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Santa Maria Antiqua: The amalgamation of Identity in Early
Medieval Rome

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The intent of this investigation is to frame an identity for the church of Santa Maria Antiqua and the urban condition of Rome during the sixth through eighth centuries. Coupling topographical and semiotic information with larger geographic issues, this study interrogates the church and specific individuals associated with it as a way of more comprehensively understanding Santa Maria Antiqua as a visual medium of cultural change and political propaganda. Narrating the complex formation of personal and social identity at the site allows us to understand greater physical and social contexts and explore more thoroughly early Christian Rome.



Introduction

The church of Santa Maria Antiqua in central Rome began to function for Christian purposes during the sixth century CE and became a vehicle of civic expression during the subsequent three centuries. Positioned at the foot of the Palatine hill with direct access to the Roman Forum, the church articulates the interface of competing political interests in Byzantine Rome.

From the establishment of the church to its demise in a mid-ninth century earthquake, Santa Maria Antiqua experienced the interaction of multiple processes: Hellenistic cultural propagation, shifting burial rituals, and the exchange of political power between the Byzantine imperial government and the Church. Constantinopolitan theological disputes often politicized the differences between emperor and Church, initiating geographical identities for many civic and religious issues. Byzantine imperial decrees, in particular, conflicted with papal interests during the seventh and eighth centuries. This tension owes itself in part to the blurring of definition between the ruling elite in Rome, the Byzantine exarchate government, and the clergy.¹ The lexicon of Roman art, architecture, culture and theology was nuanced by a trans-Mediterranean exchange of people and ideas. Santa Maria Antiqua, expressing this concept, reveals a number of identities. As Christianity gradually usurped Paganism and the church patrimony began to overlap secular leadership, a palimpsest of personalities, theological polemics and political agendas took shape on the walls of the church. Consequently, there is an intentional identity at the church as well; Pope John VII (705-707) is the most well-known patron of art at Santa Maria Antiqua, and his work there during the early eighth century promulgates a particular papal identity.

The collective existence of identities makes Santa Maria Antiqua a medium of implicit and explicit representations: implicitly reflecting culture and society in the early medieval period, and explicitly conveying propaganda and intentional religious or civic meaning.

Topography

Characterizing the early history of the building in pre-Christian times is important to understanding its later role as a church. The function of the original structure is largely unclear; it is possible that the building originated in the time of Domitian, emperor in the first century. Like other ancient buildings in the area, thick masonry walls provide the structure and allow for the carving of niches and other spaces. A connecting ramp up the Palatine indicates a formal entrance to the palaces. With a large, open atrium space and a smaller covered courtyard surrounded by cellular rooms, the plan suggests a magnified Roman house typology.²

Considering its scale, the ancient structure may have functioned as a *quadriporticus* for the emperor to meet with or address crowds. The arrangement of the structure emulates a large, traditional house and has an inherently domestic quality to political engagement and civic obedience. The emperor could have used the ramp as a direct connection between his imperial affairs on the hill and his local affairs down in the Forum.

Two potential routes served the entrance to Santa Maria Antiqua: one route between the *lacus* of Juturna and the Temple of Castor and Pollux, directly connecting the church to the Via Sacra; and another along the northern edge of the former *aula* of Domitian, connecting Santa Maria Antiqua to the Vicus Tuscus. The latter route infers a relationship to the Horrea Agrippiana and other infrastructure to the west and south; that a series of low walls line this path suggests that grain stores or market stalls may have populated the street scene (Fig. 2). The conditions imply an official public building adjacent to the everyday activities of Rome. The arrangement primed the building for connecting traditions and memory to new political powers.

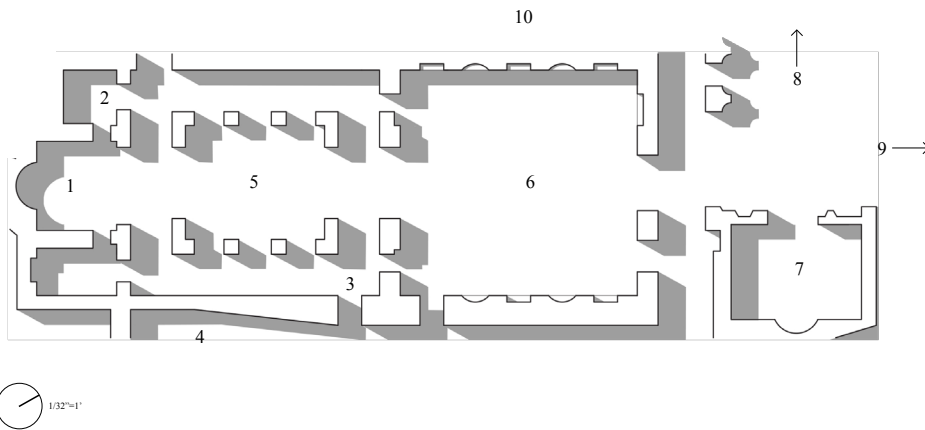


Figure 1 1) presbytery with apse and palimpsest wall; 2) Chapel of Physicians in the diakonikon; 3) church passageway to Palatine ramp; 4) Palatine ramp; 5) nave; 6) atrium; 7) Oratory of the Forty Martyrs; 8) route along the aula of Domitian to the Vicus Tuscus; 9) route to Via Sacra, weaving between the fount of Juturna and the temple of Castor and Pollux; 10) aula of Domitian. Drawing by author and Christina Lulich, referencing the archeological work of Carlo Pietrangeli.



Figure 2 Contemporary view toward the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs and the main entrance to S. Maria Antiqua, from the remains of the Vicus Tuscus. Photo by Christina Lulich.

Methodology

This investigation personifies the identity of Santa Maria Antiqua, focusing on specific individuals: Amantius, a sixth-century *aurifex* (goldsmith) whose epitaph survives at the adjacent Oratory of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste; Plato, *cura palatii urbis* during the mid-seventh century and his pious wife Blatta; and Plato's son John, *rector Appiae* of the late seventh century, who became Pope John VII of the early eighth century. Limited textual information remains about the figures, but inscriptive and pictorial information associates them with issues of identity and propaganda at Santa Maria Antiqua.

The burial inscription of Amantius expresses very directly the assimilation of Christian necrological beliefs in the sixth century. The existence of the epitaph has social implications, as the growing prominence of salvific ideology and a culture of warfare disestablished many patterns in the urban social hierarchy; the inscriptions of Plato and Blatta, vis-à-vis the career of their son, demonstrate the maturity of a new urban aristocracy supported by Byzantine military elitism and the appropriation of Roman civic power to the church; and Pope John VII's pictorial campaign at Santa Maria Antiqua demonstrates the semiotic quality of the church and the pope's agenda of self-glorification.

Amantius

Here rests in peace Amantius the goldsmith who has lived 50 years, more or less,
put down under the 11 day of the Kalends of March, in the consulship of our lord the
consul of Justin, they are immortal, after five times of Augustus, fourth indiction.³

The inscription of our early figure Amantius (Fig. 3), discovered in the precinct between Santa Maria Antiqua, the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs, and the Fount of Juturna (*Lacus Iaturnae*), expresses structural change in Roman society during the sixth century. As Pagan traditions of the past continued to retreat from or adapt to Christianity, the social hierarchy of Rome became increasingly post-senatorial. After the restoration of Byzantine control by Narses in the mid-500s and ongoing invasions by Lombards, many aristocratic families began to flee south to cities like Naples and Palermo, where they could maintain their high status and comfortable lives. Byzantine and Church authorities assumed many civic offices as the nobility drained out of Latium.⁴ Artisans and other skilled workers, particularly those providing services to the church, rose in relative status.

During the sixth century, precious metals and stones grew in significance to liturgy. Lustrous materials like gold expressed church opulence and societal value, giving a character of splendor and power to the institutions of God. The culmination of this portrayal in Rome was important to popes and the church patrimony, as the religious centrality of the city established a geographic identity for Christianity. Pope Pelagius I, contemporary to Amantius, pursued a restoration of gold and silver vessels in Roman churches. At Santa Maria Antiqua, paintings of metalwork appear on the walls of the side chapels. Some of the depictions are medical instrumentation for healing saints, while much of the focus is on representations of wealth like gold crosses and lamps (Fig 4.). Although many of these paintings were executed later than Amantius' life, their presence underscores the role of wealth and sacrifice in the spatial vocabulary of the church.

Amantius' epitaph falls into the category of implicit in its characterization of Santa Maria Antiqua, since it is reflective of societal change but it does not intentionally symbolize an idea. The epitaph may have existed before the official establishment of the church, but its existence is unique because Amantius was not an aristocrat. Although he was likely very

wealthy and powerful, he was a skilled worker, not the son of a noble. Many goldsmiths of the day, who still associated with the guild on the Via Sacra, were involved in the restoration of many public buildings and churches. Amantius may have contributed to Pope Pelagius' efforts to revitalize Rome's churches, earning him accolades and salvation. Although the inscription is concise in wording, its reality is enough to discern a sense of status. The notion that an artisan was identified on a church funerary inscription brings considerable prestige to the perceived importance and skill of such an individual. Furthermore, the ancient slab of marble used for Amantius' inscription was likely extracted from an adjacent ground.⁵ His services would have amounted to pious behavior, especially in the context of papal patronage. It is here that we can infer that Amantius' inscription, marking his burial, social standing, and ultimately his salvation, was achieved by merits of his service to the Church. His inscription is one of the oldest at Santa Maria Antiqua.⁶



Figure 3 Today Amantius' epitaph is mounted within the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs. Photo by Gregor Kalaa.



Figure 4 Image of a gold cross, likely executed during the time of John VII, on the lower western wall of the Chapel of Physicians. Photo by the author.

Plato, Blatta and John

The same Lombard threat in the late sixth century that dispersed the traditional aristocracy effected major changes in attitudes toward burial. In light of unrest outside the Aurelian walls and a decrease in the urban population, a steady translation of Christian relics and burials from suburban to urban churches began to occur.⁷ Upstanding citizens – Byzantine exarchate figures, clerics, the remaining converted aristocracy, and skilled workers like Amantius – forewent suburban cemeteries so as to be buried near relics. The concept of dedicating Rome's urban space to burials speaks to significant land-use changes during this period in Rome, because as the population waned an increasing percentage of city space became available for uses like burial.⁸

About a century after Amantius, a Greek official named Plato attained the position of *cura palatii urbis*. The father of Pope John VII likely had a successful military career in service of Constantinople, the incentive for which was the position of curator. Son John, who at the time of his father's death was *rector Appiae*, or director of the Appian Way, esteemed his father.

Here lies Plato himself, who traveling across many currents
rushing across the long straits of the sea filled with waves
Shined like a noble and was a pleasing official in the empire,
And rose to the top as one who was famous for what he did by his own hand.
For after his many services (*curae*), the ancient palaces of Rome
Were improved, he restored the long staircase.

He proceeded to the divine palaces of the eternal king
To obtain for his service the durable rewards of God.⁹

In the burial inscription, John celebrates his father's past successes as a Byzantine military officer, his improvement of the imperial palaces in Rome, and his subsequent rewards in heaven. John identifies his father as a self-made noble who became a respected official of the empire. The staircase or ramp which Plato restored is probably the set of stairs from the northern Palatine to the Forum, not the ramp connecting to Santa Maria Antiqua.

The inscription of Blatta tells a great deal about the background of her son. Characterized by her piety and dedication to service, Blatta's inscription reveals that she inspired fidelity in her marriage, produced two celibate sons (one of whom died), and devoted her life to charity.

Recently in this tomb, the distinguished offspring had placed (his) father's bones,
And now here lies (his) mother (also):
Indeed, that honored parent, when the beloved father was dying,
Comforted her son, as she was managing everything for the father
With a daily care encouraged by pious worship:
This son learned of (his) father's supervisory post (*cura*) in the very womb,
The sorrow over a son she lost had abated, and both were together,
One spirit, one mind, a whole household in harmony.¹⁰

What is interesting about her wealth and generosity is the effect of her social standing: as wife of Plato, Blatta seems to have converted part of the imperial palace into a charity center. It is therefore plausible that Blatta's establishment of a charity center informed her son's later actions at Santa Maria Antiqua.

The inscriptions of Plato and Blatta are reflective of the meritocratic social hierarchy in Rome during the seventh century. The shift to urban burials, introduced in this paper by Amantius' inscription a century earlier, was associated with salvific assurance by proximity to relics. Following this tradition, Plato and Blatta were laid to rest at Sant'Anastasia, where their identities as pious Christians could remain.¹¹

John, the son of Plato and Blatta, served as *rector Appiae* prior to his reign as pope. As financial manager of properties along the Via Appia in the 680s and 690s, John oversaw lands where traditional Roman catacomb burials had previously occurred.¹² The position suggests a hereditary connection to both the church patrimony and aristocratic status. In spite of the ancestral tradition of land ownership, John did not descend from an established aristocratic family; his parents were Greek. I therefore assert that Plato's official position helped his son achieve the *rector Appiae* position and later the papacy.

It is quite likely that John grew up on the Palatine hill, residing in or near the palaces which his father managed. Blatta's burial inscription indicates a charity center operating on or near the Palatine hill, which may have functioned during John's childhood or early adulthood before he was pope.

She fostered priests and she restored the needy,
Whatever the poor man sought, she willingly gave,
And because she cherished zealously the martyrs of Christ
She deserved to be the companion of the martyr Christopher
And (he prays) that she is rejoicing with the chorus of the blessed. Made by her
kindly son, John, of grieving heart, who was the administrator (rector) of the Appian
Way¹³

Implied is a *xenodochia*, a sort of pilgrim's hostel or care center, which would have been convenient to central Rome's many religious attractions. Saint Christopher, patron saint of travelers, fits well within the narrative. The essential basis of a *diaconia* is provided as well, as a facility serving the needs of the poor. John appears to be close to his mother, as he refers to himself as "her kindly son" instead of attaching himself to his father.

The relationship between *rector Appiae* and a Palatine charity center is unclear. If indeed Plato's position warranted management or ownership of Appian lands, it is likely that his son inherited them. Implicit of new hereditary orders in Rome is John's *rector Appiae* position; direct and explicit is the notion that Blatta provided a charity center on the Palatine hill, preceding her son's establishment of the *diaconia* at Santa Maria Antiqua.

Pope John VII

Of the discussed persons, Pope John VII has the most documented connection to Santa Maria Antiqua. The Liber Pontificalis and images at the church confirm his restoration there, and it also appears that he established his papal residence on the nearby Palatine.¹⁴ Referring to Blatta's inscription, there is a possibility that John's palace was converted to a monastery,¹⁵ the practice of which was common by this time. As mentioned previously, Santa Maria Antiqua is connected to the Horrea Agrippiana via the Vicus Tuscus and to the Forum by a route which runs along the Fount of Juturna. The dual legacies of governmental provision and healing, at the base of the Palatine, reinforce the role of Santa Maria Antiqua as a *diaconia*. Monastic importations from the East, sixth-century *diaconia* generally functioned as distribution centers of essential items and food, and sometimes as medical facilities; *xenodochia* performed a similar function for pilgrims.¹⁶ A large part of John VII's restoration of Santa Maria Antiqua involves the Chapel of Physicians, which flanks the altar on the right side of the church and serves as part of the semiotic scheme. The typical *diaconiae* and *xenodochiae* met basic nutritional, medical and spiritual needs of people but lacked a strict spatial typology; the *diaconia* of Santa Maria Antiqua was positioned near Rome's public food services and to the Palatine hill. Thus, the notion of charity clearly became part of John VII's propaganda.

The papacy of John VII was not practically biased to imperial or local association. His pictorial program at the church included both Eastern and Western saints,¹⁷ and his interactions with Justinian II proved to be less than ideological.¹⁸ Important to note is that from the sixth through eighth centuries, Greek monasteries cultivated a majority of the artistic, literary and intellectual culture of Rome. The so-called 'Byzantine captivity' of the papacy can be associated with this pattern, which can be related to a growing Hellenistic demographic in the city during the period. A Greek colony is believed to have concentrated in the area between the Tiber, Aventine and Palatine. Easterners were establishing a presence in pre-Iconoclastic Rome not only to fill political posts, but to work as artisans, merchants and clergymen. Imagery and inscriptions at Santa Maria Antiqua evidence that John VII was sensitive to eastern interests.¹⁹ Centuries after John VII, cycles of non-biblical saints like Saints Quiricus and Julitta and the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste appeared at the church, indicating the growth of cult movements.²⁰

The Chapel of Physicians, occupying the *diakonikon*, is also characterized by Eastern sentiments.²¹ Greek inscriptions and semiotics involving the *Anargyroi* or Holy Unmercenaries appear in the chapel. The Unmercenaries were sainted for providing medical services without payment.²² Metallic imagery, in the form of a gold cross on the lower western wall and the medical instrumentation of the saints, maintains a presence in the Chapel of Physicians. A clear notion of provision emerges at Santa Maria Antiqua; characterizing the church as a monastic *diaconia* allows other visual arrangements to become grouped as a metaphor for spiritual provision.

The Marian campaign at the church is prominent, concentrating on the nave and

presbytery, with other references throughout the church. The Virgin is depicted on the pillars which frame the central space, and care seems to be given to preserve earlier Marian imagery on the pillars; *velums* may have been overlaid on seventh-century frescoes as protective measures.²³ The Annunciation appears on the SE pillar and a niche dedicated to the Virgin remains on the NE pillar. A depiction of the Virgin with crossed hands covers an image of the important Roman icon Saint Luke, the patron saint of artists, physicians and other everyday occupations.²⁴ On the presbytery, the retention of previous Marian images is even more pronounced; the uniformity of the apsidal scenes is interrupted by a preexisting image of the Virgin in the arms of St. Anne, her mother, whose canonization was popular in the East. Nordhagen refers to the Chapel of John VII at Saint Peter's in suggesting that John VII depicted himself as donor in many of the Marian images;²⁵ on the edges of the Santa Maria Antiqua ambo and at his oratory at San Pietro he refers to himself as *Iohannes servu(s) s(an)c(t)ae M(a)riae*, or 'servant of Mary'.²⁶ The *Liber Pontificalis* sardonically implies that John VII loved having images of himself everywhere.²⁷ There is significance in this interblending of Mary with saints and depictions of John VII; the allusion to maternal care through Mary adds to a vocabulary of provision.

The theological dispute over monothelitism, which had to do with distinguishing Christ as human, God, or one and the same, found its ways to the apse wall of Santa Maria Antiqua; although the fight over monothelitism became politically tumultuous for East-West relations in the late seventh century, John VII's stance was somewhat unclear in the way it visualized the debate. In the *Adoration of the Cross*, John VII employed a youthful depiction of a wide-eyed Christ in place of a lamb;²⁸ among the images of the church fathers to the right of the apse, there is an image of Pope Martin I. This suggests a reference to his murder by Byzantine Emperor Constans II following the Lateran Council of 649.²⁹ The portrayed liveliness of the Crucified is consistent with the imperial coinage of Justinian II, but the portrait of Martin revisits the geopolitical tension created by the council in 649. The duality complicates attempts to clarify John's political agenda at Santa Maria Antiqua. Somewhat more political are the Old Testament verses on the apse wall, which seem to demonstrate a resistance to the Quinisext Council's anti-Semitic agendas.³⁰ To the left of the apse, below the *Adoration* sequence, John depicts himself as donor.

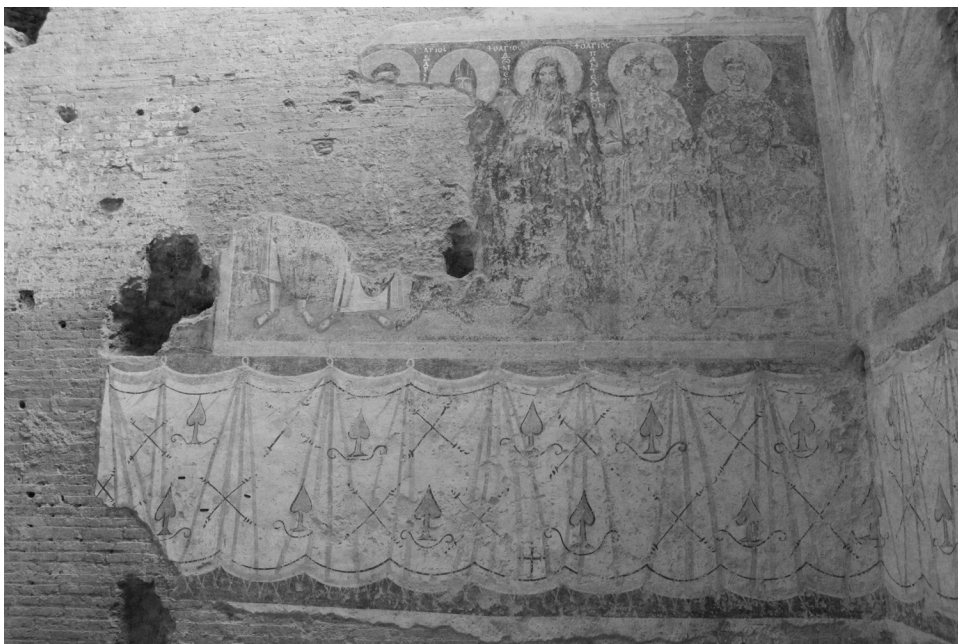


Figure 5 Western wall of the Chapel of Physicians, with the Anargyroi depicted. Photo by Gregor Kalas.



Figure 6 Upper portion of apse wall, with the Adoration of the Cross above the niche and the church fathers to the right and left. Photo by Gregor Kalas.

When Justinian II sent the canons of the Quinisext council to be signed by the pope, John VII simply returned them without amends. Unlike Sergius I's direct refusal to accept the papers of the Council at Trullo in 692, John VII made no forthright stance on the issues. The *Liber Pontificalis* was surprisingly critical in its account of this incident.³¹ The apparent dismissiveness could have been an avoidance of conflict with the Byzantines, considering that Justinian II was known for his ruthless military and theological agendas. The move could also evidence inclusiveness and a lack of stringent orthodoxy. Either way, John VII did not actively disassociate with the Byzantines; indeed, he restored Santa Maria Antiqua in a very Greek manner. His theology at Santa Maria Antiqua, in this sense, was not regulated by his identity as Roman pope.

Visual Identity of Santa Maria Antiqua

Layered visual campaigns, as well as burials in the atrium floor, fragment the wholeness of visual expression in Santa Maria Antiqua. Although Byzantine is the church's concealment of burials beneath the atrium floor and out of main sightlines, aspects like the side chapels and the Palimpsest wall add inconsistency to the compositional expression of the interior. John's preservation of preexisting frescoes brings to light the pre-Iconoclastic conditions of objectification of peripheral images.³² As Byzantine church schemes were generally more comprehensive than their Western counterparts, the church seems to lean west. Scholars like Rushforth have presented Santa Maria Antiqua as a church with a Byzantine heritage and local sentiments.³³

Theological and political propaganda, as well as burial, are important themes of Santa Maria Antiqua. As a *diaconia*, the church illustrates Papal propaganda in the early eighth century, with a pictorial agenda and charitable services. The evolution of Christianity significantly influenced cultural attitudes toward location, time and place. Amantius' inscription suggests an evolution of local burial practices and an altered social hierarchy. The administrative position of Plato sheds light on the continuation of the works-based economic system, which had political implications for local identity. Blatta's possible role in operating a charity center on or near the palaces of the Palatine hill holds a certain bearing on the future endeavors of her son John. Pope John VII's efforts at Santa Maria Antiqua synthesize monastic charity and the economics of salvation by combining practical institutions like the *diaconia* with imagery of generous saints and stories, creating an identity for himself and the papacy.

Conclusion

An earthquake in 847 CE buried the complex history of Santa Maria Antiqua and preserved its contents; over a millennium later, modern scholars unearthed the site. At Santa Maria Antiqua the inherencies of early medieval culture, as Pagan traditions faded away or blended organically into Christianity, surfaced as interrelated qualities of an evolving urban society engaged in dialogue with Constantinople. The lives of Amantius, Plato, Blatta and John VII narrate the identity of Santa Maria Antiqua in implicit and explicit ways, as the church frames them in their social and geographical context, while marking personal achievements, influence, and status of salvation. The way they frame our understanding of the church as a built form is by piecing together a synthetic identity for Santa Maria Antiqua and the greater context of Rome; an identity that displays not one discernible patron or agenda, but a confluence of people, events and processes.

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Endnotes

1 For the structural upheaval wrought by the onslaught of Gothic and Lombard invasions and the reestablishment of authority by the Ravenna exarchate and the Roman church, see Brown, pp. 31-35, 61-69.

2 This idea was suggested to me by Gregor Kalas after discussions of the original intention of the building and as Christina Lulich and I constructed the plan drawing.

3 *ICUR*, p. 442. English translation provided by Shane Bobrycki.

4 Brown, pp. 24-27, 164-167. As the dispersal of the ancient aristocracy took place, the share of wealth held by old senatorial families shifted toward those placed in office. Reinterpretations of the term 'nobile' began as early as the late sixth century, as office-holders began to assume titles.

5 Rushforth, p. 108.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 108-109. A third century epitaph of unknown identity was excavated by Rushforth in a corridor leading to the fount of Juturna.

7 Costambeys, p. 174. For the translation of reliquary and the subsequent displacement of traditional burial sites in the sixth century, see Osborne, pp. 293-296.

8 The Aurelian walls continued to be maintained, but their function in defining the extents of the city was lost. See Costambeys., pp. 170-171.

9 *ICUR*, p. 442.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 442.

11 Rushforth, p. 7.

12 Augenti, p. 116-117.

13 *ICUR*, p. 442.

14 *The Book of Pontiffs*, pg. 86.

15 *ICUR*, p. 442.

16 Knipp, p. 8 and Dey, pp. 406-408. Knipp and Dey differ in their interpretations of *diaconiae* and *xenodochiae*, but both suggest that the definitions between them were interchangeable by the seventh century. *Diaconiae* were intended to serve the resident poor, whereas *xenodochiae* seem to have served people on pilgrimage. But the definitions between them, in function and nomenclature, are difficult to resolve.

17 Rushforth, p. 73.

18 *The Book of Pontiffs*, p. 86.

19 van Dijk, pp. 309-310.

20 Jessop, p. 234.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 235.

22 Knipp, p. 2.

23 Nordhagen, *Frescoes*, p. 87.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

26 Rushforth, p. 90.

27 *The Book of Pontiffs*, p. 86. The wording implies that wherever one looks in the various Roman churches of his restorations, they will see John VII's face.

28 Nordhagen, *Adoration of the Cross*, pp. 389-390.

29 Portraits of Martin I, which began appearing very shortly after his death, symbolized Orthodoxy and resistance to Byzantine influence; see Rushforth, pp. 14 & 19.

- 30 The Council in Trullo, Netunñāṭṭā. References to anti-Semitism throughout, but appearing particularly extreme in Canons XLV, LI, & LXXI)
- 31 *The Book of Pontiffs*, p. 87.
- 32 Nordhagen, *Frescoes*, p. 90.
- 33 Rushforth, pp. 13-15.

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