

Pilgrimage and its Effects on San Paolo Fuori le Mura during the Middle Ages

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to examine the history of San Paolo fuori le mura (Saint Paul's Outside the Walls), the basilica in Rome dedicated to St. Paul, in order to demonstrate the impact that pilgrimage had on the development of its church structure and interior ornamentation. Several factors played a key role in this basilica's importance as a pilgrimage destination throughout the Middle Ages. I will argue that while the papacy's attempts to attract pilgrims to this particular church were primarily motivated by economic considerations, the various methods they employed contributed to the basilica's architectural development. During the Middle Ages one of the most important factors contributing to the overflow of pilgrims traveling to San Paolo fuori le mura was the institution of the Christian Jubilee. The papal bull issued by Pope Boniface VIII in 1300 C.E., greatly increased the number of pilgrims visiting Rome, and, in particular to the church dedicated to St. Paul. The paper concludes that during the Middle Ages, the popularity of this site as a holy journey destination was one of the main factors which brought about changes to its overall structure and for the addition of lavish decorative elements.

1. Introduction

Many notable scholars have investigated the growth of Christianity in and around the city of Rome while others have detailed the great pilgrimages that took place during the Middle Ages. My project goes beyond previous research by investigating the ways in which the church in Rome worked to make the city one of the most frequented pilgrimage destinations in the Christian world. In doing so, I am able to highlight the effect that this had on the pilgrimage activity at the basilica in Rome dedicated to St. Paul. This paper examines the means by which popes exerted their political influence, in addition to identifying the importance of the relationships that existed between various papal authorities and political leaders. By applying these findings to the architectural development of the basilica San Paolo fuori le mura we are better able to understand that patronage was largely for the purpose of financial gains.

2. Discussion

As soon as Christianity acquired imperial recognition under the Emperor Constantine (307-337 C.E.), Rome became a destination for holy journeys second only to Jerusalem. The earliest Christian basilicas in Rome surrounded the city, situated just outside its walls. These buildings functioned as a form of early Christian propaganda, since anyone leaving or entering the city would have come into contact with them. The Emperor Theodosius (379-395 C.E.) commissioned a large scale rebuilding of San Paolo fuori le mura, turning the site into an elaborate basilica. After Theodosius' death the project was completed by his son, Honorius (395-423 C.E.). The Spanish writer Prudentius (348-413 C.E.) in his *Liber Peristephanon*, describes the glory of the renovated basilica carried out by Theodosius and his son. In it he gives a firsthand account of the grandeur a pilgrim would have observed coming upon the great basilica: "The splendor of the place is princely, for our good emperor dedicated this seat and decorated its whole extent with great wealth" (XII 47-49). That high-ranking church officials and members of imperial families were most often the patrons of such extensive building projects comes as little surprise.

During the fifth century the Roman church began promulgating the cult of the Christian saints and martyrs in an attempt to establish its preeminence. The church in Rome gained popularity by emphasizing the intercessory powers of the saints and martyrs, largely because of what the city personally had to offer to a pious pilgrim, as it controlled the shrines of two important Christian martyrs. When the popularity the city had gained began to wane, Pope Gregory the Great (590-604 C.E.) launched another attempt to regain its authority, this time, by emphasizing the primacy of holy relics. By the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 C.E. it was mandatory for every church to have a saint's relics before it could be consecrated. Pilgrims devoutly made the trip to San Paolo fuori le mura because they were allowed an unusual closeness to the martyr's body. They could lower strips of cloth into holes made on the lid of the saint's tomb, thereby, making contact with St. Paul. In order to

substantiate claims professing the healing powers of a saint's relics, papal authorities looked to Acts 19:11-12 "God was performing extraordinary miracles by Paul's hands, so that even facecloths or handkerchiefs that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, and the diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them." This was used as an early example of the use of relics.

In 1300 C.E. Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal bull that instituted the first Christian Holy Year, the first Jubilee. This was by far the most decisive method used by the church during the Middle Ages to encourage pilgrims to visit Rome. Indulgences were awarded to the pilgrims who made the long and difficult journey to Rome. In Boniface's decree he specified that each pilgrim would be required to visit San Paolo fuori le mura in addition to St. Peter's.

3. Conclusions

Soon after the Jubilee was instituted by Boniface VIII changes were quickly made to aspects of its implementation. First, the frequency with which it was to be celebrated was decreased, and secondly the number of churches each pilgrim had to visit was increased to four. Thus, it seems likely that the primary motivation for such changes is closely linked to economic benefits. The revenue created by the mass amounts of pilgrims visiting Rome in order to gain their indulgence generated a great deal of wealth. There is an obvious, important link between the politics and piety of the city of Rome throughout the Middle Ages, and such a theme is pertinent to understanding the usefulness of pilgrimage to the economic and political history of the city. The Donation of Constantine, a document that granted both status and power to the papacy, which has been discovered to be a forgery, clearly demonstrates the papacy's attempts to control their image, and reveals its political motives. In addition, the papacy's ulterior motives do not detract from St. Paul's appeal to the devout throughout the Middle Ages. The fame of St. Paul has been constant since shortly after his death. His story inspired the faithful, and his letters served as guides cherished by the pious believers of Christianity. Thus, we see that St. Paul's influence and dominance as an early Christian martyr was used for two very distinct purposes: to understand the message of Jesus, and to sell the message of Jesus.

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[1] Debra Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome in the Middle Ages Continuity and Change* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 1998), 23; Herbert

Kessler and Johanna Zacharias, *Rome 1300: On the Path of the Pilgrim* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 1-2.

[2] The building project that these two emperors patronized stood until the early nineteenth century, when in 1823 the basilica was mostly destroyed by fire.

[3] Prudentius, *Perstephanon*, trans. H.J. Thomson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 326-327, note a.

[4] Wilfrid Bosner, "The Cult of Relics in the Middle Ages," *Folklore* 73 (Winter, 1962): 236.

[5] Kessler and Zacharias, *Rome 1300*, 179; Nerida Newbigin, "'Del grasso di Lorenzo un'ampolletta': Relics and Representations in

the Quest for Forgiveness in Renaissance Rome," *The Journal of Religious History* 28 (February, 2004): 54, n. 22, 56.

[6] Matilda Webb, *The Churches and Catacombs of Early Christian Rome A Comprehensive Guide* (Portland: Sussex Academic

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[7] Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome, 194-196*; Gary Dickson, "The Crowd at the Feet of Pope Boniface VIII: Pilgrimage, Crusade and the

First Roman Jubilee (1300)," *Journal of Medieval History* 25 (1999): 289; Kessler and Zacharias, *Rome 1300*, 1.

[8] Kessler and Zacharias, *Rome 1300*, 158; Webb, *Churches and Catacombs*, 207-213.