

Old St. Peter's and the emperor Constans? A debate with G. W. Bowersock

Paolo Liverani

“Writing this paper has been a tedious work ... Still I feel it had to be done”: thus begins R. Krautheimer in an article¹ which remains the best discussion of the issue of how to date the Basilica of St. Peter. Now, a quarter of a century later, the topic must be revisited. Although there are some updates, there is little really new to report, but Krautheimer's study is not as widely read as it should be, even remaining unknown to many scholars who have dealt with the topic in the meantime (perhaps because it was published in a journal specializing in art history). Even if the result will be no less tiresome, it is even more necessary than it was in Krautheimer's day.

In studies of Early Christian architecture, the attribution of the Vatican Basilica of St. Peter to Constantine was never a topic of debate; if anything, attention was paid to establishing a precise chronology and to determining how much of the building and its annexes (e.g., the quadriporticus in front) could be considered as completed by Constantine's successors.² A few years ago, G. W. Bowersock took the radical step of questioning Constantine's paternity of the church and of attributing the entire project to Constans.³ If this new theory turned out to be true, it would have consequences for several established ideas about the architecture of the period and the origins of the Christian basilica. The weakness of the arguments on which the theory is based have long made me hesitate to write the present article: it seemed to me more productive to strengthen the reasoning behind the Constantinian dating⁴ rather than write a critique of Bowersock's work. I must confess, however, that this approach was too idealistic. The issue of the church's paternity is clear to specialists of late-antique and Early Christian archaeology and epigraphy,⁵ but a good number of distinguished historians have accepted the new conclusions without seeking to verify the arguments on which they are based.⁶ Moreover, the new thesis would have

1 R. Krautheimer, “The building inscriptions and the dates of construction of Old St. Peter's: a reconsideration,” *RömJbKGesch* 25 (1989) 3.

2 Ibid.

3 G. W. Bowersock, “Peter and Constantine,” in J.-M. Carrié and R. Lizzi Testa (edd.), “Humana sapit,” *Études d'Antiquité tardive offertes à Lellia Cracco Ruggini* (Bibl AnTar 3; 2002) 209-17 (reprinted in W. Tronzo, [ed.], *St. Peter's in the Vatican* [Cambridge 2005] 5-15).

4 P. Liverani, “Saint Peter's, Leo the Great and the leprosy of Constantine,” *PBSR* 76 (2008) 155-72.

5 Chr. Witschel, “Alte und neue Erinnerungsmodi in der spätantiken Inschriften Roms,” in R. Behrwald and Chr. Witschel (edd.), *Rom in der Spätantike. Historische Erinnerung im städtischen Raum* (Stuttgart 2012) 383; L. Bosman, review of Tronzo (supra n. 3), *ArtBull* 89.1 (2007) 162-64; F. A. Bauer, “Saint Peter's as a place of collective memory in late antiquity,” in Behrwald and Witschel (ibid.) 155 n.1; M. J. Johnson, “Architecture of the Empire,” in N. Lenski (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to the age of Constantine* (Cambridge 2006) 297 n.27; H. Brandenburg, *Le prime chiese di Roma (IV-VII secolo)* (2nd edn., Milan 2013) 100.

6 M. Humphries, “From emperor to pope? Ceremonial, space, and authority at Rome from Constantine to Gregory the Great,” in K. Cooper and J. Hillner (edd.), *Religion, dynasty, and patronage in early Christian Rome, 300-900* (Cambridge 2007) 27 and 35-36; T. D. Barnes, *Constantine: dynasty, religion and power in the Late Roman Empire* (Chichester 2011) 88; J. Bardill, *Constantine, divine emperor of the Christian golden age* (Cambridge 2012) 241; P. Brown, *Through the eye of a needle* (Princeton, NJ 2012) 244 and 586 n.11 (but very cautious). M. Humphries, “Liturgy and laity in late-antique Rome: problems, sources, and social dynamics,” *Studia Patristica* 71