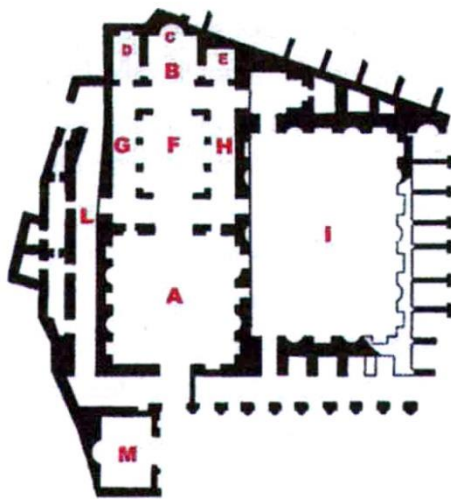


Santa Maria Antiqua

At Foro Romano

Via della Salata Becchia 5/6

Foro Romano (00121)



Pianta di Santa Maria Antiqua e delle strutture archeologiche adiacenti:

A) Atrio; B) Presbiterio; C) Abside;
D) Cappella di Teodoto; E) Cappella dei Santi Medici; F) Navata centrale;
G) Navata sinistra; H) Navata destra;
I) Tempio di Augusto; L) Rampa al Palatino; M) Oratorio dei XL Martiri

In the heart of the Forum in Rome there stands building, which is partially hidden from view that at a second glance seems odd. It has a roof and there is window glass to be seen which seems incongruous compared to its neighbours that are glorious ruins. A small sign tells that it is Chiesa Santa Maria Antiqua and it is closed to the public. Most people move onto to the Temple of Augustus. Yet, the simplicity hides a great secret, for here is the “Greek Church” of Rome, the place that almost displaced St John Lateran as the seat of the Bishop of Rome. Hidden upon its walls are some of the oldest **iconographic frescoes** that still survive dating back to the 5th century and spanning the period up till its burial by an **earthquake in 847 AD**. It was once home to the majestic and mysterious **Icon of the Theotokos**, the Santa Maria Antiqua which dates from just after the time of the Council of Ephesus and provided a prototype for many, if not all the ancient Icons of the Theotokos revered in Rome today.

History of the Site

This is an area fraught with difficulty. As far as I can work out there are now 3 theories as to the origins and original purpose of the building. However, one thing is clear; it was the final enclosed section at the bottom of a processional way from the Imperial Palaces that overlooked the Forum. It was here Emperors, Governors and their retinue made themselves ready before entering the Forum proper. Likewise, if things were rowdy it marked a place of sanctuary where they could escape to from the crowds. Thus, we know that there was a military presence and function. As Christianity became the religion of the empire and the Emperor a Christian, so to become a member of the Praetorian Guard it became obligatory to be a Christian. So we find by **around 380 C.E. the first evidence of Christian art** and also

worship in this space. At some stage after the conversion and stabilization of Christianity as the faith of the Empire early signs appear that this area had become a devotional space.

Over the years, the structure was expanded in size taking its final size in the mid 4th century C.E. It was sometime after the Council of Ephesus and the later Council of Chalcedon that the oldest fresco of the Theotokos, of which there are but fragmentary remains, was painted. It shows her in imperial like regalia seated on a throne and yet she is not yet the “imperial” Theotokos of Ravenna just yet. Parts of it survive in what is known as the “**palimpsest**” which provides at least three clearly discernible layers of art.

During the time of the **Emperor Justinian II (c 565 – 578 C.E.)** various architectural alterations were made including the construction of the apse. The construction of the apse led to the destruction of much of a fresco that depicts the Blessed **Virgin Mary as a Byzantine Empress**. However it was not just the Emperors who made the changes to the building. As it evolved Santa Maria Antiqua became the focal point for two things that would shape its future. The first is that it **became the focus for the Greek clergy and community in Rome**. Records show that by the beginning of the 7th century the Church was very much the place where visiting Greeks came to worship. As many of the Popes of the time also were from the eastern part of the Empire, Santa Maria Antiqua became like their private chapel and thus they decorated it without the restraints that may have come if they tried to do it at St John Lateran, St Peters or the other major basilicas. Secondly, Santa Maria Antiqua became a “**diakonia**”, a place where material aid and spiritual assistance was given. It also became the focus for a “healing” ministry.

Each Pope contributed something unique in the works commissioned.

It was during the time of Pope Zacharias that saw the decoration of the Chapel of **Theodotus** on the left side of the presbytery. It is so named as the donor was Theodotus, an official of the papacy. It is important to remember that whilst this Chapel was being decorated the first iconoclastic period was in full flight in the Eastern part of the Empire. Zacharias predecessor Gregory III had already **condemned iconoclasm as heresy** and despite threats from the Imperial Legate in Ravenna **the popes used Santa Maria Antiqua to thumb their noses at the heretical Emperor**.

The end of Santa Maria Antiqua came about with the **earthquake of 847 C.E.** when much of the Church was buried in a landslide. Pope Leo IV had a new church constructed across the Forum naming it Santa Maria Nova and assigned to it the role Santa Maria Antiqua had to the new building. Various items from the ruins were retrieved including the large image, known as “Santa Maria Antiqua” dating from the 5th century. Attempts were made to use parts of the building where it was structurally sound and so there were a number of chapels still in use at the time of the Norman sack of Rome in 1084, yet the earth had other ideas and gradually the site was covered and another church built over the top.

The site was mined for stone for the building of St Peters Basilica by Julius II. There were minor excavations that occurred from time to time during the 16th and 17th centuries but it was not until 1900 Giacomo Boni undertook the first systematic excavation of the site.

The Special Significance of Santa Maria Antiqua for Orthodoxy

Santa Maria Antiqua has a pivotal place in Orthodox Iconography. For Santa Maria Antiqua is the home of the earliest surviving examples of two images that are to be found in just about every Orthodox Church throughout the world. They are The **Anastasis** – The figure of the risen Christ reaching out to Adam, Eve and other figures such King David. The image is situated at the rear of the Church at the door leading to the ramp up to the Imperial Palace Complex. (705 AD) The second is the **Deesis** – The figures of the Theotokos to the right of Christ and the Forerunner to the left interceding with Christ.

Conclusion

Santa Maria Antiqua began its religious life when it was part of the barracks for the Praetorian Guard. With the withdrawal of the Emperors from Rome to the eastern capital of Constantinople, the imperial complex above became offices, the residence of the Viceroy, and also a papal residence. As result, the Church became a papal peculiar, that is to say a place that was the pope’s private possession where they could do what they wanted. Therefore, it was that we find that there is a rich history of figures, styles and peculiarities reflected in the decoration reflecting the particular devotions of the pope who commissioned the art.

Yet there was more to the Church than just that. It served as **Diaconia**, a place where food, welfare and other assistance was provided to populace. The church was also known as the “Greek church”. Many of the clergy and monks who served there were from the eastern part of the empire and brought their unique understandings, practices and devotions, art to this place. Here a visitor to Rome from the East could feel at home, a haven in the