#H1 Building History

The Baptistery is still one of the greatest enigmas in the history of architecture. From the high middle ages to today, the Baptistery has served as a favorite subject of historical fascination for serious scholars. It has been dated in the fourth and fifth centuries, in the seventh and eighth, in eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth or even fifteenth centuries, so that its building history fluctuates throughout an entire millennium. The oldest date was suggested by Dante?. Dante argued that the building was a creation of Roman antiquity, perhaps a temple of Mars (2). In my opinion, the still older dating in the third? century of the early-Christian era needs to be abandoned (3). Lastly, the hypothesis of a Lombard-era origin is only contingently correct (4); Those other hypotheses of the foundation in the eleventh or twelfth centuries are also only conditionally plausible (5); the legends of significant (modifications) in the early Renaissance are completely wrong (6). I base my account on documents and the architectural remains, but these conclusions are speculative due to regrettably inconclusive excavations of the last half-century (7).

The remains of three older cultural layers are located under the church. First, there are remains of a Roman palace that was probably established in the Augustan time and destroyed within Roman antiquity. Second, nested in the ruins of this palace, late-antique residential buildings and baths remain. At the end of the fourth century, this second layer was also destroyed. Graves of a Germanic cemetery dating to the early-middle ages occupy the most recent layer; one of these graves was partially destroyed with the installation of the left cornerstone of the apse of the Baptistery (8).

Access to the digs: in the Apse. In 897, documents first mention a church of S. Giovanni located in the northeast corner of the Roman city wall, thus on high ground (9). It was again mentioned in in 909, 967, 990, and 1040 (10). Perhaps it was initially a Baptistery and Co-cathedral of St. Reparata; at the latest in the middle of the eleventh century, S. Giovanni ceased its original use as a cathedral and served as a baptismal church [and as a foundation of the Dominicans.]

Maybe this shift was associated with the time when radical changes on the building were initiated. In 1059 or 1061 Pope Nicholas II, former bishop of Florence, likely performed a consecration in S. Giovanni, which was probably the cornerstone dedication for a monumental new building (12). The construction seems to have continued for a century. The first floor was largely finished by 1113, since Bishop Ranier, whose long governmental activity was closely linked with the first great progress of the new building (1077-1113), was buried in one of its walls (13). In 1117 the work was apparently still in progress, because the Pisans likely donated to the Florentines two columns, which then were erected in front of the Baptistery (14). In 1128 the ground floor was removed from the building (15). By 1150, and perhaps as early as 1128 (16), the design of the lantern concluded the construction of the dome and, therefore, the entire structure (17). Around this time, the cloth merchants guild began their control of the construction and the builders' hut (18).

Subsequently a few larger changes were undertaken on the finished church. In 1202 they replaced the half circle form of the Apse with an oblong choir chapel, the so-called "Scarsella" (19). Around 1207 the marble floor was initiated (20). In the second half of the 13th century the great dome gained its mosaic decoration (21).

In the 1280s and 1290s, the Baptistery became the subject of a great architectural project for the last time, in connection with the redesign of the cathedral and cathedral square. In 1285 the city began to repave the square (22), and in 1293 or 1296, after removal of many funerary monuments, that had been embedded on the gray ashlar (Macigno), Arnolfo di Cambio encrusted **external cornerstones/corner pillars** of octagons with black-green and white marble coating. Through this massive renovation, he presumably wanted to match the Cathederal’s new façade with that of the Baptistery; he also apparently replaced the upper section of the foundation of the Baptistery (23).

Since then, S. Giovanni has only been restored, though very frequently and drastically. In 1339 Florence cleaned the dirty marble floor and refaced the chief ornamental molding of the cornices (24). In 1341-1346, 1364, and 1389/90 repairs on the marble roof took place (25). In 1444-1471 the tile roof needed to be completely replaced again (26). Leonardo da Vinci wanted to lift the whole building into the air in order to place a base underneath (27). In 1515 a chain was embedded into the brickwork on top of the second cornice for structural reasons (28). In 1548 broad, not accurately defined restorations took place (29). Despite the violent protests of the citizens, in 1577 Buontalenti removed the medieval baptismal font and the accompanying canon’s chancel out of the church interior in order to create a place for a baptismal scene in honor of Don Filippo, the first-born son of Grand Duke Francesco I (30); this was the most severe mutilation the building ever suffered. In 1722 the canons erected a new choir screen in order to integrate a sacristy into the apse (31). Around 1782 the architect Giuseppe Manetti cleaned the building and rebuilt the base cornice (31). From 1895-1902 the stonework of the lantern, the "Tribuna", and the east side of the octagon were dismantled and reassembled (33). At that time, and again in 1912/15, the baroque additions in the apse and on the altars were removed. In 1887 the northwestern half of the Piazza S. Giovanni was dug up, in 1895/97 the southwestern half, and in 1912/15 the various building layers under the western half of the church were uncovered (34).

A full clarification of the building history can only be attained through research of the remaining, temporarily untouched site under the Baptistery and the plaza.