

The Provosty of Campiglia Marittima

GUIDE

TO THE PARISH CHURCH OF SAN GIOVANNI

Traslation: Bettie Luppitt Gambaccini

The existence of a parish church on this site in 1075 is recorded in a document written by William, Bishop of Populonia, addressed to Pope Gregory VII. The Papal Bull mentions a church dedicated to St. John, situated between Vico Montanino (the Mountain Road) and Gualdo del Re (the King's Wood). Almost certainly, this document does not refer to the present building, for a stone plaque on the facade records a more recent date. The church was built outside the walls, as was the custom in medieval castle-villages, and placed on a small hill in the middle of what is now a cemetery.

THE EXTERIOR

The **facade**, in the Romanesque style of a "hut" built on a foundation which functions as a base, is adorned at the top with a cornice and two small brackets decorated with motifs of animals and plants. In the center is a quatre-foiled rose window composed of recessed cornices. The portal is of particular beauty: the architrave rests on two elegant capitals (one is a reproduction); the cornice is decorated with tendrils and the large arch, consisting of alternating black and white wedges, is surmounted by a finely decorated cornice. At its center is a wheel, carved from a single piece of limestone, which gives light to the interior. To the left of the architrave is an inscription on stone, important for the dating of the church. It reads:

+MCSIII GRAtia Dei HOC OPus ComPOSUIT PE (CATOR MATHEUS) O FRatreS DEuM ORATE UT EI DIMITTAT ComMISSA PECCATA.

Abbreviations normally used at the time conventionally replaced some letters with circumflex accents: we have substituted small letters for those missing. The words Cator Matheus, put in parenthesis, are carved on a stone on the other side of the architrave but are a part of the same inscription. The translation of the words is as follows: "*The sinner Matthew achieved this work through the Grace of God: O Brothers, pray God, so that He will forgive the sins committed.*" The date, at the beginning of the inscription, has been interpreted in different ways, according to how the letter "S" is deciphered. The theory supported by Prof. P. Bacci in 1910 upheld that it stood for the number 6, making the date of construction 1109. More recent studies, which consider the "S" an abbreviation of seventy, argue that the date is 1173.

THE INTERIOR

The interior is both simple and solemn, with a single central nave constructed in skillfully squared stones. Just inside the entrance, an **octagonal frame**, still visible on the floor, marks the spot where in ancient times the christening font stood. Six single splayed lancet **windows** give light to the nave. The roof is constructed of wooden trusses. A **door** halfway down on the left was once mistakenly called “of the women,” since it is closest to the area marked off by a high balustrade, once thought by Prof. Bacci to be the “matroneo”, or area reserved for women. It is more likely that the balustrade separates the nave, reserved for the faithful, from the presbytery, reserved for the clergy.

The **balustrade** is composed of two parapets, each one including three plutei decorated with geometric figures, worked in concentric frames. On the left a circle, a hexagon, and a rhombus that each contain a corolla. On the right, two rhombuses and a hexagon with leaves of different kinds. A narrow entrance, which signifies the evangelical tale of a “narrow door” through which it is necessary to pass to reach salvation, leads to the area reserved for the clergy.

The **altar**, in the form of a chest, is raised on a step. The sides are decorated with colored marble slabs, framed in white marble. Behind the altar is the splendid semicircular **apse**. The curve of the apse should be examined with attention: it is built with small, square, hewn stones, called ashlars, connected and joined so precisely that they create a perfect sphericity. At the center of the apse is a single lancet **window**, through which every morning, because of the particular orientation of the church, the early rays of the sun shine. On the clearest days, if one looks straight through the opening, it is possible to glimpse the summit of Mount Amiata.

In the rear of the **left hand chapel** is the door reserved for the clergy, surmounted by a slit in the form of a cross. In the **chapel on the right hand side**, observe the **rose window**, unfortunately missing the center part, and the single lancet **window** with a **figure in bas-relief** sculpted on its arch. It is the only human figure found inside the church; unfortunately its head was mutilated by a vandal. The figure is gracefully holding up its long robe, as if to walk up a hill or step over an obstacle.

Now return to the nave, and exit the side door, which will lead outside to what is probably the most interesting part of the church.

This **door**, although of more modest dimensions, repeats the style of the main door but is more elaborately decorated. At the ends of the arch are **two lions**: the one on the left clasps a dragon in his claws, while the one on the right clutches a headless human figure; in the lunette, an **eagle** grips a quadruped.

But it is the **architrave** that is the most intriguing part of the portal. In the past, it was thought to be a fragment from an ancient sarcophagus, a scene that illustrates the classical story of Meleager and the boar hunt. The myth tells of Aeneus, King of Calydonia, who forgot to honor the goddess Artemis, and thus made her angry. Her rage materialized in the fury of a wild boar which devastated the fields. The King’s son, Meleager, succeeded in capturing and killing the beast, but was unable to save his own life, which he lost in the attempt to placate a furious dispute amongst the hunters over the spoils of the hunt.

Modern scholars are now convinced that the architrave is typical of Romanesque art. It attempts to represent the classical myth of Meleager as the key to a Christian message; the boar personifies the devil, while the son of the king is Christ who overcomes with his death the forces of evil. By using the analogy of victory over sin, we can also see the two lions and the eagle, a celestial creature, as depicted in the act of subduing earthly power.

The four scenes begin on the architrave starting from the left: the search, the capture, the slaying, and the transportation of the dead boar.

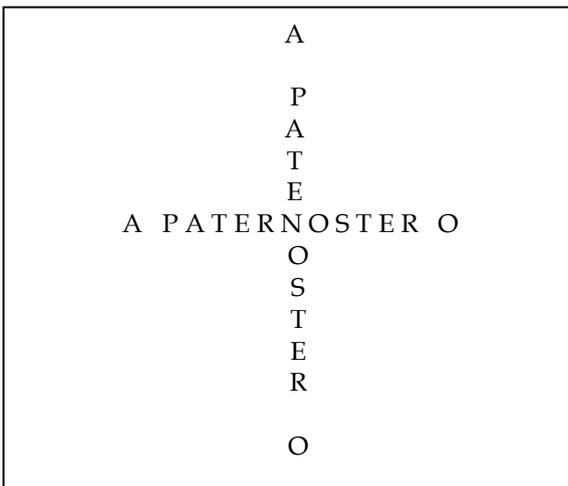
By walking carefully over the badly disconnected tombstones, we can get closer to the exterior of the **transept** and read another inscription of considerable interest, written on a marble slab in the upper corner, almost under the roof. It reads:

SATOR AREPO TENET OPERA ROTAS

This inscription, known as a magic square, was first discovered in Pompei, and subsequently in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and on many Christian churches in Europe, including the facade of the Cathedral in Siena. The five letters can be placed so as to form a square, and the words can then be read in any direction, from left to right, right to left, top to bottom and bottom to top.

S A T O R
 A R E P O
 T E N E T
 O P E R A
 R O T A S

The translation of the phrase is rather approximate because the meaning of the word “arepo” is unknown; it does not exist in Latin. The phrase could mean “The sower guides the plow with his work,” or “God (sator) directs (tenet) the creation (rotas), the work of man (opera) and the produce of the earth (arepo). Some think that it could have been a secret code, for the words “Pater Noster” can be written twice in the form of a cross, with the two left over A’s and O’s signifying the beginning and the end, or Christ, the Alpha and Omega of all things.



For a last glance at the interior, we can go back inside the church through the side door, which should then be carefully closed. We leave through the front door.

The visit of San Giovanni is now concluded. The church will surely have fascinated the lover of art and history; the vacationing summer tourist will have found cool shelter from the burning sun. Without a doubt, the majestic simplicity of the church, and the silence that reigns all around, will have spoken to the heart of each, and perhaps inspired a moment of meditation and prayer. We hope that you have enjoyed your sojourn in our town.

don Marcello Boldrini, parish priest

Since the church is within the perimeter of the town cemetery, it can be visited only during those hours that the cemetery is open.

Every day, except Monday and Friday.

Holy Mass is celebrated:

The birthday of **Saint John the Baptist** (June 24th)

during the **Octave of the Deceased**.