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Emulation or Conservation?

Reconstructing discourses on art and history in postclassical/early medieval Rome

700-850

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The following reflections offer thematic and methodological additions and introductions to Wednesday's lecture, which will be devoted more specifically to some case studies. They reflect selected aspects of my project and are intended to facilitate in-depth discussion.

The „dark side“ of a Renaissance: conflicts about material heritage as source for the norms and values of a premodern society

The projected monograph aims to reconstruct a long-ignored discourse on architecture, art and history in Papal Rome between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages (ca. 680–830). Its central question is: was the well-known revival of Roman art of the 8th and 9th centuries parallel to the Carolingian Renaissance primarily an expression of a new papal claim to power, a monarchical papacy on the way to a real Papal State (KRAUTHEIMER 1980; BAUER 2005; GOODSON 2010; MCKITTERICK 2016; OSBORNE 2021, 2023)? Or was it the complex and conflict-ridden product of a post-antique urban society in which different groups were involved alongside the church – groups with their own interests, values, and perceptions of their past (see WEST-HARLING 2020)? And was the ecclesiastical culture that developed at that time the result of tightly administered top-down politics or of a complex negotiation process in which the urban society of Rome and the Frankish Kings also played an important role?

The leading hypothesis of this work is based on the second view. It begins with the observation that there were many ruptures and conflicts in this revival of church-material culture that, until today, have not yet been satisfactorily explained: popes were criticized for their neglect of urban infrastructure or for privileging their own foundations to the disadvantage of other churches. The ambitious papal palace of Pope Leo III (795–816), symbol of monarchical power, was given up and renamed “patriarchium” by his successors, possibly because of moral reservations about papal luxury. Other popes like Pope Paschal I relocated their new church foundations to avoid conflicts with those parts

of society, whose memories were closely tied to previous church buildings (LUCHTERHANDT 2017).

All these hidden conflicts, ruptures, reactions, and turnarounds for the art historian are an invitation to take post-antique papal art seriously beyond disciplinary boundaries as a "total social phenomenon" (Mauss 1923/24): as a public matter that in societies with limited resources encompassed almost all areas of everyday life and without which Roman papacy would have been neither imaginable nor visible. In 796, the longtime director of the *papal vestiarium* Pope Leo III was elected to the highest office in the Roman church. This unusual election demonstrates the great importance that the urban heritage of Rome and its church buildings had gained in the time before. This was not least because of the enormous economic resources that were invested in the conservation and maintenance of Rome's monumental heritage, be it Christian or Antique.

The ambivalence of „productive destruction“ (Schumpeter)

The investigation starts from the premise that most of these conflicts, which have to be examined in this context, were rooted in the particular conditions of Rome as an old city full of memories, where history always had a material dimension since antiquity: wherever a new church building had to be erected, especially in places that were associated with local traditions and lore, it could only be done by destroying a place of local tradition and by facing opposition from social groups, whose memories, identity, and social visibility were tied to a particular site or monument. In the period between ca. 730 and 800 the popes of Rome and their staff renovated several dozens of churches in their city, by restoring and embellishing them in hundreds campaigns, including mosaics, paintings, marble furnishings, *opus sectile* pavements, or coffered ceilings. However, one fact is surprising: Leo III (796-816) was the first Roman pope in 400 years to replace an old titular church of the city by a complete new building, which was erected on the ruins of the old *titulus gaii/susannae*.

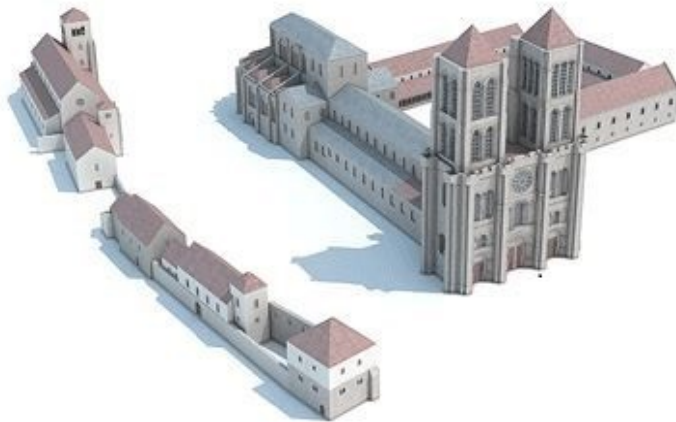
The outcome of this breach of taboo—the precedence of the new over the ancient principle of *instauratio*—was highly ambivalent: while the new basilica revived the artistic techniques of the late antique basilicas of Rome in unknown perfection (so that Krautheimer initially misidentified it as a 4th-century basilica), it simultaneously destroyed a popular pilgrimage site that was already mentioned in the Passions of the Saints and old liturgical books. The programmatic return to a great and idealized epoch of papal evergetism was paid for with the material destruction of an almost 400-year-old venerable place of worship. Nevertheless, S. Susanna inaugurated a new wave of church buildings in Rome, which since Richard Krautheimer's Warburgian interpretation of this



phenomenon has often been discussed as medieval "renaissance" or "renewal"—terms, however, which do not appear in contemporary sources.

Whereas previous research has focused on the innovative aspect of this period, on patrons, programmatic designs, and “intended meanings”, the present study attempts to reverse and broaden this picture, focusing more on the decision to destroy and its various implications by asking for its motivations, consequences, and its public perception. Drawing on Alois Schumpeter's economic theory of "productive destruction" (following Nietzsche's reflections on the destructive side of everything creative) as a characteristic of innovation-oriented societies, my considerations

focuses on the inevitably conflictual character of such a process and sees it as an opportunity for a new „epistemology of crisis“: Because the discussion about and the decision on such procedures must have touched on fundamental sensitivities among contemporaries: their personal memory of the site, of donations made there, burials of relatives, chapels, images, of material traces of their family memory etc.



Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis, 12th/13th c.

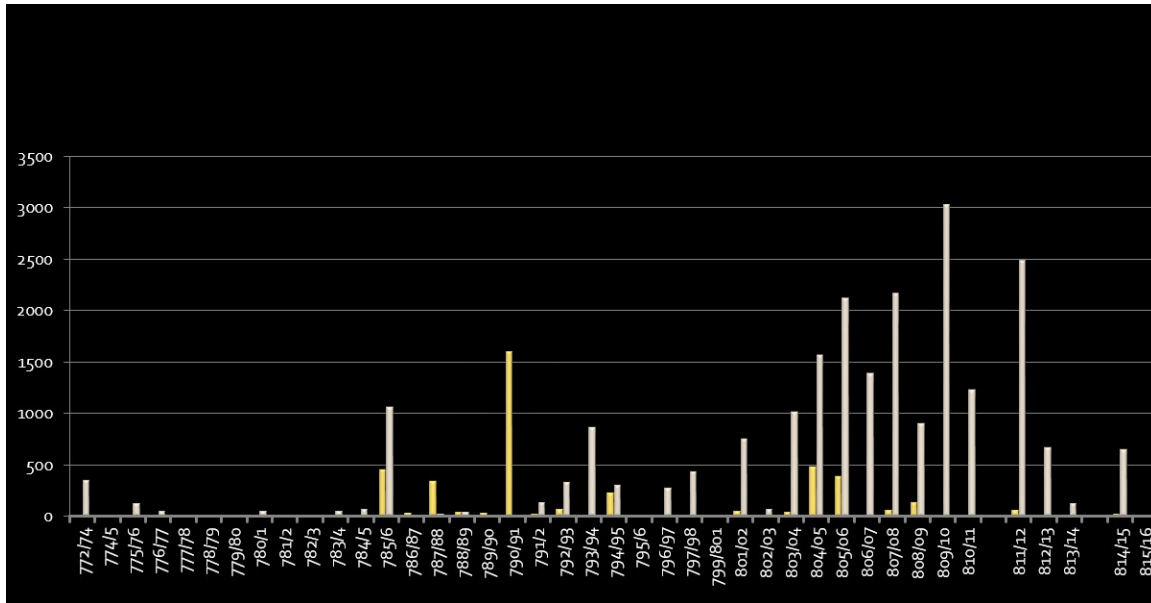
These decisions between old and new may not always have been as clear cut as the history of architecture (which is mostly a history of winners) tells us: why was Abbot Suger's ultra-modern choir building (1140-44) for the abbey church of St. Denis only continued after a century? Was it simply a lack of money? Or was there also opposition to the destruction of the old and venerable nave, whose tombs and monuments had long since become a museum of Merovingian, Carolingian, and Capetian history? Which interests and perspectives probably clashed here between the ambitious abbot and his perhaps more conservative monks? Can different actors, narratives, and forms of remembrance be identified, and what can we learn about their respective values? The goal of such questions is to develop a non-holistic, pluralistic concept of pre-modern cultures that also considers conflicts, different values, anomalies, and alternatives, which encourages counterfactual thinking. A perspective that pays attention not only to meanings, but also to their contestation, rejection, or denial.

In Rome, the papal officials, who in their *vestiarium* organised the revival of church-building around 800, could not escape this conflict of renewal and loss and the identity debates associated with it; this is a phenomenon we also know from contemporary building projects (esp. the Berlin Castle). They were not only the first to systematically renovate late antique church buildings and use them as a model for modern ones. They were also the first to demolish traditional monuments and sites that had been mentioned as early as in the late antique acts of the saints and that were closely linked to the memory of various local elites (DE BLAAUW 2010). It is no coincidence that the most ambitious builders among the popes of the early Middle Ages also found the greatest resistance from the Roman nobility: Leo III (795–816), Paschal I (817–824), and Sergius II (844–847). This fact alone is an indication of the polarizing character of their building policy, which has long been overlooked. In a city where conflicts between leading social and political groups were notorious and dominated many papal elections, a building policy that defined Rome's religious and historical identity and consumed enormous sums of money was likely to become a political issue.

A series of seldom noticed critical statements in the *Liber Pontificalis* provide clear indications that Rome's ruling elites with their traditional political parties, had very different views on what seemed to be a tradition worth preserving regarding the limits of papal zeal for reform and the proper degree of respect for Rome's material heritage. These still served as an argument in favor of Rome's orthodox tradition in the iconoclasm debate (DELL'ACQUA 2020). In the papal letters on this debate, images, catacombs, and ecclesiastical buildings always appear in close connection with the monumental heritage. Their destruction would have affected not only the churches, but also the image-rich catacombs and thus large parts of Roman church history, as well as the historical foundations of the most important pilgrim site after Jerusalem.

resources, donation rituals, professionalization of the *cura ecclesiarum*, event related decoration of churches for periodic festivals or political occasions, etc.). The documentary basis is a database on early medieval art in the Mediterranean region built up over 20 years, whose collected material addresses questions of trade and logistics to the prices of objects and the wages of workers to the phenomenon of slavery in the service of the papacy.

Much attention is paid to the development and reappearance of a highly differentiated artistic vocabulary in the Liber Pontificalis of the late 8th century (Tab. 1). This not only points to the rapid development of a very productive and highly developed art industry that imitated ancient models, it also indicates that the older *vitae* of the Liber Pontificalis were used by the papal experts of the time as a historical source for the artistic techniques of late antiquity and as a source for the material history of Rome's great ancient basilicas. In some cases, even lost objects that were only known from the Liber Pontificalis were reconstructed based on this source. Many technical art terms in the Liber Pontificalis suggest that the papal art experts in the Lateran also collected technical art literature on a larger scale, as is preserved, for example, in the famous treatise on mosaic techniques in Codex Lucca 490 (Compositiones Variae, Lucca Ms. 490), which was copied around 800, perhaps from a Roman manuscript.

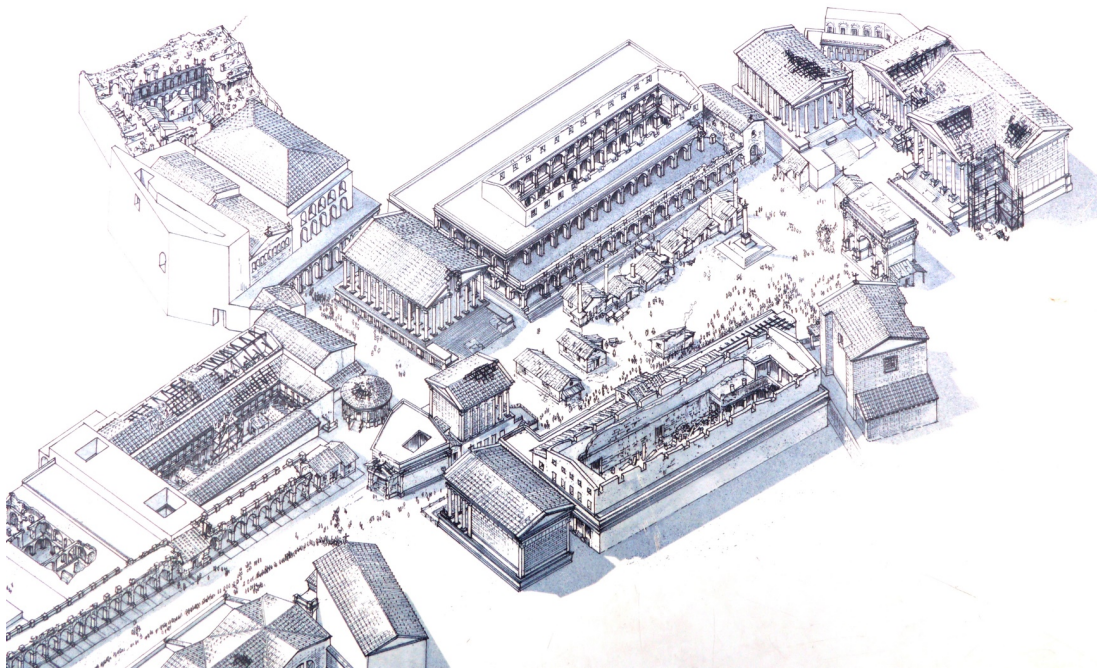


Tab 2: Papal donations of Hadrian I and Leo III In gold and silver (772-816)

The marked shift from gold to silver in papal endowments in the time of Leo III (796/816) indicates a shift in papal income from the gold-based currency of the Mediterranean (solidus) to the silver-based currency of Northern and Western Europe (denarius). It is an indication that the conspicuous wealth of the Roman churches under this pope was most probably co-financed by Charlemagne.

Post antique or early medieval Rome? Macrohistorical considerations

A study of Rome between antiquity and the Middle Ages should also be aware of the distortions caused by the language that determines our historical semantics. Terms not only organize the historical material, they also often anticipate its interpretation, as our traditional Eurocentric macro-model of "antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modernity" shows (JUSSEN 2023). Old biological semantics such as decline and renewal, "life and afterlife" (of antiquity) have now been replaced by new, more pluralistic models of societies that constantly reorganize and reassess their cultural resources. Alternative macrohistorical periodization models include Peter Brown's proposal of a "Long Late Antiquity" from 150 to 750 as the liturgical and dogmatic founding phase of Christianity, rabbinic Judaism, and early Islam. Garth Fowden's proposal of a "First Millennium" as a Eurasian culture from Spain to Iran and from Augustus to Avicenna is also under discussion.



Forum Romanum in the Seventh century, (Rec. SANTA MARIA ANTIQUA 2016)

For Rome, the abandonment of the "end of classical/pagan antiquity" as a guiding paradigm has opened the way to alternative interpretations of historical continuities and genealogies: medieval archaeology of the 1990s and more recent historical research have demonstrated a surprisingly long presence of ancient urban structures well into the Middle Ages: many forums, temples, and public buildings in the city center were maintained by imperial officials until at least the end of the Byzantine period (751), albeit with the limited resources of a state whose budget was primarily needed to defend the



Umayyad brazier, ca. 750, Amman, Citadel (copy in the MET, New York)

empire against the Arabs (Meneghini 2007, 2009). Seen in this light, Rome's notorious poverty in the 7th/8th centuries was not a matter of fate, but the consequence of global shifts of resources to those regions of the East that were essential for the survival of the empire.

Of the 400 temples known from antique sources only one—the Pantheon—had been Christianized before the 8th c., while private cult sites for Mithras or Serapis were destroyed on a much larger scale. Contrary to the medieval legend of Gregory as “destroyer of pagan idols”, it was not the “pagan/Christian” axis that was decisive for the preservation of antique monuments, but the distinction between „public“ and „private“ (LUCIANI 2021). Whatever belonged to the imperial *domus sacra* was considered part of the cultural heritage and protected by the imperial officers, regardless of whether it was Christian or pagan. Even under Charlemagne, one must imagine Rome as a largely antique city, with temples, antique churches, and a Forum with original pavement and numerous statue bases. For the Frankish King, antique „Romaness“ would have been a daily experience, not a historical reminiscence. Something similar can be said of 8th-century Byzantium or Umayyad Damascus, whose Muslim elites still lived in classical cities with *cardi* and public baths and enjoyed antique pagan art.

The parallel study of the preservation of ancient and Christian monuments in Rome thus provides us with fundamental insights into cultural values and norms that we cannot obtain from a history of art that is solely oriented toward progress and innovation. For a resident of Rome around 800, concepts such as *restitutio*, *instauratio*, *restauratio*, etc. embodied fundamental values whose significance extended far beyond the spheres of art, law, and society into the realms of politics, the state, and historical thought. Their afterlife in the post-antique societies of Europe and their transformation into a re-evaluation of innovations in art deserve further research. They represented elementary social guiding values that were just as important for the stability of a culture and society as the exploration of innovations without which the developmental dynamics of a culture cannot be adequately understood.

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