

# San Biagio de Mercato

(Ruined)



San Biagio in Mercatello is a ruined mediaeval church on the Piazza Aracoeli. Pictures of the ruins on Wikimedia Commons. [1]

The dedication was originally to St Blaise, but later to St Rita of Cascia.

## History

It was built in the early mediaeval period, utilizing the ruins of an ancient Roman insula or tenement block. Evidence for its foundation is lacking (the scholar Armellini was in error in dating a tomb epigraph it contained to the 11th century), but it is listed in the *Catalogus Camerarii* of 1192. It became a parish church, initially at least dependent on San Marco.

In the 14th and 15th centuries the church had the Buccabella family as its patrons, and it was used as a place of burial by them. Several funerary inscriptions for them are on record.

In 1658 it became the headquarters of a confraternity of expatriates from Cascia known as the *Confraternita della Corona di Spine*. They were promulgating the devotion to their compatriot Rita of Cascia, who had been beatified in 1627.

On this confraternity's orders, the church was rebuilt subsequently by Carlo Fontana, the façade being completed in 1665. It was henceforward known as San Biagio e Beata Rita. The devotion to the latter became extremely popular, as she became the patron of hopeless causes and of abused wives. (Many Roman churches have a statue of her, in a black habit and looking at a crucifix which she is holding.)

As a result, she was canonized in 1900 and the church was re-dedicated to her in the same year. By this time, plans to demolish it, in order to excavate the ancient Roman remains incorporated into the structure, had already been proposed for over a decade. However, popular devotion to St Rita managed to preserve the church for another quarter of a century.

In 1904 the Arciconfraternita di Santa Rita da Cascia (as the confraternity had become) moved out to Santa Rita da Cascia alle Vergini. The responsibility for the building passed to the *Comunità dei Pizzicagnoli*, which was a guild of specialist food merchants. On the feast-day of the saint, 22 March, they paid for a rose to be given to each person visiting the church.

However, the little church was in the way of the great Fascist scheme for a wide motor road, the *Via del Mare*, which was to be built from the *Piazza Venezia* to the *Lido*. As a result, in 1928 most of the church was dismantled and the materials put into store. In the process of demolition, remains of the former mediaeval church as well as of the Roman *insula* were uncovered and these were preserved.

In 1940, the dismantled church was re-built in *Via Montanara*. This was the only one of the churches demolished by the Fascists to be so re-erected. However, this new church of Santa Rita da Cascia in *Campitelli*, the lineal descendant of this one, is now itself deconsecrated because no-one actually wanted to use it.

### **Location**

Before the massive re-ordering of the street plan of the area beginning after 1870, the church was on the *Via della Pedacchia* and was separated from the stairs leading up to Santa Maria in Aracoeli by a domestic building which had five storeys in the 19th century.

The *Piazza d'Aracoeli* was then a long rectangular piazza running north-westwards to the Fountain of Pope Sixtus V, and it was in this piazza that the city's mediaeval market was held. All the streets leading off it were narrow, including the *Via della Pedacchia* which led off to Santa Maria di Loreto. The church did not face onto the piazza, but was visible from it at an angle. This influenced Maderno's design.

The site of the façade is given by tracing a line to the left of the bottom of the stairs leading up to Santa Maria in Aracoeli. This was the old street frontage, which is now in the roadway. The surviving little campanile was at the far right hand corner of the church.

### **Appearance before Demolition**

Despite its impressive Baroque façade, this was a very small church. The plan was that of an elongated octagon superimposed on a Latin cross, with a short nave, two tiny square side chapels and then a segmental apse.

As mentioned, the façade was meant to be viewed obliquely, from the piazza. There were two storeys. The first had four Corinthian pilasters on high plinths, the pair flanking the main entrance tripletted and the other pair on the outer corners doubletted and wrapped around the corners. In between the pilasters were three large arched recesses, the central one being larger and containing the entrance approached by a flight of steps. The actual entrance was in the back of this recess, the archivolt being molded and supported by a pair of Doric pilasters of an ogee section the capitals of which were continued as string courses on either side. The other two recesses had lunette windows over large vertical panels. Over the entrance was a horizontal elliptical oeil de boeuf window, and over the side recesses was a pair of square ones. The central window was topped by a coat-of-arms in relief, and the pilasters supported an entablature with a projecting cornice.

The second storey had three frontages, the middle one facing straight ahead and the two side ones at an angle and slightly curved. The corners were occupied by pairs of conjoined Corinthian pilasters, and each frontage had a large arched recess matching those below. The central one contained a large window, while the side ones had lunettes. A triangular pediment surmounted the central frontage. Flaming torch finials occupied the outer corners of the first storey, and the four corners of the second one. The tip of the pediment had a cross finial.

The rebuilding of this church as Santa Rita da Cascia in Campitelli ensured the preservation of the façade, except for the coat-of-arms.

Guide books of the 19th century describe the church as containing no works of art worth noticing.

### **Surviving remnants**

During the demolition, two features were allowed to remain as they were attached to the remains of the ancient Roman insula. These are the remnants of a tiny mediaeval campanile, the smallest in the city (the one at San Benedetto a Piscinula is the smallest in use) and an ancient fresco in the former apse.

The campanile is Romanesque, and is a fragment. It has probably lost some height. What survives is two storeys and one face of the third; the top two storeys have arcades of two arches separated by very thin columns. This structure looks as if it was incorporated into the body of the church as rebuilt by Fontana, as it looks too low to have served as the Baroque church's campanile.

The mediaeval apse fresco depicts the Resurrection of Christ, surmounted by symbols of the Evangelists and the Lamb of God on the intrados of the archivolt. Despite having some protection from the sun given by a little tiled canopy, it is open to the effects of the weather and is decaying.

### **Location:**

Address: Piazza del Campidoglio

Coord: [41° 53' 38.8" N, 12° 28' 56.2" E](#)

**Links and sources:**

1. [http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/San\\_Biagio\\_in\\_Mercatello](http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/San_Biagio_in_Mercatello)

2. [http://www.info.roma.it/monumenti\\_dettaglio.asp?  
ID\\_schede=2003&&monocolonna&css\\_maiuscolo=maiuscolo](http://www.info.roma.it/monumenti_dettaglio.asp?ID_schede=2003&&monocolonna&css_maiuscolo=maiuscolo)

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:San\\_Biagio\\_de\\_Mercato\\_\(Rome\)](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:San_Biagio_de_Mercato_(Rome))