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Rome in the Eighth Century

This book addresses a critical era in the history of the city of Rome, the eighth century CE. This was the moment when the bishops of Rome assumed political and administrative responsibility for the city's infrastructure and the physical welfare of its inhabitants, in the process creating the papal state that still survives today. John Osborne approaches this using the primary lens of 'material culture' (buildings and their decorations, both surviving and known from documents and/or archaeology), while at the same time incorporating extensive information drawn from written sources. Whereas written texts are comparatively few in number, recent decades have witnessed an explosion in new archaeological discoveries and excavations, and these provide a much fuller picture of cultural life in the city. This methodological approach of using buildings and objects as historical documents is embodied in the phrase 'history in art'.

JOHN OSBORNE is a Distinguished Research Professor and Dean Emeritus in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Carleton University, Ottawa. He is a cultural historian of early medieval Italy with a focus on the material culture of Rome and Venice. His publications include studies of medieval use of the Roman catacombs, murals in churches such as San Clemente and Santa Maria Antiqua, cultural contacts between Rome and Constantinople, and the medieval understanding of Rome's heritage of ancient buildings and statuary.

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A History in Art

JOHN OSBORNE
Carleton University, Ottawa

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Last but in fact foremost, Per Jonas Nordhagen has served as my unofficial guide and mentor since my first encounter with his work. His

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ground-breaking research on the painted decorations of Santa Maria Antiqua provides the foundation on which this book has been constructed, and over the years he has been unfailing in his encouragement and generosity. In return I offer this small gift in the year of his ninetieth birthday.

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Abbreviations

BAV	Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana
BNFr	Bibliothèque Nationale de France
CBCR	R. Krautheimer *et al.*, *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae*, 5 vols. (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1937–77).
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CT	*Codice topografico della città di Roma*, R. Valentini and G. Zucchetti (eds.), 4 vols. (Rome: Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 1940–53).
LP	*Le Liber Pontificalis: texte, introduction, et commentaire*, ed. by L. Duchesne, 2 vols. (Paris: Ernest Thorin, 1886–92). *Tome troisième. Additions et corrections par Cyrille Vogel* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1955).
LTUR	*Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, ed. by E.M. Steinby, 6 vols. (Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 1993–2000).
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
ODB	*Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, A. Kazhdan (ed.) (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
OR	*Les 'Ordines Romani' du Haut Moyen Age*, M. Andrieu (ed.), 5 vols. (Louvain: Spicilegium sacrum Lovaniense, 1931–61).
ÖstNB	Österreichische Nationalbibliothek
PL	*Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina* (Patrologia Latina), J.-P. Migne (ed.), 221 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1841–64).

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Preface

The seeds for this study were sown some three decades ago over convivial dinner conversations with Richard Hodges, then Director of the British School at Rome. Our views of what the city of Rome might have looked like in the early Middle Ages differed considerably: mine based largely on the compilation of papal biographies known as the *Liber pontificalis* and some remaining fragments of mosaic and mural painting, and his on the evidence of archaeology. I saw a city in which the arts and culture clearly flourished, at least in comparison to most other parts of contemporary western Europe and Byzantium, and he saw an impoverished and largely depopulated post-Roman urban wasteland that was conspicuously lacking any archaeological footprint, an 'invisible city' ('*città invisibile*') in the words of Riccardo Santangeli Valenzani.[1] In retrospect, I think we were both wrong. I relied too heavily on a written text that presented a very one-sided picture, compiled primarily for the purpose of self-promotion; and Hodges's conclusion perhaps was based not so much on the analysis of surviving evidence, but rather on an almost total absence of evidence. Today a more nuanced reading likely falls somewhere in the middle of those extremes.[2]

What has changed? Primarily the archaeology. Thirty years ago, apart from a handful of excavated churches, for example, Santa Maria Antiqua, San Saba, San Crisogono, and San Clemente, the archaeological evidence for life in early medieval Rome was virtually non-existent. Excavators of a previous age had rarely stopped to study or even record the medieval layers in their rush to get down to levels deemed to be historically more important. But this situation was altered irrevocably beginning in the decade of the 1980s, with important excavations taking place in numerous locations in the city centre, including the imperial *fora* and, perhaps most significantly, at the Crypta Balbi.[3] We now have vastly more information at

[1] Santangeli Valenzani 2003: 115.

[2] For a thoughtful analysis of the situation, although perhaps still overemphasizing the 'collapse' scenario: Hodges 1993.

[3] For the Crypta Balbi: Santangeli Valenzani 2003 and Vendittelli 2004. For an overview of early medieval Rome seen through the lens of recent archaeology: Paroli 2004. For the contribution of recent archaeology to our understanding of the broader situation across Italy: Wickham 1999.

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our disposal than we did four decades ago; and there is probably no more dramatic testimony to the advances made in our understanding of the early medieval city than the opening in the year 2000 of the Museo Nazionale Romano at that latter site. At the same time, the evidence provided by archaeology has permitted a much more informed reading of the few surviving written sources, as well as abetting increased contextual analysis of surviving fragments of architecture along with work in media such as mosaic, painting, and sculpture. As Kyle Harper has put it so succinctly: 'Archaeology provides a continuous stream of random data to correct the lapses and distortions of the textual record.'[4] That said, however, archaeology on its own also presents a distorted picture. If we measured early medieval Rome only through the changes documented in the excavation of the site of the Crypta Balbi, we might conclude that the first half of the eighth century was an era of complete catastrophe ('*una vera catastrofe*').[5] But that too would be inaccurate.

The other significant change has been the growing acceptance by historians that 'documents' are not only comprised of writing on parchment or paper. Chris Wickham has observed that 'Roman documents hardly exist for the eighth and ninth centuries',[6] but that remark applies only to a certain class of document. Archaeological materials, along with standing remains, in other words buildings and their decorations, are also 'documents', and speak volumes about life in the early medieval city. In 1980 Richard Krautheimer took an important and impressive step in this new direction with his book *Rome: Profile of a City, 312–1308*; but his focus was on the periods for which documentable activity was most intense, and surviving buildings and their decorations were most prevalent, and thus the eighth century received almost no attention whatsoever in comparison to what came immediately before and after. This book will attempt to fill in that particular crack.

The subtitle, 'a history in art', is intended not merely to be descriptive but also to signal a difference in methodological approach. Over the years I have attempted to build a case for what I have come to call 'history *in* art', as opposed to 'history *of* art'. The term is not my invention: credit for that goes to an architectural historian named Alan Gowans (1923–2001), who understood precociously that material culture could be used more broadly as documentation for history, and he passionately promoted this methodology at a time when most 'art' historians were engaged almost exclusively with what is generally called 'fine art'. Gowans was a proselytizer for this

[4] Harper 2011: 500. [5] Santangeli Valenzani 2003: 125. [6] Wickham 2015: 8.

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approach to historical study, at the time profoundly novel in anglophone universities, preferring in his own research to engage with what he deemed 'popular and commercial' architecture rather than buildings of a more elevated level of patronage; and he chose this name for the academic department he founded at the University of Victoria (British Columbia) in the early 1970s, with the wording consciously intended to signal a fundamental difference from more traditional art history programmes. I was exceptionally fortunate to be offered my first academic appointment in his 'Department of History in Art', and I instantly discovered an intellectual home.

My graduate student sojourns at The British School at Rome also played an important role in this regard, introducing me to the methods and approaches of archaeology. David Whitehouse, the director at that time, was himself a medieval archaeologist, and he employed the evidence unearthed in his excavations to shed light on larger historical issues. Indeed, the sites he chose to excavate were often determined by the desire to answer specific puzzling questions. Archaeology was thus regarded very clearly as a means to an end, not the end itself. It produced grist for the historian's mill, and I came to regard the history of art in a similar light. Many mornings he would conduct what amounted to an informal seminar over the course of our communal British School breakfasts, presenting the issues being tackled in his own current research and exploring questions of methodology. These discussions certainly helped to shape my doctoral dissertation, and the same approach was further honed in subsequent studies of the medieval use of the Roman catacombs and the atrium of the church of Santa Maria Antiqua.[7] These latter projects were intended as integrated historical studies balancing the evidence provided by various classes of document, in the fervent belief that the whole would be greater than the sum of the individual parts.

One of the most difficult issues for the 'historian in art' is the determination of basic facts about the 'document' in question, in the same way that more traditional historians need to know the date and circumstances of production of the written sources that they study. Context is essential. It is one thing to say that murals on the walls excavated beneath Roman churches such as San Clemente or Santa Maria Antiqua are 'medieval', or even 'early medieval', and quite another to determine whether you are dealing with a document of, say, the eighth century or the eleventh. And of course the difference is vitally important if one wants to bring this evidence

[7] Osborne 1985; and Osborne 1987.

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to bear on the exploration of any larger cultural issue. Dating early medieval painting in Rome, particularly in the absence of a known patron, has been enormously problematic, and until the second half of the twentieth century it was based almost exclusively on stylistic analysis, itself a highly subjective process and one frequently prone to considerable error. In attempting to develop a better understanding of the chronology of my 'documents', I have been enormously fortunate to have had a mentor who pioneered the development of more objective approaches to dating, again with one foot planted squarely in the discipline of archaeology: Per Jonas Nordhagen. Nordhagen's detailed documentation and analysis of the early medieval murals in the church of Santa Maria Antiqua constituted the methodological model to which I aspired. His work constitutes the foundation for this study, and it will feature prominently in what follows.

Andrea Augenti has recently made an eloquent plea for archaeologists and art historians to work together, in effect treating their approaches to material culture as a single endeavour, as has long been the case for the study of classical antiquity;[8] and at a broader level, over the course of the twentieth century this same thinking led to the emergence of a new academic discipline calling itself 'medieval studies', reflected in the title of the journal published by the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto.[9] 'Medieval studies' implies an integration of the disparate disciplines of history, art history, archaeology, palaeography, codicology, diplomatics, epigraphy, numismatics, theology, and much more; and to my mind it offers the most useful lens with which to shape our understanding of people, places and events from this period.

This book thus proposes to take a more integrative approach to the history of the city of Rome than has hitherto been attempted, particularly with respect to the evidence of 'material culture', here broadly defined. The eighth century should be seen as an exceptionally critical moment in the long history of the city of Rome, a time of considerable change encompassing politics, economics, religion, social and cultural practices, and even language, from the upper echelons of political and ecclesiastical life to the lowest strata of daily existence. More importantly, perhaps, this is the moment when Rome redefined itself in a way that would condition life in the city, and establish its role in the larger world, for at least another millennium. All those changes, and in some instances also certain

8 Augenti 2016: 276–84.

9 For an analysis of the particular Canadian contribution to the development of 'medieval studies': Reynolds 1991.

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continuities, can be documented through the approaches of archaeology and history in art. Despite often being viewed, and all too frequently dismissed, as a 'dark age',[10] the eighth century has in fact left us with a substantial and very tangible record of achievement. My aim is to collect and present some of that evidence; and my hope is that in doing so I can add more colour to a picture that has hitherto been much too stark.

Although the primary focus will be on the evidence of material culture, with the intention to rectify an imbalance in many earlier studies, this does not mean that written sources will be ignored; indeed, to the contrary. The *Liber pontificalis* remains our single most valuable document for early medieval Rome, and an indispensable tool for historians of any persuasion hoping to understand the city in this era.[11] Its evidence can be supplemented and at times corrected by a broad variety of other sources, ranging from surviving epigraphic inscriptions to a compendium of papal correspondence to the Frankish kings (the so-called *Codex epistolaris carolinus*),[12] to authors and historians based elsewhere who comment on matters 'Roman', among them Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Theophanes. If material culture constitutes the 'warp', then written documents provide the 'weft', the aim being to weave the two strands together in order to provide a single 'text', in the original meaning of that word as constituting a woven object.

In attempting to draw together these disparate strands of evidence, I have constructed this narrative chronologically. It is a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Rome in 800 was a vastly different entity than Rome in 700, or even in 750, and the intention is to document that change as it happened, a process of continual evolution not a dramatic revolution, and if possible also to obtain some understanding of how and why it occurred. And because so much of our evidence, both written sources and material culture, is associated with the names of individual popes, the episcopal reigns of these principal actors in our drama will be used to create an overarching matrix, with Sergius I (687–701) and Leo III (795–816) serving as useful and appropriate bookends. We begin with Sergius, because his apparent opposition to the religious policies of Emperor Justinian II may be seen with hindsight as initiating the political

[10] This common trope underlies the title of Peter Llewellyn's *Rome in the Dark Ages*. The notion goes back at least as far as the fourteenth century: see Mommsen 1942.

[11] For the nature, function and importance of the *Liber pontificalis,* see most recently Capo 2009: 3–109; McKitterick 2011; Gantner 2014a: 16–38; and McKitterick 2015. Examples of its use as a source for art historical terminology include Moretti 1997 and Martiniani-Reber 1999.

[12] Preserved in a single manuscript in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, MS lat. 449; see Gantner 2014a: 38–43. For a broader discussion of papal letters in this period, see Noble 2001a: 183–96.

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process that ultimately detached Rome from the empire to which it had given its name. And to avoid confusion, I shall generally use the anachronistic but broadly understood term 'Byzantine' as it has normally been used by art historians, which is to say more broadly in a cultural sense of the 'Christian eastern Mediterranean' where Greek was the common language used in religion, politics and commerce, and not only in the narrow political sense of the bits of the 'Roman Empire' that remained after its frontiers were dramatically curtailed in the seventh century. The story will end with Pope Leo III, because his coronation of Charlemagne as *imperator* in December 800 can be regarded as a useful marker for the conclusion of the development of a new alliance with the Franks and a shift in the papal world view from one centred on the Mediterranean to one encompassing primarily western Europe. The eighth century is also very conveniently bookended by two important mosaic projects in Rome: the funerary chapel of Pope John VII (705–7) in Old Saint Peter's, and Leo III's Lateran triclinium. Both make impressive statements about their time; and while neither survives intact, both are extensively documented, and thus we can speak of their nature and import with considerable assurance.

This book is certainly not the first to survey the history of the city of Rome in the eighth century, the moment when the papal state is born. Many others have trodden this path previously, among them Peter Llewellyn, Thomas Noble, Paolo Delogu, Federico Marazzi, and most recently Clemens Gantner. But their endeavours have been focussed primarily on politics and economics, using the evidence of written documents. In that process, comparatively little attention has been paid to material culture, so the approach here is fundamentally different. This is not to say that material culture has been ignored entirely, I hasten to add. Both Thomas Noble and Paolo Delogu have been valiant in their attempts to expand their reach in this regard, but material culture has rarely been their primary concern. What is intended here is not so much a *political* history, although to some extent it cannot escape being such, but rather a *cultural* history, in the broadest possible sense of that term, and with the focus squarely on buildings and their decorations, and what these can tell us about those who spent their time, energy, and above all their money, on such projects. In looking at the evidence of wall-paintings and mosaics we shall consider a broad variety of topics, including subject matter, patronage, audience, style, technique, and more broadly what Gowans termed their 'social function'. The intention in each instance will be to use the 'artefact' as an historical 'document', not merely to supplement the *Liber pontificalis* but rather to speak in its own voice.

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This approach will also lead to some diversion from previously accepted wisdom, most notably with regard to the characterization of the ruling élite in the city at this time of dramatic economic, political, and social change. Noble and Gantner, among others, have stressed the emergence of a Latin-speaking nobility which brought the run of 'Greek' popes to an end in 752 at the death of Zacharias; but this study will suggest a somewhat different understanding of that new ruling class, based largely on the evidence of their religious practices and patronage, viewed through the lens of the buildings, and above all their decorations, for which this new élite was responsible. These reveal some hitherto unexplored continuities in cultural practices that persisted in the city despite the obvious political changes. Rather than a 'Greek' élite being replaced by a new and ethnically different 'Latin' one, it will be proposed that the individuals and families remained largely unchanged, but instead chose very deliberately to 'reinvent' themselves as 'Romans' in the light of changing political realities, and at a moment when the adjective 'Greek' was acquiring pejorative implications in Rome. Most controversially, perhaps, I shall contend that even Pope Hadrian I (772–95) came from a family with hellenophone cultural roots.

There can be little doubt that the city of Rome changed over the course of the eighth century, and political actions were both the catalyst for that evolution and its primary theatre. The seventh-century losses of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, North Africa, and parts of Anatolia had opened the door to the possibility that the Christian *oikoumene* need not be co-terminal with the frontiers of the Empire ruled from Constantinople, so this mental hurdle had already been overcome. Cultural practices, on the other hand, including religious practices, were much more deeply embedded, and here change was very much slower to develop. In this regard Rome appears to have remained a 'Mediterranean' or 'Byzantine' city far longer than many have realized.[13] Even the political break between Rome and Constantinople, when it came, was anything but sharp and decisive, and I shall attempt to demonstrate this broader cultural continuity primarily through an examination of buildings and their decorations. For the most part, these structures are of a religious nature, as that is quite simply the evidence that we currently have; but it should be remembered that buildings were first and foremost stage sets for events that were considered necessary or important in the lives of those who built and used them, and churches in particular were constructed and decorated to frame the various religious practices, both individual and collective, and above all the

[13] This point has also been made forcefully by Maskarinec 2017: 338.

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Christian liturgy, undertaken in that space. Over and above those 'contextual' and 'functional' aspects, however, at what Sible de Blaauw has termed the 'spiritual or abstract level' they also 'performed' the liturgy in their own right, a 'visible manifestation of the invisible'.[14]

This book has three principal ambitions. The first is to survey what we know about the material culture of Rome from the period of the eighth century. The second, more methodological, is to make a case for viewing buildings, their decorations, and physical objects more generally, as important historical 'documents' which go far beyond merely supplementing written sources. They are worthy of examination in their own right, and can be usefully employed even in the absence of chronicles, letters, charters, and the like. And the third is to offer a different view of élite Roman society in the eighth century, based on the cultural 'baggage' inherent in the spaces they created, the mural decorations they chose, and the objects they used. Perhaps most importantly, however, my overarching intention is not only to demonstrate that, despite some significant challenges, life in the city remained vibrant and active and anything but 'invisible', but in addition to advance the seemingly preposterous claim that the eighth century might be regarded as the most important in the entire history of the city of Rome, measured by the subsequent longevity of the institutions and practices which evolve in that time.

Additional notes for readers

Where standard English forms exist for place names, these have been preferred (e.g. Naples, not Napoli). For churches, following what has now become a standard practice, Italian names are used with the exception of Saint Peter's.

In transcribing inscriptions, I have used square brackets to suggest letters where the originals have been lost, and round brackets for the expansion of abbreviations in the Latin original, in other words where the letters are known to have been understood.

The secondary literature dealing with early medieval Rome is substantial, much of it written in the last few decades, and the 'Bibliography' at the end of this volume makes no claim to be exhaustive. It represents only those items that I have found most important and/or useful, and to which reference is made in the text.

[14] De Blaauw 1991: 32–4; see also Osborne 2004.

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