



## The Grottoes of Maurizio

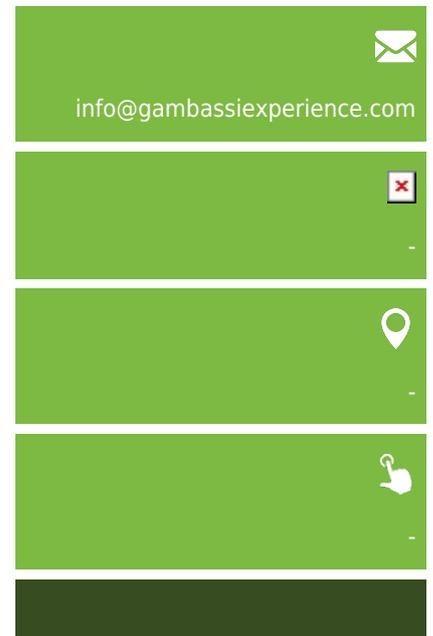
In the thick woods where the Casciani torrent originates, a marked path leads you to a secret world inhabited by stone-men. Climb down carefully until you reach a gorge dug by the waters of the cascade. There, once your eyes adjust to the dark, you will find a stone sarcophagus, a totem with human features, watched over by other cement figures and a chorus of sculpted heads.

They seem like remains from an **ancient civilisation**, but they are from the recent past. Their history is that of their maker, **Maurizio Becherini**, a construction worker like his father, a barber and tailor, father of three children, widow.

Upon his wife's death, he withdrew to the Franciscans of **San Vivaldo**, where he lived a life of prayer, interrupted from time to time by visitors. Then, the great leap: in 1918, Becherini withdrew to a solitary life in this very gorge. In just over ten years, he would tame the forest and sculpt stone, giving life to a sacred place.

He built a **small chapel** and scattered the forest with walkways, statues, niches, saints and **Christian symbols**. He used cement, with chicken mesh as rebar, and searched for shells, buttons and pebbles for the smaller details. Every so often he would go to work in the countryside to earn a few pennies, see his children. He would also welcome walkers and pilgrims who came to see him.

The Church didn't seem to consider the hermit or his sacred grotto much, but in 1928 Maurizio defended a healer who was denied the sacrament of the Eucharist, and unleashed the fury of the bishop, who treated him like a circus freak: *"a certain Maurizio meant to build a sort of holy cave, to worship Saint Trinity, Saint Peter, etc. represented by some absolutely grotesque and*



*ridiculous statues he himself created [...] destination of excursions by petty and superstitious souls or by mocking spirits.” He died four years later, in 1932.*

**Today, few traces remain;** the forest has devoured his art, reconquering it and granting us evocative glimpses of the ruins of a completely private archaeology.

Searching for this marginal universe is like digging in the imagination of Maurizio, a hermit and visionary, who lived here for thirteen years with no consideration for what was taking place in the so-called normal world.