

Santa Caterina Cloister

You may not believe this. The cloister of Santa Caterina was once a cemetery. The place we are referring to is the north side of the church of San Frediano in Lucca, inside the convent of the Basilica of San Frediano, founded in the 12th century.

There are three cloisters in the convent. The first, the eastern part, is the cemetery of Santa Caterina, already documented in 1124. The second, from the 16th century, was probably built over an older cloister, of which a 13th-century mullioned window remains today. Finally, the third cloister dates from the 17th century.

So the original designation of the Santa Caterina cloister was a cemetery. Today only two wings remain, one on the east side and the other on the north side, but without any doubt it is possible to believe that originally the cloister had four wings around the perimeter of the courtyard.

A southern wing of the cloister was occupied by the Fatinelli chapel, which dates back to the 14th century and was built in the cemetery area where Santa Zita was buried in 1278, and the chapel of Santa Maria del Soccorso, commissioned in 1509 in honor of the noblewoman Eufrosina Cenami. The cemetery is documented from 1124, in a manuscript of the State Library of Lucca (*B.S.L. Ms. 415 c.12v*) which states that in that place a chapel dedicated to Santa Caterina d'Alessandria was consecrated on 11 February 1220.

The three arches of the cloister are visible on the façade on the south side. The southern wing is the oldest one, according to Isa Belli Barsali (I. Belli Barsali, *Guida di Lucca*, Maria Pacini Fazzi, Lucca 1988). The fourth wing (western part) is now destroyed. Once it was supposed to separate the cemetery of Santa Caterina from another older cloister.

Once completed, the portico with three arches on each side closed off a small field almost certainly destined for common burial. There were also frescoes in the spans around the cloister and on the pillars, but some of the frescoes on the pillars, such as *The*



Madonna della Colonna or *The Holy Crucifix*, were moved to more suitable places in 1621, given the poor cloister conditions.

The Santa Caterina cemetery was reserved for noble and merchant families. The burials date from the latter part of the 13th century, but most of the sepulchres belong to the 14th century. During the

late 14th century the cemetery reached saturation, so earlier tombs were appropriated.

Arcosolium tombs are the hallmarks of this cemetery. The arcosolium (from the Latin *arcus* / arch and *solium* / tomb, *sarcophagus*, stone tomb) is a burial that was especially used in the Catacombs, consisting of a niche, mostly in the shape of an arch, carved into the wall, into which the sarcophagus was put.

The east wing of the cloister has undergone the least tampering and has the most valuable decorations: three arches containing three-opening or five-opening windows. The capitals of the *pentaphora* are of particular interest because they are carved with plant ornaments and symbols of Christ. One of them represents the Archangel Michael with an open book in his hands.

The west side of the cloister has been destroyed. In the basement there is a small brick apse that could have been part of the chapel of Santa Caterina, present in that part of the cloister.

The destruction of the cemetery seems to have begun in 1810 by order of Elisa Baciocchi, the princess of Lucca. In the memoir of the sacristy of San Frediano we read that on May 16 [...] *everything was done to demolish the aforementioned ancient church of Santa Caterina with the adjoining and very large cemetery [...]*. Ridolfi writes that [...] *Its destruction was a real barbarism* (E. Ridolfi, *Guida di Lucca*, Giusti, Lucca 1877).

– by Tommaso De Masi

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