



THE MONUMENTAL COMPLEX OF SANT'AGNESE, A VISIT NOT TO BE MISSED

ROMA - MAUSOLEUM OF SANTA COSTANZA

The ruins of the Basilica of Sant'Agnese (fourth century) stand in Rome, along Via Nomentana, two miles from the Aurelian Walls and near an ancient catacomb with the remains of a few Christian martyrs. Adjoining the outer wall of the south side of the Basilica there is the mausoleum of Constantina Augusta, Santa Costanza. It consists of a valuable testimony of the early Christian architecture, whose outside simplicity introduces to a surprisingly opulent interior.

BASILICA OF SANT'AGNESE

The Basilica of Sant'Agnese was built between 337 and 351 at the will of the eldest daughter of Constantino, Constantina

Augusta, in the very years in which the empress lived in Rome, between the death of her first husband Annibaliano, King of Pontus, and the subsequent marriage with Constantino Gallo, Caesar of the East, which led her to settle in Antioch. On the land of Via Nomentana, where there was the tomb of the virgin-martyr Sant'Agnese - dead just when she was thirteen years old, a basilica in her honour was built at the will of Costantina, that was a fervent devotee of the saint. So it was erected the largest ambulatory basilica, with the nave and two side aisles (98 meters long and 40 metres wide), of which unfortunately only a few ruins remain today: they consist of the outer wall of the west side, whose apse was supported by high substructures, necessary because of the slope of the land.

The excavations have revealed the presence of the remains of some Christian martyrs under the floor of the basilica. Compared to the previous ambulatory basilicas, the plan of the Basilica of Sant'Agnese was considerably more detailed and more evolved: it was made of alternating bricks and tufa and, thanks to the rectangular windows, a widespread and strong lighting was provided inside the church. A vestibule led into a prestigious mausoleum: the Mausoleum of Constantina, now Santa Costanza, surprisingly survived up to the present days. In the same complex is also situated the Church of Sant'Agnese Fuori le Mura, dating back to the seventh century, one of the most interesting ancient Roman churches, especially for the mosaics of the apse, among the most beautiful ones in Rome.

MAUSOLEUM OF SANTA COSTANZA

Mausoleum of Constantina, now known as Santa Costanza

Even if subjected to numerous restoration works, the Mausoleum is the only part of the complex, built at the will of Constantina, that still survives. Erected in the mid-fourth century AD as a dynastic mausoleum of the imperial family, the building, like the others of the early Christian architecture, was located right next to the basilica that housed the remains of a few venerated Christian martyrs. Since Constantina (Costanza) was venerated as a saint, the mausoleum dedicated to her was consecrated as a church by Pope Alexander IV in 1254. A vestibule, leaning against the south wall of the basilica of Sant'Agnese and in line with the same, linked it with the magnificent building erected to house the remains of the imperial family: here both Constantina - dead in Bithynia in 354, and her younger sister Elena - wife of Flavius Iulianus (Julian the Apostate) when he was appointed Caesar of the West, were buried. The mausoleum is a domed circular structure, surrounded by a barrel-vaulted ambulatory in which the mosaic decoration has survived: all this magnificence together with the well-articulated plan, highlight the intention of the foundress to build a very grand and solemn monument, lasting over the time.

The monument's art reflects the emerging iconography of the Christian faith in its first years of legitimacy in the Roman Empire and, more than any other building in Rome, it represents the transition from the pagan to Christian city in its decorative and architectural features. Inside the mausoleum, the visual effect is striking: the ambulatory, enriched with twelve niches and covered by a barrel-vault ceiling, leads into a central domed space through some arcades supported by twelve twin columns arranged in a radial direction, whose plain capitals are different from each other. Particular function in the articulation of the space within it have the spatial axes of the building, also visually highlighted by red granite columns: while the main axis, which starts from the entrance, ends with a large rectangular niche, where once was located the porphyry grave with the remains of Constantina, the transverse axis, less wide than the first, is defined by two semicircular niches. Twelve columns, creating twelve arches, hold up the dome which has twelve windows. This could be a reference to the twelve apostles. This creates a central space which interplays with dark and light, giving it the dynamism which arises much of the charm of the building. Today's depictions certainly do not recall the glow of the mosaic tiles of the past. Only a few fragments of the original mosaic decoration of the ambulatory have survived and, after the restoration works - although certainly not perfect, we can appreciate the importance of the decorations of the mausoleum. A typical case of adaptation of pagan themes to the Christian iconography, for a long time the mausoleum was identified as the temple of Bacchus. The decoration of the ambulatory vault has almost exclusively geometric or natural scenes, typical of the traditional pre-Christian funeral ceremonies (fruits, flowers, birds, cherubs, vines, harvest scenes, pottery, etc.), except two medallions that probably represent Costanza and her husband Annibaliano and two scenes with religious subjects of the Christian tradition, mosaics restored and placed in the niches corresponding to the transverse axis: to the right, Christ entrusts the keys to Peter and, to the left, the moment when Christ gives the Apostle the law of the Christian doctrine. Probably also the mosaic of one of the lunettes had a Christian subject; completely lost, it has been in part reconstructed, thanks to a fragment and some survived drawings.

In the large apse, directly opposite the entrance, you can also see a plaster copy of Constantina's sarcophagus. The original stone sarcophagus, carved with images of putti making wine, is now located in the Vatican Museums. Unfortunately, stucco and paintings of the seventeenth century have taken the place of the mosaic of the central dome which represented scenes of the Old and New Testament. Although this monument has undergone numerous restorations over the time, a visit to the mausoleum is very recommended, also for the sumptuousness of the interior that always arouses unexpected wonder.

It seems that today the Mausoleum of Santa Costanza is recovering the fame it deserves among the population of the city of Rome, so that even numerous young couples decide to celebrate their wedding in this church.

Mausoleo di Santa Costanza

Via Nomentana, 349 - 00198 Roma

Tel. 06 8610840

Free entry.

Opening hours:

Monday-Sunday

from 9.00 to 12.00 am

from 4.00 to 6.00 pm.

Visits forbidden

during religious celebrations.

Nearest subway stop

near Piazza Bologna.