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Back to the Future: How the Present Basilica of San Clemente Buried its Past

When one envisions *La Citta Eterna*, most picture *il Colosseo*: the Flavian Amphitheater that surpasses all other Roman Empire amphitheaters in size and in prominence. An unknown fact to many is that this structure shares a connection with *la Basilica di San Clemente al Laterano* (Figure 1) – literally. The latter was put in the hands of the Dominicans of the Province of Ireland on August 4th, 1677 (Boyle). The Prior of the Irish Dominicans at San Clemente, Father Louis Nolan, raised money to unite the Colosseum with San Clemente via an eight-hundred yard tunnel. This tunnel, completed in 1915, relieved the basilica of water that had accumulated beneath it due to an undependable ancient aqueduct (“Christ and Mithras”). During the building of the drain between 1912 and 1914, Father Nolan discovered buildings destroyed in the fire of Nero in 64 AD contained in a third stratum below the present edifice. In the century before, another Prior of Irish



Fig. 1: (Church of S. Clemente)

Dominicans, Father Joseph Mullooly, began excavations under the twelfth-century church in 1857 to later reveal the original fourth-century basilica (in the first underground layer) and two first-century buildings (in the second). Fittingly, Father Mullooly’s final resting

place is under the altar of the fourth-century basilica (Boyle). Even without the discoveries of these lower levels, the Basilica of San Clemente is deemed as a perfect Constantinian basilica (“Christ and Mithras”). However, the excavations conducted by Father Mullooly opened up the eyes of scholars to reconsider the church that Saint Jerome referred to when he wrote at the end of the fourth century of “a church in Rome [that] preserved the memory of Saint Clement”. Until the mid-1800s, scholars had believed that the upper church was the one that Saint Jerome was referring to. After the excavations, they questioned their own theories (Hellman). To uncover the mystery of the Basilica of San Clemente one must delve deeply into the past – and into the ground! – to understand how a Christian *palazzo*, a Mithraic area, a fourth-century basilica, and a twelfth-century basilica are all connected – literally.

After the Great Fire of 64 CE, a Roman *palazzo* was built atop of remains of homes dating from as early as the sixth century BCE. This palace is considered to be that of Titus Flavius Clemens, Roman consul and cousin of Emperor Domitian (r. 81-96 CE) (Hellman). The foundation of the first-century House of Clemens is a twenty-foot buried tufa wall that was most likely that of a building that was filled in after the Great Fire of Rome (Boyle). A theory is that it is part of the palace of Tarquinius Superbus, the seventh king of Rome (r. 535-509 BCE) (Hellman). This wall has been surmounted by travertine blocks that are used to support not only the west walls of the palace but also three walls of the fourth-century basilica and two of the twelfth (Boyle) (Figure 2)! The travertine wall resembles that with which the sixth king

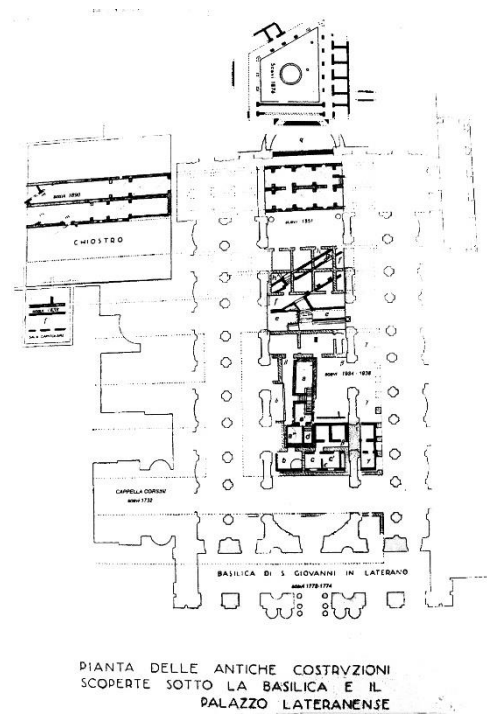


Fig. 2: (Plan of Ancient Constructions)

of Rome, Servius Tullius (r. 578-535 BCE), surrounded the city. After the victory of Constantine the Great (r. 306-337 CE) at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312 CE) and the Edict of Milan (313 CE), the *palazzo* was taken over and converted into a church in the memory of Pope Clement. To do so, fourth-century architects filled in the ground-floor rooms and the courtyard of the House of Clemens. However, it appears that there had already been a room set aside for Christian worship at the turn of the second century. Besides the *titulus Clementis* – “place of worship in the dwelling owned by one Clement” (Boyle) – Mithraic priests intruded and converted another chamber for religious rites (“Christ and Mithras”). There were only fifty known *mithraea* in Rome during the third century (Boyle). The Basilica of San Clemente is the best-preserved temple of Mithraism in Rome (Hellman). The area was formed of three rooms: the *triclinium* (the dining room), the *pronaos* (the vestibule), and a room devoted to the instruction of rituals. This room is comprised of niches vandalized with graffiti to represent the seven stages through which catechumen had to pass before being admitted to the *triclinium* and the *pronaos* (Boyle). It is in this grotto-like room – with painted stars on the ceiling to represent the universe – that seven stages of initiation took

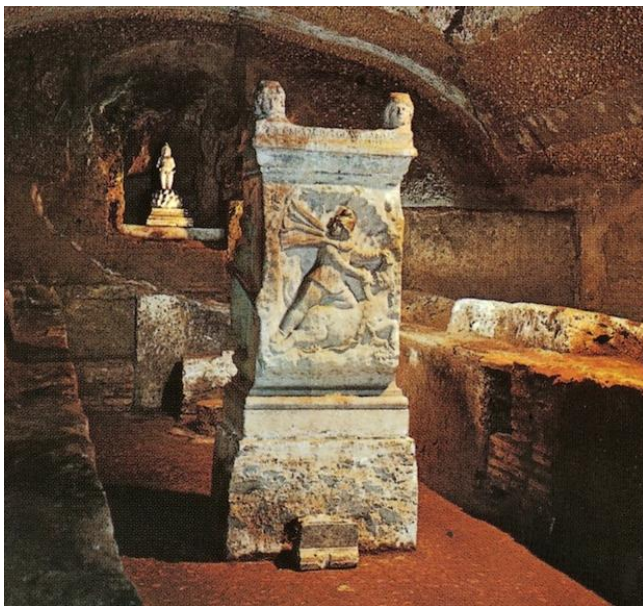


Fig. 3: (Mithraic Altar)

place, symbolizing the passage from darkness to light (Hellman). In the *triclinium*, a Mithraic altar (Figure 3) provoked a ritual meal of bread, wine, and water to commemorate the victory banquet of Mithras, the Persian god born out of rock, after he spilt the blood of the symbolic Bull – from which all good came into being - and before he ascended into Heaven (Boyle).

The Mithraic religion was originally introduced to Rome by the soldiers of Alexander the Great (r. 336-323 BCE) on their return from campaigns in Asia Minor. However, in 395 CE Mithraism was outlawed and the Mithraic temple was acquired by the clergy of San Clemente. As previously noted, the fourth-century architects filled in the House of Clemens to create the fourth-century rectangular basilica. After the suppression of the Mithraic cult, they added an apse located above the *pronaos*. On the site of the old *palazzo* and the *pronaos*, Christians built a church dedicated to Saint Clement who had once worshiped at the site and reigned as Pope from 88 to 97 CE. As the story goes, during the reign of Emperor Trajan (r. 98-117 CE) Saint Clement was thrown into the Black Sea by Romans that opposed his missionary work. In 861 CE, the Saints Cyril and Methodius uncovered the tomb of Saint Clement, which was purportedly built by angels. They then transferred his body from Crimea to San Clemente in 868 CE. The fourth-century basilica was built on top of the House of Clemens, its courtyard, and the small Mithraic temple in the center of the space. The courtyard became the area on which resides the nave of the church and the rooms on either side of the atrium have been converted into the north and south aisles. Along the north aisle, a thick rubble wall was instituted between pillars to support the north wall of the twelfth-century basilica above in 1100 CE. Towards the end of the aisle is a pagan sarcophagus (which was used for Christian burial as well) that was discovered in 1937 in the vaulting of the first-century room beneath. On the contrary, the south aisle presumably contains the burial place of Saint Cyril (869 CE). It also represents the small north aisle of the upper basilica (Boyle).

The Basilica of San Clemente, like many major early Christian basilicas, copied ancient Roman public halls by having a large, rectangular chamber with two colonnades separating a central nave from two side aisles (Hellman). The greater part of the height of the nave in the lower basilica has been incorporated into the upper basilica. Similar to its north aisle, its width has been

narrowed by a rubble wall in 1100 CE to support the columns in the upper church and then extended to support the side wall of the basilica above. However, the boundary on the left remained undisturbed since the aisle of the twelfth-century basilica rests directly above it. It was also around 1100 CE when the basilica was deemed to be unsafe due to the destruction caused by the Normans under Robert Guiscard in 1084 CE (Boyle) in sacking and burning Rome: the lower church was buried beneath a load of debris (Hellman). Anastasius, the Cardinal Titular of San Clemente, had the fourth-century basilica filled in with rubble and erected a smaller replica of the old basilica on



Fig. 4: (Borrelli)

top of this foundation. The entrance to the upper church (Figure 4) is through a defensive gateway (Boyle) – which provided defense against attack during the Middle Ages (Hellman) – that gives onto a small twelfth-century courtyard. This open space is above the original fourth-century one and is the only medieval atrium extant in Rome. The twelfth-century basilica repeats the plan of the fourth-century one –

a nave and two aisles – but does not show a “typically Early Christian disposition”. The Basilica of San Clemente added chapels in the aisles, remolded the nave, and had a series of alternating elliptical and circular windows on either side of the nave (which were later replaced by large rectangular windows). However, there were elements of the lower basilica that were literally transferred to the upper one in 1100 CE. The most important one is that of the *Schola cantorum*: the choir area in the center of the basilica. Originally donated to the fourth-century basilica by

Pope John II (r. 533-535 CE), the Titular of San Clemente, it was removed and reassembled to the new basilica once the old one had been abandoned. The present Basilica of San Clemente contains the High Altar with the reputed remains of Saint Clement. The canopy over the altar may have belonged to the altar set installed by Pope John II in the first church in the early sixth century. To the right of the altar is a wall tabernacle that was the gift of Giacomo Gaetaci, the Cardinal of San Clemente (r. 1295-1300 CE) (Boyle).

The apse of the present Basilica of San Clemente (Figure 5) features a cathedra in its center, which stood in the apse of the lower basilica. On its back is the word “MARTYR”: an inscription to mark the dedication of the original basilica during the pontificate of Pope Siricius (r. 384-399 CE). In addition, there is a record of Cardinal Anastasius as Titular of San Clemente from circa 1099 to 1125 CE: “Anastasius Cardinal Priest of this Title began and completed this work” (Boyle). In the north aisle of the twelfth-century basilica is a chapel built from 1882 to 1887 in the memory of the Saints Cyril and Methodius.

Although the former’s original place of burial was at the right-hand of the altar in the fourth-century basilica, his remains were moved to the present church in the year 1100 CE. At the end of the aisle there is the chapel of Saint Dominic, under whose altar the casket of Saint Cyril was housed until its removal in 1798 CE. It was Saint Methodius who believed that Cyril should be justly buried “in *San Clemente* itself, to which Cyril had labored so zealously to return the body of Saint Clement”.

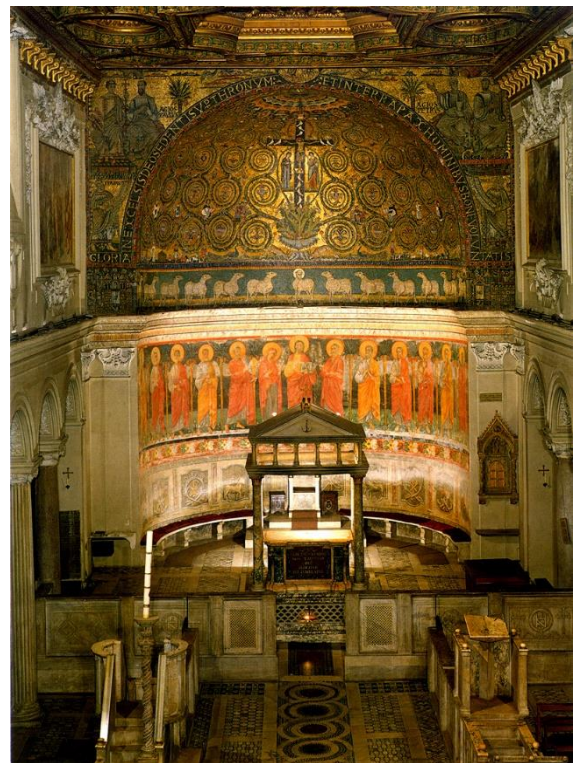


Fig. 5: (San Clemente)

Ironically, although Saint Clement had been venerated as a martyr since the late fourth century, his background may be anything but sacred. Some have hypothesized that Saint Clement was perhaps an ex-slave to the household of Titus Flavius Clemens: the owner of the first-century Christian *palazzo* (Boyle). The life of Saint Clement epitomizes the truth of the words of the English playwright William Shakespeare: “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them”. Similarly, the original sixth-century BCE foundation of the Basilica of San Clemente has had “greatness thrust upon” it! The church is situated above a still-operating system of drains and sewers almost one-hundred feet below the current street level that dates back to the Republican time period of the sixth to the second century BCE (Hellman). If one were to pass in front of the Basilica of San Clemente (Figure 6), one would see a beautiful Constantinian church but would not perceive the history on which it is “grounded”. Again, if one were to pass in front of *il Colosseo*, one would see a grand amphitheater but would not perceive its “connection” with the basilica. However, if one were to spend the time to dig up information on the past of *la Basilica di San Clemente al Laterano*, one would still see a beautiful Constantinian church but with a present “grounded” on its past.



Fig. 6: (Basilica San Clemente)

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