

The Pantheon

Marcus Agrippa, Lucii filius, consul tertium fecit. (Built by Marcus Agrippa, son of Lucius, during his third consulship). This is what it says on the Pantheon. However, it was built under Trajan and completed under Hadrian. How so? There was a Pantheon built under Agrippa on the same site. It fell victim to a fire, was rebuilt and burnt down again. Trajan then rebuilt again. But instead of claiming the building for himself, he put the original inscription on it.

The Romans built the Pantheon as a temple "for all the gods". The name of the building is derived from the Greek words "pan" (= all) and "theos" (= god). The Pantheon in Rome is one of the oldest domed buildings in the world.

You enter the Pantheon through a porch. It is divided into three naves by its columns and is thus reminiscent of typical Roman temple buildings. The interior of the porch is decorated with Corinthian columns and marble slabs. The main part of the building, the rotunda, is unique in Roman temple architecture. This rotunda has a diameter and a height of 43 metres each and is dominated by a dome that starts at about half the height of the room. A special concrete mixture was used to build the dome, which reduced the weight of the structure by adding increasingly light filling material to the concrete towards the top, such as volcanic tuff and pumice. From the inside, the dome is designed as a coffered ceiling whose recesses also save weight. Thus, the Pantheon still has the largest concrete dome in the world without reinforcement. The only source of light is a round opening in the centre of the dome roof. The angle of incidence of the light completely illuminates the space. The symbolism of the opening is interpreted in different ways: on the one hand it stands for the sun, on the other for the connection to the heavenly bodies.

The temple for all the gods shared the fate of many great buildings in ancient Rome. It was abandoned and began to fall into disrepair. But thanks to its early conversion into a church, the Pantheon is one of the best-preserved buildings of antiquity. In 609 it became the property of the church and was dedicated to the memory of the martyrs. Since then, the building has been used as a church under the name "Sancta Maria ad Martyres". Later, the name "Santa Maria Rotonda" became established. Until 663, the dome was covered with gilded bronze plates, but the Roman Emperor Constantine had them removed and brought to Constantinople. From the Renaissance onwards, the Pantheon served as a burial church. Pope Urban VIII, who came from the Barberini family, had bronze plates removed from the roof of the porch in the 17th century so that they could be used to make cannons and for the tabernacles of St Peter's Basilica. This gave rise to the saying in Rome: "Quod non fecerunt barbari, fecerunt Barberini" ("What the barbarians did not manage, the Barberini did").

The Pantheon is considered the model for numerous dome buildings from the Renaissance to the 19th century. These include St. Peter's Basilica in Rome as well as the Invalides Cathedral and the Sainte-Geneviève Church in Paris, which to this day also bears the name "Panthéon". The sculptor and master builder Michelangelo is said to have declared before building St Peter's: "I will put the Duomo of Florence on top of the Pantheon."