And They Were Always in the Temple: 
The Pilgrims’ Experience at S. Maria Rotonda

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Although not one of Rome’s earliest Christian churches, the Pantheon is one of Rome’s oldest and most prominent buildings. Built by Hadrian as a temple, it stood abandoned for some time in the Early Middle Ages. It started to function as a church only in the early decades of the seventh century when it was dedicated to the Virgin and all martyrs, and it has been a place of Christian worship ever since. The building underwent many interventions during the Middle Ages and it has been considered something of a miracle that the Roman building has survived at all. Its transformation into a church in the seventh century was surely crucial, but much remains unclear about how the pagan, and therefore tainted, history of the edifice was accommodated once the function of Christian church was imposed upon it. The Pantheon’s enormous round open space with its grand cupola was not well suited to its new function. The roof has a large hole in the middle to let the light in, but also allows in any precipitation and, in winter, the cold. Still, the building attracted much attention from the devout, during the High and Late Middle Ages. The city of Rome where the Pantheon is situated was well endowed with antique and believed-to-be antique buildings and statues that embodied the medieval ideal of romanitas. For pilgrims however, the building must have had an attraction that exceeded its connection with the Roman past. The subject of this contribution is not the physical appearance or liturgical use of the Pantheon, which have been the primary focus of Sible de Blaauw’s careful attention. Instead, I will turn my attention to the Christian interpretations of its classical architecture during the heyday of medieval pilgrimage to Rome. Although ideas and associations are intangible, it is possible to catch a glimpse of the medieval perspectives on the Pantheon from surviving images, such as pilgrimage souvenirs.

The Pantheon as a Church

In 609, 610, or perhaps 613, Pope Boniface IV (608-15) consecrated the classical building that is still known today as the Pantheon. According to the Liber pontificalis, the Pantheon became ‘the Church of the Blessed Mary, always a Virgin, and All Martyrs’. Circular churches were not at all unusual at the time as S. Stefano Rotondo, built for Pope Simplicius (468-83), clearly demonstrates. The dedication to all martyrs seems to have followed on from the tradition of the Pantheon being a temple to all the gods, but the Virgin became its most important titular. The pope might have been inspired by a tradition, already firmly established in the east, of associating round churches with the Virgin. Retrospectively, a story emerged that the Pantheon had previously been a temple to the mother-goddess Cybele. She anticipated the dedication of the building to the Virgin just as all gods had prefigured all martyrs. The inclusion of Cybele in the proto-history of the church, especially her privileged position among the other gods, was supposedly invented to underscore the position of the Virgin at the top of the hierarchy of saints. Since the Virgin was the most important figure, the roots of the Pantheon’s dedication to her had to be present from the start too.

The building’s most prominent features, the circular floor plan, the cupola and the round hole, became its identifying marks. Although the church was officially known as Mary among the Martyrs from the seventh century onwards, its popular name became S. Maria Rotonda, or ‘the Round Church of St Mary’. Serving as a conduit between east and west, S. Maria Rotonda became a model in the West for circular, and centralized, churches dedicated to Mary, such as the chapels at Centula, Würzburg, Altötting, and Ludwigstadt. Significantly, the additional title of S. Maria Rotonda already appears in
eighth-century pilgrims’ itineraries, and from the twelfth century, the name of S. Maria Rotonda also appears in official documents. S. Maria Rotonda, and not S. Maria ad Martyres, is the name written on twelfth- and thirteenth-century pilgrims’ souvenirs (Figs 2 and 3). In agreement with its popular name, these souvenir badges depict the Virgin and Child in the round church, without additional figures, without martyrs or saints.

Besides being a church and a model for sanctuaries elsewhere, the former Pantheon became a site of pilgrimage which attracted pilgrims from far and wide. Much importance has been attributed to a Byzantine icon of the Virgin and Child in the pilgrimage cult of S. Maria Rotonda, but its significance must not be overestimated. First of all, the dedication of the former pagan temple to the Virgin was probably not instigated by the icon. On the contrary, the icon’s being placed inside the S. Maria Rotonda seems to have followed shortly after the dedication and was most likely intended to reinforce the special relationship of the new church with the Virgin. The icon of the Virgin bore witness to the established hierarchy, not the other way around. Nor did the icon become the main focus of the pilgrimage cult later, or at least this does not emerge from the sources. The icon is hardly mentioned in the Indulgentiae ecclesiarum urbis Romae [‘The Indulgences of the churches of the city of Rome’]. In his description of Rome, Nikolaus Muffel (c. 1410–69) mentions an apparition of the Virgin to a large group of martyrs who were inside the church. They had refused to honour the pagan gods and turned to Mary who came to console them. Muffel does not mention the icon, only the apparition of the Virgin, on a site where an altar was erected afterwards to commemorate the miraculous event. In another story in the Liber pontificalis, from the time of Pope Stephanus III (768–72), a Lombard priest called Waldipert turned to the church for asylum ‘while Waldipert carried his
image \[\text{imaginem ipsius}\] of the mother of God to this place.\textsuperscript{13} The narrative seems to indicate that the priest brought the image with him, although it is impossible to be sure on the basis of this short passage. Pilgrims hardly mention the image in their accounts. In comparison, icons of the Virgin in other churches of Rome are described elaborately, even if they play a subsidiary role among the relics, for example in St Peter’s or in S. Maria Maggiore.\textsuperscript{14}

No saint had been martyred on the site of the rotunda, no divine vision had preceded its construction and pilgrims’ accounts and the \textit{Indulgentiae} evoke an image of a church with few relics. Muffel does mention a large number of relics at the Pantheon at the time of the consecration, but this is a later construction without historic basis.\textsuperscript{15} Sources dating back to the fifteenth century mention the relics of Sts Rasius and Anastasius, but these are not mentioned in older descriptions.\textsuperscript{16} They might have been installed later to emphasize the dedication to Mary and the martyrs and they were presumably not the focus of the pilgrimage cult. Although the link of the former pagan temple with the Virgin was strong from the beginning and remained firm, no concrete evidence emerges of a cult focusing on relics or on the icon.

\textit{Fascination with Architecture}

Different sources indicate that pilgrims were drawn primarily to the building and, after that, to the icon or the relics. Pilgrims’ accounts focus on the architectural elements, primarily the round shape, the spacious interior and the oculus. In his description of Rome, the twelfth-century Icelandic Abbot Nikolas Munkathverá mentions a church dedicated to All Saints which is ‘large, splendid’ and ‘is open above.’\textsuperscript{17} Arnold von Harff (1471–1505) describes the former Pantheon as ‘a beautiful round church without a window. High up is a round hole through which the daylight shines.’\textsuperscript{18} In Yc \textit{Solace of Pilgrimes}, John Capgrave (1393–1464) elaborately describes ‘a round house with outer piler and that of so grete widnesse and so grete heith that it is wonder who thei myth rere it.’\textsuperscript{19} He mainly revels over the spaciousness of the interior.

Likewise, the miraculous story of the transformation of the pagan building into a church focuses on the architecture. When the pope consecrated the former mausoleum and temple, the devil had supposedly appeared and tried to demolish the building to stop its transformation. He failed, and in total frustration he took the metal knob from the top of the building and threw it into the river Tiber. With the removal of the knob and the subsequent creation of the oculus, light could enter the building, symbolically creating a direct link with heaven. The miracle marked the moment when God entered the building. To further underscore God’s benevolence towards, or direct interference in, the consecration, the knob was miraculously retrieved and brought to St Peter’s for visitors to marvel upon. Books with the \textit{Indulgentiae} mention the object in the atrium of St Peter’s.\textsuperscript{20} As a tangible remnant of the pagan proto-history of S. Maria Rotonda, it showed that the consecration had met with divine approval and the building, although pagan at first, had always been destined to become a place of Christian worship.\textsuperscript{21}

In line with the pilgrims’ accounts, the badges that pilgrims took home also depicted a circular and domed church with an oculus. A chronology of badges is hard to define because they remained the same over a long period of time and it is often not possible to date them on the basis of archaeological evidence. Nevertheless, those few badges that might be dated indicate that the souvenir production for the S. Maria Rotonda had been established in the early fourteenth century and might go back to the (late) thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{22} St Peter’s – one of the seven stationary churches of Rome – had been manufacturing badges depicting Sts Peter and Paul, for some time, probably as early as the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{23} Other churches in Rome had followed suit. The badges of S. Lorenzo fuori le mura, built on the site where one of the great martyr saints of Rome supposedly had been executed, were modelled after the badges of St Peter’s. As the badges of Peter and Paul did, the badges of S. Lorenzo combined the half-length images of Sts Lawrence and St Stephen whose relics were in the church.\textsuperscript{24} Significantly, archi-
tecture plays a minor role on these images from St Peter’s and S. Lorenzo.

The badges of S. Maria Rotonda, where relics were not the focus of the attention of the visiting devout, clearly diverge from the established tradition of badge design in Rome. They focus on the architecture, prominently placing the Madonna inside the domed rotunda (Figs 2 and 3). Much attention has gone to the depiction of the antique edifice. The badges effectively combine the inside and outside of the building in one image. The lines that decorate the cupola seem to refer to the outside of the building, as it is still pictured on slightly later drawings such as one by Hendrick van Cleve (c. 1525–after 1589), but the opening in the dome is pictured from the inside. Some badges even have an actual open-work oculus as if to underline the direct link with the open sky. Pilgrims who had visited the Pantheon brought back an image of ‘a round church with a hole’ from their journey to Rome as visual counterparts to the pilgrims’ accounts. Although they are not found in large quantities, they badges are found over a large geographical area, from Rome to the United Kingdom and Denmark. Recently, a badge of S. Maria Rotonda turned up that was found between Bierum and Spijk (north eastern part of the Netherlands; Fig. 3).

Some scholars have suggested that the badges depict the icon. The icon shows Mary half-length; she is shown with her body en trois-quart and her head turned towards the viewer. On the badges, however, Mary is shown full-length, enthroned and crowned. Furthermore, the badges depict the Virgin in the apse where the altar was located. Admittedly, the icon might have been on the main altar, but, as Sible de Blauw...
Fig. 4. God as the centre of the cosmos, half-page miniature in: Aristotle, *De caelo et de mundo*, translated in French by Nicole Oresme, c. 1410, parchment, 360 × 255 mm, Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS français 565, fol. 69r. Photo: Bibliothèque national de France.
has justly pointed out, there is no evidence that the icon was placed on the main altar or even in the main apse.28 Although it might seem likely that badges document a cult icon or statue, it is not necessarily the case. Madonnas depicted on badges from other sites often do not resemble a miraculous image either, or perhaps bear only a slight resemblance. In conclusion, the badges of the Pantheon probably do not necessarily refer to a specific image in this church; the Madonna depicted is universal. They indicate divine presence in a religious building as confirmed in the eyes of the devotees by the visions and miracles that had happened there.29 In contrast with the universal Madonna, the elements on the badges that indicate the edifice are very specific, and the badges use the name rotunda, which again underscores architectural form. They clearly focus on the appearance of the building rather than the cult image.

The Pilgrims’ Experience

Whether the badges depict the icon or not, architecture played a major, if not primary, role in the experiences of the pilgrims. How did the pilgrim’s physical confrontation with the antique building combine with the spiritual experience? The building had never been very suitable for its appropriated function as a church. The large hole in the roof created problems for liturgical use rather than supplying a solution.30 But if it presented problems during the liturgy, the antique structure proved to be perfectly compatible with the symbolism of Christian faith. As early as the third century, Lucius Cassius Dio had written about the Pantheon that ‘because of its vaulted roof, it resembles the heavens’.31 Christian users embraced this antique interpretation of the dome. Indicatively, the Latin term chosen to describe the church – rotundus means ‘round’ or ‘spherical’ – was often used in combination with caelum [‘heaven’ or ‘firmament’]. It is not difficult to imagine how the cupola with its concentric circles brought to mind God-centred images of the cosmos such as was the case, for example, with a miniature in a French translation of Aristotle’s De caelo et de mundo which was once part of the library of Duke Jean de Berry (1340–1416) (Fig. 4).32 God is depicted in (and as) the centre of the universe surrounded by concentric circles to indicate the layers of the firmament. More importantly, the central oculus – literally the eye – of the cupola invoked God as the source of light: ‘God is light and in him there is no darkness.’ (1 John 1. 5) Significantly, the legends about the origin of the church stress that light had been absent when the Pantheon had supposedly served as a temple to the pagan gods. The oculus, both the symbolic centre of the universe and the source of light in the church, became a metaphor for God.

In the twelfth century, the link between the dome and heaven was liturgically established with the institution of domenica de rosa on the Sunday between the Ascension and Pentecost. During the liturgical feast of Pentecost the Christian community commemorated the descent of the Holy Spirit and the dispersal of the apostles to spread the Christian faith. The devout also remembered how the disciples and the Virgin would have gathered to imitate the Last Supper after Christ’s death and resurrection. As the pope preached about the coming of the Holy Spirit in the domed church, a multitude of roses was thrown down from the dome, possibly through the oculus.33 Symbolizing divine inspiration, the roses linked heaven and earth in a very powerful way. While this symbolic staging was probably fostered by the practical possibilities that S. Maria Rotonda offered, it would have further encouraged the participants’ association of the cupola with heaven and the oculus with God.

Indicatively, the institution of domenica de rosa occurred around the time when the Virgin started to be included in the company of the apostles at the Pentecost. The Shaftesbury Psalter from the second quarter of the twelfth century contains a miniature of Pentecost (Fig. 5).34 The miniature was modelled after a depiction of the same theme in the St Albans Psalter which also includes the Virgin among the apostles, but the miniaturist, identified as the Master of the Entangled Figures, made some adaptations that are worth mentioning here. With a crown, the Virgin is identified as first among Christ’s entourage and it also anticipates her role as queen of heaven. Moreover, she is larger than the rest. Mary is not just the focal point of the community of apos-
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‘were always in the temple, praising and blessing God’ (Luke 24. 53). This parallel was elaborated in later centuries. In many fourteenth- and fifteenth-century books of hours, an image of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended to inspire the apostles, precedes the Hours of the Holy Spirit. Alongside the description of the moment of Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles, images of Pentecost were visual models of Christian worship, because they depicted the first Christian community at prayer. The text of the Hours of the Holy Spirit starts with the words: ‘Domine labia mea aperies et os meum annunciabit laudem tuam’ [Lord, thou wilt open my lips; and my mouth shall declare thy praise]. The miniature of Pentecost depicting disciples at prayer provides a powerful prototype for the devotee who is about to utter these words of adoration.

Architecture as Cult Image

As paradoxical as it may seem, its unique appearance made the Pantheon an archetype of pagan architecture and an embodiment of Christian faith at the same time. The magnificent architecture was imbued with layers of meaning, some elaborating on the antique interpretations of the dome as heaven, others of later origin. Perfectly in line with the medieval way of thinking, pagan and Christian use became inextricably entwined, with one pointing to the other and becoming completely inseparable. Sible de Blaauw lifted the edge of the veil when he concluded his article on the furnishing and liturgy of the building: ‘Das Pantheon hat paradoxerweise seine Existenz als Kirche behalten durch seine nicht-kirchlichen Eingeschichten: die Großartigkeit seiner Architektur und seinen Ruf als eine der Meraviglia des Altertums.’ It was not just a wonder of Antiquity, an example of Romanitas, but it was considered a miracle of Christian faith at the same time. The antique design of the building did not contradict its Christian use. On the contrary, the architecture justified Christianization, because it permitted divine associations. It was open to heaven, and therefore God, the Virgin, and the community of saints. Because of its association with heaven, the building invoked those who are in paradise. At Pen-

Fig. 5. Pentecost, full-page miniature in a Psalter (the ‘Shaftesbury Psalter’), England, second half of the twelfth century, parchment, 225 × 140 mm. London: The British Library, Lansdowne MS 383, fol. 14r. Photo: The British Library.
tecost, when the Christian community gathered to praise God, the liturgy referred back to the Virgin and the disciples who gathered to commemorate Christ and to the foundation of the Church. The architecture of S. Maria Rotonda reinforced ideas of continuity from that first Christian community to the present day community of worshippers. When the roses floated down into the rotunda representing the descent of the Holy Spirit, the gathering of devotees in S. Maria Rotonda would have seen themselves as reflecting the first meetings of Virgin and apostles. Like them, and in direct continuation, the devotees present were a community gathered in praise of God.

The pagan proto-history of the building was never forgotten or even concealed, but was interwoven into its new Christian function. The pagan–Christian interconnections were accentuated and sometimes re-invented, as the medieval story of the Pantheon being a temple of Cybele demonstrates. The paradoxes, pagan–Christian, demonic–divine, only heightened wonder at the magnificent building that had come to visualize divine presence because it had been pagan. This campaign of Christianization that incorporated the building’s pagan history proved so successful that it was the architecture, the building itself, and not the icon of the Virgin and Child, that came to attract the pilgrims most. The building, regarded as an image of heaven, was described, depicted and propagated to pilgrims via textual and visual media such as the Indulgentiae ecclesiarum urbis Romae, pilgrims’ accounts and pilgrims’ badges. From these sources, it becomes clear that the building, not the icon, became the cult image. It was the building’s intangible qualities, overlaid upon its physical construction, that ensured the building’s survival throughout the Middle Ages.

Notes

1 For a discussion about the original function of the classical building, see Paul Godfrey and David Hemsoll, ‘The Pantheon: temple or rotunda?’, in Pagan Gods and Shrines of the Roman Empire, ed. by Martin Henig and Anthony King (Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1986), pp. 195-209.

2 Sible de Blaauw, ‘Das Pantheon als christlicher Tempel’, in Bild- und Formenspaße der Spätantike Kunst: Hugo Brandenburg zum 65. Geburtstag, ed. by Martina Jordan-Ruwe and Ulrich Real (Bovas. Munstersche Beiträge zur Archäologie, 17 (1994)), pp. 13-26. I would like to thank Sible for being an attentive colleague who always takes an interest, and for his support, while I was writing my PhD thesis, especially in the final stages.


5 Thunø, pp. 231-54; Michael V. Schwarz, ‘Eine frühmittelalterliche Umgestaltung der Pantheon-Vorhalle’, Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana 26 (1990), 1-29.


8 Buchowiecki, 11, p. 673.


For badges of Sts Lawrence and Stephen, see Kunera: Database of Medieval Badges and Ampullae, Radboud University Nijmegen, nos 01832, 06133, 14363 and 16644. [http://www.kunera.nl/] [accessed 8 January 2016]. For badges of St John Lateran, see ibid., nos 03488, 14379 and 14380.

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For badges of S. Maria Rotonda, see Kunera, nos 01389, 04139, 04231, 06552, 012620, and 15134. [http://www.kunera.nl/] [accessed 10 July 2016].


De Blauw, p. 25.


