

Sant' Ambrogio Basilica

The church is one of the most symbolic sites of the city, a testimony of Milan's ecclesiastical independence and ancient Christian traditions. The first church, consecrated by the bishop Ambrogio in the year 379, was built on the burial spot of two martyrs, Gervasius and Protasius. It was rebuilt in the 11th century, in the Romanesque style, and this is the church that now survives.

The shorter bell tower is called Torre dei Monaci (Monks' Tower) and dates back to the 9th century, the second tower, known as Torre dei Canonici (Canons' Tower) was built between 1128 and 1144.

A vast arcaded atrium gives entrance to the Basilica. The atrium is rectangular and almost as large as the church itself. There are composite columns with decorated capitals, engraved with figures representing different kinds of monsters and vegetables. On the left portal there is a pre-Romanesque relief depicting St. Ambrose; the central portal has lintels, door posts, and lunette formed by intaglio fragments dating from 8th - 10th century.

Inside, the basilica contains a treasure of medieval art, including many Romanesque carved capitals, a 4th-century sarcophagus carved with biblical scenes (possibly suggested by Ambrose himself), a 9th-century silver altar and above it a 10th-century canopy. Near the entrance on the right side of the nave is a short Roman column with the "Nehustan", Moses's snake.

On the north side of the nave stands a large marble ambo, a type of pulpit that was used mainly for Gospel readings by the canons and monks. Supported by slender ancient columns, it was built on top of the 4th-century Sarcophagus of Stilicone (see below). The fine Lombard Romanesque reliefs decorating the ambo are based on St. Ambrose's writings and center around the themes of sin and redemption. The north side shows a banquet, which represents either the Last Supper or the *agape* meal celebrated by early Christians every Sunday.

On the side facing the nave, there are two gilded copper sculptures which were probably attached to an earlier ambo. They date from the early 8th century and are considered magnificent examples of medieval metallurgy. They depict an eagle, representing St. John the Evangelist, and an angel, representing St. Matthew the Evangelist. The other two evangelists have been lost. The eagle may have functioned also as a book rest, just as many modern lecterns are in the shape of eagles.

The Sarcophagus of Stilicone is a great treasure, one of the few surviving elements from Ambrose's original basilica. It still stands in the exact same place it has been since it was carved in 385 AD - the ambo was built around it. Moreover, it was carved during Ambrose's lifetime and its themes may have been suggested by the bishop himself.

The tomb was probably commissioned by and for a high military official, who appears with his wife on the north side of the sarcophagus and again in a roundel on the lid. Their identities remain unknown; the name of the sarcophagus dates from the 18th century and is based on an erroneous tradition that it was made for Stilicone, a general who died in 408 in the service of Emperor Honorius.

The sculptures on the sarcophagus are of exceptional quality, indicating they were carved by a Roman artist. The south side (facing the nave) depicts the *Traditio Legis*, in which Christ hands the keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter. The other side shows Christ teaching the apostles, with the kneeling portraits of the patrons. The short sides have scenes from the Old Testament.

The Golden Altar at the front of the nave was made in 835. It depicts the Life of Christ in gold leaf on the front and the Life of St. Ambrose in gilded silver on the back. The altar is sheltered by a canopy made of four ancient columns and decorated with 10th-century stucco

reliefs. The one facing the nave depicts Christ giving the Book of the Law to St. Paul (left) and the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter.

The central scene of the apse mosaic has a late Byzantine layout and probably dates from the early 1200s. The side scenes are probably even earlier - dating from early 9th century in the Carolingian era. These connect St. Ambrose and the city of Milan (*Mediolanum*) with St. Martin and the city of Tours (*Turonica*). Both bishops were staunch opponents of the Arian heresy.

360° view of the atrium: http://milan.arounder.com/sant_ambrogio/IT000005326.html

360° view of the church: http://milan.arounder.com/sant_ambrogio/IT000005325.html