

San Clemente al Laterano

Excavations

The site of the basilica has a history that goes back to the Republican era of Ancient Rome. The building underwent multiple transformations, the latest of which took place in the early 12th century. After excavations were done by Irish Dominicans, these changes can be seen through the layers of construction underneath the present-day building. Each layer stems from a different time period and shows how Christianity had a growing influence on Roman life and culture. [2]

The entrance to the excavations is through the shop, where you also pay the fee. They are extensive, interesting and well described in the many signs down there, so it's worth the money. Especially, signs by the frescoes provide explanations for them -although buying a guidebook is still a good idea. [1]

The access staircase to the right of where you pay, which displays many fragments of sculpture, emerges at the right hand end of the narthex or entrance porch of the old church. From there, you can enter three zones separated by walls formed by blocking up the original arcades. These divide the area into the central nave (which is unequally divided by a third foundational wall), the right hand aisle and the left hand aisle. At the end of the latter is the staircase down to the next level, the ancient Roman remains. Needless to say, the vaults and the brick piers are modern.

4th century church

The church was built into and above a large Roman building, and oversailed a narrow alleyway and the remains of the house-church of Flavius Clemens. The horreum and the lower floor of the insula were filled and a new floor was created at the height of the second floor of the insula. The remaining parts of the insula were used for the construction of the 'lower basilica', which was completed around 392. This church was dedicated to Pope Clement I. Originally, the walls of the church do not seem to have been frescoed. The surviving paintings were added later. Apart from Santa Maria Antiqua, the largest single collection of early mediaeval wall painting to have survived in the city of Rome may be found in the lower church of San Clemente. [1] [7] [c] [g] [m]

Narthex

In the narthex, which is the first room that you enter, you can see columns embedded in the wall. They originally formed part of an open colonnade, but apparently after an earthquake in the 9th century the supporting wall were added. Frescoes were executed here on the right, in the late 11th century just before the church was rebuilt. although the dates of all the frescoes have been disputed. Immediately on the left is a fresco of the Last Judgment, and then come two frescoes with scenes concerning St Clement on the right. [1]

The first one you come to depicts a legend set in Crimea, the traditional site of his martyrdom. According to the story, the saint was thrown into the sea with an anchor tied to his neck. Every year on the anniversary, there was an exceptionally low tide as pilgrims visited the site and a little chapel emerged from the waters. One year a child was left behind by accident, and was thought to have perished as the water rose. The next year he was found in the chapel, in good health. The fresco shows the mother finding the little boy in the chapel, with the fish-filled sea around it. The family that gave the painting is also included, and among them is a boy named after the saint - you can see the inscription Puerulus Clemens, "The little boy Clement" written next to him. [1]

The other fresco is on the other side of the entrance into the central nave, and shows the procession taking St Clement's body from the Vatican to San Clemente. [1]

Opposite the paintings is a hinged marble slab. It was originally a pagan memorial, which was later reused by Christians. The pagan epitaph is for a child: "Marcus Aurelius Sabinus, also known as 'the

little rover', a most beloved child. He had no equal among the young men of his own rank and time." [1]

Right hand aisle

The right hand aisle contains fragments of several frescoes. It also illustrates a problem of conservation, as the residual damp in the walls causes them to sweat salt and this will ultimately cause serious damage. Fr Mullooly had the foresight to make painted copies of the frescoes as he found them, so the already tragic fading that has already taken place can be appreciated. [1]

The most important fresco here is in a round-headed niche near the narthex end of the aisle, and is of the Madonna and Child. It is thought that it was originally of the empress Theodora (died 548), and was converted into a portrait of Our Lady through the addition of the Holy Child and a throne perhaps in the 9th century. This theory depends on the rather striking portraiture of Our Lady, which is thought to resemble the mosaic depiction of the Empress at the church of Sant'Apollinare in Classe at Ravenna. There used to be another fresco of Our Lady covering this one, which fell off soon after discovery. [1] [g] [m]

The other frescoes here are much less well preserved, and are identified hypothetically as the Council of Pope Zosimus, the story of Tobias and the martyrdom of St Catherine. [1]

Towards the end of the aisle is a pagan (1st to 3rd century) sarcophagus carved with the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus. Beyond this is a 7th to 10th century figure of Christ which has been almost completely destroyed -the sarcophagus was found here, and might have been re-used as a tomb or shrine despite the pagan symbolism. [1]

You can see marble columns from the original arcade embedded in the blocking wall. It is a small puzzle as to why these were not salvaged in the rebuilding, as they are of high quality. [1]

Central nave

The central nave is divided into a larger space and a narrow corridor by the inserted foundational wall on the right. It has been made into a sacred space by the provision of an altar at the far end, with a ciborium having a design based on that of the high altar in the church above. There is a curved wall behind the screen wall behind this altar, which is not the original apse wall but a supporting wall for the apse above. The original apse of this lower church was larger, and part of it survives. [1]

After entering the nave, you'll immediately find a 9th century fresco on the left. It depicts the Ascension of Our Lord. It is in the traditional Byzantine iconic idiom for this feast, which means that Our Lady is in the center surrounded by the apostles. Included in the crowd is St Vitus, and Pope Leo IV (847–855). The latter is depicted with a square halo, which means that the fresco was executed while he was still alive. [1]

In the corner here are very damaged frescoes depicting the Crucifixion, Resurrection with the Women at the Tomb, Christ's Descent into Hell and the Marriage at Cana. [1]

Further along on the left hand side is a spirally fluted ancient column embedded in the wall, and then come two more 11th century frescoes. The first depicts the legend of St Alexis, a 4th century hermit. According to this, he was a young nobleman who left home and went to the East to live as a hermit, but then returned to Rome. His parents did not recognize him, and he took a job as their servant and lived under a set of outside stairs. After his death, it was noticed that he clutched a piece of paper in his hand. It was impossible to open his hand, and in the end the Pope came and succeeded in doing so after bestowing a blessing. The paper proved who he was, and in the picture you can see his parents struck with grief and his wife kissing him. [1]

Above this fresco is the lower part of one depicting Christ with angels and saints. [1]

The other fresco shows the Legend of Sisinnius, the husband of a Christian woman, in two panels. The top one shows him being disrespectful in church while Clement is saying Mass, and being struck blind. The lower panels shows his sight returning at home at the prayer of Clement. However, he still orders his guards to arrest the pope. They start hallucinating, and instead grab a column lying on the ground. [1]

The most interesting thing about the painting is not the pictures, but the text in the lower part. It's one of the oldest surviving examples of the written Italian language, distinct from the Latin from which it derives. Incidentally, what is written is Sisinnius's comment on the matter, so the first written Italian that we have is an expression rather unfitting for a church:

Falo dereto colo palo, Carvoncello. Albertel trai, Gosmaris, fili dele pute, traite
(Carvoncel, get behind with a lever. Pull, Albertel and Gosmar, pull you sons of whores)
Clement, being respectable, speaks in Latin:

[Propter] duritiam cordis vestri, saxa trahere meruistis

(Because of the hardness of your heart you deserve to pull stones)

Unfortunately, the fresco has faded badly in patches and the texts are not now easy to make out. [1]

Above this fresco is the lower part of another one showing St Clement being enthroned as pope by his three predecessors, SS Peter, Linus and Cletus. [1]

Quite extensive remnants of the original floor can be seen. This was made out of fragments of polychrome marbles, arranged in a semi-random way to form geometric patterns. The quality of the work is very poor compared to the floor of the church above. [1]

To the right of the altar is a doorway which lets you into the void between the supporting wall of the apse above, and the original apse of this lower church. There is a way through here to the other side of the wall running longitudinally through the central nave, where you find yourself in the right hand part of the nave which gives the mistaken impression of another side aisle. When going through this short passage, if you look up you will see a memorial to Amleto Giovanni Cicognani who was cardinal here until his death in 1973. Three modern bronzes form a Calvary. [1]

On the left, immediately on entering this part of the nave, is a recently restored fresco described in guidebooks as being of Limbo. It is actually a scene traditionally referred to in English as the Harrowing of Hell. The teaching is that, after Christ's death on the Cross, he went down to Hell to take up to heaven the righteous people who had died before him. The figure on the right is Adam (Eve has been lost). Christ treads on a devil; behind him is a figure of an Oriental (Syrian?) monk holding a Gospel book. The fresco might have been part of a memorial to this anonymous monastic. [1]

Left hand aisle

Some fresco fragments at the entrance to this aisle from the narthex are too far gone to be identifiable. A circular cavity here was thought by the original excavators to have been a baptismal font, but further examination suggests that it may instead have been part of a forge where church bells were made. This hypothesis has been supported by recent excavations at the end of this aisle, which have uncovered a real font. [1]

At the entry to the stairs leading to the Roman house below the church there is an altar to St Cyril, believed to be over the remains of a shrine containing his relics. There are many plaques donated by Eastern national Churches in gratitude to their apostle, as well as a modern mosaic of him. Most of the modern Slavic nations are represented, as well as the Moravians who are now counted as Czechs. [1]

Now, go down the stairs here into the ancient Roman remains.

1st century AD: pagan temple and Christian house-church

The lowest level of S. Clemente shows the foundation of what would have been the home of a first-century Roman nobleman. It is thought that this nobleman was Titius Flavius Clemens, one of the

first Roman senators who converted to Christianity and is often identified with Pope Clement I, although there seems no evidence to support this. Flavius Clemens would have turned his house into a house-church, which was used by Christians as a gathering place for worship. After the destruction of this house, which probably happened during the Great Fire of 64 AD, two different buildings were built on its foundations: a public warehouse (horreum) and a Roman apartment building (insula), of which the remains can still be seen. Both were separated by a narrow street. Around the beginning of the 3rd century AD the central room of the insula was transformed to a Mithraeum, a sanctuary for the cult of Mithras. Both buildings were later destroyed and in the 4th century the 'lower basilica' was built. [7]

Layout

At the bottom of the stairs to the right, there is the entrance to a very narrow alleyway which runs under the junction between the nave and apse of the church above. It separates two completely different structures, both dating from the end of the 1st century. To the left, under the apse, is a building which was converted into a Mithraeum or a temple of the mystery religion of Mithras. To the right is a large building under the nave of the church, of which only part of either side has been excavated. The original excavators, indulging in wishful thinking, identified this as the house or palazzo of St Clement, but it was certainly not a private house. [1]

There have been a very few traces found of a further, fourth layer of occupation below these two structures. These seem to have been private houses of the Republican period before Christ, destroyed in the great fire of the year 64 that cleared the way for the Domus Aurea of Nero. It seems fairly certain that the site then formed part of the enclosure of that enormous palace, with possible ancillary buildings. [1]

Mithraeum

On reaching the bottom of the stairs, you bear left to enter the Mithraeum. This building to the west of the alleyway is slightly wider than the church on top (32.5 meters), and built entirely of brick. Stamps on the bricks give a date of 90-96 AD, when it replaced another building which itself was probably a repaired survivor of the AD 64 fire subsequently incorporated into the Domus Aurea. [1]

The complex originally consisted of a central barrel-vaulted hall surrounded by a corridor, and four large rooms to the east next to the alleyway. Two of these have surviving stucco vaults, and to the south a large stairway led to an upper floor. There is evidence of a third storey. The hall vault was pierced by windows, indicating that there was probably an open courtyard on its roof. [1]

The original function of this building is very obscure, but a reasonable surmise is that it had something to do with the activities at the Coliseum nearby. Whatever it was, it was converted around the year 200 into a Mithraeum. The central hall became the temple, and this was provided with a free-standing altar. On its front is a relief of the god Mithras slaying a bull, and on the sides are representations of two torch-bearers called Cautopates and Cautes in the mythology. A niche for a statue of the god was inserted into the far end of the room, and longitudinal stone benches provided down the sides. The vault was decorated with stars. [1]

The furthest from the stairs of the ancillary rooms is described as a schoolroom, because it also has stone benches against the walls. It could have functioned as a place for lectures, sermons and rituals. A precious fresco fragment here of the 3rd century depicts possibly a worshipper. [1]

Under the church

The eastern building (the one under the church) displays a complex history, and requires careful analysis. As mentioned, the idea that it was a private house is now discounted. Also now considered significant is that no evidence of any Christian activity was found here, not even a graffito. [1]

The width of this building is exactly 100 Roman feet or 29.5 meters. Its length is unknown, since its other end has not been excavated. However, it is thought that it ran as far as the present Piazza di San Clemente because there used to be an ancient street there. [1]

The western end wall next to the alleyway demonstrates that the external walls of the edifice were built out of large blocks of tufa, the so-called opus quadratum style which was very archaic at the time of the building's erection at the end of the 1st century. This is taken as good evidence that the building had a special function which required extra security -not a house. There is no entrance here, nor on the excavated side walls, so it is also thought that there was a single entrance at the east end for the same reason. This rules out the theory that the building was a horrea or warehouse. [1]

The interior of the building consists of a series of rooms opening off a central courtyard (the latter is unexcavated). The rooms at the west end are much smaller than those to the north and south. The chambers are partitioned off and lined by walls in opus quadratum, made up of little square stone blocks laid in a diaper pattern, and ordinary brick which the Romans called opus latericum. The style where the two are used together, as here, is called opus mixtum. The ceilings are barrel vaults in concrete. The rooms on the north and west sides have communicating side doors, but those to the south that have been excavated do not. You pass through these northern rooms to reach the exit back up into the basilica. [1]

At the end of the excavated area on the north side is evidence of a stairwell, so there must have been an upper storey. Further, the rooms have beam holes which indicate that they were divided into lower and upper chambers by wooden floors in the first phase of the building. [1]

In probably the 2nd century, the building was modified. The floors of the rooms were raised by 80 centimeters (the courtyard was left alone), the wooden insert floors were removed and the interior walls were thickly plastered (opus signinum). [1]

After the middle of the 3rd century there was a much more radical restructuring, which some have suggested is evidence of conversion into a Christian church (the evidence for this does not exist). The rooms and the courtyard were filled with rubble, and the upper storey apparently rebuilt or remodeled. When the basilica was built, some of the fabric of this edifice was incorporated into the new structure. The configuration is not sufficiently clear to distinguish whether the new structure involved a radical change of function. [1]

Moneta?

What was this building? The very strong outer wall and lack of entrances, as mentioned, suggests that the activities inside were a security issue which influenced the architecture. A plausible suggestion is that this was the moneta or imperial mint, where the empire's coinage was struck. It is known that this was in the vicinity of the Colosseum, and epigraphs to various gods by employees of the mint have been found nearby. The date of its establishment in this area is known from documentary sources to have been around the end of the 1st century, which accords with the archaeological evidence. [1]

Further, it is known that the mint workers went on violent strike in 274 and were massacred, which might tie in with the building's reconstruction at about that time. Coin production is known to have been suspended for a period. [1]

However, the moneta hypothesis lacks direct archaeological evidence of the making of coins on the site. Hopefully, possible further archaeological investigation might settle the issue of what this building was. [1]

Spring

After passing the Mithraeum and making your way into the rooms on the south side of the possible moneta, you can hear water rushing by. The sound comes from a spring feeding into the Cloaca Maxima, the great sewer that helped to drain the area of the Roman Forum. Funnily enough, some tourists drop coins into it, taking the spot for a wishing well.

When this level was first excavated, water seepage proved a serious problem and prevented people from visiting. Descriptions at the start of the 20th century mention the Mithraeum being occupied by standing water. To solve this, in 1914 a project was put in place to tap the spring causing the

inflow and to direct its course into the Cloaca Maxima via a new pipe. This was successful. The water is surprisingly clean and pure, and has been used by the convent in the past (not now) for domestic purposes.

Catacomb

In the 1930's, a small catacomb was discovered just north of the possible moneta, below the staircase by which you first entered the lower church from the shop. At that point, you might have noticed a grating in the floor opening into this catacomb. Another view is available through an iron gate, just before you reach a second set of stairs which provide you with the exit to this level. [1]

Because the catacomb is within the city walls, something prohibited by ancient Roman law, it is dated to the 5th or 6th centuries and hence was the old church's cemetery. [1]

Links and references:

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)

7. rome-honours-groningen.co.nf/2014/SanClemente.php

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g. Barclay Lloyd, Joan E.; “**The Building History of the Medieval Church of S. Clemente in Rome**”; *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Sep., 1986), pp. 197-223 (jstor 990159)

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