religious stratification, closely intertwined with the daily life of the inhabitants of Paterno.

During the free guided tour held on **19 October 2025**, Dr. Vincenzo Ferrara accompanied visitors through the history of the site: its origins, the traditions surrounding the church's eighteenth-century closure, the central role of the confraternities, and the extraordinary geographical context of Paterno Sant'Arcangelo — a landscape marked by deep valleys, ancient fortifications of the Amalfi Republic, and areas of exceptional natural value.

Paterno Sant'Arcangelo: A Journey Through Nature, History and Spirituality

We are in the hamlet of **Paterno Sant'Arcangelo**. On the opposite hillside lies its twin hamlet, **Paterno Sant'Elia**, where the ancient Church of Saint Elijah the Prophet stands, dating back to the year 1000. The church we will visit today — dedicated to the **Ascension** and historically known as "Sant'Arcangelo" — dates to around 1100. These two buildings are among the **oldest churches in the entire Amalfi Coast**.

The name *Paterno* probably derives from *Patrizius*, believed to be the first Roman inhabitant of the area. This is a place rich in history, but also an ideal setting for contemplation: the surrounding landscape is marked by deep valleys, springs, and wooded slopes — a natural environment of rare beauty.

The Regina Maior River

Below us originates the **Regina Maior**, known locally as *Paterno* or *Patrono*. This is one of the most important watercourses in the region and, for centuries, it sustained the famous **Amalfi paper production**: along this valley there were no fewer than **18 paper mills**, most of which were destroyed during the catastrophic flood of 1958.

One of the Most Lush and Valuable Ecosystems of the Amalfi Coast

The valley beneath us is among the **richest and most humid ecological areas** of the entire coast, second only to the famous *Valle delle Ferriere*. It is home to very rare species, such as the “Tarentum salamander” (*Salamandrina terdigitata*), one of the most delicate amphibians in Italy, alongside the more common spotted salamander.

The Defensive System of the Amalfi Republic

Looking toward the mountain ridge on our right, you may glimpse **Mount Montalto**, where one of the main fortifications defending the **Republic of Amalfi (839–1131)** once stood. The garrison of archers and crossbowmen was led by the renowned warrior from Tramonti, **Giovanni Sclavo**.

Inside, I will also tell you a curious story linked to a local tradition and to a few Waldensian believers... a story that forced more than one person to rethink certain long-held certainties.

The Pietà of 1470

What stands before you is, in my opinion, one of Tramonti's most moving and precious works of art: a **1470 Pietà**, a *Vesperbild* — a German term meaning “image of Vespers,” depicting the Virgin presenting the body of Christ to the faithful.

It is a small sculpture, yet astonishingly powerful.

Restored thanks to the commitment and generosity of the local community, it had originally been heavily soiled and nearly unrecognizable. Today, it has regained its dignity, allowing us to appreciate its refinement and uniqueness.

A Flemish Artist, Sicilian Stone, and an Extraordinary Journey

The author is a **Flemish master** of the 15th century. The sculpture, however, is not made from local stone but from **white limestone from the Hyblaean Mountains** — a stone from the Modica area in Sicily. A delicate and refined material, rarely found outside its original territory.

How a Flemish sculptor and a block of Sicilian stone reached Paterno Sant'Arcangelo remains an intriguing mystery.

The most plausible explanation is linked to the **Aragonese period**, when Sicily and southern Italy maintained strong commercial and cultural ties, and

artworks often travelled along with materials and craftsmen.

To date, south of Ferrara, other documented *Vesperbilder* can only be found in Episcopio, Mola di Bari, and Melfi — but none are carved in Sicilian stone.

They are all terracotta, wood, plaster, or papier-mâché.

This makes the Paterno Pietà a true unicum.

The Strength of the Faces, the Grace of the Folds

Approaching the statue, observe:

- the Virgin's face: composed, sorrowful, devoid of rhetoric — an extraordinarily difficult expression to carve into such a hard stone;
- Christ's youthful face, with a finely sculpted beard;
- the drapery folds, remarkably soft for a 15th-century stone sculpture.

These details reveal a refined and knowledgeable hand — a northern sensibility interpreted through a Mediterranean lens.

A Sculpture of Both Art and Devotion

A note from 1571, discovered during archival research, records that the “Madonna della Pietà was kept in the cave,” referring to the crypt below — today restored. This confirms that the sculpture originally stood exactly where we are about to descend.

Alongside its artistic value, the statue carries a deeply human one.

Until a few decades ago, this path was one of the main routes connecting the upper villages of Tramonti to Maiori. Villagers travelled along it carrying:

- bundles of firewood
- charcoal
- dairy products
- wine and agricultural goods

Two elderly residents recalled that they would stop before the Pietà, placing a **5 or 10-lire coin** at its base as a gesture of gratitude and protection for the journey.

This work therefore embodies a **dual significance**: a masterpiece of art and a familiar spiritual presence in the daily life of the community.

Welcome inside the Church of the Ascension

Welcome to the interior of the Church of the Ascension, one of the most meaningful places in the religious memory of Paterno. Its history is complex, layered, and in some respects surprisingly unusual.

From Earthquake to Rebirth

This church came into full use after the nearby Church of San Michele Arcangelo suffered severe

damage during an earthquake. It was restored and reopened for worship, becoming the new spiritual reference point for the community.

At the end of the eighteenth century, during a pastoral visit, Bishop Puoti came here. He was struck by the condition of the building: the stucco decorations had fallen, the artistic elements were damaged, and the altar had lost one of its most important works — *The Ascension* by the great Neapolitan painter **Andrea Vaccaro**, a masterpiece the bishop referred to as “*the Golden Ascension*.”

Having assessed the state of deterioration, Bishop Puoti granted the Confraternity of Paterno — formed by the landowners and wealthier families of the hamlet — **six months** to carry out the necessary restoration.

Time passed, even more than six months, yet no work was ever begun.

When the bishop returned and found the situation unchanged, he made a drastic decision: **he closed the church to worship.**

The Legend That Overshadowed the Truth

Faced with the embarrassment of admitting to the community their lack of funds and responsibility, the confraternity invented a story that many local inhabitants still believe today: they claimed that a priest had been killed at the altar, making it impossible to reopen the church.

Thus was born a popular tale that, over time, intertwined with older local traditions concerning the

so-called *Valdesi*. A powerful legend that survived for generations — despite having **no historical basis**.

The reality was much simpler: they did not have the money to restore the church. But in those days, admitting such a failure was unthinkable.

A Building That Changed Function

After its closure, the church — being owned by the municipality and no longer used for worship — was transformed into a storage space. Here, bundles of branches and plant materials used to cover lemon terraces were kept: a function far removed from its sacred origins, yet essential for the agricultural economy of the area.

Those who grew up here still remember this period clearly: the interior was filled with brushwood, straw, and lemon branches destined for the terraced gardens.

The Revival of the 1990s

Only in the 1990s, after many decades of abandonment, was the Church of the Ascension finally restored and reopened. The choice fell on this building rather than reconstructing San Michele Arcangelo because it was structurally more suitable for recovery.

What you see today is, therefore, a **modern rebirth**, the result of community determination and the recognition of the historical value of this site.

A selection of photographs from the free guided tour held on 19 October 2025

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