The Parish Church

SANTA MARIA IN CASTELLO CALLED "LA SAGRA"

A story by means of pictures

CARPI
TOWN COUNCIL

Historical references

Tradition dates the construction of the church of Santa Maria to the mid 8th century, in the year 752, by order of Astolfo, king of the Lombards. Documentary sources up to the 9th century allow its origin to be placed at the time of the Lombard foundation, since instructions given by Pope John VIII in 879 for restoration confirm its existence. Ecclesiastical privileges increased its importance when it was distinguished by the title of "parish" in the 10th century with the right of a christening font, while in the 12th century its independence from the bishops of Modena and Reggio was ratified and it came directly under the papal authority with jurisdiction over a small area which, in the bull by Pope Callistus II in 1123, included the rural chapels of St. Nicolò, St. Lorenzo and St. Biagio.

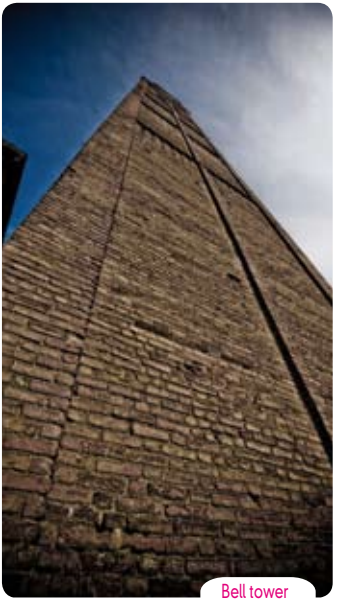
No visible structures remain of the original church from the 8th and 9th centuries, except for traces of the crypt found during excavations in 1983. On the site where it was built, foundations belonging to a late Roman building have been verified, probably a domus rustica, a valuable discovery linking up with the origin of the initial inhabited nucleus at Carpi. The surviving parts of the Romanesque architecture belong to the reconstruction begun between the first and second ten years of the twelfth century on the orders of Matilde di Canossa.

S. Martino Chapel

The church was consecrated on the 5th July 1184 by Pope Lucius III. This event gave rise to the name of Sagra, meaning "consecrated in a special way", and has remained as a common name for the church since then. The importance of the parish church Santa Maria in Castello (called "in the castle" because it is inside the Carpi fortifications) continued over the years, becoming the seat of a collegiate church with an archpriest and canons, increasing still more from 1327 with the coming of the Pio lords.
The urban development of Carpi during the 15th century, the population increase, the construction of other churches of the mendicant and confraternity orders and the downgrading of the functionality of the collegiate church into a commendam are believed to be the causes that accelerated the decline of the ancient parish church. The most evident consequence of these facts was the decision taken by Alberto III Pio in 1514 to demolish a large part of the ancient building, leaving the apsidal area transformed into an oratory.
The ecclesiastical prerogatives were attributed to the magnificent collegiate church, later called the cathedral of the

Façade and bell tower

Apse

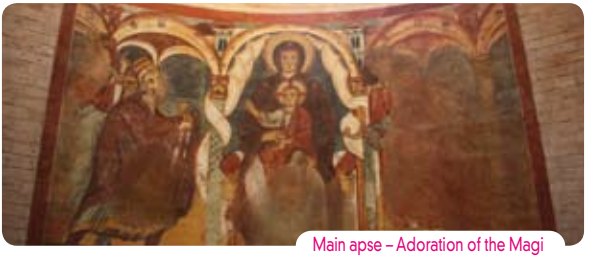


Bell tower

Assumption, erected in the great Borgogioioso square, the new political, administrative and religious centre of the renewed city.
During the following centuries it was forgotten and abandoned until the architectural salvage operation began in 1872 for the purposes of stylistic restoration to a project by Achille Sammarini who restored the old Romanesque structural features.
Other restoration projects have also been carried out, concluding in 1987.

Tourist itinerary

The parish church is situated in Piazza Re Astolfo, the ancient centre of the walled castle and the city. The small size of the building contrasts with the tall, imposing BELL TOWER built between 1217 and 1221. The Lombard style architecture presents brickwork divided by string course bands sustained by small pensile arches lightened on the two highest levels by double mullioned window with two lights. A special feature is the cusp crowning, terminating in a dodecahedral loggia sustained by corbels flanked by four small towers also topped by a conical covering.
The parts of the church surviving from the 12th century are enclosed on the FAÇADE by the very elegant Renaissance design created in 1515 to a plan by Baldassarre Peruzzi. The model was inspired by Bramante's plans. Three commemorative stones can be seen there: the centre one concerns the Renaissance restoration, while the side stones are copies of medieval inscriptions regarding the legendary founding of the Lombards and the papal consecration. The portal comes from the 12th century Romanesque building.



Main apse – Adoration of the Magi

It has a lunette decorated by panos, an architrave with meanders and portrays the scene of the Crucifixion by the Antelami school. The SIDES and the APSIDAL area, with the exception of the smaller apse on the right, are from Romanesque times. The blind arch motif divided into three parts by small pensile arches on corbels closely resembles the one by Lanfranco in the Duomo in Modena. The two capitals with grotesque figures on the northern side face inspired to Wiligelmo's workshop. A slab, sculptured with intertwined meanders and palmettes, perhaps re-used, has been inserted on the jambs of the portal on the southern side. Around the church towards the east, the rectory cloisters were found in the past. They have now been made into a garden facing the PALAZZO DELLA PIEVE, a building from the 13th century currently used as the magistrate's courthouse.

Interior

Even though it was reduced down to the last bay and the apsidal zone, the area of the church retained the original basilica partition into a nave and two side aisles. The sober brick appearance and the ceiling of painted beams and rafters is due to the stylistic restore operations in the late 19th century by Achille Sammarini. The surfaces were once plastered and covered with resplendent pictorial decorations. The remains of these frescoes can be seen in the central nave. The Maiestas Domini and the Annunciation are on the triumphal arch and the Adoration of the Magi in the apse is well preserved. Scenes from the New testament are found on the upper part of the walls. Starting from the left you see the Flight into Egypt, the Massacre of the Innocents, the Mystic Lamb, and traces of the Marriage at Cana The series is then interrupted due to the 16th century demolition and the new façade. Going on the left there is the Traditio Legis, St Thomas' Doubt, the Ascension and the Pentecost then, towards where the apse joins on, the Supper at Emmaus. This is an exceptional pictorial cycle of very high quality and rare for the breadth of the surviving surfaces. It was created by an artist from the Po Valley Plains with Byzantine influences and can be dated to the end of the 12th century. The high altar is a modern work from 1909 carried out in medieval style. On the right side of the apse there is a

S. Caterina Chapel and Fore-chapel

terracotta relief of the Assumption of Maria held by two angels. This is the remains of an altar frontal, the work of a Tuscan workshop from the early 1400's. The pulpit standing against the façade wall was moved in 1606 for the new collegiate church and then brought back here during restoration work by Sammarini. A rather important work from the 12th century, this uses sculptured slabs of Greek marble coming from the old church presbytery enclosure and was made by Nicolò, an artist working with Wiligelmo on the building of the Duomo in Modena. The symbols of the Evangelists: the bull, the eagle, the lion and the angel are powerfully sculpted as well as a rather thoughtful Prophet. In the right-hand aisle stands the marble sarcophagus of Manfredo Pio, the first lord of Carpi, made in 1351 by Sibellino da Caprara from Bologna. This has an articulated structure supported by corbels with foliage separating the

S. Caterina Chapel

surfaces with the inscription, the imperial eagle and the Pio coat-of-arms. The coffin has high relief panels: in the centre, the Madonna and Child enthroned flanked by Angels; on the left, Manfredo kneeling presented by St Catherine of Alexandria and John the Baptist, and on the right, St George slaying the Dragon. On the left end, Manfredo Pio on horseback and on the right end, the Crucifixion. On the corners there are small statues of the saints James the Apostle and Possidonio. The cover is in the form of a funeral bed where Manfredo lies with two female figures at either end holding candelabra.

The left-hand aisle ends in ST MARTIN'S CHAPEL erected in the first half of the 15th century replacing the minor apse. It has a ribbed cross vault and was originally completely

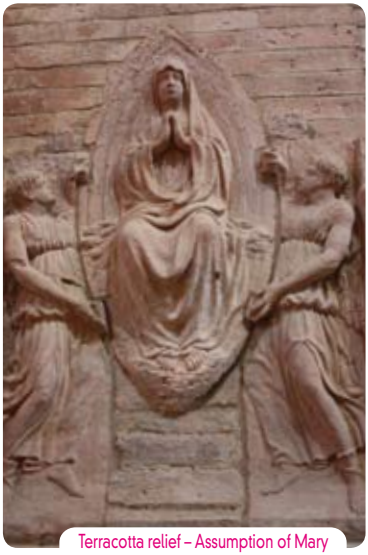
Nave – fresco with scenes from the Apostles (detail)

frescoed; the decoration can now be seen only on the triumphal arch, the left-hand wall and in the vault. These were done by the fine painter from Ferrara, Antonio Alberti, an artist belonging to the international Gothic stream and were carried out in about 1424. On the pilaster at the entrance on the left, there are the figures of St James the Elder and St Christopher and, partially within the vault inside quatre-foil frames, the busts of the saints Lucy, Agnes and Flora. In the lower curve of the arch there is the Annunciation, while the Adoration of the Magi is in the lunette on the left and, below, inside the false perspective architecture with poly- foil niches, the stern figures of the Saints Agostino, Ambrose, Gregory and Girolamo. The vault, painted as a sky with golden stars, shows the Evangelists with their respective symbols in the medallions. At the altar there is a stucco

Sarcophagus of Manfredo Pio

frontal with the figure of St Martin, the work of the 17th century Carpi school associated with Gaspare Griffoni, and a Crucifixion , a wooden sculpture from the 15th century Emilian school. On the right-hand wall there is an 18th century painting, perhaps by Francesco Maria Raineri known as Schivenoglia from Mantua, portraying St Martin on horseback giving his cloak to the poor man.

Through the small door in the left aisle you pass into a room, added to the external north wall of the church in the 15th century. The blind arch decoration with subdivisions of



Terracotta relief – Assumption of Mary

Sarcophagus of Manfredo Pio (detail)

Marble ambo with the symbols of the evangelists Mark and Luke

small arches on corbels can be seen continuing the rest of the outside design. This space, considered to be an entrance lobby, leads to the CHAPEL OF ST. CATHERINE OF ALEXANDRIA. It has cross vaulting and the walls are decorated to give the illusion of a bower made up of interlacing branches pruned where there are flower bushes and a rooster, the latter a symbol of the passing of time. Panels with candelabra on the walls and in the gores of the vault surround medallions with the Pio coats-of-arms which bear the prelate's hat, referring to the commendator, Galeotto Pio, archpriest of Carpi in the second half of the 15th century.

The Chapel of St Catherine of Alexandria, in keeping with the adjacent St. Martin's Chapel, is on a rectangular plan with a cross vault. The fresco decorations covering the walls and the vault are intact. These were carried out in the second ten years of the 15th century by two artists trained in Emilia belonging to the international Gothic stream and by Giovanni da Modena. The space is divided up by fake architecture with slim spiral columns meant to provide a narrative continuity to scenes from the life of the saint. On the wall above the altar there is the Mystical Marriage of St. Catherine with Christ and, in the higher lunette, the Annunciation. The sequence of the events begins on the left-hand wall at the top in the lunette where we see the Meeting of St Catherine with the Emperor Maximinus ans the Debate with the Philosophers of Alexandria. On the right-hand side in the lunette we find Catherine converting the empress and the prefect Porphyrius and the philosophers condemned to the stake. At the bottom, returning to the left wall, the Martyrdom of

the wheel which leaves Catherine unharmed and the Decapitation of the empress and Porphyrius. On the corresponding right-hand side, Catherine is decapitated in prison and the Transportation of the body to Mt. Sinai by the angels. In the vault, on a background of blue sky and stars, the medallions with the Eternal Father and the Archangels Michael, Raphael and Gabriel as well as the animals symbolising the Evangelists. Note the stucco altar front from the 18th century portraying St. Nicola da Tolentino, a work from the demolished church dedicated to this saint.

S. Martino Chapel

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ROMANESQUE ON THE MODENESE PLAINS

MODENA
Duomo

QUARANTOLI
Pieve di Santa Maria Della Neve

GANACETO
Pieve di San Giorgio

SORBARA
Pieve Di Sant'agata

NONANTOLA
Abbazia di San Silvestro

NOVI DI MODENA
Parrocchia di San Michele

PROGETTO GRAFICO: labirinto.net

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