

SAN PIETRO ALLA MAGIONE; SANTA MARIA IN PORTICO; and PORTA CAMOLLIA

Two moderately interesting small churches near the Porta Camollia, Siena's main northern gate.

San Pietro alla Magione



San Pietro alla Magione with its later brickbuilt extension on the right

This little Romanesque church, on the right about a hundred metres down the via Camollia, would have been the first church that pilgrims entering Siena encountered. In the 12th century, the Knights Templar, a Christian military order founded during the Crusades to defend and give succour to pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem, set up a hospice (probably a cross between a hostel and a hospital) by the church, called La Magione – the word comes from the French “*maison*” – and also took over and probably built much of the present church (although there has been a church here at least since 998).

The stone-built church is a few steps up from the street and is very plain and simple, although a triangular marble Gothic arch has been added rather incongruously to the Romanesque entrance. The inside is even simpler, a single nave and no ceiling to hide the roof. The brick-built chapel next to the church was built in the 1520s in thanks for the end of an episode of plague. There is a very simple open bell-tower, in a form typical of the Templars. An alley called *via Malta* runs down the side of the church, reflecting the fact that the church later passed to the Knights of Malta.



The austere interior of San Pietro alla Magione (the altar is modern).

This part of the city is in the Contrada dell'Istrice (porcupine), and the contrada fountain is behind the church, decorated with a fine porcupine. The Romans introduced porcupines from Africa to Italy and they have been in Tuscany ever since, much to the disgust of the farmers, as they eat the root crops. They come out mainly at night and their quills can quite often be found around Barontoli.

Santa Maria in Portico



Interior of Santa Maria in Portico

A little further along on the right a small lane called *vicolo di Fontegiusta* leads through a portico down to the church of Santa Maria in Portico. Its front is plain brick and unadorned apart from the marble surround of the door. But inside the church is that rare thing in Siena, a Renaissance gem. It was built in the 1480s as a thanksgiving to the Virgin Mary after the Sienese victory over the Florentines at the battle of Poggio Imperiale in 1479. The church is almost square, with slender pillars and lovely renaissance arches separating the three naves. There is a glorious carved marble altarpiece, surrounded by attractive frescoes of the life of the Virgin (her birth on the left; the Annunciation above; and her "Transition" – for she did not die in the normal sense – on the right) by the artist Ventura Salimbeni (1568-1613) and dating from 1600.

The altarpiece or tabernacle displays a late 14th century fresco of the Virgin And Child, a much venerated and miraculous image that was originally set in one of the old city gates as protection against enemies (the Sienese saw the Virgin as very much their personal protectress). On the right wall, there is a charming little organ-loft. The various paintings on the side walls are of limited interest – although that on the left wall near the entrance, allegedly by the painter/architect Baldassare Peruzzi, represents the somewhat unusual subject of the Sybil predicting to the Emperor Augustus the coming of Christ.

The church possesses a whalebone said to have been presented to it by Christopher Columbus, who is thought to have passed some years as a student at Siena University.

Porta Camollia



Porta Camollia, inner façade

Siena's ancient northern gate, the Porta Camollia is at the top end of the via Camollia and was the gate used by travellers from Florence and pilgrims from northern Europe coming along the Via Francigena to Rome and Jerusalem. Because it was the gate facing Florence, Siena's old enemy, it was one of the best defended. A couple of hundred metres outside the main gate, there is even a large secondary gate, the Antiporto di Camollia, – a huge brick structure built in the 13th century and rebuilt in the 17th.



The Antiporto

The name Camollia is said to come from Camilius, a Roman who was, according to legend, asked by Romulus, the founder of Rome, to go to Tuscany to capture the two sons of Romulus's brother Remus, whom Romulus had murdered. The two sons, Ascius and Senus, had fled Rome and became the legendary founders of Siena. Camilius seems to have decided to throw his lot in with them, as he stayed in Tuscany, founding a settlement near where the gate now is. There is an alternative and much less romantic theory that the name Camollia comes from a nearby nuns' convent or *ca' mulierum*.

The original gate, probably dating back a thousand years, was destroyed during the 1555 siege of Siena, and the present structure was erected in 1604 when Siena was under Medici rule. The outside of the gate is decorated with the five pawnbrokers' balls of the Medici crest, and the inscription *Cor magis tibi Sena pandit* (Siena opens her heart to you wider than this gate) was put there – no doubt with teeth gritted – to honour the entry into Siena of the Medici Grand Duke of Tuscany Ferdinand I.



Porta Camollia, the outer façade .

The open space between the Porta Camollia and the Antiporto was used in the middle Ages for markets and fairs. On the western side stands the Colonna di Portogallo (Portugal Column), so-called as it is where Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the future Siennese Pope Pius II, presided over the meeting of the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III with his bride Eleanor of Portugal. Piccolomini, who was at that stage Bishop of Siena, had arranged the marriage, in a fine piece of international diplomacy. The meeting of the bridal pair, with the column behind them, is depicted in the scenes of Pius II's life by Pinturicchio in the Piccolomini Library of the Duomo.



The meeting of Emperor Frederick III and Eleanor of Portugal in front of the Colonna di Portogallo, by Pinturicchio



The column today, sadly without its gilding.

2015

27/5/16