

The Constantinian Bishop's church at Ostia: preliminary report on the 1998 season

Franz Alto Bauer and Michael Heinzelmann

References in the sources

In the biography of Pope Silvester in the *Liber Pontificalis* we read the following entry:¹

Eodem tempore fecit Constantinus Augustus basilicam in civitate Hostia, iuxta portum urbis Romae, beatorum apostolorum Petri et Pauli et Iohannis Baptistae, ubi et dona obtulit haec.

Then the emperor Constantine built in the city of Ostia close to Portus Romanus the basilica of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul and of John the Baptist, where he presented the following gifts.

After this sentence there follows a list of donations, liturgical equipment, and also different properties, dwelling houses as well as economic goods, which in the majority of cases were situated in the region of Ostia and Portus.² From the proceeds of these — an annual total of 1118 *solidi* — the Basilica should have been maintained. Moreover, as the *Liber Pontificalis* observes, a certain Gallicanus too donated various items of equipment and estates of which the revenues — this time making annually 869 *solidi* and 1 *tremissus* — likewise should serve for the upkeep of the church.³ Obviously it concerns an important imperial dedication whose annual upkeep entailed a not inconsiderable financial expenditure.

Most probably this is the church of the Bishop of Ostia. That follows because the church possessed a baptismal installation: the *Liber Pontificalis* lists under the liturgical equipment a *pelvis ex argento ad baptismum* weighing 10 lbs, a silver basin which served for baptisms. Besides, the fact that the church was dedicated to the Apostles and to John the Baptist is a secure indication that it was here that the Bishop performed baptisms.

Lastly, the Constantinian cathedral of Ostia is known from one further source. It is mentioned in the *Acts of Saint Gallicanus*, the very Gallicanus who makes his appearance in the *Life of Silvester* as the joint benefactor.⁴ Flavius Gallicanus assumed the consular garb in the year 330 and he must then (in any case, so the story goes) have established himself in Ostia before he moved to Egypt under Julian the Apostate and suffered martyrdom as a hermit under the same emperor.⁵ While still in Ostia he founded a church which is described in the *Acta S. Gallicani* in the following words:⁶

Hic primus in ostiensi urbe extruxit ecclesiam et dedicavit officia clericorum. Huic se sanctus levita Laurentius revelavit, adhortans eum, ut in eius nomine ecclesiam fabricaret in porta, quae nunc usque Laurentia nuncupatur.

This passage is instructive in several ways. For one, in contrast to the *Liber Pontificalis*, the weight is shifted entirely to the person of Gallicanus; while in the *Vita Silvestri* he appears only as a secondary donor of properties, here in his own (saint's) legends he is the sole builder of the church. Secondly, this text is important because it provides a topographical statement:

1 *Le Liber Pontificalis. Texte, introduction et commentaire* (ed. L. Duchesne) I (Paris 1886) 183, 18-19. The translation is that of R. Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis)* (Liverpool 1989) 24.

2 *Lib. Pont.* I, 184, 1-13.

3 *Lib. Pont.* I, 184, 14-22.

4 *Acta Sanctorum*, June, VII, p. 33 f. P.-A. Février, "Ostie et Porto à la fin de l'antiquité. Topographie et vie sociale," *MEFRA* 70 (1958) 295-330, esp. 300 f.

5 On the person of Gallicanus see H. Grégoire and P. Orgels, "S. Gallicanus, consul et martyr dans la passion des Ss. Jean et Paul, et sa vision 'constantinienne' du Crucifié," *BullAcadRoyBelgique* 42 (1956) 125 ff.; also A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale, J. Morris, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* 1 (Cambridge 1971) 382 f. s.v. Gallicanus I.

6 *Acta Sanctorum*, June, VII, p. 34 para 7.