

Case Romane del Celio

Overview

The building complex below the Basilica of SS. John and Paul al Celio was discovered in 1887 by Father Germano of San Stanislao, rector of the basilica. The ancient houses beneath the church, now known as the Case Romane, were excavated from 1887 to 1958. The entrance to the excavations used to be in the church, in the right hand aisle just after the chapel of St Paul of the Cross. This is no longer, and the set of stairs has not been used by visitors since 1989.

In 2002 the Case Romane were re-opened to the public under the aegis of the Fondo Edifici di Culto of the Ministero dell'Interno, who had contracted the city government (Comune di Roma) to perform a thorough restoration and conservation over the previous fourteen years. The rooms are now run as a museum, entered off the Clivus Scauri running down the left hand side of the church. They contain a number of paintings, both Christian and pagan, including frescoes of the 3rd and 4th century. There is also an early medieval oratory, and an Antiquarium which displays many artifacts found during the excavations as well as the Muslim pottery dishes removed from the campanile.

History

Layout of ancient neighborhood

In ancient times the area was built over, and in the late imperial period was a wealthy residential neighborhood occupying the shoulder of the Caelian hill between the vast enclosure of the Temple of the Divine Claudius and the east end of the Circus Maximus. The latter site marked the beginning of the Appian Way at the Porta Capena. A street ran up the west side of the temple enclosure (the wide monastery gate on the piazza marks the route of this "Temple Street"), and a parallel street north of the Clivus Scauri made the city block. The said Clivus Scauri was itself a street that ran west to east from near the end of the Circus up the hill to the Porta Caelimontana, and is one of the few streets in Rome that has kept both its ancient name and its route. It is thought to have been laid out and developed by Marcus Aemilius Scaurus, who was censor in 109 BC. The archaeologists found evidence for the first buildings erected in this development, below the two houses which later replaced them and which are below the church.

The church actually covers parts of three subsequent ancient buildings, labelled by the excavators A, B and C.

House A

Built in the early 2nd century, with frontages on Temple Street and Parallel Street and its rooms aligned slightly west of north, this means the main façade was on Temple Street. It is thought that the area under the church portico also belonged to it, but this area is un-investigated and what was on the corner of the Clivus Scauri and Temple Street, in the present piazza, is unknown. House A was built on a hill-slope falling away to the north, and so had a cellar range including a little bath-house which is under the right hand aisle of the church. Only a small part of this house features in the Case Romane, including this bathroom. This house was high-status from the beginning, and was decorated with stuccoes, frescoes and colored wall mosaics. It replaced an earlier edifice of the early 1st century.

House B

House B was to the west of the far wall of the church nave, with the apse intruding into it. Substantial remains of this house are visible, including a high 2nd century wall, but it is not part of the Case Romane excavations. Walls belonging to a predecessor edifice were found under the apse, and are dated to the 1st century AD. Apart from the scant remains of Republican structures already referred to, these are the oldest structures on the site.

House C

When it was first built, House A was separated from House C by a dead-end alleyway running north-west to south-east from the top of the right hand aisle to the location of the confessio. This was obviously originally a service route for both buildings. House C started life about the beginning of the 3rd century, and was originally an insula or apartment block for people of much lower status

than House A. Because its main Clivus Scauri frontage was re-used for the church, it survives to a height of three storeys, behind the mediaeval buttress arches. There was originally an open portico supported on an arcade with square piers, and two entrances side by side in the middle of this. One led into the first storey, the other to the stairs to the upper storeys. The surviving upper storeys have well-made blocked windows, thirteen in the second storey and twelve in the third. The portico opened into tabernae or ground-floor shops either side of the entrances.

Conversion

In the middle of the 3rd century, the two houses A and C were converted into one notably high-status property, the latter having its ground floor lowered so as to make the rooms (former shops) higher. The alleyway was converted into a luxurious nymphaeum or chill-out space with fountains, a tessellated polychrome marble floor and impressive frescoes on the walls. The surviving ground-floor rooms were also lavishly frescoed.

Christians

The original excavators claimed that this conversion resulted in a "house church". This hypothesis cannot be sustained, especially since the original frescoes had pagan themes. What was found was that an alcove at the south-east end of the nymphaeum, under a set of stairs, was decorated with frescoes in the second half of the 4th century that seem to depict a martyrdom. If this is correct, it is the oldest such fresco cycle known. This little alcove is the so-called confessio, since it corresponds (almost) with the traditional location of the saints' tombs in the floor of the church above. The original excavators found three niches cut into the rock below, which they claimed (on no archaeological evidence) to have been tombs.

Also, two rooms were frescoed in the earlier 4th century. One of these, the so-called Aula dell'orante, was claimed to show Christian themes, especially a figure in the orans position of prayer. This claim has rightly been criticized as fanciful.

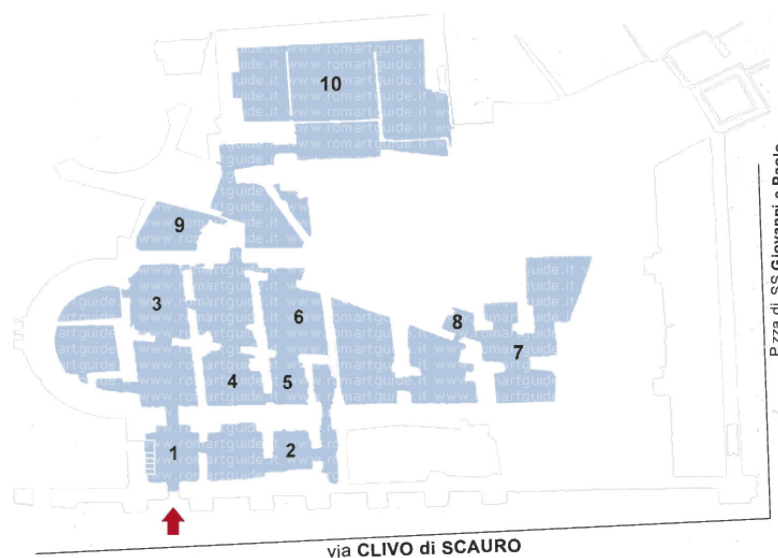
The modern consensus is that the house was a private residence of a rich Christian by the late 4th century, not a public place of worship.

In 1901, human remains were found in the north-west end of the nymphaeum which were originally hailed as being of the companion martyrs mentioned in the legend, Crispus, Crispianus and Benedicta. The actual identity of these people is controverted.

After the basilica

The house was chopped down in order to build the basilica on top of it in the early 5th century, and so most of the ground floor rooms were either filled in or cut through to provide wall and colonnade foundations. Crude blocking walls were inserted to fill in the portico arches, and one bay of the former portico was converted into a little chapel. This in turn was filled in in the late Middle Ages as problems with the stability of the church surfaced again. This chapel had been frescoed, and can now be visited as part of the Case.

Layout of Case



The present entrance is at the west end of the former portico of House C, and leads into a room (Portico sul clivo) where you buy your ticket. The mediaeval chapel comprises the further of two other rooms of the portico, to the east (your right on entry).

Straight ahead, you pass into a block of six rooms, two rows of three (west to east), with the south-eastern room sub-divided into two smaller ones. The far western room is the Stanza dei geni, and the near middle one is the so-called Stanza dell'decorazione a finto marmo. The far eastern one is the famous Aula dell'Orante, and the western of the two little subdivided rooms to the south of this is the Stanza dei Bue Api e Saltatrices. Two further large rooms are to the east of these six rooms, and the confessio is off the furthest east of this pair. Then comes a set of interconnected chambers called the cella vinaria.

You can enter the cavity under the apse from the two westernmost rooms, and if you do you will be in House B. To the far side of the Stanza dei geni is the famous Nymphaeum, then there is a small part of House A before you reach the Antiquarium. This museum chamber is actually the furthest north of the complex, and is modern. It is situated outside the plan of the church.

Cappella di Santissimo Salvatore (2)

The little mediaeval chapel dedicated to Christ the Savior was created when the original arcaded portico facing the street was walled off. It is a small square room with fragmentary frescoes, the earliest being 8th century and the latest, 12th. An important fragment of the latter period was detached by the conservators and is now viewable in the Antiquarium. It shows Christ the King between the archangels Gabriel and Michael, with presumably the martyr St Paul (missing his head) standing to one side. It is surmised that the latter was balanced by his brother St John on the other side.

Also discernible in the chapel are scenes of the Entombment of Christ and the Resurrection. In a niche is an interesting 8th century Crucifixion, where Christ is shown wearing a tunic instead of being naked (this was an ancient iconographic tradition soon to be lost). Next to this is a Division of Christ's Garments. Other fresco fragments are too small to allow identification of scenes.

Stanza dei Geni (3)

The room straight ahead from the entrance foyer used to be a taberna or shop opening into the portico, before the conversion of the insula into part of a luxurious house. Beyond that in turn is the richly frescoed "Chamber of the Genii", which features naked youths holding up richly colored floral swags on a white background and accompanied by birds. Above these, vines scroll about on the damaged barrel vault, inhabited by erotes (cherubs) and more birds. The latter are well represented, and the various species can be distinguished. One pheasant is shown having caught a mouse.

Nymphaeum (9)

Beyond this chamber in turn is the famous nymphaeum, which used to be an alleyway before the house conversion. When this took place, the walls were equipped with stone plinths having alternating square and hemicylindrical niches, some containing fountains. The floor was in a polychrome marble mosaic with large tesserae, and in the middle of this was a large well. The walls were richly frescoed, and remains of a scheme featuring erotes on sea-monsters can be discerned.

The most famous item here is the well-preserved fresco on the short wall at the north-west end, actually next to the stairs formerly leading down from the church. This wall was part of the neighboring house B. The work is five meters long and three meters high, and features a marine scene with boats on a dark blue (now grayish) background. The boats contain erotes, and others are swimming. The three central figures feature a man standing over two reclining women, the central one being nude. It is thought that this depiction is of The Return of Proserpina from Hades, but this is not certain.

The remains of (apparently) three people were found interred here in 1901, and these are now thought to have been opportunistic burials just before the basilica was built in about 410. It is impossible to draw any conclusions as to their identity.

When this room was filled in to build the church, the well was kept and its shaft extended upwards to emerge in the floor of the primitive basilica.

Stanza della decorazione a finto marmo (4)

From the nymphaeum you can pass through the far central room of the block of six, and so reach the near central room which is the "room decorated in false marble". That is, the walls are frescoed to resemble polychrome marble revetting. There was a lot of this sort of thing in ancient Rome, and it was also popular in Baroque Roman churches..

Stanza del Bue Api e saltatrices. (5)

From this room you can pass into the near right hand room, the "room of the Apis bull and leapers" after a pagan fresco theme here. The fresco work is attributable to the first half of the 4th century, in other words the same period as the more famous frescoes in the far right hand room beyond.

Aula dell'Orante (6)

The original excavators described this room as the house-church of the original congregation that worshipped here. However, revisionist scholars at the end of the 20th century rightly pointed out that there is nothing here to support that conclusion. The brethren imagined that they were seeing what they expected to find. In fact, the fresco decoration alludes more to the worship of Pan than that of Christ.

Above more fake marble work (not very well done) are depicted vine-scrolls, sprays of vegetation and capricorns (sea-goats). The fragmentary vault fresco features goats. The orante is a rather small figure up in one corner, a woman in a tunic with her arms outspread in the orans position. Unfortunately for the original interpreters, pagans used this gesture of religious supplication as well as Christians.

Confessio (8)

Persuasive evidence of a Christian presence here in ancient times is limited to the so-called confessio, which is an alcove or little room under what used to be a set of stairs to the story above. Below the base of the stairs the excavators found three cavities cut into the natural bedrock (tuff), which they interpreted as tombs.

The alcove has three frescoed walls, showing a total of seven scenes in two registers:

Bottom left, two standing male figures. Top left, a deer to the left and what looks like two men and a woman in front of two soldiers to the right.

Straight ahead at the top is a large rectangular niche, flanked by a pair of (now headless) standing figures in tunic and cloak. At the bottom is a standing figure of a young man in the orans position with curtain hangings depicted behind him, being venerated by two figures crouched down on either side.

Bottom right, two standing female figures. Top right, three figures kneeling down and with their hands tied behind their backs, apparently blindfolded and with the legs of a standing figure behind them.

Abandoning any attempt to match these frescoes to the foundation legend of the church, what we have here is a late 4th century Christian fresco cycle which seems to depict the arrest of three martyrs (two men and a woman) to the top left, and their martyrdom by beheading with a sword to the top right. If this is correct, then this is the earliest depiction extant of any martyrdom. The young man straight ahead is possibly a depiction of the resurrected Christ as the New Adam. The identity of his worshippers, and of the other six figures depicted, cannot be deduced from what is depicted.

It is now thought that this little space was a private devotional shrine fitted out for the owner of the house. The suggestion that the relics of three martyrs were enshrined for him in the rock-cut recesses below depends on how well developed the cult of martyrs was by the late 4th century.

Antiquarium (10)

The underground exhibition area, which is modern, is at the far end of the Case. It displays items found in excavation, and also importantly the 12th century Islamic pottery removed from the campanile.

Access

The scavi have different opening arrangements: Thursday to Monday, 10:00 to 13:00, 15:00 to 18:00. There is an admission charge of six euros.

Source:

[Churches of Rome Wiki](#)

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[I Viaggi di Raffaella blog](#)

[Romartguide blog](#)