



SAN SEPOLCRO



THE CHURCH OF THE KNIGHTS

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was founded as the Pisan seat of the **Sacred Order of the Hospitallers of Saint John of Jerusalem**, now known as the **Order of the Knights of Malta**. Their presence in Pisa has been documented since 1113, while the church itself is attested from at least 1138. Its floor plan is octagonal—a rare feature—and is attributed to the architect **Diotisalvi**, who is mentioned in an inscription at the base of the bell tower:

HUIUS OPERIS FABRICATOR
DEUS TE SALVET NOMINATUR



However, it is unclear whether he designed the entire structure or only the bell tower. Diotisalvi is recorded as Magister for the construction of the Baptistry of Saint John, and some

scholars also credit him with the chapel of Saint Agatha and the cathedral's bell tower.

Over time, the building underwent many alterations. New constructions eventually obscured half of it, and during the Renaissance the remaining visible sides were surrounded by a sandstone portico. Between the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the structure was radically modified: the perimeter walls were raised, new windows were opened, and the original vaulted roof was destroyed.

In 1720, the Grand Prior of the Knights commissioned new embellishments: stuccoes were added to the dome, the old windows were sealed, new ones were opened, and several paintings—copies of famous works—were ordered.

With the suppression of the Order in 1817, the church fell into decline. It was closed for worship in 1848, but by 1850 restoration work had begun to return it to its presumed medieval appearance. These interventions, typical of the 19th century, led to the demolition of the 16th-century vault and portico, the reopening of the ancient windows, and the recovery of the original base, which had sunk below street level. The church was reconsecrated in 1876.

Similar restorations, guided more by 19th-century aesthetic tastes than by philological criteria, often resulted in historical inaccuracies. Even monuments such as the Baptistery of Saint John and Santa Maria della Spina were heavily altered in this way.

Inside the church is the tomb of **Maria Mancini Colonna** (1639–1715), niece of Cardinal Mazarin and lover of King Louis XIV of France. There is also a stone well, now protected by a grate, which according to tradition was used by **Saint Ubaldesca** to help pilgrims—although in reality it dates from a later period.



Behind the altar is a Madonna and Child attributed to the school of **Benozzo Gozzoli** (15th century), and above, in a niche, is the reliquary bust of Saint Ubaldesca.

On the exterior, some Romanesque decorations can still be seen, including lion heads and a male head, probably sculpted by **Rainaldo** in the 12th century. Above the west door, the lunette holds a marble bust of Diotisalvi, created by **Santo Varni** in 1859.

In 1966, the church was struck by the flooding of the Arno River. The subsequent restorations removed the 19th-century furnishings and recovered wall paintings at the base of the bell tower, which is now used as the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament.

INSIGHT:

SAINT UBALDESCA



Ubaldesca Taccini was born in 1136 in **Calcinaia**, in the Pisan countryside, to a farming family. From a very young age, she showed a deep inclination toward prayer, penance, and charity toward the poor—values that would guide her entire life.

At the age of fifteen, she left her hometown and moved to Pisa, where she dedicated herself to religious life by joining a female monastery dedicated to Saint Salvatore. However, according to tradition, the convent was already under the influence or protection of the **Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem**.

Throughout her life, she lived humbly and devotedly, caring for sick nuns, collecting alms for the monastery, and living in a spirit of service. The last years of her life are documented by **Friar Dotto degli Occhi**, chaplain of the Order, who attested to her reputation for holiness. She died on May 28, 1206, and was buried in the Church of the **Holy Sepulchre** in Pisa, which was closely linked to the Hospitaller Order.

The relics of Saint Ubaldesca remained there until 1926, when they were transferred to Calcinaia at the request of the local population and by order of Cardinal **Pietro Maffi**. Today they rest in the parish church of her hometown, where she is especially venerated.

Within the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, Saint Ubaldesca is regarded as the prototype of the monacha hierosolymitana—an example of humility, service, and Christian purity.

The only miracle attributed to Ubaldesca during her lifetime occurred on a Good Friday near the Church of San Martino in Chinzica, Pisa. Some women, weary from returning from the Perdono di San Piero a Grado (the plenary indulgence granted that day), asked for something to drink. Ubaldesca drew water from a **well** near the church and, after making the sign of the cross, the **water turned into wine**.

The miracle, reminiscent of the Wedding at Cana and Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, has been interpreted as a sign of her sanctity. According to tradition, the well is still visible today inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Pisa.



INSIGHT:

MARIA MANCINI COLONNA



Anna Maria Mancini, born in Rome on August 28, 1639, was a noblewoman from the powerful Mancini family. She was the daughter of Baron **Michele Lorenzo Mancini** and niece of Cardinal **Giulio Mazarin**. She was also one of the famous “**Mazarinettes**,” the young female relatives whom the cardinal brought to the French court to secure advantageous marriage alliances.

After moving to France with two of her cousins, Maria lived at the court of **Louis XIV** under the protection of her uncle. There, she met the young **Sun King**, and a deep, sincere love blossomed between them. However, it was never to be fulfilled: for political reasons, Louis was forced to marry the Spanish Infanta **Maria Theresa of Habsburg**, and Maria was removed from court.

In 1661, she was taken back to Rome to marry the nobleman **Lorenzo Onofrio Colonna**. According to contemporary accounts, her husband was surprised to find her still a virgin, as he had assumed that love with a king could not have been so innocent.

The marriage, however, proved unhappy. The relationship with her husband deteriorated to the point where Maria, fearing for her life, fled from Rome with her sister Hortense. During this long voluntary exile, she stayed in various European cities including Genoa, Marseille, Paris, and Madrid, avoiding a return to Italy until her husband’s death.

During this time, she wrote her memoirs, revealing herself as an educated, clear-minded, and nonconformist woman. The work, published in 1677, remains a valuable source for understanding the condition of women and aristocratic life in the 17th century.

The final chapter of her life was in **Pisa**, where she lived under the protection of the Medici family. She died there on May 8, 1715, and was buried in the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre**.



THE HOSPITALLER KNIGHTS

The group known as the **Hospitaller Knights**, or **Giovanniti**, were originally members of the **Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem**, later known as the **Order of Rhodes** and finally as the **Knights of Malta**. Their origins date back to the first half of the 11th century as a **Benedictine** hospital order founded in **Jerusalem**. After the First Crusade, the Order also took on a military role, transforming into a religious chivalric order with the mission of protecting Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land.



The founder of the Order was **Blessed Brother Gerard Sasso**, who obtained official recognition from **Pope Paschal II** in 1113. However, its roots go back even further, linked to the management of the Hospital of Saint John by Amalfitan merchants during the Carolingian era. Brother Gerard himself came from **Amalfi**, and it was likely for this reason that the Order

adopted the octagonal cross, already present on the Amalfitan banner: a white cross, symbolizing purity, on a black background, the color of Benedictine tunics.

The standard of the Order, however, was red with a simple white cross, known as the **Cross of Saint John the Baptist**, identical to that of the Kinzica district of Pisa. The knights' garments, originally black, later became red.



After fighting countless battles in the Holy Land, the Order was forced to abandon Jerusalem in 1187 and withdrew to **Saint John of Acre**, the last Christian stronghold, which fell in 1291. This was followed by a period of exile in **Cyprus** until 1309, when the Knights conquered the island of Rhodes and established it as their sovereign seat. However, in 1522 they were compelled to surrender **Rhodes** to Suleiman the Magnificent after a lengthy siege and subsequently dispersed throughout Europe.



It was only in 1530 that, by concession of Emperor **Charles V** (also King of Sicily), they obtained the island of **Malta**. The symbolic tribute imposed in return was a Maltese falcon to be presented each year on All Saints' Day to the Viceroy of Sicily.

In 1607, the Grand Master of the Order was granted the rank of **Prince of the Holy Roman Empire**, and in 1630 he was accorded ecclesiastical status equal to that of a Cardinal, with the exclusive title of **His Most Eminent Highness**.

The medieval chapter of the Order came to an end with the expulsion from Malta by **Napoleon** in 1798: the garrison, bound by rules prohibiting the use of arms against fellow Christians, was unable to resist.








Today, the **Sovereign Military Order of Malta** is recognized as the principal successor of the Hospitaller tradition. Active in more than 110 countries, it has abandoned its military dimension to focus on humanitarian, charitable, and medical missions.

Sovereign Military Order of Malta:
<https://www.orderofmalta.int/it/>

Although the Sovereign Military Order of Malta is the principal heir of the Hospitallers, there are four other orders that trace their origins back to the tradition of the ancient Knights of Jerusalem. Since 1961, they have been united in the **Alliance of the Orders of Saint John**: <https://ordersofsaintjohn.org/>

In addition, there are at least 30 other organizations worldwide that claim, in various ways, to belong to the Hospitaller tradition, but they are not recognized and are listed in a registry known as the **False Orders Committee**.

COAT OF ARMS	TITLE	SEAT
 SOVEREIGN ORDER OF MALTA	Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta	Malta, but with its government headquarters in Rome, on the Aventine Hill. The headquarters enjoys extraterritorial status.
 St John	The Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem	London
 JOHANNITER	Bailiwick of Brandenburg of the Chivalric Order of Saint John of the Hospital of Jerusalem	Berlin
 JOHANNITERORDEN I SVERIGE	Bailiwick of Sweden of the Chivalric Order of Saint John of the Hospital of Jerusalem	Stockholm
 Johanniter Orde IN NEDERLAND	Bailiwick of the Netherlands of the Chivalric Order of Saint John of the Hospital of Jerusalem	Amsterdam

TEMPLAR ARCHITECTURE

The Hospitaller Knights adopted an architectural style often referred to as “**Templar**,” which can be clearly identified in numerous 12th-century churches and is most commonly characterized by an **octagonal floor plan**.

This distinctive design was inspired by the famous **Dome of the Rock** in Jerusalem, also known as the **Mosque of Omar**. Built in the 7th century, the building holds exceptional significance for both monotheistic religions: for Christians, it stands on the site where the **sacrifice of Isaac** is believed to have taken place; for Muslims, it is the location from which **Muhammad**, accompanied by the Archangel Gabriel, is said to have ascended to heaven to receive the Qur’an. Additionally, according to tradition, the Dome was constructed on the ruins of **Solomon’s Temple**, right on the Haram ash-Sharif, which during the Crusader period served as the headquarters of the Templar Knights.

Alongside these Islamic and biblical references, the Hospitallers also borrowed architectural elements from the Byzantine Christian tradition, particularly from the structure of the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre**, and more specifically from its original core known as the **Anastasis** (“Resurrection” or “Rising”). This sacred building, located a short distance from the Dome of the Rock, dates back to 335 AD, but was severely damaged in 1009 during an attack by the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, who destroyed much of it. By the time of the Crusades, the complex was in a fragmented state, with chapels having sprung up around the original site.

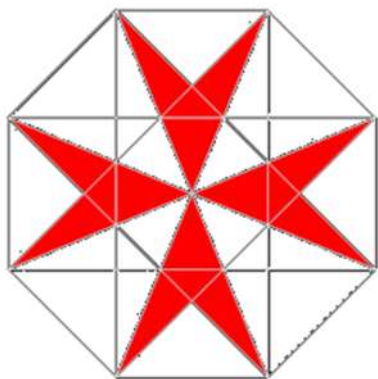
It was rebuilt in the second half of the 12th century, and the present structure of the Holy Sepulchre is based on that reconstruction.



*The Marys at the Sepulchre
Detail of a reliquary lid, 6th–
10th century
Vatican Sacred Museum, Rome*

This synthesis of architectural styles—Byzantine, Islamic, and Crusader—also found its highest expression outside the Holy Land, in buildings of the Western world. A remarkable example can be seen in Piazza del Duomo in Pisa, in the **Baptistry of Saint John**, whose original design is attributed to Magister Diotisalvi. Here, the influence of Templar and Eastern architecture is evident in the floor plan, central volumes, and certain stylistic elements that recall both the Dome of the Rock and the Anastasis.

But why the octagon? The octagon is the figure that mediates between the **square** (symbol of the earthly world and matter) and the **circle** (emblem of the heavens, eternity, and the divine). As such, it represents an intermediate stage, a passage from the earthly dimension to the celestial one: a pathway of ascent toward salvation. From a numerical and liturgical perspective, the number eight refers to the **eighth day of Creation**, which in Christian theology coincides with **Sunday**, the day of Christ's Resurrection, and thus symbolizes new life, infinity, and salvation.

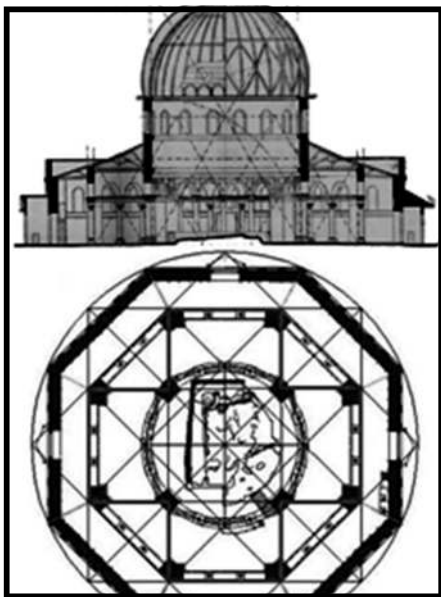


Furthermore, the octagon also alludes to the **Beatitudes** of the Gospel: eight promises made by Christ to the pure of heart, the meek, and the peacemakers. It is therefore a profoundly Christocentric figure, linked to the death and resurrection of the Savior.

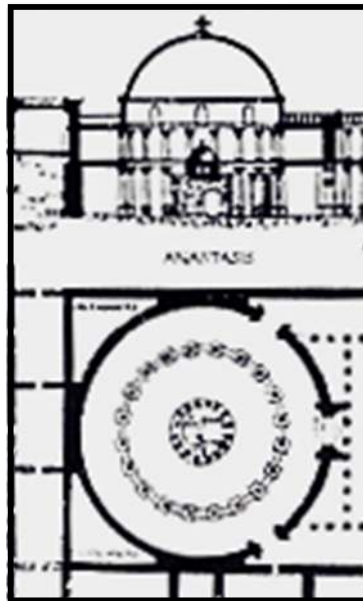
Geometrically, the octagon can be inscribed within a Greek cross, with four equal arms, visually evoking the image of the **Cross**, of the Passion, and thus of victory over sin and death.

For this reason, many medieval baptisteries—including those of Florence, Pisa, and Parma—adopt an octagonal plan to signify that baptism marks the entrance into eternal life: a rebirth that leads from the material world to the divine dimension.

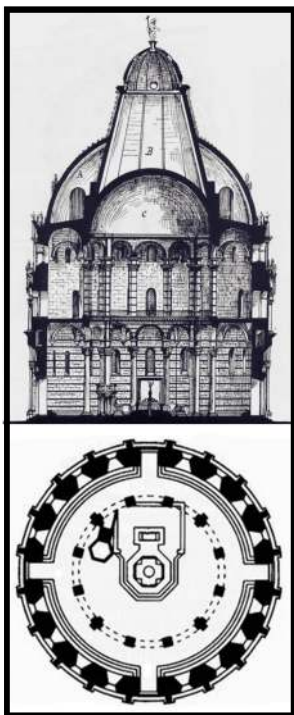
In summary, the octagon is a figure of transition and spiritual elevation, translating into architecture the journey of the faithful: from earth to heaven, through Christ.



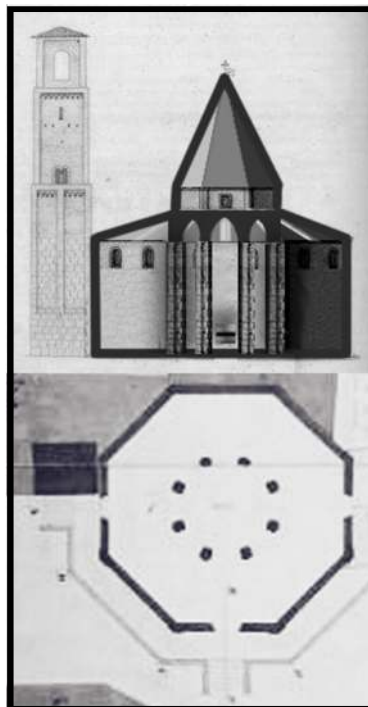
Plan and section of the Anastasis of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, 4th century



Plan and section of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem



Plan and section of the Baptistry of Saint John in Pisa



Plan and section of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Pisa



The Church of the Holy Sepulchre as it appeared with the portico

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