

## San Giovanni Battista dei Cavalieri di Rodi



**St John the Baptist of the Knights of Rhodes** is a 20th century convent church with ancient fabric at Piazza del Grillo 1, in the rione Monti. The dedication is to St John the Baptist. The Diocese regards this as a church, not a chapel. The edifice of which it is a part is called the Casa dei Cavalieri di Rodi.

### History

The remote ecclesiastical ancestor of the present edifice was an Early Middle Age monastery which was built in the ruins of the Forum of Augustus. This forum was occupied by a monastery of Byzantine-rite monks by the 9th century, and the podium of the centrepiece Temple of Mars Ultor was used for its church of Sancti Basili Scala Mortuorum ("St Basil of the Ladder of the Dead") as well as for domestic quarters. The church was small, tucked in between the back wall of the temple cella and the the temenos wall of the Forum. It stood on the site of the segmental apse of the cella, where the cult-statues of Mars, Venus and the deified Julius Caesar stood. (See the plan here for the layout of the Forum.)

This surviving temenos wall is in massive blocks mostly of peperino ashlar (*opus quadratum*), although some is in Gabine or travertine. It served as the monastic precinct enclosure on its eastern side, and a hole was knocked through it to create a public entrance for the church (this survives). The site of the rest of the temple was under the convent block, with a street running from the present Arco dei Pantani down the right (south) side of the former temple. The Arco was an ancient gateway in the temenos wall of the Forum, just to the south of the monastery church, and the street was the Strada Bonella until it was destroyed in the 20th century.

St Basil the Great is regarded as the founder of Byzantine-rite branch of monasticism, hence the dedication. The Scala Mortuorum derives from the ascetic writings of St John Climacus, who presented the moral life of a monk as an ascent on a ladder (*scala*) -or a descent or falling off. The Mortuorum refers to the monks being dead to the world.

The first documentary mention is in a bull of Pope Agapetus II in 955 (beware, Armellini got the year wrong when he wrote in 1891). By then, it was one of the most important monasteries in Rome. The next definite mention is in 1088, but there is a possible one in the "Register of Subiaco" of 983 which hints that the monastery was Benedictine by then.

It certainly was Benedictine by the start of the 12th century, when it was referred to as Sancti Basili Arcus Nervae. This was corrupted in the vernacular to San Basilio Arco Noe, with a false reference to Noah. The original Arcus Nervae was the present Arco dei Pantani which was an ancient gateway in the temenos wall of the Forum just to the south of the monastery church. The locality had become seriously badly drained with the collapse of the ancient drainage system and was unhealthy owing to malaria. This led to the name of Pantaneo or "marsh" for the neighbourhood in the Middle Ages.

This small church of San Basilio was kept by the Benedictines, as was the main large convent block covering the temple podium to the east. However, they also provided a cloister to the north of this with an east wing butted against the temenos wall. A separate cloister entrance was provided through the wall. There used to be a ceremonial entrance into the Forum at this location with three arched portals, but because of the rise in ground level these were not convenient and so the monks heightened the northern one for their entrance and blocked the other two up. To the north of this was a second large convent block, the predecessor of the present Casa of the Knights.

The monks also built a fine Romanesque campanile in the 12th century.

The cloister was arcaded on three sides, but not on the west where it faced onto the monastery gardens.  
Knights of Rhodes

In the 13th century, Benedictine observance in the city suffered a complete collapse and the order lost most of its monasteries as a result. Here, the complex was granted to the Knights Hospitaller of St John of Jerusalem of Rhodes (the direct ancestors of the present Knights of Malta).

This military order was founded in Jerusalem in 1113, but the pilgrim hospice which was the original focus of its activities had already been founded in that city by Italian merchants in 1023. It was built on the site of an old Byzantine monastery dedicated to St John the Baptist, hence the full name of the order. Back then the city was still ruled by Muslims, but it was conquered in the First Crusade in 1099.

The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem came to an end with the fall of Acre in 1291. After a pause, the knights conquered the island of Rhodes from the Byzantine Empire in 1310 and ruled it in their own right as a power-base. This is when they became a sovereign order, answerable to no-one except (theoretically) the Pope.

Apparently the Knights leased the predecessor of the present premises from the monks in the late 12th century.

It is uncertain as to when exactly the Order took over the old monastery in its entirety, but it must have been around the time that it also obtained another defunct monastery at Santa Maria del Priorato. This was in 1312, but it has been suggested that the takeover of San Basilio might have been in the late 13th century. The Knights established a casa or hospice complex here, which became their original Roman headquarters, and changed the dedication of the church to St John the Baptist their patron. In his honour they frescoed the apse of the church with scenes depicting him, and the stylistic evidence of the surviving fragments suggest that the work was done before 1300. Further, they burrowed through the temenos wall to give the church two Gothic windows which are still there even if the church is not.

The name of the church is then variously given in the sources as San Giovanni de Campo Turricano, San Giovanni del Palazzi di Nerva or San Giovanni in Capo ai Monti.

In 1466 the Grand Master of the Order, Giovanni Battista Orsini, allied with Marco Barbo, the Cardinal Protector, to renovate the convent in order to provide suitably prestigious accommodation for the Knights at Rome. This resulted in the present surviving casa as the location for ceremonial functions, while the old convent block next to the Arco dei Pantani remained as a hospice. The old monastery garden became a famous herb garden attached to the hospice.

Fresco work was executed in the second decade of the 16th century, and a surviving Crucifixion can be seen in the so-called Stanza Cariatidi in the Casa.

The knights were ejected from Rhodes by the Ottomans in 1522, and were granted the island of Malta by Emperor Charles V in 1530. It was then that they obtained their modern name. This move led to a loss of influence at Rome, and the Knights were unable to protect their property from the attentions of Cardinal "Protectors". The result was that San Giovanni was alienated in 1566, and the Knights had to move to their present headquarters of Santa Maria del Priorato.

When they moved, the property was divided. The church, cloister and hospice became a convent of Dominican nuns, Santa Maria Annunziata ai Monti, and survived as such until the early 20th century. However, the present casa was not included in this and was converted into domestic apartments and retail establishments.

The Fascist government of Italy announced in 1924 that the present Via dei Fori Imperiali was to be built, and that all later accretions (no matter how old) were to be cleared from the ancient remains of the Roman and Imperial Fora. The result was a gigantic act of vandalism, with the archaeologically poorly recorded demolition of a large mediaeval neighbourhood with many old buildings and churches. The old monastery was also destroyed, in 1930. However the casa of the Knights incorporated much ancient fabric, and unusually it was decided to leave it alone instead of removing the mediaeval bits.

The ownership of the edifice was passed to the city after the Second World War, which began restoring it in a campaign lasting from 1940 to 1950. Meanwhile, it was leased back to the Knights of Malta in 1946 and much of the ground floor was immediately converted into the present church. A row of six tabernae or ancient shop premises on the north side of the edifice was kept by the city as the Antiquarium del Foro di Augusto. This is a small museum of moveable items found in the clearance of the site in the 1930's.

Oddly, this is the second newest church to be founded within the ancient city walls. Only Santissimo Crocifisso alla Stazione Termini is newer.

## **Exterior**

The Casa is most famous for its impressive 15th century belvedere which is a dominating architectural feature in the view of the ruins of the Imperial Fora. It was erected as part of the 1466 re-ordering, with the architect thought to have been Giuliano da Maiano. The Order's website describes it as a loggia for papal blessings, like the one at San Marco nearby, but this cannot be right as the main arcade overlooked the private garden of the Casa. Rather, it was a pleasant place to be in the Roman summer.

The structure is in naked red brick with limestone quoins and a pitched and double-hipped roof. The outer long west side has an arcade of five arches separated by scavenged Corinthian columns, with end pilasters in the same style. The north short side has three arches of the same form, and a single return arch on the east side.

In the wall to the left (north) of the main arcade is a little Gothic archway with its own balcony, which does look like something from which a high-status person might declaim.

Tabernae

Running west of the Piazza del Grillo is a little dead-end street (blocked at its west end by the 1930's demolitions) called the Via di Campo Carleo. The entrances of the tabernae or ancient shops can be seen here, as well as the north end of the belvedere.

### Entrance

The church has no external presence as such. On the Piazza del Grillo is a set of railings with a gate in front of two large ancient arches set at right angles to each other. Within the smaller but taller arch can be seen a door with a cross over it. This is the entrance. This is the only external evidence for the existence of the chapel.

### **Interior**

The forum was mostly of a symmetrical layout, with the temple at the back and a porticus or large colonnaded arcade full of statuary depicting great men (summi viri) down each side. Flanking these were two enormous semi-circular apses or exedrae with more statuary. At the top end of the left hand porticus was a cult-chamber containing a colossal statue of the deified emperor Augustus. It might help to look at the plan here to make sense of this.

The casa with its church contains the most substantial remaining part of the Forum's fabric. It amounts to a rectangular hall with arcades on piers occupying all four sides, slotted in at a diagonal between the left hand exedra and the Augustinian cult-chamber. Nobody knows what this hall was for, and also there is a doubt as to whether it was originally roofed. It might have been an atrium or courtyard instead. Guesses as to its function have to take into account the lack of direct ancient access between the hall and the forum proper.

The present church has the mediaeval function rooms of the casa above it, as well as the belvedere. Once through the entrance, you find yourself facing the right hand side aisle which has seven arched niches in brick on the right hand side, facing an arcade of six arches in travertine without capitals or imposts. The barrel vault is in concrete. A diagonal wall to the left of the entrance, which is actually part of the former cult-chamber mentioned, creates a triangular vestibule. On the far side of this is a single arch into the church proper, springing from a very wide pier attached to the pier between the third and fourth arcade arches to the right. There is a matching wide pier to the left, which begins the left hand arcade of three arches. Finally, there is a far arcade of three narrower arches which leads into an ambulatory connecting the far ends of the side aisles (now the sanctuary).

The three arcades and the single entrance arch have a block architrave above them, and from this springs the restored 15th century vaulted ceiling which has a blind lunette at each end and two on each side. The stone and brickwork is left exposed and undecorated, and the ceiling is rendered in plain white.

There is a free-standing bronze statue of St John the Baptist near the entrance.  
Sanctuary

The church's far wall is in naked red brick, with a tiny sanctuary niche. This has a frame in the style of a doorcase with a molded edge and the Knights' shield on its lintel. There is a floating cornice, above a frieze with a short dedicatory inscription: D[ivi] Iohanni Bapitistae dic[at]um templum hoc] anno D[omi]ni MDCCCCXVI.

The altar within has a sculpture of St John the Baptist in bronze, accompanied by six bronze candlesticks in the form of genuflecting figures. These are by Alfredo Biagini. The altar frontal is of purplish breccia, and in it is inlaid the symbol of the Knights, a white cross formed of four arrowheads meeting at a point on a red background.

Behind the statue is a fresco rescued from the house of Flaminio Ponzio in the Via Alessandrina nearby, during its demolition in 1933 (photo of the house here). It features the Madonna and Child with angels, and

dates from about 1600. The side walls have two lunette frescoes of saints, three men including St Paul to the right and three women to the left.

### Antiquarium

The Antiquarium del Foro di Augusto is housed in the ancient tabernae next to the church to the north, and also in rooms leading off the far end of the church. It mostly features sculptural details and architectural fragments, including epigraphs belonging to the collection of statuary displayed in the Forum in ancient times as well as a few sad remains of this once enormous collection of statues.

It also has some epigraphic items from the demolished churches of Sant'Urbano ai Pantani and San Nicola dei Cesarini as well as the old monastery church of Santa Maria Annunziata ai Monti. Fragments of frescoes from around 1300 from the latter, depicting St John the Baptist, are preserved.

Unfortunately, the Antiquarium is at present closed to visitors.

### Access

Access arrangements seem to be in the charge of the city's museum department, the Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali, rather than being in the hands of the Knights.

Access is limited, and full details are here. Basically, you have to phone +39 060868 well in advance to book a visit. Only groups are admitted, with a maximum number of 25 (no minimum number given, probably four). There is a charge of four euros per person.

The available times are Tuesday and Thursday mornings, except in August.

The visit includes the church and the upstairs chambers, but (as the Sovrintendenza web-page advises) NOT at present the Antiquarium.

### Liturgy

A Sunday Mass is advertised at 11:00.

Weddings are celebrated in this church, and are advertised here.

### Location:

Coord: [41°53'41.1"N 12°29'11"E](#)

### Address:

Piazza del Grillo 1

### **External links**

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[English Wikipedia page](#)

[English Wikipedia article](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Page on Order's website](#)

Nolli map (look for 127) (the casa is the large five-sided block to the north of the cloister.)

["De Alvariis" gallery on Flickr](#)

["Sovraintendenzaroma" web-page](#)

[Info.roma web-page](#)

[Roma SPQR web-page](#)

["Annazelli" web-page](#)

[Annas Rom Guide \(in Danish\)](#)

[Wikimedia Commons photos](#)

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