Memories and memory practices in late-antique Rome

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Few cities remember so many layers of their own history as does Rome, and this makes it ideal for exploring the interaction between topography and historical memory.¹ The 14 essays collected in Rom in der Spästantike, which derive from a colloquium held in Heidelberg in 2006, ambitiously tackle the question of what was remembered and how it was remembered in late-antique Rome. Its contributors include some of the foremost international scholars in the field. Many of the varied themes addressed by the different essays are brought together in an introduction by R. Behrwald and Chr. Witschel (both of whom have previously tackled similar questions²) and, in particular, by Witschel’s concluding essay, a general survey of late antique inscriptions (“Alte und neue Erinnerungsmodi in spätantiken Inschriften Roms”).

The overall picture is one of great diversity of memories, as well as memory practices, in late antiquity³ and the co-existence, interactions and tensions between them. The volume is divided into three parts: “Secular sites of memory in late antiquity”, “Christian sites of memory in late antiquity”, and “Historical memory in late antique inscriptions”. The essays themselves indicate the limits of these divisions: many explore the degree to which the categories “secular” and “Christian” (not to mention that of traditional Roman cult) were fuzzy in this period.

The editors single out three themes that they argue define the period:

(1) The physical absence of the emperor from the city: Witschel proposes (357) that we may speak of a certain “reconquest (Rückeroberung)” of Rome by the senatorial aristocracy — although this is not to say that imperial presence declined (see especially J. Weisweiler). This focus naturally invites comparison with Constantinople, the subject of another recent volume.⁴

(2) The “Christianization” of Rome, a term which, as the editors emphasize, runs the risk of masking the range of attitudes found both among Christians and adherents to traditional Roman practices. B. Brenk, in particular, interrogates the applicability of this term to newly founded churches in Rome: at times new churches were certainly intended to draw attention to the Christian identity they represented, but elsewhere there is no indication that opposition to traditional Roman cult was intended. Again, this is a theme that resonates with much recent work on late-antique Rome.⁵

(3) The shifting economic and social conditions, in particular the depopulation of Rome, that helped determined the cityscape (such as the decline of the aristocratic domus, examined here by C. Machado’s essay).

These three themes describe the large-scale changes that took place in late-antique Rome. Yet the essays in the volume do much more: they tackle the cultural logic that explains how Rome’s lieux de mémoire developed — in line with the editors’ methodological emphasis (16) on

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¹ Cf. D. Caldwell and L. Caldwell (edd.), Rome: continuing encounters between past and present (Farnham 2011).
³ Late antiquity here is taken to refer to the period from the mid-3rd to the late 6th c.
⁴ L. Grig and G. Kelly (edd.), Two Romes: Rome and Constantinople in late antiquity (New York 2012).
P. Nora’s understanding of the term. In this light, the contributions may be read as providing:
(1) a preliminary map of Rome’s late-antique lieux de mémoire; and
(2) an introductory sketch of the forms of cultural logic that endowed these sites with continued cultural significance.
What the contributions make clear is that the monuments of Rome were no mere scenic backdrop to the late-antique city, but rather contributed to shaping a new idea of what Rome was.

(1) The historical topography of late-antique Rome

Arguably, the single most defining “monument” of late-antique Rome, in terms of its physical and its psychological impact, was the Aurelian Wall, a monument simultaneously testifying to Roman strength and Roman weakness (in that the city should need such a defensive structure). R. Coates-Stephens (“The Walls of Aurelian”) examines the construction of the wall in the 270s and its effect on the city’s later urban development. The layout of the wall, motivated primarily by strategic concerns, required difficult decisions as to which properties (private estates, commercial districts, cemeteries) to include, and which to exclude or disrupt. The result turned Rome into a ‘closed city’. From now on, a finite space within the city would have to be repurposed, which explains why public spaces were often taken over by private constructions. The construction of the Wall also created a mass of building material that would continue to be put to use in subsequent constructions, not least in renovations of the Wall itself.

Among public spaces within the city, it is the Forum of Trajan, the W end of the Forum Romanum, and the Circus Maximus that stand out as active and, at times, contested sites of traditional Roman commemoration. The Forum Romanum (in particular, the space in front of the Curia, but also the Basilica Aemilia and the Basilica Iulia) and the Imperial Fora were favored locations for new inscriptions recording the restoration of older buildings or other efforts to beautify the city (as detailed by Witschel and also addressed by P. Bruggiser).

In terms of imperial visits to Rome — events often marked by tension between the emperor and senatorial aristocrats — Trajan’s Forum was of special importance. S. Schmidt-Hofer (“Trajan und die symbolische Kommunikation bei kaiserlichen Rombesuchen in der Spästantike”), focusing on Ammianus Marcellinus’ description of Constantius II in Rome, argues that this was a result of the idealization of Trajan as an imperial rôle model, for Trajan was celebrated by later Roman historiographers and, in particular, by Pliny’s panegyric which was echoed in late-antique authors, as a military commander, but also an approachable ruler. In imitating Trajan, emperors were supposed to be willing to acquiesce to the ceremonial of a visit that underscored the special status of Rome and its senatorial aristocracy. More than a literary trope, Schmidt-Hofer proposes that the imposing Forum of Trajan (a tour of which had become de rigueur for an imperial visit) played a rôle in the construction and smooth functioning of this ideal of harmonious consensus.

A number of essays address the degree to which there were “neutral” (23) sites in the city — places which could be associated with either traditional Roman cult or Christianity — or “secular” spaces. That such interpretations were open to debate, however, is made clear by R. Lim in his examination of the religious significance of the Circus Maximus in that period (“Inventing secular space in the late antique city: reading the Circus Maximus”). On the one hand, Tertullian, addressing an audience in Carthage, could “mobilize factoids” from antiquarian Roman sources regarding the Circus Maximus to argue that all traditional public spectacles, whether in Rome or elsewhere, were idolatrous. By contrast, Roman emperors and the senatorial élite continued to maintain that such amusements were not expressions of pagan cult. Specific agendas produced differing interpretations. But what made Roman monuments especially important in this regard, as Lim points out, was that Rome could stand in pars pro toto for the whole Roman world. The development of Christian cities across the Mediterranean hinged on the interpretation of Rome.

Away from Rome’s monumental center, alternative spaces of memory were appearing and disappearing. One of the most dramatic examples of memory loss, explored by Machado (“Between memory and oblivion”), was the decline of the Roman domus. In its traditional Roman setting, an aristocratic domus was closely associated with its owners, even where such
properties changed hands. Imperial Roman topography was thus marked by well-recognized sites of family memory. Lack of interest (especially as aristocrats from the provinces had less reason to establish a Roman residence), lack of funding, destruction in the sacks of the city, as well as donations to the Church, eroded these estates. And although the Christian conversion of domus at times incorporated the memory of the powerful family associated with the property, Machado emphasizes that “a specific form of social unit and its particular architectural manifestation” (130) was disappearing.

In its place a new Christian topography was forming. In many ways, B. Brenk’s essay (“Kirche und Strasse in frühchristlichen Rom”) takes up where Machado leaves off, exploring how new Christian memories were layered on top of older sites of significance, and to what degree these new foundations called attention to their Christianity. Most straightforwardly in the case of SS. Cosma and Damiano, facing out onto the via Sacra in the late 520s, Brenk identifies a public gesture of Christianization. He argues that the church can have had little practical purpose in serving a congregation, given the limited population of the area; rather, it was intended publicly to proclaim the Christian agenda of Pope Felix IV, who was prominently portrayed on the apse mosaic. In the case of private donations, Brenk contrasts the more “practically” oriented foundation of S. Vitale, located on the probably-still-functioning estates of its donor Vestina, with that of SS. Giovanni e Paolo, a church positioned directly opposite, and at about the same height as, the Temple of Claudius, in a very wealthy neighborhood populated by the senatorial aristocracy. Here was a church in dialogue with “pagan” Rome.

What were to become the most prominent Christian sites of late-antique Rome were, of course, not these intramural churches, but rather the extramural shrines of martyrs, in particular St. Peter’s. In his essay, “St. Peter’s as a place of collective memory in late antiquity”, F. A. Bauer traces the shifting usage of the area, from a burial site for both élites and those of lower status where family members gathered to commemorate their dead and pray to Saint Peter, to a symbolic site of papal power. He argues (159) that the increasing popularity of Saint Peter’s shrine led the pope to associate himself with it “to augment his own position, both as a leader of the Church and as a worldly power”. This took the form of papal burial at the site, architectural and decorative interventions, and the use of the building as a “stage for the papal mass” (159) As a result, already by the 5th c. Saint Peter and his church attracted pilgrims and precious gifts from afar, which were commemorated in the church, in turn reinforcing the “universal” interest in his cult.

Meanwhile two contributions on Pope Damasus (M. Sághy, “Renovatio memoriae”; S. Diefenbach, “Urbs und ecclesia”; on the latter, see further below) tackle the degree to which that pope’s monumental inscriptions at the catacombs turned the traditional periphery of Rome into a new center. Sághy, in a vein similar to Bauer’s interpretation of St. Peter’s, emphasizes the degree to which Damasus’ program should be seen as an effort to assert episcopal control. She questions the rhetoric of Damasus’ inscriptions, with their picture of a unified Christian community and their preservation of the memory of martyrs who risked oblivion. Both tropes, she suggests, are so strongly emphasized by Damasus precisely because the reality of late 4th-c. Rome was quite different. Different factions promoted different martyrs, and Damasus was trying to control a divided landscape. To do so, he turned to a well-established Roman medium: the monumental inscription.

(2) The memory practices of inscriptions

The particular strength of this book lies in its examination of epigraphic material as a means by which sites within Rome continued to be endowed with cultural significance. As Witschel emphasizes, there was no decline in the “epigraphic habit” in 4th- and 5th-c. Rome. Indeed, it was arguably in Rome that traditional epigraphic practices continued longer (they lasted to the mid-6th c.) than anywhere else in the western empire.

Yet this is not to say that the memory practices of inscriptions were static. An introduction to late-antique attitudes to the past is provided by S. Orlandi (“Passato e presente nell’epigrafia tardoantica di Roma”). She identifies the major trends as an interest in preserving classical texts; participating in traditional political institutions; maintaining ideologically charged traditions
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(such as the circus games); investigating the persistence of pagan cults and cult-sites (often out of antiquarian interest); restoring Rome’s ancient heritage; and, in the case of the aristocracy, recovering illustrious family names. These phenomena, she demonstrates, are similarly present in the epigraphic evidence. While many practices of commemoration took traditional forms, what was different, she argues, was the sense of distance from the past. Late-antique inscriptions (“pagan” as well as “Christian” ones) repeatedly emphasize the squalor of the monuments they are restoring and the great effort needed to restore them. They are also characterized by a more insistent rhetoric of the eternity of Rome and the possibility of recovery. Such language was not new, but it had intensified. The past was no longer, as in the Imperial period, “alive”; it needed to be actively revived.

The shifting values of the senatorial aristocracy are also considered by Weisweiler (“Inscribing imperial power: letters from emperors in late-antique Rome”). Contrary to what we might expect, he argues that senatorial aristocrats seem to have increasingly defined themselves with reference to the emperor. He examines honorific monuments that transcribed the imperial permission for their erection, a form of commemoration that appears in the provinces already in the early empire, but in Rome only in the later 4th c.\textsuperscript{6} In the emperor’s absence, “imperial power became a more precious commodity” (322), trumping traditional Roman values (descent, political commitment, and traditional piety).

As with the sites of monuments themselves, there are, at first glance, clear divisions between traditional Roman and Christian forms of memory. Topographically, so Witschel shows, there was fairly little overlap between the two genres of inscriptions (with exceptions, such as around the Vatican). Traditional Roman inscriptions were erected in “public” spaces and, even when their dedicators were Christian, gave no indication of their beliefs. References to traditional Roman cult tended to be restricted to the semi-public spaces of the aristocratic domus or the tomb. Christian inscriptions, too, tended to distinguish carefully between sacred and profane space, restricting “religious” inscriptions to the interior of churches and tombs. Early Christian funerary inscriptions were also distinctive in content, emphasizing the deceased’s Christian beliefs, not their social and political successes while alive.

From the later 4th c. onward, as more monumental forms of Christian epigraphy developed, reciprocal influences become more apparent. From a Christian perspective, this is most clearly apparent with Damasus’ inscriptions, even if the distinctiveness of his vision makes it difficult to characterize this as a broader trend. As argued by Diefenbach, these are less an example of the “Christianization” of Rome than the “Romanization” of the Christian extramural martyr landscape. Damasus aimed to transform the Christian martyrs into Roman citizens and members of the Christian church, thereby widening — geographically and symbolically — the bishop’s flock. This was a move that asserted the primacy of Rome within the universal church on the basis of the age-old ability of Rome to draw in peoples from abroad. Traditional Roman universalizing discourse was now used to underpin the Christian church.

But while the impact of Roman traditions on Christian monuments is often easier to spot than the reverse, influences were not unidirectional. A fascinating example is explored by Bruggisser (“‘Sacro-saintes statues’. Prétextat et la restauration du portique des Dei consentes à Rome”). He investigates the motivations and implications of the restoration in 367-368, by the urban prefect Praetextatus, of the Portico of the Consenting Gods on the W end of the Roman Forum, focusing on the inscription’s use of the term sacrosancta to describe the statues. By the 3rd c., the term referred primarily to the emperor or members of the imperial family. In Christian usage, it came to be applied to the bishop (as leader of the plebs sancta), as well as more generally to aspects of the Christian religion, including, by the 4th c., the altar (but not the ecclesia as a physical space). Thus Bruggisser suggests that Praetextatus, in an attempt to preserve this symbolically charged space marking the ascent to the Capitoline hill from the Roman Forum, endowed an ancient Roman cult with new cultural associations, associations

\textsuperscript{6} Cf. now the same author’s “From equality to asymmetry: honorific statues, imperial power, and senatorial identity in late-antique Rome,” \textit{JRA} 25 (2012) 319-50.
that would have been understandable to a Christian audience. Whether this should be seen as an act of rivalry or as an attempt to stress the commonalities between Roman traditions and Christianity, however, remains an open question.

What receives much less attention in the volume is the question as to how this landscape, as a whole, was perceived by inhabitants and visitors. Two contributions address this topic: V. Fauvinet-Ranson’s “Le paysage urbain de Rome chez Cassiodore: une christianisation passée sous silence”, and Behrwald’s “Heilsgeschichte in heidnischer Szenerie: Die Denkmaltopographie Roms in der christlichen Legendenbildung”. At least in these two examples the scattered memories of the pagan past did not coalesce into a comprehensive vision of the city. Fauvinet-Ranson argues that Cassiodorus’ Rome, as depicted in the *Variae*, is a “neutral” landscape. What little Cassiodorus describes of its urban topography derives from conventional literary tropes from the 4th c., such as are found in the Regionary Catalogues. Cassiodorus has little to say about Christian Rome. This, Fauvinet-Ranson argues, is in part in line with Theodoric’s attempts to sidestep the question of Arianism, yet also because Cassiodorus does not regard them as “public” buildings. A slighter later perspective is provided by the hagiographical legends of Roman martyrs (traditionally dated to the 5th and 6th c.) examined by Behrwald. With only a few exceptions, he argues, such legends do not provide recoverable traces of Rome’s imperial topography; instead, they adduced pagan sites to provide scenery for the Christian drama. Well-known sites such as the Capitoline could heighten the believability of a legend, while obscure sites could add distinctiveness to a story. There was no development of a comprehensive real, or imagined, topography of pagan Rome.

Nor, would it seem, was there yet an established “exportable” Christian urban image of Rome. Only with the so-called ‘Catalogue of 807’ contained in the Life of Pope Hadrian in the *Liber Pontificalis* do we find a document that attempts to establish a comprehensive overview of the city’s Christian heritage. Likewise, it was in the 9th c. that a scribe in Fulda gathered together earlier materials (inscriptions, itineraries, wall statistics, a liturgical description and poems) into a compilation (*Codex Einsidlen*is 326) that tackled the challenge of communicating Rome — both as a city and as a civilization. This mediaeval world was one in which new forms of memory, such as relics, liturgical commemoration and papal gifts, dominated; yet as the Einsiedeln manuscript attests, inscriptions were not forgotten. The essays in *Rom in der Spätantike* tend to look backwards to the Late Empire as the basis for comparison, not forward to “Mediaeval Rome”. In so doing, they very convincingly disprove the notion that Christianity, absence of the emperor from Rome, or social/demographic changes caused any radical break in Romans’ memory of their city before the late 6th c. This begs the question of what happened next: was “late” late antiquity the end of traditional forms of Roman memory practices, or can longer lines of continuity be traced?

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