

# Urban development at Rome's Porta Esquilina and church of San Vito over the *longue durée*

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San Vito's modern location on the Esquiline betrays little of the importance of the church's site in the pre-modern city (fig. 1). The small church was begun under Pope Sixtus IV for the 1475 jubilee and finished two years later along what was at that time the main route between Santa Maria Maggiore and the Lateran.<sup>1</sup> Modern interventions, however, and particularly the creation of the *quartiere Esquilino* in the late 19th c., changed the traffic patterns entirely. An attempt was made shortly thereafter to connect it with the new via Carlo Alberto by reversing the church's orientation and constructing a new façade facing this modern street. This façade, built into the original 15th-c. apse, was closed when the church was returned to its original orientation in the 1970s, and, as a result, San Vito today appears shuttered.<sup>2</sup> In the ancient and mediaeval periods, by contrast, San Vito was set at a key point in Rome's eastern environs. It was at this very spot that the main route from the Forum, leading eastward up the *Argiletum* and *clivus Suburanus*, crossed the Republican city-walls at the Porta Esquilina to become the consular *via Tiburtina* (fig. 2). The central of the original three bays of the Augustan arch marking the Porta Esquilina still stands against the W wall of the early modern church, bearing a rededication in A.D. 262 to Gallienus and his wife Salonina (fig. 3).<sup>3</sup>

The area of this gate has attracted attention as an urban node, serving to check traffic along the major E–W path across the city, while forming an edge between the living city within the walls and the city of the dead represented by the large Esquiline necropolis outside them.<sup>4</sup> After the reclamation of this burial ground in the early Principate, the area of the church sat at a dividing line between the *urbs* and the great suburban *horti* that grew up on the Esquiline's immediate periphery.<sup>5</sup> Current discussion of the urban and topographical importance of this site draws first upon discoveries made hereabouts by R. Lanciani in the 1870s.<sup>6</sup> Exploration beneath San Vito itself would not come until 1972 when, under the

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1 For the modern church, see G. Biasiotti, *Le diaconie cardinalizie: Diaconia 'S. Viti in macello'* (Rome 1911) 31-32; G. Caniggia, "S. Vito, l'opera di Sisto IV e i restauri in corso," *BollCenStudStorArch* 24 (1976) 55-59; J. E. Blondin, *Constructing history: the visual legacy of Pope Sixtus IV* (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Illinois 2002) 388-89.

2 P. Mancini, "La diaconia dei Ss. Vito, Modesto e Crescenzia," *Alma Roma* 18 (1977) 59-62.

3 *CIL* VI 1106.

4 See especially S. Malmberg, "Navigating the urban Via Tiburtina," in H. Bjur and B. Santillo Frizell (edd.), *Via Tiburtina: space, movement, and artefacts in the urban landscape* (Rome 2009) 61-78; S. Malmberg and H. Bjur, "The suburb as centre," *ibid.* 109-28; S. Malmberg and H. Bjur, "Movement and urban development at two city gates in Rome: the Porta Esquilina and Porta Tiburtina," in R. Laurence and D. Newsome (edd.), *Rome, Ostia, Pompeii: movement and space* (Oxford 2011) 361-85. Fundamental to this approach remains the urban theory of K. Lynch, *The image of the city* (Cambridge, MA 1960), introduced to the Roman world through W. L. MacDonald, *The architecture of the Roman Empire II. An urban appraisal* (New Haven, CT 1986).

5 On the cemetery, see J. Bodel, "Dealing with the dead: undertakers, executioners and potter's fields in ancient Rome," in V. Hope and E. Marshall (edd.), *Death and disease in the ancient city* (London 2000) 128-51; on the *horti*, see C. Häuber, "Zur Topographie der *Horti Maecenatis* und der *Horti Lamiani* auf dem Esquilin in Rom," *KölnJb* 23 (1990) 11-107; ead., *The eastern part of the Mons Oppius in Rome* (Rome 2014); M. Cima and E. La Rocca (edd.), *Horti romani* (Rome 1998).

6 Along with Lanciani's own published reports, see *LTUR* Suppl. II.1, 25-46 "L'Esquilino"