

EYEWITNESS TO OLD ST. PETER'S

Old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome stood for more than eleven centuries until it was demolished to make room for today's church on the same Vatican site. Its last eyewitness, Maffeo Vegio, explained to the Roman hierarchy how revival of the papacy, whose prestige after the exile to Avignon had been diminished, was inseparable from a renewed awareness of the primacy of Peter's Church. To make his case, Vegio wrote a history founded on credible written and visual evidence. His text guides us through the building's true story in its material reality, undistorted by medieval guides. This was its living memory and a visualization of the continuity of Roman history into modern times.

This volume makes available the first complete English translation of Vegio's text, accompanied by full-color digital reconstructions of the basilica as it appeared Vegio's day.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Christine Smith is Robert C. and Marion K. Weinberg Professor of Architectural History in the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University. A recipient of the Founders' Award from the Society of Architectural Historians, she has won grants and fellowships from the Kress Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Guggenheim Foundation, among many others. She is the author of *Architecture in the Culture of Early Humanism: Ethics, Aesthetics and Eloquence, 1400–1460*.

Joseph F. O'Connor is Distinguished Lecturer in the Department of Greek and Latin at the Catholic University of America. He is co-author, with Christine Smith, of *Building the Kingdom: Giannozzo Manetti on the Spiritual and Material Ediface*.

EYEWITNESS TO OLD ST. PETER'S

A STUDY OF MAFFEO VEGIO'S
"REMEMBERING THE ANCIENT
HISTORY OF ST. PETER'S BASILICA
IN ROME," WITH TRANSLATION
AND A DIGITAL RECONSTRUCTION
OF THE CHURCH

CHRISTINE SMITH

Harvard University

JOSEPH F. O'CONNOR

Catholic University of America



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1. Reconstruction of Old St. Peter's in 1458.

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Frontpiece: Reconstruction of Old St. Peter's in 1458

PREFACE

“I acquired a fundamental change in my thinking as I was looking at the abundant remains of antiquity in St. Peter’s basilica in Rome or reading what was written about them by others.” So Maffeo Vegio (1407–1458) begins his work, “Remembering the Ancient History of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome.” What should we expect from a text so modestly proffered? What new understanding does the author share? Will he offer the reader no more than some single, personal insight drawn from his experience and reading? That would seem a small return for our effort of reading some eighty-five pages of Renaissance Latin. If so, it’s no wonder that until now the text has been published only once, by the Bollandistes in the eighteenth century as part of their entry for the Feast of St. Peter (June 29)!¹ Since those few scholars who have studied Vegio’s work have been unable to agree about what the text’s purpose is, for what audience it was written, to what literary genre it belongs, and even whether it is complete or unfinished, Vegio’s new thinking seems to have eluded them.

With some reserve, therefore, about the merit of this work, we undertook translation of Vegio’s writing, intending, initially, only to make a little-known primary source more accessible to scholars, students, and to the general reader interested in the Renaissance and St. Peter’s. The Latin posed few problems except for some errors and lacunae in the published version, which we corrected against the earliest, unpublished manuscript.² But translation of the literal sense was not enough to lay bare Vegio’s thought, as his text is packed with allusions to legal and financial matters, historical persons and events, liturgical practices, and literary sources, all of which had to be identified.³ Even adequately comprehending the text for our own purposes required extended research and explication, which we share with our readers in a series of footnotes to the text. With its factual substance clarified, the logic of Vegio’s organization and its thematic content emerged but, since our author wrote for people who were as visually familiar with Old St. Peter’s as he was, the heart of the text still escaped us. We needed to be able to see it, too, in order to understand what he included, what he omitted, and what his criteria for those choices were. To achieve this, we created a digital reconstruction of the church’s interior as it was in 1458 (Frontispiece and Figure 1) and plans locating

the places mentioned in the text. Of course, creating such a model was not within the abilities of either author. For this work, we thank Ruo Jia, who built the model and brought the representation up to a first stage of completion, and Luo Xuan, who then carried it forward to its final form. Both of these young scholars, graduates of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, are also trained architects. Without their expertise in the logic and requirements of structure, their exquisite aesthetic sensitivity, and their extraordinary skill in digital rendering, the model would not be the strikingly beautiful artifact that it is. Whatever faults it may have in historical accuracy are not theirs but the authors', who directed the project. Such models are very costly to develop because they require intense engagement by their creators over not days or even months, but years. We thank the Dean of the Graduate School of Design, Mohsen Mostafavi, for his financial support of the work through grants to Christine Smith. We include color images of the digital reconstruction in our illustrations thanks to a generous grant from Dean Mostafavi. Hoping that our work will be built on by future scholars and aware that not all have access to the necessary resources (both financial and human) required to create their own model, we provide access to our entire model for download at (<https://goo.gl/NJK7WV>). On the same site is an animation that explores the model close up. The reconstruction was modeled in SketchUp, a program well suited for presenting the kinds of detail and finishes that we wished to show but less ideal for recording precise measurements. Some scholars may wish to download the Rhino model created by Luo Xuan, bare of all detail but exact in all known dimensions including the deformation of the nave wall, which we have also made available.

We also thank Dr. J. Steven Brown, Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies, and the Institutional Grants Committee of the Catholic University of America for a development grant to support the preparation of this book for publication.

Upon reaching this final stage in the project, which had greatly exceeded our original modest aim, it seemed clear that the full resonance of the text could be grasped only within its historical, literary, and art historical contexts: We provide these in three interpretive chapters preceding the translation. Our work centers on the text of this little-known work. For that reason, we annotate as fully as we can the text itself. In the interpretive chapters (Part I) and in our discussion of the digital model (Part III), we instead supply bibliographic summaries, using endnotes only for direct references and quotations from sources.

We think we now know how Vegio's thinking changed, why it matters, and why "Remembering St. Peter's" should be read. Yet his work is so little studied that this first in-depth analysis cannot succeed in penetrating all its meanings or exhaust its resonance within its various contexts. It was not our

aim to give a definitive reading of the text or to provide a definitive digital reconstruction of Old St. Peter's. Instead, we aspired to trace paths for other scholars to explore, and we note these throughout this volume. This is not a book that marks its topic “done!” but one that, drawing on the combined knowledge and skill sets of a classicist, an architectural historian, and two architects, presents the reader with a feast of novelties, beginning with the text itself, on which to ruminate and then to take further.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Acta Sanctorum*, June VII, Antwerp, 1717, pp. 56–76.
- ² Conrad Jannings's published version in the *Acta Sanctorum* was based on the mid-sixteenth century Vat. Lat. 3750. We corrected it against Ottobon. Lat. 1863, probably of the 1470s, which is close enough to Vegio's original of circa 1458 to be considered authoritative, although it contains some scribal errors that we ignored. We thank the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana for microfilm copies of the manuscripts containing our text in their collection.
- ³ We have not had access to Fabio Della Schiava's doctoral thesis on the text, *Il 'De rebus antiquis memorabilibus basilicae S. Petri Romae' di Maffeo Vegio: Edizione critica e commento*, currently in press at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Alfarano	Tiberio Alfarano, <i>De basilica vaticanae antiquissima et nova structura</i> , ed. M. Cerrati, Rome, 1914 (reprint 1959).
AS	<i>Acta Sanctorum</i> , ed. J. Bolland et al., Brussels, 1643–1940.
AUC	Livy, <i>Ab urbe condita</i> .
Blaauw, <i>Cultus et Decor</i>	S. De Blaauw, <i>Cultus et decor. Liturgia e architettura nella Roma tardoantica e medievale</i> , Vatican City 1994, 2 vols. All our references are to volume 2.
Grimaldi	Giacomo Grimaldi, <i>Descrizione della basilica antica di San Pietro in Vaticano</i> , ed. R. Niggli, Vatican City, 1972.
HE	Eusebius, <i>Historia Ecclesiastica. Ecclesiastical History</i> , in <i>Eusebius Werke</i> , ed. T. Mommsen, Leipzig, 1902 (= <i>Die Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller</i> , vol. 9).
ICUR	G. B. de Rossi, <i>Inscriptiones Christianae urbis Romae</i> , Rome, 1888, ns II, ed. A. Silvagni.
LP	<i>Liber Pontificalis</i> , ed. L. Duchesne, Paris, 1981 (1886–1892), 2 vols. We cite Duchesne volume and page.
Mallius	Petrus Mallius, “Descriptio basilicae vaticanae,” in <i>Codice topografico della città di Roma</i> , ed. R. Valentini and G. Zucchetti, Rome, 1946, vol. 3, pp. 375–442. We cite chapter and page in VZ.
NH	Pliny, <i>Natural History</i> .
Panvinio	Onofrio Panvinio, “De rebus antiquis memorabilibus, et praestantia basilicae Sancti Petri,” in <i>Spicilegium Romanum</i> , A. Mai, Rome, 1843, pp. 194–382.
PG	<i>Patrologia cursus completus, series Graeca</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne, 1857–1866.
PL	<i>Patrologia cursus completus, series Latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne, Paris, 1844–1890.
Richardson	L. Richardson, <i>A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome</i> , Baltimore, 1992
Rufinus	Rufinus, <i>Ecclesiastical History</i> , in <i>Eusebius Werke</i> , ed. T. Mommsen, Leipzig, 1902 (= <i>Die Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller</i> , vol. 9), facing Eusebius’s original.

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Suetonius Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*. We give the name of the emperor and the chapter.

Our practice is to give regnal dates for popes and emperors at their first appearance in the text. All are AD unless indicated otherwise. We also occasionally supply other dates and references to the Bible, always inserted into the text in brackets.