



St George's Church

Art, History and Restoration



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I am pleased to introduce you to this new publishing initiative featuring a guide to two major historic attractions in the city of Brescia: the archaeological trail at Martinengo-Cesaresco Palace, property of the Province of Brescia, where the Culture and Tourist Offices are currently hosted, and St George's Church, which is finally open to the public after thirty years of decay and more than ten years of restoration. This publication is intended to enhance the knowledge of our city, which is rich in art, history and archaeological treasures, so that tourists and visitors will fully appreciate its cultural heritage and attractions. Cooperation among institutions aiming at the same target is always fundamental in order to achieve an ambitious goal, that is the reason why the Province of Brescia cooperated with the Italian Touring Club on the project "Aperti per voi" (Open for You). Thus, it is thanks to the work of the voluntary members of the Italian Touring Club for Cultural Heritage that two of Brescia's landmarks have now been reopened to the public. Welcome!

Silvia Razzi

Councillor for Culture and Tourism of the Province of Brescia

St George's Church

Piazzetta S. Giorgio
25121 Brescia

St George's Church is open to the public, entrance is free of charge.
Opening times: Sat-Sun 10am-6pm, other days by arrangement.

For further information:

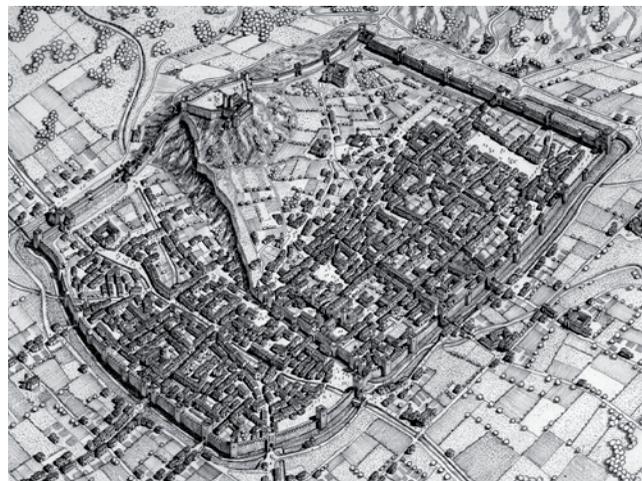
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The Building's Construction | Text by Andrea Breda, Dario Gallina

Nestled beneath the steep slope of the Cidneo hill, a few steps outside Porta Bruciata, against the Roman fortified walls which lead to the Castle, St George's Church (*Chiesa di San Giorgio*) is one of the best preserved Romanesque churches in Brescia. It is also one of the less known, as its 16th century façade in the square of the same name, *Piazzetta San Giorgio*,



may deceive visitors, hiding an unexpectedly ancient construction behind its door.

Baroque features added during subsequent restoration works did not change the size of the church, consisting of a nave, aisles, and chancel with a triple apse arrangement at the east end on which the bell tower was installed. Next to the church – under which the Roman aqueduct double channel of Mompiano runs – the remarkable remains of the Medieval rectory, once a large three floor palace, still survive.

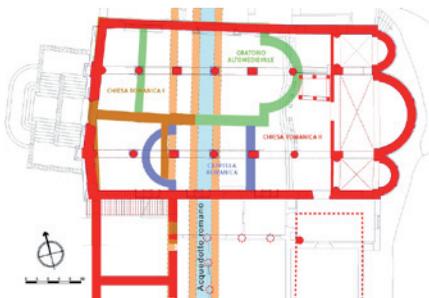
St George's was built using high quality squared stones, dating back to the 12th century. First recorded in 1186 AD, the present church is not the first place of worship dedicated to St George on this site, where a *Basilica Sancti Georgi* (Latin phrase meaning 'Cathedral dedicated to St George') had probably stood before 1000 AD, as suggested by the following three factors: St George was worshipped by the Lombards, the site is fairly near the *Curia Ducis*, and a small decorated column dating 8th-9th century has been found in the rectory.

Evidence of the Early Middle Age origin of the worship place has been discovered during the campaign for the building's restoration; excavations at the site uncovered a complex pattern of construction layers of historic importance which were partly unexpected.

Remains of the original building have been found exactly above the

St George's Church, built just outside the Roman and Early Middle Age area, design reconstructing the city of Brescia at the end of the 12th century (by L. Confortini).

On this page (right): map showing different construction phases above the Roman aqueduct channels discovered during archaeological excavations at the church. Below: external view of the apses and bell tower, both built on the slope of the Cidneo hill in the 12th century.



Roman aqueduct; its entrance was likely to have been located on a side of the present church, following the ancient Roman ducts.

Like many small churches which partially still survive on the southern slope of the Cidneo hill, between the western gate and the monastery of St Pietro in Oliveto, St George's Church was originally a mausoleum – or an oratory – founded by one of the Lombard noble families who gravitated towards the royal court and the monastery of St Giulia.

The small original church was then enlarged adding to its side an apse chapel which was certainly built

after the middle of the 11th century.

Between the end of the 11th century and the early 12th century, the original oratory expanded westward, supporting the façade with an imposing substructure, and the apse chapel was converted into a squared room, where many burials have been found, documenting the use of this site as a burial place. Next to the new room, a two floor building was erected; this palace was probably the original rectory, which may be evidence of the fact that St George's Church became a parish church during that period. Before the end of the 12th century, the church, which was seriously damaged as discovered during latest excavations, had been entirely rebuilt and enlarged reaching its current size.



The Restoration Works | Text by Studio Bozzetti

St George's Church, one of the most important Romanesque buildings in Brescia, had been neglected for years and fell into a state of decay. Factors such as lack of repairs, water infiltrations, damp, and burglaries had gradually damaged the building, transforming it into a ruin. The Church's restoration was promoted by Professor Bruno Boni, who reported its decay to the Province of Brescia at the end of the 80's, calling for investments in order to repair the building.

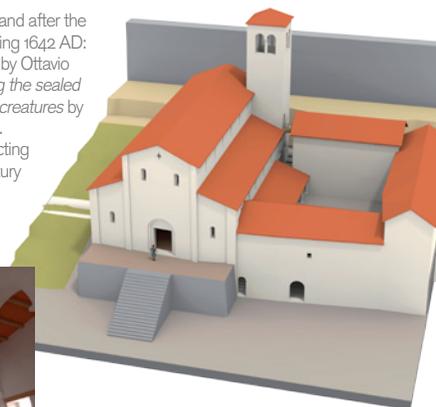
A specific restoration project started in 1994, including general surveys, stratigraphic analyses – in order to detect possible causes of instability or subsiding – and a plan to prevent them. Works went on until 2009, following different phases of gradual repairs according to the plans of different promoters who financed the project.

The church has been completely refurbished, including renovation works of the whole building and specific restoration of walls, pavements, facades, stairways and other external parts, as well as the installation of technological systems, new furniture, and lighting.



Internal view of the main apse before and after the restoration exposing two frescoes dating 1642 AD: *The Seven Angels of the Apocalypse* by Ottavio Amigoni on the apse, and *God holding the sealed Book surrounded by four many-eyed creatures* by Agostino Avanzi on the vaulted ceiling.

On this page (right): design reconstructing the church and rectory in late 12th century (by D. Gallina). Below: hypothetical reconstruction of the chancel area in the 12th century.



Internal view of the main apse before and after the restoration exposing two frescoes dating 1642 AD: 'The Seven Angels of the Apocalypse' by Ottavio Amigoni on the apse, and 'God holding the sealed Book surrounded by four many-eyed creatures' by Agostino Avanzi on the vaulted ceiling.

Restoration materials have been chosen for their functionality rather than for their decorative effect, respecting the historic and architectural features of the church, as well as its role as a place of worship.

Through a detailed archaeological excavation, the church's origin and history have finally been reconstructed, shedding light on this ancient place of worship.

Moreover, great efforts have been made in order to repair the frescoes dating from between the 12th and the 13th centuries, and wooden artworks which have been patiently restored to their original beauty.

Medieval Decorations

| Text by Matteo Ferrari

The most ancient paintings in St George's Church, dating between the end of the

13th century and the beginning of the 14th century, include the large chancel area and isolated votive images; a few fragments depicting saints and the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus have been preserved on the walls and columns of the nave.

The lower part of the triple apse was painted in shades of white and ochre, representing a false curtain whose traces have been found in both the central and right apses, behind the 18th century choir. The upper part of walls and apses were probably painted with figurative frescoes, unfortunately, many of them have been lost because of the architectural changes carried out in modern times.

A painting representing a **prayer or a devotee** kneeling toward the altar has been preserved on a side of the Romanesque window of the main apse; it probably portrays the patron who commissioned the decoration of the church, as documented by many examples of other similar paintings dating back to the same period in Lombardy. This kind of portrait on commission used to be painted at the edge of frescoes representing the redemption of the soul.



Picture (left): detail of the *Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus*, dating end of the 13th-early 14th century, on the western side of the fourth column on the left. Picture (right): devotee on a side of the Romanesque window of the main apse, about 1300 AD. Below: detail of *St Anna Metterza* standing between two holy deacons, vaulted ceiling of the northern apse, dating end of the 13th-early 14th century.



Above: detail of *Teoria di Sante (Saints'Dreams)*, dating middle of the 14th century. Below: 15th-16th century decoration composed of symmetrical monochrome squares of faux marble, now hidden behind the wooden choir leaning against the wall of the main apse; Saint Christopher (picture on the left).

in style: unlike typical Byzantine depictions, the three saints are strikingly expressive and three-dimensional. Moreover, this fresco symbolizing a Holy Family is one of the most ancient examples of a religious subject, the Holy Trinity, which was very popular in the 15th century, though this kind of paintings were already common in the territories of Brescia and Bergamo during the second half of the 13th century. Further decorations were added to the northern apse a few decades later, probably in the middle of the 14th century. These include a representation of **richly dressed saints**, who are painted along the apse, and an Apostle on the entrance archway. Characteristic features of these figures, such as their slightly red skin, are evidence of the development of figurative art according to the models painted by artists in Milan and in Lombardy at that time.

15th-16th century Decorations | Text by Barbara D'Attoma

Restoration work has discovered and repaired frescoes and other decorations dating between 1400 AD and 1500 AD, which do not belong to a specific decorative plan. There are more than one layer of paintings, including many themes and different styles.



St Anthony the Abbot, votive fresco painted on the fourth pillar of the northern aisle in 1513. Picture on the right: *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, votive fresco painted on the fourth pillar of the southern aisle between 15th and 16th century.

Below: southern apse's decoration painted on three different levels depicting respectively a 14th century *velarium* (below), the *Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus*, an *angel*, a *devotee*, *St Christopher*, *St Francis of Assisi* (in the middle), and *Christ Pantocrator* (above), all of them dating early 16th century.



Frescoes and narrative scenes by unknown artists are examples of Late Gothic style and Pre-Renaissance painting which were spread in Lombardy at that time. On the whole, the decorations of the church's interior can be classified according to two different subjects: "liturgical" frescoes belonging to the traditional Christian iconography and thus painted in the foreground in order to be easily admired by visitors, and few devotional frescoes representing saints painted in isolated squared spaces, as they are probably paintings on commission.

Entering the main door and going ahead left to right, you will notice *St Anthony the Abbot* painted on the fourth pillar of the northern aisle, this fresco was commissioned in 1513 by "Maestro Giovanni", an unknown believer who probably escaped the outbreak of plague after the loot of Brescia in 1512. Painted on the opposite pillar, you will see *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, a young Christian princess who can be

identified by her crown, along with a wheel and a sword representing the instruments of her martyrdom, the fresco dates back to the period around 1503.

During restoration, the wooden choir leaning against the wall of the main apse as temporarily removed, uncovering a 15th-16th century decoration which covers the whole wall. It consists of **nine symmetrical monochrome panels** made of faux marble, and an earlier headless figure of *St Christopher* on the left. Unfortunately, this decoration can no longer be seen, as the wooden choir currently hides it.

2008 restoration work in the southern apse unveiled the



Late 15th century fresco depicting *The Four Evangelists* or *The Church Fathers* on the groin vault of the first southern bay.

largest 15th century fresco of the church's interior, which is divided into three parts: a 14th century *velarium* (curtain) in the lower part, *the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus*, a *devotee*, an *angel*, *St Christopher*, *St Francis of Assisi* (in the middle), and *Christ Pantocrator* on the vaulted ceiling. *The Annunciation* and a *dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit* are painted on the external part of the archway (and canopy). The

late 15th century frescoes representing either *The Four Evangelists* or *The Church Fathers*, and *the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus flanked by a holy deacon* are respectively on the vaulted ceiling and wall of the first southern bay. Originally, the frescoes probably covered the whole bay, and the *Virgin Mary* was flanked by two saints, *St Stephen* and *St Lawrence*, who are also depicted on the northern apse, or *Saints Cosmas and Damien*, the martyrs who were known as patrons against diseases.

17th-18th century Decorations | Text by Fiorenzo Fisogni

The choir area was decorated by Ottavio Amigoni and Agostino Avanzi in 1642, as documented by the date which was found behind the pipe organ during its latest restoration. Remembering the terrible plague of 1630, the artists painted *The Seven Angels of the Apocalypse* on the vaulted ceiling of the main apse to remind the horror of those dark days, while on the chancel *God the Father* is looking with a terrifying expression sitting on his throne flanked by four many-eyed beasts. The frescoes painted by Ottavio Amigoni and Agostino Avanzi have monumental, vivid features which mirror the Milanese art tradition by great painters such as Pier Francesco Morazzone, Giovanni Battista Della Rovere and Giovan Mauro Della Rovere, two brothers known as I Fiamminghini who moved to Brescia from Milan.

New studies have shown that Amigoni was a cosmopolitan artist who followed the latest trend in painting, as he travelled throughout Lombardy and Switzerland in order to cultivate his style according to the finest taste of his patrons.



Above: *Jesus Christ and his Passion's symbols* by Francesco Savanni (about 1750 AD) on the ceiling of the vestry. Below: *The Seven Angels of the Apocalypse* by Ottavio Amigoni on the vaulted ceiling of the main apse, 1642 AD.

The decoration of the vaulted ceiling of the nave was completed by Pompeo Ghitti, a pupil of Amigoni, and Pietro Antonio Sorisene in 1671. Sorisene, who mastered the illusionistic ceiling painting technique of quadratura, developed an imposing patterns of architectural features which introduced Baroque style in Brescia, while Ghitti depicted a brightened *God sitting on his throne flanked by angels* in the middle of the vaulted ceiling, thus symbolizing the end of sufferance after troubled times.

Ghitti and Sorisene started collaborating in St George's Church, then they also worked together successfully between 1672 and 1683, painting



the vaulted ceiling of the church of Santa Maria Assunta (Our Lady of the Assumption) in Brancolino (Trentino), and the church of St Agatha in Brescia (1683).

An inscription on the main door of St George's

Church recalls that important modernization work was carried out in 1754, in order to make the church brighter and regular according to the new Neoclassical trend in architecture. Namely, the wall colours were brightened and a long molding was installed to simplify the Baroque architectural features by Sorisene. The vaulted ceiling was probably completely covered with white paint, though there are no traces of this refurbishment work in later sources. The walls of the choir are decorated with faux choir screens and Rococo pastel colour paintings, imitating the frescoes which Giandomenico Tiepolo was painting in the church of St Faustino and Giovita, which ruled St George's Church at that time. Influences by Tiepolo art style include the fresco by Francesco Savanni depicting a bright *Jesus Christ and his Passion's symbols* on the vaulted ceiling of the vestry.



God overlooking a peaceful city sits on his throne flanked by angels giving back the trumpets of the Apocalypse, fresco by P. Ghitti (1671) on the vaulted ceiling of the nave. Below: detail of coat of arms representing a unicorn on the grave slab of the Savallo Family, floor of the southern aisle (chancel area).

Heraldic Evidence in St George's Church | Text by Marco Foppoli

Many layers of different coats of arms have been found in churches and other worship places, as they were usually displayed on furniture, works of art, vestments and chapels in order to remember devotees and other donors who patronized them. Moreover, coats of arms used to be inscribed in sepulchres, grave slabs, and tombstones belonging to aristocracy.

Coats of arms have been also found in St George's Church, though inscriptions of many grave slabs on its floor have been ruined or completely erased; Scrapes are probably due to the fact that inscriptions in churches, as well as any other emblems and insignias were removed from public places as directed by the Cisalpine Republic in 1797. On the floor of the southern





Detail of the Savallo family coat of arms in relief representing la dolce and a unicorn on the pilasters flanking the entrance to the central chapel in the northern aisle. Below: remains of 15th century decoration, probably another Savallo family coat of arms in relief, depicting la dolce on the right wall of the vestry.

aisle, in the chancel area, is the only grave slab with a well-preserved coat of arm showing a unicorn on a Venetian shield. As explained by the Latin inscription *Reliquium Savallorum*, this is **the Savallo family coat of arms**, a noble family who lived in San Faustino district of Brescia and had their family sepulchre in St George's Church. Other two small coats of arms are on the pilasters at the entrance of the central chapel in the northern aisle; they show **a Venetian shield with emblems** which have been identified either as the Caprioli family emblems or more likely the Savallo family ones. Since the animals on the shields are similar, their nature is uncertain: they could be either a roe deer, historic emblem of the prestigious Caprioli family of Brescia, or two legendary creatures, a unicorn and the so-called *la dolce*, both emblems of the Savallo family. Moreover, *la dolce*, which is depicted as a kind of fire-breathing chimera half goat and half fox,

appears on the **beautiful heraldic shield shaped like a horse head** on the right wall of the vestry.

This elegant relief dating from the end of the 15th century could be the remains of a decoration which belonged to the original chapel.

Detail of the Savallo family coat of arms in relief representing *la dolce* and a unicorn on the pilasters flanking the entrance to the central chapel in the northern aisle.

Below: remains of 15th century decoration, probably another Savallo family coat of arms in relief, depicting *la dolce* on the right wall of the vestry.

