

Projecting Power in Sixth-Century Rome: The church of Santi Cosma e Damiano in the late antique Forum Romanum

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In the year 526 CE, the bishop of Rome, Pope Felix IV, petitioned the Ostrogoth king Theoderic for permission to convert a small complex in the Forum Romanum into a place of worship dedicated to the Saints Cosmas and Damian (fig. 1). The complex consists of two pre-Christian buildings—an apsidal hall in the corner of the Templum Pacis and a small rotunda facing the Via Sacra in the Forum Romanum—that were conjoined in the early-fourth century during the reign of the emperor Maxentius (figs. 2, 4). While Pope Felix IV did very little to alter the exterior of this complex, he installed in the apse of the narrow hall a stunning mosaic that depicts Christ, the apostles Peter and Paul and the patron saints Cosmas and Damian, as well the eastern military saint Theodore and a portrait of Felix IV himself (fig. 3). Although heavily restored in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this apse mosaic remains one of the finest and most historically significant examples of late antique Christian art in Rome. This paper critiques traditional interpretations of this church—its physical location and its apse mosaic—in light of new research that nuances our understanding of the historical context in which it was commissioned.

As the first Christian basilica constructed in the political and religious heart of ancient Rome, the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano and its impressive mosaic have traditionally been understood as emblematic of the demise of the ancient city and its institutions, and the simultaneous, rapid rise of ecclesiastical authority.¹ Scholars have long argued that the urban infrastructure and religious, cultural, and political institutions of ancient Rome began to crumble away in the decades following Constantine's departure for the Bosphorus, allowing the bishop of Rome to step into the void and become the uncontested voice of authority within the city. According to this narrative, the construction of the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano in the Forum Romanum and the composition

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¹ The narrative of rapid decline and Christianization found in Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88) remains influential in twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship. See, for example, André Piganiol, *L'empire chrétien (325-395)*, 2 ed. (Paris, 1972). Richard Krautheimer also stresses a teleological picture of change: 'The Church was the only efficient organization left to maintain the economic, social, and indeed the political fabric of Rome,' (*Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308* (Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 71; see also *Three Christian Capitals: Topography and Politics* (University of California Press, 1987)). For a more recent example, see the work of Peter Heather and Bryan Ward-Perkins (Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 2005)). Other scholars such as Raymond Van Dam and John Curran present much more nuanced studies of Rome that nevertheless preserve aspects of what Peter Brown calls a 'catastrophic' approach (Raymond Van Dam, *Rome and Constantinople: Rewriting Roman History During Late Antiquity*, (Baylor University Press, 2010), esp. p. 39; John R. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital: Rome in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), esp. pp. 142-155).

of this triumphant apse mosaic celebrated the complete Christianization of the city and its traditional institutions of authority.

Recent scholarship, however, critiques this teleological narrative of the Christianization of Rome for obscuring the city's gradual transformation in late antiquity; even as late as the sixth century, the bishop of Rome was but one of several authorities shaping a city that remained largely under the influence of senate.² This more nuanced understanding of late antique Rome has yet to be incorporated into scholarly discussions of Rome's early Christian churches, including the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano. The present essay considers how such shifting perspectives on late antique Rome may change the way we interpret the art and architecture of this complex period. More specifically, in this paper I argue that the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano should be understood not as a monument to the successful Christianization of Rome, but rather as an argument on behalf of Pope Felix IV for the authority and autonomy of the Roman Church, within a tumultuous political and religious environment where such papal power was anything but certain.³ I suggest that the physical location of the church and its famous apse mosaic projected an image of power that Pope Felix IV believed rightfully belonged to his office as bishop of Rome, but that he did not yet fully possess.

Before turning to Santi Cosma e Damiano itself, we must consider more closely the building's immediate context—the Forum Romanum (fig. 1).⁴ If, as Ömür Harmanshah suggests, the memory of a city is a material one, inscribed like a text on the surfaces of buildings and distinct

² For an overview of recent scholarship on this period, see the new introduction to Peter Brown's *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity AD 200-1000* (Cambridge, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); see also: Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750*, ed. Geoffrey Barraclough (W. W. Norton & Company, 1989); Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire* (Harvard University Press, 1993); Jas Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph* (Oxford University Press, 1998); Patrick Geary, *Living With the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Cornell University Press, 1994); Mark Humphries, 'From Emperor to Pope? Ceremonial, space, and authority at Rome from Constantine to Gregory the Great,' in *Religion, Dynasty, and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300-900*, eds. Kate Copper and Julia Hillner (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 21-58, esp. p. 51). For more on the role of the bishop of Rome in the late antique city, see Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (University of California Press, 2005), esp. pp. 279-89; Kristina Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy: Roman Bishops and the Domestic Sphere* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Claire Sotinel, 'Emperors and Popes in the Sixth Century,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³ I should here note that I use the capitalized noun 'Church' throughout this paper to represent the Christian community in Rome as distinct from individual churches as buildings or houses of worship.

⁴ David Watkin's study of the Forum is one of the most thorough explorations of this area of the ancient city that adheres to a more nuanced understanding of the late antique city as a place of gradual transformation. Watkin begins his study by asserting that 'the path from paganism to Christianity' was a far more gradual and complex phenomenon than previously thought (David Watkin, *The Roman Forum: Wonders of the World* (Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 107). On this process of change in the Forum, see also Richard Lim, 'Christian Triumph and Controversy,' in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, eds. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar (Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 196-218. Recent scholarship has even critiqued this binary between paganism and Christianity, as well as Roman and barbarian; this research paints yet a more complex picture of cultural and religious hybridity and syncretism in late antique Rome: Judith Lieu, North, J.A., and Rajak, T., *The Jews among the Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London, 1992); Judith Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford University Press, 2004); Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (Yale University Press, 1997); Ramsay MacMullen, *Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200-400* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009); Judith Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 2009); and most recently, Eric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200-450 CE* (Cornell University Press, 2012).

meaningful places, then the memory of Rome was especially poignant in and around the ancient Forum.⁵ Located in the valley between the Palatine and Capitoline Hills, the Forum was the center of Roman public life, the site of triumphal processions and elections, the venue for Rome's finest orators, and the nucleus of the city's commercial affairs. The Forum also served as an important center for religious activity and was home to several of the city's largest and most significant temples that tied the worship of the gods to that of Rome and its emperors. The traditional narrative of the rapid 'decline and fall' of Rome describes the late antique Forum as merely an outdoor-museum containing the ruined monuments to Rome's glorious past. Richard Krautheimer, for example, writes that the late antique Forum 'was a showplace, then largely deprived of its former administrative and representative functions, and had thus fallen into disuse.'⁶ Abandoned by the dwindling senate and irrelevant to the political agendas of the Ostrogoths and the Byzantines, the Forum fell into disarray, allowing the Christians to move from the outskirts into the heart of Rome.⁷

The late antique Forum, however, was anything but abandoned or forgotten. The Forum remained alluring to the Roman emperors well after Constantine departed for his new capital. In an effort to preserve this area of the city and curb the increasingly frequent practice of spoliation, the emperor Constantius declared in 357 that 'no man shall suppose that municipalities may be deprived of their own ornaments, since indeed it was not considered right by the ancients that a municipality should lose its embellishments.'⁸ In the *Codex Theodosianus*, emperor Theodosius II (r. 408-450) expresses his great concern for the continued preservation of the ancient buildings of Rome, including its 'pagan' temples.⁹ In his fourth *Novella*, issued in 458, the emperor Majorian (r. 457-461) ordered that Rome's buildings, including its temples, be preserved as *ornamenta*.¹⁰ The emperor Justinian I (r. 527-565) also exhibited an interest in Rome's imperial past and sought to protect and restore the buildings associated with Rome's historic splendor.

The emperors were not alone in their concern for the preservation of the Forum Romanum; the Roman senate, which continued to dominate the culture and society of the city throughout late antiquity, took great care to restore and maintain the Curia, their traditional meetinghouse in the

⁵ Ömür Harmanshah, *Imagined Cities: Architecture, Landscape and Commemoration in the Ancient Near East* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 191.

⁶ Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, p. 75. For a more detailed critique of this traditional position, see: Federico Marazzi, 'The Last Rome: From the End of the Fifth to the end of the Sixth Century,' in *The Ostrogoths From the Migration Period to the Sixth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Barnish and Marazzi (Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 279-316, esp. p. 312; Humphries, 'From Emperor to Pope? Ceremonial, Space, and Authority at Rome from Constantine to Gregory the Great,' in *Religion, Dynasty, and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300-900*, eds. Cooper and Hillner (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 51-54.

⁷ Again, Richard Krautheimer's understanding of the emergence of Christian churches in the Forum exemplifies this narrative: 'In the urban fabric of the city, the interplay of secular government and ecclesiastical administration and the gradual replacement of the former by the latter are first reflected in the Church takeover of public buildings,' (*Rome: Profile of a City*, p. 71).

⁸ *Cod. Theod.* 15.1.1, 15.1.19; Joseph Alchermes, 'Spolia in Roman Cities of the Late Empire: Legislative Rationales and Architectural Reuse,' in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 48 (1994), pp. 176-78.

⁹ *Cod. Theod.* 15.1.1-19, 15.1.41, 16.10.3-18; see also, Helen Saradi-Mendelovici, 'Christian Attitudes Toward Pagan Monuments in Late Antiquity and Their Legacy in Later Byzantine Centuries,' in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 44 (1990), pp. 47-61.

¹⁰ Humphries, 'From Emperor to Pope?' pp. 41-42.

Forum, in an effort to make explicit the institution's continuity with the revered past (fig. 1).¹¹ In the late fifth and early sixth centuries, before Justinian's conquest of Italy, the Ostrogoth king Theoderic also strove to restore the physical fabric of Rome so that the glory of the imperial city would shine anew under his rule.¹² Believing as Augustus did that 'buildings proclaim your character,' Theoderic launched a massive program of restoration in an effort to promote himself 'as a rebuilder of the infrastructure of Roman Italy in the tradition of Roman leaders of the past.'¹³

Theoderic relied in part upon the senate's commitment to the preservation of Rome's most important buildings and monuments in order to accomplish his own program of restoration and rejuvenation.¹⁴ He offered to reimburse individuals if they were willing to oversee and direct particular projects in his absence. Moreover, while Theoderic claimed legal rights to many of Rome's important buildings, he occasionally agreed to transfer ownership in exchange for the promise of restoration and continued upkeep.¹⁵ This policy presented members of the aristocracy with a rare opportunity to further their own social standing and political leverage by associating their family name with a prestigious building from Rome's past.¹⁶ For example, the letters written by Cassiodorus on behalf of Theoderic reveal that the king refunded the patrician Symmachus for his restoration of the great Theater of Pompey.¹⁷ While it is not clear whether Theoderic actually transferred ownership of this theater to Symmachus, the latter was permitted to attach an inscription with his name to the façade of the theater so that he could 'gain reputation from so excellent a work' and be praised as 'an imitator of antiquity.'¹⁸

Aristocrats like Symmachus were not the only citizens of Rome intrigued by the financial and political incentives of Theoderic's program to rejuvenate the city's imperial past. The bishops of Rome had long relied upon imperial patronage to increase their presence within the city, and Pope Felix IV was particularly well positioned to benefit from Theoderic's program. The king appointed

¹¹ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, pp. 194-95; Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 461. For more on the senate's conservation of the Forum, see Federico Marazzi, 'Rome in Transition: Economic and Political Change in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries,' in *Early Medieval Rome and the Christian West: Essays in Honour of Donald A. Bullough*, ed. Julia M. H. Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 21-41, esp. 34.

¹² Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 112. Brick stamps and tiles bearing the king's seal have been found incorporated into many buildings and monuments in the Forum, including the Basilica Aemilia as well as the imperial palace on the Palatine Hill. This evidence also suggests that Theoderic helped to restore the Colosseum, the baths of Caracalla, the Aurelian walls, and many other buildings and monuments throughout the city: Marazzi, 'The Last Rome,' pp. 294-95; Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 1.21-25, 3.29-31, 3.51, 4.30, 4.51, 5.9, 7.7-15; Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, pp. 194-95; Mark J. Johnson, 'Toward a History of Theoderic's Building Program,' in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 42 (1988), pp. 73-96; for the importance of architecture under Augustus, see Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988); Kalas, *Sacred Image*, p. 120; Magnus Cassiodorus, *Variae*, trans. S. J. B. Barnish (Liverpool University Press, 1992), 3.30, 3.31, 3.51.4, 4.51.1; Bertrand Lançon, *Rome in Late Antiquity: AD 312 - 609* (Routledge, 2001), p. 42.

¹³ Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*, p. 112.

¹⁴ Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*, p. 112; see also Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 4.51.1-12.

¹⁵ *Cod. Theod.* 15.1.36, 16.10.20-25; Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 4.30, 4.41.1; see also Kalas, *Sacred Image*, p. 118.

¹⁶ For more on the importance of architectural patronage and gift giving in Roman culture, see: P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*; see the essays by Kathryn Lomas, E. D. Hunt, and Rowland B. E. Smith in the anthology *Bread and Circuses: Euergetism and Municipal Patronage in Roman Italy*, eds. Kathryn Lomas and Tim Cornell (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 28-25, 105-124, 142-166, esp. p. 143; Arjan Zuiderhoek, *The Politics of Munificence in the Roman Empire: Citizens, Elites and Benefactors in Asia Minor* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Edmund Thomas, *Monumentality and the Roman Empire: Architecture in the Antonine Age* (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 70-90.

¹⁷ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 4.51.12.

¹⁸ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 4.51.1-12.

Felix to the papacy just before his death in 526 and he immediately granted the new bishop permission to restore and reuse the 'Temple of Romulus' and the apsidal hall in the Templum Pacis. For centuries the bishops of Rome had presided over basilicas constructed on the very outskirts of the city, but at long last Pope Felix IV found himself in a unique situation to expand the Christian sacred topography into the center of the ancient city.

Scholars have long interpreted the sudden shift toward the appropriation of ancient buildings in the heart of Rome as evidence of the rapid disintegration of the senate and the absence of imperial authority.¹⁹ According to this narrative, Christians occupied buildings within the city center not to appropriate Rome's glorious past, but rather in an attempt to ensure Rome's past stayed in the past.²⁰ Gregor Kalas, for example, argues that new churches in the city center served not as gathering sites for worship, but rather as points of departure; the processions that left for the 'suburban hinterland' from these new churches were carefully designed to subvert the prominence of the ancient monuments and displace the Forum's historical associations.²¹

Such an approach to the 'Christianization of Rome' ignores the complexity of the political environment of sixth-century Rome and assumes that the bishops enjoyed an immense amount of power to completely reorient the city's landscape. The continued influence of Theoderic in Rome suggests instead that his willingness to grant Pope Felix IV space within the Forum says more about Theoderic's own political agenda than it does the bishop's power within the city. While the king offered to reimburse men like Symmachus for their efforts to beautify the ancient city, he was keenly aware of the animosity that the aristocratic elite harbored against Ostrogoth rule; his letters reflect a persistent fear that the senate would betray him into the hands of the emperor Justinian.²² The fragile relationship between Rome and Ravenna suggests, as Peter Brown has argued, that the Ostrogoths survived 'as foreign bodies, perched insecurely on top of populations who ignored them and set about the more congenial business of looking after themselves.'²³

Theoderic relied in part upon the Church and its bishops to make his presence felt among the senators during his absence. A conference held under the papacy of Pope Symmachus (498-514), not to be confused with the patrician of the same name mentioned above, decreed that the Church 'could be used to signal the authority of a secular ruler—and a heterodox one at that...'²⁴ It is significant to note that when the authority of Symmachus as the elected bishop of Rome was challenged during the so-called Laurentian Schism, it was Theoderic who intervened (twice) and

¹⁹ Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, p. 22; Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, p. 33; John Osborne, 'The Jerusalem Temple Treasure and the Church of Santi Cosma e Damiano in Rome,' in *Papers of the British School at Rome*, Vol. 76 (2008), p. 175.

²⁰ Kalas, *Sacred Image*, p. 292.

²¹ Kalas, *Sacred Image*, p. 292; see also Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, pp. 71-75.

²² One particularly well-known instance where we see this paranoia emerge is in the tumultuous events that ultimately led to the imprisonment and execution of the senator Boethius in 525 (Lançon, *Rome in Late Antiquity*, p. 42-52).

²³ Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, p.125.

²⁴ Humphries, 'From Emperor to Pope?' p. 48. The king's appointment of a bishop was nothing new; the election of Pope Symmachus (498-514) two decades before the papacy of Felix IV had been ratified by Theoderic's royal decree (Humphries, 'From Emperor to Pope?' p. 48). See also Kristina Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy: Roman Bishops and the Domestic Sphere* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 103; Bart Ehrman and Andrew Jacobs, *Christianity in Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 129.

finally decreed the restitution of all the city's churches and property to Symmachus.²⁵ Several decades later, Theoderic's grandson Athalaric ordered the erection of marble tablets inscribed with his decrees in front of the atrium of St. Peter's Basilica.²⁶ As Mark Humphries notes, 'here we have an instance... of a secular ruler seeking to stamp a sign of his authority on the space of the church.'²⁷ Given that Pope Felix IV also owed his papacy to Theoderic, the construction of Santi Cosma e Damiano should be understood, in part, as a carefully calculated endeavor on the part of the king to ensure the preservation of yet another imperial building to glorify his rule as well as to visually represent his secular authority in close proximity to the senate's meetinghouse at the other end of the Forum.

This is not to suggest, however, that Pope Felix IV and the Christian community in Rome were mere pawns in the hands of the Ostrogoths. After all, it was Pope Felix who petitioned Theoderic for permission to appropriate the 'Temple of Romulus' in the Forum and the small apsidal hall in the Templum Pacis. Felix, who came from an aristocratic family like many of Rome's bishops in late antiquity, was well aware of the political advantages associated with occupying a prominent place in the ancient heart of Rome. To the west was the bustling meetinghouse of the senate and to the east was the Colosseum, which still erupted with the roar of the crowds enjoying traditional festivities. By appropriating a building for the purposes of Christian worship within this particular environment, Felix IV sought to further establish the Church as one of several authoritative institutions shaping the late antique city.²⁸ Just as the senate and Theoderic desired to reclaim the imperial past through the restoration of buildings and monuments, so to the late antique bishops of Rome sought to recast the pagan imperial past to demonstrate continuity with the emergence of the Christian church.²⁹ While the sacks of 410 and 455 may have led fifth-century Christians to dissociate their destiny from that of ancient Rome, an approach exemplified in Augustine's *City of God*, the Christians of the sixth century took a distinctly different approach.³⁰ By occupying particular buildings within the city walls, the bishops staked their claim to what Susan Alcock calls 'memory theaters': spaces that both evoke specific memories of the past through the use of monuments and also remind the community of their history and identity.³¹ Association with the monuments and buildings of the past was a means by which the various institutions of Rome, the Church included, sought to rejuvenate and amplify their authority within the complex socio-political milieu of the city.

Here I should pause to emphasize that while the sixth-century Christian appropriation of pre-Christian buildings in Rome may also be construed as a form of triumphalism, this is a triumph not yet realized at this time. Indeed, the mere opportunity to construct a church in the Forum

²⁵ Kalas, *Sacred Image*, pp. 215-16.

²⁶ Humphries, 'From Emperor to Pope?' p. 48.

²⁷ Humphries, 'From Emperor to Pope?' p. 48.

²⁸ Humphries, 'From Emperor to Pope?' p. 25.

²⁹ For this emphasis on continuity, see the many works by Peter Brown, especially *The World of Late Antiquity*, and *The Rise of Western Christendom*. See also Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (University of California Press, 2005), as well as Humphries, 'From Emperor to Pope?' in *Religion, Dynasty, and Patronage in Early Christian Rome*. This volume of collected essays provides an extensive bibliography on this subject of continuity in an 'age of transition.'

³⁰ Lançon, *Rome in Late Antiquity*, p. 161.

³¹ Susan E. Alcock, 'The Reconfiguration of Memory in the Eastern Roman Empire,' in *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, eds., Alcock, Susan and Terence N. D'Altroy, Kathleen D. Morrison, Carla M. Sinopoli (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 334-335.

Romanum speaks to Christianity's growing influence, but what separates my interpretation of the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano from previous scholarship is the realization that this influence was still very much in flux; as the role of Theoderic in the construction of this church demonstrates, the Christian bishops had not yet achieved a position of power from which they could construct a monument of triumph over the city. In the early sixth century, Pope Felix IV was compelled to clearly articulate and project his claims to power in order to receive recognition within the city. As I will attempt to show below, the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano played a critical role in this legitimization of papal power. Before turning to the basilica's famous apse mosaic, I examine and critique current scholarship that has tried to explain why the church was constructed within these two small pre-Christian buildings in the Forum Romanum. I suggest that these theories fail to appreciate the site's historical connection with the emperor Constantine and I argue that the appropriation of this small complex was an attempt to emphasize the papacy's connection with Constantine's legendary role as the first Christian emperor and protector of the Church.

As mentioned above, the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano was built within a small complex consisting of two Roman buildings—the so-called Temple of Romulus and a small apsidal hall in the Templum Pacis (figs. 2, 4). The latter was constructed in 75 CE during the reign of the emperor Vespasian (r. 69-79) while the emperor Maxentius (r. 306-312) commissioned the former, the 'Temple of Romulus,' in the early fourth century. Scholars agree that Maxentius' building did not in fact serve as a temple to the emperor's deceased son Romulus, but rather the building appears to have functioned primarily as a vestibule connecting the Via Sacra in the Forum Romanum with the Templum Pacis in the Imperial Fora.³² Despite the lack of evidence that this building ever served as a religious site, much of the historiography on the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano assumes that the church was constructed within an appropriated pagan temple that was dedicated to either Romulus or the healing gods Castor and Pollux.³³ Archaeological excavations have determined, however, that the temple of Castor and Pollux was located southeast of the Basilica Julia and west of the temple of Vesta in the Forum Romanum.³⁴ Phil Booth provides an example of a church in Constantinople that was dedicated to the Christian saints Cosmas and Damian and constructed in close proximity to an aging temple of Castor and Pollux, suggesting that the church was intended to rival and eventually replace the popular cult to the pagan gods.³⁵ A similar explanation for why Felix IV chose to build in relatively close proximity to a temple dedicated to Castor and Pollux cannot be ruled out completely, but there is little evidence that this particular cult posed any threat to Christianity in Rome during the sixth century.³⁶

³² J. B. Ward-Perkins, *Roman Imperial Architecture* (Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 428-29; Stephen L. Dyson, *Rome: A Living Portrait of an Ancient City* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp. 349-52; Watkin, *The Roman Forum*, p. 42.

³³ Oakeshott, *Roman Mosaics*, p. 90; Heinz Skrobucha, *The Patrons of the Doctors* (West Germany: Aurel Bongers Recklinghausen, 1965), esp. p. 12; Phil Booth, 'Orthodox and Heretic in the Early Byzantine Cult(s) of Saints Cosmas and Damian,' in *An Age of Saints? Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity* (Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 114-128.

³⁴ Amanda Claridge, *Rome: An Archaeological Guide* (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 60, 91.

³⁵ Booth, 'Orthodox and Heretic in the Early Byzantine Cult(s).'

³⁶ The emperor Theodosius I (379-395) forbade public sacrifices, closed temples, and appears to have encouraged acts of local violence by Christians against pagans and their temples. His grandson, Theodosius II (408-450) codified the edicts of his predecessors against paganism in the *Theodosian Code*. While these edicts cannot be taken as evidence of the eradication of paganism in Rome or the larger empire as a whole, they do appear to coincide with reduced pagan activity in the city and in the Forum in

Nevertheless, it does not appear that this particular complex was chosen at random; as Siri Sande points out, there were several buildings nearby far more suitable for the purpose of Christian worship.³⁷ John Osborne has proposed that the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano was built in part of the Templum Pacis because of the site's legendary association with the temple treasure of Jerusalem.³⁸ Although the treasure had been lost some seventy years before the construction of the church, Osborne argues that it is possible that some memory of these sacred objects lingered on, making this site particularly appropriate for a subsequent Christian presence.³⁹ While Osborne's argument is not implausible, he does not provide adequate evidence to make a convincing case.

Other scholars suggest that the site was chosen because this complex is one of only two points of access between the Forum Romanum and the Imperial Fora. Occupying this site would have given the Church greater control over the means of access to both of these important areas of the city. This argument, however, does not take into account that the only means of accessing the Templum Pacis and thus the Imperial Fora from the church was to walk around and behind the sacred space of the altar, through a small door in the apse that led into a narrow hallway, and eventually out into the Forum of Vespasian. Given that the space behind the altar was reserved for clergy, it seems highly unlikely that this path continued to function as a primary avenue between the Forum Romanum and the Imperial Fora.

The plan of Santi Cosma e Damiano and the pathways through this space also call into question the theory recently proposed by Gregor Kalas. Kalas expands upon the work of Alfred K. Frazer, who argued that Pope Felix IV was attracted to this site because of the famous *Forma Urbis Romae* that once occupied the exterior wall behind the apse of the church (fig. 4). Kalas argues that the enormous marble plan of Rome served as a site of memory for the grandeur of the imperial city and that Felix's appropriation of the map reflects his desire to transform the city into an *urbis Christiana*.⁴⁰ Kalas also suggests that the small passageway behind the apse allowed visitors to view the marble plan and hold this monument in tension with the heavenly realm depicted in the apse mosaic; the juxtaposition between these two monumental works of art encouraged visitors to (literally) turn their backs on the mundane city and instead turn their thoughts to a higher spiritual plane. But Kalas fails to address the fact that the lay visitor would have to trespass on the sacred space of the sanctuary normally reserved for clergy if they hoped to catch a glimpse of the *Forma Urbis Romae*. Moreover, as Kalas himself admits, there are serious doubts as to whether the marble plan was even intact in the early-sixth century.⁴¹ If it was intact it seems far more likely that it was utilized by clergy, who certainly had access to the rooms behind the apse, for the design of liturgical processions; in his *Historia Francorum*, Gregory of Tours describes the departure points of various liturgical processions according to the seven classical regions of the city as laid out on the plan.⁴²

particular during the fourth and fifth centuries, at least a century before the construction of Santi Cosma e Damiano (Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, pp. 74-75).

³⁷ Siri Sande points to the Basilica Aemilia in particular ('Old and New in Old and New Rome,' in *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* 17 (2003), p. 104). See also Osborne, 'The Jerusalem Temple Treasure,' p. 176.

³⁸ Osborne, 'The Jerusalem Temple,' p. 176.

³⁹ Osborne, 'The Jerusalem Temple,' p. 178.

⁴⁰ Kalas, *Sacred Image*; Osborne, 'The Jerusalem Temple Treasure,' p. 177.

⁴¹ Kalas, *Sacred Image*, p. 132.

⁴² '[The new Pope Gregory exhorted the population to perform penance in the following way.] The clergy will leave from the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano with the priests of Region VI; abbots and monks from SS. Gervasio e Protasio with the priests of Region IV; abbesses and their nuns from SS. Marcellion e

The plan may have thus functioned as an important reference tool for clergy but it is doubtful that the majority of visitors were expected or able to draw the comparison between the plan and the mosaic in the apse.⁴³

One of the most popular theories concerning the location of Santi Cosma e Damiano in the complex composed of the 'Temple of Romulus' and the hall in the Templum Pacis argues that the construction of the Christian church displaced the important Roman office of the *praefectus urbis*.⁴⁴ This theory is largely based on the traditional narrative of Christianization that insists the sixth-century Church possessed the power necessary to replace or disband important secular authorities. The *Variae* of Cassiodorus, however, testifies to the position's activity in the mid-sixth century and the position of the prefect appears to have survived well into the seventh century with no indication of having been replaced or relocated by the bishops.⁴⁵ In fact, Bertrand Lançon, among others, argues convincingly that the absence of the imperial presence in Rome conferred an even more eminent role on the already prestigious position, making it unlikely that the office was moved on the whim of the bishop.⁴⁶

All of the theories mentioned above approach the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano as a monument to the complete Christianization of Rome. Each approach fails to take into account the more complex and nuanced context of sixth-century Rome. I argue that the complex was relevant to the interests of Pope Felix *not* because of the function it had previously served but because of *who* was associated with its construction. While the emperor Maxentius constructed the 'Temple of Romulus' and connected it to the hall in the Templum Pacis, it was the emperor Constantine who ultimately claimed responsibility for the construction of the complex.

Immediately after defeating Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, the victorious and politically savvy Constantine set about appropriating his rival's architectural achievements. He removed Maxentius' dedicatory inscription at the base of Nero's colossus and used the inscription as *spolia* in his own triumphal arch, which in turn reframed the colossus as a representation of the sun god Sol, to whom Constantine gave much credit for his rise to power.⁴⁷ Constantine also left his mark on the

Pietro with the priests from Region I...' (trans. Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, trans. O. M. Dalton (Oxford, 1927) 425-28); Kalas, *Sacred Image*, pp. 316-317.

⁴³ For more on the origins and development of the stational liturgy in Rome, see John F. Baldovin *The Urban Character of Christian Worship: The Origins, Development, and Meaning of Stational Liturgy* (Oriental Institute Press, 1987).

⁴⁴ Alfred K. Frazer, *Four Late Antique Rotundas: Aspects of Fourth-Century Architectural Style in Rome* (New York University, 1964), pp. 119-25; Osborne, 'The Jerusalem Temple Treasure,' pp. 177-78; Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, pp. 9, 28, 71. This view is also perpetuated in several recent guidebooks for tourists in Rome, including the guidebook sold in the Museo Nazionale in Rome: Andrea Augenti, ed., *Rome: Art and Archaeology* (Florence: Scala, 2000), pp. 79-80.

⁴⁵ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 1.3.6, 1.4.6-8, 2.16.4-5, 3.20-27, 6.3, 8.31.3, 9.24.11-12, 9.25.12, 10.26.2, 11.16, 11.36, 11.38, 11.39.4-5, 12.5.1-9, 12.8, 12.13, 12.15.1-7, 12.16; a list of the prefects has been compiled for the years between 312 and 604, testifying to the vitality of the office; see Lançon, *Rome in Late Antiquity*, p. 45.

⁴⁶ Lançon, *Rome in Late Antiquity*, pp. 45-56; Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 111

⁴⁷ For more on the visual relationship between the Arch of Constantine, the colossus, and the Colosseum, see Elizabeth Marlowe, 'Framing the Sun: The Arch of Constantine and the Roman Cityscapes,' in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (June, 2006), pp. 228-29; John Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-elite Viewers in Italy, 100 B.C. – A.D. 315* (University of California Press, 2003), p. 58; Beat Brenk, 'Spolia from Constantine to Charlemagne: Aesthetics versus Ideology,' in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 41, (1987), pp. 103-109; Dale Kinney, 'Roman Architectural Spolia,' in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 145, No. 2 (2001), pp. 138-161.

Temple of Venus and Rome, a large double-apsed temple originally designed and built by Hadrian in the early-second century but repaired by Maxentius after a devastating fire destroyed much of the complex in 307 CE. While the emperor Hadrian had intended the temple to be a civic monument, Maxentius appropriated and altered the temple such that it fit 'very nicely into his own ideological identification with Rome, its history, and its gods.'⁴⁸ Soon after defeating Maxentius, Constantine appropriated the temple through the addition of a dedicatory inscription that now linked the complex to his own family.⁴⁹ In yet another act of *damnatio memoriae*, Constantine demolished the former barracks of Maxentius' imperial guard and in their place constructed the Christian basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano.⁵⁰ Perhaps Constantine's most emphatic statement came with the completion of the Basilica Nova. In addition to finishing the massive coffered vaulting, the new emperor added a monumental *pronaos* to the south façade and an apse in the north in which he set a colossal statue of himself.⁵¹

During his rapid appropriation of Maxentius' architectural achievements, Constantine did not neglect the smallest of his predecessor's buildings along the Via Sacra: the 'Temple of Romulus.' Constantine added his customary monumental inscription just above the doorway to identify himself as the donor of the building in accordance with a decree of the senate.⁵² More significantly, he completely remodeled the building's exterior appearance through the addition of a highly ornate, concave façade that embraced and communicated with the Via Sacra, welcoming visitors into the rotunda.⁵³ Constantine's new façade was a two-story structure with apsidal niches framed by numerous columns that resembled other monuments of Roman 'show architecture' such as nymphaea, skene frons, palace façades and 'vigorously articulated triumphal arches.'⁵⁴ The new façade of the 'Temple of Romulus' stood out from these other architectural types by means of an particular element common in the architecture of the eastern provinces of the empire but almost unknown in the monumental architecture of Rome: columns set upon pedestal-like plinths.⁵⁵ While the majority of the façade has collapsed, this particular feature is still visible today in the twin porphyry columns that flank the building's original bronze doors (fig. 5). According to Alfred K. Frazer, the monumental porch Constantine added to Maxentius' Basilica Nova also contained

⁴⁸ Dyson, *Rome: A Living Portrait*, p. 349.

⁴⁹ Marlowe, 'Framing the Sun,' p. 234.

⁵⁰ Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, pp. 21-23; Holloway, *Constantine and Rome*, pp. 77-84, 120-156.

⁵¹ For information on the Basilica Nova and the colossus, see Watkin, *The Roman Forum*, p. 46, and Ward-Perkins, *Roman Imperial Architecture*, pp. 428-29. Ward-Perkins discusses Constantine's use of curve and counter curve, a technique also employed in the mausoleum of Helena (Tor Pignattara) and perhaps inspired by the Baths of Caracalla and the Temple of Venus at Baiae. Alfred Frazer points out that the monumental portal that Constantine added to the Basilica Nova is aligned with the concave façade of the Temple of Romulus. Frazer uses this observation to help confirm his hypothesis that Constantine was the emperor responsible for the rotunda's new façade (Frazer, *Four Late Antique Rotundas*, p. 120; see also Kalas, *Sacred Image*, p. 141).

⁵² Kalas, *Sacred Image*, p. 141; Filippo Coarelli, *Rome and Environs: An Archaeological Guide*, trans. James J. Clauss and Daniel P. Harmon (University of California Press, 2008), p. 90; Frazer, *Four Late Antique Rotundas*, p. 120. For a more detailed historiography of this inscription and its reception in the sixteenth century by Onofrio Panvinio, see Pier Luggi Tucci, 'The Revival of Antiquity in Medieval Rome: The Restoration of the Basilica of SS. Cosma e Damiano in the Twelfth Century,' in *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, Vol. 49 (2004), pp. 108-12.

⁵³ Kalas *Sacred Image*, pp. 138-142; Coarelli, *Rome and Environs*, p. 89; Frazer, *Four Late Antique Rotundas*, p. 129.

⁵⁴ Frazer, *Four Late Antique Rotundas*, p. 129.

⁵⁵ Ward-Perkins, *Roman Imperial Architecture*, p. 428.

multiple porphyry columns setup on plinths flanking the primary entrance to the basilica.⁵⁶ I would add that the same unique feature is employed on a monumental scale in Constantine's triumphal arch (fig. 6).⁵⁷ With the exception of the Arch of Severus, Constantine appears to be the first emperor to frequently employ this architectural feature in the city of Rome. The use of this architectural element in the new façade of the 'Temple of Romulus' may have thus served to mark the building as his own and connect it to other sites in his imperial building program.⁵⁸

That the new façade of the 'Temple of Romulus' incorporated columns made of porphyry may also have been significant in identifying Constantine as the patron of the building. Although Pliny reports that porphyry was appreciated for its 'imperial properties' as early as the first century CE, Constantine was one of the first emperors to use the material extensively in an effort to visually connect public monuments to the imperial cult. His extensive use of the marble in his triumphal arch as well as in the new façade of the 'Temple of Romulus' and the *pronaos* of the Basilica Nova served to connect these three sites, among others, and accentuate their imperial associations. Constantine also used porphyry to adorn many of the early-Christian basilicas constructed during his reign, not only in Jerusalem and Bethlehem but also in Rome; four enormous porphyry *rotae* commissioned by Constantine himself distinguished the liturgical processional path in Old Saint Peter's Basilica.⁵⁹ Constantine's prolific use of this 'royal marble' set the tone for successive Byzantine emperors such as Justinian; the latter frequently used porphyry 'to mark thresholds of significant ritual spaces' within the Great Palace and the attached basilica of Hagia Sophia, the patriarchal cathedral of Constantinople.⁶⁰ By the sixth century, therefore, the twin porphyry columns that frame the bronze doors of Santi Cosma e Damiano in Rome, and the many other porphyry columns that once adorned the greater façade, not only linked the site to Constantine and the Roman imperial past but also recalled the imperial palace and cathedral of the new capital on the Bosphorus.

I suggest that these imperial associations provide a compelling explanation for why Pope Felix IV may have chosen this particular location in the Forum Romanum for the construction of the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano. The appropriation of such a site would have served to visually connect the Church with Rome's imperial past, lending greater prestige to the embattled office of the bishop.⁶¹ While many of the buildings that Constantine commissioned or appropriated in Rome remained in use throughout late antiquity, the small complex consisting of the 'Temple of Romulus' and the apsidal hall of the Templum Pacis appears to have been abandoned in the sixth century and therefore likely stood as the only structure in the Forum attributed to Constantine that was also available to Pope Felix IV for restoration and reuse as a place for worship.⁶² The association of this

⁵⁶ Frazer, *Four Late Antique Rotundas*, p. 120.

⁵⁷ Jaś Elsner, 'From the Culture of Spolia to the Cult of Relics: The Arch of Constantine and the Genesis of Late Antique Forms,' in *Papers of the British School at Rome*, vol. 68 (2000), pp. 149-184; Marlowe, 'Framing the Sun,' pp. 223-242.

⁵⁸ Ward-Perkins, *Roman Imperial Architecture*, p. 422.

⁵⁹ Dorothy F. Glass, *Studies on Cosmatesque Pavements* (Oxford: BAR International Series 82, 1980), p. 48.

⁶⁰ Thomas E. A. Dale, 'Sacred Space from Constantinople to Venice,' in *The Byzantine World*, ed. Paul Stephenson (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 408.

⁶¹ Marina Belozverskaya and Kenneth Lapatin, 'Antiquity Consumed. Transformations at San Marco, Venice,' in *Antiquity and its Interpreters*, eds. A. Payne, A. Kuttner and R. Smick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 91.

⁶² The Basilica Nova, for example, may have served as the office of the urban prefect well into the seventh century. The Temple of Venus and Roma appears to have been protected from reuse by the edicts of the

complex and its magnificent façade with the emperor Constantine may have served Felix in his efforts to continue the work of his predecessors in projecting an image of authority that the bishops believed the emperor had bestowed upon their office.⁶³ Constantine was praised even during his reign as the first 'Christian emperor' and acknowledged for legalizing, protecting, and contributing to the early church.⁶⁴ While this is hardly an objective portrait of the emperor and his official policies, there is no doubt that his actions transformed the place of the Church within the religious milieu of the empire. The bishops of Rome frequently appealed to Constantine's construction of the Lateran Basilica as well as of Old Saint Peter's Basilica as evidence that he had granted them an unprecedented level of temporal power.⁶⁵ The appropriation of a building the Forum Romanum linked to Constantine served as a monumental reminder of this intimate relationship and the power it implied.

While such a statement of power publicly challenged Rome's traditional institutions of authority, especially the senate that met nearby in the Curia, the bishops had difficulty in asserting that Constantine's patronage put them in a position of religious authority over Theoderic's Arian Christians or other Christian communities around the Mediterranean. After all, Constantine had built splendid churches in his new capital of Constantinople, as well as in Trier, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Antioch. In an effort to proclaim authority over these various communities, the bishops of Rome appealed to the saints Peter and Paul. According to ancient Roman Catholic tradition, Peter served as the first bishop of Rome and was granted by Christ authority over the other apostles and their respective communities; this tradition, derived from John 21:15-17 and Matthew 16:17-20, declares that the authority of the Roman bishop is divinely sanctioned. Peter was later martyred just outside the walls of Rome and was buried in the Vatican necropolis where St. Peter's Basilica now stands.⁶⁶ The late antique Roman bishops also asserted their proximity to the remains of Saint Paul, who not only helped to found the church in Rome and was martyred and buried there soon after Peter, but who also was praised as the apostle to the Gentiles for his efforts to spread Christianity to the Greco-Roman communities located throughout the empire. That the Roman bishops regarded Paul as representative of the universal reach of the Christian Church can be

emperor Majorian (r. 457-461) that ordered Rome's buildings, including its temples, be preserved as *ornamenta*. Indeed, it was not until the mid-ninth century, after a severe earthquake damaged the temple, that Pope Leo IV (r. 847-855) was granted permission to convert this site into the church of Santa Maria Nova. In addition to Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of A City*, see Humphries, 'From Emperor to Pope?' pp. 41-42.

⁶³ Peter Brown has continued the work of numerous other scholars in critiquing the traditional narrative of Constantine's unbridled enthusiasm for and support of the bishops. For example, Brown notes that although the Lateran basilica was 'given to the bishop of Rome to act as his cathedral, [the church] was built for the greater glory of Constantine and not for the great glory of the local Christians,' and that Constantine gave far less to 'the churches attended by the average Christians of Rome' than he gave to those buildings dedicated to his own family members such as Tor Pignattara and the Mausoleum of Constantina (*Through the Eye of a Needle*, pp. 242-44). See also Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750*, ed. Geoffrey Barraclough (W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), p. 126; Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, p. 126; R. Ross Holloway, *Constantine and Rome* (New York: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁶⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Church History*, trans. Paul L. Maier (Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1999) 286-332; Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Harvard University Press, 2006); Ehrman and Jacobs, *Christianity in Late Antiquity*, pp. 24-25.

⁶⁵ Holloway, *Constantine and Rome*, pp. 57-156; Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City*, pp. 3-58; Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital*, pp. 70-156.

⁶⁶ For a more detailed discussion on the tomb of Saint Peter, see Holloway, *Constantine and Rome*, pp. 120-156.

clearly seen in the fifth-century mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore.⁶⁷

The bishops of Rome made their connection to these two saints visually explicit in the *traditio legis*—a popular visual motif that developed in the fourth century depicting Peter, often accompanied by Paul, receiving the scroll of the law from Christ (figs. 8-11).⁶⁸ This motif likely decorated the apse of Old Saint Peter's Basilica, reminding all who entered the great church that the bishop of Rome drew his authority from these two apostles.⁶⁹ The motif appears on late antique Christian sarcophagi, such as that of the Roman senator and recently baptized Christian Junius Bassus (fig. 7), as well as in apse mosaics from Ravenna to Naples (figs. 8, 9). Another exquisite example from Rome is preserved in the Mausoleum of Constantina, known since at least the ninth century as the Church of Santa Costanza (fig. 10). The *traditio legis* disappeared from Christian art for about a century but was revived in the tense political climate of the late-fifth and early-sixth centuries, once again serving to project an image of papal power.⁷⁰

One of the most significant examples of this revived motif is found in the apse mosaic of the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano (fig. 3). Christ appears in the center of the apse, suspended against a background of brilliant orange, red, and blue clouds that light up the dark blue evening sky that fills the rest of the apse (fig. 11). He is dressed in a golden tunic and his bearded face is framed by a gold halo outlined in light gray. His right hand is outstretched toward the congregation below and in his left hand he holds the tightly rolled scroll of the law. The pyramidal bank of clouds on which Christ stands draws the viewer's eye toward the six smaller figures who process toward Christ, three on either side, along the verdant banks of the River Jordan. Saints Peter and Paul, both dressed in classical white tunics with mantles, stand on the left and right sides of Christ respectively, in a direct application of the *traditio legis* motif popular during the fourth century. With one arm they each embrace one of the two patron saints of the church, Cosmas and Damian, who are rendered on an even smaller scale (fig. 12). With the other arm they gesture towards Christ to introduce the martyrs to their Lord. Cosmas and Damian each take a step towards Christ and offer to him their crowns of martyrdom. Behind the martyr on the viewer's right strides Saint Theodore, a military saint popular during late antiquity and who was martyred for destroying a pagan temple.⁷¹ On the opposite side of the apse, behind the other patron saint, stands Pope Felix IV. He is dressed in the pontiff's robes and pallium and he offers to Christ a miniature model of the church. These

⁶⁷ For a detailed discussion of these mosaics see Margaret R. Miles, 'Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics: Triumphal Christianity and the Jews,' in *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 86, no. 2 (Apr., 1993), pp. 155-175. Miles' discussion is thorough, but she understands this mosaic program as constructed within 'the vacuum of political power in the West,' adopting Krautheimer's outdated narrative that 'the Empire in the West had collapsed. The emperor in Ravenna was a mere shadow. The Eastern emperor, powerful though he was, was distant and uninterested. The Roman aristocracy, pagan to the last, was gone as a political force' (Richard Krautheimer, 'The Architecture of Sixtus III: A Fifth-Century Renaissance?' in *Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss (New York University Press, 1961), p. 301; Miles, 'Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics,' p. 155). More recent scholarship disputes all and rejects many of these statements.

⁶⁸ For an overview of the academic conversation over this early Christian motif, see Bas Snelders, 'The *Traditio Legis* on Early Christian Sarcophagi,' in *Antiquité Tardive: revue internationale d'histoire et d'archéologie*, vol. 13 (MetaPress Journals, 2005), pp. 321-333.

⁶⁹ Joachim Poeschke, *Italian Mosaics 300-1300*, trans. Russell Stockman (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2010), p. 55; for a more thorough history of this motif, see also: Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 20, 46, 89, 97, 100-108.

⁷⁰ Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, pp. 108-10.

⁷¹ Oakeshott, *The Mosaics of Rome* p. 92.

processing figures are framed by a single palm tree on either side of the composition and in the tree to the viewer's left, above Pope Felix IV, is perched a small but radiating phoenix, a popular symbol of resurrection.⁷² Below the figures is a band of brilliant gold that outlines the familiar flock of twelve sheep processing towards the Agnus Dei standing on a rocky outcrop from which flow the four rivers of paradise. Sheep on the left of the Agnus Dei process from the gates of Jerusalem while those on the right depart from Bethlehem, although today both cities, along with the Agnus Dei, are obscured from view by the addition of the baroque triumphal arch and altar piece (fig. 13). The inscription below the sheep alludes to but does not name the saints Cosmas and Damian (*martyribus medicis*), but rather highlights the patronage of Felix IV and expresses the bishop's hope for eternal life in heaven (*ut aetheria vivat in arce poli*).⁷³

This apse mosaic is often considered one of the finest examples of late antique Christian art in Rome, but it is important to note that the entire composition was extensively repaired and remodeled in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷⁴ Pope Gregory XIII (1572-85) altered the portrait of Felix IV in order to depict the late-sixth-century bishop and saint Gregory the Great. In the middle of the seventeenth century, however, Pope Alexander VII (1655-67) restored the portrait of Felix IV.⁷⁵ The art historian Charles R. Morey, and more recently Walter Oakeshott, has argued that a close analysis of the extant mosaics suggests that the seventeenth-century artist who restored the donor's portrait had access to a copy of the original composition.⁷⁶ In other words, although the portrait of Felix IV and several of the sheep below date from the seventeenth century, the composition as a whole remains faithful to the original program designed in the mid-sixth century under the patronage of Felix IV.

Although this particular apse mosaic served as the visual focal point of the first Christian church in the Forum Romanum and exercised a profound artistic influence on the design of apsidal mosaics for the next several centuries, few scholars have sought to provide a detailed discussion of the composition. The art historian and classicist Ann Marie Yasin provides a brief but helpful interpretation, noting that 'the composition enforces a strict symmetry between the figures arranged on either side of the central axis...as a result, not only is Pope Felix IV elevated to the level of St. Theodore and the titular saints of Cosmas and Damian, but his church offering is also equated to the status of the martyrs' crowns.'⁷⁷ While an important observation, Yasin does not address the significance of the particular individuals or the implications of their incorporation into the *traditio legis* motif. For example, Yasin observes that the position of Pope Felix IV 'elevates' him to the level of the martyred saints, but she does not discuss Felix in relation to the figures of Peter and Paul or

⁷² Oakeshott, *The Mosaics of Rome*, p. 92.

⁷³ The inscription reads: AULA DI [DEI] CLARIS RADIAT SPECIOSA METALLIS / IN QUA PLUS FIDEI LUX PRETIOSA MICAT / MARTYRIBUS MEDICIS POPULO SPES CERTA SALUTIS / VENIT ET EX SACRO CREVIT HONORE LOCUS / OPTULIT HOC DNO [DOMINO] FELIX ANTISTITE DIGNUM / MINUS UT AETHERIA VIVAT IN ARCE POLI. For a full translation, see Oakeshott, *The Mosaics of Rome*, p. 94; for a discussion relating the inscription to the mosaic above, see Herbert L. Kessler and Johanna Zacharias, *Rome 1300: On the Path of the Pilgrim* (Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 98-99.

⁷⁴ John Osborne and Amanda Claridge, *Early Christian and Medieval Antiquities, Vol. 1: Mosaics and Wallpaintings in Roman Churches* (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1996), p. 94.

⁷⁵ Guglielmo Matthiae, *Mosaici Medioevali delle Chiese di Roma* (Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1967), pp. 135-141, 203-211.

⁷⁶ Charles Rufus Morey, *Lost Mosaics and Frescoes of Rome of the Middle Period* (Princeton University Press, 1915), pp. 2, 37; see also Walter Oakeshott, *The Mosaics of Rome From the Third to the Fourteenth Centuries* (Connecticut: New York Graphic Society Ltd, 1967), p. 94.

⁷⁷ Ann Marie Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 276.

the cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem in the lower register of the mosaic.

As noted above, the *traditio legis* motif depicting Peter and Paul flanking Christ originated in the fourth century, but was revived in the tense political climate of the late-fifth and early-sixth centuries to visually proclaim the divinely sanctioned authority of the presiding bishop of Rome. The inclusion of Pope Felix IV in an extended *traditio legis* composition makes explicit the connection between the current bishop and his spiritual ancestors, the saints Peter and Paul, the two most important patron saints of the Roman Church. That Peter and Paul were considered Roman saints is emphasized in the apse mosaic of Santi Cosma e Damiano through their dress; both apostles are clad in traditional white Roman tunics. Their place of primacy on either side of Christ in the apse mosaics of late antique churches in Rome, including Old Saint Peter's Basilica and Santi Cosma e Damiano, symbolizes the line of authority from Christ to Peter and from Peter to the presiding bishop. But the composition not only emphasizes the origins of the authority of the Roman bishops, it also conveys to the viewer the extent or reach of this power. As mentioned above, Peter and Paul were not only considered patrons of Rome but they were first and foremost praised as apostles to both the Jews and the Gentiles, respectively. The authority that Christ bestowed upon these two apostles, and Peter in particular, thus extended well beyond the walls of Rome.

The depiction of Bethlehem and Jerusalem in the lower register of the apse mosaic in Santi Cosma e Damiano underscores the universal nature of this divinely sanctioned authority. These two cities, from which the twelve sheep process toward the Agnus Dei, are common in late antique Christian art in Rome and likely represent the 'Ecclesia ex Circumcisione' and the 'Ecclesia ex Gentilibus,' the Church of the Jews and the Church of the Gentiles.⁷⁸ These two cities were also depicted in the apse mosaic of Old Saint Peter's and can still be seen in the late antique, albeit heavily restored, mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore. While the cities suggest that both Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ are members of the universal Christian Church, the looming portraits of Peter and Paul flanking Christ remind the viewer that the bishop of Rome is the divinely appointed leader of this universal Church.

The significance of the saints Theodore, Cosmas and Damian is less obvious than the relationship between Pope Felix IV, Peter and Paul, but no less essential to the interpretation of the mosaic. Situating the construction and decoration of the church within the context of Theoderic's program of restoration provides a compelling explanation for the presence of Saint Theodore. In return for permission to reuse the complex in the Forum, Pope Felix IV was required to somehow acknowledge the king for his generous donation.⁷⁹ Depicting the king as a beloved saint of legendary military prowess and steadfast faith, whose name is simply the Latinized version of

⁷⁸ The literature on this motif is vast: Jean Paul Richter and Alicia Cameron Taylor were among the first to suggest that the two cities are architectonic symbols of the Church of the Jews and the Church of the Gentiles (*The Golden Age of Classic Christian Art* (London: Duckworth and Co., 1904)). Marguerite Van Berchem and Etienne Clouzot recognize the division of the Church into Jewish and Gentile but they argue that the two cities emphasize the triumph of Christianity by recalling the birth (Bethlehem), crucifixion, and resurrection (Jerusalem) of Christ (*Mosaïques chrétiennes du IV^e au X^e siècle* (Genève, 1924); for this interpretation, see also Carlo Cecchelli, *I Mosaici di S. Maria Maggiore in Roma* (Torino: ILTE, 1956), p. 236, and Matthiae, *Mosaici Medioevali delle Chiese di Roma*, esp. pp. 91-98. Beat Brenk argues that the two cities represent the fulfillment of the promises made to the 'People of God' in the Old Testament (*Die frühchristlichen Mosaiken in S. Maria Maggiore zu Rom* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1975)).

⁷⁹ Gregor Kalas, 'Writing and Restoration in Rome: Inscriptions, Statues and the Late Antique Preservation of Buildings,' in *Cities, Texts and Social Networks: 400-1500* (Ashgate, 2010), pp. 21-44, esp. p. 26; Mazarri, 'The Last Rome,' pp. 294-95.

Theoderic, surely sufficed.

Depicting Theoderic as a popular saint in the apse mosaic would at first appear to undermine Felix's desire for greater autonomy and his staunch opposition to Arian theology. However, the position of Theodore within the mosaic may be seen as conveying a subversive message that reflects the complex relationship between the bishop of Rome and the foreign king. Theoderic is portrayed in the mosaic as subservient to and dependent upon Saint Peter and thus Peter's current representative, Felix IV, for his introduction to Christ, indeed for his salvation. Thus, the bishop's claims to authority are underscored by the very presence of Theoderic, whose witness to Peter's authority undermines his own. The emphasis placed on the primacy of Peter in the writings of Felix IV and his predecessors in the pontificate, as well as their efforts to seek autonomy from the Ostrogoths and the Roman senate, further suggests that the particular composition of this apse mosaic is intended to reaffirm the power of the Roman bishops as spiritual descendants of Saint Peter and Christ's representatives on earth. Thus, while Ann Marie Yasin may emphasize the symmetrical relationship between Felix IV and the personification of King Theoderic in the guise of Saint Theodore, a more nuanced interpretation suggests that the office Felix currently occupies is in fact elevated over that of Theoderic.

What then are we to make of Cosmas and Damian within this extended version of the *traditio legis*? Thomas Mathews suggests that the inclusion of these saints in the apse of a church in Rome is a celebration of the long-awaited victory over the Arian Ostrogoths that came with the reacquisition of Italy under Justinian.⁸⁰ On the one hand, I agree with Mathews that the saints are here employed as allusions to Justinian. Churches dedicated to these twin martyrs had been established in such late antique Christian centers as Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch as early as the fourth century. Cosmas and Damian became immensely popular in Constantinople where Theodore II (r. 408-450) dedicated a church in their name.⁸¹ It was in that church that the two saints appeared to Justinian and cured him from a mysterious affliction.⁸² In gratitude, Justinian enlarged the church and had it richly decorated with marble revetment and gold mosaics. The emperor also restored the saints' legendary home in the city of Cyrus, but brought their relics back to Constantinople and installed them in the restored fifth-century church.⁸³ Considering that even Procopius records Justinian's special affection for these two particular saints, Mathews' suggestion that Pope Felix IV employed Cosmas and Damian to allude to Justinian and the emperor's orthodox faith is well supported.⁸⁴

I disagree, however, with Mathews' conclusion that Pope Felix dedicated his church to these two martyrs in order to honor Justinian for freeing Rome from Theoderic's Arian rule. To begin with, the church was completed almost a decade before Justinian's general captured Rome.⁸⁵ Moreover, Mathews' picture of an amicable relationship between the bishop of Rome and the eastern empire

⁸⁰ Thomas Mathews, *Clash of the Gods* (Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 169.

⁸¹ Skrobucha, *The Patrons of the Doctors*, p. 10.

⁸² Skrobucha, *The Patrons of the Doctors*, p. 10.

⁸³ Phil Booth suggests that the saints Cosmas and Damian were singled out, along with several other saints, because the various accounts of their lives testify to their willingness to heal anybody, even the heretic. Like a good emperor, Justinian always sought unity and stability, and thus he promoted their cult because of their ability to generate goodwill across the theological divide without promoting an overt theological agenda (Booth, 'Orthodox and Heretic,' p. 128).

⁸⁴ Procopius, *Buildings*, 1.6.5-8.

⁸⁵ Lançon, *Rome in Late Antiquity*, pp. 42-43.

ignores the bishops' fear of Byzantine rule.⁸⁶ They knew well that Justinian engaged in transactions involving ecclesiastical property because he believed that 'there is little difference between the priesthood and the empire and between sacred property and the property of the community or state.'⁸⁷ It is precisely such examples of the emperor intruding in ecclesiastical matters that prompted the Roman bishop Agapetus to journey to Constantinople in 535 to convince Justinian not to attack the Italian peninsula.⁸⁸ The pope was unsuccessful and Justinian invaded later that same year, but Agapetus convinced the emperor to sign an agreement acknowledging the importance of the Roman see, an agreement that the papacy later misinterpreted as evidence of imperial favor over the bishop of Constantinople.⁸⁹

I argue that it is within this complex historical context that we should interpret the inclusion of saints Cosmas and Damian in the apse mosaic of Felix's sixth century church (fig. 12). The martyrs may indeed be allusions to the emperor Justinian, but like Saint Theodore, they are here depicted as dependent upon the patron saints of Rome; it is only through the generosity of the patrons of Rome that Cosmas and Damian are introduced to Christ. By extension, therefore, the incorporation of these twin martyrs into the *traditio legis* motif portrays a world in which even the emperor and his religious authorities are dependent upon the spiritual leadership and power of the bishop of Rome.

This projection of power based on the primacy of Saint Peter and Paul in the apse mosaic of Santi Cosma e Damiano should not be understood as a representation of a historical reality. It is possible to misinterpret the composition of the mosaic as supporting the traditional narrative of the Christianization of Rome. The visual relationship between Pope Felix IV and Saint Theodore, as well as the dependence of Cosmas and Damian on Saints Peter and Paul, may appear to suggest that the papacy had completely filled the power void in Rome created by the departure of Constantine. One could also appeal, as so many historians have done, to the physical location of Santi Cosma e Damiano in the Forum to suggest that the bishops were now in complete control of the city.⁹⁰

Such interpretations of this church and its apse mosaic, however, fail to fully appreciate the complex political and religious environment of sixth-century Rome. Within this context, the apse mosaic of Santi Cosma e Damiano clearly projects a hope for a *future* reality that is currently only dreamed of. The mosaic serves as a declaration of how things *should* be, not an illustration of how things really are. Letters from several bishops to Theoderic pleading for him to reprimand the senate for interfering in papal affairs highlight that even in the sixth century, the bishop of Rome was not yet more powerful than the Roman senate, let alone Justinian or Theoderic. Nevertheless, Felix IV boldly continued the work of his predecessors in attempting to increase the power of the

⁸⁶Andrew Ekonomou concludes that 'the Christianization of the empire had not extirpated the undercurrent of suspicion and even disdain that still flowed between Latin West and Greek East. Nor had the Justinianic reconquest of Italy effaced it,' (*Byzantine Rome and the Greek Popes: Eastern Influenced on Rome and the Papacy from Gregory the Great to Zacharias, A.D. 590-752* (New York: Lexington Books, 2007), p. 2). Gilbert Dagron notes that many Roman citizens of the early sixth-century believed that separate laws should govern the appointment of the emperor, the role of the senate, and the election of the bishops; Justinian, however, brushed this sentiment aside, transforming the senate into a court aristocracy and strengthening his 'imperial omnipotence,' (*Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 15-16).

⁸⁷ Dagron, *Emperor and Priest*, p. 304.

⁸⁸ Claire Sotinel, 'Emperors and Popes in the Sixth Century,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 278.

⁸⁹ Sotinel, 'Emperors and Popes in the Sixth Century,' p. 278.

⁹⁰ See notes 1, 10, and 11 above.

papacy within the city and beyond. By taking advantage of Theoderic's project of restoration, Felix was able to appropriate a building in the heart of the ancient Forum that had long been attributed to the patronage of Constantine. The church thus served to intertwine the history of the Christian community in Rome with that of the empire and with the reign of Constantine in particular, thereby justifying the bishop's claims to an authority that the bishops believed Constantine himself had bestowed upon their office. Within the walls of Santi Cosma e Damiano, Pope Felix IV commissioned an exquisite apse mosaic that depicted the desired goal: a world in which both the secular and religious authorities of the Italian peninsula and the Roman empire in the east acknowledge the primacy of the Roman bishop as the descendent of both Peter and Paul, as well as Christ's representative on earth.

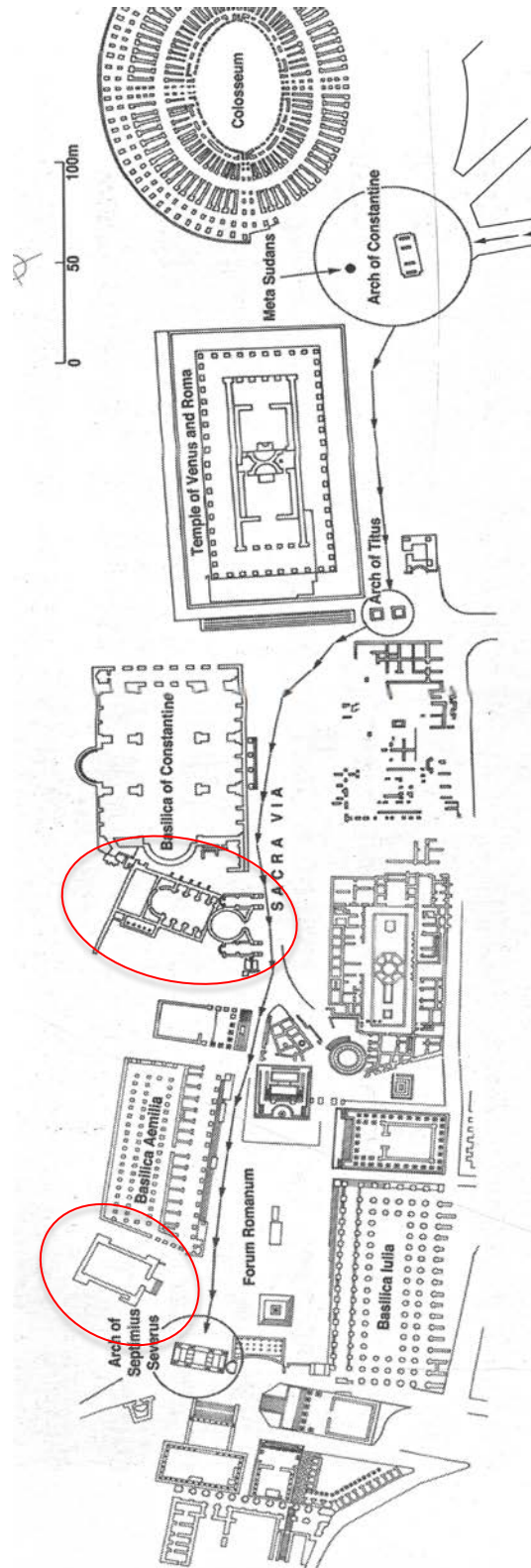


Figure 1: Plan of the Forum Romanum with path along the Via Sacra from Arch of Constantine to Arch of Septimius Severus, detail, the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano is (center) and the Curia (left) (from John R. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, p. 58, fig. , fig. 28; courtesy of the University of California Press)



Figure 2: The Church of Santi Cosma e Damiano, Rome, detail, façade of the rotunda known as the Temple of Romulus facing the Via Sacra and the Forum Romanum



Figure 3: The apse mosaic of Santa Cosma e Damiano in Rome (from left to right: Pope Felix IV, Cosmas/Damian, Saint Paul, Christ, Saint Peter, Damian/Cosmas, and Saint Theodore; the cities of Bethlehem and Jerusale, as well as the Agnus Dei, are obscured from view by the Baroque additions to the apse)

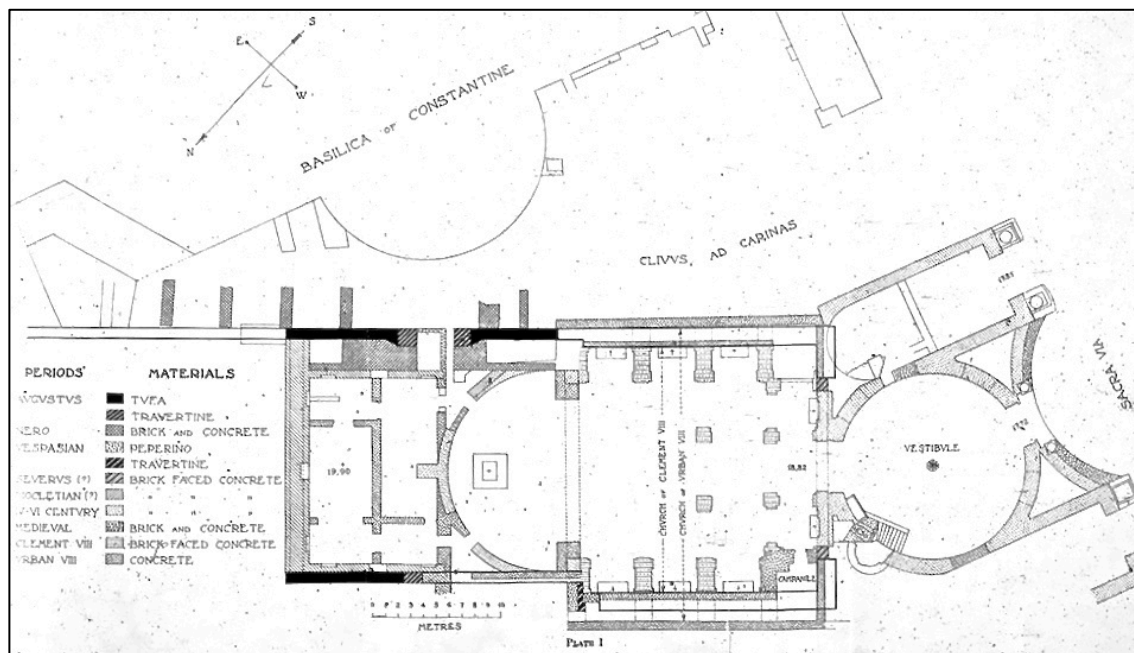


Figure 4: Plan of Santi Cosma e Damiano, note the two pre-Christian buildings: the 'Temple of Romulus' (right) and the apsidal hall of the Templum Pacis (left). The *forma urbis romae* was located on the outer northeastern wall (from P. Whitehead, 'The Church of SS. Cosma e Damiano,' plate I; courtesy of the Archaeological Institute of America and *American Journal of Archaeology*)

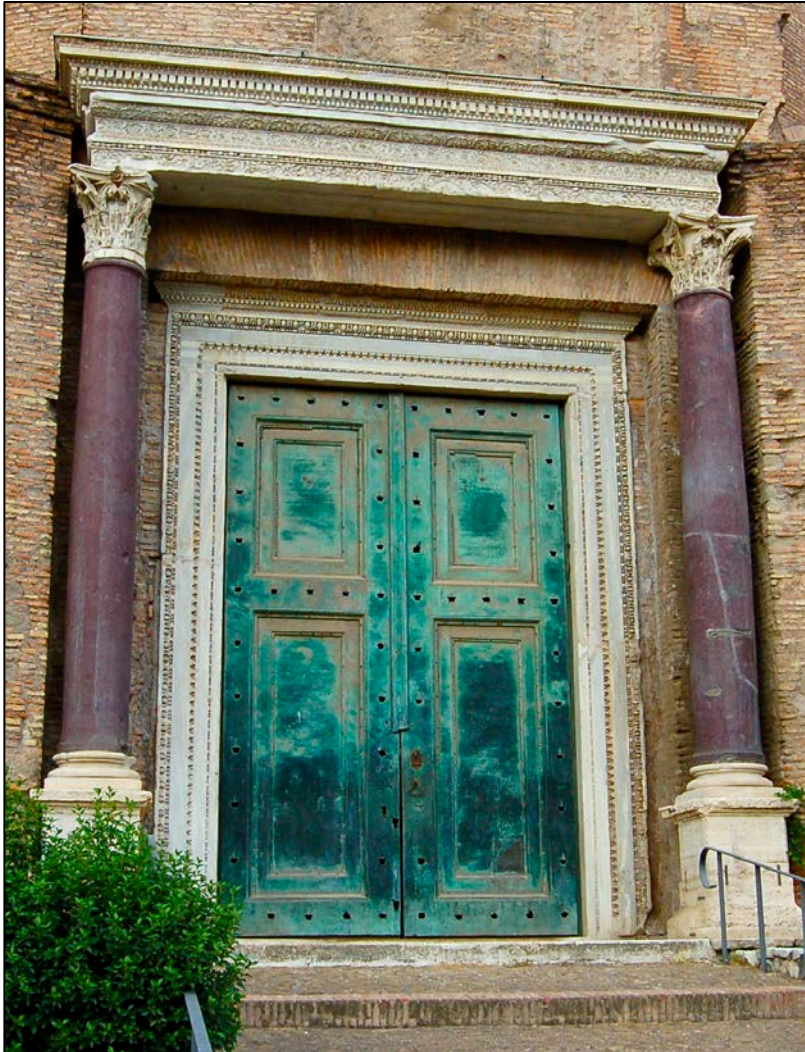


Figure 5: Santi Cosma e Damiano, detail, bronze doors flanked by twin porphyry columns on pedestal-like plinths

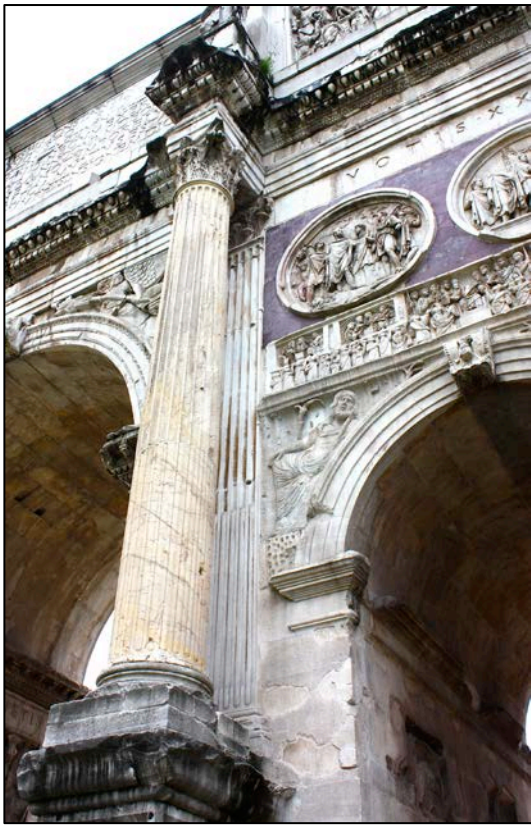


Figure 6: Arch of Constantine, Rome (4th century), detail, marble column on plinth, view from the north



Figure 7: Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (d. 359 CE) found in Old Saint Peter's Basilica: detail, *traditio legis* on the front panel and upper register of the sarcophagus (Museo Storico del Tesoro della Basilica di San Pietro, Museo Vaticano; photograph of plaster cast by author)



Figure 8: San Lorenzo, Milan, Italy (late 4th century), apse mosaic, detail, *Traditio legis*



Figure 9: Cathedral of San Gennaro, Naples, Italy (4th century), mosaic, detail, *Traditio legis*



Figure 10: Church of Santa Costanza, Rome (c. 4th-5th centuries), apse mosaic, detail, *Traditio legis*



Figure 11: Santi Cosma e Damiano, apse mosaic, detail of Christ



Figure 12: Santi Cosma e Damiano, apse mosaic, detail showing the symmetrical composition of the apse mosaic.



Figure 13: Santi Cosma e Damiano, apse mosaic, detail of Bethlehem, sheep, and the dedicatory inscription

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