

# San Sebastiano al Palatino



San Sebastiano al Palatino is a 17th century titular and former convent church, incorporating 10th century fabric, at Via di San Bonaventura 1 on the Palatine Hill in the rione Campitelli. Pictures of the church at Wikimedia Commons are here. There is an English Wikipedia page here, but the German Wikipedia page here is better.

The dedication is to St Sebastian, a Roman soldier martyr.

## History

### Ancient times

The present Via di San Bonaventura was the ancient Clivus Palatinus, an ancient access driveway for the enormous imperial palace to the south built by the emperor Domitian. A vast artificial terrace, rectangular in shape and revetted with brick, was provided to the east of the Clivus as part of the palace project. There were three monumental entrances from the Clivus, approached by stairways (the number seems to rule out the old identification of this structure with the Pentapylum or "five gates" mentioned in the Regionary Catalogues). An attractive hypothesis is that the terrace was originally a set of gardens, the Adonaea sacred to the god Adonis.

A large temple, about sixty by forty metres, was erected on the terrace by the emperor Elagabalus (203-22) in honour of the Syrian sun-god Elah Gabal. The emperor believed himself to be the incarnation of the god -hence his name. As part of his fostering of the cult of himself as divine, he ordered the collection in the Elagabalium of various ancient Roman pagan cult objects including the Palladium.

After the assassination of Elagabalus, the temple was re-dedicated to Jupiter Ultor. The Palladium apparently went back to its original place of veneration, but this is unclear (see note on original name of church, below).

### St Sebastian

St Sebastian was an expatriate from Milan, who was martyred in Rome at the start of the 4th century during the persecution ordered by the emperor Diocletian. His extant legend was written in the 5th century, and is now regarded as mostly pious fiction. According to it, he was a favourite army officer of the emperor until his Christianity was discovered, whereupon he was used as an archery target, miraculously survived and was then beaten to death. He was then buried in the catacomb at San Sebastiano fuori le Mura. What are regarded as fairly reliable are three observations: The saint was a member of the imperial household at the palace (possibly, but not necessarily) a soldier, he was martyred on the steps of the temple and was actually buried in the catacomb concerned.

The legend describes the martyrdom taking place on the Gradus Heliogabali or "Steps of Elagabalus", and archaeological excavation has revealed that the church was first built within the propylaeum of the temple and in front of the entrance of the cella. See plan here.

### Foundation

The actual date of the foundation of the church depends obviously on when the temple became derelict. It used to be thought that this was in the reign of the emperor Constantine, but the pagan Roman temples were only closed to public worship in 395 and remained the recognized property of the imperial government at Constantinople until at least the 7th century. There have been surmises that the church was founded then or soon after in honour of St Sebastian, but there is no documentary evidence.

A reference to a church dedicated to St Sebastian in the locality of the Roman Forum exists in the Itinerarium Einsiedeln which is a pilgrims' itinerary thought to have been composed in Rome in the late 8th century. This is the earliest documented reference discovered so far.

The church is known to have been built or rebuilt in the 10th century. A fragmentary epitaph of one Merco dated 977 is on the right hand side wall, reading ad Dni. confugit opem su. Sebastiani simul bene..., which indicates that he gave his property to a shrine or church of St Sebastian (possibly on becoming a monk). A (barely) surviving epigraph which is part of the surviving apse frescoes mentions Petrus Medicus as having sponsored the fresco work, and Pietro Fedele in the early 20th century transcribed evidence showing that this person was alive between 973 and 999 and that the church which he patronized was monastic.

If it is correct that the present church and attached convent are on the footprint of the original one, then this monastery was small and not very important.

### Santa Maria in Pallara

The Petrus Medicus epigraph gives the dedication of the church as being to Our Lady and SS Sebastian and Zoticus. The Marian dedication supplanted any putative previous one to St Sebastian, and the church then appears in history as Santa Maria in Pallara (the spelling of the last word might differ slightly). A 10th century martyrology exists in the Vatican Library, with an annotation mentioning the dedication of the church S. Mariae in Palladio. This seems to indicate that the name Pallara actually does refer to the Palladium formerly in the temple on the site. It has been thought that this pagan sacred object (a wooden sculpture of Pallas allegedly from Troy) was only in the temple briefly during the reign of Elagabalus (203-22), but this church name is an otherwise unsupported hint that it might have been kept here for longer.

In 1061, Pope Alexander II gave the monastery to the Benedictine abbey of Montecassino, which then forged some documentation to back up a historical claim. The convent became the Rome headquarters for this immensely powerful abbey, and would not have been an independent monastery but something more like a hospice for monks with business in the city.

In 1118, Pope Gelasius II was elected here by acclamation. He had been a monk at Montecassino, so this was perhaps appropriate.

Benedictine observance at Rome collapsed in the 13th century, and in 1352 the convent and church passed to the new reformed Olivetan Benedictine monastery founded at Santa Francesca Romana in the previous year. They seem not to have been interested in the church, which was recorded as in ruins in the 15th century. The property later belonged to the Capranica family, which ran it as a vineyard and had the convent as a farmhouse.

### Rebuilding

The present church is the result of a restoration sponsored by Taddeo Barberini, nephew of Pope Urban VIII, in 1626. The work was completed in 1631, and fortunately involved the re-use of much of the old fabric especially the little apse. Hence some of the 10th century frescoes survived, but others were lost. The pope, in a useful antiquarian gesture, ordered the copying of the frescoes about to be obliterated, and this was done by Antonio Eclissi in 1630. The Baroque frescoes provided in the restoration were by Bernardino Gagliardi, and were finished in 1633. The architect of the project was Luigi Arrigucci from Florence.

The dedication to St Sebastian was finally definitively settled on, as he was a patron of the Barberini family. It seems that the work was purely devotional, as no convent was founded here. In fact, the provision of only one altar in the church indicates that this was never the intention.

### Later history

The church was under the care of the Franciscans at the nearby San Bonaventura al Palatino until the late 19th century. In 1851 there was a restoration sponsored by the Barberini family, which retained patronage.

When that convent was sequestered by the Italian government in 1873, the church was put under the care of a diocesan priest. However from 1949 a secular institution founded by the Franciscan Agostino Gemelli, the Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ, was located here for several years.

An alternative name of San Sebastiano alla Polveriera occurs in the sources. The reason for this is given alternatively as the existence of a saltpetre mine or works located locally when the church was rebuilt (potassium nitrate is a constituent of gunpowder), or the proximity of a gunpowder store during the French occupation after the end of the 18th century.

There was another restoration in 1963, and a further one in 2000 when the apse frescoes were put on view.

The church is now dependent on the parish of Santa Maria in Campitelli, and has no independent pastoral function.

### Cardinalate

The church was made titular in 1973, the title-holder being a cardinal deacon.

The current of the church is Cardinal Edwin Frederick O'Brien.

## Exterior

### Layout and fabric

This is a very simple little church, in rendered brick. It has a single nave with no side-chapels, and a square sanctuary of the same width. The far wall of the latter has a tiny apse, with a conch. The side walls each have three windows high up to light the nave, and one for the sanctuary. The pitched and tiled roof covers the nave and sanctuary together.

The small convent is attached to the left hand side of the church. It contains mediaeval fabric, dating back to the 12th century with some evidence of a former fortified tower.

The entrance gateway from the street has an arched portal, above which is a square frame crowned with a triangular pediment. This panel contains a mosaic depiction of St Sebastian.

### Façade

The façade is one of the simplest of any Roman church (apart from those unfinished). It is dominated by a large recessed panel around the single entrance, which has a stepped edge and gives the impression of a blind pilaster on either side. The entrance itself has a pair of pilasters with doubletted outer edges, which support a nested pediment -triangular within a segment. The pilaster capitals display a Barberini bee each. The pediment tympanum contains another bee, while the panel over the lintel has a winged putto's head.

Above the entrance is the Barberini coat-of-arms, in relief but without any supporters.

The gable is occupied by a triangular pediment, with a blank tympanum. It rests on an entablature without an architrave, the frieze of which has three more Barberini bees.

The outer corners of the façade have recessed strips, which run right up to and include the pediment corners.

## Interior

### Nave

The interior is extremely simple, and is painted throughout in a pinkish yellow colour. A barrel vault springs from a basic entablature running round the nave interior, which has a blank frieze and a roll-molded entablature. This vault has three inset windows on each side, and is entirely undecorated.

The nave has two doorways towards the sanctuary, the right hand one originally being a side entrance which cannot now be used because archaeological excavations have lowered the ground level on that side.

The 1851 provided marble epigraph tablets which give information on the church's history and which are on the side walls, and also copies of the drawings by Eclissi of the lost frescoes were commissioned for display (the originals are in the Vatican Library).

The right hand side wall has a painting featuring St Francis, but the left hand features has the re-hung altarpiece. This depicts The Martyrdom of St Sebastian, and is by Andrea Camassei 1633. It was put here so that you can see the apse frescoes.

### Sanctuary

The molded archivolt of the triumphal arch springs from above the entablature, which runs round the tops of a pair of square pilasters. It continues around the little square sanctuary, which has chamfered corners and a small saucer dome on pendentives. The entablature in the sanctuary has gilded detailing on the molding of its cornice and architrave, which is echoed on the lunette arches enclosing the pendentives and on the dome cornice.

The lunettes, pendentives and dome were frescoed by Bernardino Gagliardi. The far lunette shows St Irene Healing St Sebastian, the dome shows God the Father with Angels and the four pendentives feature allegorical figures: Faith, Charity, Fortitude and Repentance. The side lunettes have a window each, flanked by a pair of angels.

The polychrome marble altar aedicule features a pair of red marble Corinthian columns, supporting the ends of a broken triangular pediment on posts. A cross finial is inserted into the pediment. Where the altarpiece used to be you can now see the 10th century frescoes in the apse.

A wall cupboard on the left has a frame dated to the late 10th century.

### Old frescoes

The 10th century paintings in the apse were preserved when the church was rebuilt, through being concealed by the altar aedicule.

The archivolt of the conch arch has foliage decoration, with a central chi-rho symbol.

The upper register in the conch shows Christ between St Sebastian on the right with St Zoticus on the left, accompanied by St Lawrence and St Stephen, two martyred deacons. Below this is a band showing the Lamb of God with twelve sheep signifying the apostles, and under this in turn is the almost effaced epigraph mentioning Petrus Medicus the sponsor. The lower register shows Our Lady flanked by two angels and accompanied by the virgin martyrs SS Agnes, Catherine, Lucy and Cecilia.

Under this is a separate fresco added in the 11th century, showing St Benedict between SS Peter and Paul. This is signed by a monk called Benedict.

The far sanctuary wall used to be frescoed, and on either side of the aedicule can be seen fragments of three registers. The top featured The Twenty-four Elders of the Apocalypse, the middle showed The Twelves Apostles Being Carried by Prophets and the bottom had Saints Carrying Crowns.

The nave side walls had two lost fresco cycles, one featuring The Life of Christ and the other, The Martyrdoms of SS Sebastian and Zoticus. In the spandrels of the triumphal arch were figures of Peter Medicus and his wife, together with six other donors bringing gifts.

### Access

The church is open (unofficial source):

Weekdays 9:00 to 12:30, 15:00 to 19:00. Closed Sundays.

However, the writer has found it closed during those times.

The church is surrounded by the "Archaeological Area of the Roman Forum and the Palatine Hill", for which there is an entrance fee. However the Via di San Bonaventura leading from the Colosseum is a public street, and gives free access to the church and to San Bonaventura al Palatino beyond. It should be remembered that the street is a dead end, and there is no entry to the Area from it. The church and its grounds are not part of the Area.

### Liturgy

According to an unofficial source, Mass is celebrated at 19:00 and 20:00 on weekdays, but not on Sundays.

The church is popular for marriages, and these seem to constitute its pastoral justification. In practice, it is a marriage chapel under the authority of the parish of Santa Maria in Campitelli, the office of which needs to be contacted by any interested parties. It is also advertised as being available for group events of a religious nature.

**Location:**

1 Via San Bonaventura

Palatine archaeological area

Coordinates: [41° 53' 22.84" N, 12° 29' 19.14" E](#)

Open: 9-12 15-18 Sunday closed

## External links

Roman Churches Wiki

[http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/San\\_Sebastiano\\_al\\_Palatino](http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/San_Sebastiano_al_Palatino)

Official diocesan web-page

[http://www.vicariatusurbis.org/?page\\_id=188&ID=846](http://www.vicariatusurbis.org/?page_id=188&ID=846)

Italian Wikipedia page

[https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiesa\\_di\\_San\\_Sebastiano\\_al\\_Palatino](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiesa_di_San_Sebastiano_al_Palatino)

German Wikipedia page

[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/San\\_Sebastiano\\_al\\_Palatino](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Sebastiano_al_Palatino)

Nolli map

<http://nolli.uoregon.edu/map/index.html?xurl=-26.333&yurl=-24.705&surl=2000>

Church's website

<http://www.vicariatusurbis.org/SanSebastianoalPalatino/>

"De Alvariis" gallery on Flickr

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dealvariis/sets/72157621319640055/>

"Medioevo.roma" web-page

<http://www.medioevo.roma.it/html/architettura/chiese-int/chiese-i10.htm#spal>

"Romasegreta" web-page

<https://www.romasegreta.it/campitelli/palatino/s-sebastiano-al-palatino.html>

"Culturacheappaga" blog-page

<http://culturacheappaga.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/roma-medievale-i-dipinti-murali-di.html>