INTRODUCTION

The Life of St. Paul's Basilica across the Longue Durée

The blaze began in the roof of the nave, where dry, aged timbers fed the voracious flames. Propelled by steady breezes, the fire leapt from truss to truss until the vast hall came aglow – a ring of flames hovering over massive columns and frescoed walls (Figure I.1). Eyewitnesses described a pyre twice as tall as the towering building. As burning beams crashed to the ground, they fueled the inferno. Heated marbles turned to lime, buckled, and brought down the ancient painted walls above them. Glass pixels of timeworn mosaics loosened, hailed down, and melted into a vitreous glob. The conflagration lasted for days, abating only when the venerable structure had been reduced to an incinerated carcass. Miraculously, the main altar crowning the relics of the apostle Paul had been spared. It was later established that on that night of July 15, 1823, a distracted carpenter left a candle burning amid the timbers of the roof. In so doing, he ironically consigned his repairs to be the last in a long line and unwittingly he wiped away 1,500 years of history at the Basilica of St. Paul in Rome.

What had been lost was the last and largest imperial basilica built in Rome (Figure I.2). It also proved to be the one that endured longest, and as such, it grants unparalleled insight onto the past. In many respects, St. Paul's is exceptional, its distinct profile somewhat outside the norm. As a result, through the centuries, the building – like its namesake – came to be a protagonist in the history of Christianity. The basilica was instrumental in the development of institutions the likes of the Catholic Church, the papacy, and monasticism. For these entities, St. Paul's was an emblematic building

Figure I.1 Filippo Bombelli, *St. Paul's during the Fire of* 1823, oil on canvas, 73 × 61 cm, 1823. Vatican City, Vatican Museums, Collezione d'arte religiosa moderna, inv. n. 4213. Photo © Musei Vaticani.

Figure I.2 Giovanni Paolo Panini, *Interior of St. Paul's*, oil on canvas, 75 × 103 cm, ca. 1750. Private collection. Photograph © Christie's Images/Bridgeman Images.

with a social function in the formation of their ideologies. Yet, its potential to retain and relay meanings and memories was never beholden to a single group. Time and again, patrons strove to define it as they saw fit: To map their ambitions onto its fabric. The basilica was also a key player in the history of Roman and Western art and architecture, because inventions and developments related to liturgy, form, and decoration all touched and, in some cases, originated at this place. In sum, St. Paul's Basilica is a benchmark for the study of religions, institutions, history, cultural memory, architecture, and the arts.

This book traces transformations to the appearance, function, and identity of the basilica and its site over the course of nearly eighteen centuries. Whether these took the form of renovations or innovations to the physical fabric, shifts in the building's identity or alterations to the functions it housed, they comprise key moments in its life history. A major premise of this study is that transformations explain how and why buildings endure, evolve, and remain relevant in a cultural context far removed from that in which they were first built. To examine these moments of heightened interest – these rites of passage, if you will – is to recount the basilica's history and to reflect upon the peoples and cultures associated with it. The building was embedded in a network of representational, liturgical, devotional, and defensive practices that underscored its place within a system of authority and power stretching well beyond its enclosing walls. That interconnectedness made St. Paul's indispensable.

The building devastated in 1823 was neither the first nor the last to occupy the site of St. Paul's tomb. Tradition has it that following the apostle's beheading around the year 67 CE, his remains were laid to rest in a necropolis along the Ostian Road south of Rome. Not long after, his followers built a memorial there and began venerating his tomb. Around the third decade of the fourth century, Emperor Constantine (or his descendants) enclosed the tomb within a small basilica. Only a few decades later, in 386, the co-Emperors Theodosius, Valentinian II, and Arcadius decreed that a bigger building befitting the increasingly popular apostle be erected in place of the previous structures. This vast, new basilica – the one that burned in 1823 – provides the setting for and target of the majority of episodes discussed in this book, though attention will be given to the earlier history of the site and to the current structure, built after the fire.

St. Paul's became a stage for shifting power dynamics. Just generations after its construction in the late fourth century, imperial influence declined and a newly ascendant force – the papacy – began to transform the basilica into a bastion of its nascent authority. During the middle ages, the site became home to the city's most powerful monastery, one cherished by patrons such as Charlemagne. And as Rome entered the early modern era, monarchs and monks, popes and pilgrims altered the basilica in accordance with Renaissance, Counter-Reformation, and Enlightenment ideals. Then, only six years after the devastating fire of 1823, the most encompassing transformation of all commenced as a new building emerged from the ashes of the old (Figure I.3). The polished, polychrome interior of today's reconstructed St. Paul's captures the richness of late imperial architecture, but its correspondence with that earlier phase and with the millennium and a half of intervening change is vague. And yet, there can be little doubt the series of structures built atop Paul's burial place echoed and even instigated broader developments across Christendom, in Rome, and in the history of architecture and art. I will now briefly expand on each of these contexts in turn.

Thanks to the apostle's central role in Christianity, his principal shrine remains a center for that religion. But just who was St. Paul? Saul of Tarsus, as he was originally known, was an unlikely figure to become Christianity's foundational theologian. Not only had he never met Christ in person, but he was converted to the cause while en route to Damascus to persecute followers of Jesus. For the rest of his life, a period rife with travels and letter writing, he rose to prominence as the first interpreter of what eventually became Christian doctrine. Additionally, he proved instrumental during his lifetime – and for centuries later – as a prime mover for the conversion of pagans, thereby earning his nickname "Apostle of the Gentiles." Our comprehension of St. Paul is incomplete without an understanding of his principle site of devotion, where so much of his cult has been formulated and given energy.

At the end of the fourth century, when the building was constructed, Paul's writings were galvanizing the empire and helping to drive even the staunchest pagans to convert. And in the centuries that followed, throngs of devoted followers were captivated by the magnetism of his remains, which, like all saintly relics, were believed to link heaven and earth. To this day, the site is one of Rome's most venerated churches and – along with St. Peter's – a principal pilgrimage destination. Ever since the first century, Romans have valorized both apostles through the structures built over their graves. The discovery of Paul's sarcophagus beneath the basilica's main altar in 2002 has

Figure I.3 View up the nave toward the apse, 2016. Photograph by Robert Glass. Courtesy of the Papal Basilica of San Paolo fuori le Mura.

only strengthened this fervor (Figure I.4). A scientific evaluation of the more sensational announcement – made on June 28, 2009, by Pope Benedict XVI himself – that explorations within the sarcophagus "would seem to confirm the unanimous and undisputed tradition which claims that these are the mortal remains of the Apostle Paul" must await the publication of those reports.[1]

Throughout the site's history, the belief in the apostle's presence drove people to undertake arduous pilgrimage and ambitious patronage. It helped that, between the twelfth and the eighteenth centuries, St. Paul's church shared some of the spotlight reserved for St. Peter's, for it was believed that a sacred mixture of the two apostles' relics was buried in each of their namesake churches – a belief that has not been given adequate scholarly attention. Were it not for the relics enshrined at Rome's two major apostolic basilicas, the city's bishop would have had little reason to call himself pope, and the city itself might not have become a center of Christendom.

St. Paul's history is deeply intertwined with that of Rome itself, even if that relationship was complicated from the very beginning by the basilica's location two kilometers outside the walls. In keeping with ancient burial practices, Paul's tomb was beyond city limits and for most of its history, vineyards and marshlands surrounded the site. The basilica built by the three emperors at the turn of the fifth century was linked to Rome via a colonnaded walkway, which

Figure I.4 View of the faithful and some discoveries from the 2002 excavations, including the Constantinian apse (curving wall under the glass floor) and the sarcophagus of Paul (far right, behind the grate). Photograph by Mimmo Frassineti. © 2017. AGF / Scala, Florence.

facilitated exchanges between the city and its satellite. Saints Peter and Paul were declared the Romulus and Remus of Christian Rome and, from the time of Pope Leo the Great (440–461), their respective basilicas developed in roughly parallel manners: When St. Peter's was restored, so was St. Paul's. Around the eighth century, the popes grew more attached to St. Peter's and to Rome's cathedral at the Lateran, and St. Paul's fell somewhat into the background; its distance from the inhabited quarters of the city did not help. Its saving grace was the monastic community established there around 600 CE. The monks not only valued the extramural location, but quickly proved themselves to be the building's most steadfast and assiduous caretakers. In the ninth century, the basilica and its adjacent monastery became a fortified enclave, which not only secured the apostolic relics, but also contributed to the city's defenses. Despite not being a physical part of the urban fabric until modern sprawl enveloped it, the basilica's rapid evolution from suburban necropolis to a venue of imperial, papal, and monastic power enabled it to become integral to Rome's spiritual and political identity. It did not hurt that with a covered surface area vaster than a football field, St. Paul's remained the city's largest church until the completion of New Saint Peter's in the seventeenth century. In a city with hundreds upon hundreds of churches, it was at once exceptional and representative.

In addition to addressing its importance to Christianity and to Rome, this book situates the

basilica in its rightful place in the broader histories of architecture and art. St. Paul's was the swansong of Roman imperial basilicas, and its builders were instrumental in transposing that ancient building type into a Christian key. The building was – as architectural historian Richard Krautheimer noted – a "critical consolidation" of the Christian basilica first elaborated at the Lateran, Vatican, and in Jerusalem. Beyond these early experiments, the basilica proved fundamental to the consolidation of the church as a building type. Additionally, its influence can also be measured by the countless and nameless artists and builders who revamped the basilica during its early history. In later centuries, the basilica attracted the designs of important artists, such as Pietro Vassaletto, Pietro Cavallini, Arnolfo di Cambio, Onorio Longhi, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Francesco Borromini, Antonio Canevari, Nicola Salvi, and many others. When possible, I expand the footnote or short article treatments that their role at St. Paul's has attracted. My goal is to offer a more complete account of the building's architecture and art than has appeared to date, and to correct some misconceptions.

In some cases, I uncover hitherto unknown episodes of patronage, as in the instance of eighth- and eighteenth-century transformations to the area of the main altar. In other cases, I reassign commissions to more fitting temporal and cultural contexts than those previously proposed, as in the example of the nave's frescoed narrative cycles, which I argue were in place at the building's inception. Despite the numerous transformations recounted over the following chapters in greater detail than ever before, the basilica retained much of its original configuration until the fateful fire, a feat that few other Roman buildings could claim. In sum, the story of St. Paul's offers an unparalleled series of key episodes from two millennia of art and architectural history – a survey course packed into a single building.

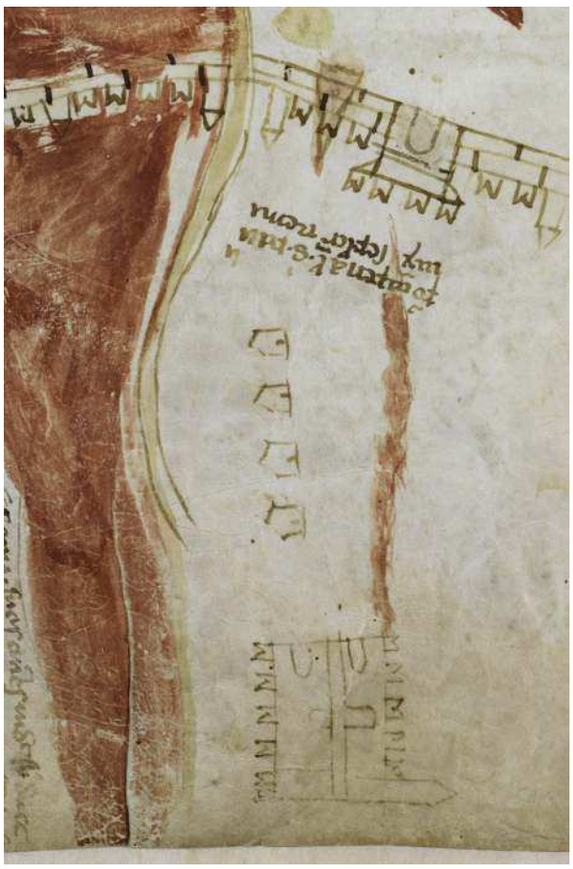

Figure I.5 Fra Paolino Veneto, detail of St. Paul's (north is at top) from a view of Rome in his *Chronologia Magna*, manuscript, ca. 1323. Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Cod. Lat. Z. 399 (1610), fol. 98r.

I have drawn on a vast array of graphic sources to create my narrative. To recapture important moments of transformation and unlock their significance, I collected around 1,400 historic images, each of which had to be evaluated in light of the degree to which it balanced accuracy with artistic license. Centuries of image production by hundreds of different hands amounted to a body of images of the basilica the vastness of which is shared only by the major monuments of the city.[2] Prior to the mid-sixteenth century, the basilica was shown only schematically (Figure I.5). More accurate details were first recorded in views by late sixteenth-century authors (Figure I.6). These images, in turn, led to more site-specific

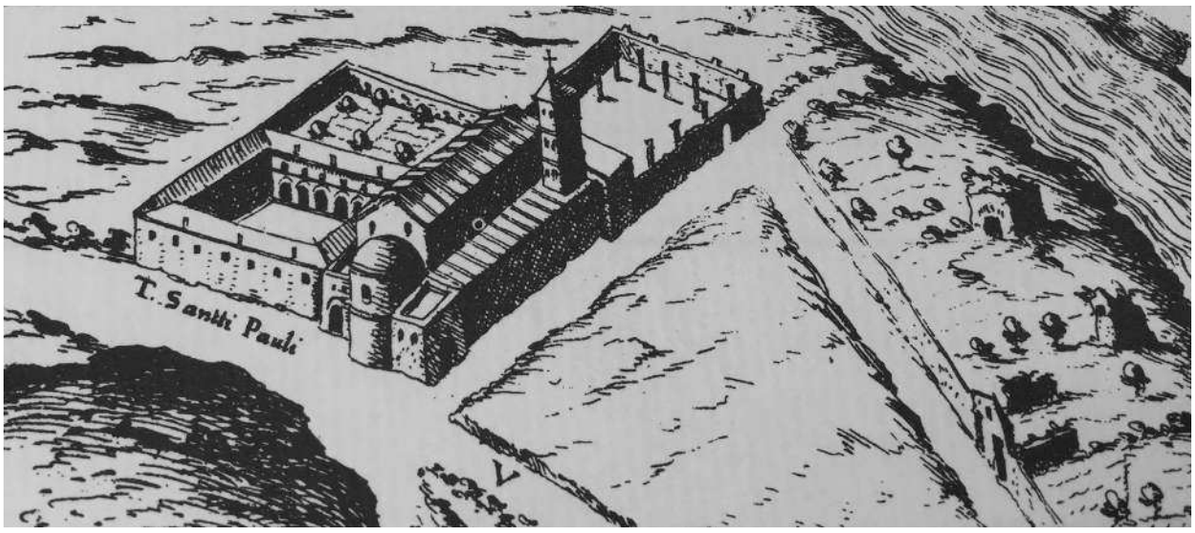

Figure I.6 Stefano Du Pérac, detail of St. Paul's, from Antonio Lafreri's *Nova urbis Romae descriptio*, engraving, 1577. London, British Library. © British Library Board, Maps * 23805(8).

Figure I.7 Israël Silvestre, *S. Paolo*, from *Les Églises des stationes de Rome*, Tav. 9, engraving, 5 × 12 cm, 1648. © Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte, Rome. Fondo Lanciani, BIASA, Roma XI.21.1.5.

representations frequently found in printed pilgrimage guidebooks (Figure I.7). With the rise of the Grand Tour, a new clientele of cultured travelers demanded increasingly detailed and diverse imagery (Figure I.8). And by the early nineteenth century, the desire to document major monuments encyclopedically inspired a flurry of analytical images that included plans, sections, and elevations. Ultimately, the fire of 1823 catalyzed a final move away from codified

Figure I.8 Anonymous, *Basilica di S. Paolo sulla via Ostiense*, engraving, 35 × 51 cm, last quarter of the eighteenth century. © Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte, Rome. Fondo Lanciani, BIASA, Roma XI.47.15.

and tired views, effectively "taking the roof off" not just the basilica but also artists' creativity (Figure I.9). Although the building missed its chance to be photographed by only a generation, the many views I have collected are valuable surrogates that make St. Paul's an underused source for scholars of late antiquity, the Middle Ages, and early modern times.

In addition to visual evidence, I have been able to draw on a large and expanding body of archaeological knowledge, from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century efforts to the most recent excavations undertaken by experts at the Vatican Museums and the Pontifical Institute for Christian Archaeology. All of these have brought to light significant discoveries in and around the current basilica. Matters of stratigraphy, layout, and function can now be elucidated – allowing us, in turn, to ask novel questions about the building's development, for example, or its relation to similar basilicas. Beyond correlating two centuries of archaeological reports with visual sources, I have also synthesized this wealth of evidence relating to St. Paul's complex palimpsest into a comprehensive digital model – technically ten distinct (but capable of being overlapped) digital models – from which I have derived new images of the building over time (Figures I.10 – I.12). Such visualizations enable a holistic spatio-temporal understanding of the building and raise topics for future scholarly inquiry – as well as, possibly, targets for excavation.

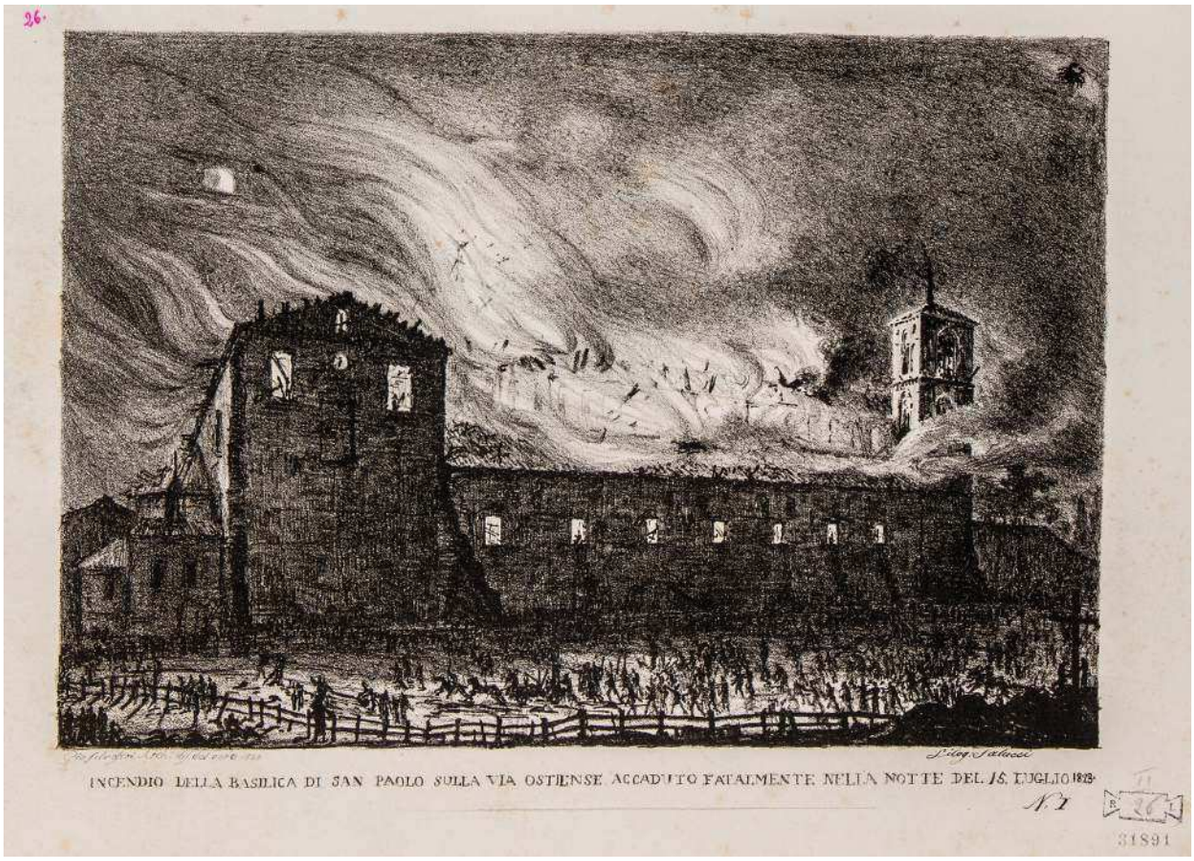

Figure I.9 Giovanni Battista Silvestri, *Incendio della Basilica di San Paolo*, from *Gli avanzi della Basilica di S. Paolo*, lithograph, 19.5 × 28 cm, 1825. © Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte, Rome. Fondo Lanciani, BIASA, Roma XI.47.49.

Complementing the copious imagery and archaeological data, perhaps the most diachronic and valuable evidence is the body of primary written sources. These include the epigraphic evidence accumulated in and around the basilica; the *Liber pontificalis*, a medieval compilation of papal biographies rich with accounts of patronage; legal documents related to the adjacent community of monks; early modern descriptions and pilgrimage guidebooks; eighteenth- and nineteenth-century chronicles of Rome; and, finally, the plentiful documents pertaining to the basilica's demolition and reconstruction. These sources are now scattered in archives around the world, only few have been published or digitized.

This book also subsumes a gargantuan and ever-expanding apparatus of secondary sources on St. Paul's in order to surpass them in chronological breadth and balance. Just eight years before the tragic fire, Nicola Maria Nicolai wrote the first monograph on the basilica, an account grounded on enviably direct contact with the building.[3] In 1934, Ildefonso Schuster – the abbot of the adjacent monastery – was the first to treat the long history of the monastic community in conjunction with that of the basilica, recognizing their pivotal relationship.[4] In 1977, Richard Krautheimer published the fifth volume of *The Early Christian Basilicas of Rome*, in which he discussed the architectural history of St. Paul's up to the ninth century.[5] While some of his