

Santa Prisca



Santa Prisca is a heavily remodeled early 12th-century titular church, on the Aventine Hill in rione Ripa (XII), built on ancient foundations. The dedication to the obscure St Prisca. Owing to confusion between her and St Priscilla, the church has also known been known as Santi Aquila e Prisca.

History

St Prisca/Priscilla

The identity of St Prisca is uncertain. One tradition claims that she is identical with Priscilla, who is mentioned in the New Testament. In the Acts of the Apostles (Acts XVIII, 1-4), it is written that St Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla, Jewish Christians exiled from Rome, when he was in Corinth and again in Ephesus after they had moved there. Later, they were apparently able to move back to Rome, as St Paul sends his greetings to them there (Romans 16, 3-5). The tradition then claims that this was Priscilla's house and that SS Peter and Paul both stayed there. [1] [7]

The alternative old tradition was that Prisca was a daughter of the couple, who was martyred as a virgin in the reign of the emperor Claudius in the 1st century. This would make her Rome's earliest martyr, earlier even than those called the Protomartyrs of Rome killed in a pogrom ordered by Nero. This story was accepted by the old Roman martyrology, compiled in the 17th century. [1]

Both traditions have been successfully challenged by modern historians, and the revised Roman martyrology merely describes her as the patron saint of this church who lived before the year 499. [1]

Church

The commonly accepted date for the church building is the end of the 4th or the beginning of the 5th

century. The first documentary evidence of the church is from 489, when it is mentioned in inscriptions. In the cloister of San Paolo fuori le Mura there are two funerary inscriptions bearing the name of "ADEODATUS" presbyter tituli Priscae. It is also mentioned in the list from the Roman Synod of 499 where it is given as *titulus Aquiliae et Priscae*. [1] [8]

The church has been altered several times throughout the centuries, and the only clearly identifiable ancient remains are the columns and the parts that are underground. [1]

Adrian I (772-797) rebuilt its roof, and Leo III (795-816) embellished it and enlarged its title to Santi Aquila e Prisca which has prompted some of the confusion regarding the dedication. [1] [3]

In 1094, Pope Urban II invited monks from Vendôme to establish a community here and to serve the church. The revitalization of the monastery was continued by Pope Paschal II (1099-1118), who had the church rebuilt between 1103 and 1105 after it was destroyed by the Normans in the sack of Rome (1084). The oldest parts of the visible external fabric, including the apse, date from this project. The present crypt also dates from this time. [1] [5] [8]

The church was officiated until the 9th century by the Basilian monks of Santa Maria in Cosmedin. The Catalogue of Turin, c. 1320, mentioned that the church has black monks ("monachos nigros"), which must be a reference to the black-clad Benedictines. The order abandoned the complex in 1414, after a fire. This destroyed the first three bays of the nave, which explains why the church entrance is away from the road. The damaged building was restored and reduced in length in 1456 by Pope Callixtus III. After being offered to the Franciscans, who refused it out of fear of malaria, the old monastery was taken over by the Dominicans at Santa Sabina in 1455 as a satellite friary. [1] [3] [5] [8]

The most comprehensive restoration took place in 1600, and was completed in 1611. The ruined first three bays were cleared away, except for the right-hand aisle, which was converted into a sacristy. The nave, presbytery, confessio were restored and the facade was rebuilt. The work was paid for by the titular cardinal, Benedetto Giustiniani, and designed by **Carlo Francesco Lambardi**. The frescoes in the nave and the sanctuary were completed by **Anastasio Fontebuoni**. A confessio was excavated as part of this restoration, giving access to the crypt from the sanctuary. The little convent was also rebuilt. [1] [2] [3]

The Dominicans left the church and the Augustinian friars took over in 1660. The stability of the old building caused concern in the 18th century. As a result, the ancient columns of the arcades were embedded in pilasters. The two side chapels at the ends of the aisles were also refitted. The work was authorized by Pope Clement XII, and financed by Cardinale Francesco Maria Casini. The work was completed in 1728. [1] [3]

In 1798, the occupying Napoleonic French army seriously damaged the church, and it was left derelict for a few years. For some time it was in a ruinous state until repaired by the Franciscans, who cared for it then. There was another restoration in 1827 which resulted in the demolition of the vault of the central nave and construction of the wooden coffered ceiling). [5]

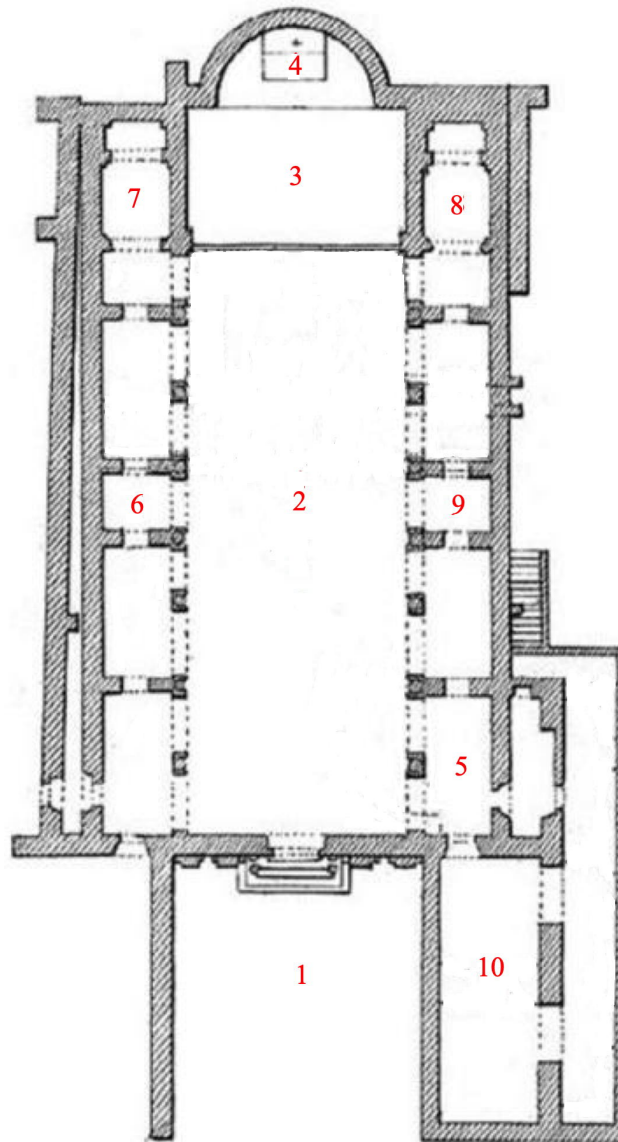
The church was restored in 1935, the year in which the Augustinians returned, and in 1947. In 1933, archaeological excavations were carried out in the area of the church which brought to light the remains of the Roman domus of the first century and, in 1940, also of a mithraeum. [5]

Exterior

The plan is typically basilical, with a nave having aisles and a small external apse. The nave and presbyterium are under the same pitched and tiled roof. The entrance is approached via a little courtyard, elevated above the street level. To the right is the sacristy, and to the left is the monastery. The nave now has eight bays, but used to have twelve. The convent has been very small since the 17th century, just the one rectangular building to the left of the church. [1]

On the left of the facade, on the roof of the convent, there is a bell gable, built in 1961 by **Giorgio Monaco**. [3] [8]

Plan:



Façade

The late Mannerist façade (1) is from the 1600 restoration and is by **Carlo Francesco Lambardi**. A first glance may be misleading, since it looks as if it belongs to an unaisled church. However, the church is flanked by the Augustinian convent on the left and the separate sacristy building on the right, and the aisle ends hide behind these. [1]

The frontage is in brick, with white travertine architectural details. There are four brick pilasters with Ionic capitals flanking the entrance, standing on high stone plinths, and these support an entablature with a projecting cornice and an empty triangular pediment. The frieze bears an inscription recording the restoration by Cardinal Giustiniani and the date, 1600. [1] [a]

The entrance is flanked by a pair of Ionic columns in grey granite (ancient spolia or demolition salvage from a very high-status building) with their capitals decorated with swags and winged putto's heads. The lintel has a dedication inscription (S. Prisca), and bears a triangular pediment. Above the entrance is an oeil-de-boeuf (horizontally elliptical) window within a rectangular marble frame decorated with volutes, also in travertine. [1] [5]

The façade is preceded by a narrow churchyard between the Augustinian convent (on the left) and the first four bays of the original right aisle, converted into the sacristy of the church, which still show the arches that connected the aisle with the central nave before the demolition of the first part

of the nave after fire damage. [5]

Apse

It is worth while going round the back of the church to see the 10th century fabric of the apse. The curved wall has a noticeable batter (slope) which becomes vertical at the top where there is a cornice having stone modillions (little brackets). The lower third of the fabric is very rough, in large blocks of tufa interspersed with bricks and with a large brick patch on the left hand side. The higher fabric is more regular, in brick with two band-courses of tufa. Towards the top, you can see three blocked round-headed windows. [1]

Interior

The interior of the church is in Baroque style, without a transept and with three naves divided by two rows of round arches resting on rectangular pillars decorated with small corbels, inside which the ancient columns are enclosed, still partially visible. [5]

Nave

The aisles are separated from the central nave (2) by arcades. The arches spring from Doric impostes on square piers. Above the arcade on each side runs a floating string course, and above this the nave side wall has widely spaced windows. [1]

Between the curves of the arcades are angels bearing the instruments of the Passion, with portraits of saints: on the left, from the rear

Angel with the Nails,
St. Benedict,
Angel with the Shroud of the Face of Christ,
St. Andrew,
Angel with a spear,
St. Peter,

and on the right, from the front

St. Paul,
Angel with the sponge soaked in vinegar,
St. John the Evangelist,
Angel with the Crown of Thorns,
St. Anthony of Padua,
Angel with the flag and whips.

all by the Florentine artist **Anastasio Fontebuoni**, dating from 1600. [1] [8]

The central nave is covered by a wooden coffered ceiling, which in the nineteenth century replaced the existing one with trusses. [8]

The side aisles have the unusual feature of four unequally spaced blocking walls, each containing a molded archway without impostes. [1]

The Stations of the Cross are by **Mario Barberis** in 1938. The Tamburini opus 414 pipe organ, built in 1954, is located on the choir in the counter-façade. The instrument is two keyboards and pedal board and, while all the pipes are on one choir in the counter-façade, the mobile console is near the altar. The organ was commissioned by the then titular cardinal Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, who would become pope in 1958 with the name of John XXIII. [3] [4]

There is a chapel at the end of each side aisle, flanking the sanctuary. The matching aedicules of these have columns of Carrara marble (the ancient marmor Lunae), and oval altarpieces. The design of these chapels is by **Giovanni Odazzi**, 1728. Also, each aisle has a side altar and the Ionic columns of these are in bigio antico. The artworks are anonymous 17th century, unless specified.

[1] [3]

Nave columns

The fourteen original arcade columns are ancient, and are spolia. They are not a matching set. The 18th-century restoration enclosed each of them in a box pier with the inner side open so as to display the column within. These piers support square Doric impostes, and below the fronts of these are pairs of little curlicues. The columns are: [1]

- six in grey granite from Mons Claudianus in the Eastern Desert of Egypt (also the source of the front door pair),
- one of red granite from Aswan in Egypt,
- one of cipollino marble from Euboea in Greece,
- three of bigio antico (grey marble) from Algeria, and
- three of marmor imezio which is white with dark grey flecks and comes from around the Sea of Marmara.

Sanctuary

The sanctuary (3) is the depth of two of the nave bays and has an apse in which is the high altar. This has a pair of Corinthian columns supporting a triangular pediment. Unusually, the pink-and-red stones of the columns are different; one is portosanto marble, and the other an attractive and brightly colored coralline breccia. [1]

The curves of the apse flanking the altar have two tablets with epigraphs. The right-hand one commemorates the restoration by Cardinal Giustiniani in 1600, and the left hand one that by Pope Callixtus III in 1456. [1] [7] [8]

St Prisca was supposedly baptized by St Peter the Apostle, and this event is shown in the fine altarpiece (4) from 1660 by **Domenico Cresti**, nicknamed *Il Passignano*. [1] [3]

The triumphal arch of the apse, the apse itself and the sanctuary side walls have frescoes by **Fontebuoni**. These are accomplished, and very much in the Mannerist style, but unfortunately are now a little faded. In the middle of the triumphal arch, over the altar, is the Coat-of-Arms of Pope Clement XII, who authorized the early 18th century restoration, which resulted in the construction of the apse. [1] [8]

The decoration of the side walls of the presbytery is divided into three registers: [8]

- in the upper part there are the scenes, on the left, the *Martyrdom of St Prisca*, and, on the right, the *Transfer of her Relics by Pope Eutychian*.
- in the central register on the left is an epigraph commemorating Pope John XXIII as titular cardinal and as pope.
- in the lower register two monochrome red earth scenes from the Life of St. Prisca: *Prisca destroys the idols* and the *Martyrdom of St. Prisca*.

These are painted around a pair of oval windows with stained glass depicting symbols of martyrdom. [1]

Left aisle, altar and chapel

In the left aisle is a fragment of a 15th century fresco of the Annunciation. [9]

Near the end of the left aisle is an inscription recording the repairs made by Clement XII. [a]

On the left is a portrait of St. Gregory the Great. [a]

The altar (6) in the left hand side aisle is dedicated to the Crucifix, which is a small wooden one on a painted landscape backdrop. [1]

The chapel at the end of the left side aisle (7) used to be dedicated to St John Gualbert, but now dedicated to the Madonna. There is a statue of St. John Gualbert in a niche in the left wall of the chapel.

Right aisle, altar and chapel

On the wall to the right is the portrait of St Anthony of Padua. [a]

The altar (9) in the middle of the right aisle has an altarpiece showing *St Rita of Cascia receiving the stigma in her forehead*. This work apparently came from the demolished church of Santa Rita di Cascia below the Aracoeli. [1]

The right-hand chapel (8) used to be dedicated to St Anthony of Padua, but was re-fitted in the 20th century and is now dedicated to the Sacred Heart. A picture of the saint is elsewhere, but this is not the old altarpiece. The present altarpiece of the *Sacred Heart* and the side wall frescoes of *Our Lady*

and *St Joseph* date from the re-fitting. The chapel has an undecorated dome with a small lantern. [1]

Baptistry

In the baptistry, (5) first on the right, there is the ancient baptismal font, a hollow Roman capital from the era of the Antonines (2nd century AD), on which tradition tells that St. Peter, in his stay in the domus of Aquila and Priscilla, baptized the first Christians. It has, however, been used as a baptismal font since the 13th century since an inscription, dated to that century, reads *Baptismus Sancti Petri*. This capital is represented in the crypt in the fresco the Baptism of S. Prisca by **Anastasio Fontebuoni** and until 1947 it was in the crypt. [1] [6] [8]

The capital is embellished Doric, not Corinthian, and has rosette and acanthus leaf decorations. The actual font basin is carved out of an impost which probably did not belong to the capital originally. On the bronze cover is a small modern sculpture depicting the *Baptism of Christ by St John the Baptist*, by **Antonio Biggi**. [1] [8]

Sacristy

The 17th century sacristy (10) has its doorway to the right of the main entrance, that is in the first four bays of the ancient nave. It is not the usual Roman sacristy of the period, lush with decorative elements, but is a rather bare room with white walls and an open truss wooden roof. The altarpiece is painting of the *Immaculate Conception* with angels that occupy separate panels on either side, by **Giovanni Odazzi**. [1] [2] [4]

Excavations

Archaeological excavations under the church began in 1934 by the Augustinian friars in charge and continued in 1940 and 1958. Some sources say that a private house was found in 1933, but this is not confirmed in archaeological reports. However, a house and what appears to have been an early Christian chapel were found quite close to the church during earlier excavations. A 1st-century domus was found just north (left hand) of the church, and brick stamps were found which date this to AD 95 or just afterward. The excavators considered this to have been part of a rather grand private house, which was extended about AD 110. The domus most likely belonged to Lucio Licinio Sura (councilor, friend and general of Trajan). [4] [8]

In the second century the quadriportico of this domus was used for the cult of Mithras. In some of these rooms there are several important frescoes depicting Mithraic worship, including the seven steps of their initiation. It has, however, been established that Christian worship was established here at an early time, as ancient terracotta lamps with the Chi-Rho monogram has been found. A building with two aisles was added to the south of the house at the end of the 2nd century, and it is possible that this was the palaeochristian titulus from which these lamps came. It lies under the present church, and was built at the same time when a room of the house was converted into the Mithraeum.

The extensions involved a quadriporticus (colonnaded courtyard) to the east of the church (beyond the end of the left-hand aisle), which was converted into a residential annex. An apsidal nymphaeum was added to the south, intruding on a neighboring property, and this is now under the bottom right-hand corner of the nave.

The excavators thought that this prestigious property was the documented Domus Privata Traiani, which was the house that Trajan lived in before he became emperor. An alternative identification is with the residence of Lucius Licinius Sura, who is known to have founded an important set of baths named after him and which were immediately north of this house.

Special notes:

A door by the baptistry leads to a terrace overlooking a playground. You can enter the crypt and the excavations from this yard, but you need to get the sacristan to let you in. The Mithraeum has traces of 2nd or 3rd century wall paintings depicting the initiation into the Mathraeic cult.

Santa Prisca is one of the station churches of Tuesday in the Holy Week.

Artists and Architects:

Anastasio [Fontebuoni](#) (1571-1626), Italian (Florence) painter of the Baroque period

Antonio [Biggi](#) (1904-1966), Italian sculptor

Carlo Francesco [Lambardi](#) (1559-1620), Italian architect of the late-Renaissance and early-

Baroque period
Domenico [Crespi](#) (or Cresti) [aka *Il Passignano*] (1559-1638), Italian painter of a late-Renaissance or Contra-Maniera (Counter-Mannerism) style
Giovanni [Odazzi](#) (1663-1731), Italian painter and etcher of the Baroque period
Mario [Barberis](#) (1893-1960), Italian painter

Relics:

St [Prisca](#) & Sts. Martesia and Claudia.
under the altar of the confessio

Burials:

Francesco Maria Cardinal [PANDOLFI ALBERICI](#), (1764-1835)

Location:

Addr: Via di Santa Prisca 11, 00153 Roma
Coord: [41°52'59"N 12°29'2"E](#)

Info:

Telephone: 0039 06 5743798
Email: s.prisca@tiscalinet.it
Open times:
Open 08:30am-12:00pm, 04:30pm-06:30pm
Mass times:
Weekdays:08:00am-06:00pm (winter)-07:00pm (summer)
Holidays:08:00am-10:30am (winter)-11:00am (summer)-12:00pm (winter)-06:00pm (winter)-07:00pm (summer)

Links and References

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 3. [InfoRoma web site](#)
 4. [English Wikipedia page](#)
 5. [Italian Wikipedia](#)
 6. [Church web site](#)
 7. [Borgato.be blog](#)
 8. [I Viaggi di Raffaella blog](#)
 9. [ROMAPEDIA Blog](#)
- a. Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842, Vol.I, Pg 627
- b. Betz, Hans Dieter; "The Mithras Inscriptions of Santa Prisca and the New Testament"; *Novum Testamentum*, Vol. 10, Fasc. 1 (Jan., 1968), pp. 62-80

[Italian Wiki site - Mithraeum of Santa Prisca](#)

[Tourist Info](#)

[PNAC web site](#)

<http://www.quondam.com/04/0489.htm>

[Rome Art Lover web site](#)

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