

San Crisogono

Paleo-Christian church

(Plan of Paleo-Christian Church [here](#))

Ancient times

The locality of the church was, in ancient Roman times, heavily populated and the site itself was on the Via Aurelia (the present Via della Lungaretta). There are very limited parts of the old church's fabric in opus quadratum, which involves blocks of tufa stone laid in courses. These are to be found in the apse area and outside the original entrance, and are of Republican date. The remains are too scanty to enable any guesses as to the form of the buildings concerned. [1]

Areas of brickwork (opus latericum), again limited in extent, are to be found in the apse area which are datable to the 2nd century and seem to relate to a fairly high-status private house, part of which was converted into a church in the 4th century. [1]

4th century

The conversion into a church possibly happened in the early 4th century. Pope Sylvester I (314–335) is suggested as the one responsible, but this is an educated guess since the archaeological evidence does not allow a precise date. [1]

The remaining brick walls of this phase in the building's history delineate what is now two-thirds of the nave from the entrance, and indicate an irregular rectangular structure. However the wall which would have made up the fourth side of the rectangle around the entrance has left no trace, so we do not know exactly how long this building was. The left hand side wall is at an angle to the major axis, so that the building widened out towards the present apse. The old church kept this peculiarity throughout its life. [1]

5th century

The early 5th century work involves the apse, a pair of rooms flanking it, the side walls of the third of the nave near the apse and two limited areas in the entrance wall. These remains are in a building style called opus listatum, also known as opus vittatum, which involves alternate layers of brick and tufa blocks. This style is characteristic of the period. [1]

In the process the church was substantially extended, and provided with a semi-circular apse separated from the main body of the church by a screen wall. This is thought to have been when relics of St Chrysogonus were brought to Rome and enshrined here (although there is no documentary evidence surviving for this). The room to the left of the apse was a baptistry (although there has been debate about its function). The building was also provided with a monumental arcaded entrance with three arches, opening from a portico. [1]

Middle Ages

The resulting church was renovated several times in subsequent centuries, as can again be deduced from its fabric and the surviving frescoes. It received attention sometime in the 6th or 7th century, when a decorative fresco cycle was executed having motifs of painted drapery (vela) and a jewelled cross. Part of this has been traced on the left hand side wall. A similar decorative scheme existed in the baptistry at Santa Cecilia in Trastevere nearby. [1]

A major re-fitting was ordered in about 731 by Pope Gregory III. This work was documented, and the pope is described as providing a new roof and frescoes for the nave walls and apse. He also ordered the digging of a confessio or devotional crypt, with two entrances flanking the high altar. The arrangement was that pilgrims entered one door, venerated the relics in the crypt and left by the other door. [1]

Monastery

The pope also founded a monastery next door, to the south, which was to have a long history under various religious orders. Its original dedication was Sancti Stephani, Laurentii et Chrysogoni, and in

order to preserve its integrity the pope specified that the abbot was not to be under the authority of the titular priest of the church. The first monks were of the Byzantine rite, as most were in Rome in the 8th century. [1]

The existence of Byzantine-rite Greek monks in Rome was maliciously written out of the historical record later in the Middle Ages, and it was pretended that monastic life in Rome was Benedictine from the early 7th century. This is completely false, but the pretence is still to be met with in modern publications. [1]

The monastery was occupied by Benedictines sometime in the 10th century, as this is the century when they arrived in Rome in reality. They added a fresco cycle featuring scenes from the life of St Benedict to the right hand wall of the church. [1]

Layout

The access to the underground remains of the old church is via a metal staircase from the south end of the sacristy. The ruins are confusing at first sight, but the church originally had a simple layout. Rather than the normal basilical plan with a central nave and two aisles at the sides, it had a single nave.

"Left hand" and "right hand" are used below in the standard way, as if you were at the main entrance to the church nave.

You exit the staircase at what was the right hand side of a large semi-circular external apse attached to an aisleless nave. A pair of rooms flanks the apse. The archaeologists excavated the left hand side wall of the nave for about two thirds of its length from the left hand side of the apse, also the entire length of the right hand side wall. Then they excavated a portico outside the church's main entrance, and a small section of the left hand side wall from the left hand corner of the portico.

The unexcavated area in the middle of the nave, and the modern brick arches there, are to stop the modern convent building above from falling in.

Relationship to new church

The old church is not under the newer church, but (as just mentioned) is beneath the convent building to the south.

The far wall of the nave, from which the apse curves, is exactly in line with the same feature in the newer church above. The old church, with its portico, is just slightly shorter than the newer church without its loggia, but is narrower because of the lack of side aisles.

The left hand external wall of the newer church overlaps the old church. Obviously there could not be excavation under this, so when you follow the right hand side wall of the old church you will be in a passage with the foundations of the newer church's external wall on the other side.

Apse

The apse and the side walls at the far end of the church are in a style of construction called opus listatum, also known as opus vittatum, which involves alternate layers of brick and tufa blocks. This is characteristic of the late 4th or early 5th century, when the church was substantially enlarged, and consists of layers of tufa blocks sandwiched between courses of brick.

Here you can also see the layout of the crypt and shrine, provided in the 8th century for pilgrims. The devotional access is a corridor running round the line of the apse, and a central corridor running perpendicular to it. The latter has a worn 8th century fresco (which is continuing to deteriorate -note the algal growth). This features St Chrysogonus and two others who feature in his fictional legend: SS Anastasia and Rufus.

The corridors isolate two segment-shaped sets of walling. The right hand one contains one of the scanty remains of late Republican edifices to be found down here.

Left hand side wall

The left hand or south wall of the nave is over to your right as you look away from the apse at the bottom of the staircase. You get there by following the apse corridor. It has fresco remnants of different eras. The earlier composition consists of folded hanging drapery, in one place embellished with a jewelled cross which represents the True Cross in Jerusalem (to be accurate, its reliquary case). This dates from the 6th century, and is the earliest unambiguous evidence of Christian activity on the site.

The figurative frescoes date from the 8th century re-ordering, and include portraits of saints in roundels. One of them is thought to be Pope Sixtus II.

You can see a joint in the wall, where the opus listatum changes to ordinary brickwork. The latter dates to the 4th century, and is part of the putative original church hall which only extended as far as here from the entrance.

There are pagan sarcophagi in this area. The first one on the left features fine carvings of standing figures which are pagan muses, and has griffins at its ends. This was found in the baptistry (see below). The second is beyond the drop in the floor, and features strigillate (s-shaped) decoration with a portrait of the deceased in a tondo in the centre.

Some of the original slab flooring is preserved here, with an early 6th century grave slab of someone called Victor. Other epigraphs and fragments of tomb slabs can be found propped up or fixed to the walls, including the lower part of an early mediaeval figure and one with Greek text. A famous one shows a skull with enormous ears.

The vegetation growing below the ventilation aperture is a stark reminder of the unsatisfactory conservation status of this site.

Baptistry

On either side of the apse are rooms known in the Byzantine rite as pastophoria, which are liturgical service rooms of a type uncommon in the West but normal in Eastern churches. However, care needs to be taken in interpreting the plan of this church with reference to the Byzantine rite, since it is thought that pastophoria only came into use in the mid 6th century or after the church was extended.

In a modern Byzantine rite church the left hand room is called the prothesis, where the Eucharistic bread and wine are prepared for Mass and where holy relics are kept. However, the room here has been interpreted (not without some dissent) as a 5th century baptistry. A number of sunken basins were found here during the first excavations, including a large one cut in half by a later wall to the south (facing the apse). The other two basins found here are not now visible.

As the plan is so untypical of what is otherwise known of early Roman churches, some believe that the room originally had a different function. The presence of several basins could mean that the room was originally a fullonica, a laundry or dye-house (the Latin word actually means "fuller's establishment", but oddly Classical Latin had no word for "laundry"). The area was a commercial district at the time, so this is quite likely.

Others think that the basin in the south wall was originally made for baptism by immersion, and point out evidence for steps which those being baptized could have used. However, it may very well have been used as a baptismal font after the original house had been consecrated as a church -and the original laundry taken over as a baptistry. Evidence of a separate entrance door supports this hypothesis.

This room is used as an antica or store-house for archaeological discoveries, so unfortunately it is usually kept locked. It would benefit from further archaeological investigation, especially in order to find out what is behind the mediaeval south wall.

Secretarium

The one on the right-hand side is thought to have been used as a secretarium (modern Byzantine diaconicon), with functions resembling those of the sacristy in later churches.

The fragmentary floor here is interesting. It is of opus sectile, incorporating white marble tesserae and green serpentine roundels in a floral pattern and dates from the 6th or 7th century.

A finely carved sarcophagus, featuring tritons nereids flanking a bust of the deceased within a scallop shell, was originally found in here.

Right hand side wall

More traces of frescoes dating from the 8th and 10th centuries are on the right hand side wall. Distinguishable scenes are Pope Sylvester Capturing the Dragon, St Pantaleone Healing a Blind Man, St Benedict Healing a Leper and The Rescue of St Placid.

Portico

The far end of the excavation contains the church portico. If you turn right here, you can see another patch of polychrome opus sectile flooring in a pit to the right. A fourth sarcophagus with strigillate decoration was discovered here, having the interesting feature of a blank central panel into which a portrait of the deceased could be slotted (in other words, it was made to be "off the shelf"). Old human bones have been dumped into this.

Source:

https://romanchurches.fandom.com/wiki/San_Crisogono#Original_church_underground