



COMPAGNIA DELLO STILEPISANO

# SAN MICHELE IN BORGO



*Church of San Michele in Borgo*

*[Picture from BeWeb \(identifier: A4Rch01a.jpg\)](#)*

# SAINT MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL

The church, along with its adjoining monastery and hospital, was founded around the year 1016 by the Benedictine abbot Bono. It later came under the management of the Camaldolese monks, who administered it until their order was suppressed in 1782, at which point the church became a priory.

Originally known as **San Michele fuori le mura** ("Saint Michael outside the walls"), the church stood beyond the earlier city walls, near the Porta Samuel. The name "**in Borgo**" was adopted later, referring to the borough that had developed outside the walls and into which the church was eventually integrated. This borough later lent its name to the entire district, which also came to be known as "**di Mezzo**" ("in the middle"), following urban expansion beyond the gate.

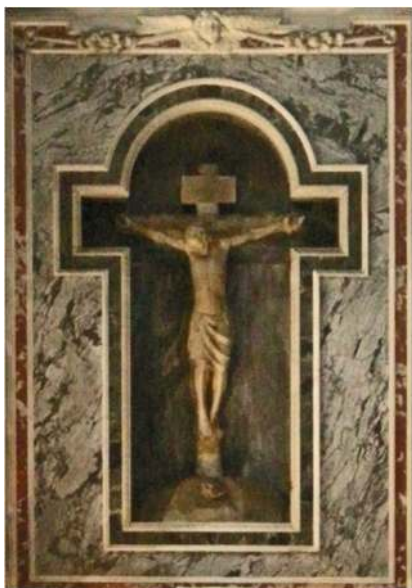


The building underwent numerous transformations over the centuries. The façade, in particular, reflects influences of the Pisan Gothic style. Notable is the **edicule** (small shrine) above the central portal, attributed to **Lupo di Francesco**.

The interior was first modified in 1568, when the vaults of the naves were rebuilt and a choir was added. A more radical renovation took place in 1758, when the church was redesigned in late Baroque style. In 1811, a new altar—taken from the suppressed church of **San Lorenzo alla Rivalta**—was installed.

The 1846 earthquake caused severe damage, especially to the roof, which was restored according to a project by Alessandro **Della Gherardesca**. However, the church suffered even more extensive destruction during **World War II**. The subsequent restoration, carried out by Gino Chierici and later by Giuseppe Sanpaolesi, was quite invasive: the two side chapels, the apse, the choir, and two Baroque altars (now preserved in the Church of **San Ponziano** in Lucca) were removed.

The interior preserves two marble holy water fountains dated to 1646. On the counter-façade is a commemorative plaque for the painter brothers **Giuseppe and Francesco Melani**, originally from their tomb in the Church of Santa Lucia. Some traces of 14th-century frescoes are still visible, though partially repainted.



On the left nave, there is an altar made of white and red marble, housing a **marble crucifix attributed to Nino Pisano** (1360), originally placed on the left portal of the **Campo Santo**. According to tradition, the Lorraine rulers intended to replace this crucifix with their coat of arms, but due to its widespread popular veneration, the artwork was removed secretly at night. Nonetheless, the coat of arms was never installed, and to this day the lunette of that portal in the Campo Santo remains empty.

Beneath the main altar lie the remains of **Blessed Domenico Vernagalli**, who in 1218 had founded a hospice affiliated with the church.

Originally, the church also featured a **14th-century marble pulpit**, now dismantled. Five panels, two column-bearing lions, and a few other fragments survive and are now preserved at the Museo **di San Matteo**. Starting in 1648, these elements were reused in various ways within the church.

Unfortunately, many valuable artworks were lost over the course of restorations, including a fresco cycle by **Benozzo Gozzoli** depicting the life of **Saint Benedict**, which decorated the cloister, and a wooden **choir stall** crafted by **Bartolomeo Atticciati** in 1613.



# INSIGHT:

## BLESSED DOMENICO VERNAGALLI

Born in Buti around 1180 into a wealthy family, Domenico Vernagalli renounced his comfortable life to pursue a religious vocation. Around the year 1200, he entered the Camaldolese monastery of San Michele in Borgo in Pisa and was appointed parish priest of the church in 1204, adopting an ascetic lifestyle.

Deeply sensitive to the social problems of his time, in 1218 he founded the "**Spedale dei Trovatelli**" (Hospital of the Foundlings) at San Michele, dedicated to the care of abandoned children. It was the first documented foundling hospital in Pisa, predating by nearly a century the better-known Ospizio dei Trovatelli of 1315, annexed to the Church of San Giorgio ai Tedeschi.

Domenico died on April 20, 1219, and was immediately venerated as a saint. His cult was officially recognized in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. A commemorative plaque and various sources also attest that he was the founder of a second hospital, likely also a foundling institution, which was later relocated near San Marco on the Via Calcesana. In 1287, a communal decree allocated funds to the "Spedale dei Trovatelli di San Domenico."

A later tradition recounts that Domenico donated a family house near San Iacopo de Mercato to provide the hospital with an annual income of about 200 lire (cf. *Annales Camaldulenses*, Mittarelli and Costadoni). A document from 1278 states that the hospital was managed by a rector appointed by the abbot of San Michele.

After his death, Domenico's remains were placed in a late Roman sarcophagus, now preserved in the **Campo Santo**. His relics are currently enshrined beneath the high altar of San Michele in Borgo, where they are still venerated.



An exemplary figure of lay charity, Domenico Vernagalli stands among those urban saints who, according to historian André Vauchez, embody a new form of medieval sanctity, centered on preaching and the works of mercy.



# LA CRIPTA

San Michele in Borgo is one of the very few churches in Pisa that has a **crypt**. It was rediscovered only in 1911 during renovation works and features vaulted structures from the 10th or 11th century, decorated with painted animals inside red-toned roundels and black ornamental friezes. The walls are made of verrucano stone, while the columns are of granite.



The structure is clearly part of an older building, possibly a primitive church with a different orientation than the current one. San Michele is also believed to have once had a raised presbytery crypt (**crypta pontilis**), with access from the front—similar to the one in the Cathedral of Modena. **The two crypts coexisted for a time**, but eventually the raised crypt was demolished, and only the older one survived.

According to some scholars, the crypt may be even older, possibly part of Roman-era buildings—specifically, the remains of a **temple dedicated to Mars**. Supporting this theory are the *opus quadratum* brickwork sections found in the masonry.

This underground area was used by the monks both as a burial site and for more practical purposes. For instance, we know that at some point it was adapted to serve as a wine cellar for barrels (as recorded by Abbot Corsi in 1637).

For further details, see the paper by Fabiana Susini, available at:

<https://www.yumpu.com/it/document/view/15271731/crypta-san-michele-borgo-pisa-2-esempi-di-architettura>



The crypt, located beneath the presbytery, has always been prone to flooding, but **today it is permanently inundated and inaccessible**. It is likely that the water infiltrates from an underground aquifer, possibly due to damage caused by World War II bombings. Draining the crypt could potentially cause greater

structural damage, as the water's pressure currently balances that of the surrounding water table.

The original entrance is located at the rear of the church, in a small square that has been made inaccessible and closed off due to a redevelopment project popularly known as "*la Mattonaia*" (so named because of its exposed brick construction), initiated by the municipality to enhance the area—but which, in reality, has eliminated access. The crypt was once reachable through the monastic cloister, which was destroyed during World War II. Today, the only way to enter the crypt is through a hatch located in the northern part of the presbytery.

Unfortunately, the crypt is now in a state of complete neglect, and this ancient treasure risks being entirely forgotten or irreversibly lost. We sincerely hope that those in charge will soon take action to recover, study, safeguard, and enhance this hidden and precious site—one that could reveal much about ancient Pisa.



# THE PULPIT

The church once featured a pulpit dating back to the early 14th century, attributed to **Lupo di Francesco**. It replaced an earlier pulpit of which no traces remain.

In 1648, the pulpit was dismantled as it no longer met the liturgical requirements established by the Council of Trent, which aimed to clear the presbytery of structures that were increasingly seen as cumbersome.

Unfortunately, the pulpit of San Michele had a troubled history, with its elements being moved several times. A far more devastating event—World War II—severely damaged the church, and following restoration work, the pulpit's fragments were gathered and transferred to the **Museo di San Matteo**, where they remain today in a disassembled state.

The pulpit consists of five relief panels, depicting: the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation in the Temple, and the Flight into Egypt. Its style is strongly reminiscent of Giovanni Pisano's pulpit in the Cathedral.

Like that of the Cathedral, it was supported by columns, two of which stood on stylophoric lions—a motif also found at the entrances of many churches. The lion is a symbol of Christ and his triumph over evil.





*Hypothetical reconstruction of the pulpit*  
[From BeWeb, created by Sandro Bonannini](#)

The base of the pulpit was hexagonal in shape and bears a closer resemblance to that of Nicola Pisano's pulpit in the Baptistery, rather than to the one in the Cathedral.

The lectern, now lost, was likely shaped like an eagle, a common symbol in medieval ambones and pulpits.

**Plans to reconstruct** the pulpit have existed since the 19th century. After the reconstruction of the Cathedral's pulpit, Cardinal Pietro Maffi expressed a wish to reassemble the pulpit of San Michele as well. However, he intended to place it in the Church of Santa Caterina,

as no suitable location could be found within the current layout of San Michele. Despite this interest, the reconstruction never took place.

To this day, there is ongoing discussion about the possibility of reconstruction, including the integration of new elements such as the supporting columns. Unlike past proposals, this one envisions restoring the pulpit within its original context, the Church of San Michele in Borgo.

Aside from the historical research and design proposals—including a digital rendering viewable on BeWeb—no further action has been taken to date.

For historical background and reconstruction hypotheses regarding the pulpit of San Michele in Borgo, refer to the BeWeb database at:

<https://beweb.chiesacattolica.it/percorsitematici/il-pergamo-della-chiesa-di-san-michele-in-borgo-di-pisa-tra-passato-e-futuro/>



# UNIVERSITY ELECTIONS

On May 1st, 1558, **Perseo Cattaneo da Carrara**, a jurist from the Padua area, was elected Rector of the Studium of Pisa. His election took place during a period of revival for the University of Pisa, strongly supported by the Medici family.

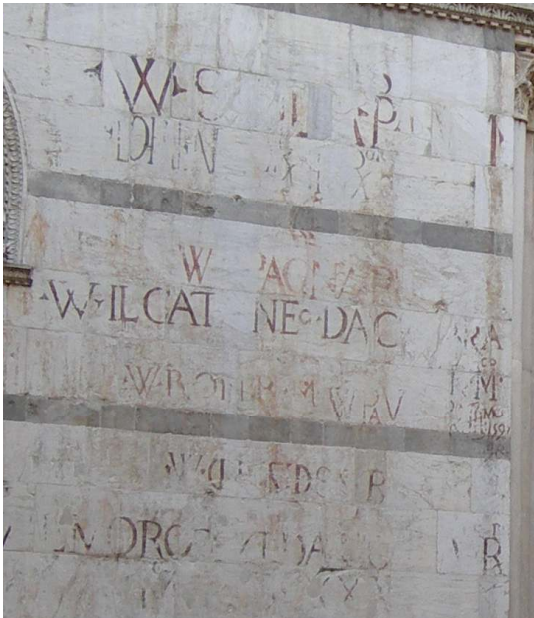
During his candidacy, a lively electoral campaign unfolded, with graffiti slogans written on various city buildings. One of these, still visible today on the façade of San Michele in Borgo, reads:

**“W IL CAT(TA)NEO DA CAR(R)A.R(A)”**

This inscription—likely made by students or supporters—is a clear example of **early electoral propaganda**, and reflects a common practice in Renaissance university towns, where the role of the rector was highly exposed to public opinion and academic rivalry.

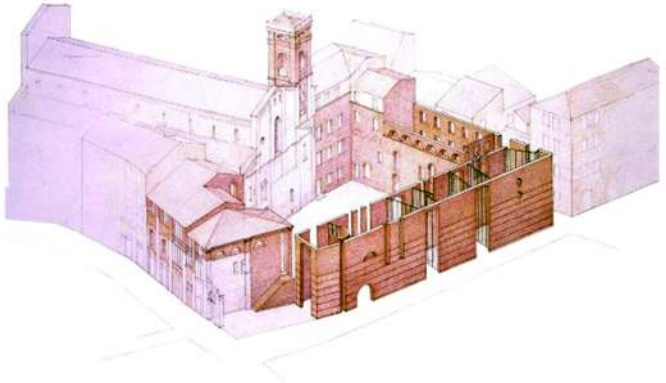
San Michele still preserves several other inscriptions, dating from the late 16th to early 17th century, such as “*W IL MORO*” and other invocations supporting rectoral candidates.

The fact that these messages appeared on a religious building and have survived to this day highlights how deeply interwoven the university was with the civic life of the city. Today, these inscriptions—still legible, though faded—are a unique historical witness, drawing the attention of scholars and visitors alike, and reminding us of the central role of the university in Renaissance Pisa.



# THE “MATTONAIA”

The San Michele in Borgo complex, located in the heart of Pisa, is the result of a contemporary architectural project conceived to recover and integrate the remains of the cloister destroyed during World War II bombings.



In the 1980s, the area had been converted into a parking lot. It was then that architect **Massimo Carmassi** launched a long-term project aimed at restoring the site’s historical identity through a sober and material-based architectural language, characterized by exposed brickwork—a feature that soon earned the project the popular nickname “**la mattonaia**” (literally, “the brickyard”).

Despite receiving academic praise and attention in professional journals, the project was never completed. Today, the complex lies in a state of neglect, with underused and unsold spaces, and a configuration that blocks Via degli Orafi, hides the rear of the church of San Michele, and prevents access to the inner courtyard.

La Mattonaia has proven to be a **clear architectural misstep**, yet no one seems willing to take the necessary step of demolishing it to restore the area’s accessibility and to return the beauty and openness of the church’s rear façade to the city. A symbol of the disconnect between design vision and lived urban experience, the complex today stands as a bitter reminder of how architecture, however well-intentioned, can fail to restore meaning and function to a place.





*The cloister of the monastery behind the church of San Michele in Borgo before its destruction during the war.*

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