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INTRODUCTION

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Astonishing for its scale and magnificence as for its preservation, rich in history and meanings, the Pantheon exerts a perpetual fascination. Written accounts, visual representations, and architectural progeny from late antiquity to our day combine to create a presence at once unique and universal in the Western architectural tradition. The Venerable Bede declared that whoever leaves Rome without seeing the Pantheon leaves Rome a fool, and this dictum seems no less valid for our time than when it was first uttered, according to legend, in the eighth century. Visitors may marvel at its unexpected majesty even as they experience a sense of déjà vu, having already encountered its resonant reflection in buildings from other epochs on different continents. Indeed, the Pantheon straddles the history of Western architecture like a colossus, its influence perhaps more pervasive than for any other single building in history (Fig. 1.1, Plate I).¹

This influence has been generous and elastic, inspiring not only copies but creative reinterpretations like Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, St. Peter's in Rome, the Capitol in Washington, and the Parliament of Bangladesh. No less diverse

¹ The main scholarly monograph on the Pantheon is Kjeld De Fine Licht's *The Rotunda in Rome: A Study of Hadrian's Pantheon*, Copenhagen 1968, recently joined by Gene Waddell, *Creating the Pantheon: Design, Materials, and Construction*, Rome 2008. For a brief but excellent introduction, see William L. MacDonald, *The Pantheon: Design, Meaning, and Progeny*, London 1976 (repr. 1981, 2002). See also Roberto Vighi, *The Pantheon*, Rome 1964, and F. Lucchini, *Pantheon*, Rome 1996.

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I.I. View of Pantheon facade, piazza, and fountain. (The Bern Digital Pantheon Project, BERN BDPP0101)

are the associations that such projects exploit, which can be sacred or secular, political or religious. Simultaneously a symbol of cultural stability or revolutionary change, the Pantheon is a remarkably vigorous and mutable icon.²

The fame of the Pantheon is of course bound up with its imagery, and its imagery with its structure. It can be appreciated as much for its technical as for its aesthetic achievements, insofar as these aspects may be separately considered. In the fourth century BC, Ammianus Marcellinus likened the space embraced by the dome to a whole city district, so capacious was its visual effect (see Plate II). In the mid fifteenth century, John Capgrave thought that the dome must have been constructed over a vast mound of earth, as had been proposed for the Cathedral of Florence. In both instances, we are told, coins would have been embedded in that mound so as to ensure its removal by the greedy populace.³ A medieval tradition held the Pantheon to be a work of the devil – since it so clearly exceeded the reach of mortal capabilities, who else could have built it? From a Renaissance perspective more in tune with ancient ideals, Michelangelo arrived at the opposite conclusion: for him, the design was “angelic, not human” and thus divine. In truth, there is something about both pronouncements that makes us think of the Pantheon as if it were,

² On the progeny of the Pantheon, see MacDonald 1976, a topic which also recurs in the chapters in the second half of the present volume.

³ Francesco Paolo Fiore and Arnold Nesselrath, *La Roma di Leon Battista Alberti: umanisti, architetti e artisti alla scoperta dell'antico nella città del Quattrocento*, Milan, 2005, p. 191.

sui generis, a work of nature (even divine nature) like an alpine peak or chasm, appealing as much to those with romantic or religious sensibilities as to those favoring unemotional analysis.

The Pantheon is miraculous, too, in its state of preservation; as a totality it is the best preserved of any ancient Roman monument with a significant interior space. While it is tempting to explain its survival as a result of its Christian rededication, its compelling scale and aesthetic qualities were arguably the agents that attracted worshipful Christians in the first instance, not to mention antiquarians and architects, both dilettante and professional, throughout the ages. Thus, while countless Roman structures were pillaged for building materials with scant regard for their survival, the Pantheon enjoyed a degree of protection as much due to its intrinsic architectural values as to its ecclesiastical status.

Despite its unique stature, however, the Pantheon continues to pose enigmas in design and intention, and many of its basic historical and technical premises remain uncertain, debated, or simply unexplained. Unlike the Parthenon in Athens, San Vitale in Ravenna, Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, or St. Paul’s in London, there is relatively little to say that is absolutely certain and indisputable about the origins, chronology, and construction of the Pantheon. Even its very name and purpose are still subject to discussion; so too are formal and symbolic readings of the building.

The present volume thus addresses an enticing but daunting prospect as it seeks to make or consolidate progress over these questions, while setting out the current state of research on major aspects of the Pantheon’s fabric and its history for the benefit of a wider public. The dual focus is, accordingly, the physical structure of the monument and its reception down to the present day.

FIRST CONCERNS

The building known as the Pantheon is located in the neighborhood of Rome called the Campus Martius, or in modern Italian Campo Marzio. Literally the field of the war god Mars, the place where military exercises were once held, this district was progressively urbanized in the late Republic. By the end of the first century BC, various public structures serving religious cults and secular entertainments, including temples and altars, theaters, stadia, baths, and parks, were located here. Situated in the heart of today’s historic center in the most densely inhabited part of Rome in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Pantheon still dominates Piazza della Rotonda, whose irregular shape has been molded over the ages by the public and private forces that typically strain urban geometry. Running mostly north–south and east–west, the narrow streets leading to the piazza offer varied frontages dating from early

modern times, yet preserving all the while the basic ancient urban pattern, as is apparent when superimposed on a modern plan (see Plate III).⁴

The name “Pantheon” probably derives from the Greek *pantheon*, a term that conveyed different but related meanings, whether a temple of all the gods, a temple of the 12 Olympian gods, or a temple in which the image of a ruler stood in the company of such divinities. For although there are textual clues, it is tradition more than anything else that explains our use of this name for a structure whose original purpose remains uncertain. In truth, we cannot even be absolutely sure that the Pantheon was a temple, as most scholars believe on account of some temple-like characteristics, most notably the great pedimented front. It is also significant that several ancient sources do refer to the building as a temple, and yet a passage from the life of Hadrian cites buildings that he restored, and it includes the Pantheon with wording that could be read to mean that it was not in the category of temples.⁵ Roman temples typically had altars in front of them, but no altar has ever been discovered in front of the Pantheon. In 1986, Paul Godfrey and David Hemsoll offered a series of further observations that question the temple label. The great domed interior, for example, has similarities to the halls of imperial baths and palaces, while later buildings that imitated it were often mausolea.⁶ Few Greek or Roman temples are circular, and those are relatively small in size; moreover, Roman temples generally honor one divinity per room, explaining why temples of multiple deities (for example, the Capitoline temple) have multiple cellae. Given its shape and size, the Pantheon can therefore be seen, at the very least, to stand outside normal temple typologies.

Part of the problem of pinning down the function of the Pantheon is bound up with that of correctly interpreting the first building constructed on the same site. This was completed in either 27 or 25 BC by Marcus Agrippa, the great consul, general, and statesman who served under the first de facto emperor, Augustus, as we can deduce from the inscription below the pediment of the present monument: “M(arcus)·AGRIPPA·L(uci)·F(ilius)·CO(n)S(ul)·TERTIVM·FECIT” (Marcus Agrippa, son of Lucius, thrice consul) (Fig. 1.2).⁷

⁴ Allan Ceen, “The Urban Setting of the Pantheon,” in Gerd Grasshoff, Michael Heinzelmann, and Markus Wäfler, eds., *The Pantheon in Rome: Contributions to the Conference, Bern, November 9–12, 2006*, Bern 2009, pp. 127–138.

⁵ *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* (S.H.A.), *Hadrian*, 19.10. For this and other ancient sources see Licht 1968, pp. 180–184, and for recent defense of the Pantheon as a temple see Fabio Barry, “The Pediment of the Pantheon. Problems and Possibilities,” in *Scritti in onore di Lucos Cozza*, ed. Robert Coates-Stephens and Lavinia Cozza, London and Rome 2014, pp. 89–105, esp. 95–98.

⁶ Paul Godfrey and David Hemsoll, “The Pantheon: Temple or Rotunda?” in *Pagan Gods and Shrines of the Roman Empire*, ed. Martin Henig et al., Oxford 1986, pp. 195–209. However, the Asklepieion at Pergamon, a religious structure, does repeat the basic form of the Pantheon.

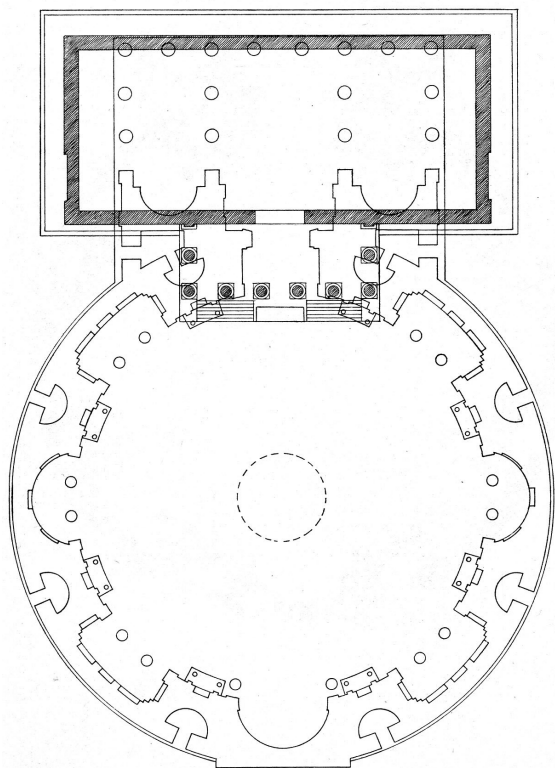
⁷ Eugenio La Rocca, s.v. “Pantheon (fase pre-Adriana),” in E. M. Steinby, ed., *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, Rome 1995–1999; vol. 5, 1999, pp. 280–283.



1.2. View of the Pantheon from the front, at high level. (The Bern Digital Pantheon Project, BDPP0114)

From the beginning of the twentieth century Agrippa’s Pantheon was generally thought to be a rectangular building that faced south rather than north as does the present structure (Fig. 1.3). More recent scholarship suggests instead that the Agrippan fabric was in fact oriented toward the north, and that its plan likewise combined a round space with a portico. This being the case, the Agrippan plan, discussed in Eugenio La Rocca’s chapter, would have forecast the outline of the present building. Although it would become one of the staples of architectural typology, at the time the combination of three distinct geometric elements was relatively novel: a circular rotunda, a rectangular portico, and a fabric that mediated between them (generally known in English as the transitional or intermediate block). It is possible that this scheme developed from precedents in the Greek East; in particular, La Rocca discusses the possibility that the Tychaion, a sanctuary in Alexandria named after Fortune, may have inspired Agrippa’s building. Knowledge of it may have come to Rome in the wake of the defeat of Anthony and Cleopatra by Augustus (then called Octavian) and his admiral Agrippa at the battle of Actium in 31 BC.⁸ This

⁸ For this connection, see Edmund Thomas, “From the Pantheon of the Gods to the Pantheon of Rome,” in Richard Wrigley and Matthew Cracke, eds., *Pantheons: Transformations of a Monumental Idea*, Aldershot, 2004, pp. 11–33. However, Thomas was of the opinion that the Tychaion stood in Antioch in Syria, whereas Alexandria is identified as the site by La



1.3. Plan of Agrippa's Pantheon facing south, orientation now in question. (Kähler, *Der römische Tempel* 1970, after Beltrami 1898)

notion would be consistent with the suggestion by Filippo Coarelli that the Pantheon was sited on the ancient palus Caprae, where according to one tradition Romulus, legendary founder of Rome, became the god Quirinus and ascended to the heavens. Agrippa would therefore have intended a programmatic connection between the founder of the city and a new Rome in the age of Augustus.⁹

This much can be said with certainty: with its north-facing orientation, Agrippa's Pantheon was aligned axially with the entrance to the Mausoleum of Augustus about half a mile away, a critical relationship that encourages

its interpretation as a dynastic sanctuary (see Plate XVI). This pairing accords with a passage by Dio Cassius, a consul of the third century, which states that Agrippa intended to honor the emperor by dedicating the building to him and erecting his statue inside, but Augustus disapproved. Agrippa therefore placed a statue of the deified Julius Caesar (Augustus's adoptive father) in the building along with those of the Olympian gods, including Venus and Mars, whereas statues of himself and Augustus were set up in the porch, presumably in the two great niches. As La Rocca's chapter argues, Dio's remark and other evidence show that the Pantheon had a special place in a sophisticated program celebrating Augustus and anticipating his future divinization. None of the statues has survived, nor do we have later notice of them. It is safe, though, to assume that Venus, Mars, and Julius Caesar were accompanied by other statues disposed in the exedras and aedicules of the rotunda. It is also

Rocca in his chapter here, as confirmed by Judith. S. McKenzie and Andres T. Reyes, "The Alexandrian Tycheion, a Pantheon?" *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 26, 2013, pp. 36–52.

⁹ Filippo Coarelli, *Il Campo Marzio: dalle origini alla fine della repubblica*, Rome, 1997, pp. 17–59.

likely that the statues of divinized members of the imperial family were added to the original deities from time to time, as the initial dynastic aspect of the program evolved into a celebration of the imperial institution and its divine authority.

Agrippa's Pantheon was damaged by fire in AD 80, restored to some unknown extent by the emperor Domitian (AD 51–96), struck by lightning and burned again in AD 110, before being rebuilt in its present form and completed around AD 125–128 during the reign of Hadrian (AD 117–138). This building was then refurbished in AD 202 under Septimius Severus (AD 193–211) and Caracalla (AD 211–217), as is indicated in an inscription on the facade carved in small letters under the Agrippan inscription.

Given the inscription's prominence, Agrippa's patronage of the present building was generally accepted until 1891–1892, when excavations revealed traces of an earlier building under the porch and a polychrome marble pavement under the rotunda. The impetus for these excavations came from the work of a young French architect, Georges Chédanne, a *pensionnaire* at the French Academy in Rome, who overturned prevailing assumptions by assigning the Pantheon to Hadrian's reign on the basis of brickstamps belonging to the structure.¹⁰ (Roman brickmakers often stamped one brick per batch with information that in effect yields a date range and sometimes the precise year of manufacture.) This drastic revision resituated the building firmly in the period of the Roman Empire during a time of great architectural innovation in the use of the very sort of concrete technology that the Pantheon exemplified. The inscription below the pediment was newly understood as a gesture of respect recalling the earlier Agrippan fabric, thus commemorating the original builder as Hadrian supposedly did in other rebuilding or restoration projects. Chédanne's conclusions met with a sympathetic echo at the time in the research of Heinrich Dressel, the first systematic scholar of brickstamp evidence, and they were confirmed in the major modern study of brickstamps by Herbert Bloch in 1948.¹¹

Lately, a new interpretation has emerged, questioning the data and proposing that many of the bricks from the Pantheon previously thought to be Hadrianic are in truth datable to the end of the reign of Trajan (98–117). Indeed, on the basis of a rigorous reappraisal of the facts, presented in this volume by Lise Hetland and already the subject of scholarly excitement, it now seems that just one of the 90 stamps from the monument catalogued by Bloch can be dated to Hadrian's reign with absolute confidence. Thus, we face some forceful

¹⁰ William C. Loerke, "Georges Chédanne and the Pantheon: A Beaux Arts Contribution to the History of Roman Architecture," *Modulus* 1982, pp. 40–55

¹¹ Heinrich Dressel, *Inscriptiones urbis Romae Latinae*, Berlin 1891; Herbert Bloch, *I bolli laterizi e la storia edilizia romana. Contributi all'archeologia e alla storia romana (1936–1938)*, Rome 1947. For further background, see Chapter Three in this volume.

evidence for attributing the planning and inception of the Pantheon earlier, to Trajan's reign, with only its completion owed to his successor Hadrian.

THE PORCH

As Rome declined and the city shrank from the boundaries of its ancient walls after the fourth century AD, the decay and collapse of buildings, the repeated flooding of the Tiber, and the demise of drainage systems produced an inexorable rise of the ground level. As a result, instead of standing proud of its surroundings as it once did, the Pantheon now lies somewhat depressed in the urban tissue. Excavations carried out in the Piazza della Rotonda in front of the porch in 1997–1998 revealed the ancient pavement level lying some two meters below the modern level.¹² The disparity between the ancient and modern pavement levels was, as we shall see, even more pronounced in the Renaissance, when visitors had to descend about seven steps from the surrounding ground level to reach the floor of the portico (Fig. 1.4).

The eight columns that define the facade of the Pantheon stand in front of eight more columns arranged so as to form two aisles and a central passage. The total of 16 columns, together with the four square antae that mediate between the portico and the transitional block, support an entablature and a tile-covered roof that is fronted by the imposing pediment.¹³ All stonework divides into two kinds: near-white marble from the quarries on Mount Pentelicon near Athens (the same marble that was used to make the Parthenon and its sculptures) and granite from Egypt. The granite came, in turn, from two quarries, the rose or pink granite from Aswan and the gray granite from the more remote quarry at Mons Claudianus, located between the Red Sea and the Nile. The eight columns of the front have shafts of the gray hue, while the other eight have shafts of pink, though due to patination and grime, the chromatic variation can seem marginal in some light conditions. In both cases, the shafts are each of a single piece (save for a few repairs), that is to say, monoliths weighing 50 tons. The pediment carried by the columns and the entablature with the inscriptions no doubt displayed a symbolically charged decoration in bronze, as implied by the presence of numerous fixing holes. Their pattern has led to the inspired yet unprovable reconstruction of a civic honor in the shape of a crown of oak leaves (*corona civica*), combined perhaps with an eagle alluding to the apotheosis of mortals to the immortal realm.¹⁴

¹² Paola Virgili and Paola Battistelli, "Indagini in piazza della Rotonda e sulla fronte del Pantheon," *Bollettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma* 100, 1999, pp. 137–154.

¹³ Licht 1968, pp. 35–58; Mark Wilson Jones, *Principles of Roman Architecture*, New Haven 2000, Chap. 10.

¹⁴ The idea came to Lucos Cozza during restoration work in 1954, as reported in Licht 1968, pp. 45–46.

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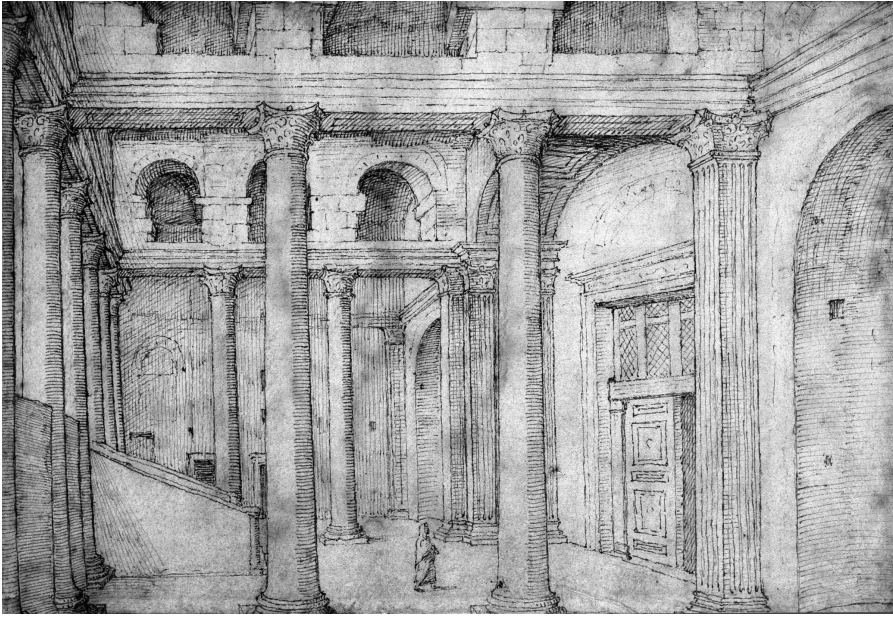
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INTRODUCTION

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I.4. View of portico interior; drawing by Maarten van Heemskerck, ca. 1532–1536. (Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Roman sketchbooks, vol. 2, fol. 2 recto)

The roof over the portico runs back to interrupt a secondary pediment applied to the surface of the transitional block, creating a compositional oddity that inspired the invention of a new kind of church facade in the sixteenth century. This unusual configuration, together with certain anomalous characteristics in different parts of the portico, especially the unhappy resolution of its meeting with the rotunda at the transitional block, represents a long-standing source of puzzlement. A controversial recent theory, advocated here on the basis of fresh corroborative evidence in Chapter Seven, proposes that the initial plan called for columns of even greater size, each weighing no less than 100 tons. For some unexplained reason (possibly a disaster such as a shipwreck), the columns originally intended were lost, and construction proceeded with the smaller-size columns we see today, a change that could help to explain the various anomalies of the portico as executed.¹⁵

Analysis of the design of the portico and its geometry and proportions is rendered more complex by this theory, but either way, it is possible to observe the harmonious numerical simplicity of proportions that is an enduring hallmark of monumental Roman architecture. As built, for example, the columns conform to the conventional rhythm known as *systyle*, in which the space between the columns is double their diameter, whereas the originally intended

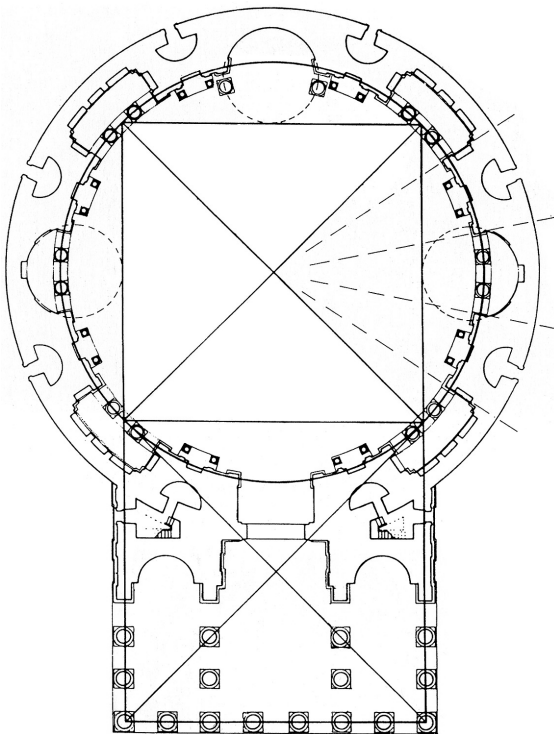
¹⁵ Paul Davies, David Hemsoll, and Mark Wilson Jones, “The Pantheon: Triumph of Rome or Triumph of Compromise?” *Art History* 10, 1987, pp. 133–153; Wilson Jones 2000, Chap. 10.

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1.5. Schematic geometry of the Pantheon. (Wilson Jones 2000, Fig. 9.11)

rhythm would have been *pyncostyle*, with the space between the columns being one and a half times their diameter. The overall scheme for the portico and transitional block meanwhile is one of archetypal simplicity, with a total height that matches its width (as measured between the centers of the corner columns) (Fig. 1.5).¹⁶

Such observations come from a scrutiny of surveyed measurements understood in the light of surviving ancient textual evidence, above all the treatise on architecture by the Roman architect and writer Vitruvius (ca. 80–70 BC—after

15 BC) that was completed not long after the building of Agrippa's Pantheon. We also have direct physical evidence for explaining how the actual design of the present building was carried out, how its stones were measured, and how they were cut. This evidence, which is another recent discovery, takes the form of a set of ancient Roman profiles for the portico etched full scale into the limestone paving that lies in front of the Mausoleum of Augustus (Fig. 1.6, a and b). As Lothar Haselberger has shown, parts of these templates match the features of the Pantheon pediment so closely that we can presume they were used in the process of shaping the stone and other materials unloaded from barges at this site, which had long hosted docking facilities for commodities that moved up and down the Tiber River.¹⁷ The templates include such details as the exact column spacing of the portico according to the executed dimensions and the configuration of the bracket-like modillions punctuating the cornice. The profiles seem to forecast the use of the Corinthian capitals, although, if truth be told, the size indicated is too big with respect to those of

¹⁶ Wilson Jones 2000, pp. 184 and 208.

¹⁷ Lothar Haselberger, "Ein Giebelriss der Vorhalle des Pantheon. Die Werkrisse vor dem Augustusmausoleum," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung* 101, 1994, pp. 279–308.