

## SAN CLEMENTE AND SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE

This is an almost unbelievable example of the stratification or 'layering' of historical sites, with the oldest buildings being deepest underground - a 12<sup>th</sup> century church built on top of a 4<sup>th</sup> century church that had been converted out of a nobleman's home, part of which had briefly served as a secret church in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. This is built on top of a late 2<sup>nd</sup> century temple to the Persian god Mithras and underneath it all are the foundations of a republican era villa and warehouse which had been destroyed in the Great Fire of 64AD.



The upper church, built in 1108, contains an ornate marble choir originally from the lower church, frescoes of the Life of St Catherine (1228) and a 12<sup>th</sup> century mosaic showing the crucifixion with a Tree of Life, Rivers of Paradise flowing from the base of the cross, stags, doves and the Hand of God reaching down from heaven. Christ and his disciples are represented as sheep along the bottom.



Off the right aisle is a passageway leading to stairs down to the lower church, which was largely destroyed by Barbarian sackings of Rome in 1084. There are a few early frescoes, including the Life of St Clement and the Story of St Alexis as well as this one, from the 6<sup>th</sup> century which is either a Madonna and child or the Empress Theodora.



The altars of both churches are placed directly over this altar in the Mithraeum showing Mithras slaying a bull and creating life. Mithraism was a popular religion in Republican and Imperial Rome, especially among soldiers, who were attracted by the hierarchy of rules and strict tests to progress from one level to a more senior one. Worshippers would recline on couches at each side for a sacred communal meal. Rituals included killing a bull and collecting its blood. This chapel is part of a villa and there are still traces of the aqueducts supplying the water.



In 356 Pope Liberius had a dream in which the Virgin Mary told him to build a church where snow fell in the middle of summer, and this is the legend behind the building of **Santa Maria Maggiore**, the largest Papal basilica in Rome. Notice the wonderful apse mosaics by Jacopo Torriti (1295). In 1615 a bronze statue of the Virgin and Child was added to the ancient column outside in the Piazza.