

I

INTRODUCTION



WILLIAM TRONZO

THE POINT OF THIS BOOK COULD NOT BE MADE in terms any more concrete than its illustrations: their greatest power lies, perhaps, in their capacity as a sequence to reveal at a glance the life of a building from beginning to end. As a sequence they make this life a reality on an almost cinematographic scale. It seems right. The story of St. Peter's in the Vatican is like a grand drama on the big screen: large and yet intricate and convoluted, full of brilliance and darkness, idealism and compromise. And almost immediately, too, our sequence of images reveals a salient dimension of the plot. Having been built, destroyed, and built again from the ground up, St. Peter's in the Vatican has had, not one but two lives, both richly detailed and full of incident. The building thus embraces one of the most resonant archetypes of our historical consciousness, the duality of ancient and modern, as it provides a case for exploring the multifariousness of relationships that could be enacted between them. It would be unfortunate, especially in these few introductory words, to deny this dimension to the building by making it adhere to the framework of a linear chronicle. I shall begin, therefore, not at the absolute chronological beginning, but in medias res, and with a moment of impending doom: Old St. Peter's on the verge of its destruction. Such a position will allow us to look both backward and forward, which is one of the eternal themes of this compelling narrative.

It was customary in the fifteenth century to come to Old St. Peter's from the *Urbs leonina*, now called the Borgo, a walled town whose tangle of streets was rich with the sights and sounds of activities in service of churchman and pilgrim. Only a few of the streets were straight enough and wide enough to permit a view of the church from a distance – the pitched roof of the nave rising above the facade of the old atrium (part of which was now covered by a luminous Benediction Loggia) and the flight of steps that led up to it. These steps were as much a physical form as a sign of the journey of the spirit: to enter the church one had to ascend.

Passing through the doors of the facade one would have reached the atrium. Perhaps it was the fountain of the bronze pinecone, the *Pigna*, that would have captured one's attention first. Its construction was deliberately magical, an amalgam of past (fragments from Antiquity) and future (imagery of paradise). Or perhaps it was the great medieval image of Christ Enthroned with the evangelists and their symbols and the twenty-four elders (drawn from the Book of Revelations) poised on the eastern facade of the nave. The image, following the line of the building, curved outward at the top as if, then and there, it were being unfurled. If one turned and faced east, one would also have seen the other great image in the atrium, the mosaic of the "Navicella" attributed to Giotto (it was probably based on the painter's design), which represented the scene of Peter's attempt to walk on water as narrated in the Gospel of Matthew. This image was apparently created in the early fourteenth century in order to assure visitors to the basilica that, whatever the vicissitudes of the moment, the church was in the good hands of Christ. These images – magniloquent, hyperbolic – were signs too of the rhetoric and power that cast its spell on this place.

Entering the narthex, one's attention might then have been drawn to the middle portal, the Porta Argentea, which had been embellished by Eugene IV (1431–47) with a set of great bronze doors designed by Antonio di Pietro Averlino (Filarete). Into the nave immediately thereafter one's sensory field would have changed. Was the light dimmed and diffused by the thick glass in the windows of the clerestory, or gathered up in the hundreds of lamps that hung beside the altars and shrines that lined the walls of the aisles and the colonnades? Was the air heavy with dampness, or was it the residue of incense from an inheritance of ceremonies now centuries-old? There is a report in the fifteenth century that the upper wall of the nave on the south side listed outward alarmingly, which may well have created the impression of a world gone slightly askew. It was certainly a world that was fading. Many of the large figures enacting stories

from the Old and New Testaments lining the walls had long since disappeared from the nave.

The compensation was in the dozens of altars, shrines, tombs, and other churchly furnishings that grew up beneath them. For the knowledge of these features we must credit, above all, the sixteenth-century canon who wrote an exhaustive description of the old basilica, Tiberio Alfarano. Drawings from the early seventeenth century that accompany an account by Giacomo Grimaldi, another canon of St. Peter's, of the part of the old basilica then still standing give some of the details. Many of these places were like the great church in miniature, with elaborate architecture, painting, and sculpture, but unique. Taken together they must have given the impression that St. Peter's was a vast gallery of the most precious artifacts of Christian devotion and memory – with one accent. The high altar, raised up above the floor of the nave and set beneath a majestic image of the enthroned Christ flanked by Peter and Paul, marked the place of the tomb of the founder of the Roman church, Peter. Nonetheless, it would have been difficult to know where to begin.

Most of these holy sites in St. Peter's, with the exception of the high altar (albeit in a different form), were the patrimony of the Middle Ages. The church as originally conceived in the fourth century would have been quite different. For one thing it would have seemed emptier. Fourth-century St. Peter's was above all an orchestrated ensemble of materials, forms, and colors, from the differently hued and patterned columns of the colonnades, to the intricately worked revetments of the walls, to the brilliant gold mosaic in the apse. No figures or figural decoration, however, except for rare passages on unusual forms such as the twisted columns that screened apse from transept and defined the functional-liturgical focus of the edifice. Vast, clean, and resplendent in painting, marble, and mosaic, the St. Peter's of the fourth century was a magnificent basilica in the Roman imperial mode. It betokened the entry of a mystery religion from Palestine into the public life of a great civilization that conceived of itself in terms of reason and magnificence. Only in hindsight could one see the early church as an almost empty vessel.

Medieval Christianity shattered the delicate metaphor of the fourth century by filling St. Peter's with the burgeoning material apparatus of the religion, the holy objects and bodies that were the focus of devotion and cult. It did so, moreover, haphazardly. The process was one of accumulation over centuries, and there is little indication in the final result as recorded by Tiberio Alfarano of a master plan for the church as a functioning environment. This apparatus, of course, enriched the church and added enormously to its prestige. At the same time, it diffused its singular focus on the altar in the apse and the tomb of Peter.

It was precisely this focus which the project of the Renaissance sought, implicitly or explicitly, to regain, and in fact finally did in the seventeenth century after the completion of the dome, with the decoration of Bramante's piers, and the addition of Bernini's baldachino and throne to altar and apse. This was a return, at least in spirit (the spirit of a unifying endeavor), to the edifice of the fourth century. But New St. Peter's did not turn its back on the medieval customs and uses that had inscribed themselves in the church.

In Bramante's famous parchment plan, Uffizi 1A, the walls of St. Peter's are filled with niches that could have served to accommodate the altars and relics, tombs and shrines moved there from the old basilica. Eventually this intention would be worked out in the very different arrangement now in place. But the idea that this mass of material had to be given order persisted. The variety, or perhaps more accurately, the cacophony that was the medieval church was rationalized and re-presented to the viewer as a totally coherent system, as the religion of Christianity itself was rationalized and re-presented to adherents by the Counter-Reform church. The linchpin in all of this was the installation of the four great relics of the church in the crossing around the tomb of Peter, as a wreath of victory, a crown, a frame. The composition was the brilliant exploitation of Bramante's architecture on the part of the seventeenth century, unforeseen and unintended in the original design, but in a sense its fulfillment in an age with an entirely different frame of reference. New St. Peter's had what the old basilica had come increasingly to lack: the order of hierarchy.

It is difficult to imagine treating any part of the long history of St. Peter's without invoking a manner of remembering. Memory is embodied above all in the saint for whom the church is named, and whose mortal remains are believed to be contained deep in the ground beneath it: the memory of an individual. There is the memory of response to this saint in the form of devotion and cult going back to the second century in the inscriptions on the red wall, and continuing up to the present day: the memory of a collectivity. There is the memory of the papacy, whose role as custodian gave and continues to give the site shape: the memory of an institution. There is the memory of the princes who envisioned and exploited the political implications of this place: the memory of the state. There is the memory of the architects, sculptors, and painters who gave St. Peter's form, and finally, and perhaps most important, there is the memory of the building itself and all that is contained within it: the memory of art. All of these memories are intertwined and interpenetrating, insupportable outside of the context in which they all came into being, so that to invoke one inevitably means calling to mind the others.

The subject of St. Peter's is thus a large one, and the following essays will treat it only in a partial way.

Although this book touches on almost every important phase in the history of the basilica, it should not be construed as a descriptive narrative, nor should the illustrations and references accompanying the text, ample as they are in number, be understood as a visual or bibliographical survey. The intention here was never to create a uniform narrative or to provide coverage of all periods in the history of St. Peter's, but to attempt to give insight into specific moments in the life of the basilica, however differently the duration of these moments may be defined. The reader, attentive to the form or history of the church, will inevitably make note of something important missing in the various discussions of the text or in the scholarly apparatus. Everything here, in fact, has taken shape under the direction of the authors who have assumed the task, within their given fields and topics, of the particularity of research and the discipline of generalization, of scholarship and synthesis at the same time.

It would be best to think of this book as a concatenation of individual views that embrace discrete, exemplary moments in the history of the church, each carefully constructed in itself, but forming a set, part of whose efficacy as a narrative device derives from the fact that it moves from one side of the story to the other, from the beginning of the basilica to the twentieth century. It would be impossible to encompass the complexity that is St. Peter's within the covers of a book unless one were selective. But there is something important to be gained, I believe, by having in one's hand and before one's eyes in a convenient and graspable format an image of the whole, even if, in the end, it is only a shadow outline. Only rarely has the European tradition bequeathed to us a monument of this magnitude, whose realization was one to which so many different eras and points of view contributed, and it is compelling in some sense, in the contemplation of the whole, that the discrete and momentary achievements of individuals and groups emerge more clearly. But it is this context, too, that gives the historical imagination scope to contemplate themes that bind the parts together.

The focus of contributions ranges from the specific (Bowersock, Iacobini, Lavin, Anselmi) to the general (Kinney, Thoenes, Millon, Etlin). The volume opens with the essay of Glen W. Bowersock, where the origins of the basilica are probed in the conjunction of two figures whose names have come to be inextricably bound up with the site: the patron saint and the emperor-patron, Peter and Constantine. This chapter is devoted to a detailed examination of the literary and material evidence regarding the connection of the two with the Vatican, and what emerges is an interesting dichotomy. Whereas the tradition associating Peter with the site may be deemed plausible, the assertion of Constantine's role in the cult of Peter is problematic and (to quote

the author) "probably came only when both of them [that is to say, Peter and Constantine] were dead." What appears here is an important new frame of reference – chronological and cultural (and the author interestingly points to Constantinople) – for understanding the foundation and architecture of St. Peter's, as well as the installation of the memory of its patrons.

Dale Kinney's chapter presents us with a survey of the old basilica in Late Antiquity in its most material form – the many bits and pieces of ancient architecture and sculpture, especially the columns and capitals, that constituted its distinctive building blocks. This material is of interest both backward and forward. Through it the building is embedded in Antiquity (and precisely in the ancient Roman tradition that the edifice itself reshapes). But it is also by means of this material that the old basilica embeds itself in the new. These often highly prized ancient fragments reused in the old church are omnipresent in New St. Peter's, though sometimes difficult to identify with precision, as Kinney observes.

The Middle Ages added much to the edifice of Old St. Peter's, to which a book in itself could easily be devoted. Antonio Iacobini's study of the patronage of Innocent III and Gregory IX provides us with a case of medieval intervention that is exemplary in two respects. It treats of important areas of the western and eastern ends of the church (apse and facade) – places where venerable images stood, critical to the meaning of the edifice. It also concerns a situation where a program of decoration and a patron's intentions can be reconstructed or, perhaps more accurately, argued with unusual conviction and clarity for the Middle Ages on the basis, not only of material remains, but also of texts (some of which may be attributed to the popes themselves).

Convulsive change marked the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in St. Peter's. Christof Thoenes's streaming narrative provides insight into the real structure and purpose of this tumult: a means of giving expression to the desire – at times overwhelmingly intense and all-embracing – of patrons endowed with new powers of personal fulfillment, and the vision – at times fervent and radical – of architects whose status and prestige had changed fundamentally from that of the Middle Ages. In reading Thoenes's essay, I was especially struck by the characterization of the Renaissance planning process as stemming from the forceful dismissal of reality. How inappropriate by contrast, it seemed to me, would it be to make such a statement about the building of the fourth-century church: the tone and nature of its ambition were completely different.

The thread that Henry A. Millon then follows is one of perfecting and refinement. This is the age that witnessed the decisive influence of Michelangelo on plans, elevations, and vaults, as well as the decision to extend the nave that sealed the fate of the eastern portion of the

old basilica then still standing. It is also the age in which the entire public presentation of the basilica to the viewer from the outside was determined, including the eastern facade and the profile of the dome that now serves to define for many the city of Rome.

In his complementary study, Irving Lavin explores the extraordinarily complicated and thoughtful role the great seventeenth-century sculptor and architect, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, played in visualizing and orchestrating the holy objects and holy sites in St. Peter's in order to create an image of the Counter-Reform Church. The throne, the Baldacchino, the colonnade, and the piazza: these quintessential achievements of seventeenth-century Rome have often been studied by scholars in isolation. Lavin makes the case that they are best understood as a vast, symphonic composition spanning Bernini's life and many pontificates, rising in crescendo at the site from east to west, and whose content and extent were pre-figured in a statement imputed to the artist at the very beginning of his career.

That the ceremonies and activities of St. Peter's, both customary and unique, were molded and shaped in the space of the church by an ephemeral architecture within an architecture, an array of draperies and platforms, portable images and canopies, is abundantly attested in the sources. Alessandra Anselmi's chapter gives us a view of a linked sequence of situations, gathered together under the functional rationale of the canonization of saints, in which this was the case. Among the many vantage points offered by this material is one into the processes of social signification and the exercise of power in the papal court, whose leader in this arena, the pope, clearly played a critical role.

In the chapter by Richard A. Etlin, our view expands to embrace Europe as a whole from England to Russia, and even extends to America. This is the stage in which

the account of St. Peter's is played out in the modern era. Major interventions in the building itself have now abated, and at the site as well, with the exception of Benito Mussolini's project of the Via della Conciliazione. The edifice, however, becomes a potent model to emulate, albeit in a highly sublimated form, even in secular and commercial contexts.

In the end it is difficult to avoid the notion of "larger than life" when speaking of St. Peter's. But such a notion would seem to be inimical now to prevailing views of human achievement in history. Ours, after all, is a post-heroic age. But perhaps the "exception that proves the rule" is the enormous impact St. Peter's has had worldwide as an image in the media (especially television). The papacy continues to use St. Peter's, including the piazza in front of the basilica, as the setting for important events, ceremonies, and speeches, to the extent that it has become the most vivid and well-known image of the Catholic Church, and one of the most well-known buildings of all time. Anything less "photogenic," of course, could not possibly sustain such extraordinary inflation and diffusion. As the essays in the present volume make clear, and scholarship, criticism, and appreciation elsewhere has continuously shown, this supremely contemporary value has come about, not in an instant, but over the course of many hundreds of years marked by both failure and success.

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PETER AND CONSTANTINE



G. W. BOWERSOCK

ACCOUNTS OF THE GREAT EDIFICE OF ST. PETER'S on the Vatican regularly give pride of place to the emperor Constantine's veneration of the apostle as expressed in his foundation of the first basilica on the site. Even modern works on quite different subjects that have occasion to allude to the present basilica normally make an obligatory reference to Constantine's patronage of Peter. In a recent volume on Bernini as architect, Tod Marder leads off his chapter on the Baldacchino with a reference to Constantine's defeat of Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge and goes on to state, "He attributed his victory to Christ, and, in thanksgiving, founded the basilica at the shrine over the burial site of Saint Peter, the first apostle."¹

But it is a fact, rarely observed, that most accounts of the reign of Constantine usually fail to mention either Peter or the Vatican at all. Historians of the first Christian emperor of antiquity seem to find no occasion whatever to comment upon Constantine's interest in Peter or his supposed foundation of the original basilica on the slope of the Vatican hill. That is a strange omission, if historians of the Vatican are right. Nor is it an omission that can readily be explained by the traditional lack of communication between ecclesiastical scholars and classical scholars. Jacob Burckhardt, who was deeply interested not only in religion but in monumental art, found no space in his influential work, *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen* (1853), for even a passing reference to the basilica of Peter. He maintained that Constantine's relations with the Christians in Rome were very much in doubt.² In more recent times, A. H. M. Jones, who, among his many distinctions, held a doctorate of divinity, said nothing in his widely read *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (1949) about any devotion to Peter on the part of the emperor. Exceptionally, T. D. Barnes, in the alert and thorough manner in which he conducts all his research, recorded the tradition of Constantine's foundation of St. Peter's in one brief line of his important book *Eusebius and Constantine*, but his trenchant notes exposed several disturbing problems in the evidence.³

Particularly striking is the absence of the whole subject in Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon, after all, wrote at great length about the character and reign of Constantine, and at even greater length about the early Christian church. Under neither rubric did he present Constantine as the founder of the church of St. Peter's on the Vatican, although he was well aware of the existence of the late antique basilica. He mentioned it with delicious irony immediately after an allusion to the site of Nero's notorious crucifixion of Christians in A.D. 64: "On the same spot, a temple, which far surpasses the ancient glories of the Capitol, has been erected by the Christian Pontiffs, who, deriving their claim of universal dominion from an humble fisherman of Galilee, have succeeded to the throne of the Caesars, given laws to the barbarian conquerors of Rome, and extended their spiritual jurisdiction from the coast of the Baltic to the shores of the Pacific Ocean."⁴ The popes, not Constantine, are held responsible for the basilica of Peter on the Vatican.

Is the Constantinian connection a mirage? Textual evidence for Constantine's initiative comes from the *Liber Pontificalis* of no earlier than approximately two hundred years after his reign. Even allowing for an early version of a source such as the legendary life of Pope Silvester, from which the *liber* may have drawn, we cannot trace the story of Constantine's involvement with the Vatican before the end of the fifth century.⁵ It was clearly in the interest of the papacy to strengthen its links with the first apostle and the first Christian emperor. The figure of Constantine, like so many historical figures who have arguably altered the course of history, tends to attract over time a series of unhistorical documents, deeds, and stories that serve the purposes of later generations. The *Donation of Constantine*, so mercilessly exposed as a forgery by Lorenzo Valla in the fifteenth century, is undoubtedly the most famous of these Constantinian accretions.⁶ Others, such as Silvester's fictitious baptism of Constantine, can already be found in the *Liber Pontificalis*.⁷ Another item in the *liber* has now

been decisively relegated to the category of fiction by the dramatic excavations conducted directly beneath the Vatican basilica in the forties and fifties of the twentieth century. The basilica was raised over a necropolis, not, as the *liber* asserts, over a temple of Apollo.⁸

The Vatican excavations have undoubtedly provided the most exciting new documentation for the original basilica of Peter since the construction of the present one in the sixteenth century. The old basilica was still standing at that time, and its remains lingered as the new work went on. The careful drawings of one Tiberio Alfarano have long provided historians of Late Antique monuments with precious glimpses into standing parts of the old structure.⁹ The excavations under the Vatican in the century just ended have fully confirmed the Late Antique – and probably fourth-century – construction of the first basilica over the graves of pagans and Christians.¹⁰ The excavations have also sensationally confirmed that the construction was carried out over a preexisting shrine that was meticulously incorporated within the new church in a highly prominent position on the chord of the apse (Fig. 1). No one can reasonably doubt that this shrine was believed to commemorate the apostle Peter, either because it stood over his tomb or because it marked the place of his crucifixion. So the latest round of excavations has revealed much about the veneration of Peter in Rome, but they too are utterly silent on any role played by the emperor Constantine.

It would be prudent, therefore, to examine these two topics independently and then to determine whether there is any substantial basis for bringing them together. Even before the excavations hardly any historian, ecclesiastical or secular, would have denied that Peter died in Rome. After the excavations it became obvious that the shrine around which the basilica had been carefully, and inconveniently, located could only have commemorated the eponym of the building. Pertinent texts, if not so specific as one might like, were nonetheless compelling: Peter's own letter written, as he says, from Babylon, which has to be Rome (it would be absurd to put the apostle in Mesopotamia), and an oblique allusion in the letters of Ignatius to the martyrdom suffered by Peter and Paul in Rome.¹¹ The scene of the martyrdom is unforgettably described by Tacitus in the *Annals*, when he reports the terrible deaths that Nero inflicted upon the Christians, whom he held collectively responsible for the great fire in the city. The crucifixions took place across the Tiber in the area of Nero's gardens (the former *horti Agrippinae*) and the circus of Gaius and Nero, in other words, in the region just south and east of the Vatican basilica.¹² Paul, as a Roman citizen, would have suffered decapitation rather than the more ignominious crucifixion, and he may therefore have died in another part of Rome.

No one tells us whether or how the bodies of the two martyrs were recovered or, if so, what was done with

them. It is highly likely that both corpses disappeared into the welter of the dead after the persecution. The crucified Christians might well have been thrown into the Tiber, and it is hard to credit that any Christians would have been able to step forward in the frenzy of the occasion and securely remove the remains of Peter or Paul. But the one explicit testimony that survives, to the veneration of these two, before the fourth century leaves no doubt that the memory of them, and possibly what were thought to be their bones, held a special place in the regard of Christians at Rome. Eusebius, in his church history, incorporated a precious citation from Gaius, an early-third-century Christian Roman, who reported the existence of what he called *tropaia* of Peter and Paul on the Vatican hill and on the Ostian road, respectively.¹³ So here, without any doubt, we have textual proof of the veneration of Peter on the Vatican in the early third century. What Gaius does not make plain, nor have centuries of learned exegesis succeeded in clarifying, is the sense of *tropaia*. A "trophy" was a Roman victory monument and not a tomb, although there is no reason why such a monument should not have been erected above or around a tomb. Gaius may simply have been exercising prudence in choosing a word that would not presuppose the presence of the bones of the martyrs. It is entirely possible that many of the faithful believed that the bones were there, even if they were not. But either a shrine or a tomb for both Peter and Paul can be guaranteed.

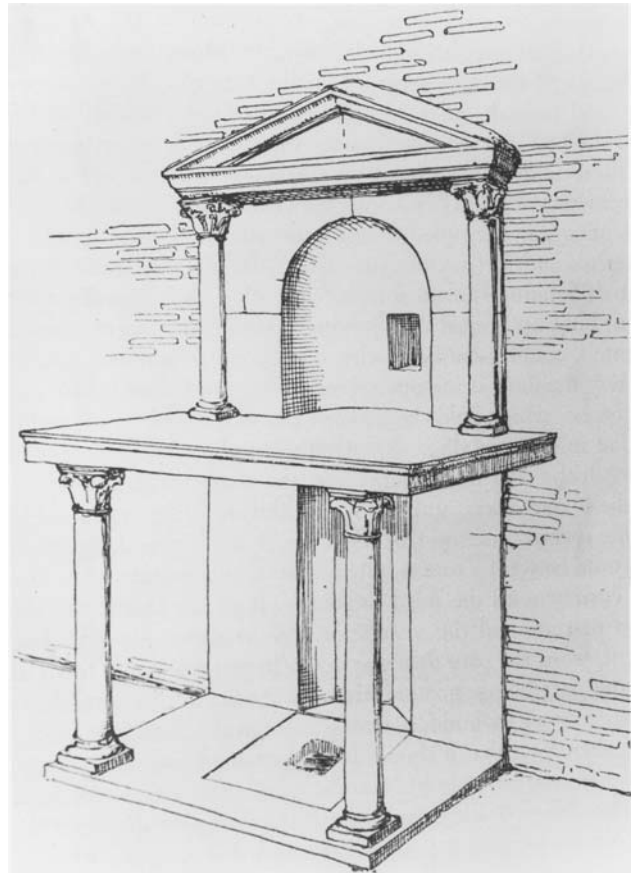
Another place of veneration for both martyrs turns up in a problematic text of the mid-fourth century with reference to the mid-third. A fifth-century chronographer reports that on 29 June 258 both Peter and Paul were celebrated in the catacombs along the Appian Way, and this tradition is reinforced by the old name of the church of S. Sebastiano on the spot as the church of the apostles (*ecclesia apostolorum*).¹⁴ The chronographer of 354 mentions the cult on the Appian Way but names only Peter,¹⁵ but an inscribed epigram by Pope Damasus from the very place alludes also to a joint cult. The lines of Damasus even declare that the two saints formerly dwelt there (*hic habitasse prius sanctos cognoscere debes / nomina quisque Petri pariter Paulique requiris*, "You should know that in former time the saints dwelt here, you who look for the names of both Peter and Paul").¹⁶ These three texts, the earliest of them coming about a half-century after that of Gaius, have led to the most extravagant speculation about the possibility of moving bones from one place to another under the pressures of the Valerian persecution in 258. Such speculation has often entailed moving the bones back again later to the places mentioned by Gaius.¹⁷ But the simple fact is that nowhere is there any explicit mention of the translation of the bones of either of these martyrs, although Damasus's *habitasse* could be taken to imply that bones had once been present, but for whatever reason, were

there no longer. The fourth-century chronographer is aware of Paul's shrine on the Ostian Way, but embarrassingly not of Peter's on the Vatican. Although his text has often been emended to incorporate the Vatican, others (notably the excellent Charles Pietri) have preferred to believe that a Vatican shrine was not yet finished or functioning in 354.¹⁸

Since we do not know whether there were any bones in the shrines mentioned by Gaius, it seems pointless to speculate whether bones were translated to the Appian Way and back again later. What is clear is that there was a joint cult of Peter and Paul, and there were also separate shrines for each, one on the Vatican and one on the Ostian Way. For the shrine of Peter the excavations in the 1940s provided a marvelous confirmation.¹⁹ Within the necropolis directly beneath the papal altar of the present basilica the excavators discovered the remains of a small but impressive monument, conventionally called the *aedicula* ("little building"), which was constructed at the same time as a drain running alongside the wall into which the *aedicula* was built (Fig. 1). The drain is dated by tiles to about A.D. 160, and that is therefore the date of the monument. The structure had two distinct levels, with two niches separated by a projecting travertine slab supported by columns standing in front of the lower niche. (A mysterious third niche was cut into the subterranean part of the wall.) The *aedicula* was designed to look out upon a piazza that might have held thirty or forty people. The odd placement of the whole complex in the middle of a cemetery would imply not only that this was a shrine, but was one that had to be fitted into that place and no other. In other words, this must have been considered the precise location of a very special tomb. As the first basilica of Peter was awkwardly but deliberately positioned to incorporate this shrine in the most prominent spot in the church, we must assume that already in the second century Christians believed, rightly or wrongly, that this was the tomb of Peter. We can be confident that the *aedicula* is none other than the *tropaion* of Peter mentioned by Gaius.

Gibbon was well acquainted with the important quotation from Gaius in Eusebius. He alluded to it in chapter 28 of *The Decline and Fall* when he commented on the emerging cult of martyrs:

One hundred and fifty years after the glorious deaths of St. Peter and St. Paul, the Vatican and the Ostian road were distinguished by the tombs, or rather by the trophies, of those spiritual heroes. In the age which followed the conversion of Constantine, the emperors, the consuls, and the generals of armies devoutly visited the sepulchres of a tentmaker and a fisherman; and their venerable bones were deposited under the altars of Christ, on which the bishops of the royal city continually offered the unbloody sacrifice.²⁰



1. Rome, Vatican Necropolis, second-century shrine (the *aedicula*), drawing by G. U. S. Corbett. Photo: after Jocelyn Toynbee and John Ward Perkins, *The Shrine of St. Peter and the Vatican Excavations* (London, 1956), fig. 17

Here Gibbon moved directly from the pre-Constantinian trophies to the churches that replaced them, one on the road to Ostia (the Church of St. Paul) and one on the Vatican Hill (the Church of St. Peter). These buildings are placed vaguely after the conversion of Constantine and conspicuously without reference to any intervention from that emperor. Gibbon's earlier comment that the popes were responsible for what he called the temple on the Vatican is wholly consistent with his observation in chapter 28.

It would now be appropriate to address the plausibility of Constantine's direct personal intervention in the founding of the original basilica on the Vatican. The usefulness of this association in establishing papal authority is beyond question. Hence there would have been every reason to advertise Constantine's role, if he had one, and to fabricate it, if not. We have seen already that the first recorded notice of Constantine's foundation of the Vatican basilica occurs in the *Liber Pontificalis*, a document that contains some incontrovertibly erroneous information such as Silvester's baptism of the emperor and the Vatican temple of Apollo. But the presence of such

material obviously does not preclude the inclusion of authentic testimony. The endowment of the church, consisting of properties in the eastern portion of the empire, evidently presupposes Constantine's defeat of Licinius in 324 and his consequent assumption of control over the East.²¹ The properties would not have been his to provide before that date. But this can serve, at best, only as an ultimate terminus post quem.

The archaeological evidence for the original basilica and its incorporation of the old *aedicula* on the line between transept and apse provides no evidence at all that Constantine was responsible for this work. There is a graffito on an adjacent wall that evokes the miracle at the Milvian Bridge (*ho[c] vin[ce]*),²² but since this was the defining moment in the Christianization of the Roman state, as shown by Lactantius, Eusebius, and others later, it could have been recalled at almost any time. There is no inscription or tile that provides the kind of dating we have for the *aedicula*. The shrine itself was actually encased in marble with porphyry pilasters at the corners, much as the *Liber Pontificalis* describes it, but of the solid bronze coffin that Constantine reportedly made for Peter's corpse there is not a trace.²³ The *aedicula* was presented to the faithful in the basilica within a pergola with four columns decorated with an ivy motif, and the back of the pergola was aligned with two columns at either side of the opening of the apse, thus forming a screen separating the transept from the apse. The reconstruction of all this on the basis of the archaeological finds appears to be confirmed by a representation of the scene on a casket from Pola, in which both shrine, pergola, and the two columns on either side of the entrance to the apse can be clearly distinguished (Fig. 2).²⁴ Accordingly, we can form a fairly precise notion of the way in which the second-century shrine was incorporated into the fourth-century basilica. But again nothing speaks of Constantine.

Other oblique testimony has been invoked in support of a Constantinian church. The Vatican Phrygianum, a pagan shrine dedicated to the Phrygian goddess Cybele (the Great Mother), is thought to have halted for twenty-eight years its grim rites of the *taurobolium*, in which votaries received the blood of bulls slaughtered over their heads. Some have seen the interruption of this ceremony as having been caused by the building of the Vatican close by. The inscription mentioning the interruption was found in 1919 near St. Peter's and presumably belonged to the Phrygianum, but unfortunately it has no date. When originally published it was assumed to come from the later fourth century, like most of the other surviving inscriptions from that shrine. Before A.D. 370 there are no dated inscriptions from the Phrygianum apart from one in 305 and one in 350. This clearly leaves too capacious a period to locate a twenty-eight-year cessation within it. Although a dedication to

the Great Mother from A.D. 319 has been brought in to create a somewhat narrower time frame, unfortunately that inscription is not connected with the Vatican Phrygianum.²⁵ So proponents of this hypothesis have simply calculated back twenty-eight years from the attested rites of A.D. 350 and come up with A.D. 322 for the start of the construction of the basilica. So tortured and unsupported an argument cannot be allowed to stand.

Similarly, an imperial decree in the Theodosian Code²⁶ with a severe penalty for tomb violation has been seen as a reflection of violations that must inevitably have taken place during the construction of the Vatican basilica. The text curiously includes punishment retrospectively for any violations committed over the previous sixteen years. If the document was issued by Constantine in 349, which is the date it bears, this ought to mean that serious invasions of tombs had been building up alarmingly from 333 onward. It is a far less plausible assumption that there had been open season on breaking into tombs before that year. In their edition of the code, Mommsen and Krüger actually ascribe the law to Constantius, Augustus for the Eastern empire.²⁷ If he is the author of this decree, it can obviously have no bearing at all on the desecration of the Vatican cemetery. But whoever the author may have been, the document has no probative value.

Oddly, the only explicit evidence, apart from the *Liber Pontificalis*, for Constantine's role in founding the first basilica of St. Peter's is considerably later in date than the *liber*. This is a mosaic text that was seen sometime before the ninth century and was recorded in a collection of inscriptions kept in the monastery of Einsiedeln. The mosaic, which was placed on the triumphal arch between the nave and the transept of the old St. Peter's, depicted Constantine presenting the church to Christ in the company of Peter himself. The mosaic inscription contained two hexameters: *quod duce te mundus surrexit in astra triumphans / hanc Constantinus victor tibi condidit aulam* ("Because under your leadership the world in triumph has risen to the stars, victorious Constantine has founded this hall for you").²⁸ The text undoubtedly confirms the assertion of the *liber*, but unfortunately we have no way of telling when the mosaic with these lines was installed on the arch. Since there were extensive renovations and changes made in the basilica between the fourth century and the ninth, including, in the time of Gregory the Great, a new altar over the supposed tomb, a mosaic such as this could easily have been put up under the influence of the tradition recorded in the *Liber Pontificalis*.

The great church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople provides an interesting comparison here. Still today the visitor can see in the southwest vestibule a tenth-century mosaic showing Constantine and Justinian flanking the



2. Capsella of Samagher (Pola casket) with image of St. Peter's, Museo Archeologico, Venice, inv. 1952, n. 279. (Photo: Ministero per i Beni culturali e ambientali, Soprintendenza Archeologica per il Veneto)

Virgin and Child. The implication is obviously that the Justinianic building we now see represented an original foundation by Constantine, and this has long been the common assumption. But, as Cyril Mango and others have emphasized, the original church was built later than Constantine – under the Arian Constantius II – although it was, like so much else, subsequently attached to the first Christian emperor.²⁹ The mosaic proves only what was promulgated and doubtless believed in later centuries. It tells nothing about the founder of the first church, and something similar may underlie the lost mosaic seen by the Einsiedeln pilgrim.

An inscription, seen much later still and after additional renovations and changes in the church, provides even more tenuous documentation for Constantine's involvement. This is another mosaic inscription, which was seen in the fifteenth century on an arch over the altar in the apse of the dilapidated old building. It was read fragmentarily as follows: *Constantini . . . expiata . . . hostili incursione* ("Of Constantine . . . a hostile incursion . . . expiated").³⁰ Although this text has recently been associated with Constantine's repulse of the Sarmatians in 323,³¹ it obviously could refer to any number of conflicts. It is likely, in fact, that this text adds to the program of the Einsiedeln mosaic text in providing emphatic and deliberate documentation of the received view that Constantine founded the church.

The legendary life of Silvester, mirrored in the *Liber Pontificalis*, preserves another text that may have been seen at some stage in St. Peter's. It is in some ways the most attractive inscription in support of a Constantinian date. Said to have been inscribed upon a golden cross above the *aedicula*, it is supposed to have displayed the following words: *Constantinus Augustus et Helena Augusta. hanc domum regalem simili fulgore coruscans aula circumdat*.³² In 1899 a perplexed scholar proposed inserting the words *auro decorant quam* after *regalem*, although the transmitted text can be construed perfectly well.³³ With the supplement included (as it normally is), the text after the two names would read: "They adorn with gold this royal house, which the hall surrounds, gleaming with a comparable radiance." The titulature of Helena looks authentic and seems to imply a date between her taking the title Augusta in late 324 or in 325 and her death in the winter of 327/8. As Constantine and Helena visited Rome in 326, this visit could have been the occasion of the donation of the golden cross. But if this text is authentic, as it might be, there is the problem with *domus regalis*, which Krautheimer thought to refer to the *aedicula* itself or the ciborium above it.³⁴ The idea of an encompassing *aula*, as introduced by the modern supplement to the inscription, may have been in the back of his mind, but it is not in the transmitted text that we have. The Latin phrase *domus regalis* would naturally

Verba Adeo ut furens haeretica Theodora mandati dedit
 Petri Mal- Anthemio, ut Vigilii papam suae in Palatio, hinc in
 lij de co- Eccl., excepta Basilica Sci Petri inueniret, mox na-
 seccratione ui in portum ad eam perduceret. Quamobrem pro
 Altaris B. reuerentia ac religione quadam obseruantia rehus ob-
 Petri per tinuit, ut limina Apollonem uocaretur, eiusq; in-
 Callisti secundu no ue fribulo fideles humiles atq; demitti ofcula, ppe-
 Beata re cordatio ant & tempora sternerent. Haec primum a Con-
 nis ant Stanino Imperatore amplius. Adificiu exstruda orna-
 Callisti montis decorata fuit, postea uero a summis Pontificibus
 Papa II uarijs temporibus praesentim uero PAVLO QVIN-
 Altare B. TO. Pontifice Maximo nunc. Cathedralis regense anno:
 Petri quod nobilitati & ampliori forma renouata, conspicietur. rum an-
 nimia ue tate e-
 lapidum rarijs & magnificentijs audient atq; ornatum ad eam
 percussio esse. Clemens VIII. antiquum Pontificu uestigijs deuote
 nibus qui insidens, & praesentim beate recordationis Callisti
 damodo uolens, qui ut scribit Petrus Mallius (Anoni-
 uiolati uidebat. tibus s.
 Optimi sicut in aed. plurimum diligens. Altare beati Petri
 marmo nimia uetustate. Et idum percussioibus, quodammodo
 nibus, ue uiolatum fuit. hanc uetustate uelut ex deo
 stituit et ruit. Quae fuit Annuntiationis. eae uirginis Mariae
 decora cum toto (que fuit laudat. Altare. hanc fuit et deuote
 uit, et in festo Annun-
 ciationis Junij. M. DC. XIII. Despuente eiusdem Sandissimi Ala-
 B. Ma- nis & reuerentem. hanc fuit in fuit in fuit in fuit in fuit
 ria cu omni uia celebrauit. hanc fuit in fuit in fuit in fuit in fuit
 loto Co- a Constantino Imp. constructo ut lateres inter amena re-
 cilio la- petri hinc hinc indicat.
 pidem altaris
 satis ho-
 nonfice
 Et deuote
 consecrauit
 In

In qua consecratione sicut in libris nostris scriptum fecit remissionem trium annorum antualiter ad eam ueniētib; s. Hae Mal-
 lius. In ipsa die Basilica agebat officium quod tantis de consecratione ut in antiquis
 Dionan's Vatic-Basilicae leguntur.

AVC. D. N. CONSTANTINVS. P. P. M. (twice)

3. Giacomo Grimaldi, *Descrizione della basilica antica di S. Pietro in Vaticano*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City, cod. barb. lat. 2733, fol. 165^v (Photo: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana)