

THE LATERAN BAPTISTERY (San Giovanni in Fonte) is the baptismal chapel of the Lateran Basilica, Rome's cathedral, which was founded by the Emperor Constantine on a site next to the imperial Lateran Palace (p. 13). Constantine also founded the Lateran Baptistery. But it was completed in its present form during the reign of Pope Sixtus III (432–440). During the seventeenth century the Baptistery was restored and modernized several times, particularly under Pope Urban VIII (1623–1644). The building's ten *porphyry* columns (two on the façade and eight inside) are said to have been collected by Constantine himself. It is not known, however, whether the shafts of these are spolia from older buildings or whether they were in fact stock items, since new architectural elements in porphyry were still being manufactured and imported during Constantine's day. Apart from its very fine structural elements the Baptistery also contains beautiful and historically important fifth- and seventh-century mosaics in the apses of the *narthex* and the adjoining chapels.

In keeping with the great contemporary interest in numbers and their significance the Baptistery's octagonal form and the eight porphyry columns inside it were meant to symbolize resurrection and the promise of this inherent in the ritual of baptism.

The exterior

This small octagonal building was built partly over the remains of the bathhouse (*thermae*) of a Roman villa and of another fourth-century building. It is fronted on the south side by a *narthex* (access – by request – through the manned entrance to the right of the Baptistery), the doorway of which was once framed by a couple of *fluted* Corinthian pilasters in *pavonazzetto* marble (first century BC), though the one to the right has since been lost (pp. 86–87). The

Noteworthy nearby churches

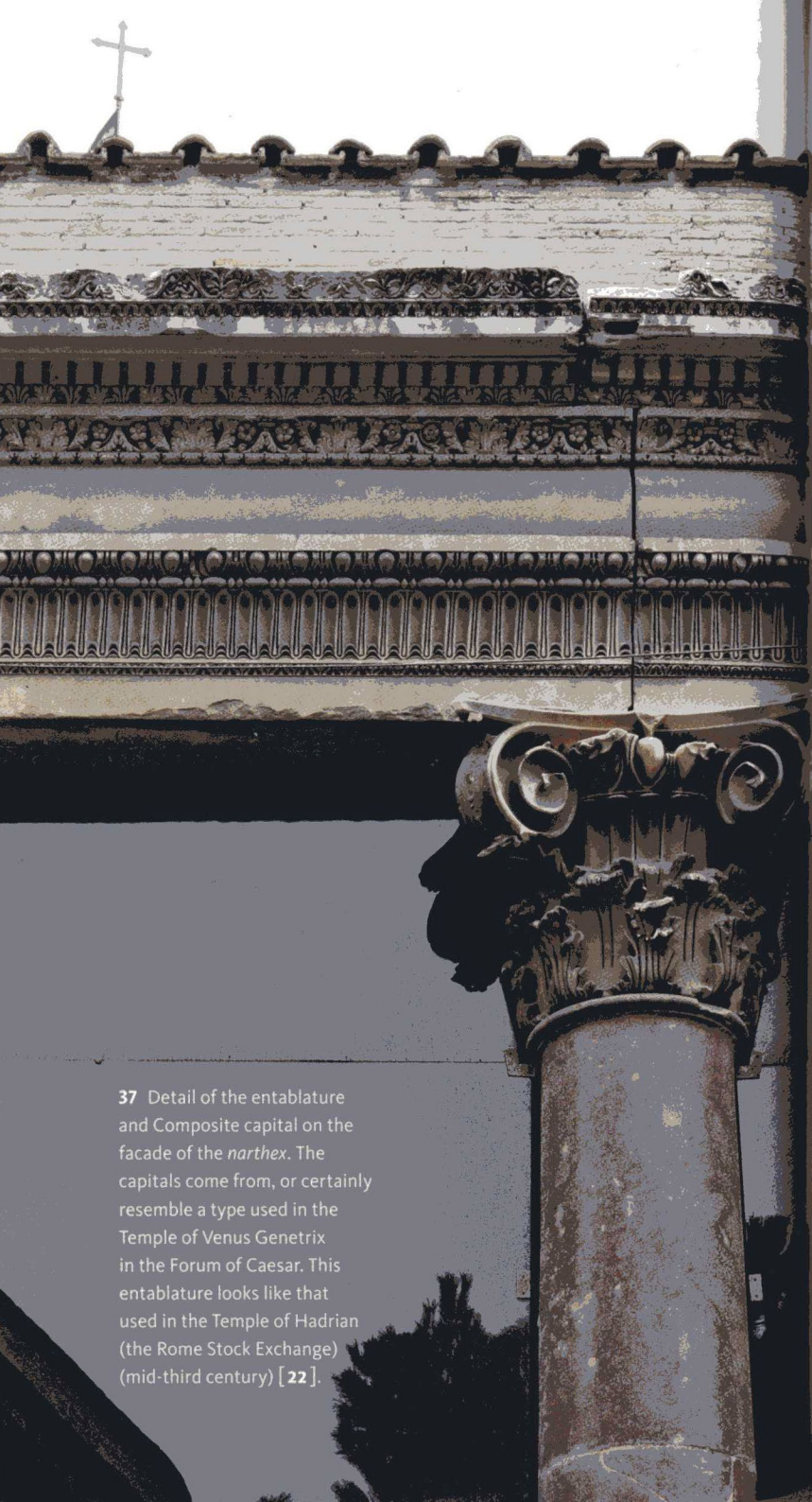
- 7 San Giovanni in Laterano [5]
- 3 **San Clemente**
- 9 Santi Giovanni e Paolo
- 14 Santa Maria in Domnica [18]
- 28 Sancta Sanctorum
- 11 **Santo Stefano Rotondo**
- 26 Santi Quattro Coronati

door in the centre is flanked by two massive *porphyry* columns (their shafts made up of two sections) with Composite capitals (produced in Asia Minor, early second century) and exquisitely carved, richly ornamented bases of white marble (first century) [36] [37].

Porphyry itself was strongly associated with dignity and power: like purple garments the purple stone from Egypt was a symbol of status, and was reserved for emperors – used, for example, for imperial sarcophagi. Christianity borrowed these badges of grandeur and rank – the stone and the colour – from the emperor and assigned them instead to Jesus Christ. That columns made from such a heavily symbolic material are crowned by Composite capitals, with their apparent triumphal associations (the Christian triumph

36 Detail of the white marble base supporting the *porphyry* column to the right of the entrance (first century).





37 Detail of the entablature and Composite capital on the facade of the *narthex*. The capitals come from, or certainly resemble a type used in the Temple of Venus Genetrix in the Forum of Caesar. This entablature looks like that used in the Temple of Hadrian (the Rome Stock Exchange) (mid-third century) [22].

over death through baptism), can be interpreted as yet another indication, on the building's façade, of what lies within and of its function as a baptismal chapel [37].

These capitals resemble those in the temple to Venus Genetrix rebuilt in the Trajanic era (98–117). Little now survives of this temple, the rearmost inner chamber containing the Composite capitals is gone (not surprisingly, if the capitals were removed to another building). The remains of the temple stand in the Forum of Caesar, which was originally a venue for public and government affairs: a place with ancient Roman and pagan overtones which remained in use until the Christian takeover of the city at the beginning of the fifth century. If the capitals did come from there then the Christian builders of the Baptistery may have wished to make the point that the principles of renewal and procreation embodied in Venus Genetrix (the life-giving mother goddess) were now replaced by baptism, through which man was born into a new life. Whatever the case, it is fair to say that the materials which had originally been considered appropriate for a temple to Venus Genetrix must also have appealed to the builders who chose these elements for the Baptistery building (p. 57). This applies both to the exuberant leafy ornamentation and the triumphal connotations of the capitals.

Resting on the pilaster and the porphyry columns is an entablature very like the one on the Temple of Hadrian (mid-second century) on the Piazza di Pietra in the centre of the city (p. 57), which was first transformed into a palace and later, in 1879, converted into the Rome stock exchange [22]. Another section of the same entablature has been used inside the Baptistery [41]: an *architrave* (second-third century) doing service here as a *trabeation*. The large marble panels on either side of the door are later additions (as is the doorway itself): this side of the *narthex* was probably open or only screened by some sort of grille.

Note the various little crosses – probably ‘Christianizing’ marks – carved into the marble doorposts (see p. 61) [43] [44].



The interior

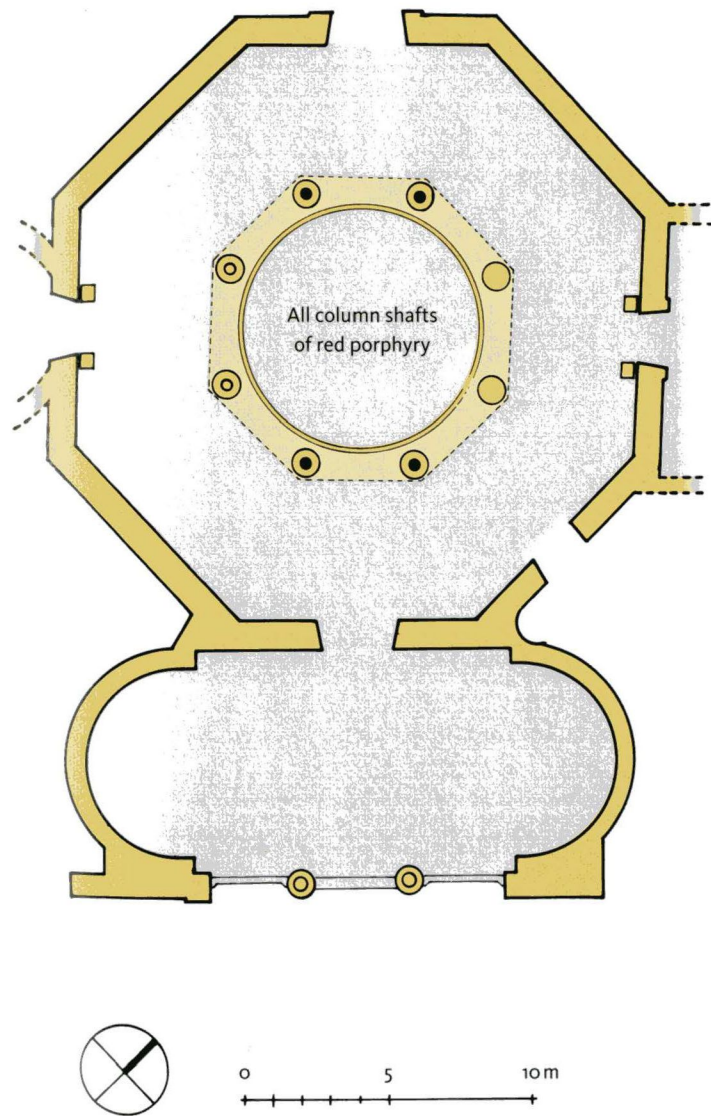
If it is not possible to gain admission to the Baptistery by the original entrance, through the *narthex*, visitors must use the newer entrance on the opposite, north, side of the building, from Piazza di San Giovanni in Laterano. This means cutting through the Baptistery to reach the *narthex*. One of the apses in the *narthex* is decorated with a magnificent mosaic of vines dating from the fifth



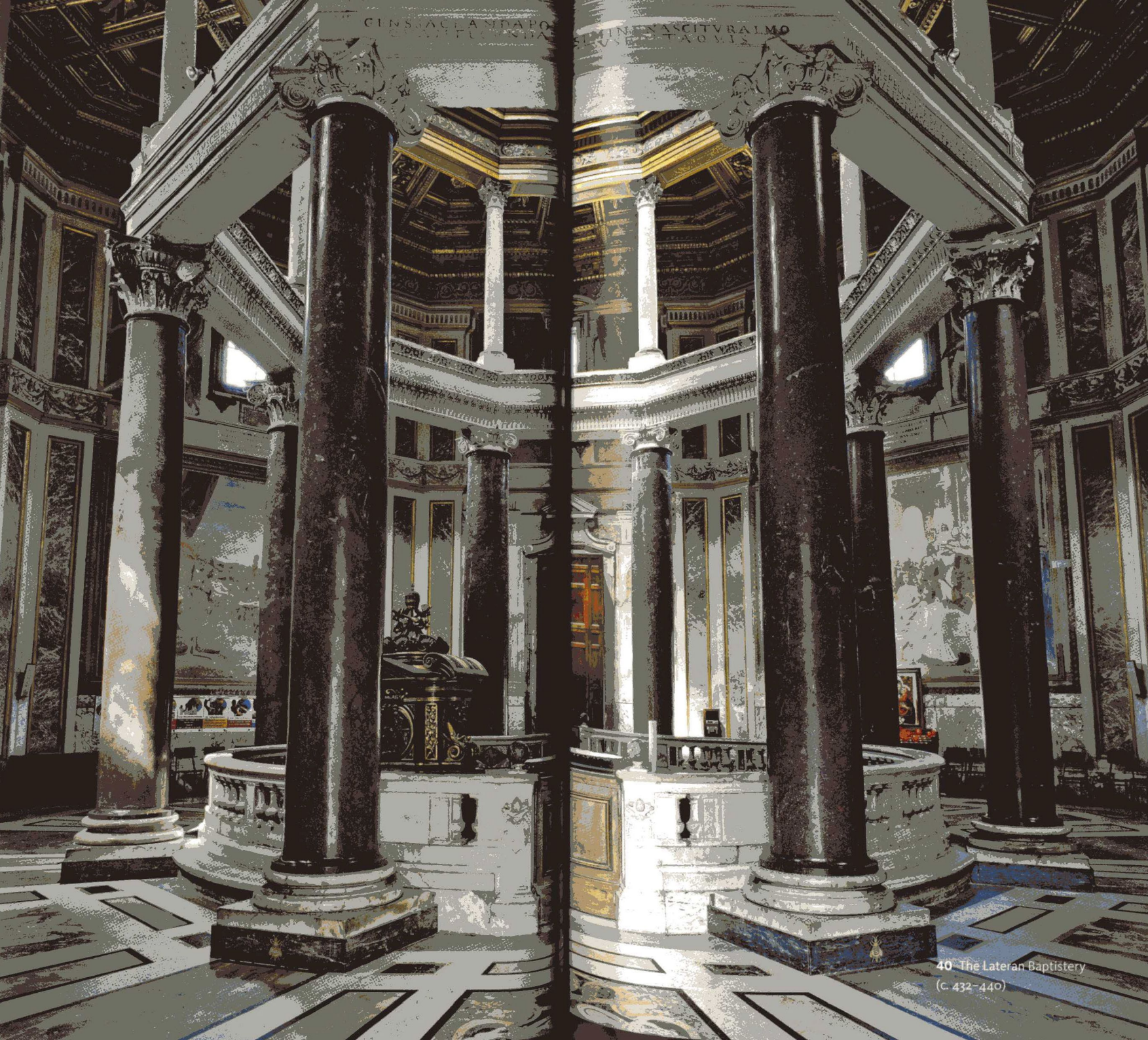
38 The wall of the Baptistery *narthex*, showing the remains of the original *opus sectile* revetment: colourful marble mosaics from the fifth century.

century. On the wall to the left of the apse are the remains of a splendid ornamented marble *revetment* in *opus sectile* [38]. The walls of the octagonal central area – and of most other Early Christian churches – were originally decorated in the same way. The Baptistery consists of an *ambulatory* running round the eight porphyry columns encircling the font in the centre, which was designed for full immersion in water [39] [40]. The columns are of varying thicknesses and heights, their differences evened out by capitals of different orders (and heights): two Ionic (second century), a couple of Corinthian (first century) and a couple of Composites (late second century) [41]. The columns were restored or, in the case of the Ionic pair, greatly remodelled in the seventeenth century and adorned with ‘Barberini bees’. These bees are the symbol of the Barberinis, a powerful Roman family, one of whose scions was the man behind the Baptistery’s refurbishment: Pope Urban VIII (1623–1644). The column shafts were restored and the bases replaced [42]. The columns support an entablature from the same source as the one over the entrance [37]. This has been carved up, in most unclassical fashion, into eight sections to fit the building’s octagonal shape.

-  Ionic
-  Corinthian
-  Composite

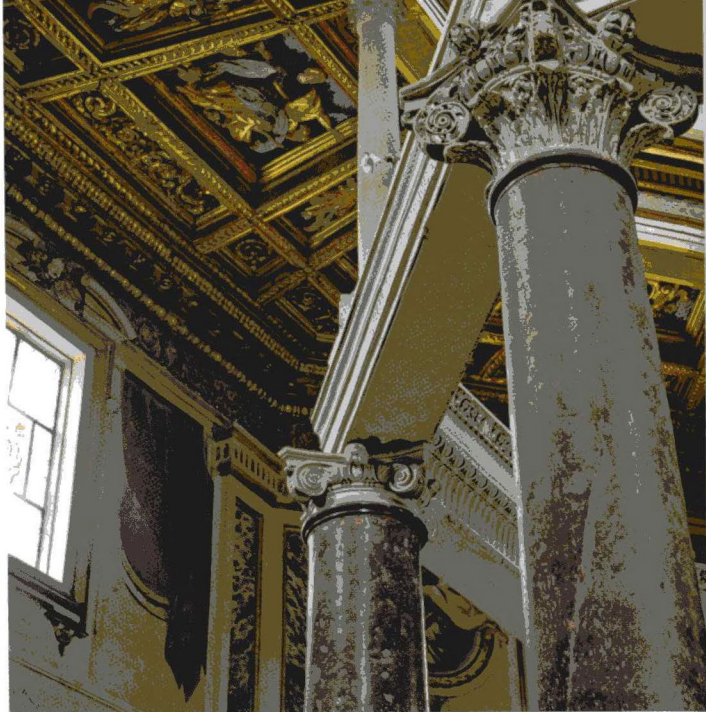


39 Floorplan of the Baptistery in its fifth-century form showing the arrangement of the capitals.



GENS ACLENDAPOR SIMINI NASCITVR ALMO
SUSSE FLUMINA TAOMIS

40 The Lateran Baptistery
(c. 432–440)



41 Detail of the entablature showing one Ionic and one Composite capital. Note the similarity between the inner side of the entablature and the entablature used on the facade of the *narthex* [37] [40]. The only difference is that here the entablature is narrower because the smooth bottom band (*fascia*) has been sawn off. The outer side of the entablature has been furnished with an inscription from the time of Sixtus III. As can be seen most clearly on the Ionic capital, these capitals were originally made for narrower shafts.

It has also been shortened by the removal of the bottom bands (*fascia*) [41]. And, last but not least, the ornamented side – the ancient ‘front’ has been turned inwards to face the font. Pope Sixtus III had a series of verses on the sacrament of baptism inscribed on the undecorated, outward facing side; the assurance of rebirth contained in the last lines of the catechism on the west-facing section of the entablature chimes with the triumphal nature of the two Composite capitals on the west side.

Atop the porphyry columns stand smaller, white marble columns with Composite capitals, these last being seventeenth-century, bee-adorned replacements for the original spolia capitals. The chapel ceiling, ornamentation and wall paintings all date from restoration and modernization work carried out during the sixteenth and, more especially, the seventeenth centuries.

On the right-hand side of the ambulatory, just past the entrance from the narthex, is the entrance to the Chapel of San Venanzio (Cappella di San Venanzio) constructed by Popes John (640–642) IV and Theodore I (642–649) in an older column-borne building. The upper part of the end wall and the apse are decorated with beautiful mosaics from this period and on the wall on the left is a Corinthian *cipollino* column from the original building. On both the east and west sides of the Baptistery ambulatory are spolia doorways leading to two chapels built by Pope Hilary (461–468). The door of the eastern chapel (Capella di San Giovanni Evangelista) is framed by porphyry columns with bases and Corinthian capitals of white marble topped by an architrave. Again, here, note the little crosses carved on the right-hand doorpost. These may have been put there when the chapel was consecrated or possibly later, in the twelfth century, when new bronze doors were installed. Or these could be less ‘official’ markings left there by centuries of pilgrims [44]. This chapel has an exceptionally early and beautiful vaulted mosaic ceiling from the fifth century. The door of the western chapel (Capella del Battista) is also flanked by trabeated porphyry columns, but here the bases and Corinthian capitals are of green porphyry (serpentine) and have been set on porphyry *plinths* [45]. The bronze doors here are the original doors from Pope Hilary’s time.

42 Detail of columns showing clear signs of restoration to the shaft and a new base dating from the seventeenth-century renovation of the church.





43 Cross carved into the right-hand doorpost at the entrance to the *narthex* (see [36]).



44 Cross on the doorpost at the entrance to the Capella del Battista.



45 The Hilary Chapel (Capella del Battista) with porphyry columns supporting a marble trabeation. The bases and Corinthian capitals are of green porphyry (serpentine).

Santa Costanza (c. 337–351)

Via Nomentana 349

9.00 a.m.–12 noon + 4.00 p.m.–18.30 p.m.

(Closed Sunday mornings and holidays)



SANTA COSTANZA was built as an imperial mausoleum (c. 337–351). It came to house the earthly remains of the daughter of the Emperor Constantine, Constantina (died 354) and her sister Helena. Constantina was laid to rest there in a splendid *porphyry* sarcophagus (the one on display is a copy, the original is in the Vatican Museum). She was later declared a saint and in the Middle Ages the building was duly consecrated as a church (first written mention of it as Santa Costanza in 865). The mausoleum was built next to and in connection with a large U-shaped *funerary basilica* (the ruins of the outer walls can still be seen) built above an underground cemetery (*catacombs*) [60]. These fourth-century buildings were supplemented by the present Sant’Agnese basilica 2 in the seventh century. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the mausoleum was referred to as an ‘ancient temple to Bacchus’, but it has never served any such purpose. One reason for this post-antiquity association of the mausoleum with Bacchus, the ancient god of wine, could be the wine-harvest scenes depicted in two of the mosaics on the *ambulatory* vault and in the reliefs on the porphyry sarcophagus.

Exterior

The small central building is cylindrical, with a low main building and a tall central *tambour* which was originally crowned by a dome [60]. It was constructed, in typical Early Christian style, out of plain, unadorned brick, but when first built it was encircled by an external colonnade. Thus it harked back to the ancient Roman tradition for circular temples as well as pointing the way forward to what was to become common building practice in Early Christian times and the early Middle Ages: the exterior of the building is of plain stone, the columns moved inside to grace the interior. One salient feature of the church is the circle of twelve windows in the *tambour*, corresponding to the *clerestory* windows of Early Christian and Medieval basilicas, as seen, for example, in Santa Sabina 10 [99]. The mausoleum has originally included a small *narthex* of which only parts of the side walls and their apse walls have survived (pp. 124–125) [62].

Noteworthy nearby churches

- 2 **Sant’Agnese fuori le Mura**, directly adjacent to Santa Costanza.



60 In the foreground, the ruins of Sant’Agnese’s original coemeterium or *funerary basilica* (c. 350). On the left in the background the church of Sant’Agnese 2, on the right the mausoleum, now Santa Costanza (c. 337–351).

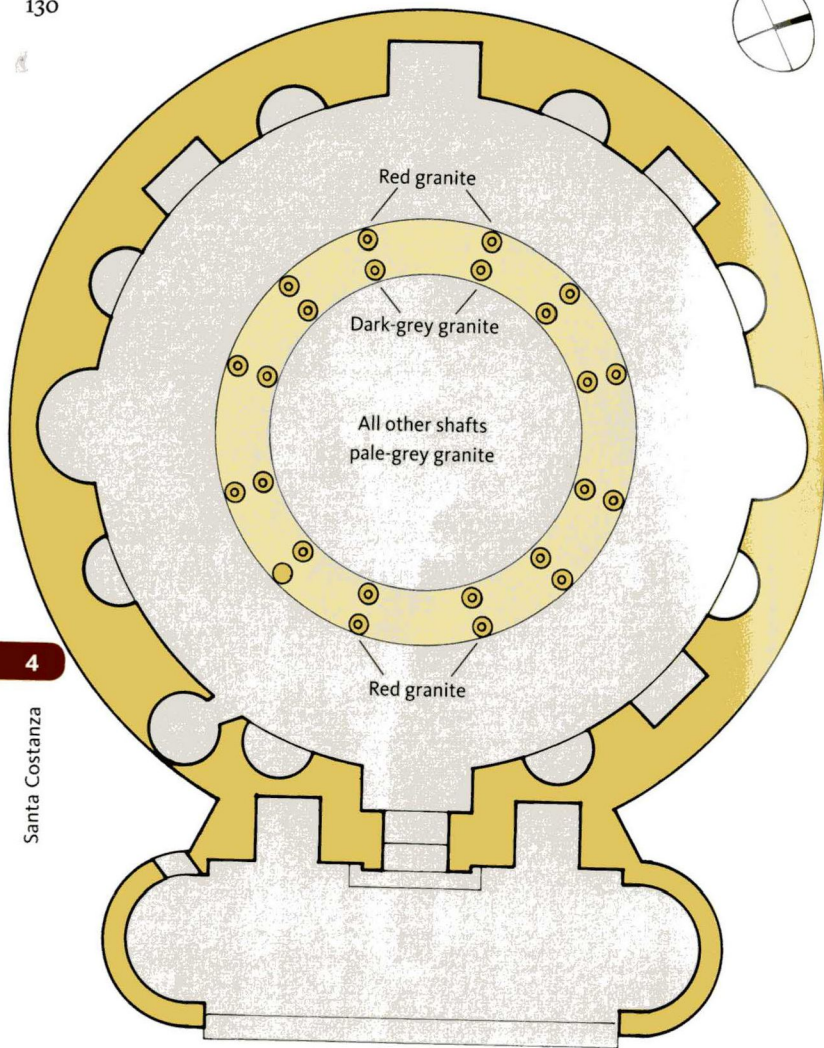
Interior

Inside, the church consists of a circular passage or *ambulatory* running round a high central space [61] [62]. The ambulatory has a barrel-vaulted ceiling beautifully decorated with mosaics dating from the building’s construction (c. 350). The mosaics are executed as two identical sets of panels facing one another across the axis from the entrance to the apse, with a single cross-patterned panel above the entrance. The central dome was also decorated with fourth-century mosaics, but these have been lost and were replaced in the early seventeenth century by frescoes which have since also disappeared. Typically for their time these mosaics – which we only know of second-hand, from Renaissance drawings and descriptions – featured candelabra and vine motifs interspersed with small figures and scenes from the Old and New Testaments. The walls were originally covered with marble revetment reaching all the way up to the windows (as can still be seen today in some church apses, above the colonnades in Santa Sabina 10 [101] and in the *narthex* of the Lateran Baptistery 1 [38]).

The ambulatory is separated from the central space by a colonnade in the same way that the side aisles are separated from the nave in the standard basilica. The twelve pairs of columns, which at first glance may look identical, are actually a discreet mix of spolia or stock elements. Column shafts of a different colour from the others



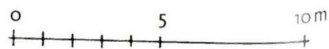
61 Santa Costanza (c. 337–351)
looking from the entrance towards
the apse with its imperial *porphyry*
sarcophagus (a copy, the original
is now in the Vatican Museum).



4

Santa Costanza

- ⊙ Composite
- Corinthian

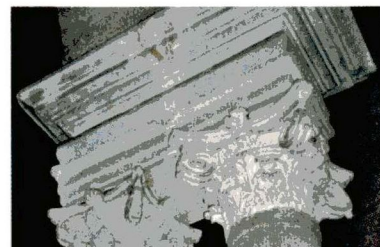


62 Floorplan of Santa Costanza.

have been used to define a central axis: the two columns directly opposite the entrance in the outer circle are of red granite, as opposed to the other twelve, pale-grey shafts (granito della Troade). And on the other side, in the columns farthest away from the entrance, not only do we have two red granite shafts in the outer circle, in the inner ring are a couple of dark-grey, polished granite shafts (granito del Foro) [64]. The arcade opening thus highlighted provided the setting for the imperial *porphyry* sarcophagus. These arcade openings are, moreover, slightly wider than the rest, accentuating the longitudinal axis, from the entrance to the apse, as well as the transverse axis, thus hinting discreetly at a cruciform composition. The combination of the cross shape, which is repeated in the mosaic over the entrance, and the twelve pairs of columns, which could be seen as representing the twelve apostles, has probably been regarded as a concrete illustration of the building's Christian nature. Another of the motifs in the barrel-vaulted ceiling and on the sarcophagus – the grape-harvesting 'putti' or cherubs – can likewise be construed as a new, Christian reference to the Eucharist, although these images can also be regarded as classic Bacchanalian scenes. During the fourth-century transition from the old, pagan Roman civilization to the new Christian culture such suggestions and ambiguities were more the rule than the exception. In the niches of the 'transverse axis' are early medieval apse mosaics featuring images of Christ, greatly restored in 1843. The age of these mosaics is debatable: they may date from as far back as the second half of the fourth century.


The space is defined still further and the impression of a hierarchy reinforced by the use of two different sets of Composite capitals. In the inner circle an elaborate set of capitals from the time of the Emperor Augustus (early first century) have been used, while the outer circle contains smaller, somewhat later and less intricately carved capitals from the Severan period (c. 200/ early third century) [63]. This marked the progression from the ambulatory up

63 The two types of Composite capital: on the left the outer, more modest Severan form (c. 200/early third century); on the right, from the inner circle: a large, ornate Augustinian version (end of first century BC). The shaft and capital of the left-hand column did not originally belong together, hence the difference in their diameters.



4

Santa Costanza



64 The two pairs of columns supporting the arcade at the top of the central axis in Santa Costanza and fronting the apse containing the sarcophagus. The outer columns are of red granite, the inner two are of dark-grey, polished granite, contrasting with the other unpolished, pale-grey granite shafts in the circle (see for example the two columns on the far right).

to the holy of holies, which is to say the central space under the light-filled, originally mosaic-adorned and hence colourful and reflective dome.

Although this is an imperial building, its construction has evidently not only involved the use of recycled elements or stock pieces selected and combined with a great deal of thought and care, in order to achieve variety rather than homogeneity of form. Great emphasis has been placed on subtle variations in colour and decorative detail.

So it is particularly interesting to note how one capital in the outer ring stands out from all the rest: a single Corinthian piece breaking the run of Composite capitals [65]. It is hard to imagine that the builders could not have got hold of one last Composite capital in the same style as the rest if they were aiming for a uniform effect. The church as a whole perfectly exemplifies the way in which its builders employed delicate and subtle variations in texture, finish and tone. It seems likely, therefore, that they deliberately chose to insert this one capital of a different order. Positioned as it is, as the last (or the first, depending on which way one moves around the ambulatory) column before the pair flanking the entrance to the church, it may have functioned as a marker, indicating the end of the circular colonnade – a visual full stop – before the entrance.

The capitals of each pair of columns are topped by a so-called *impost block*, a reference to the entablature which traditionally ran across the columns in Roman architecture. As with the exterior, the building's interior epitomizes a kind of hybrid or transitional phase, between the traditional approach to the columns as carriers of a horizontal trabeation and what was to become the new solution in Early Christian architecture: the columned arcade. Viewed from the front the columns appear to be linked to an arcade; viewed from the side they seem to be carrying an entablature [61]. The columned arcade, a beautiful, early version of which can be seen in Santa Sabina 10 [99], was later to become the most popular option in the Middle Ages.

65 The last (or first – depending which way round one walks) couple of columns to the west of the entrance, with a Corinthian capital in the outer circle as opposed to the Composite capitals crowning all the other columns.



Santo Stefano Rotondo

(c. 460s)

Via di Santo Stefano Rotondo 6

9.30 a.m.–12.30 p.m. + Winter: 2.00 p.m.–5.00 p.m. /

Summer: 3.00 p.m.–6.00 p.m.

(closed Monday and Sunday afternoons).

The mithraeum is seldom
open to visitors.



THE SANTO STEFANO ROTONDO of today is a somewhat reduced version of the original church, which was rebuilt during the Renaissance. But with its vast, circular chambers it is nonetheless a quite unique building as far as Rome is concerned. The church was probably founded in the early 460s and was consecrated during the reign of Pope Simplicius (468–483). It was erected (with imperial permission) on the site of an old barracks and, like San Clemente **3** [53], over a *mithraeum* (second century) which, in Santo Stefano is adorned with well-preserved frescoes (third century).

Exterior

In its original form the simple concentric, red-brick central building from the latter half of the fifth century seems to have been symmetrical in layout with no one main entrance. Under Pope Innocence II (1130–1143) it was furnished with a *portico* supported by four grey granite columns topped, not by capitals, but by white marble *imposts* (pp. 206–207).

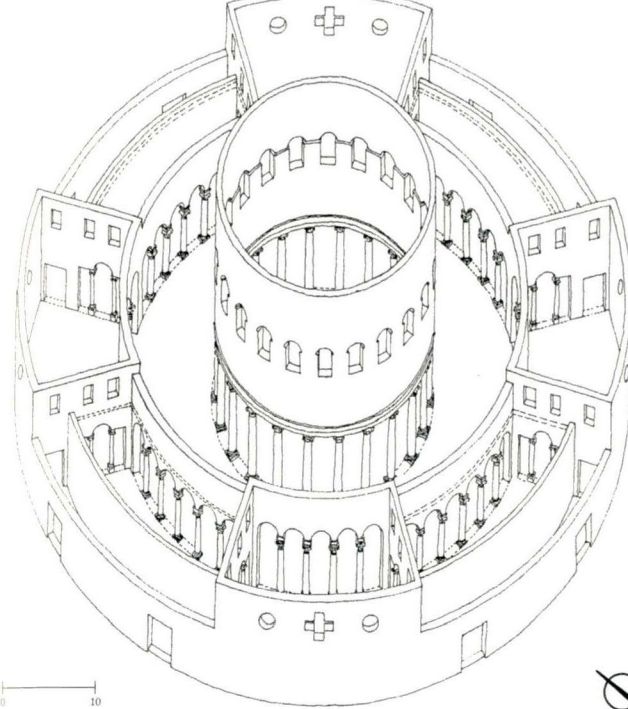
By the fifteenth century Santo Stefano was in serious danger of collapsing and Pope Nicholas V (1447–1455) commissioned architect Bernardo Rossellino (possibly assisted by the famous scholar and architect Leon Battista Alberti) to carry out restoration work on the church. This entailed tearing down the greater part of the outer, and apparently most dilapidated, ring of the building [102] [105].

Interior

The layout of the original, larger church was complex [102]. In its overall design it was a circular building with three concentric *ambulatories* surrounding a tall, drum-shaped central chamber. Onto this circular structure was superimposed the shape of a cross with each of the four arms ending in a large *narthex*-style chamber.

Noteworthy nearby churches

- 1** The Lateran Baptistery
- 7** San Giovanni in Laterano [5]
- 3** San Clemente
- 9** Santi Giovanni e Paolo
- 14** Santa Maria in Domnica [18]
- 26** Santi Quattro Coronati
- 28** Sancta Sanctorum



102 Santo Stefano Rotondo. Reconstruction of the original floorplan (according to Hugo Brandenburg).

The church could be entered through the *ambulatories* in the outer rings, which gave onto the four narthexes, and from these one could pass into the middle ambulatory or go straight into the ambulatory around the central chamber. Today the church is entered via the ambulatory to the right of the north-eastern narthex [103].

By the twelfth century, during the reign of Pope Innocence II (1130–1143), the tall drum-shaped wall of the central chamber was dangerously close to collapsing. It was therefore reinforced by the addition of an arcade consisting of three transverse arches supported in the centre by two colossal Corinthian columns in grey granite and at either end by a pier topped by a square Corinthian capital of grey-streaked (*Proconnesian*?) marble [107]. The cylindrical wall was further strengthened by the bricking up of fourteen of the *clerestory*'s twenty-two windows [104].

The columns used in the construction of the church are a combination of spolia and Late Antique elements, probably from one of the depots of serially produced pieces which were still to be found in the fifth century.

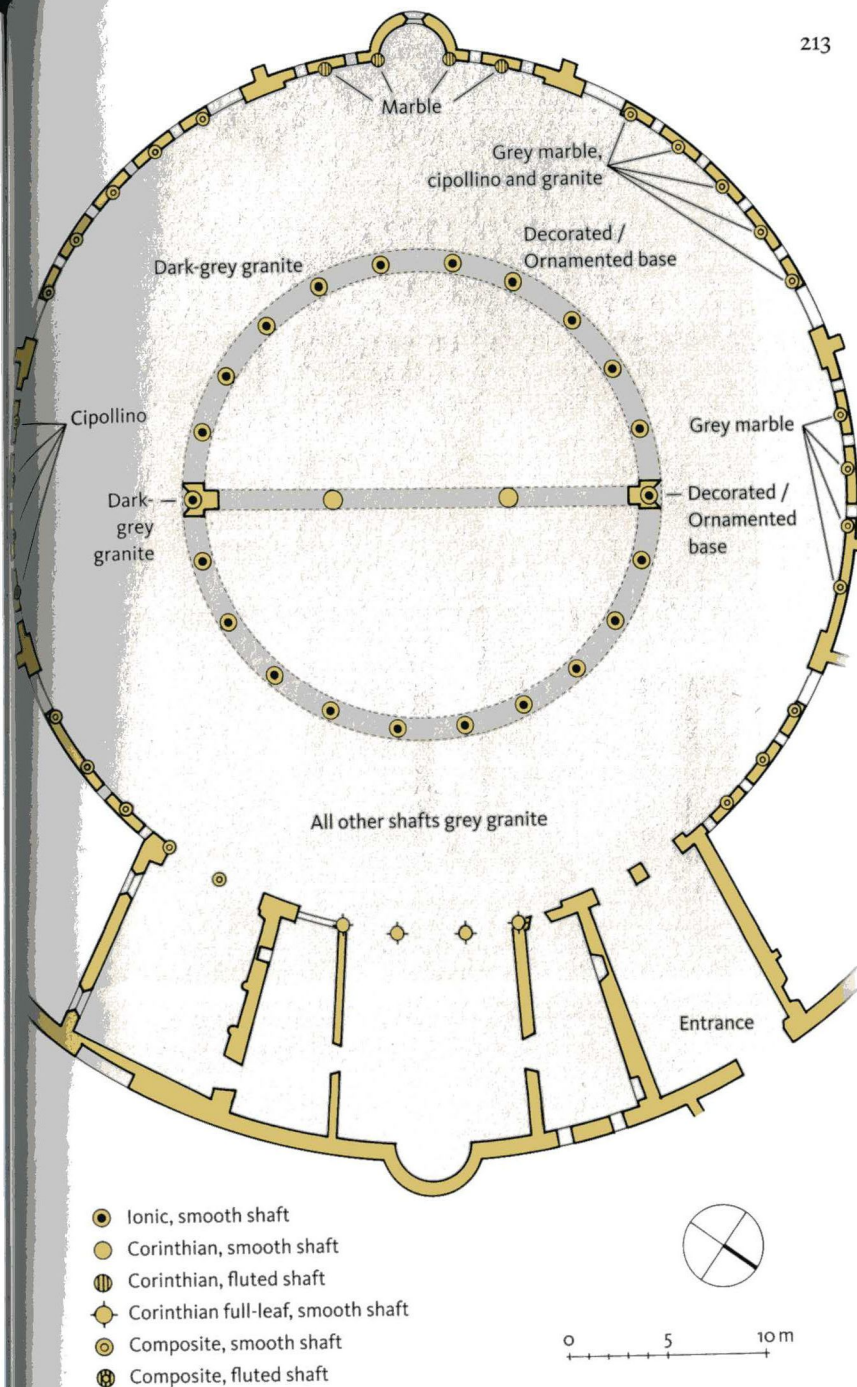


103 Santo Stefano Rotondo
viewed from the north-eastern
narthex (c. 460s).



104 Arcade supported by two huge spolia columns with grey granite shafts and Corinthian capitals. The arcade was built during the reign of Pope Innocence II (1130–1143) to reinforce the high walls of the central chamber which were in danger of collapsing.

The central chamber is bounded by a circle of twenty-two granite Ionic columns supporting a necessarily curving entablature of Proconnesian marble designed specifically for this building [103]. The Ionic capitals are of Roman make, probably from the late fourth or early fifth century. Minor differences in the size and style of the various elements suggest that these were stock items rather than pieces designed specially for the church. Certain spolia have been used specifically to highlight one axis – that formed by one arm of the implicit cross in the plan of the church – as the most important: the north-eastern narthex is separated from the central ambulatory by four spolia columns with grey-granite shafts and Corinthian full-leaf capitals (late second century) [106]. Opposite these, on the wall facing what was once the south-western narthex, are spolia columns with *fluted* marble shafts and Corinthian capitals (late second century) [108]. These capitals are thought to belong to the same series as those in Santa Sabina 10 [99] and must have lain unused for decades after the first twenty-four were used in the other church. These columns have ordinary fluted shafts as opposed to Santa Sabina's *half-fluted* versions. The transverse arm of the cross (where,



105 Floorplan of Santo Stefano Rotondo as it has looked since the demolition of the outer ring of chambers in the fifteenth century.



11 **106** Santo Stefano Rotondo: four spolia columns with granite shafts and Corinthian full-leaf capitals (late third century) separating the *ambulatory* from what was originally the north-eastern *narthex*.

originally, there would have been two additional narthexes) is defined by minor variations in the fabric of the columns. Where the circle of columns is crowned by an entablature the other columns support arcades. This is true both of the massive spolia columns in the two narthexes on the church's central axis and the smaller columns separating the central ambulatory from the outer one (most of which was torn down in the fifteenth century) [109]. The smaller columns in the outer circle are of different sorts of stone (*cipollino*, grey marble and granite) with Ionic capitals, also from the late fourth or early fifth century [105]. In the south-eastern arm



107 The outer piers of the arcade partially enclose the columns on the church's central axis. These columns are also of a slightly darker granite than the others. In addition, the one on the north side, seen here, stands on a distinctive ornamented base. The floor was being repaired when this picture was taken.

108 Four spolia columns with *fluted* marble shafts and Corinthian capitals (late third century). The columns are set into the outer wall of the church, but they originally separated the *ambulatory* from the south-western *narthex* which was removed in the fifteenth century when the church was rebuilt in a reduced form. The capitals probably come from the same source as the set of twenty-four in Santa Sabina **10** [101].

