

THE CHURCH



The Church of Santa Maria, a significant example of **Puglian Romanesque** architecture, is the fulcrum of the Abbey of Cerrate. Alongside its tiered facades and a central rose window, it features a basilica plan subdivided into a **nave and two aisles with apses**. Running around the exterior is a refined Lombard band of blind arches linked together by narrow half-pilasters that lead down to a tall base, delineating wide panels. This type of decoration, typical of the Romanesque style in the Salento area from the 12th century onwards, is also found in the Church of San Nicolò and San Cataldo in Lecce. The portal is surmounted by an arch with high-reliefs

of exceptional quality, which reproduce scenes from the New Testament. Located at the left flank of the church is a colonnade, built in the 13th century and supported by twenty-four columns with capitals depicting zoomorphic elements and mythological figures.

The interior of the edifice, imbued with rhythm by its ogival windows, is entirely decorated with **frescoes**, dating from the late 12th/early 13th century onwards; the pictorial decoration is visible today thanks to the removal of subsequent layers of fresco in the 1970s, now conserved in the adjacent farmer's house.

THE BELL TOWER

The sources –which include the pastoral accounts of visits such as that made by Monsignor Pappacoda in 1667, and the **1692 audit** – confirm that on the side of the left apse there was a bell tower built with three arches and featuring one large bell and two other small bells at the side; access to the bell tower was afforded by means of an external wooden staircase.

In **1905**, the bell tower was reconstructed with two arches in place of the three-light window, sited above the wall of the minor apse of the right aisle. In **1967**, following a storm, the reconstructed bell tower also collapsed.



THE ALTARS

The church plays host to two 17th-century altars, which visitors can admire to this day: the **high altar**, dedicated to **St Irene**, and the **side altar**, dedicated to **St Orontius**. The high altar, covered by a ciborium with re-used marble columns dating from 1269, originally featured a wooden dome surmounted by a globe with a cross – what you see today is a reconstruction based on the historical documentation. The side altar, located in the right aisle, was embellished in the centre by a painting of St Orontius. The altar has now been replaced by a portion of frescoes, datable to the 15th century.



ALTAR OF THE VIRGIN

At one time there was a third altar, adjacent to the third column of the left aisle. Historical images and stories told by local farmers indicate that this stone altar was **built in 1642** by Giovanni Battista Pagano, treasurer of the Hospital of the Incurables in Naples, and intended for popular worship.

During the works conducted in the early 1970s by the architect Franco Minissi, the **altar** and the **large canopy** that was located above it were **dismantled** and the sections moved to the outside of the church, where they remained exposed to the weather for more than forty years. After in-depth research, the stone pieces were reassembled, reinstating the original altar of the Church of Santa Maria.

