

EREMO (HERMITAGE) di SAN LEONARDO al LAGO and the PYRAMID

An ancient hermitage with good frescoes; plus a walk to a strange memorial.

About 10km from Barontoli. Open 9.30-15.30 except Mondays. From Barontoli go to Volte Basse; then right and almost at once left. Follow the signs for Firenze until you see a left turn with a sign indicating San Lorenzo al Lago. Go along this road for a couple of kilometres (it ceases to be tarred about half way along); then left again up a rather bad track. For access, ring the bell for the custodian (who appreciates a tip when you leave).

The hermitage of San Leonardo once overlooked a lake (drained in the middle of the last century), hence the name 'al Lago' (on the lake). It is thought to be the oldest hermitage in Tuscany and may well have begun when a singly monk took up residence in a cave there, perhaps as early as 800 AD. A document dating from 1168 records that a monk called Benedict built a church there, probably in the 11th century, dedicated to St Leonard. Benedict is generally regarded as the founder. He would have gathered a small group of monks about him to live in solitude.

The hermitage became fashionable when one of Siena's favourite holy men, Blessed Agostino Novello, Prior-General of the Augustinian Order, decided to retire to San Leonardo, dying there in 1309. Various local magnates endowed the little monastery with land; the church was rebuilt in the gothic style; and good artists employed to provide suitable frescoes. The complex was heavily fortified in 1366, a time of unrest, to provide a place of refuge for the inhabitants of the neighbouring village of Santa Colomba. Later the monastery went into decline and it was officially closed in 1782. All that now remains is the little monastery church, with the remains of the monk's original chapel in the crypt, the old refectory and some remains of walls.

The old **refectory** has what must once have been a powerful semi-monochromatic fresco of the crucifixion by the fifteenth century **Giovanni di Paolo** (1399-1482), unfortunately damaged as at some point when a ceiling was built half way up the refectory right through the middle of it. Only the heads of the crucified men can be seen, together with part of the figures at the foot of the cross can still be seen, women to the left and men (including some orientally dressed Pharisees) to the right.

The small **Romano-Gothic church** is decorated with attractive frescoes by the Sienese artist **Lippo Vanni**, painted between 1360 and 1370, the larger scenes demonstrating a good use of space and perspective. Those round the altar show scenes from the life of the Virgin: her presentation at the temple as a child; the Annunciation; and her betrothal to Joseph, apparently by the same priest as the one to whom she was presented earlier. In the vault, on the sides, Vanni has painted a wonderful heavenly orchestra of angels, playing a strange array of instruments.



Detail of Lippo Vanni's fresco of the betrothal of the Virgin.

On the left of the entrance to the chancel there a picture of San Leonardo himself, with, below, some illustrations of the miracles which he performed. St Leonard was a Frankish noble who converted to Christianity and became a hermit near Limoges, becoming renowned for his sanctity and the miracles that he performed. Here as often the case with Sienese saints and holy men, he has been credited with the capacity to fly like Superman through the air to spots where his miraculous aid was needed (cf. Simone Martini's painting of the blessed Agostino Novello in the Pinacoteca in Siena).

The fresco on the right depicts St Augustine of Hippo in his bishop's robes (above) and in a garden at the moment of his conversion to Christianity (below) – he heard a heavenly voice saying “take up and read”, which he interpreted as a divine instruction to read the Bible, shown on his lap. His mother St Monica prays nearby and a divine hand can be seen pointing down from the clouds above.

The Pyramid

A track leads into the wood beside the little car-park below the monastery, sign-posted “*La Grande Traversata Osteraccia*”. Follow this, taking a left fork after 150 metres. After a pleasant walk of about half a mile it brings you out onto the road below the monastery, by a little settlement called “Osteraccia” – probably an inn (“osteria”) in medieval times. On the other side of the road, to the right of the house and garden, another path leads down through the wood sign-posted “*La Grande Traversata Piramide*” (now part of the via Francigena). This comes out into a field, and on the other side of the field is the “pyramid” – actually more of an obelisk.

It stands incongruously in the middle of nowhere to commemorate the draining of the lake that used to cover the area. In medieval times, it seems to have been a true lake, its fish and

waterfowl providing a useful source of food for the local inhabitants. But by the 18th century it had become a malodorous swamp, blamed by the neighbouring villages for bringing sickness (these were the days when malaria was blamed on “miasmas” rather than to the mosquitoes that no doubt infested the swamp). A local noble undertook to drain the swamp at his own expense in 1764, and built a tunnel to take the waters to the river Merse. But he failed to complete the work. Fortunately, the then Grand duke of Tuscany, the Austrian Peter Leopold of Habsbourg (who had inherited the Duchy of Tuscany from the last of the Medicis), was an enlightened ruler and he took over the project, completing it in 1781. The pyramid was built to celebrate the event.



The pyramid and the path that is part of the reconstituted via Francigena.

There is a small picnic area nearby with a table and a minatory notice forbidding everything from lighting fires to making unnecessary noise.

1995; revised 2005 and 2016.