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The Christian Basilicas of Constantinian Rome¹

During his arduous military campaign to wrest control of Italy from the usurper Maxentius in A.D. 312, Constantine the Great invoked the *Deus summus*, the "Highest God" of the universe, for aid and power in his time of trial. Believing that he received an answer to this appeal through revelatory experiences from the God of the Christians, he decided to use the symbols of Christ as talismanic emblems on the arms of his troops. Behind the *caelestia signa* of his new patron Deity, Constantine defeated the forces of the enemy at the climactic Battle of the Mulvian Bridge on 28 October 312.²

When he entered Rome in triumphal procession the next day, Constantine came convinced that he had made the right choice for a divine patron and that he should direct his religious loyalty to this Divinity in the future. He began to surround himself with Christian advisors, and determined to use his personal resources and imperial patronage to support the cult of his co-religionists so that he might retain the benevolence of the "Almighty God" for victories in war and prosperity in peace.³ One significant part of his policy of propagating the Christian

¹This illustrated article is the result of several research trips to Rome in 1984, 1993, and 1994. I owe thanks to Dr. Victor Saxer, Director of the Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, and to Patricia Weaver and Antonella Bucci, Director of Programs and Associate Librarian of the American Academy in Rome, for their kind assistance in allowing me full access to their archival collections. I am especially indebted to Professor Bruno Apollonj Ghetti, architect and surveyor of the famous Vatican excavations, for working with me personally at the *San Giovanni*, *San Pietro*, and *Sant' Agnese* sites, and for allowing me to examine and make use of his extensive personal collection of drawings and prints of Rome's churches. I must also commend the Editors of *The Ancient World* for being willing to provide the space necessary to adequately illustrate a comprehensive article of this kind.

²The contemporary Christian accounts are found in Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 44, ed. by S. Brandt and G. Laubmann, in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, Vol. XXVII, Fas. II (Vienna 1897); Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IX. 9, ed. and trans. by J. Oulton and H. Lawlor in "The Loeb Classical Library" (Cambridge 1980), and *Vita Constantini* I. 26-40, ed. by F. Winkelmann in *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der Ersten Drei Jahrhunderte, Eusebius Werke*, Bd. I (Berlin 1975). The contemporary pagan accounts are the anonymous Trier *Panegyricus* IX, and Nazarius' Roman *Panegyricus* X, ed. by E. Galletier, in *Panegyriques Latins*, Tome II (Paris 1952). For detailed analyses of the Christian and pagan sources respectively, see: Charles Odahl, "Constantine's Conversion to Christianity," Chapter 1 of *Problems in European History*, ed. by H. Parker (Durham 1979), and "A Pagan's Reaction to Constantine's Conversion – Religious References in the Trier Panegyric of A.D. 313," *AncW* 21 (1990) 45-63. For standard general studies of Constantine's reign and Christian policies, see: A.H.M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (New York 1962); Andrew Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome* (Oxford 1969); Ramsay MacMullen, *Constantine* (New York 1971); and Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge 1981).

³Eusebius records such actions in the *Vita Const* I. 40-45; and Constantine reveals his own sentiments in his post-conversion laws and letters in favor of the Catholic Church which are found in Euseb., *Hist Eccl* X. 5-7; the *Codex Theodosianus* XVI.2.2, XVI.2.4, II.8.1, IV.7.1, XV.12.1, and *passim*, ed. by Th. Mommsen (Berlin 1905); and in *Appendices* 3, 5 and 7 of Optatus, *Libri VII de Schismate Donatistarum*, ed. by C. Ziwsa, in *CSEL*, Vol. XXVI (Vienna 1893). A good selection of the emperor's extant Latin laws and letters from this period are introduced, edited and annotated in Charles M. Odahl, *Early Christian Latin Literature* (Chicago 1993) 101-124.

For analyses of Constantine's Christian legislation, see: J. Gaudemet, *La législation religieuse de Constantin*, *Revue d'Histoire de L'Eglise de France*, Vol. 33 (1947) 25-61; and C. Dupont, "Les privilèges des
(continued...)

faith was to provide the material resources for, and to take the lead in building the first monumental public edifices for Christian worship. Over the next quarter century Constantine would carry out this program throughout the entire Roman world, and by adapting the secular basilica to the needs of Christian liturgical rites made a significant contribution to the normative forms of Christian church architecture. The initial phases and some of the more important exemplars of this building program were focused on the old pagan capital. This article offers an illustrated survey of the Christian basilicas erected by the Constantinian dynasty in and around fourth century Rome (Illustration 1).⁴

Constantine must have had two major concerns as he began his Christian building program at Rome—these concerns determined *where* he would build and *how* he would build structures for the Christian Church. The emperor's first concern was not to alienate the pagan majority which resided in Rome, and particularly the influential elite thereof who sat in the Senate and watched over the public buildings in the monumental core of the city.⁵ The pagans had greeted Constantine as joyously as had the Christians at his *adventus* into the city, and hailed him as their liberator from a wicked tyrant. The Senate had granted Constantine the position of senior emperor, and honored him with titles recalling "the good emperors" of the second century. The bronze coins it minted in the autumn and winter of 312-313 saluted him as *optimus princeps*—a title by which Trajan had been known; and the triumphal arch it commissioned to commemorate his victory would largely be made up of motifs despoiled from the monuments of "the good emperors" to whom he was being compared (Ills. 2 & 3).⁶ Yet this initial goodwill was partially damaged when the zealous new convert aroused the religious conservatism of the pagan establishment by making an all too blatant public profession of his new faith.

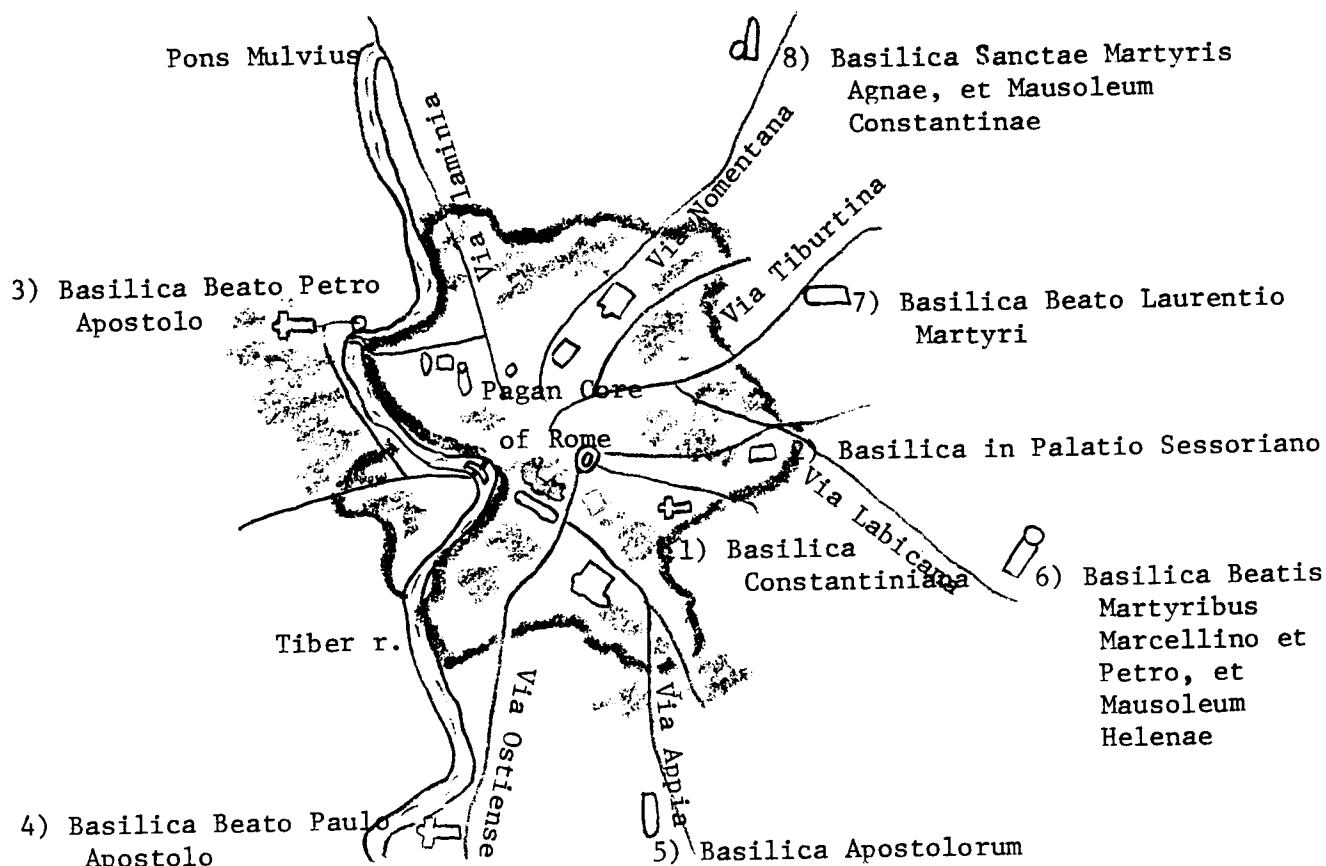
³(...continued)

clercs sous Constantin," *Revue de l'Histoire Ecclesiastique*, Vol. 62 (1967) 729-752. And for his Christian advisors and early involvement in internal Church affairs, see: V.C. de Clercq, *Ossius of Cordova* (Washington 1954); W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford 1985); Charles Odahl, "Constantine's Epistle to the Bishops at the Council of Arles: A Defense of Imperial Authorship," *The Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (June, 1993) 274-289, and "God and Constantine: Divine Sanction for Imperial Rule in the First Christian Emperor's Early Letters and Art," forthcoming in *The Catholic Historical Review* 81 (1995).

⁴Good introductory studies on early Christian architecture, and Constantine's contributions thereto are Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (New York, 1979), and *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308* (Princeton 1980); and Robert Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture* (Berkeley 1988).

⁵For this aspect of Constantine's religious policy, see: A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, Chs. IV and V; and R. Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 28-31.

⁶Ancient accounts of the *adventus* are found in Lact., *De Mort Pers* 44; Euseb., *Hist Eccl* 9.9.9, and *Vita Const* 1.39; and *Paneg* 9.19-21. The coin is listed in C.H.V. Sutherland, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, Vol. VI (London 1973), 390, nos. 345-352; and is pictured in C. Odahl, "A Pagan's Reaction to Constantine's Conversion," 55, Plate I, and C. Odahl, *Early Christian Latin Literature*, 98, Ill. 30. The Arch is analyzed and pictured in Sabine G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1981), 33-39, and Pls. 12-15; and in Odahl, "A Pagan's Reaction to Constantine's Conversion," 49-53 and 61-62, Pls. VI and VII.



III. 1: The Christian basilicas of Constantinian Rome are located and identified by their ancient Latin names on the map above, while their modern Italian and English names are given in the list below.

A. Liturgical Basilicas

- 1) *San Giovanni in Laterano* = St. Johns' in the Lateran
- 2) *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme* = Holy Cross in Jerusalem

B. Martyrial-Cemeterial Basilicas

- 3) *San Pietro in Vaticano* = St. Peter at the Vatican
- 4) *San Paolo fuori le Mura* = St. Paul outside the Wall
- 5) *San Sebastiano fuori le Mura* = St. Sebastian outside the Wall
- 6) *SS Marcellino e Pietro fuori le Mura, e Mausoleo di Helena* = Sts. Marcellinus & Peter outside the Wall, and the Mausoleum of Helena
- 7) *San Lorenzo fuori le Mura* = St. Lawrence outside the Wall
- 8) *Sant' Agnese fuori le Mura, e Mausoleo di Costanza* = St. Agnes outside the Wall, & the Mausoleum of Constantina



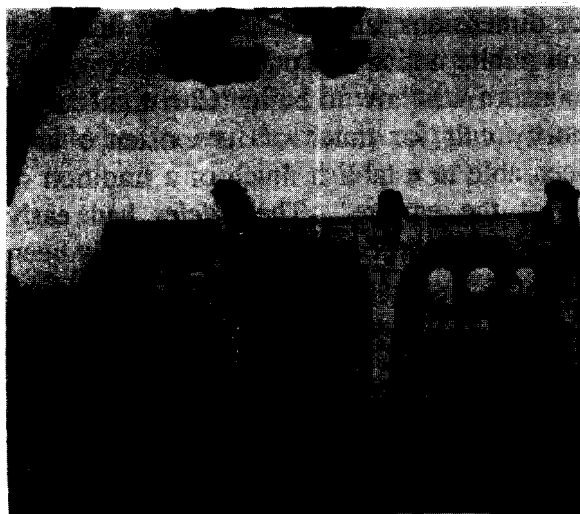
Ill. 2: Aerial view westward over the monumental core of old Rome



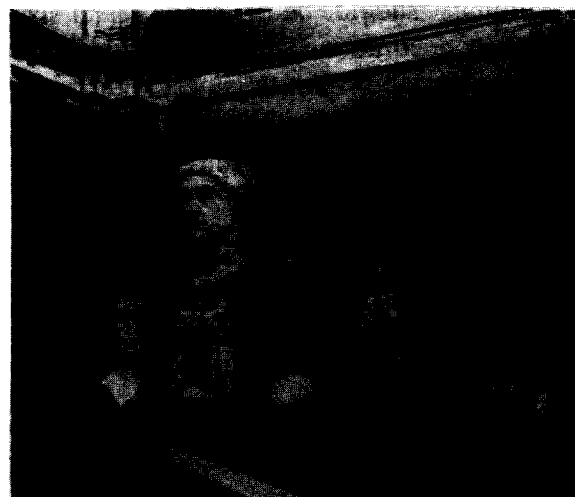
Ill. 3: The south face of the Arch of Constantine

While in Rome during the autumn of 312, Constantine completed a grandiose new secular basilica that Maxentius had begun at the northeast end of the Roman Forum. It was one of the largest structures in the heart of the city, and is still impressive in ruins with a longitudinal axis of over 90 meters in length and with barrel vaults of nearly 30 meters in height. In the western apse of this building, Constantine placed a colossal statue of himself holding his Christian war standard emblazoned with the monogram of Christ, and set up an inscription at its base giving credit for his victory "to this salutary sign." Portions of this statue with its six foot high head can still be seen in the atrium of the Conservator's Museum on the Capitoline Hill. Stories of this bold act were soon circulating across the empire, and were published at its eastern reaches as early as 313 in an edition of Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The senatorial class cannot have been pleased with such a public expression of the emperor's new religious orientation in the very core of the capital. Their discomfort must have concerned Constantine since he needed to keep their goodwill while consolidating his power against the two remaining pagan emperors in the east (Ills. 4 and 5).⁷

⁷Eusebius first described the basilican statue and recorded its inscription in *Hist Eccl* 9.9.10-11, and later repeated the story in *Vita Const* 1.40. For attempts to envisage the original basilica and colossal statue, see: Anthony Minoprio, "A Restoration of the Basilica of Constantine, Rome," *PBSR* 12 (1932) 1-25; and Mortimer Wheeler, *Roman Art and Architecture* (New York 1985), 114-115.



Ill. 4: Remains of Constantine's
Forum Basilica (from the south)



Ill. 5: Remains of the colossal
basilica statue of Constantine

Therefore, when choosing the locations for the churches he would build, Constantine seems to have taken into account the religious sensibilities of the pagan majority of the capital. This is a thesis that Suzanne Alexander and Richard Krautheimer have developed in their studies on the topography of Constantinian church architecture.⁸ A look at the map of Rome in the age of Constantine, and the placement of his churches in and around the city, seems to bear them out. Of the eight basilicas the first Christian emperor and his family built for the Roman Christian community, only two are found inside the twelve mile Aurelian Wall, and these only at the eastern edges of the city. The other six were beyond the walls beside the great roads leading out into the empire. Constantine seems to have decided to avoid the old pagan core of the capital when building his churches. This area of old temples, public buildings, and venerable traditions would be left in peace in the heart of the city. But out at the edge of Rome there was a green belt of imperial palaces and estates spread out on either side of the city wall that had been accumulating as a part of the private purse of the emperors over the centuries through voluntary grants or forced confiscations. There were also cemeteries out there that the Church now owned as a legal corporation within the Roman state.⁹ On his imperial estates and in Church cemeteries Constantine could thus build edifices that would take care of the needs of the Christian community, and not so directly confront or overtly antagonize the pagan establishment as if he were to build in the inner core of the city.

Constantine's second concern was to support the Christian community as generously as he could by building large scale edifices that would meet its needs for public worship and

⁸This aspect of the emperor's initial church building policy in Rome was alluded to by H. von Schönebeck in *Beiträge zur Religionspolitik des Maxentius und Constantin*, *Klio*, Beiheft 43 (Berlin 1939) 87ff; and A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, 50ff; and developed at greater length more recently by Suzanne S. Alexander in her two part article on "Studies in Constantinian Church Architecture," *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, Vol. 47 (1971) 281-330, and Vol. 49 (1973) 33-44; and R. Krautheimer in *Rome: Profile of a City*, Chapter One, and *Three Christian Capitals: Topography & Politics* (Berkeley 1983), Introduction and Chapter I.

⁹On the Church's status as a legal corporation in Roman law after Constantine's conversion, see: Milton V. Anastos, "The Edict of Milan (313) – A Defense of Its Traditional Authorship and Designation," *Revue des Études Byzantines*, Vol. 25 (1967) 13-41; and Walter Ullmann, "The Constitutional Significance of Constantine the Great's Settlement," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 27, 1 (1976) 1-16.

covered cemeteries. Even at the edges of the city, these imperially sponsored Christian buildings should be of such grand size in exterior dimensions, and of such ornate beauty in interior decorations, that they could not but help gain public notice and put Christianity on the map of Rome.¹⁰ Yet the question arising from this concern was how to build "Christian" structures. As a *religio illicita* and a persecuted minority cult for much of its existence until Constantine's time, the Christian Church had not been able to establish much of a tradition of public architecture in Rome or the urban centers of the empire. The *fideles* had early worshipped in the private homes of fellow believers. Some of these homes had eventually been deeded over to the local congregations, and gradually undergone internal restructuring for the purposes of communal worship and catechetical instruction. But up until the late third century, these *domus ecclesiae* (or "houses of the Church" as they came to be called in Latin) had little or no distinctive form that set them off as "churches" on the exterior.¹¹ Constantine, his imperial architects, and his Christian advisors would thus have to serve as the creators of public church architecture in Rome. They realized that using pagan temples as a model would not work. These structures were not designed for the communal worship of a congregation, and were stained with the traditions of pagan idolatry. A different kind of structure, and a secular one at that, would have to be used as the model for Constantine's public church architecture.

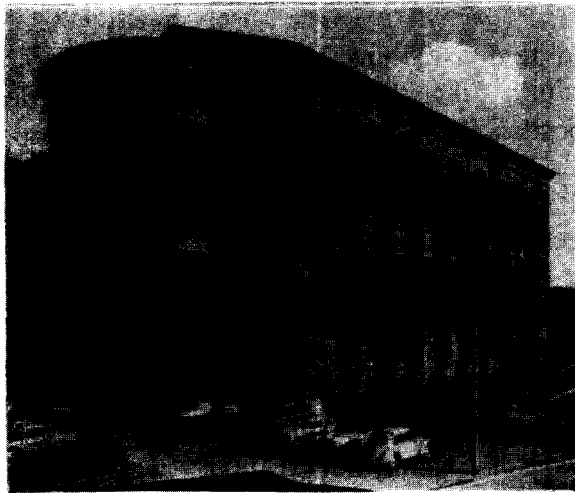
The primary ancient literary source for Constantine's Roman churches refers to all of them by the Latin term *basilica*. This was a word that designated a generic type of Roman secular architecture which was used for large assembly rooms, court houses, and imperial audience halls. It had a number of variants in design, but usually included a large longitudinal hall with a high, flat coffered ceiling, and a triangular shaped timber or tiled roof. The long and high central hall was called a nave, and it was usually terminated by a semi-circular apse at one end, and was often flanked with lower side aisles separated from the central hall by colonnades. The nave colonnades, either trabeated or arcaded, carried marble revetments that offered space for beautiful decoration and supported clerestory windows that provided an excellent source of natural light. Well preserved examples of these structures are the imperial audience hall basilicas of Diocletian at Split in Yugoslavia, and of Constantine at Trier in Germany – the latter without the usual colonnaded side aisles. With less idolatrous contamination than pagan temples, the secular basilica could more easily be adapted to the needs of Christian corporate liturgical worship. A large body of Christian believers could gather together in the central hall, and the longitudinal axis of the structure would focus them on the raised dais at the apsidal end of the basilica. Here a bishop or priest, standing at an altar under the glorification arch where an imperial throne or judgment chair had been positioned in the secular model, could now lead the congregation in Christian cultic worship. Such structures could also be employed as covered cemeteries situated over or beside the tombs of famous Christian martyrs. The faithful could

¹⁰R. Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 21ff. and *Three Christian Capitals*, 18ff.

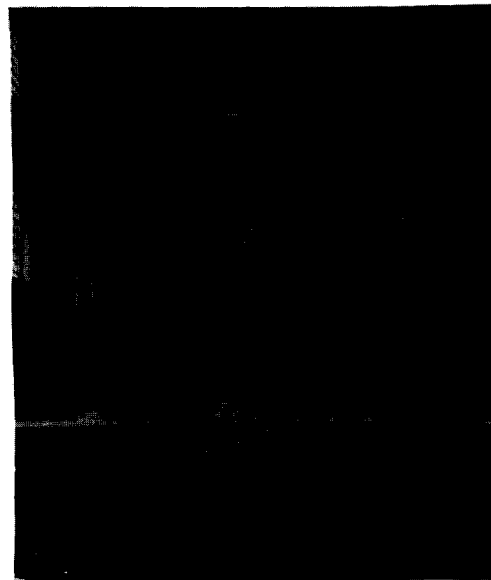
¹¹The most detailed recent study of pre-Constantinian church architecture is that of L. Michael White, *Building God's House in the Roman World—Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Baltimore 1990). He proposes that a few of the larger and richer urban Christian communities were able to move toward bigger assembly halls (which he designates as *aula ecclesiae*—"halls of the Church") in the late third century. There is some archaeological evidence for this thesis under a few of the titular churches of Rome, e.g., San Crisogono, and San Clemente. However, as the historical narratives of Lactantius and Eusebius reveal, much of the Church's property was destroyed or sold during the "Great Persecution" of 303-313. Thus, Constantine and Church leaders had to make a new start in giving the Church a public presence through the construction of monumental edifices for open worship.

be buried in the floors of the side aisles, and commemorative services could be held in the central hall (Ills. 6 and 7).¹²

Whether their original purpose was for liturgical or cemeterial use, Constantine's Christian basilicas would be built swiftly, they would be of impressive size on the exterior, and they would be decorated ornately on the interior. They would suitably fulfill his policy goals of sup-



Ill. 6: Exterior of Constantine's
aula palatina basilica in Trier



Ill. 7: Interior of the Trier
"audience hall" basilica

porting the Christian Church with massive material resources and propagating the Christian faith with impressive public edifices. The fact that they were at the edge of the city or outside of its walls has probably been overemphasized in recent scholarship. MacMullen's analogy for Constantine's churches as "a circle of jewels like a tiara ... surrounding the city" may be a more felicitous and a more accurate description.¹³ If Constantine cautiously and courteously avoided the pagan core of the city in his Christian building program, nevertheless he surrounded it with so many and such large Christian basilicas that it would have been difficult for travelers entering or leaving the capital not to notice these structures.

Hypothetically reconstructing the original position, size, and appearance of the ancient Constantinian basilicas of Rome is not very easy since most of the fourth century churches have been rebuilt, often several times during the course of sixteen centuries. Through a process that might be labeled topographical archaeology, we can start with the church presently on the ancient site, and work back in time to the original Constantinian structure. This process can be accomplished by surveying the literary and archaeological materials relevant to each site. In the early medieval collection of papal biographies known as the *Liber Pontificalis*, we can find in the entry for Constantine's contemporary Sylvester (314-335) a list of the emperor's church foundations that always includes the original Latin name of the structure, usually describes its

¹²For studies on the evolution of secular basilicas into Christian churches, see: J.B. Ward-Perkins, "Constantine and the Origins of the Christian Basilica," *PBSR* 22 (1954) 69-90; H.P. L'Orange, *Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire* (Princeton 1965); R. Krautheimer, "The Constantinian Basilica," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, No. 21 (Washington 1967), 115-140, and *Rome: Profile of a City*, 21.

¹³R. MacMullen, *Constantine*, 117.

internal decorations, and sometimes locates its topographical position.¹⁴ In old paintings, mosaics, and engravings in Roman churches and archival collections, we can see depictions of the original or slightly altered medieval forms of Constantine's basilicas.¹⁵ In the present structures we can notice remains of the original churches still *in situ*, or reused in new positions. And finally, in the reports of modern archeological investigations made in and around the church buildings, we can find much information about the remaining foundations of the ancient churches.¹⁶ Through the collation of these materials, and with the help of floor plans and isometric reconstructions based thereupon, the original Christian basilicas of Constantinian Rome can be envisioned once again.

All of Constantine's Roman churches would be donated unto the care of the Bishop of the city as the leader of the Roman Christian community. Since the Roman Bishop was regarded as the successor of St. Peter, the "prince of the Apostles," and would soon be called the Pope, the "Father" of the Church universal, Constantine may have felt that the leader of the Church should have a residence appropriate to his special status.¹⁷ At any rate, he ceded the imperial palace on the Laterani estate just inside the eastern wall of the city to Bishop Miltiades (311-314) during his stay in Rome in late autumn of 312. It was next to this palatial edifice, and over the demolished barracks of the horse guards who had fought for his enemy, that Constantine ordered the construction of his first Christian basilica as the official cathedral for the Roman Bishop and his Christian flock. It would be completed in only a few years, and Miltiades' successor Pope Sylvester (314-335) would soon be presiding over ornate public Christian worship therein. The *Liber Pontificalis* simply calls it the *Basilica Constantiniana*, but ca. 600 it was renamed for John the Baptist and John the Apostle, and came to be known as *San Giovanni in Laterano*.¹⁸ An aerial view of the present structure clearly shows its location near the eastern edge of the Aurelian wall. Galilei's eighteenth century neo-classical facade dominates the eastern front, but at the left end of the vestibule stands a fourth century statue of Constantine that commemorates the builder of the original basilica. Inside the antique bronze doors of the nave, Borromini's seventeenth century reconstruction of the basilica's interior still employs the

¹⁴For the full Latin text with critical apparatus, see: L. Duchesne, *Le Liber Pontificalis*, XXXIII. *Silvester* (Paris 1886-92, and in an expanded reprint, Paris, 1955), 170-187; and for an edited Latin text with detailed commentary and illustrations, see: Odahl, *Early Christian Latin Literature*, 133-154.

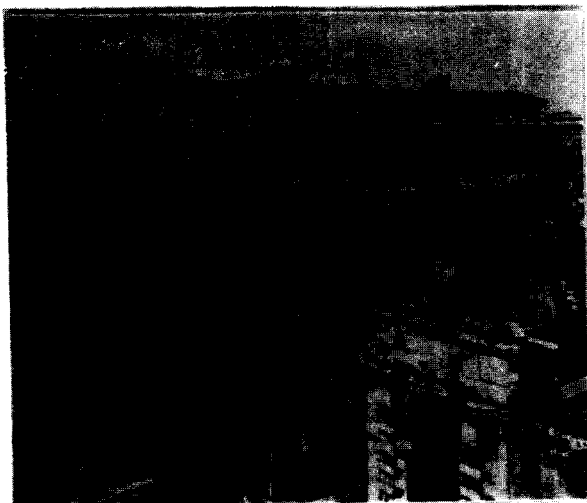
¹⁵Many of these can be seen on the walls of later Roman churches, such as Filippo Gagliardi's lovely frescoes of old *San Giovanni* and old *San Pietro* in the parish church of *San Martino ai Monti*. Good published collections of old renderings of Rome and its churches are by R. Egger, *Römische Veduten-Handzeichnungen aus dem XV-XVIII Jahrhundert* (Vienna 1911); and F. Ehrle, *Piante e Vedute di Roma e del Vaticano* (Vatican City 1956).

¹⁶The best repository of these is the Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana in Rome. Some of the more important and accessible published accounts of modern work at the Constantinian sites will be listed in subsequent notes.

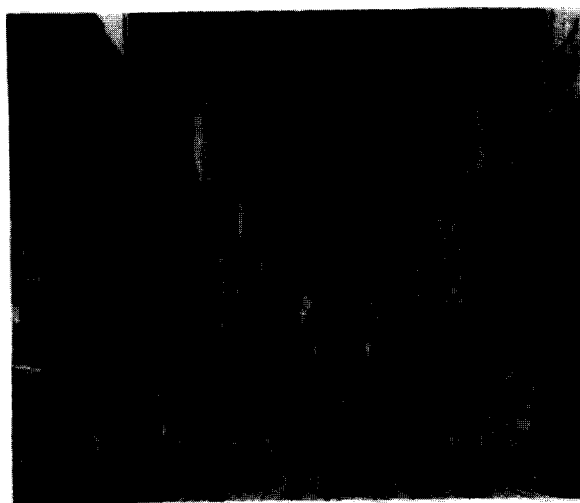
¹⁷The Bishop of Rome was already addressed as *Papa* ("Pope") in the report the Synod of Arles sent to Bishop Sylvester in 314 – *Appendix IIII* of Optatus, *Libri VII de Schismate Donatistarum*, CSEL, Vol. XXVI, 206. However the title would not come into common use, nor the popes regularly begin addressing fellow bishops as *fili* ("sons") until later in the fourth century. For the development of the doctrine of papal primacy, see: Geoffrey Barraclough, *The Medieval Papacy* (New York, 1979); and Walter Ullmann, *The Growth of the Papal Government in the Middle Ages* (London 1970).

¹⁸*Lib Pont XXXIII*. 9-15, 172-175 = Odahl, *Early Christian Latin Literature*, 140-144. For modern accounts, see: A.M. Colini, "Storia e Topografia del Celio nell'Antichità," *Memorie della Pontificia Accademia Romana d'Archeologia*, VII (1944) 343-377; Richard Krautheimer and Spencer Corbett, "The Constantinian Basilica of the Lateran," *Antiquity* 34 (1960) 201-206; S. Alexander, "Studies in Constantinian Church Architecture," 284-290; R. Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 21-24, and *Three Christian Capitals*, 14-20.

longitudinal axis and the flat ceiling of the Constantinian model, but now has massive Baroque arcades along the central hall. Yet, in between these great arches are sculptural niches flanked with green-speckled marble columns of apparently great antiquity. Krautheimer believes that these precious small columns were saved from the side aisle colonnades of Constantine's church and used for decorative embellishments in Borromini's nave (Ills. 8 and 9).



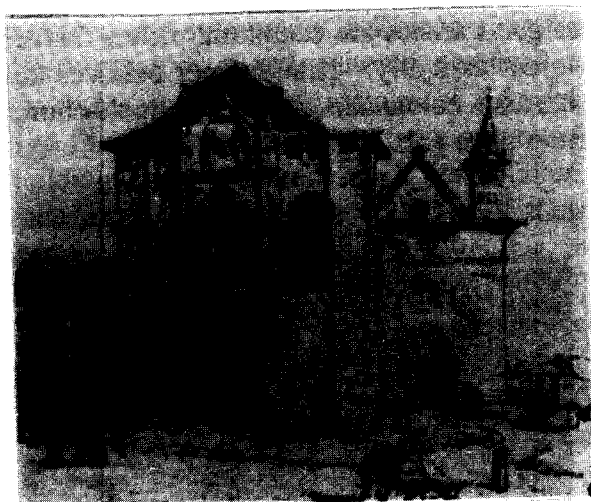
Ill. 8: Aerial view westward to the front facade of *San Giovanni*



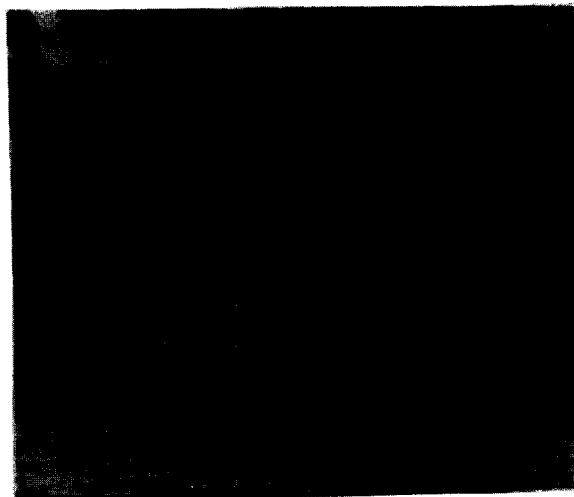
Ill. 9: Interior of the 17th c. nave of the Lateran Basilica

Archaeological work over several decades of the mid-twentieth century by Josi, Krautheimer and Corbett, and Apollonj Ghetti, has uncovered a number of Constantinian remains around and under the modern church which has revealed much useful information about the early basilica. Bruno Apollonj Ghetti, a founding father of Christian archaeology in Rome and the official architect and surveyor for many modern Popes, was kind enough to guide me through much of the evidence at the Lateran complex. While standing atop the apex of the basilica's roof, he pointed out the rectilinear sweep of the nave, and the distinctive crossing of the medieval transept between the nave and apse at the church's western end. He and Krautheimer have both shown that transepts were not characteristic of the secular basilica, but may have originated here when Constantine's architects began to modify the plan of the secular model for Christian usage. Archaeological soundings under the western end of the church indicate that the Constantinian basilica had side wings possibly used as sacristies extending out at the junction of the side aisles and the apse. A more pronounced use of the transept element would offer Christian architecture the possibility of a symbolic cruciform floor plan. Further archaeological observations have revealed that portions of Constantine's side walls are still standing to a height of 8.5 meters above ground; and that the foundation walls for the original apse and nave aisles reached a depth of 7.5 meters underground—both of these elements, as well as old columns, were reused in the seventeenth century reconstructions.

A drawing by Marten van Heemskerck of the exterior of the old basilica in 1535, and an imaginative fresco by Filippo Gagliardi of its interior from 1650, convey some idea of the great basilica in decline. The latter fresco shows the small speckled columns of the side aisles that were reused in the niches of Borromini's nave, and the great plain columns of the central hall seen in some of the underground buttressing of the modern church (Ills. 10 and 11).



Ill. 10: Van Heemskerck's drawing of the front of the old Lateran Basilica (1535, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin)

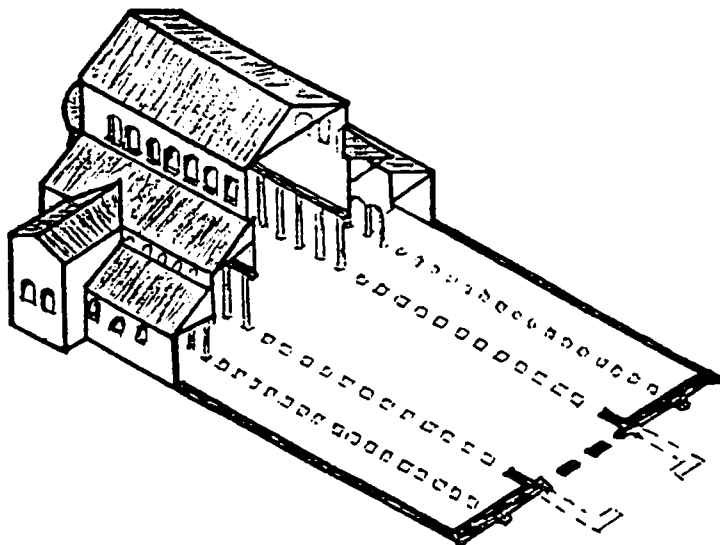


Ill. 11: Gagliardi's fresco of the interior of the old Lateran Basilica (1650, *San Martino ai Monti*, Rome)

However, such a picture conveys little of the internal beauty and ornate decoration of the fourth century *Basilica Constantiniana*. For this, one has to return to the *Liber Pontificalis*. It tells of a vaulted altar canopy of hammered silver surrounded by silver statues of Christ and the Apostles, of gold chandeliers and silver lamps hanging throughout the central nave and side aisles burning aromatic oils, and magnificent service bowls and chalices for the eucharist all donated to the edifice by the generosity of the Christian emperor.

Built over a six year period from 312 to 318, the first Lateran church was a basilican longitudinal hall, with a high central nave terminating in an apse, with lower double side aisles, and with sacristies projecting out like transceptual arms at the end of the side aisles. About 100 meters in length, it was an impressive public structure where the leader of the church could meet with several thousand of his flock for corporate liturgical worship (Ill. 12).

Ill. 12: An isometric reconstruction of the 4th c. *Basilica Constantiniana* (after J.B. Lloyd and R. Krautheimer)

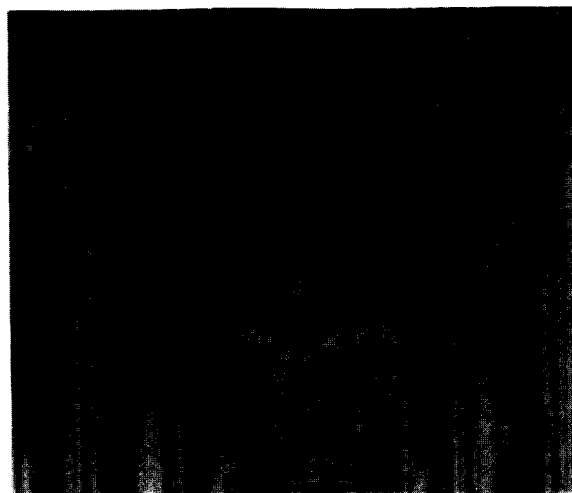


The imperial women of Constantine's family also participated in the emperor's policy of supporting the Church. The Laterani Palace came from the dowry of his wife Fausta. A few

hundred yards to the northeast of the Lateran complex, a palace on the Sessorian estate was owned by his mother Helena. The *Liber Pontificalis* records that a *Basilica in Palatio Sessoriano* was constructed here.¹⁹ From the front steps of the Lateran Basilica, a Romanesque bell-tower can be seen rising above the Sessorian area. This medieval tower survives from some twelfth century rebuilding, while the Baroque west front and interior nave are Gregorini's eighteenth century reconstructions (Ills. 13 and 14).



Ill. 13: Modern facade of *Santa Croce* and its medieval bell tower



Ill. 14: Interior of the 18th c. nave of the Sessorian Basilica

Little remains from Helena's basilica except a few sections of the exterior palace walls into which the church was built. While the empress mother was residing here—probably between 315-326—she had an imperial architect create a church within a hall of the palace for the private liturgical worship of the imperial court. An apse was added at the back for an altar, and two triple arches were installed in the hall itself dividing it into three bays—presumably one each for the imperial family, court dignitaries, and palace workers. An anonymous medieval drawing depicts it after the alterations of 1144 which added a six-columned porch and bell tower to the west facade, and some monastic buildings on its south flank. Long before this time, the palace church had lost its private character and gained the new name *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme*. In 326 Helena had followed her son to the east, which he had recently conquered from the last pagan persecutor Licinius.²⁰ She spent her final years on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land (ca. 326-27), initiating a Constantinian church building program in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. She

¹⁹*Lib Pont* XXXIII. 22, 179-180 = Odahl, *Early Christian Latin Literature*, 142-143. For modern works, see: A.M. Colini, "Horti Spei Veteris," *Memorie della Pontificia Accademia Romanà di Archeologia*, VIII (1955) 137ff.; S. Alexander, "Studies in Constantinian Church Architecture," 290-291; R. Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 24, and *Three Christian Capitals*, 23-24.

²⁰Euseb., VC 1.49-2.60 records the religious aspects of Constantine's "Holy War" of 324 against Licinius, and the emperor's laws and letters in favor of Christianity after the conflict; while the *Origo Constantini Imperatoris* 5, ed. by J.C. Rolfe Vol. III of Ammianus Marcellinus in "The Loeb Classical Library" (Cambridge 1964), and Zosimus *HN* 2.18-28, ed. by L. Mendelssohn (Leipzig 1887) narrate the military battles in detail. For modern accounts, see: MacMullen, *Constantine*, 123-165; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 62-77, and 208-212; and Charles Odahl, "The Use of Apocalyptic Propaganda in Constantine's Christian Propaganda," *Centerpoint*, Vol. 4, no. 3 (1981) 9-19.

died before these churches were completed, and her body was sent back to Rome for burial. When supposed relics of the crucifixion were found during the construction work at the *Church of the Holy Sepulchre*, some of these were sent to Rome and deposited in Helena's Sessorian Basilica in honor of her pilgrimage. Already in the mid fourth century, legends were arising that she had discovered the "true cross" herself. By then, the palace basilica had passed to papal control, was being used for public worship, and the fame of the Jerusalem relics was giving rise to the church's new name. Chapels at the eastern end of the modern church contain an ancient statue of a classical Helena with the cross, and an elaborate reliquary for the eastern treasures. A late medieval painting in the nave apse depicts Helena's pilgrimage (Ills. 15 and 16).²¹



Ill. 15: A view of the north side of the 4th c. *Basilica in Palatio Sessoriano* revealing remains of some of the ancient masonry



Ill. 16: An Anonymous drawing of the medieval *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme* (National Museum, Stockholm)

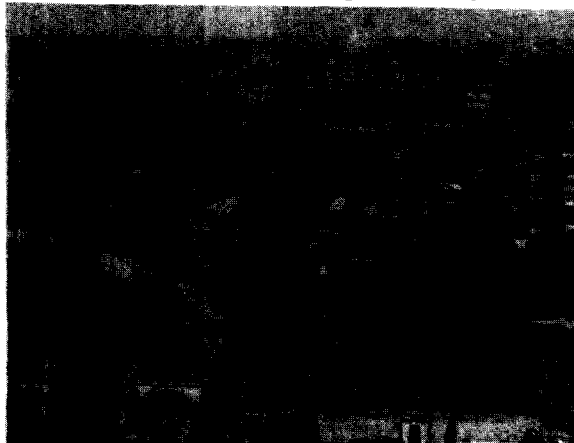
The first two churches surveyed above might be called liturgical basilicas because they were employed for Sunday worship services inside the walls of the city. The six other Christian edifices that Constantine and his family commissioned, however, were martyrial-cemeterial basilicas built outside the walls of the city and near the shrines of venerated Christian martyrs. They were originally meant to serve as covered cemeteries for Christian burials, funerary banquets, and occasional commemorative masses. But as the funerary banquet tradition died out in the late fourth century, they were used more often for regular worship.²²

²¹Euseb., VC 3.25-47 recounts the church building program of Constantine and narrates the pilgrimage of his mother in the Holy Land; Odahl, *Early Christian Latin Literature*, 153-165 offers 4th c. accounts of these eastern Constantinian churches by western pilgrims who had visited and worshipped in them. Excellent accounts of the real and legendary Helena are found in E.D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire, A.D. 312-460* (Oxford 1984); Jan W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine and the Legend of Her Finding the True Cross* (Leiden 1992); and Hans A. Pohlsander, *Helena: Empress and Saint* (Chicago 1995). Good summaries of modern archaeological work at the Holy Land sites are in Jack Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament* (Princeton 1969); and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land—An Archaeological Guide from Earliest Times to 1700* (Oxford 1980).

²²Krautheimer's classic article "Mensa-Coemeterium-Martyrium" in *Cahiers Archéologiques*, 2 (1960) 15-40, deals with the origin and purposes of this type of basilica.

The largest and most famous of these was the one the *Liber Pontificalis* calls the *Basilica Beato Petro Apostolo*.²³ It was situated at the other end of Rome from the Lateran, out beyond the city's western wall and across the Tiber river. It was here in a first century chariot racing circus that Christ's chief Apostle Peter was martyred by the Emperor Nero. Pious Christians buried the saint in a garden between the circus and the *mons Vaticanus* which rose steeply above the area. A second century Roman Bishop erected a little monument with a gabled niche, a projecting slab and two columns over the tomb that came to be known as the "Trophy of St. Peter." By Constantine's time, a necropolis of pagan and Christian tombs had arisen in the Vatican area and superceded the circus.²⁴

The *Liber Pontificalis* states that Constantine built the basilica in honor of Peter at the request of Pope Sylvester. Since the Roman Bishop's episcopal primacy was based on his claims of succession to Peter, he no doubt would have encouraged the zealous Christian emperor to expend his generosity in this manner. The papal request may have occurred during Constantine's second visit to Rome for his *Decennalia* celebrations in the summer of 315.²⁵ During the next few years, Constantine's architects moved tons of earth down from the Vatican hill to cover over all the tombs of the necropolis except Peter's, and create a level surface for the foundation of the martyrial monument for the Apostle. Here they constructed a monumental basilica that was focused on Peter's Trophy at its western apsidal end. The Constantinian church lasted with only minor modifications until Renaissance popes had it torn down, and replaced with the modern structure that was designed and decorated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by such famous artists as Bramante, Michelangelo, Sangallo, Maderno, and Bernini (Ill. 17).



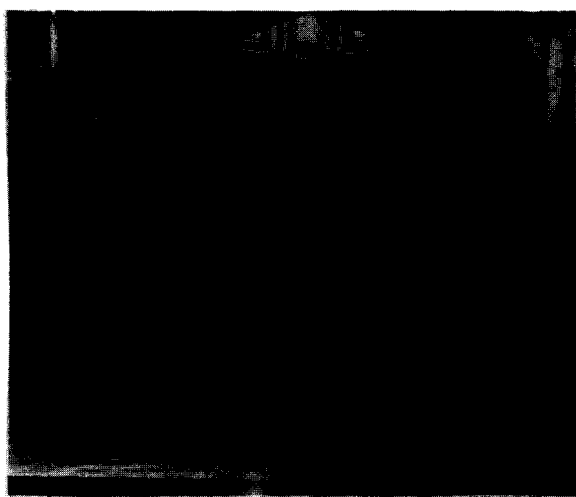
Ill. 17: An aerial view toward the east facade of the Renaissance basilica of *San Pietro in Vaticano* across the Tiber river at the west end of Rome.

²³*Lib Pont XXXIII*. 16-20, 176-178 = Odahl, *Early Christian Latin Literature*, 145-149. Some of the more important works detailing the findings of modern archaeological investigations at the Vatican are *Esplorazioni sotto la confessione di San Pietro in Vaticano*, Relazione a cura di B.M. Apollonj Ghetti, A. Ferrua, E. Josi, and E. Kirschbaum (Città del Vaticano 1951); Bruno M. Apollonj Ghetti, *La Tomba e Le Basiliche di San Pietro al Vaticano* (Rome 1954); Jocelyn Toynbee, and John Ward-Perkins, *The Shrine of Saint Peter* (London 1956); Engelbert Kirschbaum, S.J., *The Tombs of St. Peter and St. Paul* (New York 1959); S. Alexander, "Studies in Constantinian Church Architecture," 292-295; and R. Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 26-28.

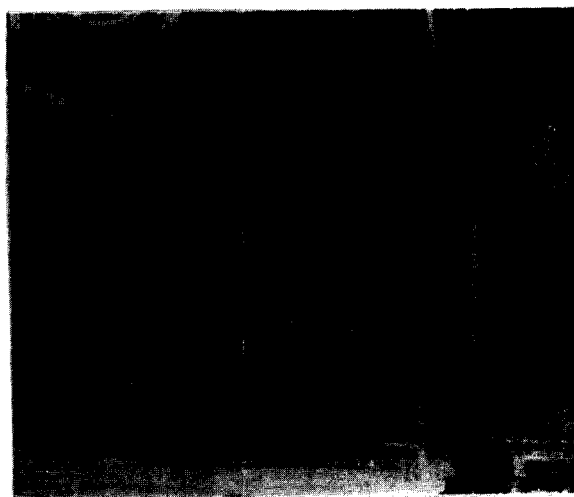
²⁴Toynbee and Ward-Perkins, *The Shrine of Saint Peter*, 127-167, and E. Kirschbaum, *The Tombs of St. Peter and St. Paul*, 120-143, detail the pre-Constantinian literary, epigraphic, and archaeological materials relevant to the site. Many of the early Christian literary traditions concerning Sts. Peter and Paul and their graves in Rome were recorded by Eusebius in Book II of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

²⁵*Lib Pont XXXIII*. 16: "*Augustus Constantinus ex rogatu Silvestri episcopi Basilicam Beato Petro Apostolo ... fecit.*" Timothy D. Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge 1982) 72, lists the epigraphic and legal evidence for dating the *Decennalia* in Rome between 21 July and 27 September of 315; and Euseb., VC 1.48 records that Constantine "offered prayers of thanksgiving to God" during the festivities. The emperor undoubtedly had a chance to meet Pope Sylvester and inspect the work at the Lateran Basilica during this time.

A comparison of the findings of the archaeological work under the floor of the modern basilica by Apollonj Ghetti, Ferrua, Josi, and Kirschbaum in the 1940's with the data of ancient literary sources and old artistic representations, however, can give one an accurate vision of the original Constantinian structure. Walking through the barrel vaulted nave and past the grand arcades of the Renaissance & Baroque St. Peter's, one comes to the late medieval statue of the Apostle that gazes out to Bernini's magnificent altar canopy with its massive bronze spiral columns. But above and behind it one can see the ancient marble spiral columns from the canopy of the Constantinian Petrine Shrine built over the Petrine Trophy that inspired Bernini, now reused in sculptural niches of the great pillars holding up Michelangelo's dome (Ills. 18 & 19).



Ill. 18: Interior of the 16th and 17th c. nave of the modern Vatican Basilica with Baroque arcades instead of columns

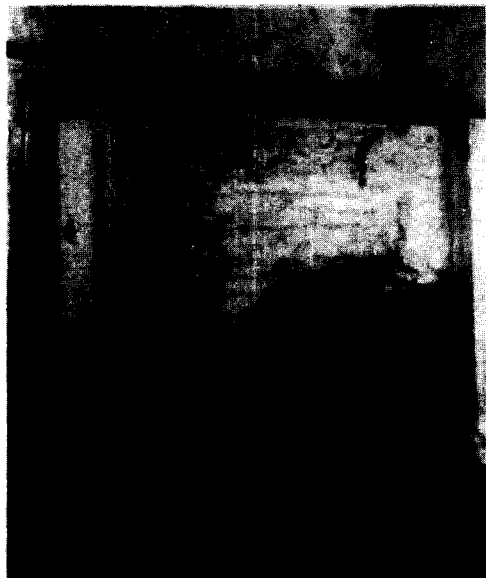


Ill. 19: The ancient marble spiral columns from the Constantinian Shrine canopy reused in sculptural niches above Bernini's baldacchino

Well over thirty feet down under the Baroque high altar is the tomb of St. Peter at the west end of the ancient necropolis. Apollonj Ghetti's team uncovered a 65 meter long stretch of this "city of the dead" between 1939-1950, finding pagan mausolea with cremation niches interspersed with Christian tombs with mosaic decorations. Archaeological reconstructions show how the Constantinian basilica sat above the necropolis and focused its longitudinal axis toward Peter's tomb monument; and how the apse of the fourth century church was built around and behind this sacred shrine. The *Liber Pontificalis* provides an elaborate description of how Constantine "enclosed the tomb of Peter all around" with an immovable monument, encircled it with Cyprian bronze, and then placed an ornate canopy with spiral columns and a precious metal chandelier above it.²⁶ The modern archaeological investigations have found remnants of these structures. The immovable monument was a solid casing of marble blocks, the western end of which can

²⁶*Lib Pont XXXIII. 16-17*, which goes on to say that he placed a cross of gold within the tomb monument carrying the inscription: "*Constantinus Augustus et Helena Augusta hanc domum regalem [auro exornamus quam] simili fulgore coruscans aula circumdat.*" The corrupted text has been amended to mean: "Constantine the Augustus and Helena the Augusta [adorn with gold] this royal house [which] a court shining with similar splendor surrounds." The *domum regalem* is the tomb monument while the *aula* is the basilican hall.

recovered parts of the original second century "Trophy of St. Peter"—a column base and a column *in situ*. They cleared away the rubble and overbuilding of centuries, and found the ancient floor of the Constantinian basilica, and the channels cut therein which held the bronze railing surrounding the Petrine monument (Ills. 20 and 21). This work, together with the *Liber*

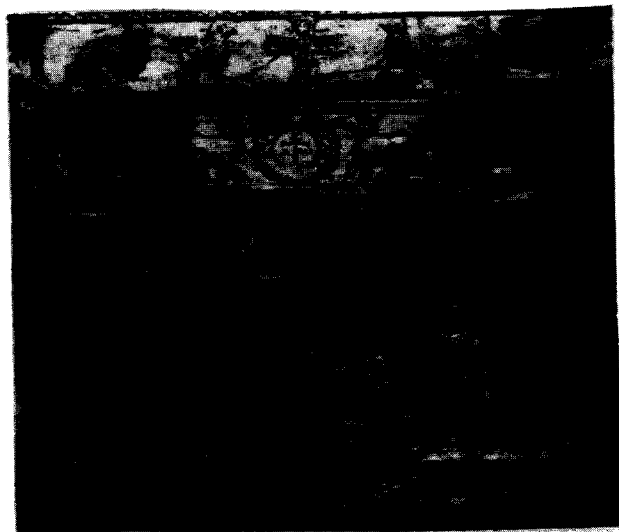


Ill. 20: A photo of the modern work into the south side of the Constantinian casing around the Petrine trophy (Apollonj Ghetti)

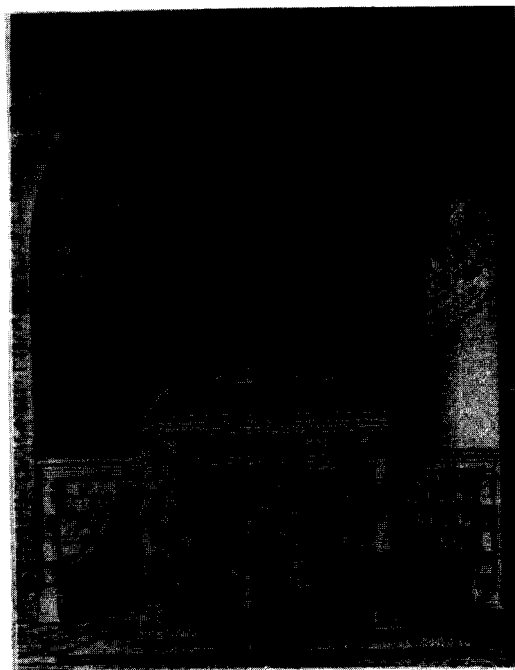


Ill. 21: A photo of the channel in the Constantinian pavement for the bronze railing around the 4th c. Constantinian Petrine Shrine

Pontificalis description, and a fifth century ivory casket carving depicting the Constantinian Petrine Shrine around the Apostle's tomb, allow a hypothetical drawing of the apsidal end of the Constantinian basilica. With the "gleaming gold" of the apse decorations above, the sinuous curves of the spiral columns around, the shimmering bronze of the railings, and the flickering light and aromatic odors of the chandelier oil, Constantine's Shrine for Peter's tomb was a beautiful monument to the saint and an enchanting focus for the basilica dedicated to him. Medieval popes wanted to be able to celebrate the eucharist directly above Peter's tomb, and several of them added altars above the Constantinian Shrine, and consequently raised the floor of the presbyterial end of the church. Thus, by the time the final high altar of the Baroque church was in place, mass was being said nearly thirty feet above the saint's tomb (Ills. 22 and 23).



Ill. 22: A 5th c. ivory casket carving found at Samagher near Pola in 1906 offers an ancient rendering of the Constantinian Petrine Shrine with its spiral columns and arched ribs supporting a chandelier above the marble encased "Trophy of St. Peter" (Museo Archeologico, Venice)

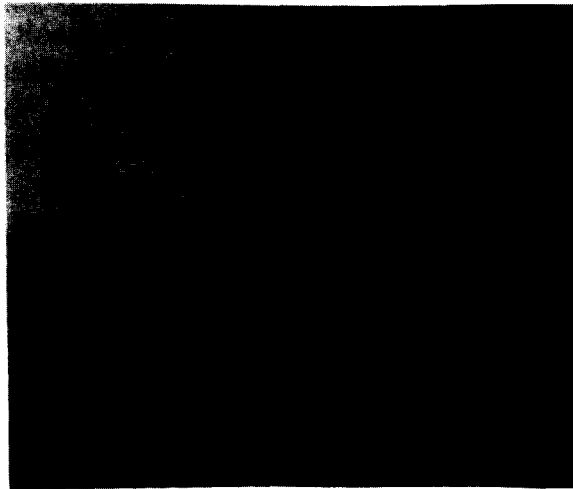


Ill. 23: A drawing of the original Constantinian Petrine Shrine at the apsidal end of the 4th century *Basilica Beato Petro Apostolo* (Apollonj Ghetti)

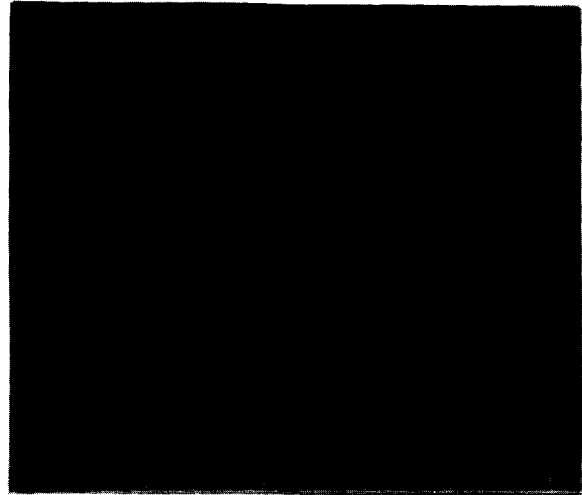
The modern work also uncovered significant portions of the foundation walls of the ancient apse and nave, and found old Constantinian columns under the floor of the present structure. These discoveries help establish the plan and dimensions of the original basilica.²⁷ Artistic renderings of the old basilica likewise aid in recreating its original appearance. An engraving by A. Lafréry of "The Seven Churches of Rome" from 1575 shows Michelangelo's dome rising at the west end of the church while the old basilica still stands in the east front (Ill. 45). Early in the sixteenth century Sangallo erected a temporary wall between the two sections of the basilica so that the eastern nave could still be used for worship—a fresco of this situation by Domenico Tasselli probably gives the clearest picture of the basilican superstructure of the original nave and aisles. And in 1650 Gagliardi matched his fresco for the interior of the old Lateran basilica with one for the old Vatican church as well (Ills. 24 and 25).

Altogether, the sources reveal a large and impressive form for the original *San Pietro in Vaticano*. Built between ca. 315-329, it had a long central nave flanked with double side aisles. A full transept separated the nave from the apse, and helped to set off the Constantinian Shrine for Peter's tomb which was positioned on the front line of the apse and projected into the transept on a slightly raised pavement. The full crossing between nave and apse gave it the

²⁷For summaries of this work, see: Apollonj Ghetti, *La Tomba e Le Basiliche di San Pietro al Vaticano*; Toynbee and Ward-Perkins, *The Shrine of Saint Peter*, 195-211; Kirschbaum, *The Tombs of St. Peter and St. Paul*, 53-63, and 143-155; and J. D. Alchermes, "Petrine Politics: Pope Symmachus and the Rotunda of St. Andrew at Old St. Peter's," *The Catholic Historical Review* 81,1 (1995) 1-40.

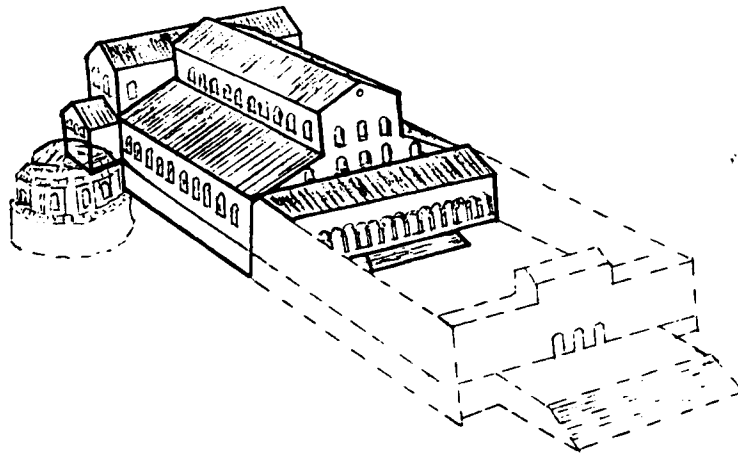


Ill. 24: Fresco of Sangallo's wall and the east nave in old St. Peter's (D. Tasselli, in the Sacristy of St. Peter's)



Ill. 25: Gagliardi's fresco of the old Vatican Basilica (1650, *San Martino ai Monti*, Rome)

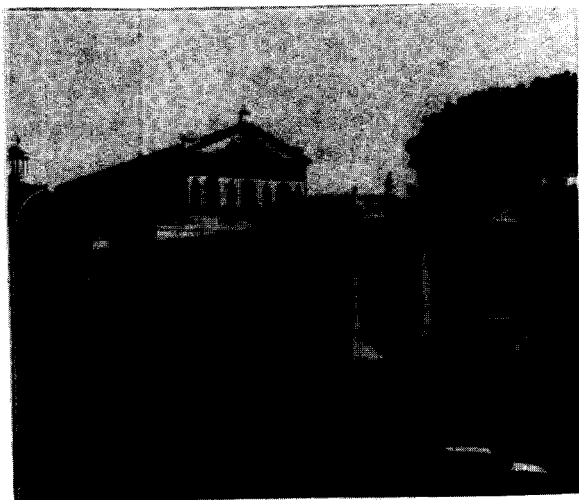
symbolic floor plan of a Latin cross. The addition of an atrium in front and a mausoleum at the side later in the century completed the form of the ancient St. Peter's. At a hundred and nineteen meters in length, this basilica was the largest of all Constantine's Roman churches. It would become the premier pilgrimage church of medieval Rome, and an influential model for church architecture in Christian Europe (Ill. 26).



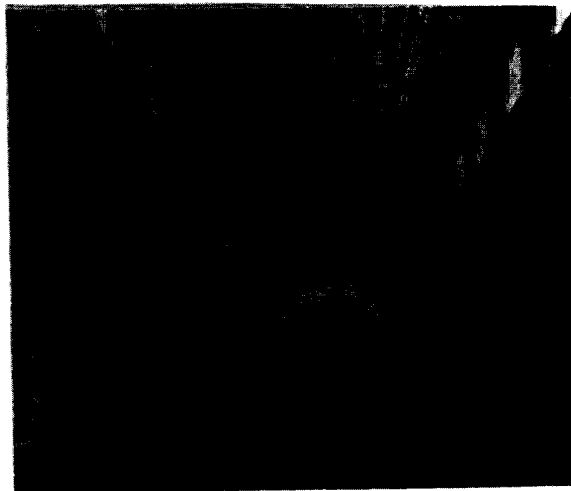
Ill. 26: An isometric reconstruction of the 4th c. *Basilica Beato Petro Apostolo* (after B. Apollonj Ghetti, A. Frazer, and R. Krautheimer)

The *Liber Pontificalis* also gives credit to Pope Sylvester for suggesting, and to Constantine for building the *Basilica Beato Paulo Apostolo* south of Rome out off the *Via Ostiense*. This assertion is only partially correct, however, for Constantine merely constructed a small basilican chapel at the site. It was the growing popularity of the *Doctor gentium* among late fourth century pagan intellectuals, and the program of Pope Damasus (366-384) to emphasize Rome as the Apostolic City that led to the erection of the grand Pauline Basilica on the Ostian Way as the near equal to the Petrine Basilica at the Vatican. The Emperors Valentinian II (383-392), Theodosius the Great (379-395), and Arcadius (395-408) patronized its construction in the last decades of the fourth century, and Theodosius' daughter Galla Placidia and Pope Leo

I (440-61) provided for its magnificent internal decorations in the early fifth century.²⁸ It was a great double-aisled transceptial basilica about 97 meters in length. Like St. Peter's, it had a large square atrium before its front facade. The nave employed the classically inspired arcaded colonnades that were more ornate than the trabeated ones at the earlier Lateran and Vatican Basilicas. The marble revetments above were beautifully decorated with biblical scenes (Ills. 27 and 28).



Ill. 27: Modern facade and left side of *San Paolo fuori le Mura*



Ill. 28: Interior of the Ostian Basilica (rebuilt in 19th c.)

The ancient St. Paul's lasted in its original form until severely damaged by fire in 1823. L. Rossini's engraving, however, shows that the rear apse and glorification arch, and parts of the right aisle colonnades survived the disaster (Ill. 29). The church would be reconstructed in the mid nineteenth century along its ancient lines, and thus gives one an excellent example of what the greater fourth century Christian basilicas of Rome looked like in antiquity. The longitudinal sweep of the central nave with its flat coffered ceiling, and the lower double side aisles are clearly seen when walking down the rebuilt church. The decorations of the glorification arch

Ill. 29: Rossini's engraving of the ancient *Basilica Beato Paolo Apostolo* after the fire of 1823 (Biblioteca Hertziana, Rome)

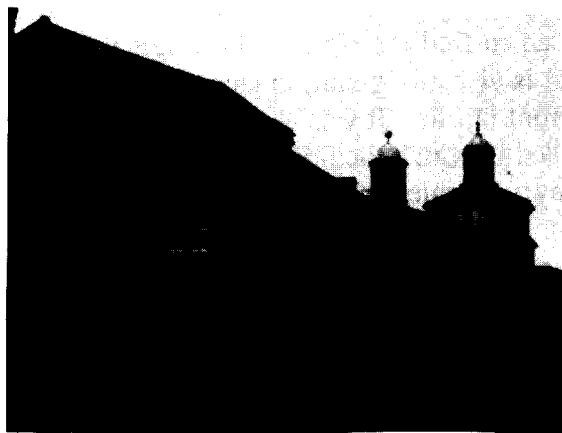


²⁸*Lib Pont XXXIII. 21, 178-179* = Odahl, *Early Christian Latin Literature*, 146-147: "Eodem tempore fecit Augustus Constantinus Basilicam Beato Paolo Apostolo ex suggestione Silvestri episcopi, cuius corpus ita recondit in aere et conclusit sicut beati Petri.... For modern work at the Ostian site on the ancient basilicas, see: E. Kirschbaum, *The Tombs of St. Peter and St. Paul*, 165-194; S. Alexander, "Studies in Constantinian Church Architecture," 295; and R. Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 42-43, and *Three Christian Capitals*, 104-105.

are original, including the lovely Latin inscription giving credit to its imperial builders and its pious decorators. The shimmering apse probably reflects what the *Liber Pontificalis* records of the Lateran and Vatican apsidal decorations recounted above. Lafréry's engraving depicts the old *San Paolo fuori le Mura* with its simpler atrium before the fire (Ill. 45). The modern reconstruction added some new grandeur to the basilica's entry as our illustrations reveal.

The greater martyrial basilicas at the Vatican and Ostian sites are sometimes called the Apostolic Basilicas, and because of their focus on the tombs of Peter and Paul they have always been more important than the other *extra moenia* churches. The latter four martyrial-cemeterial basilicas of Constantinian construction are found along the southeast to the northeast roads leading out of the city. These edifices were all built on simpler lines, and have not had the historical significance nor enjoyed the pilgrimage traffic of the four greater churches so far surveyed. However, some significant ancient remains are still *in situ* at these sites.²⁹

Out on the *Via Appia* to the south of the city is found the *Basilica Apostolorum*, so named in antiquity because of the tradition that the bones of the apostolic martyrs Peter and Paul were transferred to a Christian cemetery here during the dark and dangerous days of the Valerian persecution in the mid-third century for safe keeping. The holy relics were returned to the Vatican and Ostian sites before Constantine started his Christian building program. Yet, the sanctity of this location remained popular as is attested by all of the Latin graffiti addressed to the apostolic saints found in underground catacombs here. A famous martyr of the Diocletianic persecution (303-305) was entombed at this site, and the church eventually named after him as *San Sebastiano fuori le Mura*.³⁰ Although not mentioned in the *Liber Pontificalis*, this basilica was certainly constructed early in the Constantinian period (*ca.* 313-320)—probably with funds from the many estates that the emperor was donating to the Pope to provide revenue for the Roman church and its clergy (Ills. 30 and 31).



Ill. 30: A view of the old side walls behind the 17th c. facade of *San Sebastiano*



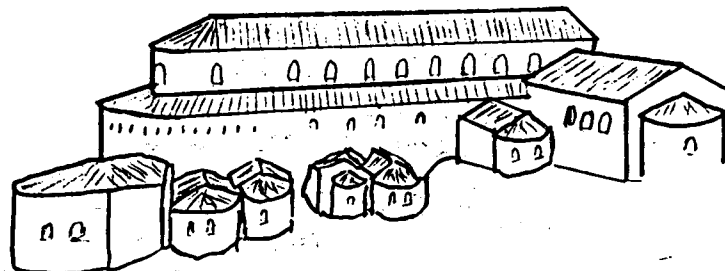
Ill. 31: The ancient apsidal end of the Appian Way Martyr Basilica

²⁹Krautheimer's article "Mensa-Coemeterium-Martyrium" focuses of these four lesser martyrial-cemeterial basilicas, and their original purposes in the fourth century.

³⁰For modern investigations in the catacombs, at the basilica, and concerning the apostolic and martyr cults focused here, see: P. Styger, "Scavi a S. Sebastiano," *Römische Quartalshrift*, 29 (1915) 73ff, and *Römische Märtyrergrüfte* (Berlin 1935); H. Delehaye, *Les Origines du culte des Martyrs* (Brussels 1933); F. Tolotti, *Memorie degli Apostoli in Catacumbas* (Collezione Amici delle Catacombe, Vatican City, 1953); Toynbee and Ward-Perkins, *The Shrine of Saint Peter*, 167-194; E. Kirschbaum, *The Tombs St. Peter & St. Paul*, 196-200; R. Krautheimer, "Mensa-Coemeterium-Martyrium," 19ff.; S. Alexander, "Studies in Constantinian Church Architecture," 295-296; and R. Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 24-25.

Behind the charming seventeenth century neo-classical facade and nave reconstructions of Venzano, one can find some extensive fourth century remains from the original basilica dedicated to the Apostles. Long stretches of the exterior side walls and virtually all of the rear apsidal area contain fourth century masonry according to modern archaeologists who have examined this and the other martyrial complexes to the east of Rome. Their investigations have shown that these basilicas were built in an elongated U floor plan. The *Basilica Apostolorum* was about 75 meters long, with a high central nave, and a single lower side aisle running all the way around the rear apse. It was in the floor of this aisle and in some attached mausolea that Christians could be buried in close proximity to the saints and martyrs in the catacombs above which the church was situated (Ill. 32).

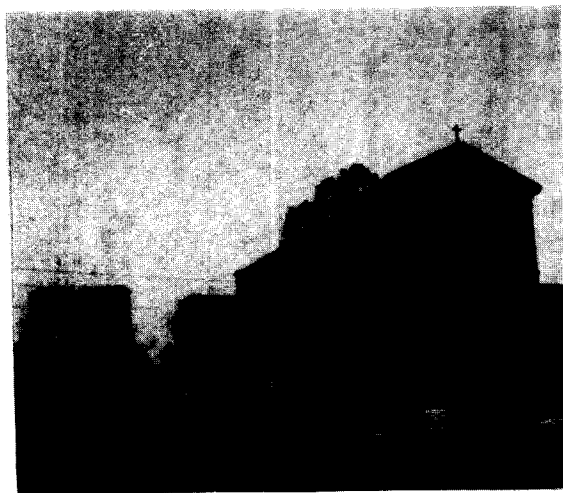
Ill. 32: An isometric reconstruction of the *Basilica Apostolorum* (after G. Pacini)



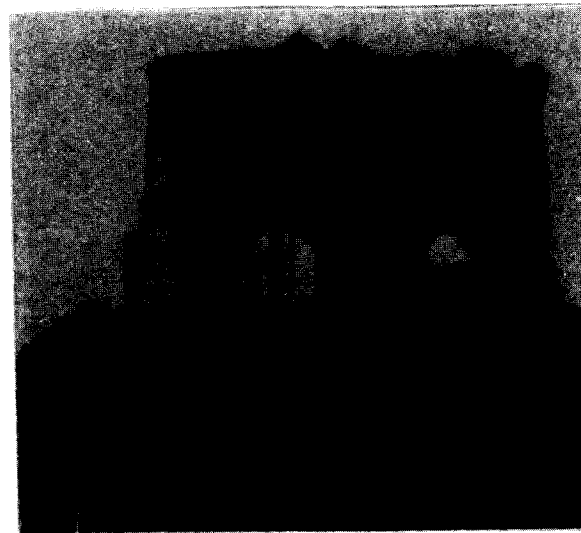
Out off the *Via Labicana* to the southeast of the city the *Basilica Beatis Martyribus Marcellino et Petro* was built for a beloved priest and exorcist of the Roman church who had also been killed in the persecutions of 303-305. Leaving the eastern city wall, one has to travel out to the third milepost of the ancient Roman road to find the site.³¹ The original basilica of *SS Marcellino e Pietro fuori le Mura* (ca. 315-326) is virtually gone, replaced by a little modern parish with some quaint arcaded columns on the front facade. It was at the original front of this basilica that the *Mausoleum Helenae* was constructed in which the body of Constantine's saintly empress-mother Helena was deposited. Her porphyry marble sarcophagus is now in the Vatican Museum, but the partial remains of her mausoleum still stands in ruins at the rear of the modern church. The plan of this basilica was the same as the one on the Appian Way, even to its 75 meter length. The only difference therefrom was the placement of the grand imperial mausoleum at the front of the structure (Ills. 33, 34, and 35).

Closer in toward the eastern wall was the structure known as the *Basilica Beato Laurentio Martyri*, now the church of *San Lorenzo fuori le Mura* off the *Via Tiburtina*. The Constantinian structure mentioned in the *Liber Pontificalis* (ca. 325-335) has largely disappeared

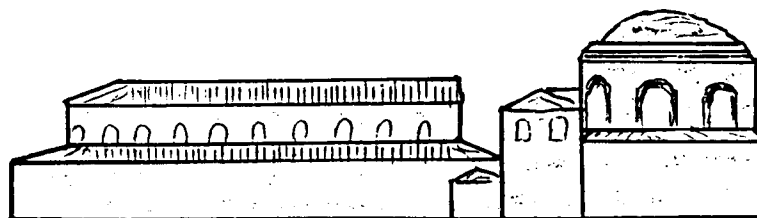
³¹*Lib Pont* XXXIII. 26-27, 182-183 = Odahl, *Early Christian Latin Literature*, 150. For modern investigations at the site, see: F. W. Deichmann and A. Tschira, "Das Mausoleum der Kaiserin Helena und die Basilika der heiligen Marcellinus und Petrus an der Via Labicana vor Rom," *Jahrbuch des deutschen Archäologischen Instituts*, 72 (1957) 44-110; R. Krautheimer, "Mensa-Coemeterium-Martyrium," 18ff.; S. Alexander, "Studies in Constantinian Church Architecture," 298-299; and R. Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 25.



Ill. 33: Facade and left side of the modern SS *Marcellino e Pietro di Helena*



Ill. 34: Ruins of the ancient *Mausoleum Helenae* off the Via Labicana (now the Via Casilina)



Ill. 35: An isometric reconstruction of the 4th c. *Basilica Beatis Martyribus Marcellino et Petro, et Mausoleum Helenae* (after F.W. Deichmann and A. Tschira)

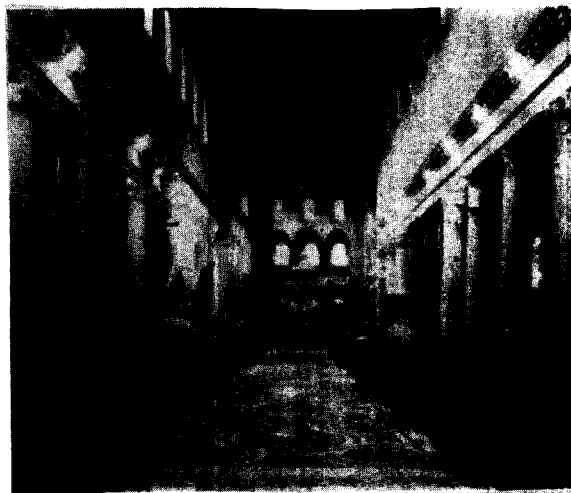
from here as well.³² Near the site now is a composite medieval basilica, with one part built in the late sixth century and another part constructed in the early thirteenth century. The front facade and long high central nave with single lower side aisles are from the later period. They were added on to a little chapel that had been built in the earlier period directly over the tomb of the saint. This older section now serves as a raised presbytery over the tomb of Saint

³²*Lib Pont XXXIII*. 24-25, 181-182 = Odahl, *Early Christian Latin Literature*, 150-151. For modern investigations at the site, see: E. Josi & W. Frankl, "Ulteriori travamenti presso S. Lorenzo," *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, 26 (1950) 48ff.; R. Krautheimer, "Mensa-Coemeterium-Martyrium," 15ff.; S. Alexander, "Studies in Constantinian Church Architecture," 296-297; and R. Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 25, and *Three Christian Capitals*, 22 and 23.

Lawrence who was a martyr of the mid third century. It contains some lovely late antique columns and arch decorations (Ills. 36 and 37).

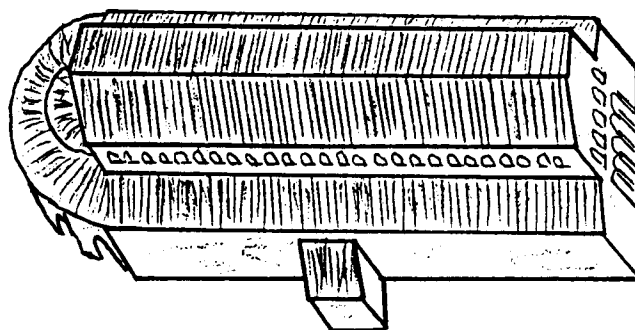


Ill. 36: Front facade of the 13th c. *San Lorenzo fuori le Mura* off the Via Tiburtina



Ill. 37: Interior of the nave of the Tiburtina Basilica looking to the presbytery and saint's tomb

The original basilica, however, had been built on a much grander scale beyond the tomb on the Verano plain, and was the largest of these martyrial-cemeterial basilicas to the east of the city.³³ It follows the same plan as the two others described above, but archaeological work in the Verano Cemetery has revealed that it was fully 98 meters in length. As Rome declined in size in the early middle ages, and this end of the city became sparsely populated, the old basilica was pulled down, and replaced by the smaller chapel. Constantine's edifice had been off to the south side of the martyr's tomb, and, as the *Liber Pontificalis* reports, was connected to it by graded stone steps.³⁴ The composite medieval church rests over the tomb, and provides a good example of the continuing influence of the basilican style plan on western church architecture (Ill. 38).



Ill. 38: An isometric reconstruction of the 4th c. Basilica Beato Laurentio Martyri (after W. Frankl and R. Krautheimer)

³³Some foundations of the Constantinian basilica have been found in the Verano Cemetery next to the medieval *San Lorenzo*.

³⁴*Lib Pont XXXIII. 24: "Constantinus Augustus Basilicam Beato Laurentio Martyri Via Tiburtina in agrum Veranum ... fecit, ... et usque ad corpus sancti Laurenti martyris fecit gradus ascensionis et descensionis.*

Constantine very probably examined many of the above listed basilicas when he was in Rome for his third and final visit to the old capital during his *Vicennalia* celebrations of 326. This may very well have been the time when the Christian emperor and his mother Helena dedicated the new Petrine Shrine monument in the western apsidal end of the partially completed basilica for St. Peter at the Vatican.³⁵ Constantine's recent victory over Licinius and the forces of paganism in the east had increased his sense of missionary zeal to propagate the Christian faith, and he was not as concerned with assuaging pagan feelings as earlier in his reign. In fact, an open break with the pagan establishment of Rome occurred on this visit, and the emperor returned to the east determined to build a second and Christian capital for the empire at Byzantium (soon to be known as Constantinople).³⁶

Constantine thus never got to see the last of the eight Christian basilicas he and his family patronized in Rome, although the *Liber Pontificalis* gives him credit for commissioning it at the request of his daughter Constantina. Appropriately it was built in honor of a female saint, the teenage martyr Agnes who was tortured and killed in the Diocletianic persecution, ca. 304. The *Liber Pontificalis* calls it the *Basilica Sanctae Martyris Agnae*, and it is found several miles northeast of the old city wall on the *Via Nomentana*.³⁷ A small medieval church of the seventh century was built close to the grand ancient basilica as at the site for St. Lawrence. The interior of this later structure has ornate Baroque era decorations. Yet, this site is very important because the original basilica of *Sant' Agnese fuori le Mura* (ca. 335-350) was not torn down, but just allowed to decay gradually through the centuries. Today its majestic ruins spread down an open field for its original length of 90 meters, and its side walls still rise heavenward to a full height of 25 meters. The roof and interior supports are gone, but the remains can still offer one a vivid impression of the vast size of Constantinian constructions at Rome (Ills. 39 & 40). Even better preserved is the mid-fourth century mausoleum of Constantina which was built off to the left front side of the basilica. Here one can inspect Constantinian era masonry up close, and marvel at the beauty of the interior arcaded colonnades supporting the dome of the structure (Ills. 41 and 42).

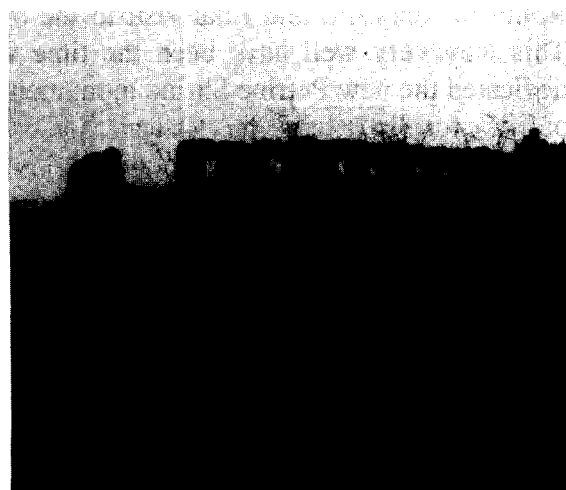
³⁵Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*, 77, gives the ancient evidence for dating the *Vicennalia* in Rome during July and August of 326. The *Lib Pont* XXXIII. 17 records an inscription on a gold cross placed in the tomb shrine that gave credit to both *Constantinus Augustus et Helena Augusta* for adorning the shrine and the basilica (cf. note 26 above). An ancient mosaic above the triumphal arch of the basilica still visible in the late middle ages also portrayed Constantine as presenting the church to Christ, and contained a metrical inscription that read: *quod duce te mundus surrexit in astra triumphans / hanc Constantinus victor tibi condidit aulam* ("Because under your leadership the world rose up triumphant to the skies / Constantine, himself victorious, has founded this hall in your honor)—listed in E. Diehl, *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres* (Berlin, 1925), I, no. 1752.

³⁶These events are alluded to by the ancient pagan historian Zosimus in his *HN* 2.29-30; and they are detailed by the modern scholars A. Alföldi in *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, 99ff.; and R. Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals*, 41ff. Constantinople was first consecrated in late 324 after the victory over Licinius, but Constantine seems to have enlarged his plans for his *Nova Roma* after returning to the east from his last trip to Rome.

³⁷*Lib Pont* XXXIII. 23, 180-181 = Odahl, *Early Christian Latin Literature*, 151-153. For modern works on this church, see: F. W. Deichmann, "Die Lage der Konstantinischen Basilika der Heiligen Agnes an der Via Nomentana," *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, 22 (1946) 1ff.; R. Perrotti, "Recenti ritrovamenti presso S. Costanza," *Palladio*, n.s., 6 (1956) 80ff.; R. Krautheimer, "Mensa-Coemeterium-Martyrium," 18ff.; S. Alexander, "Studies in Constantinian Church Architecture," 299-301; and R. Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 25.



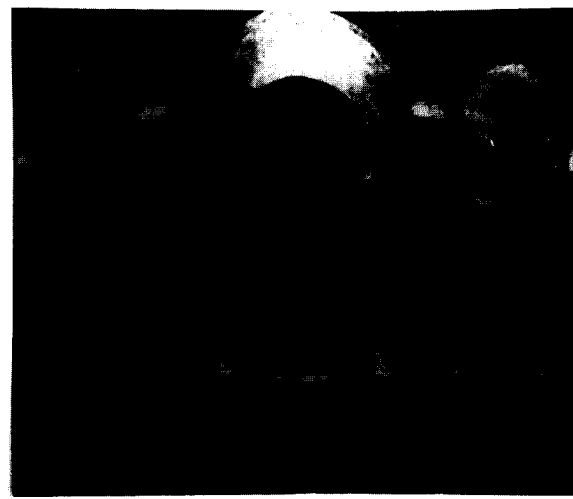
Ill. 39: An old engraving of the *Sant' Agnese* site, showing from left to right the 7th c. church, the 4th c. basilica and mausoleum



Ill. 40: A view of the ancient nave wall apse of the *Basilica Sanctae Martyris Agnae* still in situ off the Via Nomentana



Ill. 41: An exterior view of the mid 4th c. *Mausoleo di Costanza* next to *Sant' Agnese*

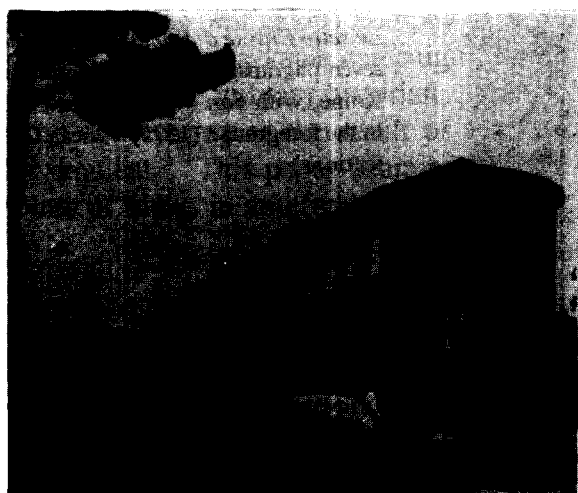


Ill. 42: Interior of the ancient *Mausoleum Constantinae* with its 4th c. rotunda and colonnades

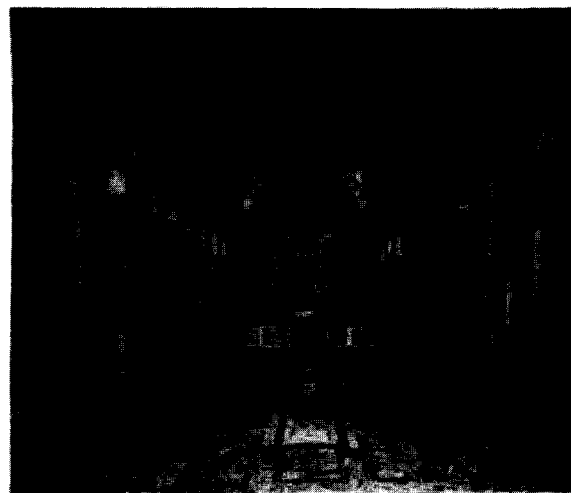
The *Liber Pontificalis* states that both Constantine's sister Constantia and his daughter Constantina were baptized herein by Pope Sylvester. As this 22.5 meter diameter structure closely resembles the ancient baptistery behind the Lateran basilica, this tradition is entirely possible. Constantina's porphyry marble sarcophagus originally sat in an apsed niche opposite the entry; now it rests in the Vatican Museum with that of her grandmother Helena. The location of the altar under the central dome now is probably the place where the baptismal font was situated in antiquity. Fifth century mosaics adorn the interior of the building, including a lovely one depicting the scene from *Mt 16* where Christ gives St. Peter the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven.³⁸

³⁸Pictured in Odahl, *Early Christian Latin Literature*, 65.

The popes as successors of St. Peter were being given more than keys by Constantine. As the descriptions and illustrations of this survey have revealed, the first Christian emperor and his family were handing over to Pope Sylvester and his successors in Rome a magnificent set of eight Christian basilicas that initiated the Christianization of the city at its outer edges. Constructed between A.D. 312 to 350, extending from 75 to 119 meters in length, able to hold thousands of Christians for worship and burials, these impressive edifices initiated the beginning of the late antique transformation of Rome from a pagan capital city to the Christian *Apostolica Sedes*. Backed with extensive revenues from the donations of Christian emperors and the offerings of pious parishoners and pilgrims, the fourth and early fifth century popes would complete the process Constantine had begun as paganism withered and Christianity triumphed. Over the next century they would fill every historic region of the old city with parish churches for local worship services. Pope Sylvester himself started this campaign with the building of a little church on the slopes of the Oppian Hill later to be known as *San Martino ai Monti*. It appropriately contains Gagliardi's beautiful frescoes of the old Lateran and old Vatican Basilicas which Constantine had originally constructed in his pontificate. One of the last and best preserved of the local *tituli*—as these parish churches were called in Latin—is the one completed under Pope Sextus III (432-440) on the Aventine Hill (Ills. 43 and 44).



Ill. 43: Exterior view of the *tituli* church
Santa Sabina on the Aventine



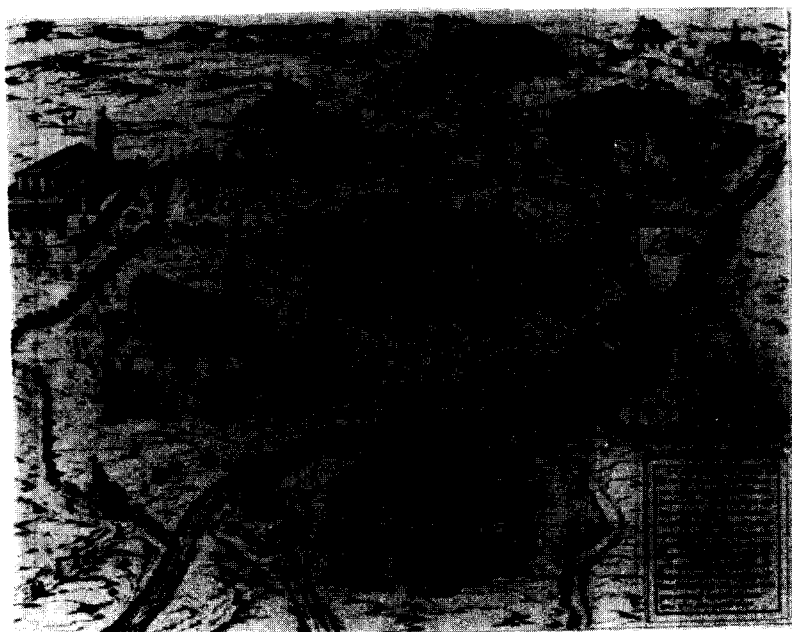
Ill. 44: The 5th c. nave of ancient
Santa Sabina

Largely in its original state, *Santa Sabina* offers an excellent example of the ancient church plan employed for the smaller martyrial basilicas Constantine and his architects had pioneered. Its high central nave terminating in a rear apse and sided with lower single side aisles closely followed the Constantinian model. So too did the papally sponsored grand liturgical basilica of *Santa Maria Maggiore* built on the Esquiline Hill in the north central area of Rome, and likewise completed during Sextus' pontificate. This latter church was the capstone to the Christianization of the ancient city.³⁹

By the mid fifth century, the popes were using the greater and closer in basilicas of the city as station churches wherein they could celebrate festival masses during the important seasons

³⁹For the papal building program of the 4th and 5th centuries, see: R. Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, 33-58, and *Three Christian Capitals*, 93-121.

of the Christian year. *Santa Maria Maggiore* and *San Pietro in Vaticano* were used for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services, while *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme* and *San Giovanni in Laterano* were employed for Good Friday and Easter worship. These grand station basilicas and the more important martyr basilicas for *San Paolo*, *San Sebastiano*, and *San Lorenzo* became the seven great pilgrimage churches of medieval Rome. A. Lafréry's beautiful sixteenth century engraving depicts these structures just before their modern rebuilding. The fact that six out of the seven most important churches of Rome were of Constantinian origin reveals the fundamental role the Christian emperor and his family played in Christianizing the city of Rome and in establishing the norms of church architecture (Ill. 45).⁴⁰



Ill. 45: A. Lafréry's engraving of *Le sette Chiese di Roma* showing the seven pilgrimage churches of medieval Rome, with *San Pietro in Vaticano* in the foreground (1575, Vatican Collections)

Charles Odahl

Boise State University
Boise, ID

⁴⁰Special thanks are due to John Kelly and Charles Scheer of the Simplot-Micron Technology Center in Boise for developing the prints for this article from the author's collection of slides, prints, and negatives of Constantinian art and architecture.