

San Giorgio in Velabro



San Giorgio in Velabro is a heavily restored 9th century titular and convent church in the rione Ripa. The dedication is to St George, the 'Great Martyr' in the East, and located on the ancient Roman Velabrum, near the Arch of Janus.

The ancient *Arcus Argentariorum* is incorporated into the church's front façade. Velabro refers to the area of Rome in which this church was built.

The Velabrum

The church is located in the ancient locality of the Velabrum, where frequent flooding from the river had turned it into a giant vel, the Latin name for a marsh that features in the church's name. When Rome was just several hamlets of Bronze Age huts, three thousand years ago, it was where the stream that carved the Forum valley ran into the Tiber and formed a low, marshy area. Here was the lowest fording point on the river, a point later marked by the Pons Sublicius (Rome's first bridge), and the area's first trading site. This later became the young city's cattle market, the Forum Boarium. It was the reason that Rome first became a city. [1] [b]

The location has a special place in the legendary history of Rome as well, as the foundation legend of Rome claims that it was here that Romulus and Remus came ashore after being abandoned in a basket on the river as babies. The famous she-wolf then picked them up. [1] [d]

The Etruscan kings of Rome drained the Forum valley and the Velabrum by building the Cloaca Maxima, and this runs next to the church. [1]

History

The church was built in an area inhabited by the Greeks. The first church was built in the 7th century on the preexisting structure of a civil building of the classical age and a 5th century deaconry run by Oriental (Greek) monks, i.e. an institute that performed the charitable activities and gave provisions to the poor. [3] [4] [b] [d]

The first reliable documentation derives from the *Liber Pontificalis*, a 10th century copy of an older

document. According to this, a church here was built in the reign of Pope Leo II (682-683). The Liber Pontificalis entry describes the original dedication as being both to St Sebastian, believed to have saved Italy from a plague in 680, and to St George. [1] [2] [a]

St. George was originally martyred and enshrined at Lydda in the Holy Land, and became venerated as an Eastern soldier-saint. The development of his cult at Rome, like that of St Anastasia at the basilica of Sant'Anastasia nearby, is witness to a flourishing Greek expatriate colony in the city in the 6th to 8th centuries. [1]

In 741, Pope Zacharias I, who was of Greek origin, ordered relics of St George, (his head, spear and part of his battle-standard) to be ceremonially transferred from the Lateran to this church. Some scholars consider that the dedication to him was made at this point. [1] [a]

The church was completely rebuilt by Pope Gregory IV between 831 and 833. This project involved the building of the extant apse, a new portico, a sacristy, a schola cantorum (like the one nearby at Santa Maria in Cosmedin) and mosaic work (completely lost). [1] [a]

The church seems to have used the Byzantine rite during the 9th century. Epigraphs in Greek from the reign of Pope John VIII (847-55) have been found re-used as flooring, and give evidence that a Byzantine-rite monastery was attached to the church. [1]

The Greek monks would have been replaced by a college of secular priests in the 10th century. [1]

In the 12th century the campanile was built, and the present high altar with its baldacchino was provided. [1]

In the 13th century important additions were made to the church. At the beginning of the century the prior Stefano [di] Stella modified the façade by opening the rose window and creating the portico, while the first written testimony relating to the bell tower dates back to 1259. In 1296 or 1297 the cardinal deacon Giacomo Caetani Stefaneschi, a noted humanist, was titular deacon here from 1295 to 1343, had the church restored. Cardinal Stefaneschi is credited with commissioning the apse fresco, long attributed to Giotto but now usually considered to be by the school of Pietro Cavallini. [1] [3]

In 1347, Cola di Rienzo posted his notice warning of the coming revolt on the architrave above the portico of the church. [1]

Between 1477 and 1484, Cardinal Raffaele Sansoni Galeotti Riario had the roof rebuilt. [3]

In the 16th century the church was known as "San Giorgio alla Fonte" due to its proximity to the mineral water source, located near the arch of Janus. [3]

The 17th century saw several restorations. In 1601, the floor was raised to a level nearer that of the ground outside. Following the Council of Trent, the presbyteral area was reorganized with the demolition of the schola cantorum; this operation was carried out as part of the more extensive restorations of 1610-1611, commissioned by Cardinal Giacomo Serra. He was from Genoa, and so invited the Discalced Augustinians of his home city to take over. [1] [3]

The portico was substantially restored on the orders of Pope Clement IX by 1669. The iron railings date from this time, and it is suspected that the inscription on the frieze does, too. [1]

In 1704, Cardinal Giuseppe Renato Imperiali ordered another restoration involving the ceiling. [1] [3]

The Napoleonic occupation of Rome at the end of the 18th century left the church derelict, and the Augustinians abandoned the complex. The church, devastated and plundered of its furnishings, was used as a warehouse for oil and wine. So, in 1819 Pope Pius VII (1800-1823) granted the church to the Congregation of Santa Maria del Pianto, and reopened for worship. It was later given to the Order of the Holy Cross (Crocigeri), who serve it today; their generalate is adjacent to the church. [1] [3]

Throughout the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the church was the subject of repeated

restorations which alternated with periods of neglect. The first, important restoration intervention was carried out in the early 1810s under the direction of **Filippo Nicoletti** and concerned both the exterior (including the bell tower) and the interior. However, already in 1819 others had to be carried out, with the construction in the first intercolumniation of the right aisle, of a new sacristy (to which Pope Pius VII granted some marbles from the burned basilica of San Paolo fuori le mura to obtain a washbasin) and the demolition of part of the former convent. The church was restored again between 1820 and 1824 through structural and decorative interventions, with the construction of flying buttresses on the left aisle to support the main one and the new façade designed by **Giovanni Azzurri**. [3]

In 1828 **Giuseppe Valadier** intervened on the perimeter walls to counteract humidity, but the following year the church was closed to worship due to its precarious conditions and used as a cellar. The serious damage caused by the fall of lightning on the bell tower, which took place in 1836, made new works necessary which followed a heated debate on the possibility of demolishing the tower to free the Argentari arch, and were conducted the following year by **Azzurri** . A partial isolation of the arch was put in place only in 1869 at the same time as a new consolidation of the bell tower. Pope Pius IX granted the church and the former convent to the Pontifical Roman Seminary. [On 8 December 1907, after years of neglect, the church was reopened for worship and entrusted to the Popular Association of the Immaculate Conception; two years later the interior was restored and in particular the apse. [3]

Until the 20th century, the apse fresco was obscured. However, in 1910 the Italian government undertook a restoration of it which left it in its present state. [1]

The church was restored by **Antonio Muñoz** in 1926. He was commissioned by Pope Pius XI. The object of the restoration was to as far as possible turn it back to its original state. The simple panelled ceiling was removed and replaced with the present one. Any stucco wall decorations were scraped off. The floor was lowered to its pre-17th century level, and funerary monuments and side altars were removed. [1]

In 1939, the church and attached college was given into the care of the Order of the Holy Cross (OSC). This is an order of Canons Regular, or priests living a common life under a rule. The church and convent is now the order's international headquarters or Generalate. [1]

On 27 July 1993, the portico was destroyed by a car bomb, which also blew a hole in the nave frontage behind it and seriously damaged the Generalate. This was part of a Mafia bombing campaign aimed at forcing the Italian government to rescind certain laws passed to suppress organized crime. The perpetrators of this outrage have been caught and convicted. The Italian government had the portico restored by 1997, although some damage was left unrepaired as a memorial. [1]

The traditional foundation date of the cardinal diaconate is 590, by Pope Gregory the Great, but the first name recorded is in 1163. Among the former titular deacons of the church is Blessed John Henry Newman (died 1890), one of the leaders of the Oxford Movement in England before his conversion. The current titular of the church is H.E. Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi. [1]

Exterior

The church stands near two antique arches: the 4th century Quadrifronte Giano Arch (Arch of Janus), which in part protected the markets in the Foro Boario and Foro Olitorio, and the 3rd century Argentari Arch, which was a gift from the bankers of the market and indicated the entrance to the Foro Boario. [2]

The plan is highly irregular, and the floorplan is actually trapezoidal with central nave narrowing towards the altar. It is 9.15 meters (30 ft) at its widest, and 7.30 (24 ft) at its narrowest. The right hand arcade is perpendicular to the entrance frontage and is straight, and so it is the left hand arcade that is at an angle. Further, this arcade has a slight bend inwards at the second column. [1]

The right aisle side wall also has a noticeable bend inwards to it, about the fourth bay where there is

a side entrance. It goes from 7.50 meters (24.6 ft) to 3 meters (9.8 ft) wide. The left aisle deviates very little in its width. [1]

The axis of the church runs exactly from south to north.

The fabric is in brick. The nave, aisles and apse have separate roofs, pitched and tiled. The left hand aisle has three buttresses supporting the central nave wall, but the right hand one does not. [1]

Campanile

The 12th century brick Romanesque campanile is inserted into the near end of the left hand aisle. It has five storeys above the aisle roofline, the first one being blank. These storeys are separated by decorative projecting cornices, which are dentillated. The one between the top two storeys, as well as the crowning cornice below the tiled pyramidal cap, have stone modillions (little brackets). The second and third storeys have blocked triple arcades of arches with single-molded archivolt, the springers being continued as string courses. The fourth storey have open arches in the same style, but the fifth storey (where the bells are) have stone columns with impost in between the arches. [1]

Façade

The nave frontage above the portico is very simple. The wall is rendered in an ochre yellow, and has a large oculus or round window. The gable has a crowning pediment, with modillions. However, old prints show that this pediment did not exist before the 19th century. [1]

On the left of the façade there is a plaque that recalls the height of the level reached at that point by the waters of the Tiber in the flood of 1870. [1]

Portico (2)

The frontage of the church is preceded by an external 13th century narthex or portico, which is also crooked. The right hand wall is perpendicular to the frontage, but the left hand one angles inwards. Hence, it is thought that the foundations at least date from the Dark Ages. [1]

The floor of the portico is now 0.15 meters (6 in.) below street level. The original portico floor was discovered in 1924, and was 0.25 meters (9.8 ft) below the current level and also is 0.55 meters (22 in.) above the level of the ancient Roman road. [1]

The portico itself has four ancient Ionic columns, on two plinths either side of the main central portal. The street surface slopes here, so these plinths keep the colonnade horizontal. One column is of cipollino marble from Euboea in Greece, one is grey granite from Mons Claudianus in Egypt, and two are of Parian marble also from Greece. In between the columns are 18th century iron railings, interesting in their own right. [1] [3]

The corners of the portico are occupied by two solid brick piers, separated from the church frontage by two side portals. These piers have ancient stone impost with a diaper pattern containing rosettes. Piers and columns support an entablature without an architrave, which runs across the entire front and down the sides. The front bears an inscription in Gothic lettering, purporting to be from the 13th century but probably re-carved in the 16th. It says: [1]

"Stephen of Stella, of uncommon eloquence and famous for the light of virtues, took care to restore the pronaos by spending gold. He did this for you, St George, out of his own resources. This cleric was head of the [liturgical] cult of this church, at this place called "golden curtain".

Above the entablature are relieving arches in the brickwork, one for each portal below and with a carved lion mask at each end. Then comes the roof, which is singly pitched and also hipped at each end. Inside the portico, the nave frontal has attached several old epigraphs found in restorations. [1]

The single entrance portal of the façade is decorated with a rich frame, the result of the assembly in medieval times of elements from the Roman period, carved in bas-relief with acanthus spirals. The wooden doors in chestnut wood and poplar is from the 12th century. [1]

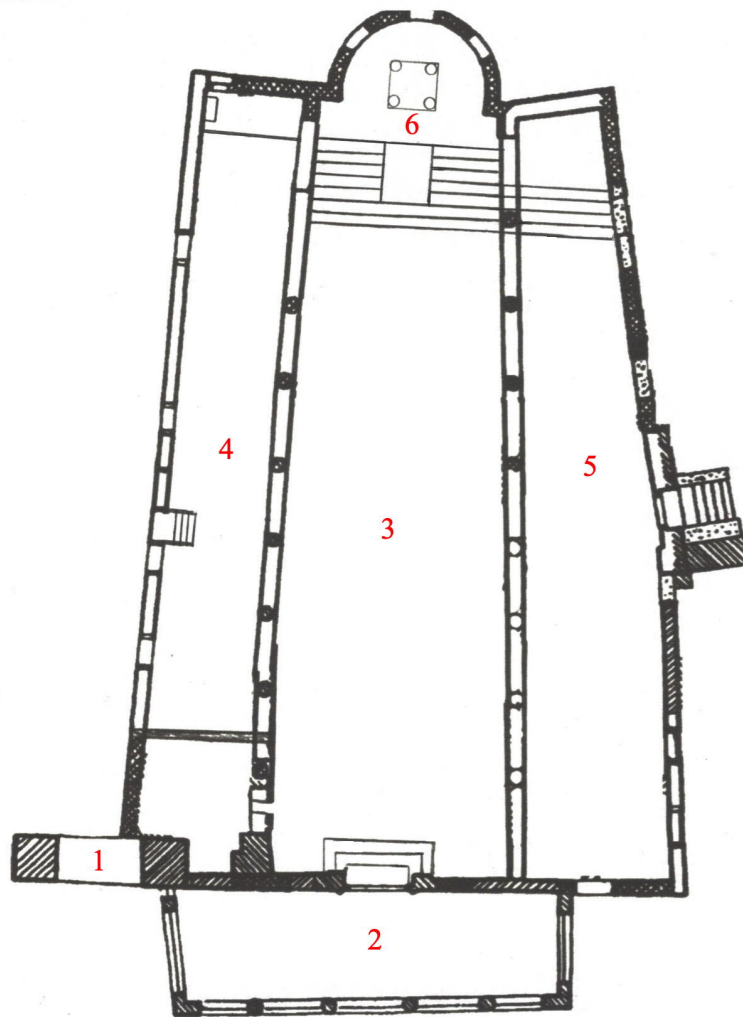
Arco degli Argentari (1)

Adjacent to the church on the left hand side is the ancient so-called Arco degli Argentari, or Arch of the Moneychangers. It was erected in AD 204 in honor of Emperor Septimius Severus and the imperial family by the moneychangers and livestock merchants based at the adjacent Forum Boarium. [1]

Calling it an arch is a misnomer. It is actually a rather small ceremonial gateway for the market, and consists of two piers supporting a flat architrave (no archivolt). The fabric is concrete, with relief-carved marble revetting on travertine plinths. The tiled roof is modern. [1]

As far as the church is concerned, the important detail is that the right hand pier is actually incorporated into the fabric, and forms the bottom left hand corner of the edifice. This looks like a rare example of a post-Classical intervention to preserve an ancient monument on the part of Pope Leo II, as if the arch had not become part of the church it would almost certainly have been destroyed. [1]

Plan



Interior

You have to go down some steps to enter the church. The floor was lowered in the 20th century to reveal the bases of the columns. There is little decoration and very few artworks of interest, but the church gives a feeling of antiquity and serenity. The layout is simple. There is a nave of nine bays, with side aisles. The sanctuary is an external apse. [1]

Nave (3)

The nave columns are ancient spolia, and neither they nor their capitals are a matched set. There are sixteen of them. Most are grey granite and have Corinthian capitals, but the first two and last two on the right hand side are Ionic. The first four on the right hand side are fluted; two are pavonazzetto

marble from what is now Turkey, and two are described as marmo Tirio which is presumably Thasian marble from Greece. Most of the undecorated arcade arches spring directly from the capitals, but the last column on the left has an oblong impost and the springing is much wider above it. [1]

The central nave side walls are also undecorated. Above each arch is a rectangular window, which now have geometric stone mullions or transennae. [1]

The attractive flat wooden ceiling is coffered in large rectangles, and is painted in blue with golden stars. It follows the right hand side wall, so you can see how the church narrows towards the altar by how the coffers on the left hand side are squeezed out. [1]

The bottom end of the left hand aisle is occupied by the ground floor of the campanile, hence is walled off. The first column in the arcade here has been revealed by cutting into the wall, but before the 19th century was invisible. That is why you may still read that there are only fifteen arcade columns in the church, instead of the actual sixteen. [1]

On the counter-façade, between the portal and the rose window, there are three epigraphs: they commemorate the restorations respectively by **Giuseppe Valadier** in 1828 (left), by **Giovanni Azzurri** in 1837 (right) and 1869 (in the center). Next to the entrance is a memorial inscription the former titular cardinal, Luigi Cinscero (1870-1936), who is buried in the Roman cemetery of Trino Vercellese. The plaque also commemorated the works directed by **Antonio Muñoz**. [3] [5]

Sanctuary (6)

The sanctuary is raised, and approached by seven steps. The apse apparently contained a bishop's throne, but this is long gone, replaced by a modern chair on a stone podium. There is some Cosmatesque flooring, with a central cracked disc of imperial porphyry from the Eastern Desert of Egypt. The apse wall has a high dado of grey-streaked marble revetting, above which are five Corinthian pilasters in the same stone but separated by dark green marble revetting. In between the pilasters are three large round-headed windows, with geometric transennae. [1]

The main altar is in Greek marble with, at the corners, pilasters decorated with Cosmatesque mosaics. [3]

Confessio

In between the steps, directly below the altar, is the confessio. This is an early 13th century vertical marble slab with an arched orifice, through which you can see the alleged relics of St George (part of his cranium, the head of his lance and part of his battle standard). The rest of the slab is decorated with fine but restored Cosmatesque work framing two rectangular panels of green serpentine from Sparta in Greece. [1]

The walling either side of the confessio is revetted with pavonazzetto marble, as is the actual altar frontal. The latter has strips of Cosmatesque work down the sides. [1]

In front of the confessio is the modern lectern, made from a fragment of 9th century pluteus or sanctuary screen. [1]

Baldacchino

The baldacchino or canopy has four Corinthian columns in grey marble, supporting an open square cornice with Cosmatesque strips. In turn this supports twenty-eight little columns supporting a smaller cornice enclosing an octagonal aperture. This second cornice has twenty little columns arranged in an octagon, supporting an octagonal conical cupola which itself has a little lantern which is the tip of the cupola cut off and raised on another eight of the little columns. [1]

Fresco

The 13th century fresco in the apse depicts *Christ the King standing on the cosmos, accompanied by the Blessed Virgin Mary and St George on his horse to the left, and St Peter and St Sebastian to the right*. The work is now attributed to **Cavallini** and his school rather than to Giotto or Arnolfo di Cambio, although the matter is not decided. [1] [b]

St George has a white horse, which is his iconographic attribute. The palm tree next to Christ is a symbol here of the Resurrection. [1]

The early 20th century restoration has left two frescoes of heraldic shields in the spandrels of the apse arch. [1]

Side aisles (4) (5)

The aisles have open single-pitched roofs. [1]

The end of the right hand side aisle now has the Blessed Sacrament chapel, which is just the tabernacle on two other fragments of ancient architrave set up to form a little altar. [1]

The end of the left hand aisle has lost its former stairs, and now is nothing but an organ platform. In the wall here has been set a very interesting carved stone ring, which is thought to have been a window frame. [1]

The side entrance in the left aisle is at the level of the floor before it was lowered in the early 20th century. Also, each aisle had two side altars which **Muñoz** removed. There are still scars on the walls where they used to be. [1]

Fragments of old stonework have been kept in the aisles for centuries. Some is 9th century or older, especially the plutei or fragments of marble screen panels carved in scrollwork. There are fragments of window transennae which encouraged **Muñoz** to provide his own, and the Greek epigraphs found in the floor. The bit of pluteus carved with looping belts around foliated crosses might date from Leo II's original church. [1]

There is no evidence of any pipe organ before the present one, donated by cardinal deacon Alfons Maria Stickler and built in 1996 by the Dutch organ firm Pels & Van Leeuwen. [3]

Access

Opening hours seem to be unclear at present, and different guidebooks and online sources give differing times. Unfortunately, the church website is coy.

Apart from the times of liturgy (see below), an unofficial source in 2017 advertises that the church is open on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday from 10:00 to 12:30 and 16:00 to 18:15.

So, you might find it closed on Mondays and Thursdays.

Liturgy

The Crosier Community celebrate their liturgical events in English. These are in the church in summer, but in the convent chapel in winter.

Mass is celebrated: Weekdays 7:30; Saturdays, Sundays and Solemnities 8:30.

The Divine Office is celebrated: Weekdays: 7:30 Lauds, 18:30 Vespers; Weekends: 8:00 Lauds, 19:00 Vespers.

If you wish to attend in winter, you have to ring the doorbell at Via del Velabro 19.

The church is very popular for weddings, and one is held here almost every Saturday. The brethren advertise that they will not do more than three weddings a day!

The feast of St George is celebrated on 23 April.

The church is the Station church for the first Thursday in Lent.

Relics:

St. George

Burials:

Romoaldo Cardinal [Guidi](#), (1722-1780)

Francesco Cardinal de' [MEDICI DI OTTAIANO](#), (1808-1857)

Giovanni Cardinal [MERCATI](#), (1866-1957)

Librarian and Archivist of the Holy Roman Church.

André Cardinal [JULLIEN](#), P.S.S., (1882-1964)

Alfons Maria Cardinal [STICKLER](#), S.D.B., (1910-2007)

His remains will be transferred when the building of the definitive tomb is finished

Angelo Mercati

Prefect of the Secret Archives of the Vatican

buried next to his brother, Card. Mercati

Artists and Architects:

Antonio [Muñoz](#) (1884-1960), Italian architect

Filippo Nicoletti (19th cent.), Italian architect

Giovanni [Azzurri](#) (1792-1858), Italian architect and restorer

Giuseppe [Valadier](#) (1762-1839), Italian architect and designer, sculptor, urban planner and archeologist, a chief exponent of Neoclassicism in Italy

Pietro [Cavallini](#) [aka *Petrus Caballinus de Cerronibus*] (1259-ca.1330), Italian painter

Location:

19 Via del Velabro, at the foot of the Palatine Hill, close to the ancient Arco di Giano Quadrifronte.

Coord: [41° 53' 22.5" N 12° 28' 59.5" E](#)

Info:

Telephone: 0039 06 69797536

Fax: 0039 06 69204527

Web site: www.sangiorgioinvelabro.org

Email: informazione@sangiorgioinvelabro.org

Email: andreosc@oscgeneral.org

Open times:

Tuesday 10:00am-12:30pm 04:00pm-06:30pm

Friday 10:00am-12:30pm 04:00pm-06:30pm

Saturday 10:00am-12:30pm 04:00pm-06:30pm

Masses

Tuesday Wednesday Friday 12:30pm

Sundays and Holidays 08:00am

Notes:

The church is very popular for weddings, and one is held here almost every Saturday.

The feast of St George is celebrated on 23 April.

Links and Reverences

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
2. [Carleton Guide to Medieval Rome](#)
3. [Italian Wikipedia page](#)
4. [Church Web pages](#)

5. [Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church](#)

- a. Coates-Stephens, Robert; "**Dark Age Architecture in Rome**"; *Papers of the British School at Rome*, Vol. 65 (1997), pp. 177-232
- b. Information plaque in church.
- c. Priester, Ann; "**Bell Towers and Building Workshops in Medieval Rome**"; *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Jun., 1993), pp.199-220 (jstor 990786)
- d. Turco, Maria Grazia; "**The church of St. George in Velabrum in Rome. Techniques of construction, material and historical transformations**"; *Proceedings of the First International Congress on Construction History*, Madrid, 20th-24th January 2003

Other links

[English Wikipedia page](#)

[Pontifical North American College web site](#)

[OSC web site](#)

[Tourist Information](#)

["Seek me and Live: blog](#)