

## 1 | The Lateran Basilica to 1600

IAN P. HAYNES, PAOLO LIVERANI AND LEX BOSMAN

The archbasilica of Saint John Lateran occupies a uniquely important place in world history. The first public building erected for Christian worship and the pope's own cathedral, it shaped figuratively and literally the reach and form of Christendom. Its location, in the south-east of Rome, is associated with many of the defining events of Late Antique and medieval Christianity. A summary history would note the synod of 313, convened at the so-called *Domus Faustae* to condemn Donatism even before the basilica's completion; synods of 649 against Monothelism and 769 against Iconoclasm; and five ecumenical councils, each of profound importance, between 1123 and 1512. Intertwined with authoritative statements on Church governance from the palace and *patriarchium* next to it came a steady stream of teachings on proper form and liturgical practice as articulated within its walls.

It is this rich pedigree that the title *Sancrosancta Lateranensis ecclesia omnium Urbis et Orbis ecclesiarum mater et caput* displayed on the building's magnificent eighteenth-century eastern façade proclaims. Yet despite its greater antiquity and unquestioned dominance to the high Middle Ages, Saint John Lateran has lost its prominence in public perception, and perhaps even scholarly attention, to Saint Peter's in the Vatican. Competition between these two great churches is one of the great themes in the evolution of ecclesial Rome, and is indeed attested in that self-same declaration that the Lateran church is *mater et caput*, mother and head, of the world's churches. With the hindsight of history, we can read in the proclamation in which it originated, a bull issued by Gregory XI (1370–8) from distant Avignon, a claim to pre-eminence that was becoming increasingly tenuous. Despite Gregory's assertion that the Lateran was 'our home above all other churches in Rome and in all the world' and his emphasis that it played a more important role than Saint Peter's, 'the church and basilica of the Prince of Apostles in the city of Rome', the Lateran basilica was in a strikingly dilapidated state. It would, of course, have taken more than structural deterioration to end the dominance of this fine basilica, which had rebounded from devastation before and was to be magnificently remodelled again. Yet the Avignon years were to mark another shift of fundamental importance: following the end of the long schism

the pope's residence and the seat of Church government moved from the Lateran to the Vatican.

In offering an end date for this volume of 1600 we are mindful of the comparative history of the two churches and their associated buildings, but we end our collection then for reasons particular to the Lateran. Our sister volume in the BSR/CUP series, *Old St Peter's, Rome*, naturally took as its end point the wholesale destruction of the fourth-century Saint Peter's, and the creation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of a radically different structure. Crucially, the Lateran basilica's history unfolded differently. Twice sacked in the fifth century, devastated by an earthquake in 896, severely fire damaged in 1308 and again in 1360, augmented already under Constantine with a separate baptistery, and further supplemented at various times by adjacent oratories, libraries and a nymphaeum, the building's appearance certainly changed many times, yet crucially its essential structure endured. There was no radical Renaissance rebuild. When the time came for major refurbishment and remodelling at the Lateran, papal priorities post-Reformation meant that this monument's tangible testimony to the antiquity of Rome's Christian tradition was seen in a different light. Francesco Borromini's brilliant three-year-long remodelling of the archbasilica of Saint John Lateran, completed in October 1649, was marked by innovation, but underpinned by an emphasis on conservation. Preserving elements of the earliest basilica was a priority. Though the degree to which this was achieved is debated further within this volume, one cannot simply speak of an 'Old' Saint John Lateran and a 'New' one.

Rather than ending with the transformation wrought by Borromini, our volume ends in the Holy Year 1600. A visitor to the Lateran prior to the building projects that culminated then would have still been able to see many traces of Constantine's basilica; key elements of the *spolia* that characterised its variegated interior still occupied the positions where their fourth-century builders had placed them. Even the recently completed commissions of Pope Clement VIII (1592–1605), the refurbishment of the archbasilica transept and its magnificent pictorial cycle, harked back to earlier times. Adorned with scenes depicting the basilica's founder, Constantine, the cycle speaks to the interconnectedness of Clement's aspirations for a revival of Church authority with restoration of the archbasilica itself. The fundamental connection between the two lies at the heart of Freiberg's study of the Lateran in 1600.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. Freiberg, *The Lateran in 1600: Christian Concord in Counter-Reformation Rome* (New York, 1995).

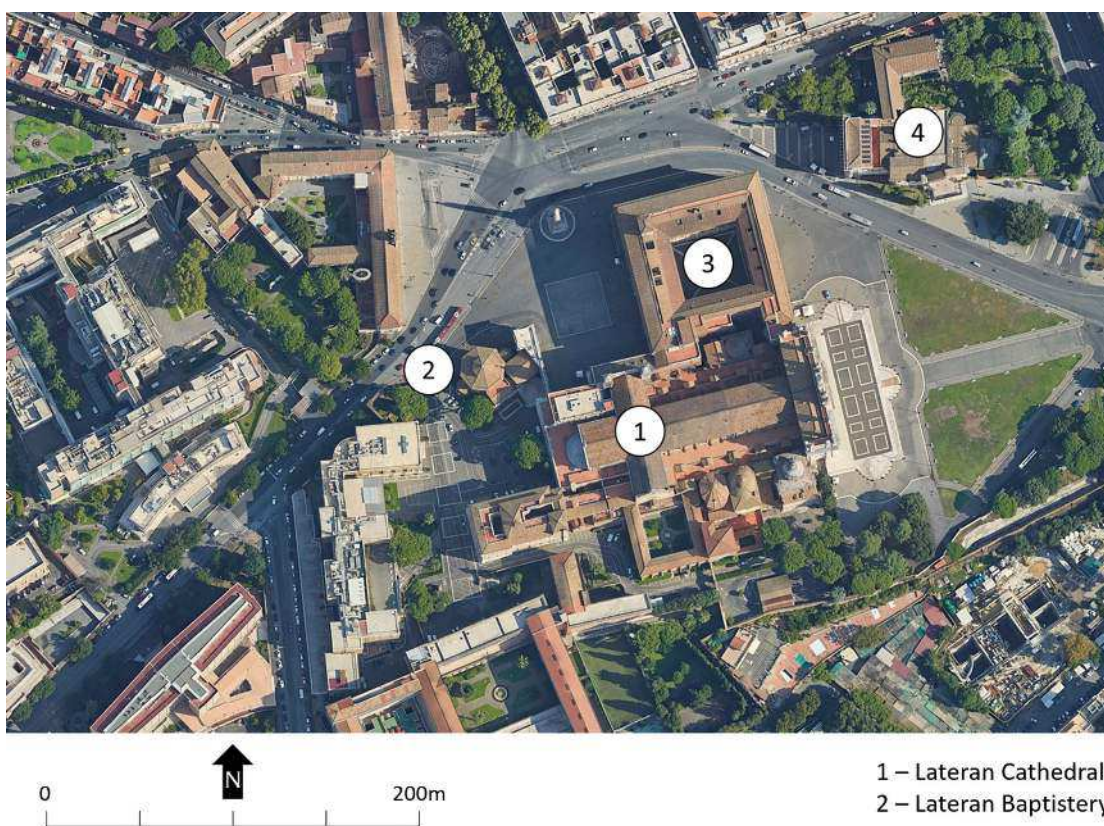


Fig. 1.1 Overview of the Lateran area (T. Ravasi, modified from Google Earth Image Landsat/Copernicus, IBCAO)

Perhaps less obvious, initially, will be our starting point for this volume. To understand the location and significance of the Lateran archbasilica, we believe that it is necessary to go back beyond the building's Constantinian foundation, and to look at the history of the Lateran quarter itself. Aspects of this history, such as the origins of the quarter's name, or the location of the *Domus Faustae*, have certainly been much debated. Chapters in this volume address both these issues and, as the reader will see, the volume seeks to go beyond them to situate the Lateran basilica's emergence within the broader transformation of Rome. The site of the foundation was at once pragmatic and symbolic, for it took over the newly available site of the *Castra Nova* of the *equites singulares*, the imperial horse guards who had formed a vital part of the force that had unsuccessfully opposed Constantine at the critical battle of Milvian Bridge (312). The platform on which the fort had been constructed provided a prominent space in an area of Rome which had, from the reign of Septimius Severus onwards, become increasingly valued by the successive emperors. The alignment of the basilica to the east, towards the Sessorian palace, a complex greatly developed under Constantine, further underscores the attraction of a setting looking south-east, away from the traditional heart of the city.

Consecrated by Pope Sylvester I (314–35), in either 318 or 324, the basilica has been known by several names over the centuries. Reference to it as the *Basilica Aurea*, or Golden Basilica, current in the sixth century, recalled its lavish interiors, but the earliest reference to a dedication, to the Saviour, appears in the seventh century.<sup>2</sup> Bede, writing in the eighth century, refers to it as the Basilica of Saint John, known as the *Basilica Constantiniana*.<sup>3</sup> And the Saviour and two Saint Johns are honoured in the church's formal title today: *Archibasilica Sanctissimi Salvatoris et Sanctorum Iohannes Baptista et Evangelista in Laterano*. That we cannot fully reconstruct the process and pattern of the basilica's many dedications underscores how much there is that remains unknown and contested in its history.

How should we approach study of this remarkable building about which so much has been written, but so much remains uncertain? We acknowledge with pleasure the foundational work of previous scholars, of Krautheimer for his pioneering work on the Constantinian basilica,<sup>4</sup> for example, and de

<sup>2</sup> Readers are directed to McKitterick's careful analysis of Lateran dedication, Chapter 10 in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> Bede, *De temporum ratione*, c. 66 in C. Jones (ed.), *Beda's Venerabilis Opera. Pars VI: Opera didascalica 2 (De temporum ratione)* (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 123B) (Turnhout, 1977), 509: 'Constantinus fecit Romae, ubi baptizatus est basilicam beati Iohannes baptistae, quae appellatur Constantiniana.'

<sup>4</sup> *CBCR* V.

Blaauw for his illumination of *Cultus et decor*,<sup>5</sup> but we also look to the future. This volume brings together a body of work which collectively marks a major expansion in the range and depth of research into the Lateran. In bringing together the contributions that make up this volume, we wish to stress the many different disciplinary approaches that may be fruitfully applied. Studies of the archaeology, architecture, art, history, topography and liturgy all have a vital role to play and are all represented within these pages; bringing these approaches together is essential to advance new thinking. Our aim has also been to foreground the latest research and, in doing so, provide what we hope will prove an essential point of reference for scholars. Complete and even coverage, however, must remain elusive; we acknowledge that some aspects are better represented than others. While the Lateran palace and the *patriarchium* are bound up with that of the basilica, we can only engage with them partially here and direct colleagues to other important forthcoming research.<sup>6</sup>

The attentive reader will also note another aspect of our approach which we trust will reward close reading. The bringing together of diverse contributors and specialist expertise has strengthened the case for some hypotheses, but it has also highlighted differences of scholarly opinion over others. In the richly stimulating conference held at the British School at Rome to discuss the Lateran which laid the foundations for this book,<sup>7</sup> and in subsequent extended correspondence with and between our authors, we have sought to ensure that all have been exposed to such differences of opinion and responded to them. In several cases it has not been possible to resolve these differences to the satisfaction of all, and of course the contributors' right to argue their case their way is respected. Ensuring that difference in opinion emerges clearly from these pages is, in our opinion, every bit as essential for future research as is identifying areas where we argue that a new consensus has been achieved.

<sup>5</sup> S. de Blaauw, *Cultus et decor: Liturgia e Architettura nella Roma Tardoantica e Medievale: Basilica Salvatoris, Sancatae Mariae, Sancti Petri*, 2 vols. (Studi e testi 355) (Vatican City, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> The work of P. Cornelius Claussen, *Die Kirchen der Stadt Rom im Mittelalter 1050–1300: S. Giovanni in Laterano* (Corpus Cosmatorum II, 2) (Forschungen zur Kunstgeschichte und Christlichen Archäologie 21) (Stuttgart, 2008); P. Lauer, *Le palais de Latran: Étude historique et archéologique* (Paris, 1911); M. Luchterhandt, 'Päpstlicher Palastbau und höfisches Zeremoniell unter Leo III', in C. Stiegemann and M. Wemhoff (eds.), *799: Kunst und Kultur der Karolingerzeit: Karl der Große und Papst Leo III. in Paderborn* (Mainz, 1999), 109–22; and M. Luchterhandt, 'Rom und Achen: Die Karolinger und der päpstliche Hof um 800', in F. Pohl (ed.), *Karl der Große/Charlemagne: Orte der Macht* (Aachen, 2014), 104–13 remain important points of reference, but we draw the reader's attention particularly to forthcoming monographs by Manfred Luchterhandt and John Osborne.

<sup>7</sup> The Lateran Basilica, 19–21 September 2016.