

# Santa Sabina all'Aventino

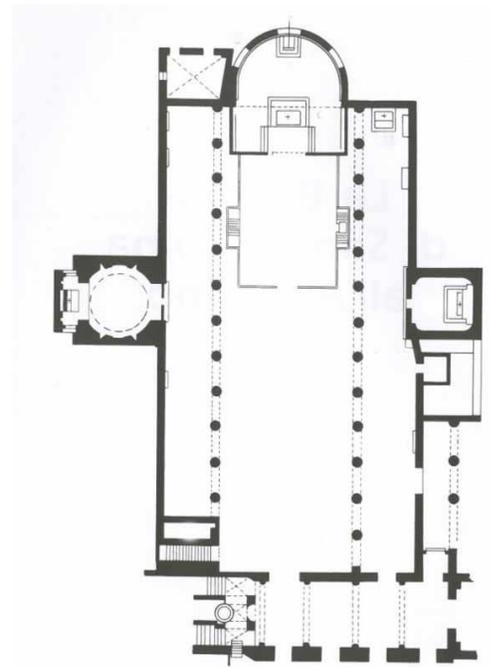
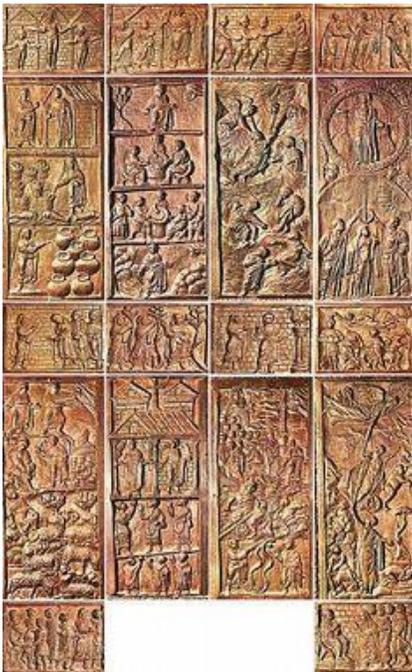
Piazza Pietro d'Illyria 1, (00153)

8 AM – 12:45 PM (Every Day)

3:30 PM – 6:00 PM (Every Day)

Metro:

Bus:



Built in 422 AD, **Santa Sabina** is widely considered the best example of an **early Christian church in Rome**. It has a similar design to the great basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, which was built later. Although few of its mosaics survive, Santa Sabina is famed for its **5th-century wooden doors carved with biblical scenes**. The church stands atop the **Aventine Hill**, providing fine views of Rome from an adjacent orange grove.

## History of Santa Sabina

Santa Sabina was built at the **top of the Aventine Hill** on the site of the **Temple of Juno Regina**, using many of its materials. The church was an expansion of a Roman house-church (*titulus*) owned by a woman named Sabina. As was common in ancient Rome, the church preserved the name of the title holder by simply adding "Saint" onto her name.

The Church of Santa Sabina was **founded around 425 AD** by the presbyter Peter of Illyria, who recorded his name and good works in a mosaic inscription (which can still be seen). It was completed by about 432.

Marking a development from the earlier basilica style seen at San Clemente, Santa Sabina "typifies in plan and proportion the new Roman standard basilica of the fifth century," representing "a high point of Roman church building".

A number of changes were made to the church over the years, including a restoration under Pope Leo III (795-816) and a redecoration under the archpresbyter Eugenius II in **824-27**. Eugenius added the marble furniture of the chancel (which survives) and enshrined the relics of three saints in the high altar: Alexander, Theodolus and Eventius.

In **1222**, Santa Sabina was given to the newly-created **Dominican Order**, in whose care it remains today.

A major remodeling of the interior in the Renaissance style took place under Pope Sixtus V (1585-90), which was reversed in a restoration of 1914-19. The work included reconstructing all the original windows and piecing together the marble chancel furniture from fragments found in the pavement.

### **What to See at Santa Sabina**

The tall, spacious **nave** has 24 columns of **Proconnesian marble** with perfectly matched Corinthian columns and bases, which were reused from the Temple of Juno. The spandrels of the closely-spaced arches have inlaid marble designs in green and purple, depicting chalices and patens to represent the Eucharist.

The interior is very bright, thanks to the row of large **windows in the clerestory** plus three in the apse and five in the facade. The beautiful windows and marble **chancel furniture** (*schola cantorum*, *ambo* and *cathedra*) date from the 9th century and were painstakingly reconstructed from fragments in the early 20th century.

The 16th-century fresco in the **apse** is one of the few later decorations allowed to stay after the restoration, since it reflects the spirit of the original apse mosaic. There are a few traces of **5th-century fresco** to be found in the church, at the east end of the left aisle. The floor of the nave contains Rome's only surviving **mosaic tomb**, dating from around 1300.

Sadly nearly all of the original **mosaic decoration**, which would have been as sumptuous as that of Ravenna's basilicas, has disappeared. The sole survivor is an important one, however: the 5th-century **dedicatory inscription**. The lengthy Latin text, written in gold on a blue background, is flanked by two female figures who personify the Church of the Jews and the Church of the Gentiles.

This inscription is important not only because it gives the founder's name and date of the church, but also because it expresses the doctrine of papal supremacy, which was still developing at that time.

The **5th-century door** of Santa Sabina is easy to overlook, but it would be a great shame to miss it. It is at the end of the narthex beyond the entrance door to the church. Beautifully carved from dark cypress wood, the ancient door contains **18 panels of narrative carvings, most depicting biblical scenes**. Its frame is made of 3rd-century marble spoils.

The panels are not in their original order (it was restored in 1836) and 10 others have been lost, but the door remains a remarkable and precious survival. In particular, the **Crucifixion scene** is the earliest known depiction of that subject in the world.

Other subjects include Moses and the Burning Bush, the Exodus, the Ascension of Elijah, the Ascension of Christ, Christ's Post-Resurrection Appearances, and Three Miracles of Christ. There are also two intriguing panels whose subjects are not biblical and are difficult to interpret.

### **Doors**

The crucifix in the wooden door of the Basilica of Santa Sabina is among the **oldest known depictions of the Crucifix** in a Christian church.

The artist apparently did not have actual knowledge about crucifixion as a method of execution. Note how Christ and the two robbers are depicted standing, how the nails pierce their hands and how their arms are comfortably bent without carrying the weight of the body and how the three have loin clothes for modesty.

Christ is shown physically larger to emphasize his importance. He has the long hair and bear familiar from so many images of Jesus done ever since.

It has been suggested that the structure behind the three crucified could depict the walls of Jerusalem. The symmetric roofs and a window up left make this interpretation unlikely.

This door carving is important evidence about the hiatus between the times when crucifixion was common and the Theodosian period when its horrors and technical details had been forgotten.