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The Space of “Paganism” in the Early Medieval City: Rome’s Polytheistic Past along the Real and Imaginary Topography of the Pilgrims’ Paths

Introduction: Rome’s Classical Temples and Early Medieval *Itineraria*

Between the 6th and the 8th centuries, Rome was a remarkable Mediterranean metropolis, retaining its crucial symbolic status of ideological core of the now Christianised Classical civilization and accordingly prompting within its borders the implementation of new impressive architectural programs. In this regard, a fundamental role in shaping Rome’s Early Medieval topography continued to be played by its pre-Christian monumental heritage, still a key factor in influencing new urban developments and the population’s distribution. Classical temples and buildings were in fact still performing prominent practical functions within the city, while at the same time conveying powerful symbolisms and messages, both connected to their original status or re-formulated for a Christian audience. Hence, their distribution and significance within the urban landscape must be regarded as instrumental in defining the ways both Rome’s citizens and visiting foreigners experienced and perceived the space enclosed by the Aurelian Walls.

Yet, contemporary topographical sources appear as mainly silent in this regard, in sharp contrast with the abundance of literary data conveyed by the Late Antique Regionary Catalogues. These two texts, the *Curiosum* and *Notitia Urbis Romae*, detailed in fact the urban fabric of 4th/5th centuries Rome, giving an estimate of the number of its sacred areas as comprehensive of more than 300 public sanctuaries and private shrines. This figure dates to a chronological phase when Polytheistic cults were still practised and both the great public temples and a myriad of minor shrines were integral part of the city fabric.

The Catalogues represent the last efforts at providing such an overall picture of Rome’s Classical landscape, and no comparable topographical attempt was produced during the following centuries. Despite the presence of Pagan landmarks being still prominent within the 6th/8th centuries’ city in fact, from the 7th century onwards near all the sources tend to put the emphasis on Christian elements, presented as pivotal points of the urban fabric, consequently downplaying civic buildings and former temples. Such pattern is for instance followed by the main topographical sources of the period, intended as *Itineraria* for pilgrims visiting the holy city, therefore highlighting

churches and basilicas on their paths and contributing in creating the image of Rome as *Urbs Christiana*.¹

Indeed, hosting the most important Episcopal seat of the Latin world (the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles and a multitude of suburban shrines linked to the *memoria martyrum*), Rome quickly evolved into the main centre of pilgrimage of Western Europe. In order to orientate themselves within this city of wonders, pilgrims relied on written *Itineraria*, presenting series of paths where to be listed were the main religious topographical locations of the city and its surroundings. Such texts were probably produced already during the 6th century and even before, yet the earliest known examples date to the 7th century. In fact, during this century three of the four known *Itineraria* were realized; the *Notitia Ecclesiarum Urbis Romae* and the *De Locis Sanctis Martyrum quae sunt Foris Civitatis Romae – Ecclesiae quae intus Romae habentur*, both written within the first half of the century; and the *Notitia Portarum, Viarum, Ecclesiarum circa Urbem Romam*, realized some decades later and survived as interpolated within the 12th century's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* of William of Malmesbury.² Dating to a phase when the majority of the sacred places was connected to the devotion of saints buried outside the city walls, all such *Itineraria* dedicate most of the text to the description of roads leading out of Rome, listing their suburban catacombs and shrines.³ Yet, a brief list of the main churches and basilicas *intra moenia* is provided by all of three, meaning the pilgrims were actively looking for such places all over the city.

A more detailed approach to the intramural topography emerges from the pages of the latest of these texts, the *Itinerarium Urbis Romae*, also known from the Swiss monastery where it was found as Einsiedeln Itinerary, that was most likely compiled between the pontificates of Hadrian I (772–795) and Leo III (796–816).⁴ This work dates after the massive intramural transfer and re-entombment of martyrs operated during the central decades of the 8th century, consequently shifting its focus within the city walls.⁵ Accordingly, to be presented by the *Itinerarium* are the detailed descriptions of ten paths, each one covering a different area of the city and listing the main topographical elements as divided on a right and a left column, corresponding to the sides where the walking reader would have spotted them. Such paths are no doubt more detailed versions of roughly the same ones followed by the 7th century pilgrims, whose relatively scarce *intra moenia* information makes a precise reconstruction more difficult. In fact, several topographical indications along the paths of the Itinerary of Einsiedeln are given, including Classical buildings, demonstrating the surviving importance of the architectural heritage even

¹ On the phenomenon of Roman pilgrimage: Fiocchi Nicolai 2000; Bauer 2001; Pergola 2001.

² A survey in Lapidge 2017, 659–666.

³ See Spera 2007; Brenk 2016.

⁴ See Bauer 1997; Santangeli Valenzani 2001; Blennow 2019.

⁵ Dey 2006, 235–240.

after the vanishing of direct Imperial patronage over public structures around the mid-8th century.⁶ Furthermore, the manuscript also preserves an epigraphic *Sylloge*, containing the transcription of 74 inscriptions visible across the city, almost all of which dating to Classical and Late Antiquity.⁷

Precisely following this *Itinerarium*, the present article aims to deal with the actual perception of the cityscape across the city, trying to show how it could have been enriched not just by the new Christian creations, but, above all, by the massive temples inherited by the ancestors. Hence, the article will focus on one of its main paths, the number 8, corresponding to the route of the *Via Papalis*, from the Tomb of Peter and the Vatican Basilica on NW to the Lateran Palace and Basilica on SE, thus connecting the two main religious pivots of the city by crossing its monumental centre, the Roman Forum.⁸ For these reasons, the path represented a privileged itinerary for visitors and ritual processions, thus constituting a keystone of the Roman pilgrimage since its early developments. The article will address the mentioned pre-Christian religious sites and, most importantly, the unmentioned ones located in proximity of listed toponyms. Such sites will be approached taking into consideration the archaeological record and the contemporary sources, trying to get a glimpse at the ways people could have perceived them, in forms whether connected to still relevant public roles or as framed within a new Christian symbology (Fig. 1).

Non-Christian Religious Elements along the Path N. 8 of the *Itinerarium Urbis Romae*

Before Entering Porta San Pietro: The Vatican

The pilgrims engaging the path had their starting point in the Vatican area, to pay homage to the Tomb of Peter within his Basilica. Yet, the area used to be a pivotal point for other religions during Late Antiquity, hosting in the 4th century a favourite sanctuary for the senatorial class, the *Phrygianum* of the *Magna Mater*. Unfortunately, there is no substantial evidence regarding the fate of its structures after the banning of religious activities at the end of the 4th century, and no mentions of the *Phrygianum* are known after such phase.⁹ Indeed, the rooting of Christianity within the area does not seem threatened, and around St. Peter’s Basilica the pilgrims

⁶ On the reshaping of Rome’s Classical topography within the Early Medieval Christian liturgy: Osborne 2021.

⁷ Blennow 2019, 37–40.

⁸ On the *Via Papalis* and its relationship with the Classical main ceremonial path, the *Via Triumphalis*: Dey 2020.

⁹ Liverani 2000.

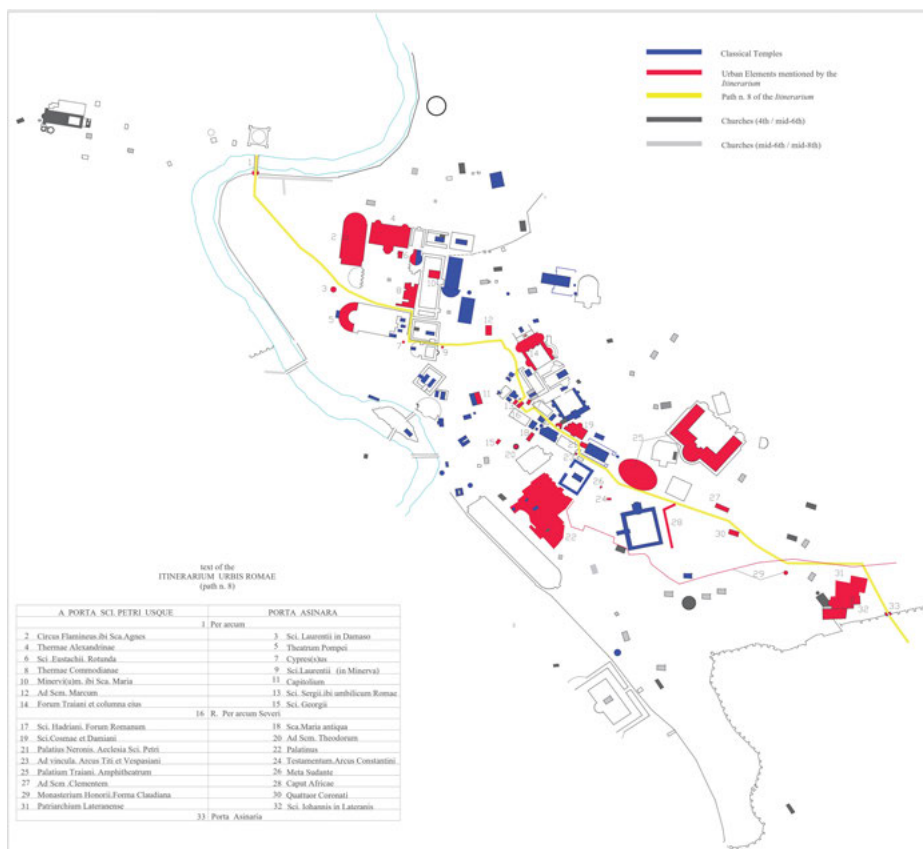


Fig. 1: Path n. 8 of the Einsiedeln Itinerary (map realized by the author).

would have definitely experienced a urban setting where almost every corner was communicating messages linked to the Christian religion.

Yet, in the mid-5th century Pope Leo I in his sermons had to chastise the common pre-Christian practice, among people entering St. Peter, to bow towards the rising Sun (*ad nascentem se solem*) before crossing the Basilicas' door (*ut priusquam ad Petri apostoli basilicam*), in order to pay homage to it (*in honorem se splendoris orbis*).¹⁰ What is more, an exchange of letters between Pope Zacharias and St. Boniface, dating to the years 742/743, glimpses at the persistent celebration of pre-Christian festivals in the area, perceived as sufficiently heterodox to scandalize foreign pilgrims on their route. St. Boniface reports how some newly converted Germans he had sent on pilgrimage to Rome had witnessed Pagan dances and ritual parades (*paganorum consuetudine chorus, adclamationes ritu gentilium, cantationes sacrilegas*) performed by people wearing

¹⁰ Leo Magnus, *Sermones*, 27, 4.

and selling amulets and bracelets (*pagano ritu flacteria et ligaturas*) near St. Peter's Basilica (*iuxta aeclesiam Sancti Petri*) at the turning of the year, during the *Kalendae* of January (*quando Kalende Ianuarii intrant*).¹¹ In his reply to Boniface dating to the year 743, Pope Zacharias admitted the truthfulness of these statements, but also emphasized that thanks to actions taken by his predecessor, Gregory III, these rites were now in sharp decline.¹² Nevertheless, the same year, during the Synod of Rome Zacharias himself deliberated against winter festivals, possibly meaning that they were still exerting a certain appeal. Indeed, to be condemned were the celebrations of the festivals of *Kalendae* and *Bruma* (*ut nullus Kalendas Ianuarias et Bruma ritu paganorum colere praesumpserit*), with the express prohibition of street parading and dancing (*per vicos et plateas cantationes et choros ducere*), described as a crime against God (*quod maxima iniquitas est coram Deo*).¹³

Crossing the Campus Martius

After crossing Porta S. Pietro, the pilgrims entered one of the most important sectors of the ancient city, the *Campus Martius*, still characterized by a large number of Classical buildings. On the left side, the Circus Flaminius and both the Baths of Nero and Commodus are listed, while on the right the text informs the pilgrims to look for the Theatre of Pompey. Furthermore, the structures of several temples, unnamed by the *Itinerarium*, would have appeared as standing. Thanks to the archaeological record is in fact possible to determine that at least the huge *Hadrianeum* and the four temples of the sacred area of Largo Argentina were still preserved during the Early Middle Ages.¹⁴

Indeed, while describing this area the *Itinerarium* explicitly addresses the pre-Christian past of the city. The first indirect reference to a worship building is the mention of the *Theatrum Pompei*, which had the small Temple of Venus *Victrix* located on its *summa cavea*. A restoration of the theatre and temple was carried out in the 6th century and the inscription attesting such activities is transcribed within the epigraphic *Sylloge* annexed to the Einsiedeln Itinerary, suggesting that the temple could have appeared well preserved to pilgrims walking the streets of the *Campus Martius*.¹⁵

¹¹ Bonifacius, *Epistulae*, 50. Regarding the employment of gems and amulets in the Imperial Era: Mastrocinque 2003; Faraone 2019.

¹² Bonifacius, *Epistulae*, 51.

¹³ *Concilium Romanum* (743), 9.

¹⁴ On the *Hadrianeum*: Gatto 2005. The temple is recorded in Ligorio, *Codex Tauriniensis* A. III 6 J. 4 (vol. IV, libro 2); Palladio, *Delle antichità di Roma*, III, 19; Alberti (Cod. C. f. 46 tav. CCXXXVII); Cavalieri (tav. 17, 1569), Dupérac (f.27v, 1575). On Largo Argentina: Meneghini/Santangeli Valenzani 2004, 201; Guaglianone 2018.

¹⁵ Cassiodorus, *Variae* IV, 51.

Right after the theatre, on the same side, the *Itinerarium* lists the toponym *Cypressus*, likely referring to a sacred tree. Because of both the practice of dedicating trees to Jupiter and the presence of a cypress in the Volcanal in the Roman Forum, the indication on the *Itinerarium* has been linked to the cults of these two gods in the *Campus Martius* known from Roman calendars. Hence, the indication *Cypressus* has been interpreted as referring to a sacred tree located in the area of the temples of Jupiter *Fulgor* and Vulcan, possibly within a *temenos* shared by the two sanctuaries together with the Temple of Juno *Curitis*.¹⁶ The state of preservation of such temples during the 8th century cannot be determined, yet the mention of the tree within the *Itinerarium* could suggest at least some sort of preservation of their memory. In any case, the decision of the anonymous author to address the area through the mention of an element sacred to pre-Christian religions appears worth of notice, possibly hinting at the survival of the perception of its cultural significance.

Such veiled reminiscence of associations between places and their religious past can be also discussed in relation to the Pantheon, located by the *Itinerarium* on the left side of the path. The building appeared to 7th/8th century pilgrims as the Church of St. Mary *ad martyres*, after its conversion in 608 by Pope Boniface IV.¹⁷ Writing in the 8th century, Paulus Diaconus stresses Boniface's request to Emperor Phocas to cleanse the building of the gods' images (*ablatis ydolatrie sordibus*).¹⁸ Nevertheless, some sculptures could have survived *in situ* and during the 16th century a statue of Agrippa and a bust of a goddess, identified as Cybele, were attested in the Pantheon.¹⁹ Such preservation could have been possible because of the temple's status as part of the Imperial patrimony, at the disposal of the secular authorities even after the granting of Government's permission to convert it into a church, as also suggested by the stripping of its roof tiles by order of Emperor Constans II in 663.²⁰ What is more, the Lombard historian mentions the decision to replace the "demonic" memory of all the gods with the one of all the martyrs, thus confirming the preservation of the knowledge of the building's original dedication more than a century after its conversion (*ubi quondam omnium non deorum sed demoniorum cultus agebatur, ibi deinceps omnium fieret memoria sanctorum*).²¹ Such form of perception is echoed by the Einsiedeln Itinerary itself, that probably around the same time addressed the building as *Rotunda* instead of using its

¹⁶ Mancorda 1996, 136–138.

¹⁷ *Liber Pontificalis*, Bonifacius (IV); Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* 2.4; Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Longobardorum*, IV, 36–5.18; Teophanes, *Chronicon*, 351. On the Medieval phases of the Pantheon: Thunø 2015.

¹⁸ Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Longobardorum*, IV, 36–5.18.

¹⁹ *Roma, Pantheon, Congregazione dei Virtuosi, Liber I*, fol. 3 r (1543) (AAAKR, *Pantheon* 612); *Liber I*, fol. 11 v (5 Ottobre 1545). Thomas 2017, 146–212.

²⁰ *Liber Pontificalis*, Vitalianus. On Rome's management of public buildings in the Early Middle Ages: Coates-Stephens 2006, 162. On Constans II and the Pantheon: Coates-Stephens 2017.

²¹ Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Longobardorum*, IV, 36–5.18.

church name, thus likely suggesting a still strong perception of its original nature by the 8th century population.

Moving on, on the left side of the path another reference to Polytheistic cults is represented by the toponym *Minervium ibi sca. Maria*. This refers to the 8th century Church of St. Mary *supra Minerva*, erected on the area of the Temple of Minerva Chalcidica, whose structures could have appeared as still standing at the time when the Einsiedeln Itinerary was written. Indeed, the temple was part of the vast complex of sanctuaries centred on the Temple and precinct of Isis and Serapis, also connected to a sacred area known as the *Porticus Divorum*.²² The process of deconstruction of the complex seems to have begun in the 8th century, highlighted by the erection in the area of the churches of St. Stephen and the aforementioned St. Mary. Yet, from the excavation reports it seems likely that a huge sculptural apparatus, depicting a large number of subjects related to Egyptian cults, could have been on display in the open spaces of the sanctuary until such phase, thus being visible to the population and to the pilgrims on their route.²³ Indeed, the area of the sanctuary played a crucial role in the conservation and redistribution of imported food supplies arriving to the Tiber ports of the *Campus Martius*, which were then stored in a series of *horrea* located within the *Porticus Divorum*. These silos were still in use during the 6th/7th centuries, to be probably dismissed around the beginning of the 8th century, with the decline of the Western Mediterranean market.²⁴ Hence, the area of the *Iseum et Serapeum* could have appeared to 6th/7th centuries pilgrims as a living space, where officials of the Imperial administration carried out important public duties surrounded by symbols of pre-Christian religions.

Skirting the Capitoline Hill on the Right

While leaving the *Campus Martius* to enter the Roman Forum, at their right the pilgrims found the imposing bulk of the Capitoline Hill, core of the Roman public religion, represented within the *Itinerarium* by the toponym *Capitolium*.

In fact, the history of the Capitoline Hill between the 6th and 8th centuries seems to be characterised by a substantial respect for the pre-existing architectural landscape. The hill was dominated by the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, whose structures, despite having suffered some limited acts of spoliation in the 5th

²² Ensoli 2000a; Spera 2014. The temple's structures are reported by: Vacca, *Memorie*, N. 27; Marlianus, *Thesaurus Antiquitatum romanarum*, VI 5; Bracciolini, *De Varietate Fortunae* I, VZ p. 234–235; Panvinio, *Codex Vaticanus Lat.* 3349 f. 25r.

²³ Lanciani 1883, 34–37.

²⁴ Spera 2014; The silos are probably to be identified with the ones mentioned in: Procopius, *Bellum Gothicum* V, 15, 17. On Rome and the Early Medieval Mediterranean trade: Sagui 2001; Arthur 2012; 2017. On Rome's food supply system: De Francesco 2017.

and 6th centuries, were still mentioned as standing in the 11th.²⁵ During the 5th century the temple continued to receive gold dedications and was still theatre of the celebration of the *Kalendae*, marking the inauguration of the political year, while in the 6th century it is remembered as a wonder of the city.²⁶ The same definition *Capitolium* is a reference to the temple, reflecting its centrality within the Early Medieval landscape.

Furthermore, the Capitoline Hill Hosted a large number of sanctuaries, three of which, located on the slopes of the mountain on the side of the Roman Forum, are directly addressed by the Einsiedeln's *Sylloge*, where the inscriptions on their architraves are transcribed. These are the temples of Saturn, Vespasian and Concordia, the latter collapsed during the 8th century, presumably after the transcription of its epigraph within the *Sylloge*.²⁷ Additionally, in strict proximity and connection to the three temples, on the slopes of the hill the *Tabularium* was located, likely employed by public officials well into the 7th century to host the offices of the *moneta publica*.²⁸ Therefore, even on the location most vividly associated to the Polytheistic religions, civil servants still moved and worked in an environment enriched by Classical temples.

Yet, the hill seems to have gradually evolved within the Christian literature into the topographical centre of the setting of various Roman legends. Most of these Christian stories depicted the Capitoline Hill as the stage of *passiones*, where in locations such as the temples of Jupiter and Mercury the martyrs were asked to abjure their faith in front of Pagan *simulacra*.²⁹ Among such legends, to present the Capitoline Hill as shrouded in a particularly ominous and universal light are the *Actus* of Pope Sylvester, where, through a fictional retelling of the conversion of Constantine and Rome's population, a "Christian foundation myth" for the city itself is engineered.³⁰ The tale revolves around two main topographical areas, the *Capitolium* and the *Lateranum*, both reimagined as quintessential pivots respectively of Paganism and Christianity: Constantine's conversion is in fact said to happen when, in order to heal from leprosy, he refuses to bathe in a blood pool (*piscina sanguinis*) prepared by Pagan priests on the Capitoline Hill (*pontifices Capitolii*) to be instead baptized by the Pope on a second pool on the Lateran (*piscina pietatis*); afterwards, the entirety of Rome's population joins Christianity after Sylvester, challenged by some Pagans with which he was having

25 Limited spoliations in: Procopius, *Bellum Vandalicum* I 5,4; *Consularia Italica*, *Excerpta Sangallensia* anno 571, 714. The temple's structures are still mentioned as standing in a Papal bull by Anacletus II (in Casimiro 1845, 670–85).

26 Last dedication in *Codex Theodosianus* XI. 1. 34. Mention of 5th century's *Kalendae*: Salvianus, *De Gubernatione Dei*, VI, 12–13. The temple is described in Cassiodorus, *Variae* VII, 6.

27 *Sylloge Einsiedlensis* F. 72b. 35.

28 On the public use of the *Tabularium*: Moralee 2018, 67–69. On Italy's mints between the 6th and the 8th centuries: Prigent 2021. A focus on Rome: Rovelli 2001.

29 Among the tales set on the hill: *Passio Callisti* (Oct. VI); *Passio Eusebii* (Nov. IV). For an in-depth analysis of Roman *passiones*: Lapidge 2017.

30 For in-depth discussions of the text: Pohlkamp 1992; Canella 2006.

an argument (*cum haberet cum paganis pro defensione veritatis conflictum*), defeats a dragon inhabiting the Capitoline Hill (*in monte Trapeio in quo est Capitolim collocatum*) that was afflicting the city with its poisonous breath since Constantine’s decision to interrupt the flow of offerings made by Pagan priests (*Ad hunc draconem per CCCLXV gradus, quasi ad infernum, magi cum virginibus sacrilegis descendebant semel in mense cum sacrificiis et lustris*).³¹

The popularity of this legend was such to cross the borders of the Italian peninsula, and the episode of the dragon was even re-imagined as having the British Saint Gildas as protagonist instead of Sylvester, yet still locating the monster’s lair on Rome’s Capitoline Hill.³² Reflections of the impact of such perception can also be detected within the changing rituality of power in Rome, as evidenced by the gradual abandonment of the Capitoline Hill’s traditional role as arrival spot of the *Princeps*’ parade during the Imperial *adventus*.³³ This process appears as complete in the year 663, when Constans II became the last Roman Emperor to set foot in the ancient capital. During such occasion the *Capitolium* was left out of the Imperial itinerary, while to be underlined by the sources is the Emperor’s ritual bath on the Lateran at the Pope’s presence, thus manifesting the employment of symbolic rituals popularized by the *Silvesterlegende*.³⁴

Nonetheless, the legendary re-imagination of the Capitoline Hill was not uniquely conceived as a form of “demonization”, and some of the legends preserved traces of its civic role. That could be the case of the popular legend of the *Salvatio Romae*, that sees the temple of Jupiter as hosting *simulacra* of the peoples subjected to the Empire, magically able to move to signal any rebellion.³⁵ Likewise, the *Capitolium* is invested with a positive symbolism as the location where the popular prophecy of the Tiburtine Sibyl before Emperor Augustus was made, foreshadowing the conversion of Constantine and predicting the coming of the Christian apocalypse. The legend probably originated in 6th century’s Syria and the earliest known Greek source already highlights the Capitoline setting, later re-employed in numerous Latin translations (καὶ καθίσασα ἡ Σίβυλλα ἐν τῷ Καπετωλίῳ ἔσωθεν τῶν ἐλαιῶν ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς λέγουσα).³⁶ The most famous of these Western versions is arguably the *Chronicon Palatinum*, probably realized by Theodore of Tarsus, archbishop of Canterbury in the second half of the 7th century, where the Sibyl also prophesizes the erection of an altar on the hill, thus referencing the

31 *Vita Silvestri*, 510–514; 529–530. On the Capitoline Hill’s role in the legend: Aronen 1989; Santangeli Valenzani 2007; Ogden 2013a; Luciani 2018.

32 *Vita S. Gildae, Catalogus*, 1889–1892: ii, 184. See: Ogden 2013b, 226.

33 Moralee 2018, 29–56.

34 Lonardo 2012, 164. On the rituality of the Emperor’s entrance in Rome during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages see Latham 2021.

35 Pseudo-Beda, *De Septem Mundi Miraculi*, PL 90:961–62; Kosmas, *PG*, 38, 546. See: Cilento 1983. On the altar and the Christian occupation of the area: Bolgia 2017.

36 Oracle of Baalbek, 10–11, in Alexander 1967, 10.

Capitoline church of St. Maria *in Aracoeli*, a Christian landmark of prime importance (*quare exiens inde Augustus Caesar a divinatione, aedificavit in Capitolio aram magnam in sublimiori loco*).³⁷

In conclusion, the Capitoline Hill was perceived by the 7th/8th century population as still preserving strong civic and administrative roles, while being at the same time symbolically sufficiently ambiguous to be cautiously avoided by the rituality of power.³⁸ Glimpses of such ambiguity can be traced within the Einsiedeln's manuscript. Indeed, the anonymous author walked by the side of the hill, just touching its slopes, thus instructing the pilgrims not to climb it. In fact, because of its religious nature, interested in creating a devotional path where the episodes of Christian legends could be contextualised, the *Itinerarium*, though having to address an urban element so topographically and symbolically important, avoided the crossing of an area compromised with the defeated Polytheistic religious systems. Yet, Christian writers seem not to have had any issues with climbing the *Capitolium* and walking through its area themselves, as evident by the listing of seven inscription visible on the hill within the Einsiedeln's *Sylloge*, thus showing how, once cast off his mantle of Christian preacher, the author could have enjoyed a walk through the Capitoline antiquities. What is more, the frequentation of the area must have appeared possibly even more unproblematic to the authors of the 7th century's *Itineraria*, writing during a time where, as previously stated, the Capitoline Hill was still very much bustling with public life.

Skirting the Imperial Fora on the Left

While passing the *Capitolium*'s mountainside on their right, on the opposite side the pilgrims had the structures of the Imperial Fora, and accordingly the *Itinerarium* mentions the Forum of Trajan and its column. The temples within the Fora were not visible to the pilgrims' eyes, laying behind the porticos' walls. Yet, the structures of the sanctuaries were still well preserved during the Early Middle Ages, and a pilgrim briefly diverting from his path could have stumbled upon them. The first signs of deconstruction of the Forum of Trajan date in fact to the 8th/9th centuries, while the preservation of the cult colossus of Minerva within her temple in the Forum of Nerva is still attested during the 13th century.³⁹ Traces of limited spoliations of the

³⁷ *Chronicon Palatinum*, 8. See: Mandatori 2015; Shoemaker 2015.

³⁸ About the religious significance of the Capitoline Hill during Late Antiquity: Frascchetti 2001; Grig 2012; Moralee 2018.

³⁹ The Temple of Trajan is mentioned in: Ligorio, *Codex Taurinensis*, XV, c.58. The statue of Minerva is described in: Magister Gregorius, *Narracio de Mirabilibus Urbis Roma*, 18. The temple is mentioned as standing in Signorili, *Descriptio Urbis Romae*, VZ IV 198 (CIL VI953); *Codex Escorialensis* f. 58r.

colonnade can be detected in the temples of Venus *Genitrix* in the Forum of Caesar and of Mars *Ultor* in the Forum of Augustus, yet both the structures seem to have likely survived, with the latter being replaced by a monastery only during the 9th or 10th century.⁴⁰ The Temple of Mars is also remembered as the setting of saints' trials within the *passiones* of the Greek martyrs and Polychronius, hence possibly meaning a peculiar cultural significance in the eyes of pilgrims aware of such legends.⁴¹

Crossing the Roman Forum

Upon passing through the Arch of Severus, the visitors entered the heart of Rome's public life.⁴² Even before reaching the arch, the *Itinerarium* bears the toponym *Umbilicum Romae*, possibly to be identified with the shrine of *Genius Publicus*, located nearby the *Rostra*.⁴³ This is the only direct mention of a pre-Christian religious element in the Forum, yet the pilgrims found themselves surrounded by a high density of temples, as the ones of Castor, *Divus* Julius and Antoninus and Faustina, the latter converted into a church during the 8th or 9th century.⁴⁴ Also, a huge concentration of sculptures was visible, several of which were located on the *Rostra Augusti*, including the statues of three Sibyls (Τρία Φᾶτα), during the 6th century described as *μοῖραι* by Procopius, and probably sufficiently relevant within the urban fabric to give to both the churches in front of them, St. Hadrian and St. Martina, the attribute *in tribus fatis*.⁴⁵

Besides, some clues suggest that, at least during the mid-6th century, the area could have even retained part of its religious appeal for people still harbouring sympathies for the Polytheistic faiths. Indeed, in front of St. Hadrian (*Sci. Hadriani* in the *Itinerarium*), the pilgrims met the Temple of Janus, whose doors, according to Procopius, were forced during the Gothic siege by some citizens having in mind the old pre-Christian beliefs (παλαιὴν δόξαν), thus exposing the colossal cult image; the Greek historian relates such actions to the ancient custom of opening the temples' doors when the *Res Publica* was at war in order to seek the god's help (θύραι τε χαλκαῖ ἐφ' ἑκατέρῳ προσώπῳ εἰσίν, ἃς δὴ ἐν μὲν εἰρήνῃ καὶ ἀγαθοῖς πράγμασιν ἐπιτίθεσθαι τὸ παλαιὸν Ῥωμαῖοι ἐνόμιζον, πολέμου δὲ σφίσις ὄντος ἀνέωγον), therefore

⁴⁰ On the Temple of Venus: Hansen 2015, 91. On the Temple of Mars: Santangeli Valenzani 2015, 340.

⁴¹ *Passio Polychronii* (Aug. II 140).

⁴² For an approach to the Roman Forum as a theatre of civic memory: Machado 2006. For a general survey during Late Antiquity: Kalas 2015.

⁴³ See Liverani 2007.

⁴⁴ About the Temple of Castor: Pensabene 2017, 188. Possible conversion of the Temple of Antoninus in the 8th century: Coarelli 2007; Schuddeboom 2017.

⁴⁵ Procopius, *Bellum Goticum* I, 25. Mentions of the two churches in *Liber Pontificalis*, *Honorius*. See Rutledge 2012, 179.

suggesting that the grip of Christianity over part of the population was still not strong enough to prevent a temporary reversal to old rituals during times of crisis.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, some contexts within the Forum, particularly perceived as antagonistic by the Christian propaganda, undergone a process of “demonization” conveyed through hagiographic legends. This is the case of the Temple of Tellus, hosting, at least until the year 599, the seat of the *Praefectus Urbi* and its public tribunals.⁴⁷ Accordingly, the temple is portrayed within several hagiographic texts as the location where martyrs were put on trial.⁴⁸ It is interesting to note how, probably during the 7th century, the judicial offices were moved from the temple to the area of the *Forum Holitorium*.⁴⁹ This was part of a process of structural change within Rome’s Imperial administration, but could have been at least partially influenced by a growing perception of incompatibility between the execution of justice and a place this much associated to the Pagan persecutors.

In any case, the employment of temples’ buildings for administrative purposes appears as common practice, and on the right side of their route, on the slopes of the Palatine hill right beyond St. Maria Antiqua (mentioned by the itinerary), the pilgrims encountered the Temple of Vesta, likely used as a residence for Imperial bureaucrats during the 6th/7th centuries. The temple has in fact been linked to high ranking functionaries, as evidenced by traces of lavish banquets and by the massive redefinition of its structures, with the installation of a “mausoleum” within the *penus Vestae*, where originally the treasure of the sanctuary was stored.⁵⁰ One of these officials could have been the *curator Palatii* Plato, entrusted in the second half of the 7th century with the maintenance of the Imperial Palace, that according to epigraphical evidence restored the monumental staircase leading from the temple to St. Maria Antiqua.⁵¹ Hence, the building must have appeared to the walking pilgrims as a landmark of the Imperial presence in the area, virtually unconnected, at least from an official perspective, to any correlation with its religious past.

⁴⁶ Procopius, *Bellum Gothicum* 1.25. See: Kaldellis 2004, 165–166.

⁴⁷ Last mention of the *praefectura* in Gregorius Magnus, *Epistulae* VIII, 32. On the temple in Late Antiquity: Marchese 2007.

⁴⁸ *Passio Polychronii* (Aug. II 140); *Passio Marcelli papae* (Jan. II 370–372), *Passio Marii, Martae et alii* (Jan. II 582); *Passio Stephani papae* (Aug. I 142); *Passio Eusebi, Pontiani et alii* (Aug. V 115); *Passio Eusebii et soci* (Nov. IV 97); *Passio Calogerii et Parthenii* (Mai. IV 302); *Gesta Abdonis et Senis* (Mombritius I 6r); *Acta Cornelli papae* (Mombritius I 210).

⁴⁹ Valenti 2002–2003, 222.

⁵⁰ Filippi 2001, 601; Johnson 2012, 109–110.

⁵¹ *ICUR* II, p. 442, nn. 152–153. For the connection between St. Maria Antiqua and the Imperial administration: Coates-Stephens 2006, pp. 155–157; Maskarinec 2018, 38–39; Brubaker 2019, 1003–1020. For a discussion on church patronage by high-ranking Byzantine officials in Italy: Deliyannis 2021.

However, within the Roman Forum some elements still carried important symbolic values, not despite but because of their original dedications. For instance, the church of St. Maria Antiqua itself could have possibly hosted healing rituals, perhaps to be read as continuations of the curative sacred character of the area, in Classical times embodied by the nearby fountain known as *Lacus Iuturnae*.⁵² Yet, in this regard the most prominent example is probably the Temple of Venus and Rome, whose imposing mass the pilgrims would have reached just outside the Forum, after crossing the Arch of Titus. The sanctuary is still presented as magnificent by Cassiodorus, and, despite the re-employment of its roof tiles in the Vatican Basilica with the consent of Emperor Heraclius around the year 630, is three times mentioned by the *Liber Pontificalis*.⁵³ These sources agree in defining the sanctuary as *Templum Romae*, seemingly denoting a shift in perception to highlight its celebrative role of the glory of the city. Catalyst of such symbolism was the statue of the goddess *Roma*, from the 4th century onwards located on the western *podium* of the temple in order to be visible from the *Via Sacra*.⁵⁴ The sculpture is also depicted as standing within the temple on the 5th century apsidal arch of St. Mary *Major*, meaning the preservation of its civic symbolisms even within Christian figurative contexts.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the permanence of Classical statues inside the sanctuary is suggested by its identification with the Temple of Fortune (Τύχης) mentioned by Procopius, in whose sacred precinct the historian witnessed a copy of the *Palladium* (Ἀθήνης ἄγαλμα), one of Rome’s most important religious symbols.⁵⁶

After passing the temple, the pilgrims then reached the Colosseum (*Amphitheatrum*) in which proximity one of the most important landmarks of the city was located, the bronze Colossus of Nero/Helios. The statue is for the last time mentioned *in situ* by Cassiodorus in the 6th century, and possibly in a document dated to 982, where an unspecified huge sculpture is said as standing in the area.⁵⁷ Yet, interestingly, the *Itinerarium* does not mention the Colossus, hence suggesting a possible transfer of the sculpture. Indeed, the destruction of the Colossus doesn’t seem probable given its strong civic symbolism and the link between its preservation and the survival of both Rome itself and the entire world, as stated by the famous prophecy of the Angle-Saxon bard Bede (*Quamdiu stat Colysaeus stat Roma; quando cadet Colysaeus cadet*

52 Regarding the survival of the sacred character of the Roman Forum: Iara 2015. On the cultic memory of the *Lacus Iuturnae*: Aronen 1989. A survey on the Early Medieval phases of the monument in: Steinby 2012. For its relation to St. Maria Antiqua: Knipp 2002; Coates-Stephens 2021.

53 Cassiodorus, *Chronica* II. 142; *Liber Pontificalis*, *Felix* (III), *Honorius*, *Paulus*. Spoliations are attested in 1385: *Notizia della famiglia Boccapaduli patrizia romana*, *Nardo de’ Vendettini*, prot. 785. Regarding the Medieval phases of the temple: Lorenzatti 1991.

54 Kalas 2015, 74.

55 Warland 2003, 127–141.

56 Procopius, *Bellum Gothicum* I, 15. Coates-Stephens 2017, 200.

57 Cassiodorus, *Chronica* 107. For the 10th century’s document: Lega 1989–1990.

Roma et mundus).⁵⁸ Such perception could have been subject to a certain degree of ambiguity, because of the prominent role of the Colossus as a “Pagan” pivotal point in the hagiographic account of the Roman martyrs Abdon and Sennen, both of them put on trial before it.⁵⁹ Yet, this negative interpretation of the Colossus must not be overestimated, especially considering how the rest of the sources describes it as an integral element of the urban fabric, whose civic symbolism was very much able to reach peripheral areas of the Christendom such as Britain.

Skirting the Palatine Hill on the Right

While leaving the Forum, the pilgrims could see the Palatine Hill and its vast public complexes, collectively referred within the *Itinerarium* with the toponym *Palatinus*. On the hill the huge Imperial Palace was located, still subject to public care at the end of the 7th century.⁶⁰ The most visible Palatine temple from the Forum was the sanctuary originally known as *Heliogabalium*, already in the 3rd century rededicated to Jupiter *Victor*. At least from the 6th century the sanctuary was probably housing a residential area for public officials and an administrative district. A sector of the vast courtyard of the temple was in fact converted into a burial site, while the living quarters were mainly concentrated in the Eastern gallery of the portico.⁶¹ Hence, to the citizens and visitors siding the hill, the complex appeared as a massive pre-Christian temple, in topographical correlation with the Imperial Palace and consequently employed by the public administration. Nevertheless, the *Heliogabalium* too was in some regard capable to convey contrasting messages, as suggested by the hagiography of Saint Sebastian, where the great staircase leading to the sanctuary, the *Gradus Heliogabali*, is re-imagined as the stage where the confrontation between the martyr and Emperor Diocletian reaches its dramatic climax.⁶² The same toponym with which the area is identified within the text denotes the continued perception of the site as still linked to the god El-Gabal, even though centuries had passed since its conversion to the cult of Jupiter.

At least during the 6th century some Palatine sanctuaries were also able to exert a religious appeal in times of crisis, and during the same Gothic siege when the doors of the temple of Janus were forced some senators consulted the Sibylline Books (τῶν τινες πατρικίων τὰ Σιβύλλης λόγια προὔφερον), traditionally preserved within the Temple of Apollo Palatinus.⁶³ What is more, for the last time at the very

⁵⁸ Beda, *Collectio* 1, III.

⁵⁹ *Gesta Abdonis et Senis* (Mombritius I 6r).

⁶⁰ See Augenti 1996; Wulf-Rheidt 2015.

⁶¹ Villedieu 2004; Johnson 2012.

⁶² *Passio S. Sebastiani* (Jan II, 642).

⁶³ Procopius, *Bellum Gothicum* I, 24.

end of the 5th century, in a famous letter of Pope Gelasius addressed to the senator Andromachus, the race of the *luperci* is attested as still interesting the Palatine and the Roman Forum, probably having its pivotal point in the Lupercal situated on the opposite side of the hill, hence not visible to the pilgrims on the route n. 8.⁶⁴ The celebration of the *Lupercalia*, perceived as sacrilegious and unacceptable by the Pope, is described as a living phenomenon still preformed in Classical fashion (*non longe impari cultu et devotione ea ducitis celebranda, quam profanitatis vestrae celebravere maiores*). Nevertheless, the festival is presented as sponsored by prominent Christian senators, chiefly by Andromachus himself, that the Pope accuses of exploiting the race for propaganda purposes (*quod vobis singulariter prodesse putatis*). Therefore, the Pope’s letter seems to show how, at least at the turn of the 6th century, the *Lupercalia* were still perceived as bearing strong positive social values by the urban elites (*venerandum vobis cultum, et salutiferum quem putatis*), and there is no evidence pointing at a precise date of dismissal.⁶⁵ Moreover, that this festival could have in some circumstances survived within a Christian environment is attested by its introduction in Constantinople, where it endured well into the Middle Ages.⁶⁶ Therefore, taking also into consideration the attested practice of other pre-Christian festivities within the city of Rome (the *Kalendae* of the 742/743), the continuation of the *Lupercalia* for at least part of the Early Middle Ages cannot be entirely ruled out, meaning that some pilgrims on their route, at least during the 6th century, could have possibly witnessed the *luperci* racing around the hill.

Crossing the Esquiline and Caelian Hill, Reaching the Lateran

While leaving the Colosseum behind, on their right the pilgrims could have spotted the last major temple on their route, the massive sanctuary of *Divus Claudius*, whose sacred enclosure was still standing in the 13th century.⁶⁷ Indeed, in accordance of its nature of aristocratic residential neighborhood, until the 5th century the area hosted mainly private sanctuaries, as *mithraea*, or religious institutions sponsored by senatorial dynasties, such as the *Basilica Hilariana*, housing the school of the priestly college of the *Magna Mater*.⁶⁸ The majority of these structures were demolished or obliterated before the end of the 5th century, as part of a process of

⁶⁴ On contrasting hypotheses regarding the location of the Lupercal: Carandini/Bruno 2008; Vuković 2017.

⁶⁵ Gelasius, *Epistulae, Adversus Andromachum, Collectio Avellana*, 100. See: McLynn 2008, 161–175.

⁶⁶ North/McLynn 2008; Graf 2015.

⁶⁷ A mention in a bull of Honorius III (1217).

⁶⁸ On the dismissal of *mithraea* in Rome: Schuddeboom 2016. On the *Basilica Hilariana*: Pavolini 2013.

intense Christianization of the area, probably making it the city sector where the rooting of the Monotheistic religion appeared as more evident.

Indeed, among the main sites of the area, to be counted were the Episcopal Palace (*Patriarchium Lateranense*, reported on the left side of the itinerary) and the Lateran Basilica (*Sci. Iohannis in Lateranis*, on the right side), representing the religious and, from the 8th century, political core of the city, both encountered by the pilgrims before crossing Porta Asinaria and exiting the city walls. The open space of such complex, the *Campus Lateranensis*, was accordingly a main gathering place for pilgrims, with service buildings for visitors being inaugurated at least from the 8th century. This was a hugely symbolic space, where the travellers finally reached the institutional centre of the entire Western Christendom. Therefore, during the 11th/12th century it is attested how the walking visitors would have experienced an impressive collection of Classical pieces of art, there assembled as a visual manifestation of Papal authority. The beginning of the transfer of antiquities within the *Campus* has been attributed to the pontificate of Hadrian I, thus suggesting how, at the time of the writing of the *Itinerarium*, the space was already conceived to highlight the civic power of the Popes through the exhibition of images connected to the religious past of the city.⁶⁹ Indeed, the collection included some pieces evoking the Polytheistic systems, such as a she-wolf. Also, from the *Campus* come three large fragments of a colossal bronze statue (head, hand, globe), now preserved in the Capitoline Museum, for which an identification with the Colossus of Helios has been suggested.⁷⁰ If such identification is correct, a strong civic perception of the statue of Helios until the High Middle Ages could be inferred, so relevant to inspire its transfer to the new centre of power on the Lateran in an undefined moment (after the 982, if the last dubious mention of the Colossus besides the Colosseum is accepted, or even more than a century before, if the planning of the exposition in its entirety is to be attributed to Hadrian I). In any case, from the late 8th century foreign visitors at last ended their journey in front of the major centre of Christian authority, where they were intended as the ultimate recipients of the messages behind the assembling of the Classical collection, amassed to manifest the symbolic triumph of Christianity over Rome through the sculptural representations of its pre-Christian antiquity.

⁶⁹ About the collection: Nardella 2001. On the Lateran's role in the pilgrim's route: Luchterhandt 2017.

⁷⁰ Ensoli 2000b. The three fragments are recorded in: Magister Gregorius, *Narracio*, 6; Rucellai, *Zibaldone Quaresimale, Delle bellezze e Anticaglie di Roma*, cc 51–56 (VZ IV p. 408); Paulino da Venezia: *Biblioteca Marciana, ms. lat. Zan. 399* (1610), fol 98r; *Codex Vaticanus* 1960, fol. 270v.

Conclusions

The examination of the route n. 8 allows to delineate a very complex and mixed perception of a variety of elements connected to the Polytheistic religions. Unsurprisingly, from a general topographical perspective the presence of pre-Christian buildings escorted the pilgrims along the entire route, yet they would have met the majority of visual and sensory stimuli in the city centre, between the *Campus Martius*, the Capitoline Hill, the Fora and the Palatine. Regarding the reception of the elements under consideration, the data seem to suggest that temples and sculptures were still perceived as carriers of important messages, and six toponyms connected to religious locations are listed within the path n. 8 (*Theatrum Pompei*, *Rotunda*, *Cypressus*, *Minervium*, *Capitolium*, *Umbilicum Romae*). Indeed, until the central decades of the 8th century Imperial officials remained in charge of the administration of Rome’s public buildings, temples included. In this regard, crucial will appear the modalities of reuse of public temples carried out by the Imperial administration or with its explicit authorisation, and accordingly both citizens and visitors would have familiarized with several sanctuaries hosting public offices, such as the *Iseum Campense*, the Temple of Vesta and the *Heliogabalium*.⁷¹

Yet, it appears that a huge disparity of possible approaches to the pre-Christian elements was possible, and their perception could have greatly varied based on the social extraction, education and religious knowledge of the single individuals. Hence, several clues seem to suggest how, during the 6th century, members of the upper classes were still familiar with the exact religious nature of pre-Christian religious artefacts and worship buildings. This could for instance be inferred by senator Andromachus’ revival of the traditional rituality of the *Lupercalia* as a propaganda gesture to boast his status within the city ruling *milieu*, as well as by the consultation of the Sibylline Books by some senators during the Gothic war, evidently in search for help or comfort in a well-established pre-Christian practice during a time of extreme political turmoil. What is more, the opening of the Temple of Janus during Rome’s Gothic siege is also expressly interpreted by Procopius as a conscious reverting to an ancient custom, meaning the building’s doors were opened by citizens fully aware of the god’s traditional role.⁷²

Hence, the aforementioned cases seem to indicate that at least the upper segments of Rome’s population still retained the ability to identify specific Polytheistic deities, even in some cases perceiving their *simulacra* or sacred places as connected to existing benevolent superhuman beings. These data seem to be well contextualized within the cultural environment of Late Antiquity, when a Classical educational and cultural

71 On Rome’s Byzantine administration: Brown 1984; Cosentino 2008; Herrin 2020. On the Early Medieval Imperial administration: Haldon 1990; Brandes 2002.

72 On Procopius’s involvement in the episode: Kaldellis 2004, 165–166.

imprint was undoubtedly still strong among members of the aristocracy and government elites.

No direct participation in such activities on part of public officials or aristocrats is instead registered starting from the late 6th century, as a result of the slow and gradual process of transformation of the Roman ruling classes, evidenced by the disappearance of the Senate in the first decades of the 7th century.⁷³ The evolution undergone by the *Urbs* and its society in the course of this period seems in fact to denote a slow, gradual and yet incomplete decline of the understanding of the original nature of the cults and the public role of specific temples, while at the same time fostering a growing reinterpretation of some distinct elements according to new cultural trends. The pre-Christian civic perception appears thus challenged by the spread of Late Antique and Early Medieval legends set within specific urban areas, leading several of the contexts along the path n. 8 to carry contrasting messages, more and more departing from the original ones. A prime example of this tendency is the Capitoline Hill itself, reimagined both as a quintessential residence for “Pagan” demons, like in the *Silvesterlegende*, and as a city wonder embodying the glory of Rome, like in the tales of the *salvatio Romae* and the Tiburtine Sibyl.

Yet, the still strong awareness, at least among the city elites, of specific temples as connected with Rome’s identity could possibly be read as a motivation behind the two registered activities on Roman temples authorized by the Emperor in the first half of the 7th century, the conversion of the Pantheon and the stripping of the bronze tiles from the Temple of Venus and Rome. The decision to dedicate the *Rotunda* to all the martyrs appears in fact as an explicit reference to the building being previously dedicated to all the gods, thus hinting a conscious inheritance of its symbolic and cultural identity, while the selection of the *Templum Romae* as the source for the roof tiles of a Basilica of prime importance as St. Peter could have been inspired by the connection of the sanctuary to the very concept of the *Urbs* itself.

Indeed, the rooting of certain aspects of the traditional Roman culture in the collective mentality could have been so deep to ensure the survival across the city of pre-Christian practices between the 7th and the 8th centuries, as for the lingering of the healing character in the area of the *Lacus Juturnae* / St. Maria Antiqua, or the celebrations of the *Kalendae* around St. Peter reported by Boniface. In particular, the identification of the nature of such festivities during the Early Middle Ages is controversial, and while during the 6th century they could still be partially regarded as manifestations of actual Mediterranean cults, at the time of Boniface’s letter they

73 On the crisis of the senatorial aristocracy: Haldon 2004. For a survey on the evolution of the upper classes in Rome: Noble 2003.

probably survived as heterodox practices by then largely absorbed within the Christian popular religion, despite being perceived by the upper classes as connected to the Early Medieval concept of Paganism.⁷⁴

In this regard, a perceptive difference could have possibly occurred between the mindsets of the inhabitants of Rome, grown up within a urban landscape inherited from their ancestors, seen as bearing positive civic values, and foreign pilgrims, alien to many civil and social symbolisms specific to the city. A very large influx of pilgrims belonged in fact to Germanic *nationes*, and mainly entered the Roman cultural orbit during Late Antiquity or even the Early Middle Ages. Hence, such people possessed distinctive religious and cultural backgrounds, and didn't share the exact same religious pre-Christian traditions of the citizens of Rome, thus shaping their views on Rome's symbolic position within the Classical world order thanks to the contact with a predominantly Christianized Imperial apparatus. Consequently, such people probably lacked the ability to formulate a comprehensive understanding of the entirety of the original distinct religious and civic associations with Mediterranean and local cults within Rome's urban fabric, and largely embraced the interpretations of specific contexts as they were conveyed by Christian propaganda programs and hagiographical texts.

This is for instance apparent by the reception of Rome's specific elements by the Angle-Saxon high culture, a prime example of which being again the Capitoline Hill. The motive of the *Capitolium* as site of monstrous incarnations of Paganism is in fact preserved in the retelling of the dragon's episode of the *Silvesterlegende* with the popular British St. Gildas as its new protagonist, while a more positive view is reflected by the introduction of the tale of the Tiburtine Sibyl for a Latin speaking audience by the Syrian archbishop of Canterbury Theodore and by the narration of the myth of the *salvatio Romae* by the English monk Bede. The latter's works appears indeed to insist on the civic character of Rome's Classical landmarks, as evident by the linking of the Colossus' preservation with the safety of the Christian world.

What is more, it has been observed how some of the Classical religious urban elements of Rome, thanks to their Christian re-contextualization, could have influenced architectural developments in the pilgrims' origin places. In this regard, of particular interest would prove the Pantheon, that after its conversion to the Marian cult could have inspired the erection of circular churches dedicated to the Virgin across Europe: such dependence has been for instance noticed for a round Marian church realized in Hexham by the Northumbrian bishop Wilfrid at the end of the 7th century, after his return from the Roman pilgrimage.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ See Hijmans 2003; Mastrocinque 2004; Kaldellis 2007; Kahlos 2019, 195–213. A specific focus on the *Kalendae*: Graf 2015; Grig 2016; Latham 2022. For the survival of pre-Christian rituals in Italy see also Binazzi 2012.

⁷⁵ Thunø 2015, 238.

In conclusion, thanks to their background, pilgrims walking Rome's streets would have ultimately interpreted the city fabric around them through cultural lenses reflecting Classical structures and places as ancient *mirabilia*, whose religious appeal would have appeared as neutralized or reused to embody new Early Medieval symbolisms, thus also helping Rome's ecclesiastical classes to present the *Urbs* still as the head of the civilized world.

In this regard, the *Via Papalis*, retraced in Einsiedeln's itinerary n. 8 and unfolding across the core areas of the city, indubitably emerged as a privileged path to connect the pivotal points represented by St. Peter and the Lateran, by unveiling Rome's landscape in all its might. Starting from the Vatican Basilica the route permitted the pilgrims entering the Aurelian Walls to cross the *Campus Martius*, at the same time one of the richest sectors in terms of monumental heritage and one of the most densely inhabited areas of the Early Medieval city. The urban relevance of the *Campus* in Rome's ritual life was in fact further corroborated by its prominent involvement in the Major Litany (both of whose date and pathway overlapped those of the pre-Christian festival of the *Robigalia*), with the *Rotunda* of St. Mary *ad martyres* itself made into one of the main *stationes* along the Papal procession.⁷⁶

From there, after leaving the area the pilgrims would have continued on a path still surrounded by Rome's monumental heritage, firstly passing by the Capitoline Hill and the Imperial Fora, and then crossing the hearth of the Classical city, the Roman Forum. All along the path, the pilgrims would have stumbled upon several temples or ancient buildings still in use by ecclesiastical or administrative classes, either in cases they were converted into Christian churches or employed as public offices, thus further affirming their integration within the Early Medieval urban fabric and society.

Lastly, at the end of their journey, the pilgrims would have reached the Lateran Palace and Basilica, hence climaxing their "triumphal" path celebrating the glory of Christian Rome in front of the Papal seat.

Nonetheless, some sources are able to show the cracks within this narrative, and indeed pilgrims walking through the city could have met rituals and festivities alien to their original culture, by them consequently interpreted as genuine manifestation of Polytheistic faiths. Hence, at least during the 6th century, within the Roman Forum they could have possibly observed the race of the *luperci* or interacted with people ready to revert to Pre-Christian gods for help, while still during the 8th century they would have witnessed the celebration of the *Kalendae* under the shadow of St. Peter's Basilica. Speaking of such festivities, in his letter Boniface went so far to declare they could have affected the still fragile Christian faith of newly converted pilgrims, prompting both him and Pope Zacharias to urge new measures to contrast heterodox practices within the city fabric. Yet, the rooting of

76 Dyer 2007, 113–137.

“prohibited” rituals within the urban landscape was such that, despite all the efforts, in the mid-8th century they were still an integral part of the public life even within the most central city sectors and the Vatican area itself, hence successfully challenging the topographical narrative of the period that insisted on a fully orthodox urban city centre.

Ultimately, these sources are thus of extreme importance in the understanding of the rituality within Rome’s metropolitan space, hinting at a rift between how it was presented by contemporary accounts and the actual urban experience of inhabitants and visitors alike. To emerge is a picture of Rome’s city environment as a wondrous centre of the Christian world, under the firm spiritual authority of its clergy, where nonetheless absolute control of the urban fabric was still far from possible, sometimes to the astonishment of the arriving pilgrims.

Abbreviations

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