1 Rome in 700: 'Constantinople on the Tiber'

Any attempt to chart the history of Rome over the course of the eighth century must begin by establishing a point of departure, and consequently the aim of this initial chapter is to paint a picture of political and cultural life in the city in or about the year 700, a 'launching pad' or foil against which to measure the continuities and changes that will follow. The overarching premise in this regard is that Rome in that year still functioned as an integral part of the Empire to which it had long ago given its name, even if the political capital had been moved to Constantinople (formerly Byzantium) some four centuries earlier. As yet, no one seriously questioned the existing political order. This continued integration can also be documented extensively in the sphere of material culture, as revealed through both archaeology and the analysis of buildings and their decorations.

Many of the ivory diptychs created for the Roman consuls in Late Antiquity featured personifications of 'Old Rome' and 'New Rome', the twin poles of the Empire's constructed identity. And although its geographic extent was fractured in the seventh century by the dramatic loss of Egypt, North Africa, and the Levant to the Arabs, in addition to being divided by deep theological differences regarding the nature of Christ, if there had been consuls to issue diptychs in 700 the traditional formula would probably still have been regarded as appropriate. There can be no doubt that the importance of 'Old Rome' had dwindled mightily over the course of the sixth and seventh centuries, particularly in political terms. The city was no longer a place of authority where important decisions were made, but the name alone still carried enormous *cachet*, and would in fact be used by the emperors in Constantinople until their conquest by the Ottomans in 1453. Nevertheless, 'Old Rome' remained a part of its homonymous Empire in much more than name. In 700 it still exercised considerable influence in the sphere of religion, and, despite some opposition from other senior patriarchs, its bishop, the pope, was broadly considered to wield substantial influence in matters of the faith, a position reaffirmed by the success of the Roman delegation to the Sixth Ecumenical Council that

had met at Constantinople in 680–1 CE. There the opposition of the Roman church to the 'heresy' of Monotheletism received formal approval.

At the end of the seventh century the imperial capital on the Bosporus was no longer a youthful upstart, fashioned in the shadow of 'Old Rome' which initially it had sought to emulate. It had long since overtaken and surpassed its parent as a political, economic and cultural centre. In fact, by 700 their relative position had been largely reversed in broadly cultural terms, with the result that 'Old Rome' could now be aptly described as a 'Constantinople on the Tiber'.[1] Per Jonas Nordhagen, who coined that phrase, was thinking primarily in art historical terms, and indeed the Roman monuments dating from the years around 700 may have been little different from work being undertaken at the same time in Constantinople, and, as we shall see, possibly even executed by the same workshops of painters and mosaicists. Of course the question is complicated enormously by the Byzantine imperial policy of Iconoclasm,[2] in effect over much of the eighth and early ninth centuries, with the result that almost nothing now survives of the pictorial arts in the city of Constantinople from the years before 843. But we can nevertheless assess the situation in the capital from two directions. The first is the scattering of contemporary buildings in 'Byzantium' about which something is known, for example, the mosaic decorations of the Church of the Dormition at Nicaea (modern Iznik in Turkey);[3] and the second is art in Constantinople from the years immediately after Iconoclasm. While the latter does not provide reliable testimony for questions of pre-Iconoclastic style or technique, the overall schemes of decoration and the iconographic formulas employed appear substantially unchanged after the hiatus in image production, where these can be assessed. All told, enough evidence survives, in Rome and elsewhere, to suggest that Nordhagen presents a highly plausible case.

This chapter will propose that Rome in the year 700 was a 'Byzantine' city in many if not most other respects as well, from politics and economics to language and culture. This is not to say that early medieval Rome remained unchanged from Late Antiquity. To the contrary, it had changed dramatically, particularly in the areas of demographics and social practices; but, if anything, this period of transformation had served to bring it closer to the world of the contemporary eastern Mediterranean rather than pushing the two regions farther apart. That break would indeed come, but at the dawn of the eighth century it still lay somewhere in the future. In

[1] Nordhagen 2000. [2] *ODB*: 975–7.
[3] Underwood 1959; Barber 1991; and Brubaker and Haldon 2001: 21–3.

700 there was no substantial dichotomy between the notions of 'Rome' and 'Byzantium', either in conception or reality.

In order to understand Rome in the year 700, we need to begin by looking briefly at the previous two centuries, and in particular the devastating effects of the calamitous Gothic wars on the city, its population, and its administration. The period of the sixth and seventh centuries was not the best of times for the broader fortunes of the Roman Empire in general, and the Italian peninsula in particular.[4] It suffered an endless series of conflicts, plagues, famines, and natural disasters for which we have very scant records of their consequences for daily life; but for the period of the Gothic wars (535–53 CE), and for their effects on Rome in particular, we have an observant eyewitness in the person of the historian Procopius, albeit writing only some years later. He provides, for example, a lengthy and vivid account of the situation in the city during the year-long Gothic siege from March 537 to March 538. And so we shall begin with him.

Following a successful campaign to retake North Africa from the Vandals, in 535 Justinian had sent his foremost general, Belisarius, to reconquer Italy from the Ostrogoths. Belisarius landed in Sicily and moved north, eventually reaching Rome in December 536; but then the Ostrogothic king Vitiges counter-attacked, and laid siege to the city. Vitiges did not have sufficient strength to break through the city's Aurelian walls, but the outnumbered imperial forces wisely resisted all attempts to lure them into an open battle, resulting in a prolonged period of stalemate. At first this was a mere inconvenience to the populace, with the cutting of the aqueducts resulting in the necessary closure of the baths, but it was not long before famine and disease began to take a significant toll.[5]

The 'Gothic War' would drag on over almost two full decades, with first one side and then the other gaining advantage, before the final defeat of the Ostrogoths by Narses at the battle of Mons Lactarius in Campania. Over that period, the city of Rome would suffer a number of sieges, being occupied first by one side and then the other; and slowly but surely the population was severely reduced. In the 546 siege by the Ostrogothic king Totila we are told that the inhabitants were reduced to eating nettles and their own dung. Procopius reports that 'there were many too, who, because of the pressure of the famine, destroyed themselves with their own hands; for they could no longer find either dogs or mice or any dead animal of any

[4] For a recent survey of the evidence for the collapse of 'social cohesion' in sixth-century Italy, see Pohl 2018.

[5] Procopius, *History of the Wars* 5.20.5, 6.3.1–22; trans. Dewing III: 195, 309–15.

kind on which to feed.'[6] When Totila's army eventually occupied the city, apparently only some 500 men remained, the rest having either fled or succumbed to starvation;[7] and when the Ostrogothic army moved on, they took the last remnants of the population with them, 'refusing to allow a single soul in Rome, but leaving it entirely deserted'.[8]

Procopius's dismal picture is corroborated fully by the sequence of papal biographies known collectively as the *Liber pontificalis*.[9] During the siege by Totila, for example, we are told that 'Such a famine occurred in Rome that they even wanted to eat their own children'. Our text goes on to report that 'some of the senators – the patricians and exconsuls Cathegus, Albinus, and Basilius – escaped, reached Constantinople and were presented before the emperor Justinian in their affliction and desolation'.[10] Understandably enough, there is no evidence that they ever returned.

Justininian's 'Pragmatic Sanction' (554 CE) brought a new civil-military administration, headed by an exarch resident in the Adriatic port city of Ravenna; but political upheaval continued to plague the Italian peninsula, culminating in the invasion in 568 of the Lombards, who quickly occupied north and central Italy, establishing their capital in the Po Valley at Pavia. War was not the only affliction to be suffered by the populace of Rome: time and again we hear of the devastating effects of famine, disease, and the flooding of the Tiber river (*LP* 64.1, 65.1, 69.1; ed. Duchesne I: 308, 309, 317). The most obvious result was that the city became severely depopulated, although the decline in numbers had already started in the fifth century.

Various historians have attempted to calculate an approximate figure for the city's remaining inhabitants. Richard Krautheimer, for example, estimated a population in the mid-sixth century of about 30,000,[11] which would represent a decline of some 97 per cent since the era of Constantine (r. 306–37) when it is thought to have been about one million. Although one scholar has expressed the view that Krautheimer's figure may actually be too high,[12] most others who have tackled this topic are slightly less pessimistic; Ludovico Gatto, for example, has argued that the population probably did not dip below 100,000,[13] although Riccardo Santangeli Valenzani prefers a figure of

[6] *Ibid.*, 7.17.19; trans. Dewing IV: 299–301. [7] *Ibid.*, 7.20.19.
[8] *Ibid.*, 7.22.19; trans. Dewing IV: 349.
[9] For the origin and nature of this important and influential text, first compiled in the sixth century using models such as Suetonius, Pseudo-Aurelius Victor, and the *Historia Augusta*, see McKitterick 2011 and McKitterick 2015: 226–7. For a survey of the various manuscript recensions, see most recently Capo 2009: 58–88; and Gantner 2014a: 302–14.
[10] *LP* 61.7, ed. Duchesne I: 298; trans. Davis 2010: 57. [11] Krautheimer 1980: 65.
[12] Hodges 1993: 356. [13] Gatto 1998.

50,000–60,000.[14] Given the lack of hard evidence, all such figures must necessarily be guesswork, however 'educated' on the basis of data such as the figures for pork distribution;[15] but regardless of the precise number, and even accepting the most conservative estimates, the effect on life in the city will certainly have been dramatic. Large areas within the perimeter of the third-century Aurelian walls were no longer inhabited, and would be re-deployed for agriculture, interspersed with little islands of population. Wickham envisages 'as many as a dozen "urban villages" scattered across the vast area inside the perimeter of the Aurelian walls'.[16] Unfortunately, very little is known about the nature of domestic housing in this period, until the reappearance in the ninth century of newly constructed residences in areas like the Forum of Nerva.[17] A similar picture of what Hodges deems 'staggering depopulation' characterized the rural hinterland outside the city, and he notes that the 'population passed below any threshold that is readily identified by field archeology'.[18] By the beginning of the seventh century, daily life in 'Old Rome' and its environs would no longer have been recognized by those who had lived there in the years before 500 CE; but from the ashes a new city slowly but surely emerged, albeit one very different in a great many respects except for the institution of the papacy with its stout adherence to what it defined as orthodox Christianity, as well as the physical urban landscape created by the buildings and monuments inherited from a previous age.

These dramatic developments did not pass unremarked by contemporary authors, and perhaps most notably by the pope whose reign ended the sixth century and inaugurated the seventh, Gregory I (590–604).[19] Two passages from his writings paint a bleak picture of the situation in his time. In his homily on the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel, Gregory observes: 'Everywhere we see lamentation, on all sides we hear groans. Cities lie in ruins, fortresses are razed, fields are deserted, the earth is returned to solitude. No countryman has remained in the fields, hardly any inhabitant in the towns. . . . For where is the Senate? Where now are the people? Rome, though empty, already burns.'[20] And a similar sentiment is expressed in his *Dialogues*: 'Now the cities have been depopulated, fortresses razed, churches burned down, monasteries and nunneries destroyed, the fields abandoned by mankind, and destitute of any cultivator the land lies empty and solitary.

[14] Santangeli Valenzani 2004a: 23. [15] Whitehouse 1988: 29–30. [16] Wickham 1999: 15.
[17] Santangeli Valenzani 1997.
[18] Hodges 1993: 356–7. For the broader Italian context, see also Valenti 2018.
[19] For Gregory and his world view, as expressed in his numerous books and letters, see Markus 1997 and Neil 2013.
[20] Gregory I, *Homil. in Ezechielem* VI.22 (*PL* 76: 1010); trans. Gray, 228–9.

No landholder lives on it; wild beasts occupy places once held by a multitude of men.'[21]

Gregory can perhaps be seen as a sort of Janus figure, with two heads. One head looked backward and lamented what had been or was being lost.[22] It was in his time, for example, that the last recorded meeting of the Roman Senate took place, on 25 April 603;[23] and perhaps a sign of things to come may be discerned in the location chosen for this gathering: the Lateran Palace, the papal residence. But the other head looked forward, to a new place for the Christian church in the lives of western Europeans, and to a prominent role in that process for the bishops of Rome. In his time the popes became much more active 'players' in events taking place in the world around them, including the city of Rome itself. It was Gregory who organized a public penitential procession with the aim of ending the plague devastating the city in 590, with seven different groups starting from seven different churches, and meeting at Santa Maria Maggiore.[24] Another similar procession, the 'Major Litany' ('*letania maior*') from the church of San Lorenzo in Lucina to Saint Peter's via the Milvian Bridge, was celebrated annually on 25 April. It was clearly intended to replace the pagan *Robigalia* festival, given that it took place on the same date and followed much the same route.[25] These public events should be viewed as furthering an ongoing process of ecclesiastical appropriation of the physical landscape of Rome, also manifested in the concurrent development of the stational liturgy, a unifying factor that incorporated large areas of the city and large numbers of its lay inhabitants.[26] Gregory I is also the pope who initiated the Roman church's active outreach efforts in terms of evangelization, beginning with campaigns to eradicate remaining vestiges of paganism in Sardinia and Corsica, followed shortly thereafter by Augustine's mission to Kent in the year 597 to convert the Anglo-Saxons (*LP* 66.3, ed. Duchesne I: 312).[27]

[21] Gregory I, *Dialogues* III, 38, ed. Moricca: 226–7; English translation from Brown 1984: 40.
[22] McNally 1978. For Gregory's sense that these events were signs that the Apocalypse was not far off, Markus 1997: 51–4. Humphries (2007) takes a less dramatic view, arguing that evidence for some continuity in the fourth and fifth centuries should be extended to the end of the sixth.
[23] Chastagnol 1996; Burgarella 2001; and Humphries 2007: 21.
[24] Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, ed. Krusch and Levison, I.1: 477–8; trans. Dalton II: 427–8. For the development of the 'seven-fold litany' (*letania septiformis*) processions and their implications, see Baldovin 1987: 158–9; and Latham 2009.
[25] Dyer 2007.
[26] Baldovin 1987: 268; Quattrocchi 2002; Romano 2014: 54–62, 109–39; and De Blaauw 2017: 24–7. For the influence of imperial ceremonial on emerging papal practices, Humphries 2007: 51–3.
[27] Richards 1980: 228–50; Markus 1997: 80–2, 177–87; and Ricci 2013. The position of Rome as the source for all aspects of Christian theology and liturgy in Anglo-Saxon England permeates the writings of authors like Bede; see Hilliard 2018: 41–2, 45–7.

Gregory has long been seen by historians as a pivotal figure in the history of the papacy, someone from a distinguished and wealthy family who began his career in the secular administrative system, including a precocious stint as the Urban Prefect of Rome in 573 CE, but who then moved into ecclesiastical life, founding some seven monasteries on his family estates (six in Sicily and one in Rome), and also serving as the papal *apocrisarius* to Constantinople before being elected pope in September 590, apparently against his will and while still only a deacon.[28] The use of the term 'consul of God' ('*consul Dei*') in his funerary inscription is telling, as it suggests that this melding of civic and ecclesiastical duties and responsibilities was ultimately a conscious decision. Richards sees in him 'the deep intertwining of *Christianitas* and *Romanitas*'.[29]

The full papal exercise of authority over the city of Rome still lay somewhere in the future, however. When Pope Boniface IV (608–15) wanted to convert the abandoned and presumably derelict structure of the Pantheon into a new church, he first sought and obtained permission from Emperor Phocas (*LP* 69.2, ed. Duchesne I: 317), and at the same time the imperial *patricius* Smaragdos erected an honorific column to the emperor in the Roman Forum.[30] Public monuments and public spaces were clearly still controlled by the civil administration. A few decades later, Pope Honorius (625–38) similarly obtained the permission of Emperor Heraclius to remove bronze roof tiles from the temple 'that is called of Rome' ('*qui appellatur Romae*') in order to re-cover the roof of Saint Peter's (*LP* 72.2, ed. Duchesne I: 323). Public buildings and monuments were evidently still regarded as imperial property in 663 when the Emperor Constans II decided to strip the city of its bronze, including the Pantheon's roof tiles (*LP* 78.3, ed. Duchesne I: 343),[31] but these first inklings of papal interest in the urban architectural fabric would continue to develop as time passed. It would be interesting to know if Pope Honorius also sought imperial permission when he converted the Curia Senatus building in the Forum into the church of Sant'Adriano. Presumably he did, but in this instance no mention is made in our only source for this action, the *Liber pontificalis* (*LP* 72.6, ed. Duchesne I: 324).

Of all the social customs that were significantly disrupted by prevailing political circumstances, the most readily documentable through archaeology is undoubtedly burial practice. Roman law dating back to the fifth century BCE had prohibited burial within the *pomerium*, which in Late

[28] Richards 1980: 25–43; and Markus 1997: 7–14. [29] Richards 1980: 50.
[30] Taddei 2014a; and Kalas 2017. [31] Coates-Stephens 2017.

Antiquity had become more or less synonymous with the circuit of the Aurelian walls. As a result, the major cemeteries were situated along the roads leading outwards from that perimeter, both on the surface and, from the beginning of the third century CE onwards, below ground in subterranean passages that have come to be known as the catacombs. With very few exceptions, extramural burial remained normative until the first half of the sixth century, at which time a dramatic change occurred. Dated catacomb burials cease fairly abruptly at this moment, and at the same time we find the earliest evidence of burials inside the city walls. This change may have been prompted initially by the sheer impossibility of gaining access to the cemeteries in times of siege,[32] and indeed two sources record this circumstance explicitly, albeit anecdotally. The first is Zosimus's account of the unsuccessful siege of Rome by Alaric and the Visigoths in 408: 'And when there was no means of relief, and their food was exhausted, plague not unexpectedly succeeded famine. Corpses lay everywhere, and since the bodies could not be buried outside the city with the enemy guarding every exit, the city became their tomb.'[33] Just over a century later, we find a similar situation during the twelve-month Ostrogothic siege of 537–8. When a deputation of citizens came to the imperial commander, Belisarius, to voice their complaints, the inability to follow the normal practice of burying their dead outside the walls was singled out for specific mention.[34] In such circumstances it is not difficult to imagine that new solutions must necessarily have been sought, and in recent years the written accounts have been fully confirmed by the discovery of many dozens of intramural graves datable to the sixth and seventh centuries, beginning with Marina Marcelli's excavation of the Porticus Liviae on the Oppian hill. This site included some fifteen tombs, cut into a late fourth- or early fifth-century mosaic floor, constituting a useful *terminus post quem* for the interments; and the few objects of glass and other materials found in the graves suggested a date near the end of the sixth century.[35]

[32] Osborne 1984b.

[33] Zosimus, *New History* 5.19; trans. Ridley, p. 120. Zosimus was writing a century later, and in Constantinople, but his account of the years 407–10 CE is heavily dependent on the earlier work of Olympiodorus of Thebes, who is generally considered to have been well-informed, although not himself an actual eyewitness; see Matthews 1970 and *ODB*: 1524, 2231. For the impact on burial: Meneghini 2013.

[34] Procopius, *History of the Wars* 6.3.19; trans. Dewing III: 312–3. Procopius too was writing later in life, and in Constantinople, but had accompanied Belisarius in Italy, and thus had first-hand knowledge of the events in question.

[35] Marcelli 1989.

In subsequent years, Roberto Meneghini and Riccardo Santangeli Valenzani collected and analysed evidence from some 85 burial sites within the walls of Rome, totalling some 500 graves, and proposed dates in either the second half of the sixth century or the seventh century on the basis of stratigraphy and articles found in the tombs, primarily glass and ceramics, although finds of any objects were quite rare. These graves were not elaborate, often in simple trenches or reusing earlier materials.[36]

Rossella Rea has used this data to propose a typology of urban burials, dividing them into three groups that succeeded one another in approximate chronological sequence.[37] The earliest are what can be termed 'casual' burials, usually found in isolation and devoid of formal organization. For Meneghini and Santangeli Valenzani these represent the '*momenti di emergenza*' recorded by Zosimus and Procopius,[38] when traditional extramural burial was simply impractical. By the middle of the sixth century, however, a practice that had been born of necessity now became more systematic, with burials laid out in a more orderly fashion and comprising larger groups, no doubt reflecting the simple reality that large areas of the city lay derelict, and thus were available to be put to new uses. And in the final phase, these urban burials began to be clustered around the city's churches, for example, Santa Maria Antiqua in the Roman Forum.[39] Marios Costambeys has suggested that the development of ecclesiastical graveyards might be associated with an attempt by the clergy to reclaim some measure of control over this important social practice.[40]

Perhaps fortuitously for the future of the city of Rome, the seventh century also witnessed enormous disruption in the eastern quadrant of the Empire, with the conquests undertaken by first the Persians and then the Arabs, the former ephemeral and almost immediately reversed by the Emperor Heraclius, but the latter permanent and still a defining factor for the political geography of the Middle East today. This turmoil resulted in a significant displacement of population, best documented for male religious communities at least some of whom made what was presumably a conscious choice not to live outside the now diminished frontiers of Christendom. A number of 'refugees' and other peripatetic monks and clergy, both individuals and groups, found their way westwards, many apparently preferring Rome to Constantinople.[41] Among them, for example, was John Moschus, author of

[36] Meneghini and Santangeli Valenzani 1993; Meneghini and Santangeli Valenzani 1995; and Meneghini 2004b.
[37] Rea 1993. [38] Meneghini and Santangeli Valenzani 1993: 106.
[39] Augenti 1996: 163–8. See also Coates-Stephens 2020. [40] Costambeys 2001.
[41] Bréhier 1903; Sansterre 1983 I: 17–20; Dagron 1988: 48–9; and von Falkenhausen 2015: 44–9.

the *Pratum spirituale*, who came to Rome along with his disciple Sophronius, a future patriarch of Jerusalem. Moschus would end his days in the city in 619.[42] Some two decades later, a community of Greek-speaking monks from Cilicia established itself outside the walls at Aquas Salvias, now the site of the Cistercian community of Tre Fontane.[43] This latter group brought with them the head of Anastasius the Persian (martyred in 628), and this relic is listed in the more-or-less contemporary guide for pilgrims to Rome, the *De locis sanctis martyrum*.[44] Other ascetic communities would soon follow, perhaps most notably a group from the monastery of Saint Sabas outside Jerusalem, also refugees from the Arab conquest, who settled on the 'little' Aventine hill in the 640s, naming their church San Saba after their original founder.[45] We shall return to this building and its decorations in a subsequent chapter. And in the reign of Pope Donus (676–8) a group of Syrian monks who had migrated to Rome were discovered to be Nestorian heretics, necessitating their dispersal among other houses in the city (*LP* 80.2, ed. Duchesne I: 348). Communities of hellenophone monks would remain a feature of religious life in Rome through to at least the eleventh century.[46]

Not all the religious 'refugees' were monks. Others were or would become regular clergy, and they soon found a place among the ranks of Rome's ecclesiastical establishment. One such was Theodore, whom we are told was born in Greece, the son of a bishop from Jerusalem (*LP* 75.1, ed. Duchesne I: 331). He was the first of a line of hellenophone *émigrés* or their offspring to reach the top of the church hierarchy in Rome, becoming pope in the year 642. Many more would follow. Of the thirteen bishops who occupied the seat of Saint Peter from the election of Agatho in 681 to the death of Zacharias in 752, only two are described in their *Liber pontificalis* biographies as 'Roman': Benedict II (684–5) and Gregory II (715–31). Among the other eleven there are five 'Syrians', four 'Greeks', and two Sicilians, the last presumably also Greek-speaking. This statistic is rather stunning, and despite what must presumably have been a fair degree of 'Italianization', the prolonged dominance of individuals whose cultural and religious background was grounded in the eastern Mediterranean must have been significant.[47] As Jean-Marie

[42] Sansterre 1983 I: 57–60. [43] *Ibid.*, I: 13–17.

[44] *CT* II: 109; and Bertelli 1970. In the autumn of 713 CE this relic effected the cure of the daughter of Theopemptos, an *émigré* bishop from Syria who had sought refuge in Rome, as recorded in a contemporary text, composed in Greek and later translated into Latin: Smith 2018.

[45] Sansterre 1983 I: 22–9.

[46] Sansterre 1988. For a more general introduction to monasticism in early medieval Rome: Ferrari 1957, and Costambeys and Leyser 2007.

[47] For a fuller documentation of the Greek presence in the city, see Mango 1973: 695–714; Burgarella 2002; von Falkenhausen 2015: 44–57; and especially Sansterre 1983. Thomas Noble