

Crypt of the Church of San Sepolcro

Nowhere in Milan is historically more evocative than Piazza San Sepolcro. In the days of Constantine the Great, this was where the Forum of the imperial city stood. The emperor walked on slabs of Verona pink marble that covered every flagstone and pediment. As did Maximian, Theodosius and Saint Ambrose. It has always been the "true centre" of the city, as Leonardo called it in a note, immortalising in two wonderful sketches the plan of the upper church and the mirror image of the crypt, paved with slabs from the Forum.

The walls encircling the city, which gave Milan its circular plan, are reminiscent of the heraldic serpent, the "Biscione." Filarete's architectural treatise *Sforzinda* imagines an ideal city that is very reminiscent of this Milan. Leonardo's skilled hand immortalised the city with a few well-placed pen strokes in an expressive sketch that is now preserved in the Ambrosian Library. It shows a perfect circle, crossed by waterways in a manner reminiscent of his Vitruvian Man except that here it is the Church of San Sepolcro at the centre that squares the circle.

This church and its crypt have a thousand-year history that began in 1030 when Rozzone built the first nucleus of a place of worship on the ruins of the Forum. Transformed in 1100 and dedicated to the Holy Sepulchre following the capture of Jerusalem by Milanese Crusaders, it has come down to us almost unchanged.

In 500 years little has changed with respect to what Leonardo would have seen, apart from the façade that was remodelled in the Baroque era and then redone, in Romanesque style, at the end of the nineteenth century. The adjoining Ambrosiana Academy built on the orders of Cardinal Federico Borromeo, opened in 1609 as a beacon of holiness and learning. It sits at the heart of the ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary city. And at the heart of the city to come.

Piazza San Sepolcro

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